Intangible Quantities

by raven_aorla

Summary

Jonathan can’t let the Scarecrow drag him back to hell again. He won’t let the inoculation having burned away most of his ability to experience normal emotions ruin his life, either. He needs a support system.

Jonathan also has a vision of understanding and mastering fear, and taking his father’s mistakes and turning them into something revolutionary. But for all his intelligence, he's just a teenager. He needs Edward Nygma.

[Can be read on its own. S3-divergent and s4 disregarding.]
Dad must be right. Dad must be justified. Dad must be doing this because he loved Mom and loves his son, and it must be worth it.

Because if Gerald Crane is wrong, then giving into the pressure to help him kill means Jonathan Crane is going to hell. If there is one. With the cops chasing them out into the field, Jonathan can’t do anything but follow.

Then there’s a needle in his arm, and gunshots, and everything goes to hell. Especially Jonathan.

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Scarecrow.

Scarecrow?!

(scarecrow)

ScAReCroW

S c a r e c r o w

SSCCAARREECCROWW

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His throat is dry. He’s been shackled to a bed. He’s hooked up to monitors and IVs. And a catheter. Ew.

Figure out the rest later. He wants some water. There’s nobody in sight or hearing. It’s as dark as it ever gets in a hospital.

“Hello?” God, his voice is raw. He can’t raise it without massive pain. “Help?”

He waits and waits, but nobody comes. He can’t get up or reach any sort of button. He is, however, attached to a heart monitor. Those beep loud when heart rates go weird, right?

So Jonathan holds his breath as long as he can. Like toddler in a tantrum. Again. Again.

Finally a nurse comes running, flicks the light on, and stares. Jonathan whispers an explanation. Her face goes from shock to sympathy. “I’m so sorry. You haven’t been lucid in so long, the night shift got complacent…” She says something into a walkie-talkie and starts asking him basic questions, probably to confirm his lucidity.

A male nurse comes with some water and a straw. He confirms with the female nurse that it’s safe to free Jonathan’s wrists. Jonathan can’t help but rub them. They’re as raw as his throat.

“For four months, you’ve either been fighting your restraints and alternating screaming with whimpering, or you’ve been passed out from exhaustion. The best of drugs didn’t work on you other than taking the edge off a smidgen.”
The female nurse looks askance at her colleague. “Is this the time?”

“Hey, I would want to know.” He helps Jonathan steady the cup in his wobbly hands. “Besides, coming out the other side of that, you’re a bigger badass than anyone else in this hospital, kiddo.”

“It’s Jonathan, not ‘kiddo’,” Jonathan says coolly. “But thanks. Could you get a doctor to come sanction freeing my ankles and letting me eat something?”

He’s calm. Kinda annoyed that he’ll surely have to repeat a grade, what with relearning how to walk and properly digest and such on top of the already-wasted months, but that is a ripple on a still and quiet lake.

Already, he knows he is not the same Jonathan who ran out into the field, still believing in his father.

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Dr. Leslie Thompkins comes to see him three days later. She persuaded a children’s hospital charity she works with to provide partial aid for his treatment. He’s not really a child, but they cover minors as a whole. It must have been an uphill battle, given he aided in murder, isn’t a cute tot, and all of this must be very expensive.

“Your father’s life insurance is enough to make the charity’s contribution not an extravagance compared to the rest of their budget.” Dr. Thompkins is beautiful, he feels distantly, like she’s a statue. He wonders for a second whether his sexual and romantic orientations have been affected. That’s a question for another time. Maybe when he gets to take a shower, and he can summon up a bit of imagination in private.

“How sweet of dear ol’ Dad.” Jonathan has another sip of broth. He pokes the surface of the pleasingly jiggly Jello he’ll have next. He threw up the first cup of broth they gave him two days ago, but the second one stayed down.

She gives him a half-smile. “How are you in general?”

“Tolerable. Looking forward to walking all the way to a toilet instead of this bedpan nonsense.” His Id could really go for a pepperoni pizza, but he knows it’ll be awhile before he can safely manage even a nibble. “You’re the medical examiner for the GCPD.”

“Yes.” She seems taken aback that he knows. Oh please, nurses chatter like starlings.

“You were the one who examined the bodies, then. The ones Dad took the adrenal glands from. I expected disgust, not help.” It doesn’t bother him much either way, but while almost all of his emotions have been either stripped away stripped down to basics, his curiosity has sharpened.

She toys with her visitor’s badge and says quietly, “We saved one victim. Only one. I hoped we could save one more.”

Jonathan remembers that the old him would have felt things at this point which would make him want to reassure her. Following that principle would make her less likely to regret helping him. Her regretting that would be undesirable. He says, “Maybe not in mint condition, but I guess you did.”

She smiles fully. “The specialist said you’d been showing very, very gradual signs of your neural activity and brain chemistry returning to baseline, but the scans from yesterday show a massive leap. He said it wasn’t ‘standard’...”

“But the sudden increase in functionality is miraculous, yes, he told me.” He takes a sip of lukewarm
water. He’s been advised against cold water until his vocal cords have had more of a rest. This visit is the most he plans on talking all day, except to express basic needs.

“Would you be up to a visit from the forensic analyst who read your father’s paper? I promised I’d ask. He thinks maybe a chat with someone who understood exactly what your father was doing might help you with closure.” She lowers her voice as if this analyst might overhear. “It’s fine if you say no. He’s a sweetheart really, but he can be tactless and some people find his eccentricity wearying. It’s not his fault.”

Jonathan shrugs. “My tactlessness isn’t my fault either. And I’m bored. Tell him I’m okay with it.”

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The visit happens eight days later.

Edward Nygma is only six feet tall, which is tallish but not exceptional, yet he appears gangly and noodle-y. It’s probably how slender he is, and the shape of his face. He’s either almost thirty or just over thirty. He’s got a messenger bag over his shoulder and a bouquet of flowers in one hand. He has big, 1950’s aesthetic glasses and an eager smile. “Tell me, do you feel fear anymore?”

Jonathan appreciates Nygma skipping the meaningless small talk. “I’m not sure.”

“OH MY GOD I HAVE A HUGE SPIDER IN MY POCKET!” And Ed flings a large spider at Jonathan’s face.

Jonathan doesn’t flinch, or really react at all. It bounces off his cheek. It’s fake, which makes sense. “How’d you know I used to be afraid of spiders?”

Nygma breaks out into a grin. “Your father’s paper mentions arachnophobia three times, when he mentions all other phobias once at most. It was of significance to him. Educated guess. By the ‘used to’, I gather that we have found supporting evidence for my hypothesis. When you get out of here, maybe you could try a few scary things. Safe scary things. Like roller coasters.”

“Want to take a seat, Mr. Nygma?” Jonathan asks, feeling truly lively for the first time since he ‘woke up’.

“Thank you.” Nygma puts the flowers down on the bedside table, places his bag on the floor, and leans forward. “You know, yours was the most energetic coma I have ever heard of.”

Jonathan laughs. Another first since the ‘energetic coma’. “I’m going to have to start calling it that.”

For a brief moment, Nygma’s earnestness becomes a more intense, bittersweet variety. “I can end a war or mend a heart, but I am the most difficult of gifts to grant. What am I?”

“Is that a riddle or a song lyric?” Jonathan asks, lounging against his upright mattress. He got to go to actual bathroom yesterday. Next step was without a walker.

“Riddle.” Nygma, back to normal, beams benignly at him.

Jonathan looks at the flowers. “I don’t have a vase.”

“Hm. Do you have a magazine?”

“Yes.”

Nygma holds out his hand. “Do you mind if I rip it up?”
“Not at all. Why the orderly thought I’d welcome a copy of *Sports Illustrated* is beyond me. Teen boy love sport, hurl durr.” Jonathan fishes it out from under the bed and passes it to Nygma.

While Nygma does whatever he’s doing with the magazine, Jonathan thinks about the riddle. Because he’s not good at riddles, he thinks about the riddle-giver. Why would Nygma bring it up? Why did he look more serious when he did?

Jonathan is better at thinking about brains than thinking about words. It takes a moment, but he gets it. He says, “Forgiveness.”

Nygma nods and holds up an improvised origami vase. “The bouquet is already wrapped in plastic that can contain the water, so this can just serve to hold it up.”

“Nice trick. Do it for me? I’m as weak as an arthritic hamster.”

As he sets up the flowers in the vase, Nygma says, “I told Dr. Thompkins that I would like to help you with closure, and that is not untrue. I am also here to apologize.”

“What for? You were doing your job, and I know that no charges are being pressed against me.” Jonathan figures the GCPD didn’t want to waste their time and money only to have the jury give him a pity acquittal.

“I didn’t do my job well enough. If I’d been faster, your father might not have...hurt you like this.” There is something in the man’s tone, and the deliberateness of how he’s arranging the peonies - which aren’t super common flowers in florist’s shops - that make Jonathan think this might be something else, too.

“Mr. Nygma. I’m the one who gets to decide whether to forgive you or not. Questioning that is like questioning my intelligence. Were you planning on questioning my intelligence?”

“No.” Nygma finishes fussing and places the bouquet in a prominent position. “Ta-da. Be sure to put some water in soon if you want to hold off wilting.”

“Why that choice of flowers?”

“In some versions of the language of flowers, they symbolize apology.” Nygma sits back down. He reaches into his bag.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jonathan asks.

“If you are thinking that it’s your father’s paper that took me days of cajoling to be allowed to return to you, yes.”

Jonathan holds it like it might break. He’s never been allowed to actually read it. His father’s desperate quest, laid out in dry and bloodless type.

*This is where I was born, boy,* says a voice. He knows the voice. It has never said words before, but he knows the voice.

“Why are you here?” Jonathan whispers.

Nygma tenses. “Jonathan?”

The Scarecrow laughs. It has an inferno inside it, always burning yet never consuming the prickly straw and rough burlap scraps of its exterior. *Did you think you were free of me? You might have*
crawled back to your world, but I’ll always be here. Ready for whenever you lower your guard and let yourself truly feel anything at all. Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and I frighten feathered things away.

Then it leaps onto the bed and grabs Jonathan by the throat and squeezes the air out of him, and it presses down on his chest and his heart is in his throat and he cannot breathe or move all he can do is scream

and

scream.

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When he comes back to himself, he’s in restraints again, but this time there’s a call button within reach of one of his hands.

“How long was it this time?” he asks the nurse when she appears. This is a different one.

“Only two hours, thankfully,” the nurse says. “You’re seeing a psychiatrist tomorrow. The neurologist thinks your episode is more her territory than his.”

Jonathan squirms. “Let me out, please.”

“If you agree to take an anti-anxiety pill that, full disclosure, will also make you a bit drowsy.”

Sounds nice. “Deal. Can I have, like, a lozenge or something?”

“I’ll ask.” She starts undoing the cuffs. “You’re back on warm water until tomorrow morning. If you promise to rest your voice for me, I’ll see about mixing you up an unofficial moderately-hot chocolate. With cinnamon.”

“Also a deal.” Everyone feels so sorry for him. If it gets him hot chocolate and foregone jury acquittals, then he welcomes it.

“We asked your visitor to leave, and told him politely not to return unless you give your express permission. He left a note for you on top of that paper booklet. Nice of him to get you flowers.”

She’s trying to lead him into opening up.

“My friends and I don’t have much in common anymore, and it’d just be weird to interact with them without being able to emote the way they’re used to. My new legal guardian considers me a devil child that she will only put up with the bare minimum that is required of her. My mother got away from her as fast as she could.” Jonathan says it lightly enough so that if the nurse wants to interpret it as a joke, she can.

She says nothing, but gives him serious side-eye on her way out.

Jonathan picks up the note.

I miscalculated the effect returning that paper would have on you, and I regret it. I know a bit about fathers whose actions have lingering echoes. I enjoyed our brief time together, and wouldn’t mind talking again. I understand if you aren’t interested. My personal cell phone number is below just in case.

Wishing you swift healing,
Chapter End Notes

"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul," is an Emily Dickinson quote.
This is the only chapter in which the child abuse is not implied/referenced. It's only a small part and not graphic.

Jonathan doesn’t get around to calling Mr. Nygma again. He doesn’t have any resentment towards him, in fact he was agreeable company for those few minutes, but Jonathan gets busy quickly. He has to rebuild muscle tone and strength. There are nutritional supplements involved, and physiotherapy. He’s got trauma counseling. He’s got a trial prescription of an antipsychotic. So far it just make him want carbohydrates so much that he’d hold up a bakery. His favorite nurse sneaks him an extra roll when she can.

He gets a pair of cops other than the ones that shot his dad wanting to know if there were any other murders, in an effort to see if they can close any of their missing persons cases.

“Not to my knowledge. Now go away, I’m enjoying *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat.*” Dr. Thompkins sent it to him. Jonathan sent a thank you note. He doubts his neurologist is as cool as the one who wrote the book. Oliver Sacks wouldn’t take all the credit for Jonathan getting better. He’d remember that Jonathan did the heavy lifting, from the inside.

“Are you sure?”

“He did have a day job too, you know. It wasn’t an around-the-clock quest. Go away.”

A number of doctors and scientists also come to talk to him and poke at him. Many of them have contributed to his financial aid, so he isn’t a brat to them. Much. A lawyer comes to go over what he’s inherited from his dad. Tedium but worthwhile. Jonathan is gracious to him, because having lawyers of any kind like you is useful.

One reporter from the Gotham Gazette shows up, presumably having bribed his way in, and Jonathan has another Scarecrow episode. Nobody lets a reporter at him again. It shouldn’t have happened at all. The antipsychotic is joined by an anti-anxiety, under the theory that it’s stress which sets him off.

“How are you feeling?” the counselor asks him each time they talk.

“Distant,” Jonathan replies each time.

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In his new dwelling (it’s not a home) in an old farmhouse on the outer edge of the wider Gotham municipality, Jonathan pretends not to be distant when his grandma backhands him across the face or gives him a spur-of-the-moment thwack with her cane. She will keep going if she doesn’t get a reaction, so he fakes the kind of distress and contrition she’s looking for.

In truth, he doesn’t care much. He feels pain but it doesn’t really bother him. It’s more like an impassive, automatic alert that his body is not benefitting from something. Also, it’s almost
impossible to hurt his feelings.

He thinks it’s pathetic how much of her strictness is just a front for how scared she is of him. The best evidence is her claim that the reason cooking and grocery shopping are the only chores he isn’t required to do is that he’d do them badly. She’s invested in a refrigerator that locks, and locks the cupboard too, supposedly to discourage snacking. He knows full well she’s nervous he might poison her. Which he won’t. Not as long as her death would mean uprooting himself with a tremendous hassle. She never does more than bruise him, and he puts makeup on any visible ones so that there won’t be any annoying fuss. You might think a better strategy would be kindness towards her troubled grandson, but he doubts that’s in her repertoire.

She doesn’t realize that Dad taught him how to pick locks after he taught himself from research, and that locking him in his bedroom nightly - which she claims is to keep him from partying and delinquency - is therefore hilarious. He can’t pick them quickly when all he has are improvised tools, but for this he doesn’t need to. Sometimes he deliberately rearranges food in the refrigerator or small items on the shelves in the middle of the night and she thinks it’s just her getting old and forgetful.

This used to be a functioning farm, with fruits and vegetables for home consumption and a little bit of special county fair sales, and alpacas for the wool. When he was little, he asked Mom if they could go to farm to see the alpacas, but there was a lot of shouting in the house between his parents and Grandma while Grandpa took Jonathan to their barn, where the alpacas were spending the winter. He never asked again. Maybe if Grandpa was still here, Grandma wouldn’t be as much of a screeching harpy as she is now, but he died six years ago and she sold all the alpacas.

They had gentle faces, Jonathan remembers.

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Jonathan thinks his outpatient therapist, Helga, is probably a much better parent than Grandma. He figures she has kids. He’s seen the picture on her desk. She’s not callous, but she doesn’t mess around with sentimental crap. She knows that leaves him unmoved. He doesn’t tell her about Grandma, because therapy is for things you want to fix right now. They have plenty of other issues to work on. Already, Helga has referred him to a free art therapy class for trauma victims twice a month. He went to one and wants to go again. She also gave him pamphlets on resources for LGBTQ+ youth when he mentioned that he is questioning.

At the beginning of their sixth session, she says, “It’s obvious to both of us that your very smart head is screwed on in a way that nobody else’s has ever really been. We’re going to be partners in feeling our way through this together. However, I have some experience in helping people with Schizoid Personality Disorder, and a few of the things that you’ve said you want to improve are things people with SPD struggle with. By now we’ve built some familiarity and trust between us, I hope, and maybe you’re more likely to trust my hunch.”

“Sure, no problem. You could have told me I’m a psychopath and I would’ve rolled with it. What does this mean for us?”

She pauses in taking her notes and chooses her words. “If you’re interested, we could try some of the techniques I’ve used with those patients. It’s only tangentially related to schizophrenia. Very tangentially. Hallucinations and delusions are not standard parts of an SPD diagnosis. Your hallucinations are chemically-based and therefore mostly your psychiatrist’s job, though I can help you cope with their impact on your life.”

“What symptoms do I have in common with SPD, then?” Jonathan is eating a cherry twizzler. Helga has a candy bowl on her desk, which gives her bonus points. His outpatient psychiatrist has a bonsai
tree, which is pretty, but you aren’t allowed to help prune it or rearrange the tiny ceramic animals living underneath its branches. Lame.

“Severe disconnection from other people. Especially their emotions, which you have to understand logically rather than intuitively. If you care, and much of the time you don’t. Difficulty feeling emotion yourself, and when you do, often faintly or inappropriately. Discomfort with emotional intimacy, and usually rejecting it. A sense that you are in a bubble through which all human interaction must be filtered. Coming across as “cold” to the point where others often find it unnerving. What do you think? I advise continuing to work on the panic attacks triggering your hallucinations, but we can attack your demons on multiple fronts.”

Jonathan lets the twizzler dangle from its mouth. Like a bird with a worm. “I don’t want or need to become social again, but I’d like to be part of this world. And navigate around the people in it.” And defy the Scarecrow.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

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“Hey, Cray-Cray.”

Jonathan’s in a different school district now, which is just as well. Better to put on a new shoe than force on one which no longer fits. Because he’s repeating a grade, he’s often bored, and is taking as many advanced classes he can to relieve some of it. The other students in them are high-achieving enough to not get on his nerves with incompetence. Lunchtime, though, is when all the steps on the evolutionary chain mix freely.

“If you need this chair, feel free to take it,” he says, not putting down his book of the workweek. He goes through two on weekends if there isn’t a big project or upcoming test. He’s been eating one-handed while holding open the paperback.

What’s-his-name plops himself down. “Like the nickname?”

“Two out of ten stars. A girl I knew in third grade beat you to it. When I said you could take the chair, I meant remove it and go sit somewhere else.”

Thingamajig grabs the book out of his hand. “Your dad was a serial killer.”

“And a high school biology teacher who was qualified to be a medical researcher but couldn’t get hired. Everyone forgets that part.”

“Oh my god. I’m going to tell everybody.”

Jonathan shrugs. “You’re going to tell everybody something that was in the papers. And on TV. For weeks. Knock yourself out.”

“I bet you helped him, freak.”

This part he doesn’t relish saying, but he knows nothing will disturb Who-Cares more than relaxed honesty. “Not with the killing itself. Mostly as lookout. Sometimes getaway driver as soon as I was qualified.”

As expected, this lack of prevarication stuns the guy into silence. “Why aren’t you in jail or a
nuthouse?"

“Mitigating circumstances and at least two psychiatrists in this municipality not being bumbling idiots. Give me back my book.”

“Why should I?”

Jonathan looks him in the eye. Responding to idiots is generally a waste of time and a silent stare is enough to make them fidget. But he just got to a particularly good part in the book, which is from the library, and he doesn’t want Generic Dude to pour soda on it or something. “Because you’re very afraid of mosquitoes and/or mosquito-borne diseases. Because it’s easy to breed mosquitoes in a bucket of stagnant water and collect the larvae in a jar. There’s the option of waiting for them to mature, or just pouring out the jar full of larvae. Into someplace they would not be welcome.”

A look of shock. As if reeking of insect repellent while indoors on a chilly day isn’t an obvious sign.

Seconds later, Jonathan resumes his book and his sandwich.

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Jonathan learns that Mr. Nygma has gone to Arkham. He crumples the newspaper up and takes it to the barn to burn. Jonathan is indifferent to the morality of the situation. His morals have been flexible for years, and now they are lax to the point of floppy. He doesn’t like that the one person so far who’s been on his wavelength, in a way he can’t define, has fallen apart and been locked up. He very much dislikes that might imply for Jonathan in the future.

Fortunately, Grandma blames the paperboy for the lack of a newspaper this morning.

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In Jonathan’s AP Psychology class, everyone’s supposed to find a partner to do a twenty-minute presentation with by the end of the month. He has interacted with his classmates so little that he doesn’t know many of their names, let alone whether any would be more tolerable to work with long-term than others. Everyone is milling around negotiating, and he’s sitting at his desk.

Then a slip of a blonde girl with a big grin plops down next to him. “You up for it, Jonathan?” She sounds very Valley Girl, but if she’s in this class and dares to work with the likes of him, she’s got at least some academic chops.

“I’m not picky. I either never learned your name or have forgotten it. I think you’re the girl who skipped a grade at some point.”

“Harleen, but my friends and my dark and mysterious project partners call me Harley. And you’re right. Us age outliers gotta stick together.” She offers her hand. Jonathan shakes it, because he will accomplish more on this project if Harley finds him agreeable. “I was thinking of doing something on Stockholm Syndrome and Lima Syndrome?”

“Remind me what Lima Syndrome is again?” Jonathan opens his notebook to a fresh page so they can brainstorm and start hashing out who will do what.

“It’s fascinating. There was this embassy in Lima, Peru, and a bunch of the people got taken hostage. I think it was a Japanese embassy? Anyway, the captors treated them more and more nicely as time went on? They let several of them go unharmed without asking anything in return, even when they lost leverage because of it. Since then it’s been used to mean a kind of opposite of Stockholm Syndrome? Whenever someone’s holding someone else in captivity, but starts to empathize with
them, think the way they do? To the point of maybe letting them go or helping them escape? It’s rarer than Stockholm, but what I’ve read says that Stockholm is not that common either, and most of the time people are just pretending to be on their ‘jailer’s’ side in order to survive and get what they want?”

“Comparing the mechanisms behind the two could be interesting,” Jonathan says. He notices that Harley’s earrings are flatly diamond-shaped. Only because they catch the light. “Do me a favor, though, and try to pronounce your sentences with periods rather than question marks if they’re not actually questions.”

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Jonathan’s partnership with Harley is nice, all told. Helga tells him that people with SPD can often build connections with others when they are all working towards a common goal or focusing on a common interest. Jonathan thinks this applies to him, too, because when Harley asks if he wants to hang out without working on the project, he finds himself uninterested.

He doesn’t like her sad face. Even though she bounces back. Helga says this is an encouraging sign that his empathy isn’t gone and can be cultivated.

They work at Harley’s house because Jonathan doesn’t want to introduce anyone to his grandmother if he can help it, and because if adults don’t confirm with Grandma that he’s not lying to her about his whereabouts, things can get ugly.

It’s the last weekend before showtime. They’ve learned and rehearsed all their lines, and they have all the important information ready to go. Since they’re ahead of schedule, and Jonathan likes showing off and Harley likes pizzazz, she’s making their poster extra fancy and he’s making a diorama that involves a lot of Lego people in chains made of painted Cheerios.

“Do you want to study psychology in college and stuff?” Harley asks. “And pass me the special pens.”

“Not neon puffy paint. Too undignified.”

“Of course not. Red glitter?”

He hands it over. “Do you want to study psychology in college?”

“Yes! I want to go on to med school from there, too, and become a psychiatrist.” She looks up and looks at his face. She stops smiling. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Uh huh. Right.”

Jonathan slows his breathing and grounds himself by touching nearby objects the way Helga’s taught him. He can’t hold off the Scarecrow by sheer willpower, but it’s possible for him to avoid the feedback loop of being stressed enough to increase the chances of the an episode because he’s so stressed about increasing the chances of an episode. “I’ve wanted to work in the mental health field ever since I was little and watched Dr. Phil. I’ve learned since then that he’s not actually qualified, but seeing someone helping other people feel better, and be better, just by talking to them, that struck a chord in me. Later I became interested in psychiatry because psychiatrists know psychology but are doctors, too.”

“You sound sad.”
“I don’t know how much you know about my past. Or what’s accurate.”

She puts down the glitter pen and sits up. “I heard the rumors about your dad being a ‘psycho killer mad scientist’ and I looked it up. Kids at school don’t talk about the part where you were in horrible torture for a long time, but you beat the odds here you are now. Annoying all the other AP students by quietly doing better than them at everything you put your mind to.”

If she’s willing to say that, she’s unlikely to mock him for telling this particular truth. “I still want to be a psychiatrist. But I’m screwed up now, in ways you don’t even know. Even a CAT scan shows it.”

Her eyes widen and she says, “Wait right there! Right there!” Then she dashes off.

Alone, Jonathan grimly glues a split Cheerio to the leg of a Lego man with the beginnings of a painted beard.

Moments later, though, Harley returns with a book. “This is *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison. It’s about her struggling with severe mental illness while also being a successful psychiatrist? She has to take time off to get herself settled, but she makes it work.” She puts it on the table next to the chips and dip she set out at the start.

“Appropriate.” He tucks it into his bag. “Thank you.”

She looks sad in a different way. “You don’t have to read it,” she says softly.

Jonathan realizes that she misread his tone. “I’m not good at feeling strong emotion anymore, or showing it, but I like you enough to not fake it. If I wasn’t grateful, I’d either fake it to seem normal, or if your feelings about me weren’t important I would be blunt about my ingratitude.”

“Oh. Then awwww. So you don’t process emotions the same way as you used to?”

“No. I’ve gone a bit, uh, cold.”

She takes a ring off one of her fingers and holds it up. “It’s a mood ring. They’re not that reliable, but they use your body’s warmth to guess. Here. You gotta return the book, but if you want, you can keep this.”

There’s a moment of humor from her fingers being smaller than his, but she gets it onto his right pinkie. It fits elsewhere, too, but not comfortably. “Thank you,” he says again.

The presentation is on Friday, and it goes really well. Harley follows him out of the room. “Can I talk to you somewhere more private?”

“We could go right by the service elevator?”

“Now you’re the one using excessive question marks.”

When they get there, Harley murmurs, “It’s been great spending this time with you.”

“It was fun, definitely. What do you need to discuss?”

She leans in and kisses him.

He shoves her away and runs.

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He doesn’t get home until it’s night. He still has the mood ring on his pinkie. He heads upstairs, where he has a secret stash of cookies under a floorboard.

Just before he enters his bedroom, Grandma accosts him, and she hits him and she tells him that she got a call about him playing hookey. He listens with a blank face. She hits him again. He doesn’t have enough fucks right now to play along. She hits him again.

Then she says, “Did you run off with that Quinzel girl to fornicate? I should’ve known you were the type to turn a good girl into a selfish slut. Just like your father.”

Right. Okay. *If that’s how you want to play it.* Jonathan doesn’t feel conscious anger. But, dreamlike, he pushes her down the stairs.

He didn’t know she’d bonk her head and that alone would kill her. Huh.

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After he’s done basic damage control, Jonathan ransacks his room until he finds a folded-up letter he’s been using as a bookmark. He takes out his cellphone. He bought it with Dad’s life insurance money, just like his mental healthcare, school supplies, and new clothes. He’s also going to use some of it for college. It won’t be enough, but will reduce his scholarship needs or loan burden. Grandma is - was- only obligated to feed him, shelter him, and keep him from severe injury and sickness.

He doesn’t know exactly how wiretaps and bugging happen, but it’s probably harder for authorities to track what people say on cellphones. He punches in the number. He is not afraid, and he is not panicking, but he nevertheless wants the number to work. Reinventing the wheel in this respect would be a headache.

“It better be important. Who is this?”

“Jonathan Crane. Sorry to disturb you at this hour. I know you’ve been extremely busy since you got out of Arkham. I need advice, Mr. Nygma.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't know, some psych meds really can make you crave carbohydrates. Like, crave them to the point where you aren't hungry at all yet you eat half a pack at hot dog buns in the middle of the night crave. It's not the most common, but it's one of the weirder side effects out there.
Chapter Notes

There is some discussion of medically-related weight and food issues.

Mr. Nygma’s tone becomes fractionally less snippy, suggesting he remembers Jonathan, and not with dislike. “What do you need advice about?”

“I just killed my grandmother. I didn’t mean to, but I’m not sorry, and I have no interest in turning myself in or in getting caught. You were a forensic analyst.”

“I am a forensic analyst. Never stopped. I just wear other hats now as well.”

“Right, of course. Advice, please?”

“Where do you live?”


Jonathan tells him, and adds, “The nearest neighbors are ten minutes away by car. Relatively isolated.”

Rustling sounds. “Every day in the United States, at least eight people are killed in accidents attributable to distracted driving, especially phone-related distractions.”

“And?”

“Iktsuarpok.”

“Huh?”


Jonathan fetches and flips through his paperback Merriam-Webster dictionary. He doesn’t see it there, so he goes into the part of the attic where his grandpa’s things are stored. Grandma never heard him creeping around late at night and cataloguing the potential resources. Grandpa must have loved crossword puzzles. Cryptic crossword puzzles. He left behind a big, dusty book to help people who get stuck figuring out obscure references.

There it is. “Iktsuarpok: Inuit word meaning the intense feeling of anticipation for a visitor that causes you to go outside to check if they’re there yet.”

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He doesn’t know when Nygma will arrive, but he wants to show appreciation, so he picks all the locks that bar access to food and sets everything out to make hot cocoa, or tea, or coffee. He goes to check to see that Grandma’s where he left her. In accordance with iktsuarpok, Jonathan is waiting on the front steps when Nygma arrives. The moment Nygma gets out of the car, Jonathan gets to his feet
and asks, “Was the Inuit word meant to be a test?”

“What? Oh, right. No. I get elliptical when I’m sleepy.”

“Want some coffee?”

“After you’ve shown me your grandma. Most of the time, people don’t bat an eye at an old person tripping and falling, but even if you were never charged you do have a reputation.” He smiles when Jonathan hands him one of the flashlights. “I like working with people who think ahead.”

Jonathan leads him into the woods a ways behind the barn. “It’s well-known at my grandma’s church that she hated crows. Flying vermin. Filthy creatures. I’ve gone to a few sessions of this one free art therapy class, and I painted a bunch of crows and truthfully told them I like feeding the crows scraps, since they’re omnivorous and it prevents waste. And to spite her. They thought that last part was a humorous exaggeration.”

“I assume this leads to your cover story.”

“Yes. Mind the log just ahead.” Jonathan points the beam of light at it to make it more obvious. “If you fell and died, it’d be difficult for me to explain myself to Mayor Cobblepot. How mad is he that I interrupted ‘private adult time’?”

“Um…”

“I heard him in the background. Your shirt collar is partly turned up and partly not. The partly-not part reveals what looks like a fresh bruise, but it’s mouth-shaped. I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable, just show you the extent of my gratitude for you helping out. I’m discreet.” Jonathan looks back to make sure Nygma isn’t angry. He looks more embarrassed, except for a slight, irrepressible smirk.

“We’re not trying hard to hide it, but we’re keeping it low-key,” Nygma says finally. “He’s irritated, but I reminded him that he’s run out on me to go talk to people, and either way it’s not on you. Let’s move on.”

“Not much farther. So, I was thinking that while I was out she noticed things missing from the kitchen, put two and two together, then went to go gather up the food to put a stop to it. Except she tripped on one of the many, many fallen tree trunks and logs around these parts - look, there’s one, there’s another - and hit her head on a rock. And the crows, so used to getting food from me, found her body surrounded by their favorites, and crows eat meat anyway. So she got pecked a ton. Making clues harder to find. There.”

Nygma peers at the body thoughtfully as they both shine light on it. “Nice touch putting her shoes and coat on. And the cane.”

“It wouldn’t make sense otherwise.”

“If she was holding the cane when she fell, it wouldn’t be at that angle. Lucius Fox is a smart cookie. I respect him and would prefer to do nothing drastic against him...I’m worth sixteen of my remedy. What am I?” Nygma puts on a pair of gloves and adjusts his hat before kneeling to reposition the cane. “I’ve seen you’ve put a lot of meat and…”

“Peanut butter and sunflower seeds. Crows like those a lot. That’s what she noticed was missing. I wanted to give them something other than garbage for once.”

“Right. It’s all around her. But - here’s the thing- the crows haven’t shown up.”
Jonathan restrains himself from rolling his eyes. “Crows sleep at night. I’m going to call late in the morning, when they’ve had time for breakfast. Not until I’ve made sure the crows have cooperated, of course. I was out past dinner, right, and I thought she’d gone to bed, and I didn’t realize anything was off until I slept in super late and she hadn’t tried to wake me.”

“It’s in your favor that you look like you weigh less than her.”

“I put her on an old plastic sled from the attic, I think from when my mom and her brother were kids, and dragged her on it.” Jonathan figures out why Nygma leaned on the word “weigh”. “A pound weighs sixteen ounces. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Even in the dim light, Jonathan can see Nygma grin from ear to ear. “Correct. I don’t normally give hints, but you’ve got a lot going on in your head tonight. Anyway, good start, but you need an alibi. Guide me to the house.”

****

Jonathan makes coffee for Nygma and hot chocolate for himself. Nygma finds out that Jonathan hasn’t eaten dinner and insists on making both of them sandwiches.

“I didn’t eat much dinner,” Nygma says.

“I skipped lunch as well. I’ll have a peanut butter and banana, if you insist. With the whole wheat.” The doctors had recommended certain foods to help Jonathan bulk up to something approaching average, and that was his favorite. “I haven’t put away the jar yet.”

“Ghoulish of you,” Nygma teases.

“I like a drizzle of honey on the banana slices. Cupboard just above.”

Armed with Jonathan’s sandwich and his own assembly of cold cuts and a token wisp of lettuce on white bread, Nygma sits across from Jonathan with a look of determination. “In real life, when was the last time someone other than your grandmother saw you?”

“My...classmate...Harley and I had a private talk that went wrong at around 12:15 PM. At school. This was less than ten minutes after the whole class and the teacher saw me. I didn’t want to deal with my disagreement with her and needed to clear my head. When I get too stressed, I sink back into how I used to be for between fifteen to ninety minutes, on average. It used to be up to two hours but my meds have dialed it down. Whoops, I forgot to take my meds.”

“Are you able to take them now?” When Jonathan nods, Nygma nods back and takes a bite of his sandwich.

Jonathan runs up to his room to grab his plastic pill organizer and pour the correct ones into his hand. He comes back down to find Nygma sipping coffee. There’s a big glass of water next to Jonathan’s plate, which wasn’t there before. Nygma has more of his sandwich while Jonathan swallows them down one at a time. Generic, therefore cheaper, versions of meds seem to only come in massive tablets and capsules.

“Nobody makes you take those, right?” Nygma asks.

“I wasn’t cleared to leave the hospital until the psychiatrist said so, and I had to take what he gave me, but nobody’s making me do it now. They help. It’s not like Arkham. I know Arkham’s a shitshow.”
Nygma clears his throat and takes something out of his pocket. It’s a small envelope. “So, I grabbed this on my way out of the house, and it’ll serve our purposes. The Mayor gave a speech this evening at a new wing of the Gotham Natural History museum. It wasn’t filmed, since all the news crews were busy with the latest high-profile chaos in the Narrows. A number of students, elementary through high, were invited to come hear the speech, have refreshments, and enjoy the museum free of charge. You left school early because you received a text message that a slot had become free and you should go to the museum immediately to pick up an official ticket. You were worried about traffic, so you left right away. You had the presence of mind to leave a message on your grandma’s landline’s answering machine. What a pity that she isn’t diligent about checking it.”

Jonathan takes the hint and walks over to the answering machine and plays back all new messages to make sure nothing will contradict the fake timeline. He’s still eating his sandwich. He hadn’t noticed how hungry he was, which is a common problem with him. The machine doesn’t record when a message was left. He takes out his cellphone, then stops.

“What?”

“Shtick-y ffood…”

Nygma snorts and darts to the kitchen to get a cup. He looks in the fridge. “Is the full-fat milk yours?”

“Mm.”

“Extra calories and fat are good. Four months nourished solely by IV in which you were still burning calories by violently struggling hasn’t lost its effect yet, I see.” Nygma pours a generous amount and brings the glass over.

Jonathan drinks, and the milk acts as a solvent to clear away the peanut butter and honey. He puts the rest of it on the coffee table and wipes his mouth. He mouths for Nygma to be quiet as he calls the landline. He doesn’t try to sound more enthusiastic than he ever genuinely does. That might raise suspicion. “Hi, Grandma? I just got a last minute ticket to museum event I was talking about. Someone had to cancel. I’ll be back late, okay? I’ve got my phone if you wanna check in. Don’t wait up.”

Mid-chew, Nygma just gives him a thumbs-up. When he can, he says, “The guest book will have your signature in it, and the person who checked the tickets will, if necessary, swear to the Virgin Mary and all the lesser-known saints that he saw you. He owes me a favor. Sign your name in my notepad for forging purposes.” He produces a small notepad and a pen.

Jonathan returns to the table, milk with him, and signs. “What do you want from me in return for all this? I’m warning you right now that sixteen might be legal in this state, but I’ll not be party to cheating on Mayor Cobblepot. Not worth it.”

The color goes out of Nygma’s face, and his hand gestures are whirlwind expanse. “No! Just - what - no! What made your brain even go there? What makes you think I’d either cheat on Oswald or go after someone so young?”

Jonathan says quietly, “No offense meant. I was just thinking of what the Penguin does to people who upset him. I forgot that it’s taboo, too. These days I have to consciously think about what’s considered immoral. I don’t have that automatic gut feeling anymore. My first impulse is just what’s advantageous. I’ve been occupied tonight and haven’t had the headspace to observe and analyze you. There are universal desires that drive us. As I don’t know yet what you want and fear, and I can’t give you wealth or power, I took a shortcut to logical potential motive.”
Nyga finishes his glass of water and closes his eyes. His face is red. He slips the notepad back into his pocket. “Can I use your bathroom?”

While Nyga’s absent, Jonathan does breathing and grounding exercises to guard against the Scarecrow. He won’t tell anyone else about tonight, but he wonders what Helga would think about him feeling calm when he killed Grandma, yet being on the verge of an attack because he might have screwed things up with Nyga.

Then he sees it at the corner of his eye. This is not a good time. It’s never really a good time, but it’s especially bad tonight. But instead of leaping onto him and holding him down, it stays right where it is. It removes its inconsistently-present hat. It...bows. In its voice of growls and hissing flame, it says, A promising start.

And vanishes.

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Nyga spends ages away, but he has seemingly reset himself to before Jonathan indirectly questioned his honor. Jonathan is scrubbing the rubber dishwashing gloves in the kitchen sink. He has filled with lots of Lysol suds as well as hot water.

“You wore those when handling her, I assume. Have you wiped down the sled?”

“Yes.”

“Put it back in the attic. Put a bunch of mementoes and junk on top.”

“Already done.”

“You’re a bit of a show-off.”

“I suppose.”

“Takes one to know one. Hey, look, I need you to watch.” Nyga reveals that he’s holding a key. He opens the cutlery drawer and places it inside. “When telling any cops about your grandma’s hatred of crows, also tell them that her hatred of ‘vermin’ extended to locking all the cupboards and the fridge to keep rats and roaches out. Tell them this key was always kept in this drawer, and that you had access to it and were able to unlock them whenever you wanted. How’d you get in this time?”

“My dad taught me how to pick locks,” Jonathan said. Nyga looks unhappy. “He involved me in everything non-violent that he could. The day I turned enough months after fourteen, he took me to get my learner’s permit and started teaching me how to drive for him. I was old enough to get my license only recently, but it was a cakewalk. He taught me basic cleanup, but eventually he started on phobics whose phobias can’t be triggered subtly and tidied away without taking too long for a clean escape.”

Maybe Nyga considers that par for the course. Maybe he has residual negative feelings about Gerald Crane, or the Crane case. Either way, he lacks enthusiasm as he shuts the drawer and leans backwards against the counter, arms folded. “Mm. Well, hopefully this won’t come up, but if anyone asks why your bedroom door only locks from the outside, it’s because it used to be a storage room before you moved in. She didn’t routinely lock you in. Deny that with mild surprise if anyone suggests that.”

“Why?”
This was the wrong thing to say, for some reason. “Jonathan, the fact that you’ve got bruises on your face is bad enough. If they know she abused you, in their minds that gives you a motive to kill her. That’s screwed up thinking, but that’s what they’re going to think. Especially with how happy they are to label anyone they don’t understand ‘insane’ and ‘dangerous.’

Jonathan strips off the gloves. He starts draining the water. This much Lysol might not be safe to wash dishes in. “I think ‘abused’ is a strong word, but fine. You know about these things. I’ll do what you say. Don’t freak out about the bruises. Didn’t tell my therapist because she wouldn’t be allowed to keep it confidential. I’ve always covered them in makeup. Nobody’s seen.”

Before Nygma can respond, his phone rings. He holds up a finger and goes downstairs to talk in the basement. Jonathan doesn’t run down to tell him that the floor is thin and Jonathan can still hear the conversation.

“Hello...yes, I made it...sorry....we’ll be finishing up soon....Jonathan did the majority of it before I arrive, you know maybe he’d be worth hiring as a lieutenant when he’s - I will be home within an hour, since this time I know the way. Everything is fine...you’re being a tiny bit of a hypocrite Oswald. Oswald. Oswald stop. I am fine. We are on friendly terms...Because I like puzzles. Do I need other reasons? He only needed advice and an alibi, easy-peasy…”

Then Nygma is silent for a long, long time. Eventually he says, “Fine. If you really want to - Oswald! No sixteen-year-old should act like covering up bruises is routine. Do you have any idea what I would have given for...

Jonathan concludes that this is a mixture of amusement and pity. That’s fine by him, if it gets him help with no other strings attached.

Another long silence. It’s broken when Nygma says gently, “Within an hour. Love you too.”

When he comes upstairs, Jonathan holds out a travel flask of coffee. “For the road.”

“Thanks.” Nygma takes it and stares at Jonathan for a moment. “If I don’t answer my phone, it’s because I can’t, but try again later. I won’t be angry. If you get mail with a return address that says it’s from ‘Cory Michaelson’, it’s actually from me. It’ll fit the story for you to sleep in on a Saturday morning anyway. Get some rest. You’ve got a big day ahead of you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Nygma. More than I can express.”

With an avuncular smile that reminds Jonathan of their previous meeting, Nygma shrugs and says, “Hey, I like puzzles.”

Chapter End Notes

I figure anyone who canonically responds to having to kill a random guy who catches him burying a dead body with a sigh and “great, now I gotta improvise” would treat all this as an unexpected team-building exercise. Until knowing what’s really been going on with Jonathan and his guardian, that is. Almost everyone has their tender spots.

Think I got them right? Let me know! :)
Paramedics come and check that she’s dead. Jonathan makes sure to be sitting quietly on a log near her body, staring at nothing, and gives a monotone summary of his story when they talk to him and drape a blanket over his shoulders. Grief is beyond him to fake convincingly right now, but numbness is acceptable. Normal.

A two county police officers arrive shortly thereafter. Tells them that since Jonathan’s grandmother is Dead On Arrival and beyond help, please stay back. Officer Yashere tells him that he is not under arrest, but some GCPD detectives are going to drive up from the city just to ask a few questions, and she would appreciate him staying inside the house until they arrive.

“It’s...you were previously involved in a criminal case, so it’s standard policy to treat this with more...caution. You aren’t being detained. This is doing us a favor. Helping us be thorough.” She says it in such a way that Jonathan could almost believe that’s all it is. She sounds like she’s often the one sent to give difficult news to vulnerable people, unless maybe they’re as racist as some of the people in this county, which is less diverse than Gotham City. It’d be their loss. She sounds like she would have found a way to not shoot his father. He appreciates that.

He says to her, but not to the man,“Would you like to come sit in the parlor while we wait for them?”

“I’m cooperative. I have nothing to hide.”

Her partner nods when she glances at him for agreement, and she follows Jonathan in. He indicates where he is fine with her sitting. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to do some homework. I’ve learned that keeping myself busy is helpful. I’ll bring it down and do it at the dining table. Would you like something to drink?”

“Is the tap water clean here? Point me to where you keep the glasses and I can fetch some myself while you go get your homework.” Smart of her. This way she doesn’t risk offending him by outright refusal, while also maintaining caution. She has that glass of water with her when he returns. He brings her a funny Dave Barry book to read, because people like people who provide them with laughter. She thanks him.

“You don’t have to read it, but it’s collection of short columns, so it’s bite-sized for a busy person.” He remembers to give her his best impression of a pained half-smile from someone upset but brave.

Then he dives into an unholy mound of physics problems. He excels in Biology, of course, and Chemistry has so much overlap that it comes fairly naturally. Intro to Physics is a different ballgame for him. Unlike everything else, he has to bust his ass to even get a B+. AP Physics is going to be an uphill climb when he gets there. He doesn’t have to take it, but the more AP classes he does well on, the more college credits will be out of the way, meaning the less money he’ll have to spend in the long run. It’ll also look good on merit-based scholarship applications.

Dr. Au has told Jonathan again and again the importance of him staying well-hydrated while taking the meds she prescribes. He has learned to take periodic sips of water even when he’s so into what he’s doing that everything else has faded. This time, everything fades away to the point where Jonathan almost jumps out of his skin when the detectives arrive.

And nearly throws a textbook at them when he sees who they are.

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Jim Gordon makes it clear his hands are nowhere near his gun. "Jonathan, we're not trying to scare you."

“I don’t get scared anymore, Detective. Not since it got burned out of me. This is rage.” It’s interesting, a distant part of Jonathan thinks, to feel something strongly again without the Scarecrow barging in to stop him. Maybe the Scarecrow just doesn’t like him being weak, and doesn’t see Jonathan’s current emotion as weakness. “I’m the only resident of this house now. Unless you have a warrant, I demand that you leave. Bring back the policewoman you just sent out. I’ll answer her questions. This is cruel and unusual.”

“We’re the most familiar with your family history, and it might be relevant,” now-Captain Harvey Bullock says. There's an undercurrent of schadenfreude that strikes Jonathan as unprofessional, along with how checking up on him is technically below his pay grade now.

Then Dr. Thompkins enters. Her voice is soothing. “Jonathan, I’m here to make sure your grandmother’s body is transported properly once Forensics are finished. While I wait, would you like me to sit nearby? Would that help?”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. He’s not angry at her. That will ground him enough to get through an interview. The less defensive he is, the less he’ll be suspected. “Okay. Come sit at the dining table, Detectives. I mean, Detective and Captain. Dr. Thompkins, please sit on one of the chairs over there. You may pour yourself a beverage first. Only you.”

****

Gordon asks if they can look around the house, and Jonathan says, “I can show you around.” Like with the glass of water, it’s not outright refusing, while retaining some protection.

It’s good that Nygma advised Jonathan on what to say about his bedroom door lock, because Gordon asks. He seems satisfied enough with the answer. Bullock doesn’t say much. Mostly peers and mutters. Though inside Jonathan’s room itself, he says, “You gotta lotta biology and psychology books.”

“Yes. I have great admiration for psychiatry for having taken me from where I was to where I am now.” Jonathan points. “I also like Japanese manga - comic books - but I don’t have many. Translations are expensive, and I have to go to, like, one particular store in the city. You have to read them right-to-left.”

They’re on the way out when Bullock says, “Wait just a second. One of the floorboards is wonky. There’s a gap.”

“I can explain!”

“Just a minute, Crane, whatever it is you’ve got, there’s no way you can hide…” Bullock kneels down and pries up the board. He pulls out a jumbo-size plastic bag full of precious Thin Mints, Tagalongs, and Trefoils. “Girl Scout cookies.”

It is imperative for Jonathan not to grin at how defeated and embarrassed Bullock sounds. “I said I can explain. Grandma doesn’t - d-didn’t - like me eating upstairs, but sometimes I get hungry when I’m studying. The board was already loose before I moved in. If you want to confirm that the Girl Scout cookies aren’t...evil...you can have one. One. Each. I’m running low and they don’t sell them except in spring.”
Gordon gives Bullock a stern look. “I think we’re done here.”

The rest of the tour goes fairly smoothly. Bullock makes a fool of himself again when he picks up a book in the attic. “Is this a code?”

Jonathan looks at it. “It’s my uncle’s old Portuguese-Yanomaman diary. He took a later edition with him to Brazil when he went to document the lives of the Yanomami people in the rainforest and advocate for their rights. He’s still there. Hard to get in touch with. It took almost a year before anyone was able to tell him about…about my mom dying…”

Gordon actually rolls his eyes at Bullock. It’s delightful.

They end up at the dining table. Dr. Thompkins is reading the Dave Barry book and seems to be enjoying it, though she lowers it to make eye contact with Jonathan and waits for his little nod before she resumes.

“We know you’ve already told the story, but please repeat your account of between when you left school yesterday and when you called 911 this morning.” Gordon’s hands are clasped together on the table. He looks noble. A statue to justice.

Jonathan does, with occasional hitches and stutters for subtle effect. Bullock keeps glaring at him and then remembering he’s not supposed to be.

At the end, Gordon says, “Thank you. Now, I don’t want to pry, but what was the nature of your disagreement with Harley?”

“I was told I’m not being charged with anything.”

“You’re not. You’re a witness. Your father’s activities made him enemies, and your recovery has made the news. It could well be that this really was an accident. It could be that someone with a grudge against Gerald Crane’s remaining relatives came here. You weren’t home, so…this is of course speculation. Just trying to leave no stone unturned.” So noble of face, that Jim Gordon. Jonathan wonders what he fears.

“We aren’t however, discounting the possibility that you killed her.” Bullock looks at Gordon and shrugs. “No stone unturned.”

“You liked that woman a lot,” Jonathan says, in epiphany.

“Who?” the men chorus.

“The one Dad almost drowned. He said Detective Bullock jumped into the pool after her and saved her. This is personal for you. You’d love it if I’d done something you could throw me in Blackgate or Arkham over. Such a hero.”

It’s unclear whether this is a good cop/bad cop thing, or whether Gordon is frozen in horror. Either way, Bullock leans in and says, voice low in volume and octave, “And where were you when that was happening, kid? And when you knew about it all along, and didn’t tell the police? Couldn’t prosecute you when you were out of your mind, but now you’re better. You got off scot-free. But you’re even worse now. Heartless. At large.”

