Bastards Deranged

An "anonymous" tip to Commissioner Gordon forces him to arrest the most wanted criminal in Gotham, The Batman. Bruce is locked in a world of pill popping madness and therapy. Arkham Asylum's star patient, The Joker decides to lend a helping hand.
"Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." – Measure for Measure (Act II, Scene i)

Daytime raids and nighttime running, hours spent sitting and waiting, always ended here: Behind a desk covered in forms, a pot of bitter coffee, and a smoking ashtray. Gray ribbons curled around his face, hugging the black-frame glasses that had slid to the tip of his nose. Bleary eyes read lines of Times New Roman till it all morphed into a forgotten language. He shouldn't have to be the one—no, no one should have the burden of hunting down his colleague and old friend, Gotham's Dark Knight.

All the masked man tried to do was revive justice and bring some peace to this once great city. Now some days he wondered, maybe it would have been better to be honest with the public and told them how one terrorist had taken the best of us and tore him down. Sure, he could overlook the loss of a few crooked cops, but the citizens should know Harvey Two-Face Dent could never do what this vigilante had done. Dent had accomplished a lot, but what kind of world do we live in if the best solution was to sweep his sins under the rug and give him a eulogy full of praise when that man had held a gun to his son's head? True madness when he left the boy's life up to a flip of a coin. How much longer was Jim expected to lie, each false truth testing his gag reflex?

Incessant ringing startled him from his thoughts; the black ants scampering across the white sheets slowed and came into focus as words. The progress report on the apprehension of the caped crusader stared blankly back at him. The phone was hidden under more papers which he pushed aside; a healthy stack splashed to the floor.

Sighing, he rested the receiver against his ear. "Commissioner Gordon."

The signal crackled, as the caller took their sweet time replying.

"Commissioner Gordon," he repeated, frustrated.

The subtle restraint of giggles filtered through the receiver like static. "Evening, Com-missioner," a nasally vibrato slithered inside Gordon's ear; the tiny hairs there shivered and shied away.

"Who is this?" he asked even though deep down the answer was clear.

"Now, now, is that any way to greet the, uh, crim-in-al mastermind that, heh, launched your career?" the voice chided, sending Gordon into a mild panic.

"How- how did you get this number?" Trace it. Alert someone. Make sure Barbara and the kids are alright. Lock the doors.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry over such things. Mystery is a lot more fun, wouldn't you agree? I'm calling to perform my, ah ha, civic duty."

He would have to alert Arkham, if the mad man was even still there, and put together another special task force. Better to chase a real villain and not a victim of the media.

"Gooooordy Gord Gord Gordon... aren't you dying to know just what I have to say?"
The Freak's too smart for a trace, Gordon hated to admit. "Bomb threat?"

Silence... Then a repelling cackle erupted over the phone. If he could, he'd rip the phone from its jack and pretend this damn call never took place. Cold sweat surfaced along his salt and pepper hairline; a trembling clench in his stomach. Gordon was a brave cop, one of the best, and no bad guys haunted his sleep. That was until months ago, when this clown proved all of his efforts useless. Made him a joke. Not even Batman could truly defeat the psychopath, and that little known fact terrified him.

Laughter subsiding, the voice tsked in childish glee. "A bomb- a bomb threat?! Tempting but no, no... hmm no. See, I'm being a good boy here at the ole loony bin. Doctor Pretty is saying I'm making a reeeaaaal improvement. I'm a changed man already! Be-sides... I ring the newsies for business and pleasure. This, no, this is more of a, uh, personal call."

"What do you want?" He heaved a major sigh of relief. As long as The Clown's still locked up, a drag off his cigarette and a phone call from a monster was endurable. Fresh nicotine clung to his gums while he listened carefully and quietly thought of ways to get in contact with-

"Gordy, as a, uh, responsible citizen and law en-for-cer, I think you'd like to be clued in on some exciting info..."

"And it is...?"

Gordon could only sickly imagine the Knave as he delivered a wet pop of his scarred mouth and smirked.

"I know... who The Batman is."

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"Mr. Reese, maybe it's time to review the numbers from this past year." Lucious Fox, in a crisp brown tweed suit and quirky bow tie, nodded towards the small pencil pusher. The man returned the gesture and -suitcase shielding his chest- stood at the head of the conference table. Sweat glands working overtime; drops seeping down the contours of his round face. He started with a stutter and fumbling coordination. Fox was the only one of the suits to notice Reese's flickering prey eyes across the room, weary of the farthest filled chair.

Gotham's favorite son sat at the end: Shiny black shoes and gun metal gray Armani legs propped atop the table, and battered hands clasped on his slow-rising chest. His soft snores rumbled as a soundtrack underneath Reese's presentation. Considering the billionaire's playboy reputation, many of the much older board members tolerated the Wayne heir's lack of business etiquette. (Reese's acceptance was, well, obvious.) Little did they know the reality of the vivid pictures of blood and chaos, death and gunfire, and crimson smiles emitting chilling laughs spinning behind his dark eyelids. His exterior was smooth and peaceful, betraying the nightmares. To Bruce, this regular business meetings turned out to be the most precious sleep of the day, since Alfred was so keen on waking him for normality's sake.