Jonathan stares calmly back, the way he does with bullies. Bullock is a bully, too; Jonathan’s heard through the grapevine how he treated Nygma until the sweet puppy dog he once was bit back. “Do you like burgers? I do.”
Bullock leans back. “Uh…”

“I suspect you do. If you like cheap burgers, the kind you get in diners, a lot of that meat is imported. Otherwise they couldn’t keep up with demand. My uncle, he’s written us letters from where he is. The Yanomami are having their land sold out from under them. To ranchers. Who cut down the ancient trees and kill all those cute monkeys and un-cute but important bugs, eat or drive out the colorful birds, slashing and burning. Bringing disease, hunger, and homelessness to the Yanomami. They’re a fierce people, and they snort hallucinogens that make their snot drippy and green, which is weird, but they don’t deserve that. Or the animals, or plants. We aren’t glad about it. We shake our heads. But we like our burgers, you and me. You know? I bet at least one of us here is going to eat one within the next two weeks.”

There is silence. Jonathan takes a sip of water, composes himself, and continues, “I’m not proud that I bought into what my dad was selling, just because he yelled at me when I argued and made it sound like not helping him equalled saying I was glad Mom was dead. I know it was wrong. I know I should have been stronger. I’m sorry people died. I’m just trying to show you that to me, that woman was like a Yanomami woman. My dad wasn’t a burger. He was my world. He made damn sure of it. Don’t throw that in my face when I’ve done nothing since then but try to recover from that night.”

Bullock strokes his beard thoughtfully for a second, and says, just above a whisper, “So’s everyone a random person in a rainforest now? I pity you.”

Ngyma wouldn’t like this, but that crosses a line. Jonathan tips his drinking glass over, letting water spill. "If you hadn’t killed him, he could have fixed me. I wouldn’t have been tortured in ways none of you can comprehend for so long.”

Dr. Thompkins gets to her feet, and Gordon says, “Jonathan, we didn’t want to. He was charging at us with a weapon. We warned him. You were hurt. We had to get to you.”

“There it is! Gotcha!” Bullock waggles a finger at Jonathan. “You’re upset we killed your dad because that caused trouble for you. You don’t care about losing your father. Bet bashing Granny’s head in was just like SWATTING A FLY!”

This time, Jonathan doesn’t do Helga’s breathing exercises. He doesn’t try. He free-falls into the Scarecrow’s arms.

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The Scarecrow sneaks up from behind, but it’s no surprise. What’s a surprise is when it says, Look what happens when you don’t resist. My gift to you. A coarse, crackling hand pats his head before shoving him out of the chair.

There is a Jonathan on the floor, screaming, crying, thrashing as he tries to escape. Or fight. Or shrink into himself and become a harmless, impossible-to-harm little atom of a person.

For the first time, there’s also another Jonathan. He’s trapped inside the first and can only see and hear what the first one does. But he is calm. Beautifully calm. Seraphic. He can breathe easy and is in no pain. The body he’s inside is making a lot of noise, but that’s not his concern. Unlike Standard Jonathan, he can understand everything he hears.

The moment Jonathan lets out his first shriek and topples over, Bullock says, “Jesus shitfuck hell-damn-Christ!” If Second Jonathan were in charge right now, he’d find that funny. Gordon runs to Jonathan’s side, or as close as he can get without getting hit but a stray limb, but Dr. Tompkins says,
“Wait. Let me check his wallet. It’s common for people who have seizures and such to carry instructions just in case. I saw it on a shelf by the door.”

Bullock walks closer to Jonathan, but stops from farther away than Gordon did. “He was like that when you visited him, right after?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Tompkins is still out of Jonathan’s field of vision, but she presumably finds his card. She says, “Name...date of birth...blood type...emergency phone number...condition is listed as ‘seizure disorder accompanied by temporary psychosis’...’Do not move unless advised to by Dr. Amanda Au at the number above, and/or position is hazardous, and/or episode has lasted more than ninety minutes.”

“An hour and a half?”

“He did this for four months, Harvey, it’s a major improvement. ‘Remove heavy objects from immediate vicinity. Supervise for the duration without attempting unnecessary touch. If only symptoms are flailing, screaming, and crying, these are normal and don’t require additional intervention. Self-injurious behavior not a concern unless multiple medications recently missed.”

The glimpses Jonathan gets of Gordon show him looking grim. “I’ll go explain to everyone outside. They’re probably worried. Le - um, Dr. Thompkins, please call Dr. Au. Harvey, supervise Jonathan. The uncomfortable fact that you shouted at a brain-damaged minor and then he had a ‘seizure’ will look better on your report if you can add that you stayed with him protectively afterwards.” He leaves. Dr. Thompkins’ footsteps go to another room.

Standard Jonathan’s energy has flagged for now and is quietly begging in unformed proto-languages instead, and he’s more of a trembling ball than a live wire. Bullock is leaning against the table, gripping the edge, and said, “Go back to screaming, maybe? This is making me sad.”

When Jonathan immediately lets out a single scream, Bullock yelps, startled. “Can you understand me like you are right now?”

Jonathan starts rocking back and forth as well as holding himself, sobbing and babbling, and Bullock sighs. “I’m not letting you off the hook, Crane, but I see there’s gotta be a high caliber of evidence to get judge willing to sentence you to anymore than a life of recurring that . Good thing almost all the Forensics guys and gals out there worked on catching your dad. They get it. We had to replace Nygma. I miss him sometimes. More than I thought I would. Nutcase from the start, but he got reliable results reliably fast…”

Bullock says nothing else, just watches, until Dr. Thompkins returns. “She says we’re doing everything right, and to call back in two hours either to tell her he’s fine or to tell her what hospital he’s en route to. The ninety-minute thing is calibrated for random locations. Home is safer.”

“Okay. You both think I’m being ridiculous.”

“It makes sense, Harvey. I know you loved Scottie. Maybe you still do. But you can’t make it twist and overtake your detective skills.” She pauses. “Such as they are.”

“Gee, thanks.” But he chuckles briefly before he enters Jonathan’s field of vision as a concerned face. “You and Jim finally managed to put on your big-kid pants and work together without squabbling or whining. She’s happy with someone, she’s not even around, and I should...Anyway. What are we going to do when we need to move on and he still needs a babysitter? There’s that friend of his he mentioned…”
“There are few things a teenage girl would want to do less than spend an hour watching over a teenage boy - that it sounds like she probably has a crush on - while he’s in that state. He wouldn’t be thrilled either.”

Second Jonathan’s gratitude for Dr. Thompkins increases.

“Then what?”

“He offered to answer questions from ‘the policewoman you just sent out’. He might respond well to waking up with her there, if she’s available.”

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It’s forty-three minutes total before he comes back. The agreeable cop is sitting in a kitchen chair near him. “Jonathan? It’s Officer Yashere from this morning. Do you need anything? Water? Aspirin?”

“Two Tylenol, please. Medicine cabinet, second shelf, first floor bathroom.” Jonathan gets up, muscles stiff and creaking. “I’m going to call Dr. Au.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to hear from you,” Officer Yashere says, giving him an assessing glance. Jonathan does. She is. Jonathan checks his text messages, of which there are an unexpected number. Moments later, Officer Yashere gives him the pills and one of the many bottles of Gatorade Jonathan put in the fridge. When she gives the expected spiel about how it’d be a good idea for Jonathan to stay with someone else tonight, or have someone stay here, he says, “I’ve got an old friend I can stay with if I need to. Don’t worry about me.”
Jonathan doesn’t feel like finishing up his homework that night. He takes a very long, almost-too-hot shower because that helps him feel realer in his own skin. He also touches himself because that helps too, though he’ll never tell anyone except Helga. Thinking of nothing in particular. Lazy about it. Slide of skin. Autonomy. Life.

Helga says it’s good to do things that appealed to his senses after an attack is over. Jonathan makes mac and cheese not from a box, and adds bacon. He can only eat some of it. More than half a plate of rich food and he might throw up. Which isn’t going to be fun if anyone invites him to Thanksgiving this year. He boxes up the rest and put it in the fridge. He changes into flannel pajama pants and put on a t-shirt from a “fun run” he’d done as a freshman, washed so many times that it’s become the softest thing in his wardrobe. He has some tangerines for dessert, and thinks of that poem about stealing plums. *Forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet and so cold.*

****

He’s considering whether to watch a video or not when his phone rings. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Harley?”

“Hi.”

“The cops just left. They asked questions about you.”

“Oh.”

“They said your grandma’s dead?”

“She is. She accidentally fell and hit her head.”

“They think it’s suspicious.”

“Yep.”

“Is it suspicious?”

“Only if they insist on it being.”

“Did you tell them I kissed you?”

“No. Why would I?”

A sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“It wasn’t their business.”

“I didn’t tell them you shoved me. I told them I asked you if you wanted to hang out later and you said you couldn’t and that I felt hurt because you keep rebuffing me. And that you left without saying where you were going. Is that an okay answer?”

“You need to work on your self-esteem and craving for validation.”

“Jonathan, please. I’m trying. I’m sorry I surprised you. I shouldn’t demand things from you. From
anyone, but especially not you. I know you try."

“I’m not mad at you. It was an okay answer. I’m really tired, though. Can we talk on Monday?”

“You’ll be in class?”

“I don’t see why not. Bye.”

After some thought, Jonathan fetches a cord to tie the mood ring around his neck. He doesn’t want his finger to feel constricted while he sleeps.

***

Jonathan can’t remember what he’d dreamed of, but he wakes on Sunday morning with a singular purpose. It takes almost an hour to drive to his old house. Especially since he’s taking country roads and avoiding the city.

He hasn’t been there since his father’s death. It’s a forgotten shell of a thing. Dad’s estate lawyer tried to get it sold on Jonathan’s behalf, with his permission, but nobody wanted it. The sun isn’t high up yet. It gets into Jonathan’s eyes.

He parked his car in the driveway. It was Mom’s car, actually. Dad’s van was confiscated as evidence and is now sitting in some storage locker Jonathan hasn’t bothered to investigate. After Mom died, Dad kept it covered under a tarp in the garage except to occasionally wash and wax it and make sure it was in good working order, despite no intention to let it be driven. It’s a small, modest asset that’s everything Jonathan needs in that department. In those respects it’s much like Mom was.

The house is not his concern for now. He takes a sharp-tined garden fork with him as he marches out to the dry, nearly dead field he’d always been able to see from his bedroom window.

“You’re still here, huh?” he asks the scarecrow.

It can’t speak, not on this plane of existence, and it doesn’t have the fire. Otherwise it looks just the same. A dead, shriveled thing, arms spread wide.

“Let’s get you off that post. You’re not above me.” He isn’t physically strong, but he leans his entire weight into the shove, and when it’s down he pounces on it the way it likes to pounce on him. He lifts the garden fork high for the first blow. “It’s not just about the hitting. It’s about the tearing.”

Many blows in, he realizes he’s yelling. That’s better than screaming. Eventually he tosses away his tool and starts tearing at the horrible thing with his bare hands. Doughy. Moldy. Boneless. A ghoul of straw and rags.

Then he feels something hard. Small, but hard. Metal. He pulls it out. It’s a watertight cylindrical capsule. Scratched onto its otherwise smooth stainless steel surface is “GC 4 JC”.

Jonathan removes the shrink wrap cocooning it and unscrews the cap. He tips it sideways and a rolled-up piece of paper falls out. It says,

_I know you fear this most. 4 backup doses hidden in the house. Love, Dad._

In his bones, Jonathan knows that if he goes into that house alone, he’ll have another attack. Maybe if he wasn't alone...
Nygma whistles when he sees the scarecrow’s current condition. “You lost the chance to destroy it with a crowbar, you know.”

“Hah. Thanks for showing up.”

“I like puzzles. So I assume he left no clues, in case somebody else read it.”

Jonathan squats to poke at the remains in grim fascination. “He also got serious tunnel vision by the end. I’m irritated that nobody knew this while I was in the hospital. They might have found a way to fix me sooner.”

“If you start obsessing over your father’s mistakes, we’ll be here all day. Come on, let’s go look for clues.” Nygma reaches out to take Jonathan’s arm to help him up, but Jonathan flinches away.

“Please don’t touch me unless you have to for safety reasons,” Jonathan says. He gets up on his own.

Nygma frowns for a second but quickly turns it into a smile. “Right. Is there a way I can keep you grounded while we’re inside the house?”

“Talk a lot about anything except my family and dad’s case,” Jonathan says, leading the way.

Rubbing his hands together in glee, Nygma says, “How about I tell you a number of stupid things Harvey Bullock has said and done?”

Nygma gestures with the crowbar he brought along, in case of prying up floorboards, as he tells Jonathan about the time Bullock almost drank hydrochloric acid instead of his cup of coffee while hanging out in the forensics lab and calling Nygma a ‘whackmobile’. “...Which sounds like something Zsasz would call his car.”

“You should have let him drink it,” Jonathan says, amused. So many cobwebs and so much dust. The first floor looked like it had been abandoned for decades.

“I was a different man then, unfortunately. There isn’t much furniture in here.”

“The estate lawyer who came to see me when I regained lucidity asked if I’d like things sold off on my behalf. I said everything except Mom’s car and a few of my personal belongings. I put as much into savings as I could.” Jonathan examines the floors as they walk for any sign of previous prying. Nygma is doing the same for the walls. Nothing looks noteworthy.

Nygma snaps his fingers. “You said your father had tunnel vision near the end. Fear. His fear. Your fear. Right?”

“Uh huh.”

“But this hunt is for you, not him. Your fear. What in this house has scared you? Top four?”

After a moment, Jonathan says, “The boiler in the basement because it hissed. Underneath my bed, because monsters. The rafters in the attic, because we had a wasp infestation for awhile. The upstairs bathroom shower drain, because when I was very little and mostly took baths I thought I would dissolve and flow down it if I didn’t get out of the tub before pulling the plug.”

“Ooooh.” Nygma’s entire face speaks of joy. He really does love puzzles.
“No splitting up.”

“Of course not.”

Jonathan’s bed isn’t there anymore, but in the exact center of the rectangle underneath where his bed used to be, one of the boards is crooked. This is easier for Nygma to spot than for Jonathan. Nygma doesn’t have OCD, he says, but he likes patterns, and he quickly sees when patterns are imperfect.

“Have you considered that you might be on the autism spectrum?” Jonathan asks as Nygma is mid-excavation.

Nygma doesn’t look at him, but his posture stiffens. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.”

“There it is. Sneaky little bugger.” Nygma crouches and plucks the capsule out of the gap. “One of course hopes that he knew how to preserve it with full effectiveness. Vaccines don’t have unlimited shelf life.”

“Tunnel vision,” Jonathan repeats.

Jonathan gets the one taped just inside the interior of the shower drain. Nygma’s fingers are slightly longer but Jonathan’s are slightly more slender. Which is saying something. Dad provided a helpful loop as part of the protective wrapping to hook a pinkie through.

The one fastened to a rafter in the attic is too high up for either of them. There aren’t any ladders in the house or in either car.

“Can I sit on your shoulders?” Jonathan asks.

“Nerve-racking but feasible. Won’t the contact bother you?”

“No, because it’s purely practical. The only kind of physical contact that bothers me is when it’s someone being genuinely kind or affectionate,” Jonathan says matter-of-factly. “My therapist helped me figure it out.”

Their combined heights are more than enough. When they get down to the basement, they spend ages examining the boiler and everything surrounding it.

“There’s no way he could have put it inside, right?” Jonathan asks.

Nygma taps an irregular rhythm on the side of the boiler. “Not easily. Especially not if he wanted it to be any good to you. Not sure how much your father knew about plumbing anyway. This was all very ambitious for a biology teacher.”

“He couldn’t find steady work as a neurobiologist, so he took something low-paying and boring so at least he’d have a regular paycheck for his family. Mom was a theater costumer. It didn’t pull in big bucks but it made her happy.”

“Yeah?”

“Taught me how to sew and mold papier mache masks and make plaster props and all that. I’ve asked the teacher of my art therapy class if I could maybe take over one day. She’s sorting out the logistics.”

Nygma tilts his head, looking pleased. “You’re smiling. Really smiling.”
“Oh?” Jonathan’s face does feel odd.

“That wasn’t me telling you to stop.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Jonathan snaps his fingers in an imitation of Nygma earlier. His face stops feeling odd. “When I was afraid of the boiler, she asked me what I imagined it looked like inside. I said I imagined a big snake curled up in it. She asked what it ate, and I said it probably stuck part of its body through the plumbing and came out the kitchen sink. To eat all the roaches and mice attracted by our food. Then it slithered back into the boiler to sleep all day but hiss whenever we came near. She asked me to draw a picture, and she taped the picture to the wall above the kitchen sink to show the boiler snake we knew what was up. She said the hisses after that were apologies.”

“You mom sounds nice.”

“She was. Kitchen sink?”

Without Nygma, Jonathan wouldn’t have thought to try yanking out one of the hot/cold knobs of the faucet. It’s inside the pipe under the cold knob.

“Forensics,” Nygma says with a smirk.

Outside again, in the afternoon sun, Jonathan holds the four cylinders up to the light. “I’m going to keep these safe and I’m going to find out how it works.”

“Sounds good. Want help with that?”

“Maybe one day.” Jonathan looks up at him. “Thanks. For all this.”

“You’re welcome. Do you know what’s happening with your new guardian?”

Jonathan sighs and put all the containers back in his hoodie’s big kangaroo pocket. “It’s my uncle, but he’s in the Amazon rainforest. When they finally get in touch with him, in who knows how long, he’s not going to be thrilled. From what I remember he’s a lot better than Grandma was, but I don’t want to live with someone whose life I’m ruining. Besides, I might have to move to where he lives when he’s in the country. I was just getting used to this school.”

Beckoning, Nygma goes his car, unlocks it, and pulls something from the glove compartment. It’s a large envelope. “These are the papers to file to become an emancipated minor, if you’re interested. I could pull a few strings. Twist a few arms. Your grandma left you everything.”

“She did? Seems improbable. She used to tell me I’d never get a penny from her, so don’t even think of trying anything.” Jonathan takes the envelope and undoes the metal clasp to have a look.

“Twisted a few arms,” Nygma says, winking. “But it is provable that you never saw the will, and there is no evidence that she ever told you about it. It’s not a great fortune anyway. Still, you need it more than that starchy preachy church she originally willed her money to.”

“You’re freaking me out a little. With the niceness.” Jonathan means for that to sound lighthearted, but it comes out serious. He notices he’s backed away. Interesting, that he’s become more so much more viscerally (rather than intellectually) averse to kindness than cruelty. Helga says it’s not just a schizoid-ish thing, but that in his case it reminds him of his difficulty reciprocating those kinds of feelings.

Nygma closes his eyes for a moment. He breathes deeply. When he opens them, they’re sort of...squinty. “This is between us. What I’m about to say is strictly confidential.”
“Yes.” It’s not like Nygma doesn’t have way more dirt on Jonathan than the other way around.

“When I was fifteen, I was in a brief coma. Two days, not four months. My father said I’d ridden a bike into a tree. My injuries were not consistent with that. It was blindingly obvious. But he knew people. The right sort of people.” Nygma looks back at the house. His next words are nearly inaudible.“I would have given my frontal lobes to have someone who cared.”

“I suppose someone with no frontal lobes could still appreciate affection. Lobotomies had variable results in their day.” Jonathan wonders what Nygma’s father was afraid of. And what he wanted. The two most important drives, Dad said.

Nygma gives a hollow laugh. “So don’t worry, Jonathan, this isn’t altruism. This is selfishness. Wish-fulfillment.”

“With bonus puzzles.”

“Yeah.” Nygma looks at his watch. “Oswald expects me for lunch…”

“Thank you for your selfish wish-fulfillment, Mr. Nygma. I’ll let you know about the emancipation papers.” Nygma still looks upset, so Jonathan clears his throat and asks, “High five? Successful scavenger hunting?”

They solemnly high-five.
On Sunday night, Jonathan hides the four vials in four different places in what had been his grandmother’s house. His now. He deliberately talked to Nygma as though analyzing them is a distant dream, but all he’s waiting for is a way into his school’s lab. If he can secretly get in after hours and spend a few hours there every night, with his father’s paper and his own hospital records as a guide…

But the rooms full of expensive or dangerous equipment in his school are accessed via numerical codes, not by locks he can pick. Hmm.

He texts Nygma to let him know he is okay. Nygma is projecting his own trauma on Jonathan, he knows now, and the more Nygma feels like he’s healing himself by helping Jonathan, the more he’ll continue to help Jonathan.

Then Jonathan goes to use the clunky, but serviceable, desktop PC in the basement and plays Tetris. His uncle parked it there before going to Brazil. Jonathan likes making odd objects slot together neatly. He falls asleep with his face on the keys, wakes at about 3 am, and the computer tells him that he got an email.

Dr. Tompkins worked on a Sunday for his sake, because she believes he’s been through enough already. She says his grandmother’s death has been ruled an accident.

He smiles, shuts down, and goes upstairs to brush his teeth and go to bed.

***

On Monday, first period, Jonathan is called to the principal’s office. He has a waiver excusing him from gym class and all other athletic activities, so that’s when he gets to do his elective Crafts and Fiber Arts class. He’s been put in charge of some of the Greek masks for an upcoming school production of Antigone. He’s irritated by the interruption but doesn’t show it.

“Full disclosure, the police asked me for a statement about your whereabouts on Friday. I’m sorry for your loss,” Principal Watkins says the moment he takes a seat. She has a gazillion pictures of her children and pet dog, and her manicure doesn’t completely hide a fingernail-biting habit.

“Thank you,” Jonathan said, looking appropriately droopy. He’s pretty sure.

“You still have to have detention for skipping class. Just the one.”

“I understand. Policy.”

She fiddles with the pearls around her neck. “Do you have someone taking care of you right now?”

“I’m alone for a bit, until either someone manages to contact my uncle or Social Services gets
impatient. Though I’m looking into the possibility of emancipation. I want to stay in this school, for one thing. When’s my detention? Where? Who with?”

“Tomorrow right after school, one hour, room 314, Mr. Brooks. I believe he’s your Intro to Physics teacher?”

“Yes. Out of curiosity, did he volunteer?”

“I believe he might have. Why?”

“No reason.” Except that Mr. Brooks seems very happy whenever Jonathan asked him for help explaining that day’s lesson after class, and leans in closer than he needs him to. Mr. Brooks, a married man in his late forties, no children. Sponsors the Robotics club. Bright neckties. Large hands. Has his own private office, unlike most, due to seniority and possibly nepotism. Knows all the key codes to all the doors.

“I won’t keep you from your class. Remember that our school counselor is here for you, if you need to talk to someone.”

“I’ve got a therapist and a psychiatrist, thanks.”

***

They have a test in AP Psych, which Jonathan forgot about but he knows everything well enough. Harley sits in a corner.

However, Harley comes to sit with him at lunch. She’s experimenting with blue eyeshadow and red lipstick, and wearing tights under shorts that barely fit the dress code. It suits her, actually. She elevates it. He’s less likely to assume girls are vapid because of their clothing than he used to be.

“Am I welcome?”

“If you don’t touch me.”

“Again, I’m sorry about that.” She puts her backpack on an empty chair next to them. She's eating one of those school lunches that looked like warm, vivid plastic on a tray. Jonathan always packs his. Ages of hospital food have been enough of this sort of thing for a lifetime. The lunch line is too crowded anyway.

“We’re good. Well, you are.”

“You’re off the hook about your grandma, right?”

He nods. He puts away his book on how the pharmaceutical industry works.

“Bad news.”

“Oh?”

“Someone spotted me kissing you. Everyone’s heard.”

“Whatever.” He stabs his straw into a box of vanilla-flavored protein shake. He accidentally skipped dinner, so this is a way to add extra calories to his lunch without hurting his stomach. His sandwich has spicy salami that is two days away from only being suitable for the crows, so he has to use it up.

She plunges her fork into food-like mass. “There are kids who think you rejected me because you’re gay.”
“Inaccurate, but whatever. I don’t think I’m straight, but that’s like saying our lunch is neither Mongolian Hotpot nor French bouillabaisse. There are lots of options.”

“There are kids who say Mr. Brooks wants to you-know-what with you. There are rumors about him that haven’t ever been proven, and there haven’t been official complaints, but it inspires gossip.”

Jonathan raises his eyebrows. “Does anyone think I want that?”

“It varies. Mostly no. People say you’re a cold fish. In the girl’s bathroom I’ve heard girls saying it’s such a waste ‘for a boy like Crane to be kinda cute.’”

“They’re not wrong, on either count.” He offers her a piece of his sliced-up pear. He put a little diluted lemon juice on the flesh of it earlier to keep it from going brown. Dad always used to do that when packing his lunches.

“You can give back the mood ring if it makes you feel awkward,” she says as she takes the pear slice.

He fishes it out from underneath his shirt. The cord it’s hanging on is pretty long. “I just wanted to check to see if you’re okay with me wearing it visibly.”

She puts a hand over her mouth in surprise. “Um. Maybe not at school until the hubbub dies down? But not visibly, whenever you like. I didn’t know you liked it that much.”

“I need something to prove I have moods, don’t I?” He gives her a crooked little quarter-smile and tucks it away again.

***

Jonathan has AP Bio after lunch today. No Harley here, and everyone is avoiding him.

“Look,” said Ms. Sanchez, rolling her eyes, “I see three of you huddling together rather than one of you splitting off and working with Jonathan. He doesn’t have cooties.”

The guilty trio, one guy, one girl, and one neither, stares at Jonathan like he has something much worse. “But he’s a…”

“Yes?”

“He’s a serial killer Ms. Sanchez everyone knows,” the guy mutters hastily.

“No, his father was a serial killer. His father was also a biology teacher. Does that mean I’m a serial killer? No. And we’re doing a dissection and Jonathan is sufficiently amazing at those that you’re going to have the easiest time of everyone in class.” Ms. Sanchez tells things like it is, rides a motorbike, and teaches a salsa class on Saturdays. She’s from Gotham City and moved out here when there was an job opening. Her hair is all in ringlets that she ties back when it’s a lab day rather than a lecture day. Jonathan can imagine Dad falling for her in a world where he’d gotten over his grief like a normal person.

One of the trio comes to sit next to Jonathan. “Some kids in band have been avoiding me lately since I came out, and I don’t want to be a hypocrite,” they say. “Warning you, I hate dissections.”

“You take the notes and I’ll do the cutting up,” Jonathan says. His school’s three little science labs have been recently revamped and restocked, as they are every eight to ten years. The scalpels are still shiny. In a few more years they’ll become dull, and the microscopes will get grubby and fall prey to
accidents, and the bunsen burners will be scorched, and the lone centrifuge will scuff and creak. For
awhile, though, both this and the Chem lab would do nicely.

The only reason Jonathan’s fingers don’t twitch with wanting is that he needs them steady. Frogs
have itty bitty lungs.

***

Spanish II and American Literature are both uneventful, except for finding out what work he missed
and discussing how to make it up with the teacher. On Jonathan’s way out, Mr. Horowitz returns the
essay everyone else got back on Friday. “B-plus. It was very good overall, but some of the it felt
more like psychoanalysis of the main characters than literary analysis.”

That night he eats the rest of the food he made on Saturday night, and reads through the
emancipation paperwork again. He texts Nygma that he’s definitely interested, and asks if he needs a
lawyer.

***

The next day brings International History, Pre-Calculus, and Intro to Physics. Tues-Thurs classes are
longer to make up for being less frequent. When Jonathan runs out of biology courses, it’ll be the
perfect time to take up Chemistry II alongside a physics course. AP Chemistry senior year, naturally.
He has a chart at home mapping it all out, showing him how to make up for his repeating a grade
with as little frustration as possible.

The first two are all very ordinary. During Intro to Physics, Jonathan pays attention to Mr. Brooks in
a manner he’s never done before. Jonathan doesn’t tend to pay attention to people in ways that don’t
suit his purposes, but once he starts, he’s thorough. This includes experimenting. When he plays with
a bit of his own hair, for example, Mr. Brooks stumbles over his sentence. Twice, he calls on
Jonathan even though Jonathan isn’t the first person to raise his hand. During a quiet moment as
everyone’s focused on their workbook, Mr. Brooks keeps glancing at Jonathan despite himself when
he starts chewing his pencil.

“Remember to study for Thursday!” Mr. Brooks announces to everyone. Jonathan approaches him
once everyone else has rushed out of their last class for the day.

“I think I’m your detainee,” Jonathan says. He unzips his hoodie. He’s deliberately wearing a shirt
that was already on the big side for him pre-Incident, and now the increased sag of it has resulted the
neckline showing a lot of his collarbone.

Mr. Brooks thinks he’s better at hiding his gaze than he is. “I...uh...I suppose you are. There are two
others, we’ll see if they…”

“Yes?”

“We’ll see if they’re there yet or not. You can follow me.”

***

By Thursday, Jonathan has done two important things: First, bought a small but accurate audio
recording device, and practiced using it. Second, learned the material for the physics test so well that
he is not only capable of getting an A, but will be able to do the much harder feat of intentionally
getting precisely a C-plus. It’ll be in-character for him to act upset, but high enough so that it doesn’t
seem like he’s a whole new person. He doesn’t want his average to take too much of a hit, as well.
On Friday after school, Jonathan spontaneously invites Harley over to watch some anime with him. It turns out she’s already into Sailor Moon, so it’s easy to ease her into something more sophisticated. He orders pizza. They don’t touch, and they talk very little. She reacts a lot to what’s happening onscreen. It’s nice. It’s less nice when she takes a call and is clearly getting yelled at. He drives her home as soon as she asks, her eyes red, and doesn’t comment.

Saturday morning, he feeds the crows all their favorites, and a nice lawyer makes a housecall to guide Jonathan through the emancipation paperwork and explain all the details of what this will mean for him. She says not to worry about the fee. Nygma sends his regrets. Jonathan knows he’s incredibly busy. When the lawyer leaves, he does a tiny bit of homework but focuses on washing only his clothes and cleaning only things he thinks is dirty. Grandma’s clothes that are still in the hamper, he tosses. The rest of her clothes can go to charity if her church friends ask. He’s not lifting a finger for her ever again.

Sunday, he gets more groceries - including things the crows will like - and cooks up some food that will keep. Mom and Dad used to take turns cooking, and after she died, it was Dad and Jonathan. He does homework. He rereads Dad’s paper.

Monday is boring. After school he has to go see Grandma’s much less respectful lawyer to sign things that means his inheritance is official. The lawyer is sneering under his mustache, under his required minimum of courtesy. Jonathan smiles at him like a mannequin would. Some people from Grandma’s church are taking over funeral arrangements, thank God. All Jonathan has to do is show up in black formalwear next Sunday and not scandalize everyone too much.

Tuesday, the test grades are in. It was mostly multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank, and Mr. Brooks staggers the testing between his different courses, so it was a quick turnaround time. Jonathan has a C+. Perfect. “Can I come to your office to talk about this, please? It’s more personal than usual.”

Mr. Brooks looks around to see if anyone is still here to see him nod.

***

“I’m not asking for a handout, Mr. Brooks, I was just wondering if some extra project might perhaps boost me over the edge. I was off my game just once, because of all the recent...stress. Please? The scholarships I’m applying for are extremely competitive.” Because he’s listening for it, Jonathan hears the tiny click of Mr. Brooks locking his office door behind him. Because he isn’t listening for it, Mr. Brooks doesn’t hear the tiny click of Jonathan turning on the audio recorder in his backpack while slipping his test into a folder.

The blinds on the window, Jonathan notices, are drawn. It’s not that sunny outside today. He suspects that Mr. Brooks thought of this possibility. Mr. Brooks watches as Jonathan tidies his hair, especially when he tucks some strands behind one ear.

Mr. Brooks takes a seat at his desk and searches for a file in a drawer. He pulls it out, places it on the desk, and beckons Jonathan closer. He holds the open file close to himself so that Jonathan must stand even closer to follow along. “I’m sympathetic, especially to your difficult current circumstances, but as you can see by the curve here you are already very close to the top. There’s very little wiggle room without it being obviously artificial.”

Jonathan looks down at his own shoes and projects reluctant acceptance, with a hint of disappointment in his face and posture. “I understand, Mr. Brooks.” It needs to be clear on the recording who the teacher is. Without a doubt.

Then there’s a hand on his shoulder, and Jonathan is “startled” and looks up again. Mr. Brook’s
other hand is slowly traveling towards his face. “I didn’t say there wasn’t any wiggle room at all.”

“W-what are you doing?” Jonathan doesn’t raise his voice, but he enunciates. If Mr. Brooks were a good person, he wouldn’t have started this, but if he were a decent person he would stop right now at Jonathan’s confused voice. At how Jonathan has gone very still.

But Mr. Brooks puts that hand on Jonathan’s cheek and strokes the cheekbone with his thumb. “You stay after class to talk to me more often than not.”

“That’s because - because I want to improve - why are you touching me like that?”

“Shh, it’s alright, Jonathan, not going to hurt you.” Mr. Brooks gets to his feet and presses Jonathan against the wall.

“This isn’t - this isn’t - it’s not what I meant.” Jonathan knows that a man who wants someone so much younger, over whom he already has so much power, will fixate on any further display of vulnerability. So he turns his face to one side, as if overwhelmed. It gives the effect of baring his throat. Submission. He can see in his peripheral vision that Mr. Brooks’ pupils have dilated at this.

The hand on Jonathan’s shoulder slides over to spread against his chest instead. “You’ve going through a difficult time. Nobody would think less of you if your grades went down. Even now. Even in just one class. Even if by very much indeed. Scholarship committees can be more cruel, though. You know?”

Jonathan inhales deeply. Exhales shakily. “Yes, Mr. Brooks. I get it.”

The hand on Jonathan’s cheek moves to twist loosely in Jonathan’s hair. His head isn’t yanked, but steered into place. Mr. Brooks probably believes himself to be a decent person who is just indulging himself a little. Jonathan shows neither enthusiasm nor rejection. He’s glad his first kiss was from Harley, though, because he gathers it more closely resembled how first kisses are supposed to work. This one is a far less accurate.

He could do without the tongue in his mouth. A bit gross. His mom said, when he asked her about kissing, that when people are having fun they stop thinking about things being gross.

When one hand starts moving further down, Jonathan gasps with a dose of extra shocked innocence. “Are you going to take off my pants? I don’t want…”

“Shh, you delicious thing, don’t worry. Not going to hurt you.” Instead of undoing Jonathan’s jeans, Mr. Brooks slips most of his hand into one of the back pockets, molding against the flesh under the denim. He pushes his thigh between Jonathan’s legs and uses it as another method of pinning Jonathan. That also makes it easier for Mr. Brooks to grind against him.

Jonathan doesn’t know what to do with his hands, so he just keeps them against the wall while the poorly-executed kissing resumes - mouth, face, and neck. This gets interspersed with being told he’s unbearably pretty and fragile, and that when Mr. Brooks sees him drowsy from lunch and wanting a nap it’s nearly intolerable to hold back urges. He’s crystalline, he’s spun sugar. It’s horrific what he’s gone through, and he needs to be cherished, needs someone to take care of him. Such good care of him.

Mr. Brooks needs no further involvement from Jonathan in order to come in his pants with a groan. He sinks into his rolling chair and pulls a slack Jonathan into his lap. “Would you like to finish?”

“Can’t finish what you don’t start,” Jonathan replies, then kicks himself internally because that might sound too defiant for this trap’s persona.
Thankfully, Mr. Brooks just chuckles. “You’re painted as this little ice prince, but there’s fire in you. Next time, I’ll go about this properly.”

A patronizing comment like that means Jonathan is going to enjoy deflating Mr. Brooks’ ego even more. “Can I go now, please? I won’t tell.”

“Of course you won’t. I’ve never been an accessory to serial murder. Skews people’s perceptions.” Mr. Brooks takes a turn at tidying Jonathan’s hair. A slow, psuedo-loving turn. “Want a ride home after I clean up?”

“I drove here. Um, Mr. Brooks? What about your...what about your wife?”

“What about my wife?” He smirks and pulls at Jonathan’s shirt collar so that he can leave a purple-red mark over his collarbone. Jonathan plays up his whimpers and squirms. It goes on for an egregiously long time. Mr. Brooks then kisses the spot and readjusts Jonathan’s tee - which is less loose than the one from last week - to hide it. “Mm, I’ll be thinking about that under your clothes. Wish I could decorate all of you.”

“Um…”

He takes Jonathan’s face in his large hands for one more kiss. “Run along.”

Jonathan plays back the recording as soon as he’s in the car. He laughs and laughs. Phase 1 wasn’t as awful as it would be for someone who cared about such things, but it wasn’t great. Phase 2 is going to be awesome.

***

The next day, Jonathan knocks on Mr. Brooks’ office door right after school. Mr. Brooks lets him in with a smile and locks the door. He puts a hand on Jonathan’s hip. Jonathan doesn’t swat it away. He just takes his secret weapon out out of his messenger bag and presses play.

Mr. Brooks steps back, dumbfounded. “What?”

“I’ve made several copies,” Jonathan says thoughtfully, even as the damning noises continue. “Imagine if I set one to your wife...one to the principal...the school board...the cops, even. Were you aware that in our state 16 is legal in general, but not if the other party is in a position of authority over the teenager? The best part is that there’s nothing to indicate our clothes stayed on, but it’s clear that you threatened me.”

His jaw is clenched so hard a muscle twitches. “Turn it off.”

“Okay. I thought you might enjoy it. You seemed be really enjoying yourself yesterday, either that or your premature ejaculation problems must be longstanding.” Jonathan puts the recorder away.

Oooh, that touched a nerve. Good. “You set me up, you son of a bitch.”

Jonathan feels alive and real. He gazes at Mr. Brooks with spades of condescension. “Tsk. If you didn’t already want to be a statutory rapist - or, if the rumors are true, have been for some time - this wouldn’t have worked. Don’t cry to me about it. The superintendent’s your brother-in-law, right? Wanted to protect his sister from shame, right? He’s not going to be able to sweep this under the rug. You can’t get that many people to look away. And if something were to happen to me, someone I trust is going to publicize this on my behalf.”

Jonathan was already going to send Nygma the hiding place of one out of four of the fear inoculation
samples, so that if if Jonathan dies or something at least one can be retrieved, but if Nygma betrays him or is compromised the other three still have a chance of being safe. So he included a labeled cassette tape in the same plastic container as the sealed vial, with instructions. It occurred to him that Harley probably liked him enough to go along with this plan as well, but he didn’t like thinking about her face if she found out what he’d done.

“I could choke the life out of your skinny bird neck right now,” Mr. Brooks growls.

“You could.” Jonathan steps closer and grabs both of his teacher’s wrists. He’s so surprised that he doesn’t stop Jonathan, and Jonathan wraps the hands around his own throat. Jonathan looks him dead on. “Wanna give it a try? I’ll give you a ten-second head start before I scream. I’m good at screaming. I’ve thought about verifying if I’ve broken any records. Your ten seconds have started. One Mississippi, two Mississippi…”

Mr. Brooks barely tightens for two seconds, testing the waters, then he chickens out. He lets go and goes to slump in his chair. “What do you want?”

Jonathan takes a folded-up piece of paper out of his pocket. “The hush money can be on an installment plan within reason; I know teachers in public schools aren’t rolling in it. There are some options spelled out in this note. I want all the numerical door codes immediately. My grades will not be artificially boosted in an effort to butter me up. Or lowered out of spite. I’ll be comparing them with classmates to make sure you’re giving me the scores you would any student. Also, you are never going to do this to any other kid. If I hear even a whisper, our deal is void.”

“I bet you killed your grandma.” Mr. Brooks takes the detailed list like it’s dripping with slime.

“It really was an accident, believe it or not. And either way I’m the one who has real dirt on you.” Jonathan pauses. “On a scale of 1-10, how frightened do you feel?”

“Shut up.”

Jonathan grins to the point where it hurts his face. “I’ll put that down as a ‘quite’. Did you know that cranes are opportunistic omnivores that frequently hunt in shallow bodies of fresh water, including brooks? You can pretend it’s destiny.”

Chapter End Notes

Various Gotham characters seem to live in different technological/aesthetic eras that usually manage to mesh together. I have decided that my Jonathan hovers around late 90s.

A+ problem solving, right?
The night before his grandmother’s funeral, Jonathan gets a call on the house’s landline.

“Hello? Is this Jonathan Crane?” asks the voice, a male voice, amidst static.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Your uncle. I hope I didn’t wake you. I just found out, happen to be in a city documenting the prosecution of some illegal loggers on Yanomami land, so it was easier to get the news to me…”

“You didn’t wake me.” He’s just gotten back from his second secret lab session. Hadn’t accomplished much so far, just getting a feel for his own procedure and how he’s taking notes, how he’s cleaning up after himself, how he’s going to separate out the components of the first dose he had to analyze.

“I’m sorry I can’t be there in time.”

“It’s okay. I heard you helped organize Dad’s funeral.”

“Somebody had to, and I was in the country begging my sponsors for more funding. I followed the instructions he left behind as best I could. Inscription and everything.”

“I heard you came to take a peek at me.”

“I admit I sort of wish I hadn’t?”

“Hah.” Jonathan forgot that his uncle has his mother’s speech patterns. He isn’t sure how he feels about that. He feels something, though. He’ll tell Helga.

Same way of throat-clearing, too. “You’ve filed for emancipation.”

“Yes. About that. The prospects are good…” because the mayor’s Chief of Staff/lover has adopted me as a charity case and is prepared to threaten people “…but I have to demonstrate a baseline of financial resources. If you don’t contest me inheriting…”

“By all means, keep the old bat’s pennies. If you really want me around I’ll be around for you, but it sounds like both of us prefer to go our own way. Amicably.”

“Yes. I heard you didn’t like her.”
“I didn’t, and I’m sorry for leaving you to her, but I think you understand the complexity of my situation. If I’m in the country and you’d like me to drop by, I wouldn’t mind.”

“We can commiserate.”

“Yeah. Oh, gotta go, the chief wants to consult with me about how to handle the lawyers. He’s a savvy guy and can speak for himself and his people, but he’s gotten to know me well and is trying to get the measure of these strangers. Write me letters if you want. They get to me eventually.”

“Thanks.”

“Put flowers on her grave for me from time to time?”

“What, your mother’s?”

“Pfif. No. Yours.”

****

Jonathan is still dressed in his one nice black suit when he comes to stand at the two gravestones. The flat kind. Cheaper. Nowadays he weighs less and the suit hangs accordingly. He knows what he looks like. He wonders if the Scarecrow has a sense of humor, and if it would laugh if he dressed in rags and spread his arms.

He reads the inscriptions. Karen Crane: “Tis a fearful thing, to love what death can touch.” Gerald Crane: "Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.”

“Subtle, Pops,” Jonathan says. He places red and white carnations on Mom’s grave, and after some consideration he takes out one of the red ones to put on Dad’s. He knows they can’t hear him, but Helga’s had him talk to an empty chair and pretend it’s one of them before - mostly Dad - and this might have a similar effect.

Therefore he continues, “Grandma’s funeral was today. It was boring. Everyone kept giving me side-eye. I packed up a bunch of leftovers from the wake and dropped them off at home before coming to this cemetery. Nobody stopped me. It’ll keep me in meals for two weeks, maybe, which is good because I’ve got more than just homework to do now. I’m not sure what you’d think of my new project. I’m not sure if I care.”

It’s sunset. This cemetery is closer to their old house than the one Grandma and Grandpa are buried in. Chilly October evening.

“Harley’s asked for my help with her Halloween costume, for a party,” Jonathan tells Mom’s grave, because he knows Mom would like that. “Helga thinks it would be nice if I went. Put myself out there. Just to see.”

He hasn’t been here since Dad screwed him over, but he visited Mom’s grave before, and he felt things. He felt them. He wants to feel them again. That’s new.

“You did this to me,” he tells Dad’s grave, his voice even. There’s nobody nearby. It’s a chilly evening and on chilly, dark evenings, cemeteries all become graveyards. People you love and honor are buried in cemeteries. Graveyards are for ghosts. “I’m afraid of only one thing now. I have very few emotions, and some of them bring back the Scarecrow. I’m alone. I hate you a bit, maybe. Is this hate? Or is it apathy with a needle buried in it? Like a tiny bite of a tiny needle in my arm?”

There was another Jonathan who wouldn’t be willing to stay here after dark. There was a Jonathan
who felt the loss of his mother like a gash in his stomach, like a burn in his throat. He’s an afterimage behind the eyes of the Jonathan who exists here.

“I’ll be right back,” Jonathan says. When he returns, he’s brought a combination radio/cassette player/CD player, with a particular CD already inside. He places it right between the two gravestones.

“You thought this album was the cleverest thing to get Dad for your anniversary that year,” Jonathan says, arranging the bouquet in a more symmetrical fashion. “I’ve read that music can tap into memories, especially emotional memories, better than many other outside stimuli. Also the sense of smell, but I’m not sure how to do that one in this setting. It can even bypass certain kinds of brain damage. Sometimes.”

He presses play.

*It was a cold night, and the snow lay round. I pulled my coat tight against the falling down. And the sun was all, and the sun was all down.*

“You listened to this song over and over after she died. You thought you were being sneaky about all the drinking after I went to bed, Dad. Was it worth not recycling all those bottles just so you could ineffectively hide them?”

*I am a poor man, I haven't wealth nor fame. I have my two hands, and a house to my name. And the winter's so, and the winter's so long.*

He realizes he's very cold. Literally, he probably needs a coat that fits him better, and to wear it consistently, and he should start dressing in a way that reflects having less body fat now. Maybe Harley can help him pick out clothes. She would enjoy repaying him for the Halloween costume assistance. Her style isn't the same as Jonathan’s, of course, but his only other friend is an incredibly busy openly bisexual closeted hipster who seems stuck in the fifties, will always wear at least some green unless he's been forced into an Arkham uniform, and who shouldn't be seen with him in public anyway.

Metaphorically, he finds himself checking the mood ring, like a talisman, to see if there is warmth coming from inside him at all.

*And all the stars were crashing round as I laid eyes on what I'd found.*

Jonathan actually drew an illustration of the next few lines in art therapy.

*It was a white crane. It was a helpless thing. Upon a red stain, with an arrow in its wing.*

Except his was also being besieged by crows.

*And it called and cried. And it called and cried so…*

He told the art therapist that he realized it was on the hackneyed, obvious side of representing his trauma, and she said that self-censorship was the enemy of self-care, and that incidentally his linework was quite nice.

*My crane wife, my crane wife…*

Dad was practically catatonic for three days after the funeral was done and no longer giving him a sense of purpose. He took two weeks off from work before diving back in, robotic, humorless. For a month, Jonathan didn’t bother going to him when he needed anything. His friends had nice parents
who drove him places and made sure there was food in the house while his father drifted. It was several months before Dad started on getting the second floor restored, which he mostly did because Child Protective Services were making noises about the house being up to code.

*Now I helped her, and I dressed her wounds. And I held her beneath the rising moon. She stood to fly, she stood to fly away...*

Their house was so quiet that Jonathan heard the rustling of the tall grass in the abandoned field, more and more, like the gaunt figure crucified above it was generating its own nightly breeze.

The music changed in pace and melody.

*My crane wife arrived at my door in the moonlight, all star bright and tongue-tied. I took her in. We were married, and bells rang sweet for our wedding...*

Dad had never been...he hadn’t ever yelled at them, or fought really. He was good at making it feel like it was your fault things had gone wrong. He never apologized. He made you feel like you needed to apologize. But he loved both of them, and so what if that meant being hugged a little too tight?

Not a lot of hugs after Mom died, but he really leveled up when it came to the making all dissension an ungrateful betrayal, making all bad things other people’s fault. All bad things except one.

*But I was greedy, and vain, and I forced her to weaving on cold looms, in closed rooms.*

It hadn't been a fight per se, but Mom had gone to bed early with "a headache." Dad stayed downstairs grading tests at the dining table while Jonathan did homework, a passive-aggressive frost over them all until the flames and fear burned it away.

After the ashes had cooled, after the dust had settled and the tears depleted, eight-year-old Jonathan sought out solace in data. The smoke inhalation is what kills most people in a house fire. It doesn’t hurt much, physically. Death gathers them up safely before they burn. That’s what Jonathan’s research said, library books he leafed through when unable to sleep, curled up on the pullout couch on the undamaged first floor. Dad slept on an air mattress in the basement, where you couldn’t see scorch marks on the ceiling.

*Sound the keening bell, and see it’s painted red.*

I could have saved her, Dad kept saying. He said it to the firefighters. To the paramedics. He said it to the police. To the funeral guests. To the pastor. To his son. To himself. To the bottles. To the computer, typing. To the colleague he asked to look over his paper. To the goddamn sky.

To the first kill, whispered in a dying ear, almost tenderly.

(He didn’t know Jonathan saw and heard. He’d told Jonathan to watch the door and not move unless someone came.)

*Soft as fontanelle, the feathers and the thread...*

When Mom was still alive, Jonathan looked up the word *fontanelle.* It’s the soft spots on an infant’s head before the bones of the skull fuse properly. Growing skulls. Growing brains. Fragile. Your own child, precious. What’s inside your child’s head, even more so, or at least it should be.

*And all I ever meant to do was to keep you, my crane wife.*
Instead, Gerald Crane broke his son.

*There’s a bend in the wind and it rakes at my heart.*

Jonathan sinks to his knees.

*There is blood in the thread and it rakes at my heart.*

*Heart.*

*Heart.*

With a shaking hand, he turns the music off. For the first time since the Scarecrow came, and without it interfering, Jonathan cries.

Chapter End Notes

Jonathan's mother's inscription is from Yehuda Halevi. His father's is from Frank Herbert.
Close to the Sun

Jonathan considers, deep burgundy lip pencil in hand. “How about a little dribble from the corner of your mouth, like juice from the seeds?”

Harley gives him a thumbs-up. They’ve already gotten her into the thrift shop green dress with a torn skirt, a crown of wilted leaves and flowers, and a glove painted to look like a skeletal hand wrapped around one ankle. She likes pomegranates and has a real one to snack on. Her dentist has recommended she cut back on candy.

He looks her up and down. “Nice morbid plant girl look.”

“I guess I’m into morbid plant girls? Let’s get your wings on.”

Though Harley is only in the chorus for the upcoming production of Antigone, this gives her sufficient cred for an invitation to this particular event. The drama club and A/V club share members and have pooled their resources to set up a “Classical Halloween” party in two senses of the word: costumes from classical mythology paired with a viewing of classic horror films.

Anyone helping out on the play can come as well, and Jonathan has made three of the masks. What finally made Jonathan decide to go was the two contests. The first is Best Costume, which Harley is low-key hoping for, and the second is Try Not to React. There’s going to be a betting pool on who can most stoically get through all the movies.

“You and I are going to be victorious,” Harley says cheerfully as she ties the modified store-bought wings onto Jonathan’s arms. He’s gone a bit postmodern in his interpretation, wearing black and white stripes to evoke old-timey prison uniforms (or Arkham).

Once the wings are on, she sits him down and gets out the face paint to draw a sun around one of his eyes. As she works she says, “Icarus and his father Daedalus were imprisoned together for years and years.”

“Mm.”

“And Daedalus came up with an invention to free them. But he gave his son bad instructions on how to use it.”

“What?”

“Hold still and be quiet. I know what I’m saying. The father made the wings. He understood them. He just sort of slapped them on his kid in a hurry while escaping their jailers. Don’t go too high, don’t go too low, he said, and, like, nothing else, and expected that to be good enough. As if anyone who’s been trapped for years and years would be able to stay low in the sky. So the father flew, and the son fell, with the sun in his eyes.”

“How long have you been planning that little speech, Persephone? Because I could say a thing or two about bright girls hanging out with deadly guys.”

“I’m sure you could.” Harley gets out another shade to make the sun more vivid and less flat. “I’m meeting other friends at the party, too. I won’t make you talk to them.”

“Thank you.”
“There’s a freshman who’ll be at the party, Ian, who’s really into anime. He’ll be dressed as Pan? Might seek you out.”

“Okay.” What a novelty.

***

The party itself is fine. There are snacks to eat and decent efforts at costumes to look at, and Jonathan observes people. Ian approaches him while Harley was busy hanging out with her other friends, and talking to him is reasonably pleasant. Discussion of bootlegs leads to Ian telling Jonathan several tips on how to edit audio cassettes, for mixtapes and multimedia projects.

Harley doesn’t win the costume contest. A Medusa does. “I can’t stand to look at her now,” Harley jokes afterwards.

When it comes time for the movie marathon, Harley and Jonathan aren’t the only people who bet on Jonathan. He has a reputation for being poker faced. However, Jonathan also makes a side bet with a guy dressed as a Cyclops that will net him an additional forty bucks if he wins.

“Someone’s sure of himself,” comments a girl who’s conveying that she’s dressed as Iris by wearing every conceivable rainbow-printed item possible. She’s also been giving out Halloween cards with mini packs of Skittles, addressed to “Mount Olympus”. She settles on Harley’s other side.

Jonathan gives the Iris a half-smile and tells Harley, “If you get scared, be sure to grab her hand, not mine.”

“All I need you to do is be yourself,” Harley says, sipping her orange soda. Jonathan thinks soda is following the letter of the less-candy recommendation and not the spirit, but it’s not his job to say so.

Atlas sets down his inflatable globe and settles down to watch the rest watch the movies. Nemesis, with an enormous pair of scissors and many threads dangling from one hand, does the same. Two observers. They can’t see the movies, to keep them from getting distracted.

Jonathan enjoys watching all the others being scared, which is good, because otherwise these five hours would be very dull. Also the popcorn gets in his teeth.

***

Harley is riding home with someone else, but he thinks she’d like it if he said goodbye to her before leaving. He takes a moment to check that all the cash the seething Cyclops gave him is genuine currency before searching for her.

He spots her in a quiet corner of the dark backyard, holding hands and talking softly with the girl dressed as Iris. He tiptoes away.

Later that night he gets a text apologizing for “abandoning” him, and he tells her that he’s fine. He cuts off the wings, since he can’t untie them easily and can make new fastenings, and washes his face.

Before turning in, he goes to check the non-lethal traps he’s placed around the house, where he’s deliberately been leaving scraps lying around, along with the barn, and in the fields and woods. He’s collecting rodents to keep in a pen in the shed. When he finally gets to a stage where animal testing is workable, he’ll need supplies.

***
Mr. Brooks does a good job treating Jonathan normally within the confines of class. The furtive looks are now glares, but that’s it. In Mr. Brooks’ office, Jonathan counts and inspects the first payment carefully. “Would it be terribly insensitive of me to ask some questions about calculating acceleration?”

The teacher is slumped in his chair. “Please leave me be.”

“How far did you get with your other victims? What are your kinks other than pederasty?”

“What do you need to know about acceleration?”

Jonathan smiles.

***

“Between you and me, I think I’m bisexual, or maybe pansexual,” Harley confides over lunch.

“Cool.”

“Also I’m going on a date with Irene tonight. She was dressed in rainbows at the party. Don’t tell anybody.”

“Harleen and Irene. Good luck. Make sure not to be a doormat.” Jonathan offers her an M&M.

***

It’s a school night, but Jonathan is in the zone here in the Chem lab, and he's going to be busy for the next few nights. He ends up staying much later than he should.

The next day is his first attempt at managing school on four hours of sleep. He’s always been better at time management than this. Everything’s dreamy and headache, but he’s otherwise fine.

Until when right in the middle of History class, the Scarecrow appears right in front of his desk. “No,” Jonathan whispers.

“You weakened yourself, boy. What else can you expect? It runs fingers through his hair. Strands catch in the coarse fabric.

Jonathan has just enough time to tell the teacher, “I’m about to have a seizure. I think you were briefed, but there’s a card in my wallet, too. I’m sorry.”

The Scarecrow fills his world, snarling, How sweet of you, to care what people think.

Jonathan is dimly aware of pandemonium around him, but apparently he’s not being the cooperative prey the Scarecrow wants him to be, because he doesn’t get any more information than that.

He wakes in an empty classroom, the school nurse nearby. He sits up. “How long?”

“Twenty minutes.” She looks worn out. “Since it’s best not to move you, the class relocated.”

“Oh, okay. What room?”

“You should go home for the rest of the day.”

“I’ve got an important -”
“Jonathan, we can’t.”

“But...”

“You were screaming.”

“That is generally what happens.” He picks himself up and dusts himself off.

“Is it safe for you to drive?”

“These episodes are sufficiently infrequent and come with enough of a warning that any risk is minimal. You know how this has never happened at school before? It’s that rare. You know the way I warned everyone? I’d be able to pull over in time. Many people with epilepsy or narcolepsy are allowed to drive if they can keep their symptoms in check. Have a nice day.”

Jonathan drives home on autopilot and sleeps. He dreams of the field, but that Dad stabs him in the gut with a knife instead. Dad holds him and tells him that he loves him while he gurgles and bleeds out.

***

“How did you get emancipated when some would argue that you have a disability?” Harley asks the next day, when Jonathan tells her the one good thing that happened since they last saw each other.

“The judge concluded that my ability to cope with my chronic condition wouldn’t be affected much by having a guardian,” Jonathan says. Mr. Nygma said this conclusion was helped along by money and only the lightest dusting of terror. “How was your date?”

“It was nice. She wants to move faster than I want to, though…”

Jonathan furrows his eyebrows. “You move exactly as fast as you want to. Okay?”

Harley stares at her Tater Tots. “Okay.”

***

One night, Jonathan thinks he may have managed to isolate a part of the fear inoculation that would cause a more acute reaction, more short-term. All the data suggests it. The next lab session, he brings along a pair of his home-raised mice, which are more portable than rats, if harder to dissect. He also grabs a syringe from the nurse’s office, meant for an emergency insulin dose to a particular diabetic sophomore Jonathan knows of. There are backup ones, so taking a single one probably won’t cause a tragedy. He alters the inventory file to reflect the new number. Their school nurse is very organized and labels all her folders, and the cabinet’s lock is easy to pick. He’ll visit a medical supply store when he has time.

In the lab, Jonathan tells the mice, “I will eventually record what normal fear responses for various rodents are, for comparison, but this is just proof of concept.” He fills up the needle.

Then the door opens. “Like father like son?” Mr. Brooks asks rhetorically.

Jonathan subtly turns on the tape recorder he’s using to take notes when his hands are busy. “I’m just trying to figure out what Dad did to me,” Jonathan says. He feels nothing except the need for strategy.

“Mm, and how many people are going to accept it’s as innocent as that? You should have thought
this through, kid, that I might investigate exactly what you’re doing with your knowledge of the
keycodes.”

“What are you hoping to achieve? I told you that I have multiple tapes, including one I’ve entrusted
with a friend.”

“I doubt Harleen Quinzel will be a tough nut to crack,” Mr. Brooks says, coming closer and closer.
Jonathan isn’t sure how Mr. Brooks knows they’re friends, but he wouldn’t be surprised if he’s the
object of Teacher’s Lounge gossip.

“It’s not her. I wouldn’t get her mixed up in that. I have friends other than Harley, beyond your
reach,” Jonathan exaggerates. The plural sounds better.

“Then we can have some fun getting you to tell me who they are.”

Admittedly, Jonathan wasn’t expecting Mr. Brooks to lunge forward and start choking him. It’s not
the best way to get information. Mr. Brooks is being irrational. Or perhaps he’s going to do simple
assault as an appetizer, and then switch gears for more sensibe torture or more satisfying rape or
whatever. Maybe get Jonathan to pass out and bundle him into his car for a more private location?
It'd be a lot easier to threaten him with a gun. This is clearly spur-of-the-moment.

Jonathan does as little spur-of-the-moment as he can. For example, he's researched maintenance
schedules so he can avoid interruptions by innocent janitors and the like. There's nobody scheduled
to be in the building right now. Good.

Jonathan wheezes, “You...should...have thought this...through…” He grabs the syringe from the table
and plunges it into his strangler’s side.

Mr. Brooks doesn’t feel the effects right away, just the jab. He curses and shoves Jonathan off his
chair. Jonathan has grown used to falling out of chairs thanks to the Scarecrow, so he falls in such a
way as to minimize bruising.

Then Mr. Brooks collapses into incoherent screams.

Jonathan gets back onto his chair. “I wish I had a video camera, for science,” he says to himself, and
settles in to observe the writhing/crying/whimpering/shrieking. He handwrites notes to supplement
the audio, and checks his watch periodically.

Twelve minutes and sixteen seconds in, Mr. Brooks dies of what appears to be his heart rate having
been pushed beyond its limit.

“Hypothesis supported. More acute,” Jonathan tells the tape recorder. “Unfortunately, an amateur
autopsy would not be feasible, and I don’t have the expertise to know what to look for anyway.”

Jonathan snaps on a pair of latex gloves and does an initial inspection. Thankfully, Mr. Brooks didn’t
soil himself. He must have gone to the bathroom recently enough. That’d be a chore to clean. The
nurse’s office has a folding wheelchair. Jonathan fetches it. Knowing that there’s almost certainly
been previous cover-ups, Jonathan guesses it'll be easy to provoke another one, too. He also bets he
can spin this to his advantage. After arranging things just so, he goes home. He's grateful for his new
habit of taking a long nap before going to the school labs, and manages to catch enough sleep after
going home to function the next day.

Jonathan tells Harley that he’s coming down with a cold, which is why his voice is hoarse and he’s
wearing a scarf indoors. There’s a substitute teacher for Intro to Physics that afternoon. The students
are told nothing.
The police talk to him, of course, and treat him with nervous care, but there’s no evidence of foul play. Just foul misdeeds. There’s not a lot of sympathy for the deceased. It’s ruled as death by natural causes.

Today, things are starting to come to fruition. The departed Mr. Brooks’ brother-in-law is wealthy, influential, and currently sweating like hell. His lawyer is doing most of the talking. “Seeing as Mr. Crane has already suffered through extensive legal issues and recent bereavement, my client would like to offer a settlement out of court in order to keep him from unnecessary stress and keep Mr. Brooks’ loved ones from unnecessary fallout.”

The lawyer Mr. Nygma gladly called up for Jonathan when Jonathan said he’d had to dispose of someone - Jonathan left out the details for when Mr. Nygma wasn’t in a rush to get to a meeting - folds her arms. “You want us to help you cover up that he was found dead in his car - where his wife was unlikely to catch him in the act - with his pants down and his right hand on his private parts and a particular tape in the player. You want us to conceal that the police determined that he’d been masturbating to an audio recording of himself molesting my client when he went into cardiac arrest. You want my client silent regarding coercion and statutory rape.”

The other lawyer watches his client twitch for a bit before saying, “Essentially, yes.”

She looks at Jonathan, who is chewing his fingernails for effect. He nods slightly. She places her hands flat on the table. “Not for cheap.”

Jonathan loves Gotham.

“Would you like to explain the circumstances of your first intentional solo kill over Thanksgiving dinner?” Nygma asks over the phone, skipping the hello. “I want you and Oswald to meet.”

“Sure, thank you. Will anyone else be there?”

“Selina might appear for food and then vanish again, but you’re the only one invited to stay overnight. Or two nights.”

Jonathan is intrigued by the idea of seeing Mr. Nygma in his natural environment. He wonders if he’ll be impressed with how Jonathan handled himself. “Sounds good, thank you.”

“I’ll come pick you up, since your car’s presence might be suspicious. Kitchen help would be appreciated. I enjoy cooking when I have time, and we have a housekeeper/cook, but a traditional Thanksgiving involves an awful lot of prep.”

“I don’t mind earning my keep.”

“Excellent. Bye now.”

“Bye.”

This reminds Jonathan that he should eat. During dinner he ponders how much of his new money he can spare to outfit a home laboratory, or at least a partial one. While doing a bit of laundry later, he pops in a Bastille CD and pays special attention to one of the songs.

*Living beyond your years*
"Acting out all their fears
You feel it in your chest

Your hands protect the flames
From the wild winds around you

Icarus is flying too close to the sun
Icarus's life, it has only just begun
It's just begun...

***

He dreams of the field again, but he's the one leaning over his father. "Don't think badly of me, Jonny, please," Dad says, reaching for him. He hasn't called Jonathan that since he was seven.

"You don't get to tell me what to think. I'm going to build my own wings, Dad, and they'll be better than the ones you forced on me."

Then the man lying in the tall grass turns into Mr. Nygma, dressed in Arkham stripes. "Excuse me, my name is Ed, not Dad," he says in a teasing tone, though his hair is disheveled and he has bruises around his neck. Jonathan lets him pull him into a hug. The last part is what tells him this isn't real. Only in a dream would this hug feels good. Only in a dream would Jonathan hug back.
“Welcome to the formerly Van Dahl, now Nygma-Cobblepot mansion,” Nygma says, taking one hand off the steering wheel so he can make a flourishing gesture. He’s given Jonathan a bare-bones briefing on Oswald’s family to avoid faux pas, beyond the sanitized and exaggerated stories Mayor Cobblepot has used for speeches and interviews.

It’s Wednesday evening. Jonathan has the whole day off and spent the morning and afternoon setting up less haphazard conditions for his rodent stock, with enough food and water for Jonathan’s two nights of absence. Yesterday he went out and bought real cages, water bottles, an exercise wheel per cage, and other such infrastructure now that he has the resources. He left an extra bounty for the crows. He also did a little homework, but he’ll be back Saturday and Sunday and can do the rest then. There isn’t much.

Nygma had work today but managed to leave early enough to pick Jonathan up for dinner. They’ve spent almost the entire drive discussing neurology and endocrinology, with a detour to amuse Mr. Nygma with the story of Jonathan winning the horror movie betting pool.

“Looks a bit Tim Burton,” Jonathan says.

“Who?”

“A filmmaker with a trademark, kind of gothic aesthetic. Do you ever call yourselves Nygmobblepot?”

Nygma makes a face. “That doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.”

“Cobblema? That sounds more like a real last name.” Jonathan admires well-tended autumn trees that dot the grounds as they pull into a garage that would probably spit out Jonathan’s car in distaste. At least Nygma’s is vintage. Or maybe vintage-style. Jonathan doesn’t know much about cars.

Coming to a stop with easy familiarity, Nygma raises and eyebrow and says, “Are you teasing me, Mr. Crane?”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s good to hear you so relaxed. Thank you for dressing less casually than you usually do. It’s not required for the whole visit, but it’s apt for introductions and dinners. Oswald will appreciate the gesture.” Nygma gets out of the car and takes Jonathan’s weekend bag with him.

As per advice, Jonathan dug out a navy blue button-up to wear over one of his plain black t-shirts and has a black/dark brown argyle cardigan layered between that and his pea jacket. As a compromise between style and comfort, he ironed his least baggy or frayed pair of jeans and is wearing his new black Converse knockoffs. He wasn’t thinking about it when he bought it, but his scarf is scarlet. The intent had been to have a colorful accent for once, not evoke fresh blood. Ah well. Jonathan removes his scarf as well as his gloves when he gets out of the car.

Right on the doorstep of the grand entrance, Nygma stops and turns to Jonathan. “I like your necktie. I like that you wore it in the first place. I like that the cobalt shade brings out your eyes, and the self-reference of the white feather pattern. All that being said, I would really like to fix the knot. May I?”
“Okay.” Jonathan holds still.

Nygma puts the bag down and reaches like he’s trying not to spook a wild horse. He begins undoing the tie. “The decent four-in-hand that you’ve done is easy, but it’s called the schoolboy knot for its lack of sophistication as well as its simplicity. This tie is too short for a perfect Windsor and you’re wearing light fabrics, so let’s do a half-Windsor…” Then he freezes.

It’s been days, but Jonathan’s bruises haven’t completely faded, and this hasn’t been helped by his pale skin. It’s still apparent that his enraged strangler had large hands. “I’m fine,” he says.

“Brooks?” Nygma pulls himself together and starts retying the tie with quick, deft moves.

“Yes. At least my voice is back to normal.”

“Retaliation against blackmailers is a not uncommon motive for murder, you know. Quick thinking might have saved your life, and it definitely saved you from serious harm. I’d enjoy listening to the recording of him after you jabbed him.” Nygma steps back. “Et voila.”

Jonathan can’t see the knot, but he feels it with his fingers. “Are forensic analysts meant to know a lot about neckties?”

“No, but ever since I started helping Oswald with his outfit every morning I’ve picked things up. You look good.” Nygma unlocks the door and carries in Jonathan’s bag.

They take off their outer layers and accessories to hang on nearby hooks. Jonathan didn’t bother to wear gloves when he was spending so little time outdoors. However, Mr. Nygma removes his gloves and reveals a wedding ring.

“That’s new to me,” Jonathan says, taking his bag back.

Nygma actually blushes. “It was a quick courthouse appointment. No fanfare.”

“Congratulations.”

The new voice is accompanied by a telltale shuffling noise. “Why, thank you, Jonathan. Welcome to our home.” Oswald Cobblepot, Mayor of Gotham - the Penguin, King of Gotham - extends his right hand. The left is gripping an elegant black and silver cane.

Jonathan shakes hands. “Thank you for letting your husband invite me, Mr. Cobblepot.”

“Are you so sure that’s how it is?”

“Yes.”

Cobblepot nods in approval. “Ed says you read people well when you have time and motivation.”

“And poorly when I don’t have both.” Jonathan took in the expansive interior, full of velvets and curlicues and carved woods and fussy objects. “You know, you two might like the movie Beetlejuice.”

“Dinner’s at seven-thirty. I think Ed will be glad to show you to your room.” Everything is cordial, but there’s a certain stiffness to Cobblepot’s demeanor. The Penguin is not known for genuine warmth. Jonathan doesn’t mind that in general, but he wants there to be no barrier to Nygma’s continued enthusiastic assistance.

Also, like with Helga and Harley, Jonathan is finding that he doesn’t like Nygma’s sad face, or its
variations. Such as the worried one right now when Nygma steps forward to squeeze his husband’s hand. “Next time have Zsasz do all the running, perhaps?”

“I wanted to carve the letters into those traitors’ chests myself before the police showed up,” Cobblepot sighs. “I agree that it would have been better to not push my limits. I’ll minimize going up and down the stairs for the next few days. Once in the morning, once at night. I can make you fetch things for me.”

Nygma smiles a soft, warm smile that’s different from what Jonathan’s seen from him before. “I’m more than willing. We’ll be down soon.”

The staircase is wide and smooth, the ceilings tall and chandelier-lit. The house Jonathan grew up in wasn’t small, and it had a similar open feel, but was more rustic. The sort of place you associate with fiddle music. His current house is an acoustic guitar and harmonica house. This, meanwhile, is a string quartet place.

They walk down a hallway all paneled in dark woods with the occasional piece of art on a wall. “There are multiple en suite bedrooms with bathrooms. There’s also a hall bathroom, and that small door is the linen closet. Feel free to take any additional towels or bedding from there.”

“Sounds good.” This is the first time Jonathan is going to sleep somewhere other than his current house, the hospital, and his old house in years.

Nygma paused in front of a few doors and pointed at them in turn. “This one’s the master bedroom. Keep out unless it’s a life-or-death emergency. That one is what we dubbed my ‘bachelor’ room, which I used between my release from Arkham and the beginning of our romantic relationship. It’s now my study and place of refuge when I want to be alone. Same rule as the master bedroom. Otherwise, you may wander this floor as you please. The attic has been sealed off. Don’t try to unseal it. It’s full of things belonging to relatives Oswald wants to forget.”

“I have no idea how I’d get up there, anyway,” Jonathan says. He follows Nygma to the room where he’ll be sleeping.

It’s cozy, not cramped. The color scheme is in soothing browns and greens, except for some of the rugs. There are enough nice rugs that Jonathan decides to slip off his shoes before checking out the bathroom. He places his bag at the foot of the freshly made bed as he walks past it.

Nygma hangs back in the doorway, leaning against the frame. “What becomes dirty while it cleans?”

“A bath. This bathtub has animal feet. I’ve only seen that in movies.” There’s a fluffy natural sponge, soap, and shampoo on a small shelf attached to the wall. There are rugs in there too that aren’t the kind usually put in bathrooms.

“No shower, I’m afraid. I like showers myself.”

“It’s fine. All of this is great, thank you.” This reminds Jonathan that his bed at home needs a new mattress. It creaks and sags.

“Olga and I put in a few extra rugs last-minute; that’s why the colors clash,” Nygma says. “I’m aware that your episodes are relatively infrequent and short these days, but these floors are unforgiving when bare, and in these two rooms you’ll be on your own for many hours. In case you get an attack and it makes you fall.”

Jonathan goes to check the stack of books perched on the windowsill. Poetry and folktales, interestingly. “That’s considerate of you, thank you. You sound nervous.”
Nygma adjusts his glasses needlessly. “You’re very mature, but you’re not an adult yet, and your characteristics and needs are different from most, and I admit...I admit that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t have to know,” Jonathan says. He’s thinking about how much of adulthood might really be children playacting to their best ability. “I know you mean well. Just communicate with me and stuff. Like, right now, I’d enjoy seeing your lab downstairs.”

Nygma lights up with enthusiasm. “Let’s!”

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This home lab is much better-equipped than Dad’s. Much bigger budget. Shinier.

“It’s beautiful,” Jonathan says sincerely.

Nygma looks at him like Jonathan’s complimented Nygma’s child. In a way, that’s accurate. He makes another sweeping gesture. He likes those. “It is! For amusement, I’m racing the GCPD’s current forensics team team to solve a crime done on our territory but, as far as I can determine, not by any of our employees. They don’t know.”

“My therapist says it’s important to follow your own passions when you can even when you’re busy. What happens if you win?” Jonathan walks around, examining the shiny and lovingly-cared-for equipment.

“I’ll sent in a very patronizing anonymous tip.”

“Cool, vigilantism as pettiness,” Jonathan says. “May I look in the drawers?”

“Certainly, though for the rest of your visit I’d rather you not come in here without asking me first.” This time, Nygma gives him permission to keep looking around even after Cobblepot asks him to discuss confidential matters in Cobblepot’s home office. Jonathan ends up finding some paper and a pen to write an inventory.

A Slavic-accented woman’s voice comes from the doorway. “You are Jonathan?”

Jonathan turns to face her. She’s a severe looking woman who wears a housekeeper uniform like a suit of armor, though if she smiled she might look a little like Helga. “Yes, ma’am. What should I call you?”

“I am Olga. Mr. Nygma says you have different diet needs, perhaps come look at dinner, tell me what you cannot eat, so I do not waste with serving. Most of time I clear away what is left, but I am off from nine tonight until seven on Friday morning. Faster to put less on table.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She sizes him up with a nod. “I like polite guest.”

“I believe in politeness to people who have access to things I’m going to eat,” Jonathan says dryly. Olga snorts.

The kitchen is vast, and so is the spread waiting to be laid out. Jonathan examines it. “This is all good. The main thing is that I have to eat very small portions at a time. Did Mr. Nygma tell you how we met?”
“No.” Olga hands Jonathan a plate. “Serve now, then.”

Jonathan considers how to explain simply without sounding patronizing. “When Mr. Nygma worked for the police, he helped catch my father, who was killing people and making a new drug with chemicals from their bodies.”

Olga takes the covers off the dishes one by one, and provides ladles and such as needed while Jonathan talks. He continues, “My father injected me with it. The police killed him when trying to arrest him, but I spent months screaming and thrashing around. I couldn’t eat but I also couldn’t stop moving, which still affects my ability to eat now. Until one day I was better. Mr. Nygma came to talk to me because he was interested in the science behind it, and he became interested in my recovery.”

“Shame to your father.” Olga points at Jonathan’s loaded plate. “Do you eat many times a day? Three of only this in a day, no wonder you are thinner even than Mr. Nygma.”

“I eat five times. Breakfast and lunch, I have a sort of afternoon tea when I get home from school, and I eat dinner and again before bed. Mostly I try to eat food high in calories and I take vitamins.” This is only if Jonathan remembers or isn’t busy, but he doesn’t feel like telling Olga that. Various nutrition shakes make up the difference well enough.

Olga takes the first dish to place on the dining table. “I know these, now I can properly host when you and Mr. Nygma are not cooking Thanksgiving.”

During dinner, Jonathan whispers, “How much does Olga know?”

Cobblepot finishes his bite of salmon. “About us? She has vague awareness but plausible deniability. So does Selina Kyle. Who might drop by tomorrow. Filling out our quota for criminal orphans.” Then he stares at Jonathan to see his reaction.

Ah, so this is a cordial interrogation. Jonathan doesn’t bat an eye. “The best of mayors pay attention to their underserved constituents, after all.”

Nygma won’t look at either of them, but he says nothing, just eats. Stiffly. Maybe this is a compromise he’s not thrilled about. Jonathan only has his own parents’ marriage as a yardstick, and that’s like having a yardstick made of melted plastic.

“Under what circumstances do you prefer to be self-sufficient?” Oswald continues. Jonathan half-expects him to ask what are his intentions towards Nygma.

“All of them. I’d even grab condiments myself if it weren’t considered rude, but since it would be, please pass the salt.”

This continues for awhile. Then Cobblepot says, “You’ve still got marks from being strangled.”

“Yes.”

“My Edward,” a telling way of referring to him, “says that you were blackmailing a teacher of yours, who retaliated.”

“He is correct.”

“He doesn’t know what you were blackmailing him with.”

Nygma takes a sip of his wine. “Should it matter, Oswald?”
“I thought it was pretty clever,” Jonathan says with a half-smile.

Cobblepot raises his eyebrows. “Do tell, then.”

“Well, I knew that Mr. Brooks had a sexual interest in me, so I let him indulge it a little. You should have seen his face when he heard the recording I made, and it served double duty in convincing his family to settle out of court after they thought he died while using it as homemade pornography.”

Nygma stands up. His hands are shaking. “You. Did. What?”

Cobblepot puts a hand on his. “Easy, dearest. Jonathan made his choices, he’s in one piece, and you have to admit it was pretty diabolical.”

“My actions seem bad to you?” Jonathan asks cautiously. It would be preferable to have at least one person know about and approve what he’s done. And to not get kicked out of this house. He would like to sleep in that guest room at least once, and play in the lab, and help make a real Thanksgiving dinner.

Rather than looking at him, Nygma looks at a mirror on the far side of the room. He mouths a few words. Then he turns his gaze to Jonathan and says, sounding drained, “You just had to phrase it that way, didn’t you?”

“He’s worried about you,” Cobblepot said. “Like your...mother...would have been if you’d, say, played in the street and almost got hit by a car.”

That makes sense, though it presupposes an unexpected level of attachment to Jonathan. “I’m sorry. I’m not planning on doing something like that again, if it helps any. A bit disgusting.”

Nygma takes a long gulp of wine. “I need to use the bathroom.”

“That’s what you said last time I talked about...”

“Your casual approach to people abusing you. Yes. Remember when I told you I have my own ‘scarecrow’?”

“You randomly texted me in the middle of the night,” Jonathan said. The actual words had been, I *hallucinate and nobody i like but you does twoo*. The following morning Nygma sent a text saying he’d been drunk, that it was true, that Oswald knew, and to tell nobody.

Nygma says through gritted teeth, “I just need to argue with it for a few minutes, all right?” He literally ran off.

Jonathan turns to Cobblepot. “Am I, like, ruining your domestic harmony?”

Cobblepot resignedly butters a roll. “No. This has happened before. In fact, I think it’s your presence that made him willing to explain the situation rather than just turning into a desperate gazelle. Don’t judge him.”

Jonathan pulls out his special-occasion antique lacquered pill box, inherited from his mother, and takes out all five of them. He lines them in a neat row on his plate. The rest of his meds are in their bottles upstairs. “One of these is a multivitamin and one is an iron supplement. I only take those once a day.”

“What are the others?”
“Antipsychotic, anti-anxiety, anti-convulsant. I call them my Aunties. I take the first one three times a day, the second two twice. I have an optional sedative I can take as needed. My brain is so altered that my dosage for the antipsychotic is considered lethal for everyone else ever. My brain just breaks it down and soaks it up before I get poisoned, in a manner of speaking. The pharmacy calls my psychiatrist every single time I get a refill, and they make me bring reams of paperwork as further confirmation. They’re legally obligated to. I could have killed, like, three physics teachers with one day’s worth of my antipsychotic. Four if two of them were less than a hundred and thirty pounds.”

Jonathan had been bored in math class, which was an unavoidable repeat, and done his own math out of curiosity.

“Fascinating.”

Jonathan puts all three Aunties in his palm. Swallowing the other two in one go is still beyond him. “Depending on how you measure it, Mr. Cobblepot, I’m the least sane person for miles. Here I am, though, an Honor Roll student politely parrying what is clearly the Mayor of Gotham’s worry that I’m going to take advantage of my benefactor. That’s what this was, right, before it took a sharp turn?”

Cobblepot adjusts his tie. “You know, I see why he might respect you as well as like you.”

“Why, thank you.” The conversation turns more relaxed after that, except for the undercurrent of concern about Nygma. He’s still gone by the dessert course, and Jonathan offers to talk to him. Cobblepot concedes that fellow psychotics - in the non-pejorative, purely medical sense - might feel more of a sense of solidarity when it comes to literally yelling at a hallucination. Which is what they can hear Nygma doing down the hall.

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Jonathan knocks several times, but Nygma ignores him in favor of continuing his argument with himself. Jonathan kneels and pulls out one of the two bobby pins he’s started keeping right against his scalp. After Mr. Brooks, he’s concluded it’s best to have at least one surprise to deploy. He has long enough hair to hide them. He bends the pin into the shape he needs. The bathroom door has a simple lock and clicks open shortly.

Nygma freezes. “This is my house. How dare you.”

Jonathan stays on his knees, a non-threatening position towards someone highly agitated, and just tilts his face up. He crosses his arms to show his resolve despite the overall submissiveness. “If you were in my house and you heard the Scarecrow come for me, would you leave me alone?”

“It’s not the same.”

“I don’t see how.”

“Get up, please.”

Jonathan does. He stays on the other side of the threshold. “Do you have a name for yours?”

“Dark Ed. Mirror Ed. My reflection. We had a deal that when I stopped being…” Nygma grips the sink with both hands, attention to the mirror instead of Jonathan. “When I stopped being such a miserable little pushover with a pasted-on smile, I thought we were whole. Then shortly after Oswald and I got together, he started coming back. I know he’s not real, but -”

“Pardon my language, but bullshit. He’s real. The Scarecrow’s real.” Jonathan’s trembling, even though he feels nothing stronger than moderate concern. “They’re real like emotions are real, or
memory, or hate. They’re parts of you telling you things that you don’t want to hear. The Scarecrow didn’t talk to me until I came back to myself. Now he says things. Not all the time, but they pack a punch. I’m not saying they’re correct, I’m saying they’re believed. Our demons are fragments of us that chipped off when we got broken. We’ll never be whole, but if we can come to terms with the reality of all the pieces, maybe one day we can be *complete.*”

Letting go of the sink and coming closer, Nygma’s face shows all the signs of having just emerged from a meltdown. His eyes are obviously reddened and his lips are dark like he’s been biting them. “Bending but not folding. Blowing but not popping.”

“You know, my therapist asked me if I would be willing to consider a domestic violence support group. I said, oh right, like I’m going to stand up and say hello, my name is Jonathan, and my emotionally abusive father murdered a bunch of people from *his* support group before he stabbed me with Hell Juice. If I didn't say it, someone else would connect the dots, which would be even worse.” Jonathan tries to reproduce the face Harley made when she gave him the mood ring. “Wanna be a two-person one, maybe?”

“I’m not sure I can be as candid as I understand is expected for such things, but…” Nygma adjusts his glasses again. It's a recurring tell. Jonathan files this away for later.

“Hey, I’ll take that ‘but’ and those ellipses.”

Nygma chuckles faintly. “How about you come help me set up the turkey to brine overnight? The meat’s much more juicy that way. I can eat the rest of my dinner while you have your Nightmeal before bed.”

“Nightmeal” will be the term Jonathan uses from now on. Definitely. “Sounds like a plan. Though you should go talk to Oswald first. He’s worried. I’ll go help Olga with dishes so she can leave soon.”

“Yes.” Nygma gestures at Jonathan’s tie. No, at his throat. “You said you value self-sufficiency, but don’t value it too highly, alright?”

“You don’t need to -”

“Please?”

Jonathan nods.

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Since he’s getting up bright and early to prepare a feast, Jonathan doesn’t take his optional sedative, which can make him drowsy until about nine. He usually doesn’t have trouble falling asleep. Its purpose is to keep him from waking at minor sounds, as all the extra adrenaline that was in him for so long makes him a hair-trigger light sleeper. This has been less of an issue now that he lives alone in an isolated house. The mansion is also away from urban noise.

The sedative also reduces the frequency of nightmares about The Incident. This time the nightmare stays away on its own. Jonathan is having an absurd but emotionally neutral dream about sentient chopsticks being interviewed on a talk show when the sound of the window opening jerks him wide awake. A shadowy figure is at the window.

“Give me a reason not to raise an alarm,” Jonathan says, turning on the bedside lamp.

It’s a teenage girl all in black, with impressive boots and shiny fingerless gloves. Likely to protect her
palms. It didn’t escape Jonathan’s notice that this room’s window is the closest to the drainpipe.

“You’re Jonathan? I’m Cat.”

Jonathan nods. “Is that a nickname for Selina? I thought you were coming tomorrow afternoon, if you did at all.”

“Eh, we’re having an unexpected frost tonight. Lots of people I do business with have gone to be with their families. These guys are nice if you don’t tick them off or get in their way. Is there another room I can sleep in? Because you’re not hideous or anything, but we’ve only just met.” She bends down to remove her boots. She’s also got goggles on her head for some reason. "If you weren’t expecting someone, you’re pretty calm considering."

"I’ve heard that."

Chapter End Notes

Hint: When Ed's emerging from the bathroom, he's referring to adjectives you can and can't begin with a certain word related to their discussion.
As always, trivia brought up by Jonathan and Ed is based on things I have read from nonfiction sources, though I confess the details may have grown fuzzy in the meantime.

Oswald and Selina are both still asleep when Jonathan descends for breakfast at seven, as agreed. Nygma is sitting with a plateful of scrambled eggs and two slices of toast, and an oversize sheet of paper that he was scribbling in. He looks cozy but still on the smart-casual side with his gray button-up shirt under a moss green sweater-vest. Jonathan is in his novelty Ravenclaw sweatpants and an old science camp t-shirt under his black hoodie.

“You know Selina’s here, right?”

Nygma nodded. “I heard her snoring and went to see who it was en route to peeking into your room. Just to check if you were okay.”

“Whatever, I don’t care.” Jonathan gets his own food and sits perpendicular to Nygma. “Is that a battle plan?”

“In a sense. This many traditional dishes of different cooking times and types is a balancing act. Which of these are you familiar with cooking on your own?”

By the time they’re both done eating and cleaning up, Jonathan’s been assigned to take care of mashed potatoes - though he’s following Nygma’s recipe that substitutes sour cream for some of the milk - his memorized cornbread recipe that was originally his mother’s, a simple salad with red wine vinaigrette, lightly steamed green beans with garlic, and general assistance. Nygma’s taking charge of corn chowder as a starter course, turkey, stuffing, making store-bought cranberry sauce more interesting, and mini pumpkin tarts. The heavy hitters. He has fun talking about the chemistry of pie crust before asking how Jonathan came to learn such varied cooking.

“Mom died when I was eight, and once Dad stopped being such a ghost in his own house he started seriously teaching me how to help out more,” Jonathan says as he ties on the apron he brought with him. It was a present from one of friends at his previous school, black and with the words: *Come to the Dark Side, we have cookies.*

“Mind if I put on some music?” Nygma asks.

“Depends on what.” They briefly negotiate until Jonathan consents to Ella Fitzgerald. Nygma returns from putting on the record, with another ready to go, rolls up his sleeves, and they get down to business. His green apron has a purple umbrella embroidered over his heart.

At first it’s all business as they learn to work together and Jonathan is still learning where things are, but they get into a harmonious rhythm soon. They only tolerate Oswald’s presence long enough for Oswald to get something to eat, then banish him as an interloper. Selina is still carrying out her nocturnal lifestyle to its natural conclusion.
“Who did you spend this holiday with before?” Jonathan asks Nygma while cubing bread. The potatoes are diced and boiling.

Nygma’s assessing the success of the overnight brining process. “I used to volunteer to pull extra shifts and cover folks in Forensics that wanted the time off. I made food for everyone who’d be working at the station with me.”

“I bet they didn’t appreciate it as much as they should.” Jonathan watches Nygma turn and fetch a ziploc bag, and jokes, “Either those are premixed herbs, or you’re trying to corrupt an impressionable youth.”

“I think the work’s been done,” Nygma mutters, but he smiles too. “I’ve only realized recently - now that I’ve learned what genuine approval and non-passive-aggressive teasing sounds like - that they appreciated the taste but didn’t go for my presentation.”

“Shallow of them.”

Digging for additional cookware in yet another of the zillion cupboards, Nygma continues, “I thought I’d make it fun and thematic, so I did things like leave the giblets outside the turkey and put caution tape around the whole platter, with cranberry sauce as blood and the breast split open. To represent our work. I piped skulls onto the pumpkin pie to represent the genocide of the native peoples, and the place mats I made of construction paper had all sorts of facts about the history of Thanksgiving as a convoluted mythology we’ve latched onto as our culture’s version of a harvest feast, which is something that all agriculturally-based societies seem to have. I put still-wrapped gold coins in the cooled split rolls to represent the incoming consumerism of Black Friday. You get the idea, I believe.”

“I do. Need help with that roasting pan?”

“I’m just trying to keep everything else in here from collapsing in a heap, which means yes.” When he’s completed that objective, Nygma returns to his chowder procedures. He goes on a long verbal tangent about how he once put lime juice in the cornbread because of indigenous wisdom that this combination prevented pellagra in a largely-corn diet...but it ended up not being a popular combination.

“Cool thing to try, though,” Jonathan says. The herbed bread cubes are now toasting. He steps over to Nygma’s battle plans to see what he should start on next.

Nygma twirls his wooden spoon with a dose of melancholy underneath the whimsy. “Didn’t really get a clue, though, did I? If I’d just stuck to more conventional recipes I’d probably gotten thanked more, rather than being Creepy Needy Nygma yet again.”

Jonathan frowns. “Does this place have an icing bag?”

Nygma turns to look at Jonathan full-on. “Why?”

“So we can pipe some goddamn skulls on some goddamn pie.” Jonathan isn’t a gratuitous swearer, but he can wield it to get attention.

“I’d normally chide you for language, but…” Nygma looks unsteady on his feet. “You really want to?”

“We could do a white outline around the turkey instead of caution tape if you don’t have any. Cartoony, but it’ll get the point across. Is there something you did with green beans?” Jonathan’s supposed to chop vegetables for the chowder now, but this moment is key.
“This is Thanksgiving, not Halloween,” Nygma says — no, quotes. He’s quoting, and the faint scorn in his words is an echo.

“It’s whatever we say it is.”

After a moment, Nygma pushes his glasses up his nose, and a corner of his mouth twitches. “You’re right, it is.”

***

Dinner’s nearly ready when the doorbell rings. Cobblepot shouts, “TEENS, OUTSIDE!”

“Go on,” Nygma says, helping Jonathan undo his apron quickly. “There’s a lovely copse not far from here. Get Selina to teach you how to climb a tree and keep her from sneaking back in before the all-clear, alright? I know you’ve been wanting to repay me for hospitality.”

“I know how to climb trees,” Jonathan says, but because he’s pedantic rather than unwilling. Fresh air will do him good.

The sky is crisp and clearly azure, no clouds. He doesn’t know how to climb trees like Selina does, which is no surprise, and the “easy” one she picks out for him is enough to get him out of breath.

“At least you’re dressed more practically than some people I know,” she says, snickering at him. She’s already at the very top of a practically branchless tower of timber. “Put your right foot at two-o’clock, and put your weight on your right hand, then haul up.”

“This might be the time to mention that I’m so weak I’m allowed to skip all school-related physical activities,” Jonathan grits out.

“Well, if anyone’s chasing you, they’re not going to ask to see the school nurse’s note. Imagine something you really want is at the top.”

Caw, a crow adds from a nearby tree.

Caw, agrees another. They look at Jonathan expectantly.

“I don’t have anything for you right now, check tomorrow morning,” Jonathan says.

“You talk to crows?” Selina asks, raising an eyebrow.

He painfully makes it up another branch and reaches out. “It’s not a meaningful two-way communication, but when I feed the ones near my house I use them as sounding boards and stuff.”

A third flits by. Caw?

“These aren’t your crows, are they? Because I wouldn’t not believe you, given the kind of people I know, but I’d laugh.”

“I doubt it. Crows can communicate amongst each other which humans are friendly and which aren’t. Researchers who tossed rocks in the direction of crows - not trying to hit them - while wearing masks found themselves constantly attacked by crows all around town whenever they wore the masks. Crows that weren’t involved in the original incident.” Jonathan did give them a nice fresh corpse to enjoy that one time, too. “These are the only other woods I’ve spent much time in other than the ones at home, so it hasn’t happened before.”

The crow count is up to five. “This is weird and hilarious,” Selina says with amusement, sprawling
like a tree limb is another kind of couch.

Jonathan gets as high as he’s interested in getting, and straddles the branch for a few deep breaths. “I wonder…” He puts on his sunglasses and pulls up his hoodie.

“They’re not that stupid,” Selina says.

“It’s still worth testing.” The crows continue to linger hopefully. Jonathan smiles the tiniest bit.

Selina taps one of the branches on Jonathan’s tree. “Ground-level, five o’clock. Stay still and I do the talking.”

“Okay.”

It’s a pair of women in their late twenties or earlier thirties, one of whom looks like a blonde vintage Playboy bunny in a special Autumn issue (Jonathan got a long lecture about how unethical it was to rifle through Dad’s special adult reading), and the other of whom looks like every bit of her completely black outfit has been used to kill a man. They’re both beautiful. They make Selina look wary. Jonathan doesn’t have enough information to follow his head, so he’ll follow Selina’s lead.

Mankiller Outfit looks up at Selina. “When the lovebirds kept insisting they were alone in the house, they were insisting just a little too hard. You’re usually harder to track than this, kitten.”

“I thought you melted in the sunlight, lady-Galavan,” Selina replies. “Excuse my mistake. Hey, Barbara, ‘sup? Did you ever get around to selling that sweet apartment of yours? Because it might be good to have a failsafe in case your current living arrangements don’t work out.”

“I’m fine where I am,” ‘Barbara says with a perfect smile with perfect teeth.

“What are you doing here today?” Galavan - where does he know that from? - asks.

“Penguin wanted to discuss an assignment with me, I said how about over dinner? That’s all. Might case the joint while I’m at it, but you know that Nygma has probably memorized where everything is down to tiny jars of, like, smelling salts. They’re worth more as employers. You two got a job for me?”

Barbara glances at Galavan and the latter’s clenched right fist loosens. “Not right now. Just saying hi. Who’s your friend?”

“Colin’s got talents, and Penguin said I could bring him too, might be relevant.” Selina jabs a thumb in Jonathan’s direction and stage-whispers, “Paranoid!”

“And mute?” Galavan also takes in the persistent crows, but doesn’t mention them.

“Yo,” Jonathan says, waving.

There’s a moment of silent tension between the three women before Barbara takes her companion’s hand. “C’mon, Tabby, let’s go make sure the bartender’s got enough Cranberry Gimlets ready for the sad nightclub crowd tonight.” The two leave. Jonathan takes off the sunglasses and hood when they’re no longer in view.

On the way back to the house, Jonathan asks, “Why’d you pick ‘Colin’?”

“I feel like you could be a Colin. Why the ‘yo’?”

“It’s not something I’d normally say.” Jonathan dusts off his pants. “I should get changed. Thank
you for taking charge on that. Where have I heard ‘Galavan’ before?”

Selina stares at him. “Theo Galavan was, like, mayor? Tabitha Galavan was his sister? Then Penguin killed him? Then he came back to life and Penguin killed him again?”

Jonathan stares at her. “You’re looking at me like what I said was weird. I was in a kind of coma for almost all of that. I now remember reading something in the papers about a guy supposedly coming back to life and the police dealing with it after much running around screaming, but I didn’t connect the dots. Plus I live outside the city itself, and we don’t panic as much about undead ninjas and whatnot that stick to downtown.”

“Huh. You and Barbara could’ve swapped coma stories.”

“I doubt we had the same experience.”

****

“Why does the food look weird?” Selina asks.

“Because we’re commemorating Nygma finally getting to eat Thanksgiving at home instead of covering for slackers in Forensics,” Jonathan says. He holds out a bottle. “Sparkling cider?”

“It wasn’t all bad. Sometimes I got to take over for the M.E. on that day of days.” Ed sighs wistfully.

“Is that crime scene tape around the turkey corpse made from fruit roll-up candy?” Cobblepot asks, picking up the carving knife with hesitant fingers.

Nygma smiles and ducks his head like he’s been nominated for an award. “Fully edible. Couldn’t have done it without Jonathan and Jonathan’s habit of hiding snacks in his luggage.”

Neither Nygma nor Cobblepot want to discuss underworld or Mayoral business with “the kids”. Cobblepot doesn’t want to say anything very personal and doesn’t want Nygma to either. Selina and Cobblepot are bored by Nygma and Jonathan’s nerdy rambles. Selina throws crumbs at Jonathan when he talks about high school. This means that almost all the conversation is Selina telling ridiculous stories, Jonathan asking her leading questions, and the adults being nonverbally soppy.

“‘So then I stole Jim Gordon’s wallet…”

“That’s one of the best opening phrases in a sentence of all time,” Cobblepot says. “I don’t think any of us here wish death on the man…”

“It’d make Dr. Thompkins sad,” Jonathan says, because that’s very important. Nygma nods in agreement.

“…But humiliation is welcome,” Cobblepot continues.

Selina’s hand darts out for another piece of cornbread. “What’d he do to you, Jonathan? Put you in the coma?”

“He killed my dad, who admittedly was charging at him with a gun. Mainly, Gordon didn’t get to me in time to prevent the coma. Same with Harvey Bullock, but Bullock constantly humiliates himself with no outside interference needed.”

She grabs butter and honey to go with. “I’m going to meet you on your level here: You say really upsetting things really casually.”
“My dad gave me brain damage. I don’t feel emotions normally anymore.”

Nygma is making his mashed potatoes into a gravy-holding crater. “You’re interested in maybe setting up your own home lab, right?”

“Yes. In the barn where my grandpa used to keep the alpacas in bad weather. It’s was wired with electricity to keep them warm, and it’s a nice big space that’ll be easy to clear out. I was going to talk to you about how much your equipment was.”

Nygma calculates in his head for a moment. “I know you got a big payout recently…”

“Blackmail,” Jonathan tells Selina, whose face goes from confused to conspiratorial.

“…But from what my sources said about this and your finances in general, you should reserve the majority of for living expenses and what you can put by for college. I know you want to be a psychiatrist, and that is a lot of higher education to figure out, and scholarships are competitive.”

“Plus all my stellar grades don’t completely obscure my history,” Jonathan finishes. They’re not supposed to discriminate based on that, but they do.

“Maybe you could turn that into a feature rather than a bug.” Nygma takes a sip of his wine. “There’s a scholarship the GCPD offers. They don’t advertise it. Merit-based, but only for minors who’ve had at least one parent killed directly by an officer in an altercation. There was a lawsuit some years back that set a precedent. You have to be in high school but you don’t need to be a senior. Could look into that for you.”

“It’s telling that this happens often enough for there to be competition in such a category,” Cobblepot sneers.

“I know a friend who’d qualify if she wasn’t a dropout,” Selina says. “Just FYI, dudes, you two are good cooks.”

Nygma beams. “In the same vein, I believe in the hubbub of recent attacks on the GCPD, some of the evidence seized in the Crane case never made it back to you, right?”

“Right. Including Dad’s murder van.”

“Go to Lucius Fox. He’s an honorable man. Ask for it back. Alleviate your financial burdens. I put myself through graduate school as well as undergrad, and the money was harder to figure out than the classes, I can tell you.”

“There are collectors who pay top dollar for stuff involved in exciting murder cases,” Selina offers. “Could fence it for you.”

“If you feel indebted, I can give you a nonviolent but useful task to accomplish while in the station,” Cobblepot says.

His grin fading to calculation, Nygma says slowly, “You’ll need to buy your equipment with a minimum of suspicion and fuss, given your age and, well, history. That’s a tricky one.”

“Merc,” Selina says automatically. “Sells crime stuff? They rebuilt it after Barnes blew it up. Different location, higher security. These days you either gotta be a member or have a member chaperone you. They’ve got a whole section for DIY secret laboratories.”

“Are you a member?” Jonathan asks. He finished eating ages ago but is enjoying his sparkling cider
and the company.

She shakes her head, as her mouth is full. When she’s chewed and swallowed, she said, “But I know someone who is, and he owes me a favor.”

“Thank you.” Jonathan’s chest suddenly feels tight. He takes his medication.

****

After dinner, he and Selina work on cleanup. Jonathan excuses himself partway through to go to the bathroom. Then he sees Nygma and Cobblepot curled up on the couch together.

He’s seen people kissing and holding hands recently. He’s a high school student, how could he not? Hugging is common in plenty of places between plenty of people. Then there’s what’s on TV and in movies.

However, they’re nestled together so liquidly (on the physical level) and so solidly (on the emotional level). They’re quiet and barely moving. Cobblepot’s head is on Nygma’s shoulder and Nygma is stroking his bad leg with utmost gentleness and whispering in his ear and Cobblepot just looks so relaxed and the fingers of their free hands are interlaced and -

Jonathan runs to his room and locks the door behind him. He curls into a ball right on the floor, on one of the rugs Nygma had brought in just for him. “Scarecrow, come for me,” he whispers.

Nothing happens.

“Come on, please. I don’t like what I’m...not feeling. Feeling? I don’t like this.”

He’s alone.

“Scarecrow? This once? Let me call the shots?”

_It doesn’t work that way, boy_, says the crackling dust voice, with something akin to pity.

“Why not? You said you’d take me when I’m weak.” He slightly wants to throw a toddler tantrum. “How could I be weaker than this?”

_You’re having a revelation. One you need. I’m not going to let you skip it._

“What’s the revelation?”

_You want your nightmare to hand feed you wisdom?_

Jonathan sits up so he can look at it in the eye. He’s never done that before. His bones are tired. “Since when do you become relevant when it comes to having feelings rather than not having them?”

It pokes his chest. _Don’t be too worried that I won’t be my usual self next time. I’ll be here to make you scream and cry again. But I want you to understand my nature. You’ll never be a proper host until you do._

Host? Jonathan rubs his face in his hands so hard it hurts. “You’re involved with all my emotions, not just my fear.”

It nods. Its movements sound like mounds of straw under heavy tread.
“Fear isn’t...it isn’t separate from everything else in your head. Dad tried to take my fear away, but what he did was make you all my fear instead. And as long as you are...as long as we are separate, everything else I feel is only faint echoes. Because I am not whole, and we are not complete.”

It nods. The fire burns brighter.

“You hurt me, but I also need you. Getting rid of you is not the solution. Controlling you is. For me.”

For everyone, Jonathan Crane. Humanity doesn’t need fearlessness. It needs control over fear.

Then it’s gone.

****

Jonathan is lying on his back, sprawled out diagonally on the bed. His shoes are off. He’s listening to music. He’s been thinking not entirely new thoughts, simply gathering up idle ideas and organizing them.

Now the bed’s on fire and the ceiling’s gone, and your mom and dad still sing the same old song...

Nygma opens the door. “It’s been thirty minutes of you not responding to knocks. Picked the lock. Tit for tat,” he says, a half-smile on his face but his eyes worried into crow’s-feet.

“It’s okay,” Jonathan says. He doesn’t sit up. “Sorry to worry you. I’m not fine, but I’m stable. Do you know Radical Face? The album Ghost? It’s a good album. Some music can...bypass.”

“Not familiar, but I’m glad you’ve found a compensatory mechanism.” Nygma clears his throat. “When people have a severed corpus callosum, their left hemisphere can’t communicate with the right.”

“I know.”

“Do you know that if you cover one eye, and show them a funny picture with the other, sometimes they’ll laugh and have no idea why?”

“I’m not surprised.”

I closed my eyes and saw my father’s sins; they covered me like a second skin.

Nygma approaches. Jonathan doesn’t spook. “I think what your father did to you might have taken less than you think. You just don’t know all of it.”

Jonathan sits up. “Your hypothesis has merit.”

“I forgot how much you don’t talk your age - except the occasional slang interjection - until I listened to you in the same conversation as Selina.” Nygma sits next to him on the edge of the bed. He’s not wearing a tie anymore.

“Harley de-ages me a little.” Jonathan’s been wearing the mood ring around his neck today because he’s either been cooking or semiformal but he slips his pinky into it without removing it from the chain.

I peeled them off, and sure I bled a bit, but now I’m free to sink my own damn ship.

“Is there something I can do?”
Jonathan hesitates over whether the question will hurt Nygma’s feelings, but Nygma has always wanted Jonathan to answer the question asked rather than a question implied. “Please ask your husband to come talk to me. Alone. I’ll give him the choice of whether to tell you what we talked about, but…”

“Whatever you need.” Nygma pats the bed. “This represents how I would pat you on the shoulder if you wanted me to.”

“Thanks.”

Nygma gets up again. “May I ask what brought this on? In case it’s preventable?”

_I cut my branch down from my family tree to start a fire in the living room. Now the house is just ash. This time it’s sink or swim._

“I saw you and your husband being what I can’t be,” Jonathan says softly.

“I’m not certain I understand.”

“Do you know what the last thing I said to Dad was? And what the last thing Dad said to me was?” Jonathan’s told Helga this, and she’s helped, but Helga doesn’t know pain like this. Not the way Nygma knows. “I saw him filling up the syringe, and he was in a hurry and his hands were shaking with adrenaline, right? He was putting in more than twice as much as he’d injected himself with. I’m like, _That’s too much!_ and he doesn’t hear me, or he doesn’t care, I don’t know, he always resisted being corrected. I hear Gordon and Bullock and they’re shouting, and Dad says he loves me. That’s the last thing he says before the needle goes in.”

A mask of restraint, covering up anger or grief maybe, falls over Nygma’s face. “You’ve, you’ve been _classically conditioned_ against being loved. Against even witnessing deep love.”

“I’m starting to think so. Like if Pavlov hit his dogs every time they tried to eat a treat. Thank god I can do friendship,” Jonathan says. “You can tell Mr. Cobblepot that, when I’m not around, but nobody else. Please, I want to talk to him.”

For his moments alone, Jonathan just listens to the song. It finds the part of his brain where Former Jonathan lives.

_Let the river in. If blood is thicker than water, then let the river in. We might drift a ways, but we’ll find our way again._

****

Cobblepot takes the chair. Jonathan sits on the bed. “Dad was afraid, and Mom died. I was afraid, and I followed Dad into hell. Dad wasn’t afraid, and he died. I’m not afraid, more or less, and parts of me have died. All of these things are bad, and they happen to everybody in one way or another, if not always so extreme. I’m going to find a balance, Mr. Penguin sir. For everyone. Not to banish fear, but to control it.”

He has rather pale blue eyes for someone with such dark hair. Jonathan’s eyes are blue, but a deeper blue, and his hair is more brown than black. Jonathan wonders when he started wearing eye makeup, and what makes him like it, and why he always wears suits but also gels his hair into a peak. “I’ve heard worse speeches from people just about to create a clandestine laboratory that will likely end up using human subjects. I know it will sooner or later. I know how these things go. Brooks will have whetted your appetite and you are not a sentimental young man, except for your few friends and I suspect your therapist, given how you go on about her.”
“Do you disapprove?”

Cobblepot makes a dismissive hand gesture. “As long as you don’t break Ed’s heart in the process by getting yourself in trouble. I like seeing him revel in friendship.”

“I asked to see you alone because I want to know what you really think.” Jonathan removes the mood ring from the chain to put on his finger. He needs something to do with his hands.

“It’s what I really think.”

“I think I can raise the funds to start off, but I’ll need additional resources as time goes on.” Jonathan twists the ring. “In the process of achieving my goal, one step will be a serum like what I injected into Mr. Brooks. I want to make it nonfatal and possible to calibrate, possible to end the effects of when desired. It will lead to understanding. It would also, I think, be potentially very useful for torture or punishment. Mr. Brooks’ death was ruled as cardiac arrest. There weren’t any marks on him. If it hadn’t been fatal, it could potentially have been used over and over as long as you gave him a rest in between. Having had the same experience, only stretched out, I can promise you that it is worse than any physical pain imaginable. Useful and marketable among the underworld.”

“Hmm.” Cobblepot strokes his chin. “You want an investor.”

“Yes, sir.” Jonathan wraps a blanket around himself. It’s an old building, not the best insulation.

“If, and only if, you can demonstrate to me that you can reproduce your current prototype with consistent results, I am willing to provide a stipend for the development of a more commercially viable version. I don’t mind Ed mentoring you as long as it doesn’t interfere with his other pursuits.”

Jonathan feels mildly insulted by the idea that he’d be constantly demanding attention. “I did resolve the situation with Mr. Brooks all by myself.”

His face softens. “Yes. You’re also clever. So I’ll make this bargain with you in good faith, and assuming you meet this criteria, I’ll write up a real contract such as the Penguin would use with any investee in organized crime. This is more informal, so let’s shake hands.”

Jonathan does. “Thank you, sir.”

“What are your plans for the rest of the evening?”

“A hot bath to ground myself, then my Nightmeal.” What a great term.

“Ed would like someone to watch Star Trek with him, which you could do while eating. He’s doing Chief of Staff work from home in the meantime, so you don’t need to rush.” Cobblepot gets to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. “Just having someone to make him stop pestering me to watch Star Trek is worth a bit of cash. Selina’s out doing Selina things, but she promised to be back before you leave to talk business.”

“Sounds good. If I might ask, why did Tabitha Galavan and Barbara Kean drop by today?” Jonathan eventually got their full names out of Selina.

Cobblepot groans, becoming much more relatable in the process. “They dropped off a casserole in what they said was a gesture of the Thanksgiving spirit. They did not specify how literal they were being.”

“Like sharing food in friendship, or like sharing smallpox blankets in conquest?” Jonathan gets up and stretches. A long bath sounds really nice. Clean away the sweat he always gets when the
Scarecrow visits, even if he didn’t have a seizure this time, and reclaim his physical existence.

Cobblepot grimaces. “Exactly. Seeing as Ms. Galavan stabbed my mother and Ms. Kean loves playing mind games with Ed, we decided to take the ‘gift’ far away from the house and destroy it safely. I wish we could have them simply disposed of, but that’s politics. My two roles are more similar than some might think. Have your bath, Jonathan. Well done today, not only with dinner.”

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Later, after having to listen to a long debate on whether to watch Original Series or Next Generation, Cobblepot emerges from his study and says with a straight face that he retracts that last statement. Nygma and Selina don’t understand why Jonathan laughs.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t actually know how police handle things seized as evidence after the case has been solved, but Gotham as a show has messed up criminal justice/judicial procedure anyway, right? Like what's up with 2x1 where a guy gets arrested and shows up in Arkham on the SAME DAY. No effort to see if it's part of a bigger picture? No trial? No evaluation? Just, "This guy's talking weird, clearly an Arkham case and not a mentally competent killer faking it?" I hope it's just because Theo Galavan was greasing wheels.

*

On a happier note, my father is always in charge of Thanksgiving, he likes to play music while cooking, and he likes Ella Fitzgerald, so this is me evoking as much paternal affection vibes for myself as I can. Ed's not old enough to be Jonathan's father, sure, but that's the role he naturally falls into.
“Jonathan?” Dr. Thompkins sounds startled to see him sitting on a bench at her place of work, doing his assigned reading for English class. Now that his non-school activities are taking up more of his schedule, he needs to fit his academics here and there when he can.

He looks up properly. “Hello, Dr. Thompkins. I have an appointment with Mr. Fox in Forensics, but his meeting is going overtime.”

“Is everything alright?” She’s still wearing her lab coat, so maybe she’s just on her way to the ladies’ room or something else brief.

“I’m hoping to get some of my father’s possessions back.”

“I see.” She looks sad, though she’s still smiling cordially.

“I was going to give you this whenever I ran into you here.” Jonathan rummages through his messenger bag and takes out the gift. “I don’t know if you celebrate Christmas or not, but if you don’t want to use it as a Christmas ornament, you could keep it on your desk or something.”

“It’s a...spaceship?” She accepts it into her open palm.

“Origami spaceship on a string. Your biographical blurb in an old brochure for a charity event you organized mentioned that you like sci-fi novels.” Nygma helped him fold it. The man is an origami whiz.

Her smile turns tender. “Thank you. I’ll take good care of it. I’m afraid I have things to do, but if you need anything…”

“I will. Thank you.”

Half a chapter later, a polite throat-clear draws Jonathan’s attention to a tidy, nicely-dressed man with a pragmatic face. “Mr. Crane, I presume.”

“Yes, sir. Are you Mr. Fox?” Jonathan gets to his feet.

“Indeed I am. I apologize for the delay; thankfully, I put in a request for an itemized list of everything seized in your father’s case and was able to pick it up on my way over. Let’s go to my desk.”

Fox’s desk is also very tidy. He places the list right in the middle, oriented so that Jonathan can read it easily. “I apologize that no one contacted you about this.”

“There’s been a lot of upheaval,” Jonathan says, scanning it. Items from Dad’s home lab setup that he can repurpose, various elements of the crime scenes that took so long to set up and execute that it
wasn’t feasible to clean up rather than just flee, the van, the syringe he used on Jonathan…

“May I ask who first alerted you?”

“The attorney I went to for advice about becoming emancipated.” Jonathan has discussed with Nygma what he can and can’t reveal when questioned about their association, so he doesn’t have to worry about missteps here. Nygma also said the first time he met Fox, he’d been thrown for a loop about the man’s perceptiveness, so there would be no shame if it happened to Jonathan as well.

Fox sounds completely guileless, just curious. He folds his hands on the desk. “Interesting that your counsel would know about a matter one might consider completely unrelated.”

“Dr. Thompkins is qualified as both a medical examiner and a general practitioner, which are very different specialties,” Jonathan points out, tapping his foot idly. He hadn’t considered that they might have kept the syringe. It shouldn’t be that surprising. Dad was dead, but they wanted to see if he could be responsible for any cold cases. He wonders if anyone had tried to analyze any residues to help Jonathan, too. Nygma hadn’t said anything about it when asking for Jonathan’s forgiveness, so probably not.

“I won’t dance around it. You’re not a child.” Fox’s points at one of the items on the list. “This is the only thing that was recorded as having been returned. A copy of the paper your father wrote detailing his justification for his activities and a summary of his proposed methods along with the goal he hoped to achieve. It was signed out before Gerald Crane was posthumously ruled innocent of any crimes other than the ones he was originally supposed to be brought in for - my apologies, by the way.”

“Why? You didn’t work here at the time.”

Fox doesn’t make eye contact with Jonathan, but he looks at his face like he hasn’t truly done previously. “Because it was Edward Nygma who signed it out, before he was arrested for multiple homicides, and nobody noticed or followed up on a troubled employee having recently shown interest in a victim of a case he’d worked on. Someone should have looked into that. It was negligent, and I am to a degree complicit.”

Nygma was right. Fox is an honorable man, and Jonathan knows he would never be able to put the fear in him. If he absolutely had to kill him, maybe a quick bullet to the head, but from this moment on Jonathan doesn’t want to poison him with that terror. Just as with Dr. Thompkins. Fortunately, there are tens of thousands of other people to choose from in this city.

Jonathan sits up from his slouch. “You’re being too hard on yourself. Mr. Nygma’s trying to keep our association quiet because I’m in my father’s shadow as it is, but he didn’t want me to lie to you if you asked. Did you ask Dr. Thompkins? She could tell you that he visited me in the hospital after I regained lucidity to help me with closure.”

“She did, but that can mean a lot of things.” Careful words. No judgement. Due diligence.

“He gave me the paper to help me understand what had been done to me. To empower me. And he asked me to forgive him for not doing a better job.” Jonathan smiled slightly. “Also he gave me a get-well bouquet and improvised a vase when I didn’t have one.”

“You’ve been in contact with him recently.” Not a question.

“As the mayor’s Chief of Staff, he helped me get a ticket to the grand opening of a new wing of the science museum.” Reinforcing the alibi, retroactively.
“He did?”

“He remembered from our conversation way back then that I might be interested. We caught up a bit, and when I learned about getting the evidence back I asked him for information on the procedure, since he used to work here.” Jonathan sighs. “Before he had a bit of a breakdown.”

The corner of Fox’s mouth twitches. “You could phrase it that way, I suppose.”

“He said he wasn’t sure how you felt about him after he threatened to kill you. He says he’s sorry, that there was never any intention of actually killing you, and that he did it because Dr. Strange and his assistant were threatening him with physical violence.” This is, in fact, completely true. Though Nygma admitted to having gotten a bit giddy while playing “deadly quiz show bluff”, because if you can enjoy doing what you have to do to avoid getting eaten by a barely-restrained cannibal, you might as well.

“Strange is an appalling piece of work. I hope we catch him soon.” Fox stares out the window for a moment as if Strange might be huddled in the shrubbery.

“Me too.” Jonathan wonders what the man who hurt Nygma and Cobblepot is afraid of.

“Anyway, tell Mr. Nygma that I thought that might be the case, and that my reservations regarding his past actions and the circumstances of his release aren’t personal. I know he is capable of doing good, and I’m glad to hear an example of him showing kindness.” Fox hands Jonathan a pen. “I’ve already signed. You need to sign on this line, and you need the signatures of both detectives who led the case. If this is difficult, and I understand how it might be, I could accompany you to Detective Gordon’s desk and Captain Harvey’s office. They’re trapped under mounds of paperwork at present and won’t be able to run.”

Jonathan smirks for a second, imagining them literally trapped under a mound of paperwork, being crushed against the floor and helpless. “I can manage. Then do I bring it back to you?”

“Yes. I’ll make sure everything’s in order, assign someone to escort you to the storage unit where everything should be appropriately bagged and tagged, and file this appropriately.” Fox folds his hands on the desk again, like that’s his resting state. “I’ll keep what you’ve shared with me to myself. No need to put you in danger of Nygma-stigma.”

Jonathan chuckles and says, “Crane-shame is bad enough.” This surprises a grin out of Fox.

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“Could you sign this for me please?”

Gordon takes the document without looking at who’s handing it to him, at first. Then he reads the name at the top and does a double-take. His smile is all teeth, no eyes, but he’s trying. “Um. Hi.”

“Hi. I just need you to sign. Please.”

“I’m sorry about what happened when we came to talk to you.”

“Not your fault.” Jonathan helpfully points to the correct line. “Please sign. I don’t want my dad’s things in a GCPD storage unit anymore.”

“What’cha gonna do with ‘em?” Bullock asks from a few feet away. Yes, he’s actually got his own office now, but he’s sitting in a chair near Gordon’s desk as if the former detective-partner bond needs renewal from time to time.
“Mostly sell. Every little bit helps. I’ll probably stomp the syringe he used on me into the tiniest shards possible, though.” Jonathan mouths a thank you to Gordon and then goes to Bullock for him to sign.

Bullock reads it slowly, dragging his finger along for annoying emphasis. “I’ll sign if you tell me whether you helped load them into the van.”

Jonathan tilts his head like a mystified owl. “Do you mean when they were still alive, or after they were dead?”

“Harv…” Jim warns.

Bullock ignores him. “When they were still alive.”

“No. It was a combination of preserving a scrap of innocence and not wanting them to see me just in case they escaped. The woman who you rescued was a fluke.”

“She said you came to get more quarters for the parking meter.” Bullock picks at his teeth. Ew. Nygma’s tics aren’t gross and are in some ways endearing.

“Wouldn’t want to break the law,” Jonathan says.

Bullock throws the pen on the floor. “You think this is funny?”

“Harvey!” Jim’s doing what he thinks is a subtle mime of Jonathan having an episode. It’s really not.

“I…” Jonathan flops onto the floor and bangs his head on the desk.

“Shit!” Bullock leaps out of his chair and Gordon runs to Jonathan’s aid, such as move him out of the way of heavy objects he could hurt himself flailing against. Dr. Tompkins may have broken up with him, but she saw something in him once, and she’s not an idiot. Jonathan will grant him that.

This time, Jonathan grabs Gordon’s hand and allows him to pull him to a sitting position away from the desk. “Sorry, my new medication’s reducing the attacks but it gives me occasional dizzy spells if I’m tired, and I’m running on not as much sleep as I should.” None of this is a lie. It’s simply not what just happened. Jonathan gets back up all the way and takes a seat on a spare chair.

“Look. I’m signing. Please go lie down peacefully somewhere and not scream.” Bullock finishes signing and thrusts the paper at him.

“A lot of people use humor as a coping mechanism, Captain Bullock. I don’t think what I participated in putting people through is funny.” Jonathan takes the document. “You’d have a tough time raising a toddler. I do think that’s funny.”

“I’m watching you,” Bullock mutters for Jonathan’s ears alone as Jonathan walks by.

Jonathan gives him a thumbs-up.

****

Awhile later, Jonathan returns to his car. For once Jonathan’s the one who’s gone to do a spot of crime and left an assistant in the car, which is parked about a block away to keep him from feeling too nervous.

Ian Hargrove is sitting in the backseat with one of the windows down, working on something involving lots of small parts. He used to make bombs compulsively, but then Fish Mooney’s gang
had him abducted and forced him to make bombs that hurt people. Hargrove doesn’t like hurting people, and he really didn’t like being in Arkam. Cobblepot and Nygma have recently succeeded in getting him released. They’re giving him training and resources to make less dangerous yet useful-to-Penguin things instead. Everybody’s happy, even if Hargrove is lied to by omission fairly often to protect his deniability and feelings.

“How’s it going, Mr. Hargrove?”

Hargrove says, without taking his eyes off it, “It’s a music box that also plays coded messages.”

“Cool.”

Hargrove looks out the window. “Didn’t you say you were getting your dad’s van back now that the cops don’t need it?”

“Yes. A friend of mine is driving it for me.” Selina’s got everything else Jonathan wants to sell, too, and is making her way to the meeting point with the collector she got in touch with. They’ll split the proceeds. Jonathan is aware that Selina could potentially skim a bit, but having her as an ally is more important than quibbling. Nygma’s briefed him on the neighborhood of what various things are probably worth.

“I’ll check that the bugs are working before we go.”

“Please do. I put one in the lab, one under the desk of an influential detective, and one in the captain’s office.” He’d waited until after lunchtime to get back to Fox with the signed documents and just hung out as if waiting for someone else. Nygma was right that Bullock held leaving the office for at least half an hour at noon on the dot as a sacred ritual. All it took was a determined, confident stride with a borrowed clipboard in hand.

Soon Hargrove confirms it and Jonathan starts the car. “Now the Mayor will be able to listen to the dirty cops and have them stopped,” Hargrove says with shy, tentative happiness.

“Exactly.” Other kinds of cops too, spying on them as he pleases, but Hargrove is a gentle soul and Jonathan won’t spoil his mood. “I’ll drop you off.”

****

It’s more than two weeks before Jonathan, Selina, and her contact are all free at the same time. Selina says you must pay in cash at Merc, but he also mustn’t walk anywhere unaccompanied with the cash on him, otherwise mugging is guaranteed. Within three hundred feet of Merc is a neutral zone, as in the store itself, but it’s not like Jonathan can just teleport in. He wonders what she does to keep hers safe. The two of them made a appreciable profit on Dad’s van, after all. Selina told the buyer gory fabrications of all the horrors that had supposedly taken place inside it.

Jonathan picks Selina up from the alley she specified two days earlier. She has a phone, but instead of carrying it with her she frequently stashes it somewhere safe and checks her messages every day or two. She’s concerned it could be used to track her.

She jumps in without ceremony. “Okay, so he’s currently having pizza at a mom-and-pop place he likes close to Merc. I told him I’m having a nap in your car to keep it safe and because your backseat is surprisingly comfy, but he says you can join him.”

How typical is this behavior? Cobblepot had only so much time to answer Jonathan’s questions about the underworld, though he was good-humored about it. “I ate already. Besides, eating out for me means having a ton of leftovers to take home.”
“That’s fine. We can ask him to come meet us instead. He won’t make you tell him your name, but you have to give him your real phone number so that his boss can follow up if he wants to confirm something. I’m gonna let him decide what he wants you to call him. Next left.”

Below his layers of calm, Jonathan feels a frisson of excitement. It’s like fizz in a drink. Selina borrows Jonathan’s phone to make the call.

Soon they’re parked in another alley, one Selina says she knows well. Jonathan says, “There are some blankets and a pillow in the trunk if you want them.” He hands her the keys.

“I’m good for now, thanks.” A tiny ‘mew’ sounds just outside. Selina opens the door and looks down. “Ooh, a stray cat.”

“I have crows, you have cats?”

“Something like that.”

Jonathan looks at her making grabby hands towards a bedraggled tabby. “Not in the car, please.”

“Fine.” Selina jumps out to cuddle it. “I know this one! I call her Pompom. Do you have anything I could feed her with?”

Another voice asked, “Does she like anchovies? Or at least do you like anchovies? Otherwise I have horribly miscalculated.”

“It’s our guy,” Selina says to Jonathan, so Jonathan gets out of the car. In a louder voice she says, “I think she might. You need to stop being so nice, dude, you’re an embarrassment to your profession.”

The embarrassment to his profession looks to be around twenty, lean and wiry. More pretty than handsome. Jonathan wonders how he feels about that. He’s mostly wearing black - jeans, boots, leather jacket, leather gloves - but his carefully knotted scarf and the glimpse of the shirt under his jacket are bright blue. The elastic hair tie keeping back his dark hair is an even brighter, electric shade of blue. Which is an interesting choice in someone whose eyes are not blue, but green.

He hands the small pizza box to Selina and comes up to Jonathan, smiling. “Don’t listen to her. I’m nice by default and vicious by their-fault. I’m thinking of putting that on my business cards, once I get them.”

“I would rather not tell you my name,” Jonathan says.

“Okay, but that does mean I’ll call you what I want. Hey there Newbie, I’m…”

“If you tell him to call you by that nickname you’re working on, I’m going to laugh,” Selina interrupts.

“Did I laugh when you told me to call you Cat?” he says, looking at her and Pompom, who is eating anchovies out of Selina’s hand.

“You did.”

“I laughed out of delight at how fitting your nickname is.”

“Who’s to say that’s not why I’ll laugh?”

“Because I know you.” He turns back to Jonathan and gives a little bow. “But Merc shopping members, though not their guests, have to declare their real names and affiliations at the door
anyway, so here’s no reason not to give you the option of either calling me Knifepoint -”

“HA!”

“...Or Nefyn Pontiac. I'm an apprentice with the Zsasz Family, but I'm not a real assassin yet, basically the hitman equivalent of an unpaid intern/indentured servant, so I'm as cheap a date as you're going to get around these parts."

Amused, Jonathan bows back. “Hello, Nefyn."

Chapter End Notes

- Jonathan gave Lee something much like this origami Serenity, as in the spaceship where I first saw Morena Baccarin being better than all of us and dealing with a nobly asshole-ish love interest.

- I felt bad for Ian Hargrove, and he's also played by Leslie Odom Jr. and therefore earns a special place in my heart, plus I needed someone to make the bugs. It all came together.

- Nefyn, fresh from being invented for "The Other Tally" and barging into "Inches and Miles", batted his eyes and whimsically twirled a dagger. I gave in. So he's in this too now.
Megastore

Chapter Notes

I hope this isn't too silly. Maybe think of it as a counterbalance to the cemetery chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nefyn walks beside Jonathan, close enough to make their association obvious. It’s afternoon but the shadows are long enough for lurking. “Do you have any ground rules for me?”

“No touching me unless you absolutely have to.”

“Easy enough. Careful, broken glass.” Nefyn turns left out of the alley. A cat passes them on its way to Selina.

Jonathan steps over it. “Is this all covered by you paying back Selina for a favor, or do you need something from me as well?”

“I want you to sign my log that I worked as your bodyguard for x number of hours. I have to get a certain amount of freelance independently arranged time in, you see.” Nefyn takes a small, hand-stapled booklet out of his right back jeans pocket and waves it. “You’ll have to leave some form of contact info, too, so if one of my mentors thinks I’m lying for some reason they can get in touch.”

“Sounds a bit like upgrading from your learner’s permit to a driver’s license. Will email do?”

“Sure, and you can block them right after if you want. One of them sometimes forwards chain letters. Plus a few comments about my performance.” Nefyn chuckles. “I like the license analogy. I’ll be using it.”

They have to cut through another alley almost immediately. Jonathan can see the roof of their destination above the grimy, squat brick burnouts where people whose captors can’t get them all the way to a warehouse probably wake up tied to chairs. “What did she do for you?”

“A handful of parkour lessons. We met when I was giving a few self-defense pointers to kids who live under the same bridge I did once upon a time. We got to talking about our respective skillsets. Almost asked her on a date, then found out her age. Instead, she little-sister mocks me.” Nefyn eyes a large Dumpster and motions for Jonathan to switch sides with him. “You ever been to the Narrows before?”

“No. But I don’t scare easily.”

“She said that.”

“Are there dead bodies in that Dumpster?”

Nefyn whistles. “Cool as a cucumber. Most days, yes. Just walk on by. We’re almost out in the open.”

“Almost isn’t there,” growls the lurker who has just de-lurked himself. He looks about thirty pounds of muscle more than Nefyn and has a gun.
Without question, Jonathan allows Nefyn to step in front of him. It’s his job, after all, no need for machismo. Let him earn his positive review. Nefyn sighs as if disappointed in Lurker’s threat delivery. “Turn around and go, you live. Stay where you are, you die.”

“You’ve got cash, and Merc doesn’t let people bring guns in, pretty boy,” says Lurky McLurk.

“I carry a gun as backup sometimes. They aren’t my favorite. Hard to fit one up your sleeve, for example.” Nefyn moves. Swiftly. Sleekly. And a throwing knife embeds itself in the man’s throat from several feet away.

Jonathan watches the physiological and psychological results with scientific interest. Nefyn watches Jonathan with interest of whatever kind it is. When Ex-Lurksome stops moving and making noise, Jonathan asks, “You need help getting him into the Dumpster?”

“Just take my knife out and hold it for me until I can sheath it. Thanks.” Nefyn shakes his head. “I asked the management if they were planning on doing anything about this - which happens all the time - and they said that if you’re too much of a sissy to survive a mugger to get to the store, you’re the type of person who’d crack if the cops asked you to give them up.”

“Criminal Darwinism,” Jonathan suggests as he crouches to extract the knife. Nefyn grins.

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To get in, Nefyn has to provide his alias as well as his real name, and affiliation Then the guard asks, “Do you want to verify your identify by fingerprints, punch, regular slap, or backhand?”

“Backhand, please.” Nefyn turns with the force of the blow, to minimize bruising, but he looks nothing but cheerful.

The guard nods. He points at Jonathan. “If you’re seen away from Knifepoint’s side, you’ll be taken to a back room for an interview you probably won’t like.”

“Understood.” Jonathan trails after Nefyn as the big steel doors open. “What was that last part meant to guard against?”

“New measure. One of Hugo Strange’s escapees can make his face look like other people’s, but if you hit it everything goes smushed Play-Doh.” Nefyn spreads his arms out in a way that reminds Jonathan of Nygma showing off the mansion. “Welcome to Merc! Might be missing some things, and there’s a markup to account for security, but if you want fast non-stop shopping that the police can’t track, this is the place. There is a strictly enforced code of ‘forgetting’ anyone else you saw here, plus nobody cares about you. I mean, I do.”

“I know what you mean.” It reminds Jonathan of a utilitarian big-box megastore like Costco, with high ceilings and fluorescent lights. The floor is concrete. There are several fire extinguishers attached to the at various intervals, which a person more inclined to emotion might find both reassuring and worrying at the same time.

“They don’t do much in the way of bondage and restraints. That’s a different store, which doubles as an innocent BDSM place. Inasmuch as a BDSM place can be innocent, though of course it is practiced by millions of innocent people in the legal sense. What?”

Jonathan realizes he’s smiling. “I like that you stabbed a guy a few minutes earlier and just used the phrase ‘inasmuch as’.”

“I will have you know that I finished high school and have taken a few community college courses
during my apprenticeship.” Nefyn strolls rather than walks, likely to allow Jonathan to get a good look around. They walk past a section devoted to cleanup, with large jugs of bleach marked 30% off.

“Neat. Which?” Jonathan wants to know what sort of classes would appeal to a trainee assassin. He also spares a moment to take in a row of all sorts of firearms, with a big sign saying, **AMMO SOLD EXTREMELY SEPARATELY. CONSULT STAFF.**

“A basic biology one so that I could take their anatomy elective, two criminal law ones so I have some idea what the police are theoretically supposed to do, and a drama class that I convinced Mr. Zsasz would help me lie better.” Nefyn leans closer and stage-whispers, “I just wanted to try improv. Shh.”

“I won’t snitch,” Jonathan whispers back.

“Much appreciated. Let’s cut through Basic Minion Uniforms to get to Independent Science.” Nefyn waves at a woman who’s mopping up a spill. She just looks at him oddly. Basic Minion Uniforms is amusing in concept, and one of the offerings is hilarious. Jonathan has to stop and snicker at one of the designs.

Nefyn can’t abandon Jonathan in the aisle without also abandoning him to a horrible fate, so he backtracks to stand next to Jonathan. “What?”

“Those ones right there. Have you seen Star Trek: The Original Series?”

“Which ones?”

“The red ones.”

“I haven’t seen any Star Trek, I’m afraid.”

“In the show, the people with red shirts constantly get killed whenever there’s the slightest catastrophe.”

“Oh!” Nefyn snickers as well. “I’d find it worrying if my boss wanted me to wear one, then. What about red hoods? The various Red Hood gangs keep rising and falling.”

“I don’t know. I’m ready to move on, thank you for indulging me.” Jonathan notes that there is an extremely small section labeled “Henchwomen”, and a lot of items are unnecessarily skimpy. If a person wants to dress skimpy, that’s fine, but it’s not great when those are the only styles available for people with certain proportions. Plus it looks like certain vital areas don’t get as much padding or armor.

“Not at all.” Nefyn notices where Jonathan is looking. “Yeah, the Zsaszettes tend to look down their noses at flimsy assembly-line stuff.”

“What’s the masculine form of Zsaszette? Zsaszor?”

“The debate rages on. If there’s a spot for me in the core part of the Family when I graduate, I’ll make something up for myself.” Then a sea of sturdy glassware and lab equipment lies before them. Nefyn pauses and turns to Jonathan like they’re in a car dealership and he knows he’s clinched a sale. “Look good?”

Jonathan stares at the rows and rows with awe. There are basic things of Dad’s that he can use, and more advanced machinery Nygma’s going to help him discreetly acquire, but this will cover at least
two-thirds of his wishlist. “Do they have shopping carts? Can we go get, like, three?”

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It ends up being only two carts’ worth. Jonathan restrains himself from going wild. The Penguin would not be impressed with someone lacking in financial restraint. Nefyn asks if it’s okay for him to pick up some plastic explosives for himself.

“Training purposes,” Nefyn explains during the detour. He takes off his gloves. “There’s been a problem with fake versions of this product, and one of the ways you can tell is the texture of the packaging.”

“Did you lose three fingernails?” Jonathan asks. Nefyn’s left pinky, ring finger, and middle finger all seem to be re-growing their nails.

“I had interrogation-withstanding practice three weeks ago. I’m not going into information-extraction or apology-extraction as a skillset, so I’m not really learning the other side, but employers need to know that you can take a beating and keep their secrets, you know?” Nefyn studies Jonathan’s expression.

Jonathan feels no need to make one. “That follows. It’s good that you’ll have an idea of what to expect and how to deal with it.”

When they get to the cash register, Nefyn helps Jonathan lift up his shirt and remove the packs of cash he’s strapped all over himself. He chats and mutually giggles with the cashier over the shirt she’s wearing, which says: Build a man a fire, warm him for a day. Set a man on fire, warm him for the rest of his life.

Selina keeps rolling her eyes at both of them when Jonathan’s driving her as close to home as she’ll let him get. She won’t say why. Nefyn shares some underworld gossip he’s heard recently. Among other things, Victor Fries has gone to live in a mountain igloo where he is pursuing a hobby of frozen lepi...lepid...butterflies.

“Lepidoptery,” Jonathan says, parking. “See you around, Selina, thanks.”

“You taking Nefyn home with you?”

Jonathan blinks. “Yes. I can’t unload all this stuff by myself. Have you seen my biceps?”

“What you lack in muscles you have in fortitude,” Nefyn says. “And Selina, I’ll run a few miles to where someone can pick me up.”

“Right, see you both around. By the way, puppy boy, you still owe me a favor, in fact you owe me two favors, because I just did YOU a favor.”

“Did she mean you getting to log work hours?” Jonathan asks as they head for the outskirts.

“I’m sure that’s what she meant. Do you have anything we can listen to?”

“Do you know the Decemberists?”

Nefyn slams both hands on the dashboard. “OH MY GOD YES.”

****

With Nefyn’s assistance, it doesn’t take long to get everything into the barn. There’s a bunch of
clutter in here still, but it all fits in a corner and Jonathan puts a protective tarp over it. He accepts Nefyn's hastily handwritten slip of contact info for future semiprofessional help, and writes Nefyn a glowing review.

As he hands it over, Jonathan says, “I thought the Zsasz family wore all black all the time.”

“We don’t at home, and I like to wear a bit of blue no matter what.”

“You really like blue.”

Nefyn unzips his jacket a little further and taps at the shirt. “It’s the only color I can see other than shades of neutrals. So everything blue pops out to me and is an absolutely gorgeous homing beacon. Like your eyes.”

“What?”

Nefyn slips on a pair of sunglasses. "Yeah, I went there." Then he literally runs away towards the sunset.

Chapter End Notes

In other fics so far I've only written Nefyn interacting with authority figures, so seeing him in another context is a treat for me.
At Tables

Chapter Notes

Entirely poked out with a stylus while traveling, posted just before entering a leg of less-certain internet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cafeteria

Harley has a number of friends other than Jonathan, but she always has lunch with him. It’s a structured, non-smothering ritual, and Jonathan starts packing a non-candy item to offer her after he forgot and tempted her a few times. Ever since she got yelled at for coming over to Jonathan’s house, they haven’t tried to spend time together other than lunch, AP Psych, and library study sessions. (This dovetails well with Jonathan’s slow but steady improvements to the alpaca barn, ones she mustn’t stumble on.)

Today, Harley’s pushing her food around with a fork and looking like she slept about two hours the previous night. Classes are getting more intense with the coming of Winter Break. “I called Irene my girlfriend in front of her friends,” she says tonelessly.

“And it was bad?” Jonathan hasn’t interacted with Irene, who goes to a private school not far from here, since the Halloween party. He’s busy. He has to get a decent night’s sleep every night, so other than that educational supply run with Nefyn his life has been school, sleep, homework, housework, and home lab. He’s even stopped art therapy, though he’s seeing Helga biweekly and Dr. Au bimonthly. He does feel somewhat run-down because of this schedule, despite not being sleep-deprived. Helga advises him to take time to “simply be”, but he really wants to get this lab up and running soon. He went to the school labs two last times to make two more doses of what he gave Mr. Brooks, and has sworn them off from now on as unnecessarily risky.

Harley takes a long drink of one percent milk straight from the half-pint carton before answering. “She said I was jumping the gun and being clingy? I thought we were on the same page, if not her moving faster because of other milestone stuff? She called me later and said she didn’t mean it when she called me a needy child. I said I forgive her, but it still hurts. Just because I’m fourteen and she’s sixteen and she was my first girl kiss…” She drifts off, finally putting a bit of pasta in her mouth. “...She doesn’t get to say things like that,” Jonathan finishes.

“It sounds so logical and, like, dispassionate? In general, it does when you say things. That’s one of the reasons I like confiding in you, and also one of the reasons I’m glad you turned me down. Good for a friend, bad for a partner.” She clears her throat and takes her planner out of her backpack. “Could you maybe meet with me at the library sometime this weekend and help me figure out what to make of my chemistry notes? I’ll pay you back. You name it.”

Jonathan finishes his peanut-butter-spread celery stick before replying, “Make me a t-shirt that says, ‘Good for a friend, bad for a partner.’”

She giggles. “Seriously, I’m having such trouble in Intro to Chem that maybe I’m more cut out for
clinical psychology than psychiatry. Maybe you and I could share patients one day.”

“There’s a thought. I can’t do Sunday morning or afternoon, though.” Jonathan holds out his bag of mini pretzels. It was hard for Nygma to coordinate with him, especially for such a big chunk of time.

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*Dining Room*

Dr. Au warned Jonathan against caffeine, which would mess with his heart rate and blood pressure, but his grandmother bought instant coffee in bulk and there is some left for him to give his guest.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything better.”

“I’m a wine snob but a coffee plebe, don’t worry.” Nygma ignores the coffee for now, though, in favor of eagerly opening the small Tupperware Jonathan has liked with newspaper and bubble wrap for Nygma’s journey home.

Stirring his half-drunk hot chocolate, Jonathan explains, “The first of what I’ve codenamed ‘cranes’ which my dad made, has been good for three of what I call ‘crows’ so far. I used one of the crows on Mr. Brooks, but there looks to be enough of that crane left to make one more. I’m giving you one crow and two cranes - the first crane to analyze intact with your better skills and resources, see what I’ve missed, and the second to make your own murder.”

Nygma does jazz hands. “A murder of crows! I am feeling a group of lions.”

“Thank you. Like-minded people are a group of unicorns.” Jonathan sees the grin that shows Nygma’s appreciation of the wordplay, so he presses on without drawing additional attention to it. “I’ll keep the last crane in reserve. Okay?”

“Wonderful. I’ve already wrapped up that GCPD case for them, and this’ll be the perfect thing to tinker with.” Nygma takes one large envelope and one slim folder out of his bag. He slides the envelope over. “Application for the scholarship I mentioned. You won’t need a lawyer for this, but feel free to ask questions, and I won’t pull strings unless you ask me to.”

Jonathan nods. He prefers to know what he can achieve on his own. Unneeded help skews data. “Thank you. And that?”

“I convinced Oswald that you need a bit of pre-investment in the form of more specialized equipment Merc wouldn’t have. I don’t want to go behind his back when it comes to you. That just doesn’t seem like good p...mentoring.” Nygma has some coffee without any indication of the word he almost said. “He agreed, but under a few additional conditions for both of us. The main one is that I will teach you how to autopsy, and I may supply a sample human subject that I’m able to research and plan out beforehand, but I may not assist you in obtaining additional ones. As this would involve us possibly being seen together and me taking risks he dislikes.”

“That’s fine. Tell him I accept. Want to go out to the rat shed and barn lab with me now? I need your expert eyes, and also your expert ability to help me lift large objects.” Jonathan finishes his hot chocolate and stands.

Nygma clears his throat. “I’m worried about you getting hurt under these terms. I’ll teach you how I abducted a certain Leonard some time ago, but you’re still young and not very muscular, and even with a drug or a stun gun…”

“Would you feel better if I learned some self-defense?”
He purses his lips and looks up at Jonathan. “A bit.”

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Kitchen

On his next day off, Nefyn is amiably professional as he pushes Jonathan through what he calls “the scrappy street urchin survival set”. This is mostly things like ducking and getting out of holds. He also points out various moments when biting, scratching, tripping, and other pragmatic tactics would apply.

The lesson is out on his lawn, which is more forgiving than his wooden floors and thin rugs in the absence of crash mats. After three hours Jonathan is bruised and grass-stained. He’s in a good mood, though, as he assembles each of them an odds-and-ends lunch. Nefyn is perched on the tiny kitchen table - after getting permission - and dangling his feet while he answers Jonathan’s question of how he ended up living under a bridge for awhile. He’s also nursing a big glass of water.

“My mom died when I was seven, and I was sent to an aunt and uncle who lived in downtown Gotham. We didn’t get along. Then when I was a few weeks from my fourteenth birthday they caught me kissing a male friend when we were working on a school project.”

“School projects are dangerous,” Jonathan comments as he evaluates a banana.

“I got kicked out,” Nefyn continues casually. “I managed to keep going to school for the next few months. I had school friends who couldn’t take me in but helped out here and there. Hung onto my stuff. On really cold nights there’d be someone to sneak me into their room for some sleep and get me a hot shower. I was lucky that way. I lost touch with most them after I cut a creep’s dick off when he wouldn’t back off. The public defender advised I take the plea bargain. The juvenile detention facility’s pretty far upstate. Some wrote letters, bless them.”

“What made you decide you wanted to be an assassin?” Jonathan asks, judgment complete. The rats will enjoy the novelty of an overripe banana.

“No, it was awhile after I got out and my guardians were legally forced to take me back - they claimed I originally ran off on my own initiative. Shortly after I learned I could never make the police academy because of my record and vision. I made it look like my aunt and uncle died in a normal street mugging.” Nefyn makes a win-some-lose-some hand gesture.

It’s only a tiny bit spontaneous when Jonathan puts both plates on the table and kisses him. He can feel Nefyn’s (chapped) lips stretch out and curve upwards as he responds.

“This might sound weird,” Nefyn murmurs when he breaks about three inches away, clasping Jonathan’s hands in his, “But if you want to go clothes-off I have to get permission from three of the Zsaszettes and Mr. Zsasz first.”

The three regrowing fingernails on Nefyn’s left hand have made the barest of progress. With training like that, what did punishment look like? “Because you’re their apprentice?”

“No, because I’m in sexual relationships with them. We all have to clear out-of-household playmates with the others. It’s a formality, but an important one. Plus our time together won’t count for experience hours any longer, but I can deal. That okay, buddy?”

“I’m glad you don’t need me, and you can start calling me Jonathan.” It was his first kiss that was his idea. It was candid, warm, wry, playful, and unsentimental, and Nefyn means him no harm but owes him no loyalty. He wants more.
Nefyn hops off the table and moves his hands to Jonathan’s hips, where they’ve already been placed in another context. “I’ve been telling you a bit of hopefully-impressive backstory as a subtler way to flirt while you fix me lunch, which, don’t get me wrong, I’m going to eat in a moment regardless of all your sinful temptation…”

“I researched! Your name is the Welsh variant of the ancient Irish family name Nevin meaning little saint.” Jonathan kisses him triumphantly.

Nefyn comedically groans and sits down to eat. “Okay, you need to not spread that around, all right? I actually get teased less when people think I’m named after a quaint seaside town.”

“My paternal grandparents have a cottage near the sea. In England. The South Downs, I think. We went when I was six. I mostly remember a house down the road having a lot of ducks milling around the yard. And I won’t tell.” Jonathan sits across from him and moves his box of medications closer to his plate. “What do I get for my discretion?”

“The moment we’re done here, I will take you to the couch in front of the fireplace - do you want to learn how to chop wood, by the way? It’s good practice for hatchet skills as well as making for cheaper fires than precut logs. Anyway, I will take you there, and I will show you what I can do without overstepping anyone’s boundaries. Deal?”

Jonathan wonders what Nefyn looks like with his hair down. “Deal.”

Nefyn gives him a thumbs-up and consumes his food while wordlessly humming.

Chapter End Notes

One day you'll have a badass eccentric girlfriend who loves you just the way you are and will smite your enemies with angry plants, Harley, I promise.

True to his word, immediately after lunch Nefyn removes all the back cushions from the living room couch to give them more space. He arranges them on the floor as a sort of crash mat. “I’m thinking side by side, and there’s always the slight risk of someone rolling off. Do you want to be on the inside or the outside?”

“Outside. I have infrequent seizure-type things where I fall to the floor and flail and scream in terror for - these days - between ten and thirty minutes. I hope that’s not a deal-breaker.” Jonathan places his wallet on the coffee table. “Detailed instructions are where most people keep a wallet photo. Basically keep me from smashing into objects and otherwise let me ride it out. I’ll have enough time to warn you and do a directed fall.”

“Not a deal-breaker. Nobody I live with and nobody who employs us is exactly in pristine emotional condition, Jonathan.” Nefyn smiles at him and moves the coffee table another foot away from the couch. “I was really impressed at how good you are at falling with minimal bruising, which when you’re on the defensive in survival mode is the second most important skill. In my opinion, anyway.”

“What’s the most important?” Jonathan asks, taking off the mood ring and setting it beside his wallet.

“Running away.” Nefyn removes two throwing knives he'd somehow concealed at close quarters earlier. One has a black handle and one has a blue-painted. He’s previously explained that blue is easy for him to find and retrieve but black is generic and harder to trace back to him, so he carries mostly black-handled knives but one or two blue. Two knives is his absolute minimum when away from home. When he thinks he’ll encounter other armed people not part of his Family, it’s more like a dozen, plus a larger non-throwing knife or two, plus a small handgun he is “decent” with.

“I think I might like you running fingers through my hair,” Jonathan hypothesizes. He removes the pins he keeps in his hair to add to the growing pile.

Nefyn leans forward to peer at them. “I get the two bobby pins, but why thread a safety pin through them?”

Shedding his pullover makes Jonathan a bit chilly now, but he doesn’t think that will last, and he wants to maximize skin contact. Then he joins Nefyn on the couch. “People have, like, locked me in or assaulted me recently, so these two I can shape into lockpicks and this one I can at least cause a distraction with, even if I can’t get it in an eye.”

“I can show you how best to incorporate little tricks like that if you want.” Nefyn puts a hand on Jonathan’s thigh and another around his waist. “I gotta tell you, that sentence was the hottest thing I’ve heard you say. I’m a fan of that kiss from earlier, but you haven’t done much kissing, have you?”

“No. Show me better.”
He does. And he does. As he does, he lies down and pulls Jonathan slowly down towards him and against him, facing each other. Sometimes he gives tips. He often checks in to make sure everything’s truly going well. Jonathan considers pausing to take notes, but decides to wait until he has a better idea of what he’s doing. Maybe next encounter. Nefyn might take issue while he’s less familiar with how Jonathan thinks, after all.

Nefyn’s hair, just barely long enough for tying back, curls just a bit when loose and is fun to wind with an index finger. He’s got what he says is a birthmark behind his left ear.

“It’s shaped like a miniature spoon,” Jonathan remarks even as Nefyn seems to be trying to unsystematically give every one of Jonathan’s exposed pores a friendly peck. Nefyn keeps alternating between suavely passionate and silly platonic, and it’s working.

“You’re not the first to say that. In fact, two different people independently followed that up with a crack about this showing that I’m edible.” Nefyn’s hand hovers lightly over Jonathan’s lightly covered crotch, waiting for explicit permission.

Jonathan pushes Nefyn’s hand down and makes a sound somewhere between a sigh and a hiss at the sensation. He can’t help but rock into it. Nefyn threads the fingers of his other hand through Jonathan’s and presses it flat onto the outer part of the couch. It’s both a gentle take-charge gesture and a way to keep Jonathan safe from a non-Scarecrow tumble. He’s now leaning over Jonathan a bit. Jonathan doesn’t want this to change per se, but he’s become nervous.

So Jonathan shows one of his cards. Indirectly, but completely ignoring this crack in his pure pleasure would make things worse. “I’ve got marks that say I’m poisonous,” he says.

Nefyn stops fondling and brushes a spot Jonathan’s pinned arm with the tip of his index finger. Jonathan’s gotten pale enough from bundling up against the cold, and has also regained enough muscle, that it’s become easier to see the track mark of a hypodermic needle violently, sloppily shoved in by someone as explosively high as a hydrogen kite. “I know the story. It’s standard to research clients, even practice ones. Looked you up as soon as you called me for a second job.”

“They say I don’t actually have the drug in me anymore, but I’m permanently altered.”

To Jonathan’s amused surprise, Nefyn licks the mark. “Guess I’m gonna die. Oh no. You’re not venomous too, are you? Otherwise those nibbles earlier have already doomed me.”

“My fangs are retractable. I’ll use normal teeth on you.” Jonathan cranes (hah) his neck so he can bite Nefyn’s earlobe. “You make me feel good, and you know the difference between poisonous and venomous.”

****

Harley doesn’t eat lunch today. When Jonathan looks at her face and asks what she needs from him, she moves her chair so that she is sitting by his side instead of across from him. She tells him about why she won’t be spending time with Irene anymore, and asks how knowing someone for only few weeks gives them the power to devastate you with only a few words, and calls herself all sorts of names until Jonathan clears his throat and puts a pack of tissues and a package wrapped in red and black tissue paper in front of her.

“I don’t like hearing you put yourself down. It’s the only absurd thing you do, and from someone so intelligent and earnest it’s disturbing. Keep crying if you need to, but don’t do that.”

“T-thanks.” Harley blows her nose in a daze and asks quietly, “Is that little box for me?”
“Mm hm.”

She opens it and her mouth opens. “It’s a puzzle ring?”

“With a chain you can hang it from if you don’t want to wear it on your finger.” He shrugs. “You gave me a ring to remind me that I have emotions. Maybe this’ll remind you you’re smart as hell. Or at least give you something to fidget with when you’re stressed.”

“I would hug you.” She doesn’t need to supply the ‘if’ clause. “I’m going to give you something after the break, okay?”

“You don’t need to.”

“Did I say I needed to? I was already planning to.” She blows her nose again. “I’ve been so upset that I just know my in-class essay for the Psych final was cruddy.”

“What’d you write about?” He holds out his bag of baby carrots.

She takes one. “What factors would predispose a person to join that creepy Jerome cult, and whether they could be prevented. I could hardly make coherent sentences.”

Something about her tone makes Jonathan say, “I would hug you.”

Harley smiles crookedly. “Snowboarding at the resort should be fun, though? I’ll take lots of pictures.”

“Looking forward to seeing them.”

“Aren’t you going to be lonely?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “Besides, that support group friend of mine I mentioned is dropping by the day after finals.”

****

The first point of the visit is for Nygma to drop off various sources of chemicals he’s determined might allow them to replicate doses of “crow” without needing more “cranes”. The most interesting one is ergot, a fungus that grows on damp rye grain and can cause paranoia, hallucinations, and convulsions. A breakout of ergot that ended up in all the bread may have affected matters in Salem. Jonathan and Nygma have an entertaining discussion about the historical riddles that were various mass hysteria breakouts, witch trials in particular.

“What with the crows, rats, my wardrobe, and now these ‘potion ingredients’, I might be turning into a warlock,” Jonathan deadpans as they return to the house. Upon arrival, Nygma demonstrated the use of all the ingredients and made sure Jonathan’s storage system would suffice. Everything related to the project is kept in the barn or the shed, so if Jonathan needs to destroy the evidence he can set all of it ablaze without harming the house. Besides, it saves on trips back and forth.

They’d made a quick detour to Nygma’s car on the way, for a basket full of another set of ingredients. Nygma sets the basket on the kitchen table and removes his apron to start with. “I appreciate you helping me with a bit of culinary wizardry, at any rate. If I try to make these holiday treats for Oswald at home, I can’t guarantee that he won’t walk in on me.”

By agreement, Jonathan hosting and assisting with this present for Oswald counts as his present for Nygma, and Nygma letting Jonathan keep some of what they make - along with the written-down
recipes - is his present to Jonathan. Nygma gives enough stuff and help to Jonathan already, and Jonathan can’t buy anything that Nygma wouldn’t be able to buy himself.

The conversation is mostly light, especially when Nygma talks up the three days he and Oswald will finally get to spend away from the city. It’s very difficult for a chief of staff to get the same vacation time as their respective mayor.

Then Nygma says, out of nowhere and while beating eggs, “I used to hate any time off from school.”

“You were safer at school?” Jonathan fetches vanilla extract from Nygma’s basket and places it within his reach.

“It worked out roughly the same, danger-hours-wise.” Nygma continued to mix his wet ingredients with precision, his words slower than usual. “My father, as long as he was working, wasn’t the new variable, and on the all-day shared holidays we were with extended family who would be too many witnesses. While my mother was alive…”

Jonathan asked if Nygma was okay, as he’d stopped moving.

“In the ground I’m a hole, but I’m a weight on the soul. What am I?” As if the riddle has jumped-started him, Nygma resumes mixing.

Jonathan goes back to finely chopping fresh ginger root. “Depression.”

“Yes. Seeing my mother hardly there all day long was worse than seeing a vague shadow at just dinnertime. Perhaps it was better she lost steam on leading holidays or recreating family tradition after I was very young. All that trying to put on a happy face for several consecutive nights would have become…” Nygma takes a deep breath. “That’s one reason why I refuse to let you contrast our fathers when we compare them. A parent trying but failing to love you like they should is awful in its own way. Certainly more complicated than one you can cleanly hate.”

“I remember hate,” Jonathan says with an odd, wistful fondness. “Dad actually tried to be how he used to be on Christmas. Took me to church, special dinner, presents. He called his sister on the twenty-sixth, and I’d say hi. Then he went solitary again from the twenty-seventh unless he needed another set of hands or needed to do basic offspring upkeep.”

Ten heartbeats, then Nygma spins around, switch flipped to smiling again. “The chocolate babka, savory cheese loaf, and berry scones are right on schedule. Time to attend to the rugelach and the gingerbread. Did you know that gingerbread goes back to Roman times? My regular driver saw penguin cookie cutters in a shop window and put a set on reserve until I had a chance to see them. She’s almost a friend.”

“How do you define friendship? Also I’m getting myself a glass of farmers’ market non-alcoholic eggnog. Want any?”

Nygma gives him a thumbs-up. “Real friends are not in a romantic or financial relationship and will go out of their way to do non-sexual, unnecessary things together just because they want to. They like each other and want each other’s time but even more importantly, their happiness. My driver can’t completely be my friend, since I pay her a salary. My number of friends over the years, by this metric, has never...has never exactly been, uh, large.”

Jonathan ponders this as he pours them their drinks. Cobblepot has pledged to invest in Jonathan’s efforts, yes, but Nygma has always been here because he wants to be. When he hands one to Nygma, he suggests, “A toast to being real friends?”
Nygma’s smile softens and sweetens. “Yes, please.”

****

As his gift to himself, Jonathan indulges in several marathon lab sessions that he stops only for medication, nutrition, hydration, bathroom breaks, and just enough sleep to keep the Scarecrow off his back.

“Let’s go Roman and call you a sacrifice to Minerva,” Jonathan tells the rat that changes everything. Because after he injects it and starts filming the results with his new camera, it shows exactly the same response as all the ones injected with “crow”.

When its heart gives out, Jonathan realizes he’s too tired to even consider autopsying right now, so he takes photos and bags the body up for his specimen freezer. “Now let’s go generically animist, gather up your un-injected brethren I had to cull for overpopulation, and make a sacrifice to my patron wildlife.”

It’s shortly after dawn. As long as it’s daylight, his crows show up whenever he does.

“I think I’ve managed what Penguin wants,” he says triumphantly as he places several freshly-killed rodents on a log. He holds onto the fattest. He’s protecting his winter glove with an easily sterilizable rubber glove over it. The boldest of his crows, Hayao, has become willing to perch on his shoulder and eat from his hand.

Soon Hayao is a warm, tickly weight. The other crows caw and bicker over the rest. Jonathan has to talk quietly and evenly to not frighten them. “When I first heard of the band The Foo Fighters, I asked if they fought foo or fought by means of foo. I think it’s actually an alternate term for alleged alien aircraft. Anyway, the Scarecrow scares you, but I scare by means of you. You’re my muses, and - hey, cut it out, hairpins are not for eating.”

Hayao is of the opinion that everything on Jonathan’s person has become fair game, though they’ve never pecked or bitten his actual body. They’ve tried for his scarf before. Crrr.

“It totally looks like your raven’s trying to find your brain,” says the unmistakeable voice of Selina Kyle behind him.

“Ravens are larger, eat more meat as a proportion of their opportunistic omnivorousness, don’t live around here, and have, like, slightly hooked beaks,” Jonathan says. “What do you need?”

“It’s going to snow really hard. City might lose power. Can I crash here? You mentioned you have a generator. You owe me for introducing you to Nefyn.”

Jonathan chances a pat of Hayao’s back. Remaining still otherwise is key. Nefyn’s busy until New Year’s Eve, but he texts a lot and it’s hilarious. #ShitAssassinsSay. “You can sleep in my grandma’s room. You can take anything that’s in the room and eat any food in the kitchen. The barn’s full of stuff I’m working on with Nygma for Cobblepot, so stay out.”

“One of these days I’ll ruffle your feathers, crow bro.”

“I accept the challenge and the nickname.” Jonathan yawns. He needs the sleep of the victorious. Hayao flies off.

Chapter End Notes
It's intentional that Ed never *explicitly* says what family holidays and heritage he associates with his mother. It's my tribute to someone else's interesting headcanon; not saying who for the sake of the spoiler-sensitive.

Meanwhile, Ed's friendly driver is actually Caroline, an OC of irisbleufic's.

I forgot to mention that the previous chapter had a rather esoteric, possibly too faint hidden joke about one of irisbleufic's fics in a different fandom. We talk shop a lot these days. :D
Home and Hearth

Chapter Notes

Spoilery mild content warning at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sound of multiple text messages wakes Jonathan slowly. He normally turns his phone off and sets it to charge before going to bed, but this morning all he’d managed was bedtime meds and stripping off everything except his t-shirt and boxers before crawling into bed. He needs the bathroom anyway. He enrobes himself and takes care of that, then picks up his phone on the way back. Harley prefers talking out loud, and Nygma and his husband have mutually pledged not to use their phones during their brief getaway except in an emergency. It’s Nefyn, saved in Jonathan’s phone under a codename. Nefyn picked a codename for him, too.

NEEDLEPOINT: yesterday Candy said she was gonna go pray & etc, who am I to judge, and was gone for ages

NEEDLEPOINT: turns out she was just in confession a long time. She said she made the priest uncomfortable. This is a MOB-FRIENDLY PRIEST lol.

NEEDLEPOINT: suggested she go more often to avoid backlog, asked if she told what she & Yoona did to me last week with tinsel bc omg it was glorious & terrifying. VZ scolded em for my limp the next day but complained no pics :D

BLUEJAY: What’d they do?

NEEDLEPOINT: ttyl been summoned. Merry Xmas eve!

****

It’s snowing hard, about ten inches accumulated on the lawn so far. There’s a crackling fire in the fireplace. Selina’s sprawling across the couch watching a show, so Jonathan settles into a nearby armchair with his blueberry oatmeal, juice, and box of pills. He notices with minor amusement that she’s in paisley pajamas. She’s also wrapped herself in his favorite fuzzy throw blanket. The remains of her obvious raid on his pantry are piled on a tray she’s placed on the floor. He can hear the washing machine in the basement.

“I chucked a bunch of your stuff in the wash too, since it was right there in a basket marked: Wash when done scienceing!! Laundromats are a ripoff and I brought a bunch of clothes.” She sits up slightly. “Nefyn eventually paid me back for the parkour lessons for better-leather-care lessons. Didja know he does laundry for all Casa del Zsasz as part of his contract? Imagine all that blood he has to get out of stuff.”

“He told me they have a friendly dry cleaner for anything that really defeats him, and figuring out what bloodstains honestly can’t be cleaned otherwise is one of his tests.” Jonathan says a few bites in, “Though I still bet he could give Lady Macbeth some tips.”

“Huh?”
Right, no high school. Not her fault. “Never mind. It’s a...theatre thing. He’ll like it. I’ll tell him when I see him, so I can see him laugh.”

Selina snorts. “Loverboy.”

Jonathan’s shoulders go tight. “I can’t love romantically or deeply and don’t want it. Touch is only okay when practical - or part of enthusiastically consensual sex, it seems, maybe because my brain damage didn’t affect my adolescent hormones. I am literally less bothered by getting hit than being hugged. I can offer friendship and potentially physical fun to a limited selection of people, and he understands my limitations, okay?” He realizes he’s gripping his spoon too hard and loosens his fingers.

She holds up her hands in surrender. “Fine, crow bro, breathe, don’t get a heart attack. Maybe I won’t watch the news, make this atmosphere, like, more soothing.”

Jonathan hasn’t felt embarrassment in so long that he isn’t sure that’s what he’s feeling now. He says more quietly, “I get seizures. Sort of. Instructions are in…”

“Your wallet, yep. I didn’t take your money. I wanted to see how much your driver’s license says you weigh. If I ever need to take you down in a fight, you know? But if you have an attack I’ll do what it says. You’re my host. Eat.” Selina changes the channel.

It’s near the end of that stop-motion movie about a reindeer who is mocked and marginalized until he manages to demonstrate indispensability to his community. Jonathan eats, and follows the story he remembers from childhood. He afterwards tells Selina, as a peace offering, that Rudolph should have left all but those who’d already accepted him to rot.

She laughs. “I say charge ‘em top dollar. Or whatever they use for money.”

“Bucks?”

“That’s terrible. No wonder Nygma acts you’re the kid him and Penguin are never gonna hatch.” Jonathan squirms internally when she says that, but she just gets up to poke the fire. “Your house is drafty, your thermostat has a post-it saying not to push it up higher or the furnace might give out, and there weren’t a lot of logs.”

“I keep most of them in the big shed out back, in case they have woodlice or termites in them. I stocked up on food and fuel when I first heard about the snowstorm. I was going to go out there anyway, might as well now.” Jonathan puts his own tray on the coffee table. “Deal: you put these trays in the kitchen and clean up a bit, and hang up my laundry on the basement clothesline when you do that with yours. There’s no dryer. Meanwhile, I will put salt on the driveway, maybe a light shovel, fetch wood.”

“Look at you and your seriously gendered chore wheel.”

Jonathan holds up a finger. “...And as I was about to say before I was interrupted, I will come back in and roast a leg of lamb and prepare various sides. You make and tend fire and, like, protect us from wolves. I may do some sewing after dinner.”

“Why is everyone whose place I crash at such a dork?” Selina grabs the trays and heads for the kitchen.

****

The rats get fed and watered. The cleaning of cages can wait. The barn is confirmed to be sound, and
fortunately he wasn’t too tired after his big breakthrough to ensure that all delicate equipment is boxed up or at least has a tarp over it. Then Jonathan does everything he told Selina he’d do. When he gets back, she’s added a green knitted sweater with a napping tabby kitten and burgundy crocheted wrist warmers to her uncharacteristic ensemble.

“Looks cozy,” Jonathan says. He probably can’t get away with a photo for Nefyn and Nygma. He goes about cooking instead.

It goes well. Over dinner, she tells him about the time she met Nygma in the air vents of Arkham, though she’s cagey about who she was looking for and why. He breaks out his share of the baked goods Nygma made with him, and negotiates who will eat what.

“You don’t have any decorations, I’ve noticed,” she says with a mouth half-full of gingerbread. Jonathan’s got milk and she’s got mint tea.

“My uncle paid for a little rosemary bush trimmed into a mini Christmas tree in a gift-wrapped pot to be delivered to me. It’s on the kitchen counter because I was putting sprigs on the lamb.” The bush had appeared in a rustic burlap sack tied with a twine bow, which had given Jonathan an idea. “He called me two weeks ago from Sao Paolo, since that was gonna be the last time he’ll have phone reception in months. He and asked what I wanted and I said one of those Fruit of the Month Club subscriptions.”

“Is that why you have eleven huge pears? There were twelve but I ate one.”

Jonathan nods. The nearest grocery store is small with a boring produce section, plus he plans to continue being nice to Harley by sharing one lunch item. He hopes February’s passionfruit doesn’t send the wrong message. “The ‘tree’ was a surprise, but I guess it’s a joke about ‘and partridge in a pear tree’, because the card was shaped like a fat bird. The subscription is for just a dozen of an unusual or upscale fruit. Sometimed themed. October is blood oranges.”

“DORK.” Selina sips her tea and then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Did your dislike your grandma?”

“Yes, why?” Jonathan is going to try putting Nutella in this babka next time. Which, ironically, is named in tribute to, like, Slavic grandmothers or something.

“Can I ‘steal’,” she puts her mug down just so she can do the finger quotes, “the jewelry and old-lady knick-knacks?”

“Go right ahead. Surprised you haven’t already.”

She smirks. “Christmas spirit. I’ll even agree I owe you a favor.”

Jonathan decides he’s not in the mood for sewing, so he reads more of his library book on endocrinology while curled up on the couch near the fire. Selina is all over the house ransacking the undearly departed’s valuables with quiet glee. Jonathan had considered pawning things but hadn’t been desperate enough, and after the Brooks payout he can afford to invest in strengthening an alliance.

Besides, every time he tries to enter her room, he can see the Scarecrow out of the corner of his eye.

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In the morning, the snow is falling blizzard-hard. The rats have enough food for today and tomorrow. Now that he’s stopped keeping mice, doling out portions is simpler.
As she should have, Selina put the fire out before going to bed. He starts it up again. He doesn’t light fires when home alone, so this is pleasant. He sees Selina when she’s in the kitchen scrounging or by the fire watching more TV, but otherwise she’s footsteps and wails of boredom. He isn’t bored. He has three books, an elaborate sewing kit, and sack that smells faintly of rosemary.

Selina stops to look when he’s cut both eyeholes and is working on the jagged gash of the mouth. The rest will be hemming and distressing (hah), maybe loosely sew the mouth partially together again with streaks of twine.

“What’s that?”

“Art therapy.”

“I feel bad for your therapist.”

“Not planning on showing this piece to her. Anyway, she’s a capable woman. You’re staying in my house unharmed, for example.”

Selina sticks her tongue out at him. “It’s stopped snowing.”

“And?”

“This is the cleanest snow I’ve ever seen.”

“And?”

“If you beat me in a snowball fight, I’ll shovel the driveway. But if I beat you, I can borrow your car for a twenty-four hour period of my choice.”

Jonathan raises an eyebrow. “Snowball to the face means defeat, and you have to shovel according to my definition of thoroughly, not yours.”

“Deal.”

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“How did you do that?!”

“My new Intro to Physics teacher better suits my learning style. This was fun.”

“There’d better be hot cocoa when I’m done, you grim little noodle.”

“I’m taller than you, but sure.”

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The next morning, Selina announces that a country club not far from here has rescheduled their canceled Christmas Luncheon to today now that the snow has been plowed off major roads. Low security, big opportunity.

“You’re not borrowing my car,” Jonathan says, which is the only important part for him.

“Your precious car is safe from me. I’ve got my own ways to get around. Don’t wait up.”

He doesn’t. It’s a peaceful afternoon and evening, though he misses the warmth in the hearth.
The sound of his bedroom door creaking open wakes Jonathan immediately. Selina is standing in a puddle of light that cast her face in shadow. He props himself up on his elbows. “If you were secretly sent to kill me all this time, could you please have me buried next to my mom and not my dad?”

“I’m not here to kill you, Mr. Morbid.”

“Do you get a kick out of waking me up by surprise bedroom entrances?”

“No. Can I come in?”

“Whatever.” Jonathan turns on the bedside lamp. “You have snow on your shoulders.”

“Yeah, there’s a flurry out there.” She slips off her boots and jacket and let them fall to the floor. She doesn’t have the goggles. “You said you don’t like being touched affectionately but you don’t mind being touched for practical reasons, and it’s not that big a deal when people touch you to hurt you. You mentioned brain damage. What’s that all about?”

“I don’t feel like going into all the details right now. It boils down to me being FUBAR. Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.”

She crosses her arms and snarks, “Is that one of the acronyms people learn in high school?”

“Often, but not from the teachers.” Jonathan has heard it applied to himself in the boys’ bathroom, and heard the sentiment repeated when Jonathan just wanted to verify whether it was referring to his personality or the brief glimpse the speaker had of his quite ordinary penis.

“Would being so mad that I want to bludgeon a certain self-righteous sheltered little prick who I’ve stuck my neck out for a dozen times but he still can’t see past the idealized version of me he secretly wants to date in order to accept the real me…”

“This sentence is getting difficult for me to parse.”

Selina groans. “You’re not FUBAR, you’re just obnoxious.”

“I genuinely find that pleasing.” Jonathan hides a yawn behind his hand. “The rest of the sentence, please. I’m getting interested. The yawning is sleepiness, not boredom.”

“I know you like hearing things bluntly, which is convenient for how I feel right now. Would it count as practical reasons if everything I just said resulted in me wanting to touch you? Because I am pissed off at another guy, like so pissed off I screeched out of his place like a bat out of hell, and you’re right here and chill to the point of unnatural?” Selina shrugs. “And, frankly, a wonky sort of attractive?”

“I’ve never mistaken you for being tender or whatever when it comes to me,” Jonathan says, mirroring her shrug. “You’re a more conventionally sort of attractive, and I’ve been wondering how much I like girls when it’s more than hypothetical. Let’s give it a shot. Only hands and, like, kissing and biting. It would be illogical for me to use up any of my virginities on just helping you out of a snit.” Plus, Nefyn’s experience and playful patience will be better for completely new experiences.

“Fine, Spock.” She efficiently gets down to nothing but t-shirt and underwear, which requires a brief glimpse of her naked torso when she removes her bra. She’s built sleek and strong, like a gymnast. Like a panther. For now a smallish pantherlike feline, maybe, like an ocelot.
“Hah, I suspected that you liked watching Star Trek with me and Nygma more than y-” Jonathan’s never imagined someone so literally pouncing on him before, though he knows shutting people up with a kiss is a thing.

Selina pulls away long enough to burrow over the covers. “Your room’s even colder than your old lady’s. No wonder you bury yourself in blankets.”

“You’re the one who took most of your clothes off.” Jonathan hooks one leg over hers to try to help. Her skin is indeed quite cold.

“My pants are muddy and I think I got gunpowder on my vest.” She clasps the back of his neck with her right hand and kisses him again like she has something to prove.

The moment he can, Jonathan replies, “The guy you’re pissed off at leads an interesting life.” Mentally running through what might feel good based on her anatomy, he slips his left hand under her shirt to cup a breast and gently tease the nipple with his thumb.

“You don’t even - mm, keep doing that, wrap your other arm around my waist. Good. I see you have your uses after all.”

“Please don’t say creepy objectifying stuff, I’m not into it.” She’s not a middle-aged man, and she said it playfully, but it still sounds too much like a Mr. Brooks line.

She looks him in the eye and her gaze softens at how serious he is. She kisses his neck with the intensity dialed down. “Kay. Can I dig my nails into your back instead? You into that?”

“Dunno yet.” A spine-arching moment later, he says, “I am into that. Will you smack me if I take notes?”

“Yes, unless you’re into being smacked, in which case I’ll do something else.”

He moves his attention to her other breast. She hums with approval. “I’ll take notes after and not interrupt the flow, how’s that?”

“Except by when you talk like a goddamn alien.” She applies herself to outlining his jaw with lips and teeth.

“JlQos,” Jonathan says in Klingon, because he can’t resist. “Which means ‘sorry’.” He’s never been a hardcore Trekkie, but two of his childhood friends were.

He makes her forgive him by a careful combination of fingers while guided by increasingly incoherent feedback, and his understanding of how she likes her scalp lightly scratched at the same time. He likes how he can get her to tighten in spasms around his fingers and finally close her eyes. It’s the only time he’s truly believed that she’s a year younger than him, not really lifetimes older.

A few seconds later, she’s got a grip around the erection he’s absent-mindedly achieved while concentrating on her, and she’s got her other hand less lightly scratching his chest and her mouth on his. She has a better idea of what she’s doing and doesn’t need his words to guide her, just his movements and sounds.

Jonathan wrenches away to gasp, "Tissues, nightstand," at the last second.

It takes him longer to recover than it took Selina, and she spends the time nuzzling the crook of his nearest arm. Which is rather stupid in Jonathan’s opinion, but she’s too languidly content for him to begrudge it. Eventually he says, “Want another orgasm? I know people with vaginas can have
several in short succession.”

“As long as you stop sounding like a gynecologist. This time you can try pushing in a little, not just touching…”

“The clitoris and labia.” This time Jonathan’s doing it on purpose.

She rolls her eyes so hard it’s a wonder they get back to where they were before. “What did I just say?”

Jonathan gets her to come again, and she gets herself to come one more time, pushing him down while sucking bruises into unblemished expanses of his skin. He’s glad Harley won’t be seeing him until he’s all healed. Even with the understanding and openness between them when it comes to their relationship with each other, it might sting her anyway.

Then, wrung out, Selina turns off the lamp and mumbles something about it being too cold out there and too warm in here to move. Jonathan untangles himself and they lie back-to-back with a few points of contact here and there. Purely for warmth. He has no interest in snuggles.

“I like that you don’t think you’re better than me,” Selina mumbles.

“At wha’? Biochemishty? I mean bio-shem-ty...because I’m real good at chem-bio. And shycolgly.” Jonathan is proud of how articulate he is when he’s so close to passing out. He’d put that forth as another hypothesis of what he’s supposed to be better than Selina at, but his muscles are heavy. “’M better at lotsa people at those.”

She shifts, curling in on herself. Jonathan can barely hear it when she says, “Bru’ s’an asshole.”

“Joke’s on him. I’m a sphincter.” Jonathan falls asleep drowsily snickering at his own wit.

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“I don’t want to do that with you again, or anything like that with you again, but it has nothing to do with how good you were,” Selina says when she walks in on Jonathan reading about amino acids while eating a sandwich. “It was a nice pick-me-up, but I’ve decided you’re more like a weird stepbrother we keep in the attic with a pile of books except for your five mini mealtimes.”

“Well-crafted simile. I enjoyed myself but never expected more.”

“I’m leaving in a few hours. Thanks for hosting,”

“Cool.” Jonathan takes a notebook out from underneath the anatomy book, and offers the pen he’s been using for outlining the text. “Would you mind writing any comments you might have on how I did? You don’t have to sign your name. It will complete my own notes about the experience.”

Selina takes the notebook and pen. She plops down into a chair and starts writing, reading aloud as she goes. “Got the job done...polite...Vulcan…”

“Vulcans have rather unusual mating habits -”

“DORRRRRRRRRK.”

Chapter End Notes
Content Warning:

Underage, but legal. A 15-year-old and a 16-year-old consensually engage in making out and hands-only sexual activity. No oral or penetration. It is written in a more clinical/descriptive style than erotic.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jonathan spends the twenty-eighth through the thirtieth of December in agreeable solitude. He does a bunch of reading and works on his GCPD scholarship application. He finishes the Scarecrow mask. It’s in his dreams, and it tells him things. Gives him ideas. He does a second trial of what he’s dubbed “Fear Serum 1” in his notes. Also a success. He chats with Nygma over the phone - well, he chats and Nygma squees. He tells him the things the mask said, and Nygma grows more serious. They start planning.

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When Jonathan pads his way downstairs on the last day of the year, hungry and disheveled, Nefyn is sitting at his dining table five hours earlier than expected. Diagonal from him is the even less expected Victor Zsasz, who has helped himself to a glass of eggnog. Nefyn appears meekly embarrassed, which is an interesting look on him, and is dressed in all blue and brown except for his shoes.

Jonathan has only ever seen Zsasz on news footage, so he takes a moment to study the man. He’s not in a suit, just a smart-casual black ensemble that includes a leather porkpie hat. His complete lack of eyelashes suggest a condition, not just aesthetic head-and-eyebrow shaving. Then Jonathan realizes his silence might be perceived as rude. “Good morning.”

“Hi! So Penguin wants me to transport some sort of package from you to his house, and our puppy already got permission to trade his next day off after this one for a sleepover here. Besides, most everyone else has plans, and Leonara and I have to keep working on a guy. Can’t give him a day off. Undoes progress.” Zsasz taps his nearly empty glass. “This is real good, by the way.”

“Farmer’s market.” Nygma said Cobblepot would send someone trustworthy soon to pick up a dose of the fear serum for Nygma to do an independent test on, which would also serve as demonstration that Jonathan should get funding now. He hadn’t mentioned who that person would be.

Zsasz grins at Nefyn. “Ooh, we should tell Doc about the farmer’s market. She loves those.”

“I’ll get the details, Mr. Zsasz.”

“Great.” Zsasz turns back to Jonathan. “Me and the rest are kinda fond of our puppy - did he tell you why he’s called that?”

Taking a seat on the other end of the table, Jonathan says, “Your current apprentice is always called variations on ‘our puppy’ because ‘our bitch’ is harsh and has misogynistic connotations.”

“Yup. This would normally be the part where I threaten you unless you treat him right…”

Nefyn buries his face in his hands.

“...But Penguin, who’s our primary patron, says we can’t kill you or do even an teensy eensy weensy bit of torture without his say-so, and will get rewarded if we rescue you from someone else.” Zsasz leans forward on his elbows. “If you don’t treat him right, we’ll never work for you and we’ll be super passive aggressive and key your car and so on, got it? It doesn’t have to be romantic to matter.”
“Got it. Let me go to my room and get the package for you.”

Zsasz finishes the eggnog and licks his lips. “Cool.”

When Jonathan gets back, he says, “Nefyn mentioned that you’re looking for property to use as safe houses, storehouses, abductee accommodations, and so on. I own an isolated property that includes a large, fallow field. I’m happy to rent it out for cheap, under the table, full confidentiality. Nobody wants it. My mom died in a fire upstairs and my dad did mad science involving murdered people’s glands in what used to be her sewing room. Plus the plumbing’s always been finicky.”

Zsasz raises his lack-of-eyebrows and takes the carefully wrapped and boxed vial from Jonathan. “Interesting. We’ll bring it up next family meeting for discussion. Run home before it’s dark tomorrow, puppy. Make up for a lazy day.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nefyn manages to say before his boss grips him in a crushing, possessive embrace that involves more bite than kiss. Then Zsasz lets him go and pats him on the head. On his way out, Zsasz does a bit of fancy footwork and waves his hat at Jonathan like he’s doing a bit of Bob Fosse choreography.

Once they’re alone, Jonathan goes to the kitchen for some cereal and medication. “Flair for the dramatic, your lord and master.”

Nefyn trails after. “Fun fact, he does way more flips and somersaults during a chase than he needs to.”

“Do you always call him ‘Mr. Zsasz’ and ‘sir’?”

“I call him ‘Victor’ when cuddling. I’m his only current sexual partner who likes cuddling, and sometimes he just yanks me to the nearest soft surface and turns into a baby sloth. Though he lets me go if I ask or someone points out I have work to do. Or that he has work to do. He’s the boss but very much not the administrator.”

Jonathan snorts. He selects Honey Bunches of Oats from the cabinet. He’s curious about the tally Zsasz is said to cut into himself to commemorate each confirmed solo kill, which suggests a compulsion beyond what motivates most in his career. It’s the sort of thing that in Gotham divides the Arkham-potential from the Blackgate-likely. This isn’t the time to ask, so Jonathan just says as he pours out a bowlful, “Please tell me that’s not in your contract.”

“Nooooo. One of the previous puppies didn’t want to touch anybody ever unless it was essential for training or her very life, and that was fine. I’m just a huge slut, which is lucky for you, yes?” Nefyn sits on the kitchen table and dangles his legs while Jonathan eats in silence so he’ll finish faster.

“I’m done,” Jonathan gets to say after what feels like eons.

Nefyn tilts his head to one side. “Can I throw you over my shoulder and carry you upstairs and deposit you onto your bed?”

“Only if you get naked immediately after.”

“Only if I get to kiss you immediately before.”

Jonathan stands and makes a “come and get me” gesture.

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“Stop.”

Nefyn sits up. “What’s wrong? Did I use teeth by accident?”

“I don’t like that I can’t…it’s too…” Giving. Generous. Just lying there and letting him be nice, no matter how much he says he likes it. But Jonathan can’t make the words.

“He, there never needs to be an explanation for ‘stop’ or ‘no’. Not everyone likes oral and that is fine.” Nefyn removes the condom and tosses it aside. He crawls back up and lays beside Jonathan, close but not touching. His chest, back, and stomach have a number of what Jonathan suspects might be years’-old cigarette burns, but this has remained unspoken. “What would you like to do now?”

“You really want to know?”

“I don’t ask questions I don’t want answers to, blue jay.”

Jonathan kisses him fiercely and says, “I want you to fuck me. Starting gently but with the option to ratchet it up, depending. Then I want to eat lunch with you. Then I want to build a fire with you downstairs and we’ll spread out a bunch of blankets in front of it and you’ll talk me through how to fuck you on them the way you like it. Naps and other breaks as biology dictates. After that I’ll let you pick.”

The laugh is delighted, not derisive. “That’ll probably get us through the next few hours, anyway.”

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When exhaustion has truly set in, Jonathan doesn’t want to cuddle, and Nefyn clearly does but doesn’t push. It’s dark, but Jonathan can feel waves of mild poutiness emanating from a few inches away. Jonathan suspects the only deception Nefyn is good at is making someone think he’s harmless.

Jonathan says, “I told Selina that what with the amount of blood you have to wash out all the time, you could probably give Lady Macbeth some pointers.”

Nefyn chuckles. “Nice. Out, damned spot! We have a rule that all work clothes are black and no home clothes are, and that if any work clothes are stained with something other than blood they tell me. Because you don’t get bloodstains and grass stains out the same way…”

“But to you they look the same.”

“Almost the same. There’s a visual, uh, texture aspect, but it’s not easy.”

The tone is unmistakable. “You love these people.”

“They’re the first caring family I’ve had since the police screwed up Mom’s witness protection. I mean, ‘Pontiac’ isn’t even a very good new last name. I’d rather keep it than have the same name as...certain individuals. Besides, it works for ‘Knifepoint’ in a way that the original wouldn’t.” Nefyn sighs and shifts in the bed. “I’ve always had a friend or two, though, so I knew at least someone liked me during the years I otherwise felt powerless. I’m lucky that way. I believe in luck and love. I don’t believe ‘justice’ is more than a buzzword.”

“No wonder you wanted to join the Police Academy. You would’ve fit right in.”

“Their loss. Did we kiss at midnight?”

“I wasn’t looking at the clock.” Jonathan figures some type of amorous contact probably counts.
Nefyn sighs happily and settles into sleep.

(Until he wakes Jonathan with the restless twitches and whimpers of a nightmare, what sounds like sorry and I'll do better. Jonathan remembers what he said about nobody he lived with being in pristine emotional condition, and how much more open Nefyn is about his time homeless or incarcerated than a half-dozen years of middle-class life. Nefyn thankfully settles down on his own, because such intimate comfort is one of the things Jonathan can't give.)

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School starts back up again shortly after. Harley remarks on his good mood. She seems okay and doesn’t mention Irene. He dutifully oohs and aahs over her vacation photos, and more genuinely oohs over her gift for him. It’s two one-day passes to a nearby indoor amusement park, one of which is for her.

“I’ve got an excuse ready for why I’ll be gone whatever day you pick, since you’ll need an assistant in quantifying and recording your fear responses. I know you’ve been wanting to compare your reactions…”

“To a trip to that park I made when I was thirteen.” It had been part of a birthday party. “Thank you.”

“Don’t get anxious. It’s not that generous. My friend’s mom works there and helped me get a discount.”

“You know me well.”

She smirks and picks up a tater tot from her tray. “You free this Saturday?”

“Sorry, I’ve got therapy.” One session with Helga, and a rather different one with Nygma.

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“When you’re on your own, of course, I highly discourage going after anyone with a personal connection. Far too easy to trace.”

“Of course.”

“But I promised Oswald that I, personally, would only go for targets I could research beforehand. He worries.”

“Naturally. You have more resources for covering your tracks.”

The man whose house Jonathan and Nygma have just broken into eyes the gun in Nygma’s hand. He’s affecting a sardonic tone but is staying in the bed, as told, and his voice is shaky. “Should have known you were back up to your old tricks. Who’s Baghead over there?”

“That’s a beautifully handcrafted mask that represents something of great personal significance to my friend, Inqvist,” Nygma snaps at rapid-fire speed. He goes back to talking to Jonathan with a calm as manufactured as Inqvist’s. “I admit to being petty, but before his retirement last month this convenient loner was an Arkham guard who took bribes to turn the other way when inmates wanted to gang up on less popular ones for...well, being known for having colluded with Hugo Strange isn’t great for one’s popularity, shall we say. Then of course he had me punished for fighting back - successfully fighting back, don’t worry too much.”
“Still sorry to hear it.” Jonathan is borrowing the Scarecrow a bit for this, blending that burning hiss of a voice with his own without fully adopting the persona yet.

Nygma clears his throat. “But this is a teaching exercise as well as a bit of personal retribution, so why don’t you get out the stun gun.” It's a Merc product that acts a little differently from a legally available model. Using a chemical sedative might skew results. Jonathan's only had theoretical instruction, but Nygma's practiced and can correct his errors.

“What?”

“Don’t worry, sir, I’d never do anything worse than I’ve been through myself.” Jonathan may have survived his experience, but in his opinion a few minutes still pales in comparison to four months of continuous torture.

“How comforting that really isn’t.” Then Nygma says loudly, “I’m putting the gun down now, Inqvist, feel free to try to fight back. This is a teaching exercise.”

This is true. It’s also true that Nygma is not the only teacher here, Nygma who understands more than anyone what it’s like to have a stronger part of you better equipped for a fight, who will never be whole but might become complete.

Under the mask, Jonathan’s face is hot, lit from within. He closes his eyes. *Come take me, then, show me what to do. Outward, not inward.*

Scarecrow leaps.

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It’s a long trip back to Jonathan’s lab, but Nygma wants to help Jonathan accomplish all the steps on his own equipment.

“Did you lose any time?” Nygma asks, glancing at the mask on Jonathan’s lap before returning his eyes to the road. He’s driving a newly and secretly purchased car with tinted windows.

“No. I was still there, just in the passenger seat.”

“Have you come into an arrangement with it?”

“Sort of. It’s a lot more abusive than you are, says it’ll have to remind me of my own fear if I get weak again.” Jonathan says this casually, but it’s partly an act. “It doesn’t like the medication, wants me to let it come and go as it pleases. I’m not budging on that. No matter how much it promised in my dream that it won’t crush me full-time anymore.”

Nygma pauses and then says in the smallest of voices, “Am I abusive?”

“No! God no. Sorry, I phrased that poorly.” Jonathan has a sip of water. “What did it look like to you?”

Still somberly, but with a note of pride: “If that was sample of anything resembling how your Scarecrow attacks you, I’m impressed you’re sane at all.”

“Thank you.” Jonathan gets a text and checks his phone.

“Who’s that?”

“Someone on Zsasz’s crew.”
“Ah, you’re renting that property to them after all?”

“Yes.” Though the text isn’t about that - he doesn’t want to talk to Nygma about anything remotely connected to his sex life. Nefyn’s asking how Jonathan’s first premeditated kill is going. He hasn’t told Nefyn what the kill is for, and Nefyn says that’s not something assassins ask if they aren’t told. It's highly likely that Nefyn's put all the pieces together himself anyway, given the shopping trip and his knowledge of Jonathan's backstory. Jonathan texts back that it isn’t done, he’s just in a lull before the next part.

“You look tired. We’ve still got an injection, an autopsy, and a disposal to do.”

“Slightly drained. Excited though, don’t get me wrong.”

Nygma taps the steering wheel thoughtfully. “Beloved of cats, I come in the day, but put me after a kid and there will be dismay.”

“Mm, good idea.” Jonathan closes his eyes and leans against the window for a nap.

Nygma’s singing soothingly to himself. Clearly it’s to himself, some sort of stimming, there’s no other explanation, and it being a band Jonathan loves is entirely coincidence. “But you, my brother in arms, I’d rather I’d lose my limbs then let you come to harm…”

Jonathan has about forty minutes to rest in this tidy little incognito black car that compensates with green upholstery, the heat turned up to hearthside. Fear has its place.

Chapter End Notes

When Jonathan thinks of the hallucination/tortmentor, it's "The Scarecrow". When he's thinking of it as a partner-in-crime he allows to inhabit him, it's "Scarecrow" without the definite article.
Chapter Notes

The Non-Graphic part of Non-Graphic Violence holds true even though Jonathan's gone darker. I hope you too can hate these sins but love this sinner, as he is fictional and we can therefore measure him differently in our hearts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Over Jonathan’s belated Nightmeal before he can sleep - Jonathan notes that his appetite is not affected, while every time he helped his father he wanted to vomit after - Nygma says, “There are three things I did that I don’t want you to emulate.”

In neutral, non-judgmental tones, Jonathan lists, “When he woke up before we’d gotten him fully restrained and you beat him and choked him excessively until I stopped you, when you painted the nail of his right index finger green to symbolize accusation, and when you had a tearful flashback.”

Nygma is still wrapped in the blanket Jonathan awkwardly draped over his shoulders, waiting for him to snap out of it. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“Never.” Jonathan has more salad, having eaten as much pasta as he can digest for now. It’s past three AM, unusual for his stomach and medication schedule but workable.

“I know you would prefer to dive into autopsy right away.” Nygma pokes and examines his roll in a dazed fashion, as if trying to determine whether it’s a plant or a fungus. He missed dinner but doesn’t appear to be hungry. Jonathan had a small sandwich on the way to the abduction.

“We both need rest. You said he’ll keep in my new lab freezer.” Jonathan is satisfied with what they accomplished. Nygma filmed the reactions to the drug while verbally coaching Jonathan. They can measure the decibels of the recorded screams later.

Nygma has already gone over the plan several times, but it seems to ground him. “Tomorrow, well, technically ten this morning, autopsy and lesson in organ preservation, and how to hack him up with your inherited hatchet.”

“Your Inherited Hatchet would be a good name for an indie rock band,” Jonathan says, because humor helps Nygma, especially very lame humor.

It helps enough that Nygma chuckles and actually eats the bread rather than inspecting it. “I wish digging graves or dissolving the bodies in acid would be practical for your physical strength or circumstances, but I promise that a low-traffic part of the harbor I found is a good dump site for a weighed-down garbage bag.”

“Too bad we don’t want to give the crows and rats a fondness for human flesh, either,” Jonathan jokes but slightly. There would also be too much for them to eat, and all that butchering would be tedious.

Nygma nods with a half-smile. “It’s within our controlled territory as well. We should be able to get there in time for you to have dinner with us. Oswald wants to talk to you anyway, and he can stay up
late because he’s free tomorrow night and Sunday. I can use a different one when I do my own trials…”

“No. Same one.” When Nygma stares in mute surprise, Jonathan continues, “This is no insult to your plan, but we have to be prepared for worse-case scenarios. If, somehow, the bodies were found and the police closed in, I would take all the blame. I’m a juvenile with no prior offenses and a severe medical condition. They’d go easier on me. It would also be easier for you and your husband to get me out than for him to get us both out. It’s the most pragmatic option. Similarly, if you do get caught, I want you to snitch on me to lighten your sentence as much as possible. Anything to mitigate Arkham for you.”

Nygma clears his throat. “At the risk of causing offense, that’s crazy talk, and your calmness makes it wore.”

“‘Your Calmness Makes it Worse’ would be Your Inherited Hatchet’s first hit single.” Jonathan might be slightly loopy, yes, but he’s been thinking about this contingency.

Face in hands now, Nygma says, “I put in more than a full day’s work as both the Mayor’s and the King of Gotham’s right hand man before picking you up from school. I’ve sworn never to use, uh, stimulants again. I am too tired for this, and so are you.”

Jonathan places his hands flat on the table and tried to speak gently. “I can’t go on the run, ever. How would I get treatment? If I would be caught eventually, might as well cut to the chase in a way that gives you the slightest amount of protection. You’re no use as a mentor if you crack more than you have already.”

Unexpectedly, Nygma gives him a wounded stare and leaves for the spare room.

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“I figured out what I said wrong.” Jonathan says the moment Nygma comes downstairs for their late breakfast, already dressed in surgical scrubs. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, and your importance to me is not based solely on your utility. I like spending time with you baking, and, like, just talking, or watching Star Trek or trying to beat radio quiz shows, and I’d want to keep doing that even if we weren’t doing science together.”

Nygma blinks at him, face unreadable.

Jonathan holds out a steaming mug. “Coffee?”

“This is different from your grandmother’s old stash, and your psychiatrist still discourages from you consuming caffeine. Have you started keeping coffee just for me?” Nygma asks, taking it.

“Yes.” Nefyn, not a coffee person, brought his own chai tea when he slept over.

Nygma adjusts his glasses and smiles.

****

The Zsasz Family are reluctant to let anyone know where they live, so shortly after Jonathan gets home from school one day, they pull up in a black van with tinted windows and all come inside for a prearranged meeting. He has coffee, tea, and hot chocolate ready for them.

There are eight of them in total. There’s enough seats between the existing living room furniture and the chairs dragged from elsewhere. Nefyn ends up on the couch flanked by a blonde and gray-eyed
Zsaszette who keeps whispering in his ear, and a Zsaszette with a magenta streak in what Jonathan can only describe as a trimmed Afro. The two women who’ve taken point on emailing Jonathan have pushed together two chairs. He guesses based on cultural naming traditions that the one in the comfy chair with East Asian features, one shaved eyebrow, and a broken arm is Yoona, and the one in the wooden chair with a laptop and South Asian features is the one who signs off as Dr. Kali, though Zsasz calls her “Doc”.

Meanwhile, two wooden chairs are taken up by a lanky blond and blue-eyed man with the straightest, whitest smile Jonathan has ever seen, as well as a more compact man with dark hair and eyes who falls halfway between the couch ladies in skin tone. Zsasz has placed himself in the center of the circle that includes Jonathan, his back facing a gap. He’s sitting backwards in his chair with his arms folded on the top of the backrest.

Nobody is wearing black. This is a domestic matter for them.

Zsasz begins, “Yoona and Doc have written up the skeleton of a tentative contract, with gaps where the not-yet-decided matters such as exact rent will go. This isn’t legally binding, but we will file a copy with Edward Nygma as Penguin’s partner and administrative assistant in all things. Either he or Penguin will resolve disputes. All of us have read it but not discussed it as a group. Before we talk about filling in the blanks, we gotta vote on whether we’re accepting the skeleton contract at all.”

Smile Guy raises his hand and waits for Zsasz’s nod. “Are you letting Jesús and I vote on this? I was under the impression this is coming out of Core Family budget.”

Jesús explains to Jonathan, “Core Family have a shared bank account that they put all their earnings into, and sometimes freelance but prioritize helping Victor. Like a commune. Teeth and I have our own bank accounts and pay them rent, though we share grocery costs. We mostly do our own thing, but will help during the very rare times the Core needs us, and they’ll let us skip the next rent. Then there’s Family Friends, who -”

“If you want to use the new property, Teeth, you can pitch in on the costs,” Zsasz tells the original questioner. “And if you’re getting involved, you can have half a vote each time we vote during this meeting. Puppy as usual has no vote, but he can weigh in during discussion, especially since he knows Jonathan best.”

“Don’t bore him,” Yoona interrupts.

“I find this very interesting,” Jonathan says honestly, despite Nefyn having told him a few of these details already. “Behind-the-scenes in an unconventional gang.”

“If you want to use the new property, Teeth, you can pitch in on the costs,” Zsasz tells the original questioner. “And if you’re getting involved, you can have half a vote each time we vote during this meeting. Puppy as usual has no vote, but he can weigh in during discussion, especially since he knows Jonathan best.”

“‘Knows’ him super well, wants to ‘know’ more,” snickers Blonde Woman. Magenta Streak reaches behind Nefyn to lightly swat her.

Zsasz smirks for two seconds before getting serious again. “All in favor of what has been negotiated so far?”

Everyone is in favor except for Magenta Streak. “Not that it matters, I guess,” she says.

“What’s your concern, L?” Zsasz looks concerned by her concern, which is not the man the media or underworld says he is. “It matters. Maybe we can tweak it for you.”

“Why does he want to rent it and not sell it? Is there an ulterior motive?”

Everyone looks at Jonathan, who sits up more in his seat. “I’m an emancipated minor, and the best way to keep this status is to demonstrate consistent, ongoing income. Mortgages are harder to make
legitimate-looking, and Nefyn says you folks prefer to pay cash and in full for all your purchases anyway. It shouldn’t be too hard to make it seem like a regular rental arrangement for legal paperwork, according to Mr. Nygma.”

“L” purses her lips, then says, “That helps.”

The negotiations are smooth after that. Yoona, Kali, and Nefyn have already been a scouting excursion to the place - Jonathan gathers that Yoona’s injury has benched her from violence for now - and taken lots of pictures as well as tested the condition of the place. Zsasz fills in the blanks in their two copies of the contract as they’re settled. One copy will stay with Jonathan, and one will be photocopied as needed. Teeth expresses an interest in living there full-time as a sublet, but Zsasz says they can discuss that at home.

After Jonathan signs both copies and asks for them to let Nefyn sign if he wants, they sign with the full names they’re currently using, which Jonathan gathers might not all be official: Victor Zsasz, Yoona Bae, Dr. Kelly “Kali” Lahiri, Titus Heath, Nefyn Pontiac, Jesús Juarez, Leonara Patterson, and…”

Jonathan stares at the blonde woman who’s just signed. “Candace Maroni?”

She winks. “You can call me Candy. Vic’s persuasive. Not my type, but a better boss than I had before, and I could see which way the gang war was going.”

“Awwwwww.” Zsasz places his hands over his heart. “By the way, Jonathan, don’t tell anyone about our personal lives in general, but if anyone suggests that all the ladies in our household are my lovers, tell them they’re wrong and refer them to Candy or Doc for further correction.”

Kali squeezes Yoona’s free hand and says, “I’ve patched up Candy’s messes before she sends them home duly instructed. Girl’s an artist.”

Jonathan asks, “You’re everyone’s live-in doctor, right? Nefyn said you’ve learned to generalize, like, a lot, and also you pitch in on running things while nobody’s hurt or sick. He said you procure all the medical supplies.”

“Yes. Do you need something? From how you read the contract, I think you might need glasses in a few years, by the way.”

Jesús says, “She’s got a sense for these things. I’ve recently started wearing contacts, and she predicted it.”

“I’ll keep an eye on that.” Jonathan is gratified by Nefyn’s cringe-grin. “Anyway, so, when I was ten, I fell out of a tree and had to use a wheelchair for months, and I got good at wheeling myself around. Do you know where I can discreetly get a relatively inexpensive non-powered wheelchair that’ll fit in my car if I remove the backseat? I’m afraid I can’t tell you why. Also, may Nefyn spend the night, part of which for another self-defense lesson, if he wants? I did all tonight’s homework yesterday and everything.”

“Yes,” Kali says.

“Yes,” Zsasz decrees with a regal wave. “Special occasion.”

Nefyn looks bewildered by this turn of events. “Thank you, Mr. Zsasz!”

****
It takes two acquisitions before he fully achieves his favored technique. Because he’s spaced out the expeditions, the weather has warmed slightly, though he still needs a coat. Jonathan’s no vigilante, but the disappearances of petty criminals don’t rank high on the GCPD radar, and it’s easy whenever he can use himself as bait. This is how it goes:

First, he parks his car in a particularly godforsaken area and engages a booby-trap security system that Jesús a car enthusiast and constant tinkerer on his own vehicle, installed for a moderate fee. He puts up a warning sign with the assassin’s signature on it and lets reputation (and it being a cheap vanilla car) do the rest.

Second, he slings on a messenger bag, gets in the wheelchair, and wheels his way towards the darkest, loneliest alleyways he can find. He wears a hat with the brim pulled low, plus fake facial hair, as a basic identity precaution. If necessary, he calls out that he’s lost and needs help. Because this is not only Gotham but a carefully chosen part, someone comes soon, and never to help.

Third, Jonathan removes the hat and slips on the mask, and in the instant of his would-be attacker’s confusion, Scarecrow attacks.

Fourth, mask off, Jonathan duct tapes the unconscious subject’s arms in front, together from elbow to wrist and upper arms in big loops around the chest. He tapes the legs from knee to ankle, and a generous strip of the mouth. With the help of a blanket, scarf, and grubby beanie, even in the unlikely event Jonathan is spotted by someone who might care, at a casual glance it looks like he’s helping a disabled, likely homeless person. The wheelchair also compensates for him not being strong enough to lug a deadweight around.

Fifth, at the car, quick scan to make sure he’s probably not being watched, then subject goes in trunk and the wheelchair goes in the car. It’s not fully collapsible, but has a few folding bits.

The Scarecrow doesn’t want to give up control so soon, and sometimes hisses about how it’s Jonathan who’s the rarely necessary one, that Scarecrow working every night would get so much more done. When this happens, Jonathan drives listening to CDs he borrows from Harley, who represents something unrelated to these nights. The Scarecrow says she’s got madness in her too, but Jonathan says even if so, madness isn’t inherently evil, and it shuts up.

He has to use a different strategy when he is getting close to a second version of the serum and wants at least one or two women in the mix to illuminate any glaring differences between the sexes. Few women are around in such neighborhoods after dark, and those who are have no interest in mugging him. A Zsaszette might confidently stride through the area but have bigger fish to fry, and a Selina Kyle might clamber over the roofs but ignore such slim pickings.

That leaves two homeless women he finds on different expeditions. He gives them some money first and has a chat to find any obvious signs of severe mental illness or intoxication. The third one he approaches talks like a paranoid schizophrenic, so he wheels away and lets her keep the five dollars unharmed. Not worth the extra variables.

****

All these acquisitions and experiments take more than four months, because he can only do weekends and holidays, and some of that is taken up with schoolwork, chores, therapy, relaxing, or actually a bit of socializing, who’d have thought? Then when he comes up with the second iteration of his formula, he tests it extensively on rats first. Nygma picks up a sample to try on his own, and they have lunch and talk about their demons before watching Jeopardy as a palate cleanser.

It’s around dawn the following Saturday morning May. Earlier, Jonathan strapped Subject 10
securely to the examination table and caught a nap on the air mattress set up in what used to be a private stall for a sick alpaca in quarantine. Might as well get some rest while waiting for Subject 10 to recover from the second zap it took to render him unconscious from the car to the house. The sound of the usual angry/panicky questions rouses Jonathan, who puts on a white lab coat, fake glasses, and surgical mask before approaching the table. He turns on the video camera outside Subject 10’s field of vision before stepping to his side.

“What the hell is this?”

“Are you asking what you’re hooked up to? Just a heart rate monitor. If you’re asking what the situation is, you went for the bait, and now I’m going to test you. Did you come up with the threat to shove a gun down his throat and fire it so deep the bullet would come out the other end? Crass but impressively creative.” Jonathan wants to give the impression he has lackeys, hence the use of third person.

“What’s the test?” He’s shivering even though Jonathan left him all his clothes except his jacket and shoes.

“How this injection I have here…” Jonathan takes two steps and picks up the hypodermic syringe from the tray several feet from the table and gestures, “will affect you.”

“Is the test gonna kill me?”

Syringe back down. Look how far away. “That’s not the goal.” The goal is a non-fatal, yet still effective version, though Jonathan would have to kill him eventually for autopsy.

“Fuck you.”

“I’ve already got someone for that.” Jonathan picks up his notebook and pen. After a session, Jonathan watches the tape, sometimes with Nygma, takes anonymized written notes, then destroys the footage. Handwritten notes are less incriminating, easier to get rid of in a hurry, and easier to flip through. Writing notes right now saves a step and obscures the fact that he’s filming this. “There are criteria that would make you unsuitable for this test. I’m not telling you what they are, but if one of your honest answers meets any, I’ll give you an amnesiac drug and let you go. I’m not doing this for kicks, you know.”

Subject 10 anxiously answers questions about his health, physical and mental, and that of immediate family. Then Jonathan sighs. “I’m afraid you’re unsuitable. Ugh, not again. I’ll have to give you a drink that’ll make you forget the past twelve hours and put you where I found you.”

“R-really?”

Jonathan nods and walks towards the far wall, where there’s a beaker full of exactly two hundred milliliters of neon blue liquid. He brings it over, with a straw.

“How am I supposed to believe you?”

“I’m giving you a chance.” Jonathan jerks his head meaningfully to where his inherited hatchet is hanging on a hook.

Subject 10 tilts his head up and drinks it all. His breathing slows, as does his heart. He near-smiles hopefully when Jonathan puts his fingers on the buckles of one wrist strap.

Then Jonathan grabs the second syringe from a pocket he added to the inside of his coat and plunges it into the man’s neck. Then he grabs the camera for a closer view. After the first scream, when the
truth won’t make a notable difference in the subject’s distress, Jonathan tells him, “That was a sports
drink with salt and vinegar added. I had to reduce your baseline fear as much as I could, first.”

He writhes and looks to be trying to claw at himself. “You…fucking! Maniac! I shoulda..”

Jonathan raises his eyebrows. This is the first time anyone’s spoken that many coherent words
together. But there’s nothing else for the remaining fifteen minutes of life. It’s progress, but
frustratingly slight, no matter how well Nygma says he’s doing.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first time, a while after their introduction in The Other Tally, that Zsasz's
crew have told me what full names they use when they need to. Guess which one is a
complete fabrication.
Thin Ice

Chapter Notes

Contains references to various horrific things happening to kids and a long-ago traumatic animal death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nygma expresses interest in watching Jonathan feed his flock - excuse me, murder -of crows. Jonathan spreads most of his offerings on the ground, but he’s got tidbits in his gloved hands for Hayao and Satsuki, who he thinks are mates, and who these days will both perch on him to eat from his hands as long as Nygma stays far enough away and doesn’t talk too loud.

“You don’t really know what sexes these crows are.”

“Nope.” One or the other always messes with his hair. Preening? Jonathan washes it after, but he allows it as an expression of affection. It’s mid-May now, but he’s wearing a long-sleeved partially-buttoned plaid shirt to protect him from grasping crow feet.

Nygma has dark circles around his eyes. He works too hard but snaps at anyone who suggests he give something up. Jonathan has given him an out that he won’t accept, so it’s not his responsibility to coddle his mentor further - though he does feed him a good lunch or dinner before he leaves. He’s fascinated by the sight before him, at least. “You’re thumbing your nose at the Scarecrow. You’re deliberately going against its namesake’s basic function in order to assert that it has its role but you are not it.”

“Yep.” Their feathers are warm and tickly against his cheeks. “Besides, pets are good for mental health, and these are low-maintenance...oh, hello.”

An increasingly bold one he’s named Chihiro has hopped up to just in front of him, where he’s put a decapitated but otherwise healthy rat on a rock. The rats breed too quickly, and he prefers using ones about the same age for a trial. He doesn’t give his crows rats that have been experimented on.

“I took in stray kitten once,” Nygma says slowly. “But my parents...my father didn’t like when I tried to hide it.”

It is an immense, precious privilege to be the only person to hear such detailed anecdotes. Nygma still refuses professional help and can’t bring himself to share such things with someone who grew up without being abused in some way. Mama Kapelput sounds a tad smothering, by secondhand accounts, but Cobblepot is still unaware of this and only felt loved.

The key is to listen actively but without showing distress. Easy for Jonathan, who borrows some of Helga’s tactics like saying a reworded version of what’s just been said. “He didn’t react well to your deception.”

“Drowned it in front of me. In a bucket.” Casual, so casual.

The crows on his shoulders take flight and break the spell. Jonathan turns to face Nygma directly. “You could get a pet now. Nobody to stop you.”
“Bit busy, but that’s sweet of you.” Nygma rubs the back of his neck. “I have a second cousin I spent part of a summer with when my parents went on a second honeymoon to Europe. Slapping a band-aid on a gaping wound of a marriage. My second cousin was younger, but brilliant and empathetic, and we corresponded for years. It helped. He would like you if he didn’t know what we’ve been up to, I think.”

“I’m guessing you don’t talk anymore.”

Nygma shakes his head. “I could use a walk. You mentioned a spring? Show me?”

After a few minutes of silent strolling, Jonathan gets the go-ahead to talk shop. “We saw that the eighteen-year-old had the best results. Greatest lucidity. Managed to communicate the most of anyone so far.”

“I was impressed.” Nygma plucks a purple flower from a tree and twists it between thumb and forefinger.

“My neurologist theorized that I might have recovered in part because my brain is still growing, therefore more adaptable.”

Nygma holds up the flower and corrects, “Plastic. More plastic. Showing greater neuroplasticity.”

“Right. So…what if I tried younger?”

It’s not entirely surprising when Nygma freezes, but the thinly veiled shock in his voice gives Jonathan pause. “You mean children.”

Jonathan comes to a stop as well. “It’s complicated and upsets people, I know, and it’s so taboo even among many criminals that, like, Zsasz won’t. I’m not saying many. One boy, one girl. Simply to check my hypothesis. There’s ones no one will miss and no one will grieve for, I’m sure.”

“That’s the sort of thing that might galvanize the GCPD out of their usual bumbling semi-apathy if they learned of it. Thin ice.” Nygma starts shredding the flower in both hands without looking at it. “I see your point, but I won’t help.”

“Because you’re worried about consequences, or like how you won’t kill unarmed women except in vengeance?” Jonathan and Nygma had hashed out several boundaries early on. He counts women proficient in hand-to-hand combat as armed if their limbs are free and they’re otherwise unhampered.

“Both, but...more the latter.”

“Okay.” Jonathan starts walking again, and Nygma joins in. “Will you disown me?”

“No. You’d have to betray me or Oswald for that.” The answer is quick. Automatic.

Suddenly Jonathan feels very warm and removes his extra shirt. The gloves are each in a plastic bag tucked in the pockets of his baggy pants. “I won’t.”

“Give me time to think.”

“Okay.”

They’ve reached the stream and Jonathan’s spent at least a minute sitting on a fallen log before Nygma says, “I think there’s a way to get a girl and a boy who won’t be grieved and who the sort of criminals merciful to children might forgive you for. Zsasz has made one exception to his no-children
rule that Oswald knows of. It was in his Falcone days. The child had a brain tumor and less than four
months to live. It was to send a threat of escalation to her family rather than accomplish anything
against her per se. One could spin it as a quick death instead of a lingering one coming soon.”

“Brain tumors would defeat the point.”

Nygma joins Jonathan on the log. He’s dressed relatively casually, including, gasp, no necktie. “Yes,
but it’s not the only thing that causes predictable slow death.”

“Noted.” A crow flies by and gives Jonathan a friendly caw.

“Ripper Boone’s gang has a division that specializes in taking dying children off the hands of
unenthusiastic guardians. Children who can still walk and eat, for now, but with numbered days.
Those that still look nice are pimped out. The ones that aren’t pretty are made to beg on the streets
and hand over their earnings.” Nygma shrugs while also grimacing the tiniest bit. “Oswald has
known this for a long time and finds it distasteful, but Boone’s part of an alliance with several small
groups and to offend them would be unprofitable and destabilize a whole section of the Narrows. We
have standards but aren’t vigilantes, and the Mayor has to keep his ears seemingly clean as well as
his hands, as it were. Selina left a tip to the police, just in case, but no dice. I believe a friend of
Selina’s, mostly a criminal but with a vigilante streak, may have set a few Boonies on fire recently.”

Jonathan snickers and quickly says, “Sorry, but that’s a funny name for such awful people, and when
you add them being set in fire…”

Nygma’s lips twitch before he’s serious again. “Yeah. In any case, I will help you as far as telling
you where to find these dying beggar children. That’s the extent of my comfort zone. You’ll know
them by the RB brand on their left inner wrists.”

****

The Scarecrow yells at Jonathan for giving both kids a teddy bear to hold, during, loosening the
restraints just enough to do so. Boy first, girl the following weekend.

After he re-dresses the little girl’s body, he considers for a moment and tucks the bear in her arms
before dismembering both together. As with the boy, he cuts off the brand and burns it.

He’s tired. It’s a momentary whim. He's done with kids anyway. It means nothing.

****

In February, Harley started walking dogs to save money for drama camp, and also because her
newly-afflicted-with boyfriend convinced her that she needs more exercise because she is fat and that
her being fat would be a terrible thing. Jonathan’s attempts to refute both lies, more importantly the
second, haven’t worked. She attributes Jonathan’s dislike of him to his general misanthropy but
simultaneous protectiveness towards her. Unfortunate that killing Bobby would attract suspicion.

So he tries to be a good friend, and sometimes he joins her as she walks the dogs. He doesn’t help in
any aspect of the job, though. It’s restful to hang out with someone who’s never killed anyone, who
reminds him of the Jonathan he used to be.

Today she’s walking two excitable golden retriever puppies and one mopey but unusually agile
terrier. She spends ten minutes telling him about how she wants to write, direct, and star in a modern
version of a Commedia dell’Arte production…

“...And it’s traditionally a male role, but I’m thinking a feminine spin on the archetype of the
harlequin, like mine would be a mischievous, chaotic force who is amoral but really just wants to liven things up and for love to prevail? Like it’s what I’m born to play?”

“Sounds like a cool plan.”

Harley looks to see nobody’s around before she leans over and whispers, “I can’t do this anymore. I haven’t told and won’t tell anyone, and I’m certain that I’m the only one at school who knows you well enough, and I still like you, and you’ve been such a shoulder to cry on and help with studying…”

Jonathan holds back a groan. “Just say it.”

“Mr. Brooks assaulted you - in more than one way - you killed him to protect yourself, and his family hushed it up.” Harley stops to let the terrier mark a lamppost. “Am I right? You don’t have to talk about it with me, but it just feels bad for me to keep hiding that from you.”

Jonathan bites his lip for a moment, then says, “Yes. Do you want me to kill Bobby for you?” With her help, he just might get away with it.

Harley looks around again to make sure they’re alone (except for the gamboling puppies and the territorial terrier). “I’m going to break up with him tomorrow and knowing you’re in my corner will help. Don’t kill him if he comes after me, just scare him.”

“That I can do.”

It turns out not to be necessary, but Harley gives Jonathan a cupcake regardless.

****

Jonathan’s at home, washing first-floor windows (Nefyn will help with the second-floor), when Nygma’s car pulls up unexpectedly. Then both he and Cobblepot - who has never visited before - climb out. Jonathan opens the door and they enter. Nygma is pale and wide-eyed. Cobblepot is blank-faced, his cane clacking on the floor like a broken metronome.

Cobblepot takes a seat in the nearest chair and pulls a copy of The Gotham Gazette from under his arm. He slaps it onto the coffee table.

Front page headline: SALVAGERS FIND UNDERWATER MASS GRAVE

Subheading: 17 VICTIMS INCLUDE 2 CHILDREN

Chapter End Notes

Don’t give money to child beggars, folks. Also don’t experiment on them, but hopefully you knew that.
Stealth Criminal Minds crossover is GO.

“Give me a moment to take my punishment,” Jonathan says.

“What?” Cobblepot asks, as if he thinks he heard wrong.

Jonathan has just enough time to go to the rug near the fireplace Nefyn suggested he buy for making certain activities more comfortable. He lies down and lets the fear consume him. Screams. Chokes. Whimpers.

The Scarecrow hasn’t been this angry with him for awhile, and its anger stems from Jonathan’s insistence on calling the shots and things going wrong supposedly because of that. Not so much speech as staccato growl. The Scarecrow’s grasp is tight. It only lets enough air into his lungs for those tributes, those expressions of penance.

It’s not so angry that it doesn’t keep its promise to let Jonathan dissociate enough to be aware of his surroundings when he’s cooperative, though.


“Has he done that around you before?’ Cobblepot asks. His voice is steady but near-inaudible.

“No, but he’s drilled me in the protocol.” Out of the corner of his eye, Jonathan can see Nygma crouch on the floor, just out of Jonathan’s reach. The aware part of Jonathan would rather stop flailing around. It’s futile and potentially dangerous. The main part of him can’t stop, though. It thinks it’s dying, or has died and is facing a far more permanent punishment. It’s been rendered feral.

(When fully himself, Jonathan has stopped believing there can be anything worse than permanent relapse, and with that possibility dangling over his head no matter what life he leads, the unlikely off-chance of divine punishment lacks bite. Hell is empty, for his devil is all here.)

“Careful,” Cobblepot cautions. He’s still in the chair, probably. Aware Jonathan can’t turn his body’s head to look.

Nygma sits, folding his long legs and talking with his hands as well as his words. “They look like that when they’re dying, Jonathan. Is that the other reason why you wanted this? For me it’s a puzzle. Or, has been. It was also wanting to see you grow. They look like that when they’re dying, but you are not. We’ve got another puzzle ahead of us. A less fun one. But I’m good at puzzles, and Oswald’s good at winning.”

“He can’t hear you.”

“Actually, he might. He says sometimes he can have a simultaneous out-of-body experience that remains cognizant.” Nygma sighs. “It’s my fault, Jonathan. I’m the adult. You did what I said. You never went behind my back. Any idea that started with you, you ran it by me, and it was my
responsibility to veto your decision to go after children rather than enabling you. And after all, I chose the dump site.”

Cobblepot sighs even louder. “You had no way to predict that a boat full of valuable cargo would sink so close by and attract scavengers.”

“That as may be…” But then Jonathan’s screams get loud, and the others don’t try to talk over it.

Jonathan doesn’t lose time, but he loses track of its pace. When his heart stops racing and the world becomes real, he asks, “How long?”

Nygma checks his watch. “About ten minutes. I wasn’t looking at the time right when you started.”

“Okay. Not too bad.” Jonathan sits up. “Thank you for talking. I heard it. I...not all parts of me understood at the time, but I remember, and it makes sense now.”

“Would you like a hot drink?”

“Hot chocolate, um, maybe with a sprinkle of cinnamon?”

“Sure thing. Did you know that some spice traders in the olden days told their customers back in Europe that cinnamon sticks actually came from the nest of a terrifying giant bird, thus jacking up prices?”

Jonathan snorts, feeling his own throat with his fingers. Yet again he’s irrationally surprised not to find bruising. “Go fight a Cinnamon Eagle for me, then.”

“Another good name for a rock band,” Nygma says with a faint smile, getting to his feet and making his way to the kitchen. By now he knows where everything is.

“Do you need anything else before we discuss the issue at hand?” Cobblepot asks once they’re alone, not without sympathy but sharply professional all the same.

Jonathan excuses himself to freshen up in the bathroom. When he returns, Nygma hands him a chipped but beloved Astro Boy mug and indicates the coaster he’s placed on the table. There’s a cinnamon stick for stirring as well as a sprinkle of the ground variety.

There’s also a small tape player, sitting next to that coaster. It must have been concealed in one of their jackets. Cobblepot - who has a cup of tea now, in fact both he and Nygma have tea in delicate china cups - points at it. “You did us a favor by planting bugs in the GCPD precinct. This has been useful to us several times, but this time it concerns your welfare as well.”

“It’s from Harvey Bullock’s office. He’s talking to Jim Gordon, Dr. Tompkins, and Lucius Fox. If you need me to stop the recording and take a breather or something, tell me.” Nygma presses play.

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BULLOCK: Everyone’s got plenty to do and I won’t waste your time beating around the bush. Though nothing from this meeting gets out unless I say so, okay?

GORDON: Understood.

THOMPKINS: Is this about the report I gave you?

FOX: This is about what some of the media are calling the Chopper case, isn’t it? Can we get them to stop, by the way?
THOMPKINS: I can introduce you to our media liaison.

FOX: Thank you. I haven’t yet had occasion to meet her, and an introduction would make me more confident in my request.

BULLOCK: Guys - I mean, folks - not trying to waste anyone’s time, including my own. I think the Crane kid’s got something to do with this.

GORDON: Harvey, he’s sixteen.

THOMPKINS: Actually seventeen by now, if I remember his file correctly. But yes. Jonathan is seventeen and chronically ill in multiple ways.

BULLOCK: I’m not saying he did everything, I’m saying I think he’s got something to do with it.

THOMPKINS: Why? Other than…

BULLOCK: It’s not about Scottie.

THOMPKINS: I was going to say other than because among the multiple organs missing, none of the victims have their adrenal glands.

BULLOCK: (embarrassed) Oh.

THOMPKINS: It’s definitely about Scottie, then. You need to let it go, for both your sakes.

BULLOCK: You can’t ignore the gland thing. And you can’t ignore the grandma thing. Also didn’t one of his teachers die?

GORDON: That case didn’t fall under our jurisdiction. Local county cops ruled it a heart attack, they were nice enough to tell me. When I asked. Because you asked me to.

FOX: Technically, the business with his grandmother wasn’t under our jurisdiction either. It was within the Gotham municipality but outside the city limits. You overrode -

BULLOCK: The kid is obviously disturbed ‘cause of his brain damage and his dad grooming him for murder and crap! He’s got empathy problems and he doesn’t feel stuff! He dissects people’s actions and words to use logic instead of being, you know…

FOX: Normal?

[long silence]

BULLOCK: I didn’t mean it like that.

FOX: (mildly) I didn’t know you considered neurodivergent people so inherently lesser, Captain. You’ve signed off on my therapy sessions being compensated despite not normally being part of our health plan. I thought that with Nygma it was just a personality clash. I may have difficulties with instinctive as opposed to constructed empathy, but it does not negate my compassion.

GORDON: Harvey’s just frustrated with the situation, Lucius. He doesn’t mean anything by it.

THOMPKINS: You’re the most compassionate man I know, whatever Harvey’s opinions are.

FOX: Thank you, Lee. Let’s table that for now. I presume you called us three because we’ve had actual contact with Jonathan?
BULLOCK: Also you’re the only three I know for absolutely sure aren’t corrupt.

THOMPKINS: *(mutters)* I’m not going to think about too hard.

BULLOCK: I realize that we have no evidence worth a damn on these bodies. Not that I’m blaming Forensics. That much time underwater’s gotta make stuff difficult, right? Worse if they’re all chopped like a...chopped salad.

FOX: Yes. Can we please stop using the word ‘chop’ in all its grammatical forms?

BULLOCK: I want to do something that isn’t going to fly well, and I need as much support as I can get.

GORDON: Whatever you need. Well, that doesn’t involve going after a traumatized minor with no evidence. *(sighs)*

BULLOCK: We’re having trouble with physical evidence. I’m so damn tired of doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. I say we ask for help.

GORDON: We are not talking to Penguin - excuse me, our Lord Mayor.

BULLOCK: I mean federal help. I know everyone’s gonna hate it, but just this once…

FOX: The crimes haven’t crossed state lines as far as we know.

BULLOCK: Yes. But. There’s a special branch of the FBI. The Behavior Analysis Unit. They take requests, though there can’t respond to all of them. I read up on ‘em. They look at the crime scene and the victims, right? And they have...they’re like cops and shrinks at the same time, they take in the data and they come up with a profile to help narrow down who to investigate. Like, “white male in his forties who chews tobacco and likes model trains”.

THOMPKINS: It might not be the best move to tell them that you suspect Jonathan. First, you might seem compromised emotionally. Because you are. Second, you do remember that we’re giving Jonathan that full ride to Gotham University, right? He more than qualified. You signed the paperwork. So did the Commissioner. We’ve notified Jonathan’s school principal.

FOX: I volunteered to be the one to actually hand it to him at his high school end-of-year ceremony, since with you it’d just be awkward. Under a different scholarship name and supposedly being purely merit-based, to protect his privacy.

BULLOCK: I think I repressed that memory. Okay, first, I call the feds. I have sufficient cause to go behind the Commissioner’s back. Don’t I, Lucius? You’re the one who memorized all the protocols in your first week.

FOX: According to a 1978 amendment to a regulation on coordinating with other branches of law enforcement, yes.

BULLOCK: Second, when - not if, when - they tell us we’re looking for a team involving a teenager who takes antipsychotics by the fistful and likes Japanese cartoons, we go hey, we’ve heard of one of those, but we didn’t want to tell you how to do your job.

GORDON: They’ll find out you were engaged to the only surviving victim.

THOMPKINS: Not including Jonathan himself.
BULLOCK: We could get Scottie to talk to them. She never did officially, but she talked to me about it. Said he just walked in, looked at her, stuttered a bit, asked his dad for quarters for the parking meter, and left again.

THOMPKINS: She talked to me too. Said Jonathan tried to argue, and seemed frightened and doubtful.

GORDON: Do you have Scottie’s number?

FOX: It would be probably be best if he wasn’t the one to contact her. However, this is presupposing that the BAU responds and also the BAU constructs a profile reminiscent of Jonathan Crane in the first place.

BULLOCK: If all those things happen, will you back me up? This sicko took two kids.

GORDON and THOMPKINS: Yes.

FOX: I will follow the more experienced in these matters.

****

The recording ends. Jonathan hasn’t touched his cocoa. He drinks it now. Spiced chocolate milk isn’t so bad. “On the bright side, I won the scholarship.”

Nygma’s tea goes down the wrong way, and he coughs before saying, “Yes, congratulations.”

“Do you want us to have Scottie disposed of? You met her, if briefly.” Cobblepot sets his cup and saucer on the table.

A familiar voice in Jonathan’s ear is telling him one answer, but...but fuck that shit. Helga’s made him truly believe he does not have to follow anyone’s footsteps. She says his lack of fear can bless him by preventing the senseless cruelty people do in its name. He wants her to be right, not the demon that just drowned him in fire.

“No. Don’t. She’s only potentially a threat and only barely. I’m not finishing Dad’s dirty work for him.” Plus Nygma would be uncomfortable doing so.

“Her breakup with Bullock was pretty ugly anyway,” Nygma says with something approaching cheer, and Jonathan knows he made the right decision. “She would probably lean on the fright and doubt aspects even if things ever got that far.”

“Fine. Now that you’re all caught up, Jonathan, I got the call that the FBI agents will arrive tomorrow morning, by private jet of all things. Just a courtesy notice to the Mayor.” Cobblepot strokes his chin. “Ideally, you would spend absolutely no time alone for four or five days, until after the FBI have been dealt with. Perfect alibi. But it would have to be among reputable people with no connection to us.”

“I have an idea.”

Nygma raises his eyebrows. “You do?”

“My psychiatrist, Dr. Au, also sees patients in a small, private, voluntary short-term inpatient psych clinic. She says if the situation becomes bad enough that I want to try a major medication overhaul, she recommends a few days there for adjustments under supervision, and I can pay on a sliding scale. She can secure me an excused absence from school. I’d be under constant watch.” Throat dry,
Jonathan takes a sip of water before continuing, “I’d been thinking about doing it anyway.”

“Good plan, isn’t that a good plan, Oswald. Excellent plan. Oswald, love, we need to get things in -
effectual, sometimes conjectural, but never perpetual, what am I? Oswald. Oswald.”

Cobblepot puts an arm around his agitated husband’s waist and kisses his temple. “Shh, yes, great
plan. He’ll be safe there, Ed, I’ve had Au checked out. She’s good. She quit Arkham in disgust.
Anyone can leave her place whenever they want.”

Nygma melts against Cobblepot and wraps his arms around him, breathing in whatever the
Mayor/King of Gotham puts in his hair to make it peaky. “I could have done better.”

Jonathan says, “Realistically? Not really.”

“He was right, curse, trash, crazier than Aunt Diana -”

Something about this hurts. Everything about this hurts. Jonathan hurts. “Motion, Edward! Your
riddle’s answer is motion!”

Time. Passes.

Then Nygma untangles himself, clears his throat, and straightens his tie. “Roger that. Let’s set things
in motion.”

Cobblepot squeezes Nygma on the shoulder. “Let’s. We can pitch in on the fees if you stick to the
program, Jonathan.”

(It isn’t until the following night, slipping into his little bunk at the clinic with the drowsiness of a
sedative slipping over him, that Jonathan realizes he’d never called Nygma by his first name before.)

****

Dr. Au looks Jonathan in the eye. “The amount of Lamotrigine I am going to put you on is enough
for two epileptics, and schizophrenics have died at less than half the amount of Olanzipine we’re
raising you to. I will make you a certificate as well as a signed portable note that you aren’t trying to
illegally stock a pharmacy or make the most questionable street drugs ever. You’ll have to monitor
your blood sugar and if you ever break out in a surprise rash, go to the emergency room immediately.
May deities have mercy on me for doing something so outlandish.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s your choice to do this.”

“Yes. I need control.”

****

Helga also stops by that clinic twice a week, and she does a thirty-minute check-in with Jonathan.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. Adjusting. I threw up once, but it might have been eating too much yogurt.”

“It’s been rough lately, I know.”

Jonathan nods. “I’ve gotten most of my homework done. Since this is over the weekend, I’m only
missing two days of school.”

“Good. Life’s more than doing well in school, you know.”

“They have coloring books here.”

She laughs a little. “They’re meant to be soothing. Do you feel relaxed?”

“Not really.”

“Do you want to go in detail?”

“No.” Then Jonathan says, truthfully and for the first time, “My dad saw a therapist for a few months after Mom died.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Would...would that therapy be considered a failure? He turned into a murderer anyway.”

Helga furrows her brow for a moment before answering, “Mental health and moral goodness operate on separate axes. The majority of people who do bad things have no mental illnesses. The mentally ill are more likely to be victims than villains, and if they are villains, they tend to also be victims to a severe degree. We latch onto this notion of crazy meaning evil because it simplifies the world. We don’t have to worry about nuance then. A doctor sets a broken bone in front of them, no matter whose it is. A therapist, a good therapist, heals what of a mind they can, no matter whose it is and no matter where it goes from there.”

“Okay.”

“It’s worth thinking about that he might have been worse without the therapy. The only way we could say whether therapy was a failure for him is to ask him.”

Fourteen dead by Jonathan’s direct, premeditated hand, but what if?

If it weren’t for Helga, Jonathan would not be friends with Harley. He wouldn’t know how to comfort Nygma and would probably not try. He would not...Nefyn, just not Nefyn at all, all the verbs that implied. He wouldn’t have enjoyed Selina’s visit. He would have ordered Scottie’s death. He would let his other self run amok. He wouldn’t feed crows.

“Thank you,” is all he says.

***

Soon after meeting her, Jonathan asked for Dr. Kali to be his emergency contact and medical proxy. Nygma was happy to find someone suitable for the task. Not only is she a competent doctor herself and a trusted member of Zsasz’s crew, but on paper she’s never committed any crimes.

Therefore, she’s the one who picks him up from his inpatient stay five days later and hands him a sealed envelope. She takes his small suitcase and sticks it in the trunk. “Read it in the car. It’s starting to rain.”

Jonathan gets in the passenger seat and reads. It says in neat Arial font:

THIS IS IMPERATIVE

Despite our shared interests
from hobbies to music,
I think our relationship has reached a new era.
I’m not in love with you and I’m not a good actor
and I think it is best for us both to be free.
It’s time for us to face the music,
of things we’ve done that may seem a blur,
and I hope you feel the same way too.
Have some space, not cause a row.

Let’s not see each other for awhile.

I will call you as soon as I feel safe. Emotionally.

Sorry to end things this way,
Cory

Nygma said that any mail from “Cory” is actually from him. This pseudo-breakup poem makes enough sense on a metaphorical level, but there’s got to be an additional riddle.

He looks at the line endings. They would explain the line breaks and why the word “music” was used twice. So Jonathan, on a hunch, concentrates on the last letter of each line of the verse: S C A R E C R O W

Not a lot of words ends with “c”, Jonathan supposes. He smirks.

“So did they dope you up good, blue jay?” says a voice from the backseat. Jonathan turns his head.

Kali gets into the driver’s seat and says with a conspiratorial wink, “You can sit in the back if you want. Our very own car buff installed a divider. I’ll listen to the radio.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jonathan’s fumbling with Nefyn’s needlessly complicated pants - it doesn’t help that Nefyn’s already unfairly won the race with Jonathan’s Ravenclaw pajama bottoms - when he hears the radio:

“Further details have just been released on the team of federal agents confirmed dead in what has been determined to be a tragic accidental explosion five hours ago…”

“Get your own stupid combination-lock pants off,” he hisses (to Nefyn’s amusement) and leans up for a heart-pounding kiss, because the Scarecrow isn’t here right now. There’s only Jonathan.

Chapter End Notes

This is when Inches and Miles begins. I estimate between 2-4 chapters are left in this fic.

It’s really important to me to have at least one of the lawful good characters be neurodivergent in some way, you know? Not just the criminals.
Jonathan disobeys the letter of the law and calls Nygma when two minor crises arise.

First, as it’s vital to appear squeaky clean right now, he’s taking the Zsasz Family rent in undocumented cash. This reduces the risk of people learning that he has dealings with them, but also means his financial support, and therefore his emancipation, might fall into question. Dad’s life insurance has run out.

Second, though the FBI has officially decided not to expend further resources on the case in Gotham, Jonathan gets a fishy phone call and a visit from two people he suspects are suspicious. They have Virginia license plates, as in the location of FBI headquarters, and nobody has ever used his driveway as a place for car repair before. He says he can’t help them.

Nygma is terse, almost curt during the call, but he’s busy and likely stressed. The new medication regime has reduced the nightmares. Jonathan’s started feeling occasional anxiety instead. Helga says this may be a result of allowing him to feel more emotion in general, but it’s unpleasant. Then the Scarecrow comes for him. He hears Nygma promise to fix both problems, doing his best to comfort him, then hanging up when it doesn’t work.

****

Devoting himself to acing his finals is soothing in its own way. On the last day of school, during the award ceremony, he claps for Harley winning a prize for an essay she wrote about the sexualization of women in media and how that affects girls’ self-esteem.

Then Lucius Fox takes the podium. A curious murmur runs through the audience. “The Ariel Award is named for the Shakespeare character of Ariel, from his play *The Tempest*. He has nothing to do with the mermaid.”

A quiet laugh runs through most of the audience.

Fox seems subtly pleased, though Jonathan has to really look for it. “In case you are unfamiliar, Shakespeare’s Ariel is a magical spirit who spends years either imprisoned or in servitude before his hard work and achievements are recognized, and he is set free to realize his potential. This award comes in the form of a scholarship to my undergraduate alma mater, a one-time only gift from a donor wishing to rename anonymous.”

*I bet,* Jonathan thinks.

“The recipient is not a senior, but his recovery from recent immense hardship deserves recognition. He has dealt with adversity. Tragedy. He’s come out the other side, and it would be a shame to let financial need keep him from greater success. It is my hope that he will take this as inspiration to do good.”

Fox looks right at Jonathan (though not at his eyes) and concludes, “It is my pleasure to present the Ariel Award to Jonathan Crane.”

Harley is providing about forty percent of the clapping as Jonathan makes his way to the stage. She also cups her hands around her mouth and yells, “YOU’RE TERRIFIC!”
Jonathan shakes Fox’s hand and whispers, “Nice story.” He is ninety percent sure that Fox is the one who came up with the name and explanation, as well as the barely-veiled heart-to-heart.

Fox whispers, “Remember it,” then hands him a scroll.

Fragile roll of paper clutched in hand, Jonathan takes the podium and says, “Um. I don’t actually think I deserve this.” That’s partly true. Another laugh, from some.

“But I appreciate it all the same.” If Nygma is the wizard Prospero, what would make him burn his books and leave their hidden island?

****

Records now show that Jonathan is doing a paid internship at City Hall over the summer. What he really does is a jumble. Gotham summers are more cloudy than sunny, often requiring long pants and sleeves. (Dad used to say it reminded him of home in that respect.) So he doesn’t want to do much outdoors. He goes to regular therapy and he starts attending art therapy class again. He reads up on psychology, psychiatry, anatomy, neurology, organic chemistry, and biochemistry. He goes into town and picks up a stack of discounted subtitled animes. He hurts rats for a good cause.

He’s not alone all the time. He corresponds with Harley, who’s having a lot of fun at drama camp. Selina drops by and gets his permission to bury some treasure in his yard for later, and she ends up spending two days with him recovering from a bad cold. Hard to sneak up on people when you sneeze a lot. He teaches Hayao, Satsuki, and Chihiro to say, “Run away!” It scares the hell out of Nefyn once, but he finds it funny after.

Despite being on the waifish side for a male assassin Nefyn’s strong enough to hold Jonathan up against a wall and off the floor for a prolonged period. That makes for a few good endings to the self-defense lessons that Jonathan’s continuing whenever Nefyn has time. Jonathan’s not always going to have surprise and psychosis on his side, after all. Nefyn’s contract as apprentice is almost up, and he vents to Jonathan about how hard it’s going to be to complete his final task. He won’t be endorsed as having successfully completed the apprenticeship until he recruits a replacement that fits Zsasz’s exacting standards. On top of that, the Zsaszettes and Kali have to agree unanimously.

Social interaction doesn’t fully fill the void. Jonathan eventually gets restless only working with rats, and Fear Serum 3 needs a human trial. He goes out as Scarecrow and acquires two of Ripper Boone’s gang in the same week. Let the GCPD suspect vigilantism. Let the media not weep over two human traffickers. He’s strong enough to dig a grave now, and the first man’s remains keep well in the fridge until his teammate joins him. He buries them in a remote corner of the enormous property of Mr. Brook’s brother-in-law, who is on vacation. Heh.

He misses Nygma.

****

One day, without warning, Nygma resigns from his day job. School starts and Jonathan is swept up in it, but he’s concerned about the real reasons.

Then he gets a call asking if he wants to spend a weekend at the mansion. Nygma says he was just overwhelmed trying to do too much at once. That he’s fine.

Jonathan’s not so sure. He seems tired and distracted even though he’s as pleased as Jonathan is to be working together again. He no longer wants to come over to Jonathan’s place, citing his home lab having superior equipment, and how it’s safer to consolidate scientific evidence in one place where it
can be destroyed in one go. He says all that too quickly.

Then Cobblepot resigns as well, supposedly to engage in a civil suit against Arkham for medical abuse and negligence. As if holding political office wouldn’t help with that.

****

Symptoms evolve further.

Jonathan explains over dinner. “It’s a new thing. My current medication regimen means I get this instead of the screaming fits. I prefer it. I’m aware of what’s going on, but it’s like I’m lying at the bottom of a hot bath and seeing everything through water. I can breathe, though, and things are quiet and far away. I’ve seen the Scarecrow once or twice, but it doesn’t like water. It’s a fire creature inside all the straw, so it can’t touch me, and I know it. If it happens, which it doesn’t every day, it only happens after I’ve taken my dinner meds, so it’s nice and regular and doesn’t interrupt school.”

Nygma raises his eyebrows. “Fascinating. I wonder…” Then he flinches at a noise from upstairs. Jonathan’s no longer allowed to wander the second floor, only to stick to his designated room.

Cobblepot grumbles, “I’ll go check on the plumbing again,” and leaves.

“What do you need me to do if it happens?” Nygma asks Jonathan.

“Just guide me to lie down somewhere. Dr. Kali’s monitored one of the episodes and we told Dr. Au. They’re harmless. I’ll be able to follow basic commands.”

“Your brain chemistry is different from everyone else’s.” Nygma resumes eating, but slowly.

“Yes, we’ve established this.”

“But I think there are more implications than we realize. In any case, tell me more about Formula 3 and the pros and cons.”

“Well, the two men I tried it on didn’t die within twenty or so minutes like with the previous formula, but I cut it short after forty minutes because I was worried about catastrophic damage elsewhere before the hearts failed…”

****

Late that night, Jonathan creeps downstairs to the lab.

_There are more implications than we realize._

He needs to know. He will never put someone through more than he’s been through, and he needs to know this. So he injects himself with the fear serum.

He waits for fifteen minutes, and nothing. Nothing? Nothing. He’s immune.

Nygma yells at him in the morning, tells him he could have died or relapsed. Jonathan just says he didn’t, and that’s this is a breakthrough.

“What if we could make an antidote to the fear serum from my blood? Maybe I mutated. Maybe that’s how I got better. If Alice Tetch’s blood could make people aggressive, maybe mine can take away fear.”

“Interesting.”
Nygma comes up with a lot more neurochemistry babble to go with Jonathan’s hypothesis, but the gist is the same. Jonathan has school, but Nygma no longer has City Hall and has been making himself scarce in the underworld as well. Caution, probably. He has time to fling himself into developing an antidote using the blood he asks Dr. Kali to draw from Jonathan. Jonathan supplies him with some rats. Upon request gives Nygma a list of the medications he’s on, and Nygma makes use of active ingredients from those as well.

Not long after, the two of them go on a field trip together to test the antidote on one of the orderlies who participated in Strange’s experiments on Cobblepot. They take him back to Jonathan’s place, since this might be upsetting for Cobblepot to have under his roof, and will transport all the samples back to the mansion in a cooler.

“It’s the circle of mad science,” Jonathan says when he takes his mask off. He doesn’t consider what they’re doing to be mad science, but he knows a lot of people would call it that.

“You find Scarecrow disturbing?” Jonathan dangles the mask from one hand. Burlap and twine. (Horror and death.)

“I...yes. A bit. Let’s get cracking, my friend.”

The antidote works. The screaming stops. The subject begs for forgiveness and mercy with perfect coherence, heart rate normal for his situation, pupils correctly dilated.

“Oswald screamed,” Nygma says quietly. No riddle this time. He holds his hand out for a scalpel. Jonathan passes it to him, then steps back to avoid the spatter.

Then they have ice cream and play Scrabble in Jonathan’s living room.

****

The exploration of the antidote continues. They notice that the rats injected with the antidote by itself, just to test whether it’s safe or not, lie down in contented, blissed-out limpaness. They have to be sparing with the antidote because Jonathan only has so much blood he can give at a time, no matter how small a component it is by volume.

“Are these rats high?” Jonathan can’t help but ask. He pokes one with a Q-tip. It squirms lazily. Jonathan tries petting it. It doesn’t mind.

This bears investigation, so on his own Nygma runs a few tests on people who think he’s giving them a sample of a new recreational drug. They feel warm, content, floaty. Two ask for more, though he declines. He pays them for their assistance and lets them go with no strings attached. It’s not a crime to consensually give someone a drug that hasn’t been banned and doesn’t harm them.

Jonathan, despite Nygma’s protests, tries it on himself. Again, nothing.

“Inject me,” Nygma suggests with a combination of exasperation and curiosity after he examines Jonathan to confirm the lack of change.

“Are you sure?”

Nygma just takes off his sweater and rolls up a sleeve. Since Nygma is meant to survive the experience and is someone Jonathan cares about, he goes through all the hygiene steps, finds the best vein, and taps for bubbles before sinking in the needle.

“Time it,” Nygma says. His lips quirk as Jonathan even gives him a band-aid. He uncurls his fist and
Jonathan keeps two fingers on it to monitor his pulse. It’s a practical touch, therefore okay. Jonathan also turns on the tape recorder so he doesn’t have to write notes at present.

It’s one minute and fifty-three seconds before Nygma sinks back in the chair, liquid-limbed and heart rate slowed to near-sleep. He blinks at Jonathan and sighs like he’s just gotten into a hot bath. “It’s so warm inside me. I understand what they meant now.”

“Can you describe it in detail for me?” Nygma hadn’t let Jonathan join in on the previous trials.

“It’s peace. It’s...at the risk of making you uncomfortable…” His voice has smoothed out as well.

“This is science.”

Nygma’s fingers curl around the ones Jonathan’s taking his pulse with. “It’s like the first few minutes after climax, and Oswald’s holding me and I forget, I forget how broken I am and everything I regret and hate about myself. Right now I know it exists, but I can’t touch it. It doesn’t hurt me.”

“You don’t forget but you forgive?”

“Yes! Perfect. Like that. I have nothing acute to be afraid of right now, but the baseline fear that runs my life - including the fear of being so open about my feelings - it can’t touch me.” Nygma leans forward, draping himself partway over the table. “You’re so clever, Jonathan.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m always afraid of telling you exactly how attached to you I’ve become. How much I enjoy spending time with you. There are words I don’t say because I know you have baggage. I think you can guess what they are.”

“I think I can.” Jonathan knows there’s nothing romantic or sexual about this, and he’s glad. Nygma just likes him more than usual.

“You’re the one this wonderful drug comes from. You gave it to me. This gift. You say you’re full of poison, but you’re also medicine for that poison!” Then Nygma tugs his wrist free. He melts against the table and strokes its surface. “Rats can laugh if they’re tickled, and they come back for more. It’s beyond our hearing. Too high-pitched. We’ll never hear them laugh. Would we hear them cry, if we had the equipment to lower the frequency? I like it when you laugh. You’re so serious.”

“I’ve been told.”

“You know that when I get angry at you it’s because I’m worried, right? I’ve had so few people understand me so well.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think I could get angry with you right now. No matter what you did.”

Jonathan considers the statement. He’s fairly sure that when Nygma is himself again he’ll understand that this is in the spirit of science. “Your fixation with green approaches ridiculous at times.”

“Whatever you say.” Nygma sinks to the floor to pat it gently. “Such a nice floor. Reliable floor. Spent ages choosing what tiles we’d use. Oswald was patient.”

Jonathan kneels on the floor and watches Nygma curl up under the table like a cat in the sun. “Your riddles are entertaining but sometimes exasperating.”
“Mmhm.”

“How do you feel now?”

“You’re the best. You’re so great.”

Okay, this is getting funny as well as weird. “I’m going to go mix up your record collection that you carefully alphabetize. I’m going to mix it up horribly. Randomly.”

Nygma lifts his head from his contented curl. “You mean you’ll go to another room?”

“I kinda have to.”

“Then I have to come with you. Don’t leave me. I wish it were feasible to have you live here with us. The least you can do is not abandon me during a visit.”

Minutes later, this results in Cobblepot standing mystified in the doorway of Nygma’s Bachelor Room, where Nygma keeps the records he isn’t planning on playing that day. Nygma is cuddling a pillow on the bed from his own apartment and telling Jonathan how much he wished they could have gone to high school together but how glad he is that he gets to be Jonathan’s guide now. Jonathan is not only mixing up the records but otherwise disrupting Nygma’s private space. Normally not even Cobblepot or Olga enter it. He’s turned a bunch of pictures upside down and removed items from desk drawers to scatter them on the desktop instead, as well as put the cuckoo clock in the closet.

“What have you done to my husband?” Cobblepot asks, cordially but with a sharp edge.

“Consensual drug trial, love,” Nygma assures him. “We made an antidote to fear from Jonathan’s blood. He’s the opposite of Alice Tetch. It’s magical. I don’t even need riddles to keep me safe.”

“You use riddles to keep you safe?” Cobblepot asks, sounding disturbed.

“Shhh, happy things.”

Jonathan takes a seat on the edge of the bed. Nygma beams at the proximity. “To simplify, it seems I mutated in order to recover from the intense fear I was in, and I still produce fear-counteracting enzymes of some sort. The medications help me manage my symptoms, but this may be the reason I regained lucidity in the first place. It counteracts the fear serum, but if you already aren’t afraid it seems like it does this instead.”

“I bet it’s in proportion to how afraid you were already. I wasn’t at all. Jonathan can be scary, but I’m only afraid for him, not of him. I want to hug him but he doesn’t want a hug, Oswald. Come hug me? I’ll close my eyes and pretend.”

Cobblepot rolls his eyes but doesn’t appear angry. He limps over to grant Nygma’s request. Nygma closes his eyes and clings. “I’d hug you like this all the time, Jonathan. Every time I adjust my glasses when I don’t need to when I’m with you, it’s because I want to hug you. You’re like my son. I just want to be the father neither of us got.”

“I’m flattered,” Jonathan replies, trying to sound calm.

“I’m sleepy, though.”

Nygma takes a three-hour nap. Cobblepot joins Jonathan for his afternoon tea.

“Dad used to make me tea and tiny sandwiches after school. Even after he started making me help
him murder people.” Jonathan calls what his father did murder because it was to selfish ends. No matter what he said about fear being a disease he wanted to rid the world from, he really just wanted to cure himself and his son of fear, to stop being haunted by his failure. What Jonathan does is to benefit humanity in the long run.

“And none shall give me more mixed feelings than my father’s love,” Cobblepot sings.

“I like the caviar blinis,” Jonathan tells Olga as she clears away the plates.

“Yes, I see you eat so many as two,” she says with a sort of fond sarcasm.

While they continue to wait, Cobblepot tells Jonathan a censored version of how the criminal empire and the lawsuit on Arkham are proceeding, and Jonathan tells him about school and being Zsasz’s landlord. The latter is going more smoothly than one might think, mostly because Kali and Yoona are the ones who deal with regular family life while Zsasz makes big decisions and leads big jobs. Jonathan gathers that Leonara is his right hand woman when it comes to coordinating and executing jobs, and Candy takes point on dealing with their allies and their rivals. He’s sworn not to share details of their private lives, though, so he just tells Cobblepot that Zsasz is good at delegation within his crew.

Nygma comes downstairs looking dazed but otherwise fine. “I hope you didn’t find that off-putting, Jonathan. Don’t take it as all necessarily accurate in, um, intensity.”

“All part of the trial. Do you feel any negative effects?”

Cobblepot adds, “Do you want anything to eat? Dinner’s not until eight tonight. I have a phone call to make at seven.”

“No and no,” Nygma says. He lies down on the couch and puts his head on his husband’s lap. “Still a bit touchy-feely.”

“That’s fine, Ed.” Cobblepot takes the glasses from his face and places them on the coffee table, nicely folded. He lightly combs his fingers through Nygma’s hair. Jonathan’s gotten used to their gestures of casual intimacy and they bother him less now.

“I’ll write up my subjective experiences as soon as I have a handle on them,” Nygma says. “It’ll be difficult to reduce it to numbers or simple descriptions. Science is about measuring and quantifying, but emotions are intangible.”

“Just do what you can,” Cobblepot says.

“This didn’t happen with the previous trials. I would say the most significant variable is that you and I aren’t strangers, Jonathan. What do you think?”

“That makes sense,” Jonathan says. These chairs are too cushy for him. He imagines himself sinking into excessive softness. “You expressed gratitude that I was the one who injected you, and you were fixated on me.”

“I’m not being a guinea pig for anything,” Cobblepot says firmly.

“I wouldn’t ask you to. I wish we knew someone we could trust who would agree to receiving these doses of…”

“Paper Crane,” Jonathan interrupts with sudden inspiration.
Nygma turns his head. “Excuse me?”

“It feels odd to keep calling it the fear antidote when we’re not using it for that. Its primary ingredient is made from me, right? Cranes are a symbol of peace, and there’s a Japanese folk belief that if you fold one thousand paper cranes, you get to make a wish.”

“Very well. The best volunteer for trying Paper Crane would agree to receiving injections from multiple people - spaced out, of course - with whom they have close but entirely different relationships, as well as from someone they don’t know well.”

At the very same time, to both their surprise, Nygma and Jonathan say, “Zsasz’s apprentice.”

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Turns out that Nygma has already been to Casa del Zsasz, as a custom-made rubber mat in the foyer names the house. Zsasz agreed that since Jonathan’s already mixed up with them, it’s fine to let him enter the main residence.

Nefyn’s already in the elaborate medbay and Dr. Kali’s prepared everything except the Paper Crane itself. “You’re absolutely sure it’s safe?” she asks.

“I’ve tried it,” Nygma says, and she nods with satisfaction.

Despite all the Zsasz Family knowing, Jonathan still doesn’t want Nygma to know his relationship with Nefyn. He’s not worried about disapproval. It’s that every time he pictures himself telling Nygma that he’s sexually active, he remembers how badly Nygma reacted to Jonathan preemptively declining sex with him, and how in light of their current mentor-protege connection how icky that was in hindsight. And saying “boyfriend” would be far too inaccurate.

So they’re letting Nygma assume Jonathan knows Nefyn from rental negotiations. Jonathan looks at him dispassionately during the conversation.

Zsasz strides in with arms folded. “He’s still our puppy, and while he is he can’t accept money from anyone. Puppies are with us to learn and not exploit our brand for their own gain.”

Nygma pulls an envelope from his pocket. “In here is a list of contacts and useful information about them from the King of Gotham’s very own files that will make recruiting the next apprentice considerably easier. This is for Nefyn’s use and Nefyn’s use only. Is this acceptable to all? Others who participate will be compensated in a more traditional fashion.”

“I’m restraining myself from making grabby hands, Mr. Nygma,” Nefyn says. Everyone else is onboard.

Everyone present knows at least the basics of Paper Crane as currently understood, and Zsasz demanded to get to go first,

“You know how to do this properly, right?” Nygma asks.

Zsasz gives him a withering look. “You think Butch ever got an embolism on my watch?”

“That’s not the most comforting comparison, sir,” Nefyn drawls, shrugging off his navy flannel shirt so he’s just in his cerulean tee, arms bared.

Kali says, “Based on what Edward told us, you might ask for physical contact. Usually someone under the influence of drugs is not considered able to truly consent. What boundaries do you want to
“Blanket consent. I trust Mr. Zsasz’s judgment,” Nefyn says.

“I’m frightened by that,” Nygma comments dryly. Zsasz just smirks.

Zsasz himself is wearing short sleeves, which he only does at home, and the tally marks are too many to count at a glance. He’s meticulous with the injection. It’s one minute and fifteen seconds before Nefyn goes dreamy, physical and behavioral results much like Nygma’s. His answers show a similar state of mind, too. But he answers the questions in as brief a manner as possible, eyes only for Zsasz, and eventually he makes a frustrated sound and grabs Zsasz’s nearest hand to start rubbing his cheek against it.

“Use your words, puppy,” Zsasz says, amused. He runs a thumb from his other hand along Nefyn’s jawline and Nefyn leans into it, closing his eyes.

“I’m equal parts impressed and worried,” Kali says. “What about the part where he won’t get upset with you?”

“I owe him everything.” Nefyn gets out of the chair and buries his face in Zsasz’s shoulder. “You smell like gunpowder and copper. Also butter.”

Zsasz turns it into a loose hug. “I had a croissant earlier.”

“Mm, good choice. Do we have to stay here where people can see us? Victor?”

There’s a yearning to Nefyn’s voice, plus the significance of using Zsasz’s first name, that makes Jonathan clear his throat and say, “Mr. Zsasz can probably report the data back to us later. Since Mr. Nygma and I have additional plans.” Those plans being to watch classic Doctor Who serials back at the mansion, but they don’t need to know that.

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Nefyn calls Jonathan two days later.

“There’s something important I need to tell you. Having you and Nygma and Dr. Kali take turns will confirm it, but you need to know something I’m almost sure about. Because Nygma said his ability to feel negative emotion towards you was suppressed and he had an exaggerated level of affection for you.”

“Why does that mean you have to call me?”

“He probably lied out of worry that he’d upset you. I don’t believe in lying to people about how you feel about them. Holding back, sometimes, but not outright lying. I’ve always told you how I’ve felt. Just less, uh, effusively, than I would with others.”

“Elaborate.”

“I lost the negative emotions, yes, but I didn’t have an exaggerated level of affection for Mr. Zsasz. I had exactly the same amount of affection with no reservations, plus a powerful desire to tell him right then. If that was the case with Nygma, reconsider what he said.”

Jonathan can be scary, but I’m only afraid for him, not of him.

“...Oh.”
You know that when I get angry at you it’s because I’m worried, right? I’ve had so few people understand me so well.

“Jonathan? You okay?”

I’m always afraid of telling you exactly how attached to you I’ve become. How much I enjoy spending time with you. There are words I don’t say because I know you have baggage. I think you can guess what they are.

“Nefyn, I feel scared, stupid, and strangely happy. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

You’re like my son. I just want to be the father neither of us got.

Nygma doesn't like him. He loves him.

Chapter End Notes

If you've read "Inches and Miles", you will know that there are two different endings. The next two chapters of this fic will work the same way and be from the same timelines, but from Jonathan's point of view. If you haven't read it, don't worry, just know that you're getting a glimpse of what happens to Jonathan in two different timelines: one where he and Ed get caught after all, and one where they don't.
Alternate Ending 1

Chapter Notes

While this fic can be read independently from "Inches and Miles", the second part of this chapter will have more context and emotional resonance if you have read it. I've done my best to do enough recapping to keep it comprehensible to novices without irritating veterans. Feel free to ask questions if you don't want to read an entire other story.

If you are unfamiliar with Criminal Minds, especially if you also haven’t read “Inches and Miles”, this is a 46-second clip that shows Dr. Spencer Reid being like a more appreciated version of S1 Ed.

Let's assume the mere presence of Gotham characters warps the legal system, even in crossovers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hello! Did someone tell you about the new puppy being accepted? Sorry I haven’t been texting.” It’s only been two days. Nefyn’s been busy getting Amethyst “Thistle” Smith settled and briefed in the ways of the apprenticeship. He’s the first graduated puppy to stay - it helps that Teeth is now living at the old Crane house and freed up space - and wants to be a good resource for his replacement. He’s been reveling in calling Victor Zsasz by his first name and everyone calling him by his real name. And glorying in a crisp stack of business cards that say KNIFEPOINT in beautiful glossy ultramarine.

“No. I need you.”

“You okay?” It’s Sunday afternoon, and Nefyn has more control over his schedule now, but this doesn’t sound like a come-hither sort of flirty call.

“I need you here. But drive safe and park secretly a ways away. No fast or furious.”

That’s such a Jonathan thing to say. When Nefyn makes it to Jonathan's front door and knocks, Jonathan opens it a crack and asks, “Were you followed?”

“No.”

Jonathan lets him in. He’s a serious guy, but this is to the point of expressionless. “Selina called me. She owed me a favor, wanted to repay it when she still could.”

“Huh?”

“Nygma and Cobblepot have been arrested. It’ll be less than a day before the cops come for me, for the stuff Nygma and I did together that I’ve never been specific about in order to give you deniability.” His words aren’t slow, but his voice is flat as his face.

Nefyn no longer remembers what he was being punished for the first time his uncle stripped off his shirt and held him against a wall so his chain-smoking aunt could press a lit cigarette to his bare chest. He remembers that the pain wasn’t the worst part. It was the separate feeling of a twisted,
bizarre wrongness to the sensation. Woozy. A world distorted.

That’s what he feels in his stomach now. It takes tremendous effort not to grab Jonathan and squeeze him tight. “Then let’s get you packed. Pack light. Only your meds and some clothes and like maybe one little keepsake you’d just die without. I can’t go with you forever, but Victor will understand me taking a few days off. I have a friend in Illinois who can take care of you from there. Do you need me to burn anything?”

One corner of Jonathan’s mouth goes up a fraction, but his statement sounds like an apology. “I have enough medication for sixteen days…”

“Good! You’re on all generics, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find -”

“I wouldn’t be able to get any more while on the run. I don’t just need a prescription. I need my psychiatrist explaining yet again why I need such massive dosages. Robbing a pharmacy would just make things worse. The FBI would know to look for that.”

Nefyn feels like he’s going to throw up. Some of his family have done time, but they’re not like Jonathan. Cranes and crows have sharp beaks but hollow bones. “What are you going to do?”

“Everything incriminating has either been moved to Nygma and Cobblepot’s mansion or is something I don’t care about being found. If it’s not too much, I’d…” finally Jonathan’s voice cracks, and he looks at the floor and it doesn’t matter how old his soul is or what he’s done. He’s a kid. Nefyn isn’t sure if he’s in love with Jonathan, not that it matters, but he knows he loves Jonathan every bit as much as he loves the people he lives with. “I’d like some company until they come. You can climb out the window and slip away when we hear the cars.”

“There’s no law against having a booty call with your secretly criminal fuck buddy who never told you a thing. Sort of tasteless of you, Jonathan, inviting innocent lil’ me over without telling me the context.” Nefyn tries to keep his voice light, but he feels weighed down.

“You’re more than a fuck buddy. You know that. I appreciate the thought, but I don’t want to be worrying about you being questioned on top of everything.” Jonathan rubs his face with his hands. “I’m going to write a letter to my friend Harley, which I would like you to deliver, if that’s all right…”

“Of course.”

“She genuinely didn’t know about any of this. She’s going to cry. But I think you’re good with crying people.”


“I’d like you to take care of my stuff for me, however long I’m gone. You can sell stuff or use it up or whatever. If Selina wants things, that’s fine, she can have them. She buried treasure in my yard. Have the rent go into my savings account so I can use it when I get out, whenever that’ll be. I doubt I’ll get sentenced to life, what with the circumstances and since I’ll plead guilty.” Jonathan symbolically hands Nefyn a set of keys to the house, shed, and barn. “I need some stationery.”

Nefyn needs something to do while Jonathan’s writing his letter, to avoid clawing at the wallpaper, so he makes Jonathan a peanut butter and banana sandwich with a drizzle of honey on multigrain bread. He brings it to Jonathan accompanied by a glass of whole milk. It’s Jonathan’s favorite quick meal. Jonathan thanks him, eats it, and takes some pills.
“I usually take these meds later, but it’s okay to take them now. There’s going to be a lot of activity soon,” Jonathan says after his last swallow. He gets up to put the plate and glass in the sink.

“Ap pap pap. Put that down.” Nefyn puts the sealed envelope in his jacket pocket and zips that pocket shut. He’s glad he put on that jacket to come here. “This is no time for dishes. New puppy will tidy your house after you go away. What do you want to do now?”

Jonathan looks up at him. “Being a little sore can be fun usually, but not ideal when I’ll be stressed.”

“On top, check. What else?”

“I want a bunch of hickeys and bites under my clothes to remember you by.”

“Fine, but I’ll also write and call and visit as much as I can, asshole.”

This startles a hiccup of a laugh of Jonathan. “And I want to try doing two things I know you’re into and that I’ve never tried.”

So after lengthy, bitey foreplay, Nefyn ends up on his back with his wrists bound together above his head and to the bedframe with two of Jonathan’s belts. He could easily get out of it, and that’s fine. After all his training, only Yoona’s bondage still stumps him, though he did once have to dislocate a thumb to get out of Victor’s knots during a timed test. Jonathan would get anxious putting Nefyn at a real disadvantage. Nefyn reassured him that he could also kill Jonathan in multiple ways with his free legs and feet.

Jonathan shows a different kind of restraint. He’s quieter than usual, though he’s never been loud. He keeps close. Kisses frequently and deeply. Afterwards, they get up for Jonathan to use the toilet and shower, and Nefyn to dig out Jonathan’s grandmother’s alcohol stash and dampen his sorrows.

Then they try the second thing. Jonathan’s always been mildly intimidated by spooning. Doing it clothed makes it less intensely intimate.

“This okay?” Nefyn asks. He kisses the back of his neck.

“It’s okay,” Jonathan murmurs. “It helps if I think of it as a gift or something ceremonial.”

Nefyn’s not a good singer, but Jonathan already knows the song. It doesn’t matter that his voice is wavering. "From my ten floor tenement where once our bodies lay, how I long to hear you say: ‘No they’ll never catch me now, no they’ll never catch me, no they cannot catch me now. We will escape somehow…’”

Jonathan turns to face him and they rearrange themselves. He traces the little circular scars with his fingertips. A different song, a slightly better voice but not great. ”And I, seventeen and terminally fey, I wrote it down and threw away. Never gave a thought to what I’d pay. And you…you tattered me, you tethered me to you, the things I would and things I wouldn’t do. To tell the truth I never had a clue.”

“You tweaked the lyrics,” Nefyn says around the lump in his throat.

“Personalized.”

Nefyn strokes his hair, and Jonathan falls into a light sleep that he doesn’t disturb. He stays awake. He is quite certain Jonathan killed a bunch of people, and that they may or may not have deserved it. Just like Nefyn plans to for a living. He doesn’t believe justice is more than a buzzword. That makes him a bad person by societal standards. He does believe in love, both as in affection and as in
compassion, more than one might think. That makes him a complicated person.

Some time later, they hear a siren. Jonathan’s (so blue) eyes open immediately, and he kisses Nefyn and whispers, “Thank you for everything.”

Instead of climbing down from the window, Nefyn clambers onto the roof unseen. He watches Jonathan open the front door. Two FBI agents in vests and Captain Harvey Bullock are training guns on him.

Jonathan puts his hands up before anyone tells him to. So fake-innocently it comes out the other end as sarcastic, he says, “You must be feeling victoriously vindicated, Captain Bullock, but please don’t shoot me after you and your partner shot my father and all. At least not in front of these nice people from Virginia.”

****FIVE YEARS LATER****

Twenty-two-year-old Jonathan Crane is escorted to Kintsugi Laboratories by just one armed guard these days. Despite the nature of his crimes, Jonathan has behaved with perfect decorum since his surrender to the police. Over time he has been treated as less and less of a risk. He gets to wear street clothes and a lab coat while he works with the pharmacologists, neurologists, and biochemists, though the blinking tracker around one ankle remains a reminder of his status. He will be sent back to the institution at five PM.

He tilts his head, birdlike, when he spots the visitor sitting at the end of the conference table. This isn’t the first time they’ve interacted, but it’s the first time they’ve been alone together. “Dr. Reid?”

Dr. Spencer Reid was with the FBI until his second cousin Edward Nygma chose to abduct him and fake his death rather than leave him to die with the other agents he conspired to murder. Ed’s decision to keep him chained and locked in a spare room was wrong, and his attachment to Spencer in general unhealthy in how he expressed it, but it was born of some of the strongest love the troubled man has ever shown. One of the other two examples is standing in front of Spencer.

“Yes, it’s me. Your team said we could chat for a few minutes and that I could observe some of your work. Ed would love to as well, but he can’t cross state lines, so he wants me to report back in detail. I’m mainly in town to present a paper at a conference. I figure this is a good opportunity along the way.” Spencer shattered his own ankle in order to escape the chains and summon his former colleagues to rescue him. Now the ankle is permanently warped and often painful, sometimes requiring a brace. He’s switched to academia, as makes sense for someone with three doctorates. His Ph.D. in chemistry is vibrating with excitement at the moment.

“No, neither of us like shaking hands. Mr. Nygma told me that about you in one of his letters. How is he? He isn’t always honest with me. He doesn’t want me to worry. He puts on a happy voice when we get to talk on the phone.”

“Not bad. He’s still attending court-mandated therapy like he should. He’s started writing crossword puzzles and publishing them. It helps scratch the riddle itch.” It took a massive amount of work and string-pulling having Ed put under house arrest with Spencer as primary guardian rather than the institution Oswald is in full-time. The deciding factor was that Ed had protected Spencer from his husband when push came to shove.
He also likes having Ed around. He doesn’t know how much of that forgiveness stems from back when Ed injected him with Paper Crane. The effects were supposed to have worn off quickly, but Spencer is an undiagnosed but likely autism-spectrum genius with a family history of schizophrenia and a Narcotics Anonymous medallion he clutches in his fist on a bad night. Nothing about his brain is normal, either. On the other hand, their childhood friendship and the time they spent together one summer followed by long correspondence runs deep. Spencer’s occasional lover tells him not to overthink it.

(He doesn’t care if it’s obstruction of justice; he is grateful no samples of the fear serum have been found. Nobody should have such a thing. He thinks Olga had instructions to carry out before she fell off the map.)

Jonathan nods. “He didn’t lie, then. How’s Mr. Cobblepot? He and I write sometimes, but not as often.”

“As well as one could expect. They spent Valentine’s Day together. Ed fussed about his accessories for over an hour beforehand.” It took ages for Oswald to fully forgive his husband for listening to Spencer and putting the gun down in the FBI standoff. Ed is a day patient at the same institution, and now they make full use of spousal privileges.

Jonathan takes a seat. “We’ve almost gotten to an oral form of a Paper Crane derivative that can help with PTSD and anxiety disorders but doesn’t change your feelings towards the person who gave it to you - which is, like, totally rife with potential for emotional abuse.”

“It is,” Spencer says quietly before switching gears. “How do you feel about your parole hearing coming up? Ed says you’ve been told your chances are good, that you’re widely considered stable on your current treatment and able to contribute to society. Do you know what you’re going to do if it works out?”

Jonathan’s spent all this time away from Gotham in order to be near the researchers and in a place that’s not Arkham, which is thankfully now undergoing a massive overhaul due to testimonies from Ed, Oswald, and other individuals such as Barbara Kean. However, his parole will be in Gotham, under the eyes of the GCPD. Jonathan will never be like other people. He doesn’t want or need to be. What matters is that the delusions that motivated him to murder are no longer evident and have been reasoned through as well as medicated milder. He’d never enjoyed killing for its own sake. As long as he follows his treatment, the Scarecrow will be a monster under the bed rather than demon on his shoulder. Spencer has wished redemption for dozens of people he’s caught. Jonathan was indirectly his last one, and it would heal a part of Spencer to see him succeed.

“I have been told that, yes.” Jonathan takes off his glasses to wipe them. He was diagnosed with myopia and astigmatism last year. “K-Labs promises to smooth my way into Gotham University in exchange for working with them during summers and pledging to get at least a Master’s in a relevant field. More personally, I have a friend who goes to Gotham U and says she’ll give me a chance to redeem myself if the government does. Also I’ve got an It’s Complicated friend back there. He’s visited and we talk on the phone, but it’s been a long time wanting more. I’m not worried about my reputation much. Few back there will care about what I did. There’s always some fresh wacky bloodbath grabbing people’s attention. Which would be a good name for a punk band: Fresh Wacky Bloodbath.”

“Rates of recidivism are far lower in parolees who have concrete plans and a support network in place,” Spencer says. His old self would tell the exact percentage, but he’s learned how to suppress that around everyone except Ed.

“Mm. Do you and Mr. Nygma hug?”
“Yes.”

“I know he wanted to hug me, but I never felt comfortable.”

“I’m sure he understood.”

“Hug him for me. Tell him I’ll visit the day it's legal.”

Spencer looks at Jonathan, interprets his body language. “Would you like me to hug you for him as well? We do have the same mitochondrial DNA, after all.” Passed unchanging from mother to child, they got it from their mothers, who got it from their mothers, who got it from the same woman.

Jonathan bites his lip and nods. During the hug, he says, “Science is all about quantifying things, but feelings are intangible.”

That’s not meant for Spencer, he can tell. The rest of the research team, as they file in, are polite enough not to take their seats until Jonathan lets go.

Chapter End Notes

To borrow the Iron Man meme, I figure if you are a high school student who can do most of the work making revolutionary pharmaceuticals IN A BARN! WITH A BOX OF SCRAPS! - a lot of people will be willing to go easy on you and let you out after a relative slap on the wrist so you can get your higher education and become even more useful. Consider all the scientists whose war crimes were pardoned after WWII because governments wanted them. None of them even had miraculous Chill Pill blood and Blasé Brain as far as I know.

Kintsugi/kintsukuroi is the craft of mending broken ceramics with shiny metallic lacquer in order to seal the cracks without trying to hide them. The idea for the lab's name is to approach broken minds and ill bodies the same way. Let's have some noble, ethical scientists for balance.

This Jonathan really is mostly reformed. Like Dr. Kali, he'll not report the activities of people he cares about, but he'll do no harm himself. He has other ways to pursue his goals now.

Didn't like this ending? Don't worry, there's another one coming. Also I will have a collection of scraps from both timelines to serve as epilogue.
Ed called and arranged to pick up Jonathan on Saturday morning. He didn’t have time to fetch him yesterday evening. A certain development has started taking up seventy percent of his time. The rest has been his duties as co-monarch of Gotham’s underworld and trying to be a decent husband to Oswald. Jonathan simply hasn’t fit during that adjustment period. But now things have stabilized, and it’s time to start being honest with one of the three most important people in his life.

When he gets to Jonathan’s door, though, it takes a long time for him to answer. Ed has a spare set of keys but they’re only for emergencies. He respects the young man’s privacy, so he will give him up to five minutes before using them. He looks at his watch so he’ll be accurate.

Four minutes and twenty-seven seconds earlier, Jonathan opens the door. He’s dressed in a cozy brown robe, sweatpants, and black socks. He’s also got mussed hair and a livid hickey at the base of his neck. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Nygma, I overslept.”

Ed stands there for a moment, processing. Jonathan is a seventeen-year-old who is objectively not unattractive, though of course not of interest to Ed in that way for myriad reasons. There’s nothing dubious or unhealthy about Jonathan engaging in such activities consensually.

It’s a little startling, though, when Nefyn Pontiac appears in one of Jonathan’s oversize hoodies - more form-fitting on him - and puts an arm around his shoulders. “I claim full responsibility. He told me several times that he had to get up to go to the mansion in the morning. I’m a terrible influence on this boy.”

“I have a higher body count than you,” Jonathan replies, poking him in the chest. It’s an odd situation, but it’s heartening to see him so playful.

“Give me time, blue jay. You’ve slowed down and I’m just getting started. Go get dressed. I’ll make you toast and entertain your ride.”

Ed ends up sitting at the kitchen table while Nefyn makes breakfast for himself and Jonathan. This includes masala chai for himself. “Want any? I keep a stash here. Kali made some to comfort me when I had a flashback once and I got addicted.”

“Some other time. How long has this been going on?”

Nefyn finds utensils while hardly looking at drawers, suggesting he’s spent a lot of time in this kitchen. “Me and Jonathan? Jonathan’s aromantic and I have other partners, but we’ve been friends who sleep together since last January.”

“So you lied to me when you were a Paper Crane test subject.”
“He asked me to. I told him truthful data. You weren’t honest with him about your Paper Crane experience either, sir.” The toaster pings.

Ed has nothing to say to that, and as Jonathan eats efficiently as possible he listens to Nefyn talk about how he just did his first paying job as Knifepoint the day before yesterday. Last night was a celebration. It’s useful knowing what’s going on in the Zsasz household, so he asks a few leading questions about the new apprentice. Amethyst “Thistle” Smith has a nightmarish name for lispers. Ed learns that she’s nineteen and genuinely likes dumpster diving and wears lots of purple at home, or at least Nefyn has been told it’s purple. Nefyn is protectively tight-lipped about the rest. It’s especially noticeable in someone who freely announces things like being a casual service sub and having a visceral aversion to the smell of cigarette smoke that he’s learned to push through when needed.

“I still turn my head when I hear ‘puppy’,” Nefyn says, spreading jam over his toast and taking his first bite. It’s the prickly pear jam made by Olga’s niece in New Mexico that’s been arriving in excess. “I call her Thistle. Teeth calls her that too. I will not speculate on his reasons.”

“It’s probably because he lives at my old house rather than the main house, and is now removed from home dynamics,” Jonathan says with utmost seriousness.

“I’m sure that has to be what it is. He only gave her flowers and chocolates the second time he visited to make her feel welcome, right?” Impish chai drinking might have limited utility in an assassin, but one never knew.

When it comes time to leave, Nefyn kisses Jonathan goodbye and insists on loading Jonathan’s miniscule overnight bag into the car. As soon as they’ve left Jonathan’s driveway, he says, “You were vague and I didn’t want to ask in front of Nefyn. What’s special about this time?”

Ed takes a deep breath. He’s used this riddle before, but he can’t think of a better one for the revelation. “What plant grows deep with branches high, but needs blood or bond, not the sun in the sky?”

“Please just tell me.”

_Eyes on the road._ “You know how Oswald and I killed a bunch of FBI agents in a bomb blast? Uh, you see, I was so busy setting that up that I didn’t look at the actual list of names until very late in the process.” Ed licks his dry lips. “Do you remember the second cousin I mentioned to you, the childhood friend I eventually lost track of but remembered fondly? He joined the FBI some years ago. The Behavioral Analysis Unit, to be precise. I should have connected the dots earlier but I was under a lot of pressure. I was between a stone and an unyielding location and there wasn’t a lot of time…”

Jonathan stares at him. “Is this going where I think it’s going?”

“If you interrupt me again I’m going to have a panic attack before I get all of it out. Sorry to be curt, but it’s true. So, so, there was an employee who’d behaved abominably recently, and he was about the same build as my cousin, there was a last-minute swap. I couldn’t. Jonathan, I love this man. He’s the closest thing to a brother I’ve ever had. You know the suite on the second floor with only one, very high window?”

“You’ve been keeping a live federal agent in that room,” Jonathan says, as if his cousin’s a pet alligator.

“It’s complicated.”
“I have always tried to be respectful with you, Mr. Nygma, including your dislike of profanity. But I have six words to get out of my system before I can go back to normal.” Jonathan ticks them off his fingers. “What. The. Fuck. Were. You. Thinking.”

Ed’s insides are all twisted into knots. “I know, I know. I put myself, Oswald, and you all at risk. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just couldn’t let him die. Don’t you have anyone in your life you’d go to great lengths to save, at even greater risk?”

Jonathan stares straight ahead for at least a minute, where the road meets its next bend. The silence is agony. Then he says, “Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What’s happening now?”

The knots don’t completely uncurl, but they loosen. “After...measures...he seems to have come around to my way of thinking. Nothing so harsh or radical as what Zsasz would do. I love him, and he already loved me, it was just slowly becoming his world, playing on his existing mental health issues, and showing him my new path is better.”

“You do know what that’s called,” Jonathan says quietly, dispassionately.

Ed has to continue despite that stab in his heart. He may be like a father to Jonathan, but he is not like Gerald Crane, he can’t be. “I’ve tested him. He’s killed for me twice now. The first time I forced the issue by letting the subject attack him, and he bashed the man’s head in with a book and got manic and joyful after and said he felt much better now. He’d killed before, but with a gun at a distance when he or someone else was in life-threatening danger. He knew that I would only let him get hurt a bit and wouldn’t let him be killed, but he did it anyway and loved it. Soon after that I presented him with another person who’d hurt me, tied down this time, and gave him a Swiss Army knife. He’s not into torture, but he did a beautiful slit of the carotid artery while reciting a poem. Now he likes quoting books almost as he likes analyzing people’s minds. He didn’t used to do the book-quoting, simply piped up with statistics and facts like I do. I couldn’t spend all my time with him, and otherwise he only had the occasional Oswald visit and the books I gave him for company for much of his days and nights.”

“Ah,” comes the ambiguous syllable.

“Since then he hasn’t made an effort to dissuade us from anything. In fact he’s provided some valuable insights. We’re now allowing him out of the room if he’s closely supervised, and when he’s in the room we lock him in but don’t chain him anymore. I think he’s ready to roam around the house freely on his own and sleep in a cozier room with a lower window, but Oswald insists that we use Paper Crane to strengthen our bond and also check to see what his real feelings towards me are. We used it on him once already, but he was confused and frightened at the start so he didn’t get the full effect.” Ed stops at a stop sign even though they’re the only ones on the still-rural road. A traffic cop materializing and noticing him with Jonathan would be trouble he doesn’t want on top of everything else.

Jonathan fiddles with his seatbelt. “Don’t you have someone on your payroll who can make a sort of truth perfume?”

“How’d you find that out?”

“Selina. She said she’s a friend of hers.”
Ed needs to have a chat with Ms. Kyle about discretion. Jonathan is good at keeping secrets, but it’s the principle of the thing. “Yes, but she’s very possessive of it and won’t simply hand it over for us to use. It’s possible that nobody else would be able to use it regardless, for complex reasons. I don’t want anyone but Oswald, Olga, and you to know about Spencer for now.”

“Your second cousin is named Spencer.”

“Yes. Dr. Spencer Reid, Ph.D. I think he’ll like you. He understands why you did what you did now. He’s unenthusiastic about your crimes, but after I explained the children being terminally ill and his own observations that their corpses showed their killer being remorseful, he’s prepared to appreciate you as a person rather than being too dismayed to try.”

Jonathan stretches and yawns, a relaxed gesture. For once, Ed is glad that Jonathan has blunted emotions that make him much less bothered by things. “I’m prepared to appreciate him as a person rather than being too dismayed to try. Besides, we could use the additional data.”

“Wonderful. There’s something he wants to ask of you, too.”

“I’d like to listen to music for the rest of the drive while I process all this,” Jonathan says. Ed nods and turns to a classical radio station. Additional words would be overwhelming right now.

When they get to the mansion and walk up the stairs, Ed says, “He’s still a bit off-kilter after all the changes.”

“And being held prisoner and isolated while all his other loved ones think he’s dead,” Jonathan says, but without judgment. Jonathan is pragmatic. Ed finds it encouraging that Jonathan said other loved ones.

The day after Ed undid the manacle around Spencer’s ankle, he installed a bolt lock on the other side of the door as well as the regular lock so that Spencer can roam around the suite without Oswald worrying too much. The high window doesn’t open and Spencer is no longer desperate enough to try to smash it. He undoes the bolt.

Spencer can read 20,000 words per minutes. Ed had library books borrowed for him by proxy as well as him blitzing through the mansion’s library. Eventually he got Spencer a tablet with no wireless connection that Ed could periodically load up with ebooks for him. Spencer still likes physical books, though, and there’s a bunch of them on the floor near the far wall stacked into ambitious towers and bridges. One of his doctorates is in engineering.

Spencer himself is bent over the desk writing what is probably another letter to his mother. He’s written a letter to his institutionalized, paranoid schizophrenic but still loving and (when lucid) emotionally close mother every day for years, and he hasn’t stopped since Ed abducted him. He hasn’t been allowed to send them but he said it helps him nonetheless, so Ed’s supplied him with plenty of pens and quality paper and made Oswald agree not to peek.

“Jonathan’s here,” Ed says quietly, but Spencer jerks up like a startled deer that was drinking from a stream. He’s as gangly as Ed but was already slightly more slender when he first came, and the time of recovering from burns sustained in the last-minute rescue from the explosion, as well as a lack of exercise and therefore a lack of appetite, has made him almost as delicate in appearance as Jonathan. He’s wearing a button-up shirt, sweater vest, and rather dowdy pants from the suitcase Ed hired Selina to steal from Spencer’s motel room on that fateful day. Ed’s taken his measurements and will go shop for him soon. Even after Spencer has free rein on the house, it’ll take time and strategy before a supposedly dead man can be seen in public.
Spencer stands to wave. “I don’t like shaking hands. In several cultures other gestures are more common, such as pressing the hands together and dipping the head, or bowing, which are far more hygienic. Though I’m glad I don’t belong in a culture that combines handshakes with cheek kisses, the number of which can vary throughout different regions of France, for example…”

“You don’t need to be nervous, Dr. Reid,” Jonathan says. Jonathan is a picture of nonchalance most of the time, including now, and maybe Spencer will find that reassuring.

“Could we go for a walk first?” Spencer asks, coming closer. Ed gives him a pat on the back when he tells him yes.

After so long cooped up, Spencer loves walking around the grounds. Ed tries to spend an hour a day walking with him. The conversations are idyllic as long as they don’t discuss real life, though as now they sometimes must. He thinks Spencer might be getting a little more color in his cheeks from this. It’s good that Ed was able to practice caring for Jonathan part-time before tackling Spencer full-time. Whose idea was it to let someone in his mid twenties have such a dangerous job?

It’s a beautiful morning with a hint of early autumn chill. Spencer stays close to Ed. The first time he emerged, he said the large sky has become mildly disconcerting. The tentative emerging friendship between Spencer and Oswald hasn’t fully recovered from Oswald beating him into a whimpering mess after his one escape attempt, though Spencer is less timid around him now and Oswald is patiently friendly. Ed doesn’t deserve him. Either of them. Or Jonathan, who is keeping up yet giving the cousins space.

“I have a task for you, Jonathan,” Spencer says, sinking his hands into the pockets of the jacket Ed’s lending him.

“Sure.”

Spencer speaks with the enthusiastic breakneck pace that’s his default when he has more than two sentences to utter and isn’t trying to handle his listener carefully. “I’m very interested in both sides of the equation of Paper Crane and would like to help you develop it using my expertise in chemistry and psychology.”

“No fear serum, though, he’s not going to touch that,” Ed tells Jonathan, who nods as if expecting this.

“But there’s a more pressing issue. Ed told me that two of my colleagues came to your house to try to talk to you after the case had been officially abandoned, and that you also got a suspicious phone call. From your description, the two you saw were Derek Morgan and Emily Prentiss. The phone call was probably from Penelope Garcia. They may have clung - might still be clinging - onto the hope that I’m missing but not deceased. The body double wasn’t perfect and my suitcase was stolen.”

“Are you close?” Jonathan asks.

“They are some of my best friends in the world,” Spencer murmurs with a tone of gentle, resigned pain that makes Ed want to say yet again that he had to - the others must understand that he had to.

Jonathan waves at a crow flying by. “I know it’s not the same, but after what happened to me, I didn’t want to see any of my old friends. Good friends. Some from back when I was little and they and their parents helped get me through my mom’s death. I couldn’t be the person they expected me to be anymore.”

Spencer takes a deep breath, clears his throat, and resumes. “I’m legally dead. We need to convince
them and everyone else to give up. I’m really dead and not in need of misguided rescue. They’ll finish grieving and move on. I need your help planting evidence that will make them believe once and for all. Garcia is amazing at finding information and we could feed her false information. I have ideas and strategies but could always use more. Also my movements are restricted, and you’re the only other person Ed trusts with knowing about me. That’s a big deal, you know. One of their employees showed up unannounced and glimpsed me through a window after ringing a doorbell, and…”

“He should have known better than to come here without an appointment regardless,” Ed says.

It was useful to observe Spencer’s reactions to what happened after. He didn’t participate himself, but watched with mostly interest and only a droplet of horror. Ed brought the body to an already-scheduled meeting when Oswald would be busy elsewhere and be unavailable to fuss over Ed’s theatrics. He pointed out the injuries with a vivid description of what caused them. He let those present assume this was out of homicidal protectiveness towards Oswald alone. It made quite the sensation. Zsasz thought it was hilarious, of course, grinning in his own special chair near the head of the table.

“In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning,” Spencer says slightly cheerfully. “Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’. Ed knows more about fluid in lungs than I do.”

“I’m sure you could catch up on the theory in about an hour,” Ed teases. “But yes, Jonathan, Spencer’s presence is a secret that must be taken very seriously. We’d be arrested and, and Oswald and I might be separated, and you and I would definitely be separated and I’d probably be allowed only limited and long-distance interaction with you as a corrupting influence. He’d be taken away and assumed to have had a breakdown, Stockholm syndrome, something like that. Might even lock him up with his mother.”

“That last part is rather extreme, and it’s not like Bennington Sanitarium is one of Dante’s circles of Hell,” Spencer reproaches. As it was Spencer’s regretful decision to send Aunt Diana there in the first place, that must have touched a nerve. “But the last time I was abducted it was - let’s say it was bad, and that’s the paradigm they’ll be operating under.”

“Or someone might take you hostage because he loves you so much,” Jonathan says. He strays momentarily to observe unusually-colored lichen on a tree. Then he returns.

“Jonathan, one of the reasons I keep our connection hidden is that it’d be just as bad if you were taken hostage.” Ed’s moment of staggering, vulnerable honesty takes even him aback. It must be Spencer’s influence. Spencer wears his heart not only on his sleeve but all over his shirt, especially after having been (gently, lightly, please believe me) conditioned not to hide things from them.

Jonathan stops walking, and the other two stop as well. “Nefyn told me you lied to me about how you felt on Paper Crane. You claimed you exaggerated about the positive emotions rather than admitting you simply lost your filter and all negative feelings. He said that all expressions of love on Paper Crane reflect what’s there all the time. And he agreed to try Paper Crane five times with five different people, the current record, so he knows what he’s talking about.”

Ed adjusts his glasses nervously. “I told you near the start that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t need to. Don’t take this as something I can do often, but I understand gestures. Symbolism. Thanks.” And Jonathan hugs him.

After a moment of flailing bafflement, Ed catches Spencer’s eye and sees the nod. Spencer
understands people. So Ed hugs back as long as he can before Jonathan squirms away.

Chapter End Notes

Additional short clips for non-CM viewers:

From the major canonical Reid abduction. Contains his captor doing Russian roulette and telling him to choose one of his teammates to die while making them watch the discussion on live feed. Reid uses this to give them clues about where he is. He's tied up and was recently beaten (visible dried blood on his head) and drugged. It's intense, though less intense than the beating and drugging parts you can go look for on your own. This episode is also what makes me hinge the entire timeline on whether or not he wants to stay with Ed or not, eventually.

Palate-cleansing banter as Reid talks to Garcia during a case.

Spencer Reid, Derek Morgan, and Emily Prentiss on the topics of Halloween and masks. Cute. It also demonstrates the show's pattern of beginning and ending episodes with literary quotes, which inspired the trait I have given to the going-Gotham-native version of Spencer.
Alternate Ending 2.2

Chapter Notes

Ending 1 is better for society, but as a writer, the future of Ending 2 is more fun. Sorry, Gothamites! If that's your noun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**********FOUR YEARS LATER**********

Harley should have called ahead, or at least texted. She’s never been so desperate in her life, though, and she can’t bring herself to say or type the words. She has a key to Jonathan’s house and a standing invitation to drop by unless he’s explicitly told her not to. It happens if he’s hooking up with someone. Jonathan isn’t a huge player, but he’s only gotten better-looking as his health has improved. Being bisexual broadens his options while being aromantic makes him safe for people who only want a one-night stand.

If he isn’t there at the time and hasn’t warned her away, she’s still invited to raid the fridge and chill out. Sometimes she has to escape from her home to keep from going nuts. She lies about where she goes to spend a night when it gets to be too much, tells them she's with friends they approve of. Staying with him full-time would be better, but she'd be disowned - Jonathan, her very best friend, is very much not on the approved list. She’s never told him much detail. He does know she doesn’t have the happiest home life and desperately wishes she could afford to get her own place. Plenty of shadows can lurk behind a white picket fence. The shadow over her now, though, makes her wonder if she can ever go home again.

She rides up to his spooky farmhouse house in her little secondhand red and black Vespa she’s named Arlecchino, or Chino for short. She loves Chino, but it’s extra cold riding a scooter on a chilly autumn night like this. Maybe Jonathan’s lit a fire. That’d be nice. She chains Chino to a tree before heading for the door. A few lights are on, though not in Jonathan’s bedroom. Harley rings the doorbell to be polite. He doesn’t yell for her not to come in, so she enters.

Jonathan’s lit a fire, all right, and he’s lying on the couch reading The Hero With a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell for his paper on Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious and its influence on blah blah blah (Harley’s kinda stressed right now). His recently acquired glasses are folded on the lamp stand, since he doesn’t need them for things that are up close. He’s also got a guy a few years older than him cuddling him like he’s a stretched-out koala and Jonathan’s a branch. Jonathan’s lazily tousling his hair.

“Come on in. You’ve met Nefyn.”

Ah yes, Nefyn, the only person Jonathan has had sex with more than once and is his close friend besides. They’ve explained that it works because Nefyn is in serious polyamorous relationships with multiple other people, taking off the pressure. Also because the guy’s endless warmth balances out Jonathan’s colder personality in a way that Jonathan apparently doesn’t find threatening.

This is new, though, which is good. She has to act normal while Nefyn is here. Novelty is a distraction. Harley kicks off her boots in order not to track in mud from this morning’s freezing rain and hangs up her black peacoat. She goes to sit in the armchair and watches them for a moment. “I
never thought I’d see you let someone touch you like that.”

Jonathan blinks and looks at Nefyn like he’s just realized he’s there. “I touch for practical purposes. We’ve started doing scenes, you see, featherlight ones compared to what he does with his other partners, but responsible doms take care of their subs afterwards as they come down from the adrenaline high and are adjusting to normal headspace. For Nefyn it means doing this. It’d simply be irresponsible, and, like, mean to not have this ritual.”

“Uh huh, of course,” Nefyn mumbles with the slightest of sarcasm into Jonathan’s shoulder. He’s got markings around his neck that suggest a recently removed collar.

“I’m not sure I wanted to hear all that, but I’m the one who asked.” It makes sense, though. She’s been told that Nefyn works as security/look-don’t-touch eye candy for a classy BDSM club called Foxglove (or The Foxglove or Foxgloves or something). She supposes security who know the difference between healthy kink and unhealthy kink would be especially aware of when to step in, and the best way to know that would to be into it themselves.

“Speaking of hot drinks, Harley, maybe make yourself one. I got a spicy hot chocolate recently, you might like it. I’d make it for you myself but I’ve got this mysterious weight keeping me down.”

Nefyn giggles. He’s never come across as macho - not wimpy, either, just not overtly masculine - but this is a new level of softness. “I still feel like I don’t weigh anything.”

“The feeling is inaccurate.”

Harley can observe more of their cute banter later. She feels far more chilled than the weather could ever be responsible for, and she needs a moment to figure out how she can confide in Jonathan without chasing Nefyn away.

While she’s in the kitchen, she hears the door open and a strange THWACK noise. She wants to run out to Jonathan but that’d be a rookie mistake, especially in Gotham. Instead she grabs the saucepan she was going to heat milk in as a makeshift weapon, and pokes a minimal amount of her head out in order to glimpse what’s going on.

Quick as lighting, Nefyn’s moved so that he’s shielding Jonathan with his body. That second noise was the sound of a knife being thrown so hard it’s sticking into the wall.

“That was your one warning,” Nefyn growls.

“Stand down, Knifepoint, there’s no danger,” says a male voice from the doorway. Harley can’t see the speaker unless she pokes her head out even further. She feels like she’s heard that voice before.

“Unless you count the possibility that we didn’t manage to shake Batman off while we were fleeing downtown after all,” says another voice. Also male.

Nefyn says, “Sorry, I just saw the gun and instinct took over. I’m a little loopy right now from -”

“He’s a little loopy,” Jonathan cuts him off. He puts on his glasses. “But…”

“Can we come in? I’ll put my gun away. I saw a scooter I didn't recognize and was on the alert,” explains the familiar voice.

The unfamiliar voice says, “I’m very glad you give warnings, Nefyn. Sorry to surprise you, but we need to regroup. I nearly got my mask torn off. Do you think you could make me another as backup? I lost another of the slogan pins too.”
“There’s a civilian in the kitchen and she can hear you!” Jonathan wails, more emotional than she’s used to hearing from him. What a night, huh?

The door shuts. The familiar voice goes deeper, rougher. “Interesting, considering you told me that other than us, only Nefyn and Selina ever make impromptu visits. You devise me on your own and use me for gain, I’m a tool against enemies but bring your friends pain, what am I?”

“I didn’t share, but I didn’t lie. I’m entitled to keep my private life from you. If you do anything to her I refuse to speak to you again. Ever. Besides, you’re well-known and he’s masked. I’m not super worried about me.” Jonathan peels off Nefyn and gets to his feet.

The unfamiliar voice says, “You know I advocate ways other than violence unless there are no other options, Jonathan. Call your friend over. One could describe my partner in crime here as a temporarily bit ‘loopy’ as well. Chaucer wrote that the guilty think all talk is of themselves. For the sake of being colloquial, I’ve translated from the Middle English.”

“Batman had you in his clutches!” The familiar voice has gone back to how it was before, though slightly frantic.

“And I derailed him like I always do. He was impressed that I got to the Warehouse Warlock before he did and convinced the man to turn himself in, but I think he can't get past that some of my vigilantism ends in shooting them. Wouldn't engage me in debate about whether he has indirectly doomed many others to being murdered, such as by constantly sparing the Joker. Then there's the whole thing about me sort of being your sidekick sometimes, which doesn't endear me to him. I'm rambling. Jonathan? Trust me. Us.”

After a moment’s thought, Jonathan turns andbeckons. “I won’t tell them your name if you don’t want me to, but please join us.”

Harley trades the saucepan for a nearby bread knife. She’s going to trust Jonathan. Jonathan has a past, but he has always been a good friend to her. Personal loyalty is more important than morals tonight.

The familiar voice is familiar because it’s the Riddler, in the muted shades of green and black he wears when he wants to be less noticeable/eye-searing. For more than two years, everyone has known that the Riddler is Edward Nygma, spouse and co-kingpin of the Penguin and his organization. It’s said that the Riddler has either gotten enough of the GCPD in his pocket or in fear of him that he acts more or less with immunity from them. Batman is the one who worries him. Tonight he’s brought his question-mark cane too, the better to bludgeon with, my dear.

The unfamiliar voice goes with a man Harley has seen in blurry photographs and snippets of security footage. The Riddler is a loud show-off, always looking for attention and praise of his cleverness. This, though, is the Reader. The quiet Reader who quotes stories and poems and spouts off nonfiction trivia, but more importantly can read your character and your past, almost your mind. Identity unknown. He works closely with Riddler but sometimes does solo, low-fatality crime. Oddly, he also engages in vigilantism that doesn’t go against Riddler and Penguin’s interests. He gives his opponents a chance to follow demands and stay alive. He’s been seen calming the Riddler from lashing out in anger.

Now she’s seeing him in person. He’s tall and slim with brunet hair and a trimmed goatee. He’s wearing his signature ensemble of black and creamy off-white. There are black pants, black suede sneakers, a black leather newsboy cap, a black and white herringbone jacket with leather elbow patches over his charcoal vest with many pockets, and slim black gloves. His socks don’t match, one white with black stripes, one black with gray polka dots. Then there’s a cream necktie pinned to his
black button-up collared shirt to keep it from flapping around. It says in vertical letters: YOU ARE AN OPEN BOOK.

The most important thing, though, his mask: old, slightly burnt book pages with a strip of black lace over his eyes. The lace is sufficiently open weave for him to see out, but it makes it difficult to determine his eye color. It covers his cheekbones and forehead as well as around his eyes, making it more effective than a domino mask.

Everyone is taking cues from the Reader for what to do next. He takes a seat in the armchair closest to the fire. “She’s not going to tell on us, Ed. She came here to tell Jonathan that she’s just committed a serious crime and wants advice from the only person she knows with similar experiences. I suspect she killed someone.”

Harley’s shaking so hard she has to sit.

There is nothing accusatory about the Reader. He’s explaining his thoughts, that’s all. “Am I right? You’re about Jonathan’s age. For him to be comfortable with you stopping by like this, he’s known you for years. His defensiveness of you shows your bond is very strong. He doesn’t associate you with violence. You didn’t mean to kill. You’re still fresh from it. Much of your body language tells me, but especially the way you’re holding the knife, firmly but like it might turn on you.”

Jonathan turns to her and asks, “Do you need help hiding the body?”

Harley starts crying. Everyone lets her. The Reader awkwardly tiptoes away for what she thinks is a bathroom break. When the sobs are far apart, Nefyn says, “Would you like a hug from me? It’s hard for Jonathan and I think the other guys scare you.”

“Yeah, okay,” she mumbles. Jonathan hands her tissues and gets her a glass of water as an alternate way to comfort her.

“Have you heard from her?” the Riddler is whispering to the Reader. Harley can’t make out the reply.

Nefyn hugs well, so well it doesn’t compute. After the hug Harley blows his nose and asks, “So Knifepoint is, like, aspiring supervillainy?”

“No, I’m not that ambitious. You know Victor Zsasz - stupid question, everyone knows him, sorry - I’m in his gang. That’s my work name to try to sound badass. Knives, especially throwing knives, are my specialty. I didn’t completely lie to you. I worked undercover at that club to help them get rid of a super troublesome patron they couldn’t ban because he was powerful. Not as security except metaphorically. None of the Zsaszettes were going to touch that contract with a ten-foot pike, and the mark liked boys anyway. It wasn’t as hot as I’ve just made it sound. Part of my payment was them putting me on their employee books so that I have a legal job for bureaucratic and alibi purposes. I can tell people everything that happens there, stays there, and not have to make up work stories.”

“Neat.”

“Are you scared of me now? If it helps, our code is not to go after kids or those with the equivalent mental age, not kill for free unless in defense of ourselves or people we love, and to always give bystanders a chance to escape.”

“I know.” That’s one of the reasons the GCPD prioritizes chasing after other groups of assassins over them, the main one being self-preservation. “I need to adjust, but I don’t think I am. Jonathan’s the only person who’s always been there for me, no strings attached, and if Jonathan likes you? You
love Jonathan, however it is you do, and I don’t think you want to hurt me. I’m...kind of selfish? It’s hard for me to care about a city where…”

“A city where boys hurt you and you feel you have no recourse,” the Reader says, still so kind. What was he until he snapped? A therapist?

It sends her on a fresh wave of crying. Eventually she says, “He was jealous. Said I was flirting with someone else, said bi girls are slutty.”

Jonathan is crushing the tissue box between his hands. “Percy? Trust fund brat Percy with dad on City Council?”

“Yeah. I know you said he was trouble and that he wasn’t actually different from the other assholes I've dated…”

“It doesn’t matter what I said. What matters is what he tried to do.”

She smiles faintly. “I started taking Brazilian Jiu-jitsu classes three years ago because I live in Gotham and it's a good martial art for a petite woman defending herself. But it all went out the window and I just kept thinking of that time I played Mercutio in a genderbent production? When you play Mercutio in that fight scene you assume you're gonna die even though it doesn't look serious. Um. Percy’s family has a boathouse, unused during the off-season, more private than his dorm. I thought we were going for a romantic evening. It turned out he wanted to confront me about something he totally blew out of proportion.”

“Even if you had cheated, a physical attack wouldn't have been acceptable,” the Reader says. The Riddler has grown solemn, perching on the arm of the Reader’s chair, watching, looking overwhelmed actually. She never thought those two could look so human, even in full costume.

“Thanks. He got mad and made me remember other times someone got mad at me like that. You know? Threw a punch at me and I dodged. There were fishing rods hanging on the wall. I grabbed one. I was so scared and even after he was down I just couldn’t stop, and even after he was unconscious I didn’t stop, and even though he was dead I didn’t stop for a long, long time, like when you stomp on a bug but you think a leg might have twitched so you stomp more. I'm not sure how much I can claim self-defense with him in the state he ended up in, even if his family don't unleash the hounds and fancy lawyers. He only said he was gonna beat me up, not that he was gonna kill me.”

"I've been offering to kill people who've been bad to you for years now, even though your life wasn't in danger," Jonathan says. He makes it sound so obvious and sensible it's funny, this is all funny. She's known about Mr. Brooks all along, so it's not a total shock, but this is another level. What a night.

"Anyway. My family won't help. In fact, they liked him a lot, acted like he would be my salvation from queerness and weirdness. This feels like a dream. I’m waiting for it to really sink in.” Also it felt a tiny bit satisfying, in a weird way, but she's not ready to say that.

“I can empathize with your story,” the Riddler says.

“I’m not sure how comforting that is, but I appreciate the thought,” Harley says. She casts about for another subject, exhausted. “So, um, how do you know them?”

Jonathan points at each person in turn. “Reader is classified. Nefyn helped me buy some secret lab equipment so I could make drugs for Penguin based on my experiences and my dad’s work. More on
that later, if I can. I met Nygma when he visited me in the hospital after I became lucid to talk about my dad’s case, which he’d worked on. We really bonded much later, when he helped me with the business of my grandmother after I accidentally pushed her down the stairs to her death. If it makes you feel any better, she hit me a lot and it was during a confrontation rather than premeditated.”

“You two suck at comforting normal people,” Nefyn says.

“You’ve gotten a lot cheekier since you finished your apprenticeship,” the Riddler retorts. Nefyn does the ‘who, me?’ thing.

Jonathan sighs. “Anyway, Nygma supported me and taught me science I was curious about, as well as assisting with the work. He’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a good father.”

Suddenly Harley figures out that the Riddler is Jonathan’s longtime ”support group guy". What. This is not the best time to say it, though.

The Riddler’s pleased gesture is very close to flapping his hands. Then he places his hands in his lap and looks serious again. “Let’s make the sort of deal Reader really likes.”

“You sound like you’re casting aspersions.” The Reader sounds so amusingly grumpy and petty that Harley is starting to wonder whether he’s a long-lost Nygma sibling.

“As I was saying, we’re going to help you tidy this mess away. You’re not going to say or otherwise communicate anything about anything having to do with any of us and anyone that works for or with us that isn’t known to the general public. In return, we will say nothing about you killing Percy.” He says this in such a way that Harley wonders if the Riddler, without the others to stop him, would have just shot her and been done with it. Like it’s a big, generous concession.

“As I said, Percy’s got a rich and influential family and we need to figure that in,” Jonathan says, like this is just another variable in a behavioural experiment they’re gonna do on freshmen who need credit.

“You’ve got a team on your side now,” Nefyn says, getting up to remove his knife from the wall. “I’ll fix the wallpaper, blue jay.”

“You’d better, Needlepoint. Where’d you put Percy?”

Harley hugs herself tight. Jonathan drapes a throw blanket over her in response. “I didn’t know what to do. He’s where I left him.”

“What? Shit, you’re more in shock that you look, you’ve got way too much talent for putting on a happy face. I’m going to go fix that right now.” Nefyn gives his knife a twirl. “You stay here, sweetheart, I’m a pro.”

“I’ll come with you. Let Ed talk to Jonathan and his friend,” the Reader says. “You can drop me off later. It’ll confuse Batman, if he’s still coming for us. Which I doubt. He rarely leaves the city proper; he’s motivated by a love for the city rather than justice as an abstract concept. He’s relatively indifferent to the greater municipality. Whatever tragedy that spurs him on must have occurred somewhere in -”

Nefyn pointedly flings opens the door. "Someone'll find Percy if we don’t hurry!” He blows a kiss at Jonathan on the way out.

Harley has some of the water Jonathan fetched her earlier. She’s considering getting up to wash her face, then the doorbell rings.
Jonathan runs to look out the peephole and opens the door. “I’ve got someone who accidentally found out about my double life less than half an hour ago being a bit fragile and sniffly on the couch right now, so please act accordingly and use codenames.”

The woman is still out of Harley’s sight on the doorstep when she snorts and says, “Did you tell her about your creepy Scarecrow mask? Did you stop wearing it outside because it was so ugly?”

“No, I wear it when I need to do a bit of gestalt therapy or need to show someone under controlled circumstances. The Reader pointed out that if I get caught wearing it in public, the media goes, ‘Jeepers, there’s some guy dressed as a scarecrow!’ then a whole bunch of doctors go, ‘Wait a second, we had a patient who hallucinated a scarecrow for ages!’, then Captain Harvey Bullock goes, ‘HAHA I have stuff on the Crane kid, finally!’ Also I’m not a...a field agent like you and your gal pals are.”

“Crow Bro is saltier than a salt mine tonight. Can I come in or not? I gotta talk to Riddler.”

Jonathan opens the door wider. In steps a young woman. She’s got red hair falling past her shoulders and is in green, but a rich forest green, a dress that emphasizes her cleavage without showing everything, with these nubby tights that have black and green swirls. She’s wearing a small vial around her neck and she’s got some real vines wrapped around one arm and a few white flowers on her shoulder like a botanical pet parrot equivalent. She takes off her shabby chic coat and bends down to unlace her Doc Martens, and Harley has to face away. She’s not ready for this so soon.

The girl takes her socks off as well as her shoes and walks over and extends a lightly freckled hand. “I’m Ivy, what’s your name?”

“Harley,” Harley squeaks, shaking it.

“You look like you could use some of the herbal tea I left here for Jonathan’s panic attacks. I grew all the leaves and petals.”

“Yeah, probably, thank you. I...I was just crying, I normally look better than this.”

Ivy grins. “Wow, I have something to look forward to, I guess. Is the Vespa outside yours? It’s totes adorbz.”

Harley stands, adjusting her rumpled clothes. “Yes. I call him Arlecchino or Chino. It’s the name of a less-tricksy, early proto-version of the character that eventually became Harlequin in Italian theatre. I’m a Psych major, Drama minor.”

“Cool! I got my GED with help from Penguin and Riddler and I’m looking into Gotham U. next year if I can balance it with work. Maybe take fun classes like that, too, learn about stuff that isn’t plants even though botany's totally gonna be the focus. Tell about Italian theatre some more.” She waves back at the Riddler. "Hey Riddles, the distraction worked fine. Bats went splat. Non-fatally, I mean, though he'll be nursing burns for a week or two. Cat and Firefly'll rendezvous with the stuff you wanted. I’ll tell you more when Harley’s not so upset.”

It’s only hello and a cup of tea. She shouldn’t make a big deal out of it. Harley’s world has fallen apart and needs rebuilding. Things can’t properly start until other things end.

Maybe there’s room for a prologue, though?

Harley stands and begins, “Well, it was because of the Italians that actresses, like real female actors and not crossdressing cisgender dudes, as well as the complex clown instead of a totally silly clown gained traction across Europe…”
Through the corner of her eye as she turns to follow Ivy, she sees her best friend Jonathan Crane and his longtime mentor (whaaat) Edward Nygma doing an elaborate secret handshake: fistbump, twist, explosion, brief ritualized thumb war, flappy bird, pinkie promise, hand-heart.

She has a lot to ask Jonathan about, like the Scarecrow mask reference. Then there's the even wilder revelation that he can work making some kind of drugs (she always did like Jesse in *Breaking Bad*) for PENGUIN and act as a SAFEHOUSE for RIDDLER while still keeping up his Psych/Biochem DOUBLE MAJOR without DYING Jonathan Crane you FREAK OF NATURE. Tonight, though, some oddly nice criminals are going to fix a problem for her and a pretty, if morbid, plant girl is going to make her a drink. It can wait.

Chapter End Notes

- I made it four years rather than five this time so the kids have some college left to spend together with Harley being in the loop.

- Ed's trying to intimidate Harley, but in fact his heart is softened by narratives that involve a cocky guy punching you out of romantic jealousy, then you having at it him far too many more times than necessary and being a wee bit hysterical afterwards. Oh dear.

- After four years, Jonathan still doesn't call Ed by his first name on a regular basis, but he's managed to drop the "Mr." when speaking aloud, not just in his head.

- By now, the fear serum and the continuously evolving pharmaceutical-candidate Paper Crane (and its weaker recreational version, Paperboy) can be developed without killing people. Spencer helped them figure out alternatives. So Jonathan's stopped killing as a lifestyle, because in both timelines he only kills for self-preservation or science. The Scarecrow, as he hinted at, still has its place. I will present a more detailed explanation in the epilogue.

- The epilogue will be scenes, headcanons, and various other scraps from both endings that either I wanted to put in but couldn't fit, or are inspired by your some of your comments over the course of this fic. I promise some Oswald, for example. If it runs too long, I'll split it by which timeline the bits are from. If anything gets way too big, of course, it might end up becoming another fic in the series. I have a mostly-fluffy one-shot in progress already and an angsty h/c concept brainstormed. ^_^
Caught-verse: Bonus Scenes

Chapter Notes

These all take place in the first timeline. The first three are sad though with a dusting of comfort/bittersweetness, the following two are hopeful, and the last one is mostly happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In Lee’s mind, he’s still Ed. Even after he framed Jim, even after other murders and especially after Kristen, she hasn’t been able to shake it. Now another arrest, now more death. Thing is, it’s easier to have Lee take care of his busted nose at the precinct than for him to be securely transported to the E.R. and back, and he doesn’t require such drastic intervention anyway. She agreed.

She needs to think of him as a patient, not as her former friend who killed another friend. She imagines this is in Arkham again, that the men’s ward hospital wing is short-staffed this week and she’s pitching in. This is a man who’s done terrible things. This is a bleeding nose. The latter is the important part.

There’s a police officer a few steps away, in case he tries anything, but Ed’s weeping while his nose is bleeding. He looks so defeated she doesn’t have the energy to hate him.

“Lean forward and pinch your nostrils,” she repeats. He’s got a wad of tissues clutched in one hand. “I’ll check more thoroughly in a moment, but I doubt your nose is actually broken.”

“Spencer pulled his punches, metaphorically.” Ed’s words are muffled, nasal, and shaky. “Not punching. He hit me with a book. In the face.”

She stifles a laugh. It’s horrible but stated in such an unintentionally funny way. “Keep breathing steadily through your mouth.”

“Dr. Thompkins? Uh, Leslie?” Ed keeps leaning forward, but his eyes look up. “Bullock might not believe me. Make him believe…”

“What?”

“I was going to have Scottie killed. You know, Bullock’s ex-fiancée. I’ll tell the police why later. But Jonathan stopped me.”

“You mean Jonathan Crane?” Lucius mentioned Ed having not only visited Jonathan in the hospital but also assisting with his emancipation. “How did he know about that?”

“Not now. Just listen to me. Jonathan forbade it. Maybe Bullock will believe you. Whatever else, she’s alive because of him.”

When Ed’s nose stops bleeding, he’s taken away. Later, she learns the truth about Jonathan. What Ed did with Jonathan. To Jonathan, because he’s just Gerald Crane all over again, thinking that warping a boy who deserved better is love.

Lucius isn’t a big hugger or given to lengthy pep talks, but he squeezes her shoulder in solidarity. He lets her hide from people in his domain until she’s ready to return to hers. They split a carryout pizza
from a nearby restaurant even though it’s not lunchtime. He eats his slices with a real knife and fork.

****

Harvey almost did a victory jig when Nygma snitched on the Crane kid, but after he declared “Hah! I was right!”, he saw that Lee looked like she was gonna cry. She’d tried so hard and hoped so much. So Harvey put a lid on it and went to gear up for the arrest. He’ll have a celebratory drink later, maybe with Jim, though Jim’s not happy either. Especially since he’s the one observing all the interrogations. Jim’s not participating directly, since there’s so much bad blood between him and the Kings of Gotham.

Right now, Alvarez is trying to get something, anything, out of Cobblepot, who didn’t release his hostage and surrender like Nygma did when persuaded. He certainly didn’t surrender immediately like Crane did. He surrendered when the only other option was a bullet to the chest. Later the Feds will take a crack at him and wrangle his lawyer, but it’ll be best if the GCPD isn’t made of fail again.

Agent Morgan still doesn’t like him, because he thinks certain stuff Harvey said about Nygma was an insult to people like Dr. Reid too, and also because he thinks the GCPD didn’t do due diligence verifying his deadness earlier. The long-lost agent is in the hospital for surgery to fix the ankle he busted himself to get out of chains. Harvey will never underestimate a nerdy pretty boy again. (Nygma’s not pretty, though with his glasses off he’s not awful if you squint. Reid’s like a frumpily-dressed Vogue model.)

Agent Jareau is keeping Reid company and protecting him from the media. Their team leader haven’t shown up. They’re tied up in red tape because the investigation had been against orders. No matter if they were right after all. This whole thing is a jurisdictional nightmare in which the GCPD are allowing Morgan, Prentiss, Jareau, and their long-distance backup Ms. Garcia to mostly run the show (aka do the heavy lifting). Once Quantico finds its ass with its hands it’ll be handed over to the FBI anyway.

To avoid more interdepartmental drama, Morgan’s leading the search of Crane’s property for evidence and it’s Agent Prentiss in the passenger seat with him. She’s a stoic lady, impersonal and businesslike when she told Crane why he was being arrested and read him his rights. She’s the one who cuffed him and tucked him into the backseat. With their history, Harvey putting hands on him might look bad.

It’s gonna be a long drive down to the precinct. Crane’s mumbling something to himself. After fiveish minutes Prentiss asks, “Did you just say ‘Gryffindor’?”

“I’m calming myself by sorting everyone I know well into Hogwarts houses,” Crane says matter-of-factly. It gives Harvey the chills.

Prentiss keeps talking to him, though, cause she’s like a shrink-cop and the more she gets from him indirectly the better she’ll be at playing him into her hands later. Or something like that. See, Nygma’s spilling everything on himself and is ready to sing a whole opera about Crane - but when you ask about his husband he clams up. Crane might provide useful dirt. Besides, they gotta find out if Crane knew about Reid or not, or whether he’s “only” a serial killer.

She says, “I’m familiar with them. What do you sort yourself as?”

“Ravenclaw. Everything I do is for gaining knowledge.”

“Murder is super educational, huh?” Harvey spits out, but Prentiss gives him A Look that reminds him of how Fish looked at him when he pushed her too hard.
“How about Nygma?” Prentiss asks, like they’re on a road trip and they’ve already gotten sick of I Spy and this is the new game.

“How about Ravenclaw. He doesn’t really want power. He wants people to admire how smart he is.”

“How do you feel about him selling you out?” Harvey sneers.

“Good. Anything to reduce the amount of torture he goes through at Arkham if you leave him to rot there again.”

Prentiss gives him a different look. She doesn’t like the implications of that statement. Harvey does not have time for this right now.

Jonathan continues, “Mr. Cobblepot’s the Slytherin. He wants power. I tend to make friends with Hufflepuffs. Though I do know a girl who’s kind of a friend who’s cunning and more Slytherin. Hufflepuffs are patient with my blunted affect. They balance me out. You know what that is, right?”

Harvey bites back the incredulous question of how the hell this kid has friends other than the guy who’s been molding him in his own image.

“I do,” Prentiss says. “It’s a reduced ability to show, and to an extent feel, emotion, found in various mental disorders. Captain Bullock?”

“Gryffindor. Might not look it the way Gordon does, but actually brave to a fault. Literally to it being a fault sometimes.”

Wait, was there a compliment hidden in there?

“Dr. Thompkins and Mr. Fox straddle the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff line. I would have to know them better. If I don’t get a chance, someone tell them I’m sorry for disappointing them.” He sounds sincere, but sociopaths can fake it, right?

“That matters to you,” Prentiss says, building rapport.

“Yeah.” Crane shifts uncomfortably. “Um, I take medication several times a day.”

Prentiss gentles her tone for a moment. “Agent Morgan’s going to pick up your medications for you, and we’ll give you one dose at a time as stated on the bottle.”

“It’s in the upstairs bathroom medicine cabinet and also a pillbox set on my dining table. I take four different kinds if you count nutritional supplements.”

“I’ll let him know.”

“Thank you.”

“It’d be an infringement of your rights not to provide you with medical treatment you need.”

“Mm, it’s nice when law enforcement cares about that. When I get my lawyer, I’ll also sign a release form so my psychiatrist can speak freely with you about what I need, and another one so my therapist can be a character witness.”

“That can be done,” Prentiss says, glancing back at him.

After a brief silence, now he’s singing under his breath. “Stems and bones, and stone walls too, could keep me from you. Skein of skin is all too few to keep me from you…”
At least the creepy calm has the side effect of making him easy to handle in custody. Harvey drives on, considering what necktie he’ll wear to the kid’s trial, or even better his sentencing hearing instead of a trial. Pleading guilty would probably reduce the sentence, but on the other hand Harvey would get to see the day Crane admits to it all.

****

There’s a man kneeling - not standing, kneeling - at a flat gravestone, a bouquet of exotic tropical orchids clutched in one hand. He’s apologizing.

It’s rude to eavesdrop, so Lucius says, "I located you out of concern over what might be keeping you from our appointment, rather than annoyance."

The man turns to look at him, and gets to his feet. “I apologize, Mr. Fox, I spent time agonizing over what to wear, as if she’d see me. Lost track of time.”

“That’s certainly all right, Dr.…”

“Just call me Miguel.”

Jonathan Crane’s uncle looks nothing like him, but genetics and nomenclature are complex. Asking a stranger if they’re adopted is at best forward and at worst potentially offensive to mixed-race families. So he restrains his curiosity and says, “Then call me Lucius.”

“You knew I’d be here, huh?”

“It wasn’t the most difficult thing to guess.” There are eight pink orchids. Karen died when her son was eight years old. This may be a coincidence.

Almost all the gravestones in this cemetery that aren’t flat are old and worn-down. The price of gravestones may have increased in recent years. Lucius can look it up later. He needs to focus.

Miguel adjusts his grip on the bouquet. “Thank you for getting the message out to me. Paying extra to speed things up, too.”

“Colleagues pitched in.” That is, Jim and Lee. Lucius doesn’t want to talk to Harvey about Crane. Even though Harvey’s admirably trying not to be too smug, he’s still smug. It rankles. Miguel is here to deal with Jonathan’s belongings that were seized as evidence but can now be released to his next-of-kin.

The cyclical nature of this - it seems only yesterday that Jonathan came to him for Gerald’s things - has given Lucius the uncharacteristic, impractical desire to literally cling to Alfred for thirty to forty minutes. He really should visit him at the manor soon, not get too wrapped up in work. He’s observed that this harms Jim’s romantic relationships considerably.

“I should have been here. Jonathan told me he preferred to be on his own, and I took that at face value instead of thinking hey, this is a sixteen-year-old with trauma and brain damage, maybe I should at least try being around. He wouldn’t have been able to do…those things...at least not so easily. I would have noticed. He wouldn’t have needed to turn to Edward Nygma for a parental figure. I should have…”

Lucius sinks his hands deep into his suit pockets and says, “Yes, probably. But your honest human mistakes came from honest human choices. Plenty of things I could have done better. Plenty of things I won’t do as well as I should.”
“Yeah. You’re right.” Miguel gets down to one knee and places the orchids on his sister’s gravestone. Then he flips off his brother in law’s.

The man doesn’t seem quite ready for a serious stint of paperwork just yet, so Lucius says, “I worked through lunch. There’s a diner I like that has a separate menu just for pie. Do you like pie?”

Miguel smiles weakly. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand, like he was trying to wipe away sweat but went too low. “Yeah, sure, pie. Splendid.” He follows Lucius back to the land of the living.

****

“Hello, is this Jonathan?”

“Yes, Mr. Nygma, it is.”

“Good. I always worry that people are going to think my birthday requests are jokes. My existence is the ultimate April Fool.”

“I can think of more deserving candidates. Are you getting anything else for your birthday?”

“I’m seeing Oswald, and Spencer’s taking me to an art gallery. I’ve got a pair of pants hemmed long enough that you can’t see the tracker.”

“Sounds nice. Oh, and hello to the person who’s listening into our call for security reasons.”

“I miss your sense of humor. It’s not quite the same in letters.”

“Yes, but nobody reads our letters to each other except for Dr. Reid when he checks for hidden codes, and it’s not such a big deal if he reads about our mental health issues in detail. Do you ever put anything hidden in there just for fun?”

“I’ll tell you next letter.”

“Hah. Is your treatment going adequately?”

“More or less. Yours?”

“More or less. I did well on a chemistry test yesterday. My teacher’s in Gotham but she grades stuff and emails back fast.”

“Wonderful!”

“I’m not allowed to tell you about the research I’m doing, but it’s interesting and it gets me out of the institution for a few hours a week. When I’m behind the bars it’s boring but not horrific. They’ve moved me to my own room now because of the fugue states.”

“Nobody’s hurt you, right?”

“Some guys tried to hurt my feelings and another threw a bowl at me in the cafeteria, but he has a history of throwing dishes and tableware. It wasn’t personal. They thought they’d gotten him to stop. Anyway, nothing worse than that. Generously, this is a pretty decent place, though the food is only food by barest legal definition. Cynically, I’m some influential people’s golden goose.”

“Honk honk.”
“Huh?”

“That’s onomatopoeia for the sound geese make.”

“Ah, okay. Come up with any fresh riddles lately?”

“Well…”

****

Hi,

Your guy friend forwarded your letter and asked me not to toss it like I did several of yours before. My address has changed. I only applied to out-of-state colleges, where nobody knows I know you and they don’t give me grief about it. I don’t forgive you…but I miss you. How dumb is that?

Maybe I can believe the Jonathan I knew was the real one, and Scarecrow is a disease you’ve gotten in check with enough help. I want this to be more than wishful thinking. If you really do get out next year, call me, and if it goes ok maybe we can get lunch during my following winter break. I want to believe someone who hurt me this much can change.

H.Q.

******

Nefyn opens the door of Jonathan’s house. For five years, every time he’s opened this door so he can check on the place, nobody has been here.

But now Jonathan’s sitting right on the couch. Nefyn knew he’d be here. This is a planned reunion. His throat is dry, though, when he locks the door behind him and says, “Hi.”

“You brought everything?”

“Uh huh.” Protection is very important when you have sex with several people, and lubricant is extra important when one of you is out of practice.

Jonathan takes off his glasses and places them on a table. He says evenly, “Rough vanilla, you top. We’ll be sappy after. I want you this second.”

They don’t make it upstairs. Jonathan’s still thin but he’s got more meat on his bones than he used to. He’s become able to eat more over time. Nefyn likes it.

“I’m not being rougher than you want, right?” Nefyn asks at one point, because gasps can be ambiguous. “You said you haven’t done this since the last time I fucked you. It’s okay to need to relearn.”

Jonathan would be flailing if Nefyn weren’t keeping him pinned. Jonathan can probably be a great Dom if he wants, but it’s also nice for Nefyn to have someone he can hold down or pick up, who makes Nefyn the strong one for once. “No, I, I never with someone - not with someone else during, but I stole margarine…”

“You gloriously dirty boy. Tell me more.”

Later they shower together for the first time. Jonathan’s limping a bit and expresses enthusiasm over the fact. He lets Nefyn dry him off and carry him naked to bed for some rest before round two.
“Don’t get too used to me being this snuggly,” Jonathan says, even as he burrows into Nefyn’s embrace. “Therapy’s changed me but not so much this is something I’d want all the time.”

Nefyn wraps blankets around them. “This is five years all pent up, I get it.”

They chit-chat about various things, but when Nefyn’s about to tell him a fun work story, Jonathan puts a finger on his lips. “I’m not going to compromise my parole. I’m going to go to college and intern at the lab and keep my head down. I won’t report you or the rest of your family for your career in general, but don’t tell me anything that’ll make me lose deniability. Even though I’m super curious.”

“Makes sense. I didn’t bring my Knifepoint phone today, and I won’t bring it to your house ever. Do you want to keep going with the cover story that your old house was being sublet without your knowledge? Got all infested with an assassin problem?” Nefyn kisses the top of his head.

“As long as it works. Since it was outright purchased through a 'mysterious' intermediary a few months ago, I take no responsibility for what happened afterwards.” Jonathan kisses his neck.
"Thank you for feeding my crows twice a week."

“I swear they’re teaching each other how to say ‘Run away!’, you monster.”

Jonathan chuckles. “Maybe it makes picnickers run away from their food. That’s the kind of mad science I can still do. I’m going to see the crows, see if any of the originals are still there. Soon I’m going to send a gift and thank-you card to Dr. Thompkins for testifying at my sentencing hearing. It ended up being helpful. And I need to send them to Mr. Fox for being kind to my uncle. I’m going to start seeing Helga and Dr. Au again, but this time I’ll be fully honest. I’m also going to rewatch all of Cowboy Bebop. I’m going to get ready to start college, too, but that’s a given. I’m going to sit some AP tests and see if I can get basic credits out of the way first.”

Nefyn runs his fingers down the bare skin of Jonathan’s back. “What are you going to do first when your parole is up?”

“I’m going to go see Nygma. I miss him.” Jonathan unwinds himself and waves at the old CD player on one of the bookshelves. “Put on some music for us, please.”

Nefyn finds a mix CD labeled “Languid”, so he pops it in. Nothing wrong if they fall asleep. He’s taking all today and tomorrow off. He stocked the kitchen with food yesterday. And oh, he knows this one. Of course.

And here I am, softer than a shower, and here I am to garland you with flowers.

“I’ve made serious mistakes,” Jonathan mumbles.

“Yes. Here I am anyway.”

“I felt bad when my uncle came to visit and he cried. My court-mandated therapist said I’m feeling guilty more easily because my...my affect is less blunted. Than it was. I’m less numb, they say, and no longer deluded, and maybe that makes me safe for society. My uncle’s getting here next week after he's done wrapping up in Brazil. He’s got a position at at Gotham U. lined up, even though he's overqualified. Side benefit that he'll be able to keep an eye on me when I’m on campus as well.”

And all my life, I never felt the tremor, and all my life that now disturbs my fingers. I lay you down in clover bed…

“A little annoying, but you said you’re uncle’s not so bad, right? Like, he’s more like your mom was
“And not your grandma.”

“Yes. I’m going to try to make it work. It’ll reassure my parole officer, too, and I like Uncle Miguel more than I like my parole officer. She might go more hands-off because of him. We can tell him you do security and otherwise be honest. I’m also going to try making up with Harley when she gives me the chance.”

Nefyn sings along to the next part, but personalizing the lyrics. “And we’ll lie till the scared crows caw, bereft of the weight of our summer clothes. And I’ll wager all the hazards of love, the hazards of love.”

Jonathan doesn’t sing or say a similar sentiment, but he lets Nefyn hold him like five years ago, and Jonathan nods off again. This time Nefyn isn’t frightened of what’s going to happen after Jonathan wakes.

When Nefyn slips away for a glass of water, he grabs his phone en route and texts the number he was given a few days ago specifically for this message and this message alone: Dr. R, tell J. He’ll be in touch soon.

Chapter End Notes

- I feel like Spencer Reid is close to Jonathan in some ways, but Emily Prentiss is actually closer in temperament. I wanted to have them interact. This is her being cold with a scumbag. While, on the other hand, this is her comforting Reid.

- Yes, I ship Lucius/Alfred, what of it?

- In this timeline, Scarecrow is medicated/psychoanalyzed to the point of vestigial. In the other one, Scarecrow continues to exist but is channeled away from hurting innocents. Both of these are an outcome their respective Harleys (themselves different by butterfly effect) eventually find acceptable in a friend. The first Harley never met or killed Percy because she couldn’t bear to stay in Gotham under Jonathan’s shadow. The other is more accepting of crime after some Gotham Rogues help her and she herself becomes part of the gray area.

- In case it's not clear, Nefyn uses a question mark to refer to Ed in text messages.

- The next chapter will be bonus scenes for what I’m now thinking of calling "Rogues-verse" instead of previous names. Will contain onscreen Oswald, Selina, and more!
Rogues-verse: Bonus Scenes

Chapter Notes

The third-from-last scene is derived from a comment reply many chapters ago, but it's been tweaked and expanded.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oswald wakes alone in a cold bed. The clock says it’s three in the morning. Best-case scenario is that Ed’s fallen asleep in his bachelor room after staying up late working on something. There are worse-case scenarios, though. Oswald wraps himself in a dressing gown and puts on his slippers, grabs his cane, and goes to investigate.

There are lights and sounds coming from downstairs. Voices that aren’t Ed’s, and music. Once in awhile Ed has a nightmare and watches some mindless television to chase it away. He usually makes it back on his own, but twice now Olga’s found him asleep in a fetal position on the couch with the TV still burbling along.

When Oswald gets close, he sees something more disturbing. Ed is sitting on the couch watching TV, yes. He’s sitting next to Spencer. As in, their prisoner.

“What is Spencer doing out of his room?!”

Spencer spots how Oswald is brandishing his cane and shrinks as small as he can against the upholstery. Good. He already tried to escape when he came in contact with Olga - she’d followed directions to steer clear until her employers were accidentally gone so long she worried about his hunger - by pleading with her in Russian that Ed didn’t know Spencer knew. If he’s using his combination of profiler skills and Ed’s sentimental attachment to him for another attempt, this time Oswald’s not going to stop at bruises. Ed asked him to be bad cop if necessary and he takes that seriously.

“It’s okay, Oswald, he passed the test and we made a pact. We just finished dealing with the body.” Ed gestures proudly at his cousin. “You should have seen it. A glorious job. Wasn’t it?”

“I enjoyed it much more than I expected, like Ed promised. It was better than Dilaudid. He deserved it, and taking that into my own hands, carrying out my, my conviction was a revelation. Please don’t hit me.”

Oswald lowers the cane and leans heavily on it instead. Ed has such hope in his eyes. “One kill on command does not necessarily mean conversion.”

“I’m not exactly letting him into my lab or at the kitchen knives. We’re watching some Doctor Who episodes he’s missed, to wind down. Then he’ll go back to his room. Trust has to be earned bit by bit.” Ed’s face twists with mild hurt. “I’m not naive.”

Oswald sighs and takes a seat diagonally from them. “I really want to believe we can be the happy family Ed desires. Surely you understand my caution, Spencer.”

Spencer’s looking less frightened now, and sits back up. “I have no intention of any harm towards
either of you. I understand now that calling for help would be misguided and indirectly cause you harm.”

“And Jonathan,” Oswald says. “Did you forget about Jonathan before doing this, Ed? At least we know Spencer’s here.”

It hurts to see Ed look stricken, but it’s an important point to drive home. “Only out if supervised, promise.”

“You could put an additional bar lock on my door if that would make you feel better,” Spencer offers.

Oswald inclines his head. Not quite a nod, but an acknowledgment of considering the offer. “When you’re ready, you need to be honest with Jonathan so that he can be prepared for the possibility that you’re overestimating Spencer’s change of heart. Enlist his help in a Paper Crane test.”

Ed bites his lip and turns to look at Spencer. Spencer gives him a thumbs-up. “From a Shaker hymn: When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.”

That was somewhat eerie. But the cousins on the couch look content, and Oswald is too tired to deal with more of this right now. He shuffles over to Ed and runs his fingers through his hair, which he’s starting to grow out again. Oswald likes having something to grab onto, in certain contexts. “You know I think the world of you.”

“You’re right that I should have thought more about Jonathan,” Ed says, but then he smiles and squeezes Oswald’s other hand.

“Do come to bed soon. Don’t worry about waking me. I’ll settle down fine with you there.” Oswald kisses him. On his way up again, he hears Spencer tell Ed a joke about something called “the Ood”, and Ed laughing.

He’d had misgivings about Ed taking on Jonathan, too. He’ll hang onto that so he can stop fretting for now and sleep.

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“Did you...what are you doing?”

Ivy looks up and beams. “Hi, Cat! Animal blood is a component of blood meal fertilizer, which is one of the best fertilizers you can have.”

Selina raises an eyebrow. “Animal blood doesn’t usually come in hospital blood bags marked O-.”

“Crow bro and I want to test out our hypothesis that we could make a lovely ‘herbal supplement’ that uses the legal not-super-addictive seed oil from poppies - the latex is the illegal super-addictive part - grown with blood meal made from…”

“His blood.” Jonathan Crane’s mutated, unnaturally relaxed and unafraid blood. Ew.

“The version he’s mixed up for Penguin now is great. Calls it Paperboy. But it uses so much of his blood that mass production isn’t possible without leaving him permanently hooked to a tube in a Fury Road intro kinda deal.”

“You watch that part through your fingers,” Selina says, steering clear of the table. Now that she’s not living on her own anymore, she’s becoming more and more fond of domestic crap like movie
nights.

“Pale suicide warrior boys in zombie makeup are creepy, okay?” She hums a jaunty tune as she adds a few cups of ash. Bridgit’s been gathering up as much of the ash she and her flamethrower generate as she can, since Ivy has so many uses for it. “So they asked me to see if I can stretch the active ingredient and use botanicals to make up the difference. This way, it’s almost kinda homeopathic. Except not really. Don’t say that around him. He’s super anti-homeopathy.” Ivy’s wearing latex gloves and an apron, at least, and is iron-stomached as usual. She always says that if you can’t handle manure, get out of her greenhouse.

“I was here to tell you that Bridgit says dinner’s ready, but I’m not sure I’m going to eat anything for a few hours. Or days.”

Ivy laughs. “Sure you don’t wanna help me stir?” She reaches out.

Selena backs away. “I’m not even going to hug you until you’ve showered twice.”

“Didn’t you have sex with him once?”

“That makes it worse!” Nobody can fluster Selina like Ivy can, but fortunately nobody can fix it like Bridgit. Time to go back inside the house.

****

Paperboy comes in pill form and is gentle enough on its users that the GCPD might not even notice it, let alone care. Its mellow high unaccompanied by paranoia is a big success on the streets of Gotham by the time Jonathan turns nineteen. Paper Crane is going to be a longer game with a less certain reward, but Reid is incredibly committed to it for several reasons, some of which are a bit sad.

(In one meeting, when Reid says thoughtfully, “I wonder if it might have been good for Mom’s anxiety,” Nygma has to leave the room for a moment.)

As a free agent, the Reader’s got more unstructured time than the Kings of Gotham, and he’s the one who helps Jonathan come up with the long-term strategy. They’re not bringing Ivy in on this if they don’t have to, since she already has one mind-control perfume at her disposal and there are power balances to consider.

Reid wheels a large whiteboard into the dining room. He urges Nygma, Cobblepot, and Jonathan to start eating, then he gets out a laser pointer to begin his lecture. The board says:

**HOW PAPER CRANE TAKES FLIGHT**

1. **Eliminate the emotional abuse potential.**

2. **Make it possible to manufacture with neither Jonathan’s blood nor Ivy’s plants.**

3. **Present the formula, with demonstrations, to an actual pharmacologist in exchange for a massive share in any eventual profits.**

4. **Let that person do the hard work getting it through rigorous, legitimate trials and eventually passed by the FDA.**
5.Earn money through a good deed. Why not?

****

The Penguin scared Harley more than any of the others, but she knew better than to turn down a meeting with him. Jonathan sat by her side in reassuring support, and the meeting was at Jonathan’s house, familiar territory. This was a special concession. Almost all of the times Jonathan told her not to come over honestly were because of him having sex with someone. When he met with the Riddler, it was usually at the Kings of Gotham residence. That night happened to be an emergency.

She knew accepting help from any of the Rogues Gallery would ultimately come with a cost, but Penguin offered an attractive deal rather than making her smuggle cocaine or something. “Jonathan says you want to move out of your parents’ place. Somewhere closer to school, am I right? What if you could live in a pleasant little townhouse as a smokescreen for its real purpose. You’d keep it well-stocked with first aid supplies, changes of clothes...whatever you need give a hand to someone seeking refuge. The Zsasz Family have a hideout in the city, and Jonathan’s old and current houses are useful, but if, say, my husband had someone on his trail he might not be able to get to one of them. You wouldn’t be hurting anybody. Just helping Jonathan’s other friends.”

She took the deal. Duh. It’s the cutest townhouse ever. The official story is that she won it as a second prize in a lottery. The Riddler sorted out paperwork and tax issues in her favor. Apparently he can enjoy and excel at anything he conceptualizes as a puzzle.

Tonight is the first night she’s been instructed to stay home because something is definitely going down nearby. Otherwise the short list of people who know about the place will simply let themselves in. So far she’s learned Zsaszettes can be cool big sis types if they’re not out to get you. This time Jonathan’s with her as a favor because she’s nervous.

Jonathan’s making a crow-like plague doctor mask and she’s making flashcards for an upcoming exam. They’re in her bedroom. She’s got index cards and notes and her textbook fanning out neatly made bed as she sprawls on her stomach. He’s sitting cross-legged on the floor with his materials similarly around him and discussing with her how he’s going to handle his uncle staying over for part of Winter Break.

“I mean, I like him, I just don’t want this to devolve into a sitcom. Miguel’s an anthropologist, but little does he know his nephew belongs to the strangest tribe of all!”

“I’d watch that,” Harley says. “What are you gonna give him?”

“I’d make him a mask, because people like my masks…”

“The mask you made me two years ago was indeed exceedingly fab,” Harley replies.

“But he lives out of a duffel bag most of the time. Most gifts would gather dust in a storage unit. So I’ll bake him stuff my mom used to make.”

Harley internally writhes with emotion at that. “I still can’t get over that you’re the one who made the Reader’s mask. You.”

“I’m going to give the Reader a backup book mask as a holiday gift. This mask is for me. I’m not necessarily going to use this mask, but I want something in reserve that won’t remind lots of people about that poor kid in the hospital,” Jonathan sews with a steady hand, even through tough leather. “Plague doctors had those beaks to stuff with flowers to protect them from what they thought were...
deadly smells that caused the plague rather than resulting from it. I’m immune to the fear gas I’m working on, so, like, symbolism.”

“You want something that still helps you tap into your inner wildness.” It’s kind of weird, but then again Harley dreams of diamond-patterned spangled doublets and bells and her Columbina, Harlequin’s own love when the mischief is said and done. “If one day I ask you to help me tap into mine? Remember when you helped me dress as Persephone?”

“I do, and I would. Speaking of nature girls, when are you going to ask Ivy out?”

Then the doorbell rings. She and Jonathan both drop what they’re doing and run downstairs. Victor Zsasz, who Harley’s never seen in person before, is supporting the Reader, who’s keeping pressure on a long horizontal cut on his chest using the remains of someone’s shirt. His mask has specks of blood on it.

“Guest room,” the Reader says weakly. It’s on the first floor and contains closets full of supplies. Harley fetches one of the kits as Zsasz and Jonathan get him onto the bed.

“Are you comfortable with Harley being here?” Jonathan asks.

“Fine, face fine, not real name…” the Reader grabs Zsasz’s wrist. “No narcotics.”

“We all know, don’t worry.” With surprising gentleness given his reputation, Zsasz helps the Reader strip to the waist, including his mask. Jonathan carries the clothes away to clean and the bloody rag to destroy. He has more blood-removal experience than Harley does and she doesn’t feel up to a lesson right now. Plus he made the mask and knows best how to make it look like new again. Thankfully only the Reader’s run-of-the-mill clothes were damaged, not any of his signature items.

Harley tries not to gawk, and to focus on handing Zsasz items on request. But the Reader is very pretty, an innocent sort of boyish woodland-creature pretty. She isn’t attracted to him in the sense of wanting to do anything with that realization of prettiness. His personality wouldn’t mesh well with hers, and that’s a big part of attraction for her. She’s just...impressed.

He notices her looking at him and gives her a half-smile even as he hisses at the sting of Zsasz cleaning the wound. “You may refer to me as ‘Nico’ in situations where using Reader wouldn’t work. Are you going to call our doctor, Victor?”

Zsasz peers closely at the cut. “It’s really shallow. Don’t think it needs stitches. Might scar, though. You know I know. He wasn’t lying when he said this is meant to be a ‘tickle’. By his standards, it is. I think you amused him enough to say things other people would be gutted for.”


“This guy thought he could reason with Joker.”

“I wanted to give him an opportunity to…”

“Yeah, yeah, and the only reason Nygma didn’t handcuff you to a chair until you quit the notion was because you agreed to bring me along. Not even one of my crew. Me.” Zsasz unzips his jacket, which has some blood on it as well, and hands it to Jonathan. This reveals that Zsasz gave up his long-sleeved shirt and has been reduced to a black tee. Which reveals the tally. The famous tally. Up and down both arms, dizzying in implications.

Harley can’t quite breathe, and she slips away to the living room and calm herself.
Jonathan follows. “It’s a lot at once, I’m guessing.”

“Reader looks so innocent, and he thought he could go after Joker like Joker’s a regular person, and he’s being taken care of by someone who carves each kill into his own body.

“I would hug you,” Jonathan says. Their old catchphrase.

“Our city is both evil and sick.” She says both because they’re not synonymous. “You people are so nice to me and I forget what else you do. Then when I remember I’m not bothered much, but I’m bothered by how much I’m not bothered.”

Jonathan hugs a couch cushion as substitute. She does as well. “Remember when we were first getting to know each other and I was worried I could never be a psychiatrist because I’m messed up in the head, and you gave me a mood ring and lent me a book by a psychiatrist who herself is mentally ill?” Jonathan takes his keys out of his pocket and jingles them. He’s incorporated the mood ring into his keychain.

Harley breathes. In. Out. “You know, maybe someone could reason with the Joker, but they’d have to know him better.”

“Maybe.”

“How well do you know Ivy? Do you know what kind of date she might like?”

*****

Dr. Harleen Quinzel, psychotherapist, enters her friend’s private office at lunchtime, locks the door behind her, sits on the other side of his desk, then starts on her custom-grown salad.

Dr. Jonathan Crane, psychiatrist, pauses in eating his pasta. “When were in high school, I had to sneak you pieces of fruit. When did you get all healthy? It must have been our junior year at college.”

“Yeah, after Ivy and I got serious. All it took was magic plants. You got salt?”

”No, sorry. How’s Ivy?” Jonathan’s office is soundproof.

“She’s working on a giant pitcher plant. One you could drown someone in.”

“There are much more efficient ways.”

“Yeah, but it’s funny. I’m gonna tell Batman that next time, he can be the one to play along with Jerome’s crush on him - because Jerome totally does have a crush on him too - to try to find out his plans.” She calls the Joker his birth first name in sessions, and the habit has stuck. It also takes some of the danger and mystique out of him.

“I’m certainly not inclined to do the ‘manipulate someone’s desire for me’ thing ever again,” Jonathan commiserates before taking another bite. “I can’t believe the things I do to keep that rodent off Ivy’s back.”

“Bats aren’t rodents. Rodents have constantly growing teeth.”

“You spend too much time with R&R. Still.” Harley isn’t the only one to refer to Riddler and Reader that way, but she does so with the most enthusiasm.

Jonathan takes off his glasses to clean them. There’s a bit of saliva still. He genuinely wants ninety-
eight percent of the people he treats to get better, even when they spit at him. If it wasn’t for him agreeing to be Riddler’s inside man at Arkham, and Harley agreeing to be Batman’s inside woman, the two of them would probably have set up their own ‘supervillain’ voluntary clinic by now. Only Harley and Jonathan have shared their double agent status with each other, to keep the situation contained.

Jonathan just says, “We are who we are. It’s not all sunshine for me, either. Jervis Tetch is tetchy today.”

She groans. “I don’t care if your dad spoke British. If you make that joke one more time, I will beat you with a giant mallet.”

*******

Dr. Crane’s patient-seeing office is right next to his private, administration-work office. They used to be one large office but he brought in contractors to have a wall built between them. Very few people know he’d also had a few other remodels done as well. For example, his patient-seeing office is extremely well-soundproofed, to a much higher volume than his other office or any of the therapy rooms.

There’s not much rhyme or reason in Gotham over who comes to Arkham rather than Blackgate. This annoys him, and Reid is livid whenever it comes up in conversation. There’s a rhythm, though, and Nygma tends to be able to predict who psychiatrist Dr. Crane will have access to, and who will be under the purview of Cobblepot’s mole in Blackgate instead.

Jonathan opens the door of his patient-seeing office and smiles politely at the escort. (Nefyn would laugh immaturely at the word choice.) “Thank you, Mr. Zhang. You don’t need to waste your time standing there. I’ll call for someone when Mr. Browning and I are finished getting acquainted.”

Browning’s uniform is tight on him across the chest, due to expansive pectoral muscles. He wonders if this is why Browning follows Jonathan and takes a seat in the comfy chair with such confidence. Joint efforts from Crane and Quinzel - plus two nurses who are decent people and will be spared should purges of the medical staff ever be necessary - have failed to get the Arkham uniform changed from a cartoonish jailbird aesthetic. At least a few things were changed in the wake of Cobblepot & Nygma vs. Arkham Board of Directors, such as better-enforced rules for the conduct of guards. Also Jonathan’s pushed through more consistent exercise time in a fenced-in yard for those exhibiting good behavior.

He has his own methods for the very poorly behaved, especially when Nygma asks.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Browning. I’ve been over the notes from your trial as well as Dr. Quinzel’s evaluation from yesterday. She’s agreed to continue as your therapist. As your psychiatrist, my job is to determine what medication would work best for you in improving your quality of life and ability to...properly interact with others.”

“You mean be a good little boy,” Browning says, sneering.

“‘Good’ is a relative term.” Jonathan’s suit jacket hangs loosely on him. Nefyn says his suit would look much better if he got it properly tailored, but this way it has deeper pockets and it’s less obvious when they’re full.

“Quinzel’s easy on the eyes, but all this stuff’s a crock.” Considering that Browning was caught in the act of feeling up and chewing on a terrified hostage, the comment about Harley is only going to make this more satisfying.
Jonathan reaches into his pockets like it’s a nervous gesture. “I was once extremely ill myself, and therapy helped me. Don’t knock it. Have you heard of gestalt therapy? It’s when you externalize portions of your mind, often by role-playing, in order to get to grips with it. I quite liked that one.”

“Are you going to prescribe me anything or not?”

Suddenly, Jonathan takes a long step and leans down, gets right into Browning’s space. “Dr. Quinzel told me you told her about your work with Riddler.”

Browning flattens himself against the back of the chair. “Yeah, she told me to tell her all about how I got here. What’s it to you?”

Jonathan grabs his left wrist and counts the pulse. It’s sloppy, but he’ll have some idea of the baseline from normal emotional reaction. “You signed a contract with him saying you would not breathe a word. Ever. Did you think getting arrested rendered that void?”

“What the fuck?”

“Shh, save your vocal cords. This is a new version I’m figuring out - just the right dose and you remember nothing from during or immediately beforehand except a powerful sense of dread, but if you get hit with too much there’s permanent damage…”

Jonathan doesn’t technically need his old mask to do this, just as he needs no gas mask against this chemical agent. But it’s his own messed-up bit of roleplay, and the Scarecrow influences his thoughts less the rest of the time if he gives it its moments. A split second after he puts on the mask, he also whips out the mini aerosol can and sprays Browning in the face.

He gets some good video footage, which he narrates. He and Nygma will watch it and a few other recent ones when they get together next weekend. Browning’s psyche should remain intact for now, but if he hasn’t yet developed a subconscious aversion to talking about the Riddler, Jonathan can up the dose another time.

Jonathan injects Browning with the antidote and quickly hides the syringe as he comes around. “A bit rude of you to fall asleep right in my office,” he chides in a teasing manner.

Browning’s confidence is in tatters and his eyes dart around wildly. “Where’d, where’d the monster go?”

“No monsters in here but you and me.” Jonathan goes and slides up the glass part of his special barred window - job perks include fresh air, yay - while he keeps talking like everything’s normal. The fumes have to disperse before the next person comes in. Not everyone contains both poison and cure.

****

Beep. Beep.

Everything hurts and that beeping is annoying Ed.

Beep.

“Make the beeping stop,” he croaks.

“I could, but I’d have to kill you,” Jonathan says. Ed would know his deadpan anywhere. “It’s your heart monitor. You’ve been out for ten hours.”
“Glasses?”

“Here you go.” Jonathan slides them onto his face. Then he offers a drink of water with a straw in it. “Do you remember what happened?”

Ed drinks before answering. “Whether before you or behind, I leave things blank within your mind.”

“Amnesia. It might come back to you later. Batman punched you a lot for information. Apparently killing is unacceptable but violating the Geneva Convention is hunky-dory.” Jonathan takes out his phone. “We’re in the Casa del Zsasz medbay. Dr. Kali’s newly hired on-call nurse knows her stuff, made everything go smoother than Kali doing it all herself. Let’s call your husband so you can reassure him.”

“Did I tell him what he wanted to know?”

“Reid determined that Batman thought you’d abducted Lucius Fox when in fact you were trying to rescue him. He arrived on the scene, cleared up the misunderstanding, read Batman the riot act, and Batman slinked off to find Fox with the information Reid provided.” Jonathan rolls his eyes. “Though Batman did apologize and offer his assistance in getting you to medical care. Batman didn’t know you already have damage from child abuse from a young age and that beating you up therefore has greater consequences. The plan wasn’t to give you a flashback that he didn’t recognize and also render you unconscious. There’s very little understanding of psychology in this place.”

Ed remembers writing to Spencer about the two-day coma Ed’s father put him in, and Spencer’s reply being horrified and full of information about hotlines and centers. Sweet of him. Spencer was so innocent back then in some ways, despite having to raise himself after his father left and (late, beloved) Aunt Diana really started to suffer. “Is Foxy okay?”

“He’s okay. Dehydrated and a bit banged up, easy fixes. Harley checked for me. Alfred Pennyworth signed him out. Ring a bell?”

“It does, but it’s a distant bell.”

“Don’t worry about it. Reid hopes you don’t mind he told him. He wants Batman to think before he concusses. Thistle helped him bring you back.” There’s been speculation whether Spencer and Thistle have become more than purely platonic or not since she broke up with Teeth. Ed is happy not to pry. He thinks of Spencer’s sex drive like a Yeti: often doubted to exist, but with compelling if vague evidence of occasional appearances and surprising power.

“It’s fine. I like the idea of the Caped Crusader having a moral crisis. Hand me the phone, son.” Ed realizes what he’s just said and tries to figure out how to backpedal. They now acknowledge how they feel about each other, but it’s a silent acknowledgement for the most part, and he’s not sure if Jonathan’s in a receptive mood for such an overt reference.

Jonathan shushes him, makes the OK sign, and hands him the phone.

Chapter End Notes

- Thank you so much for reading and especially for commenting! This started out as wanting to account for the relationship between Ed and Jonathan we glimpse in "Inches and Miles", then became an exercise in taking Jonathan from screaming in a hospital
bed to a damn good psychiatrist/medical researcher who is also a supervillain, but one we can root for as a story protagonist even if we sometimes abhor something he does. I'll let you decide how well I've done.

- Matthew Gray Gubler's first film role was Nico, the main intern in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, a Wes Anderson film.

- I don't hate Batman. It's simply that all the POVs in this chapter are from his enemies, to varying degrees of malice. I figure Bruce was so worried about Lucius that he was more brutal than usual, and Ed's fondness for Lucius can easily be interpreted as scary stalker behavior if you're used to thinking of him as the deranged Riddler. I do agree with Jonathan's callouts. At least Daredevil has lie-detecting powers to make it less of a crapshoot. It wouldn't have been Ed's first choice for Spencer to reveal that detail about his past, but it's done, and he understand why Spencer did it.

- More either coming soon or already there for you to begin reading.

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