"So as you can see, if we increase resources in market trading and put less efforts in-"

Double doors snapped open to the liking of thunder. Executive bigwig heads turned in unison; eleven brains thinking and acting as one. The lone billionaire slept on, shifting and groaning in his slumber. The busted threshold spewed forth blue clad officers with sidearms drawn and at the ready. Screams trilled from the women as each full length window shattered; black Swats swinging inside the conference room and kneeling into position on the glittering industrial carpet.
The screams jerked Bruce into consciousness -ready to fight- and received the cops yelling and his colleagues cowering under the table, frozen like the authoritative shouts demanded. Fox stood amongst the commotion, shocked and angry. His wide eyes locked onto the last remaining Wayne, who struggled to appear just as surprised and confused as the rest of the board. The pair exchanged knowing looks before one of the cops wrenched Bruce's arms behind his back and smashed the billionaire's face into the table top. He winced but didn't resist. Perfectly silent. Handcuffs snapped onto his wrists; guns aimed at his head, knowing fully well of the potential of just who they were dealing with. Some of the officers found it hard to believe, but none of them were taking any chances.

Gordon was the last to enter the chaotic atmosphere, taking in the despairing sight of his unmasked partner pinned and cuffed. Never in a million years would he have considered Bruce Wayne to be the hero Gotham didn't deserve. It goes to show how much this day shouldn't have come. He couldn't wrap his mind around it, but Mayor Garcia was more than happy to receive the news (though Gordon didn't deliver it) and no doubt ensure himself another term in office- just like The Joker was exceedingly cooperative in helping unmask the Batman via telephone.

"Let's put this tax dollars at work, shall we?"

What hope would be left for this city now? So little people realized this simple act of arrest would, in the long run, do more harm than good.

Wayne was forced to stand by the officer holding him which he subsequently stumbled, but he paid no aversion to it. With only a calm, serious expression, Batman acted the way Gordon imagined he would: The stoic wall he'd come to know. Gordon sauntered across the crunching shards and stood beside Bruce, searching his eyes for that familiarity. There, amongst his dark irises was a cold glint he'd seen time and time again on the roof of the station. So it was true...

Maybe this time, Gordon wanted to see him go against the book, to see the man fight, to run, to hide and save himself for once.

An older exec, with a white horseshoe tuft of hair, gathered the courage and peeked his head over the table's surface. "Mr. Wayne, just what is going on here?" His voice was stern, almost scolding having assumed the playboy partied with the wrong people and furious to have put the company at risk for one of his wild romps.

Bruce's sealed lips thinned, turning away and accepting his fate with an air much akin to shame. It was past the point of playing dumb, and the truth would be smeared across every entertainment medium before he was even shoved in the back of a squad car. For this reason, he lightly tugged on his restraints as a signal to get on with this.

"See to them, you're just a freak... like me."

"Sir?" Wheeler flanked Gordon's left, waiting for orders. She understood the commissioner's drawn face and unsure stance, still fixated on Wayne and waiting to wake up from this weird dream. But everything The Clown had said checked out, as strange as that was, and an arrest had to be made.

Seconds were taken for Gordon to prepare himself for what had to be done. Sometimes the system both he and Batman believed in didn't work as it should. He cleared his throat and shook away the guilt nailing him to his spot. "... Mr. Wayne," he started and took the hold of Bruce's cuffs and placed a hand on his broad shoulder. Another fallen hero.

"You are under arrest for several counts of assault and battery, reckless endangerment... damage to city property, and total disregard of the law, and... six counts of homicide: One of which for the
murder of the late District Attorney, Harvey Dent—" Gasps ensued, as Fox collapsed in his seat, a
resigned frown on his face. With a grind of his teeth, Gordon begrudgingly tacked on, "And for
masquerading as the masked vigilante, The Batman."

Quietly he muttered for Wayne to hear, "I'm so sorry, Bruce."

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In a padded cell across town, laughter dissected the walls and echoed throughout the asylum's empty
halls. The howl orchestrated a chorus of moans and screams and sobs. The Clown Prince of Crime
led as maestro, eager to embrace his muse, The Bat.
"Name?"

"Bruce Wayne."

"Age?"

"Twenty eight."

"Wow... jumping off buildings and beating up bad guys has treated you well."

His lips pursed, blocking the crude remarks ready to serve as backlash for the nurse's musings. Even though the courts were ready to admit it, Commissioner Gordon and Alfred accepting it, and the new D. A., too, Bruce Wayne wouldn't come forth and state he was the Batman.

"Mr. Wayne, would you be so kind as to step behind there and remove your clothing." The young nurse directed him to a partition. Her blushing went ignored, and his steps towards the little privacy were automatic.

The past month had been more or less like a dream. Over a week held at the MCU -evacuated of other criminals- and watched closely and taunted like an animal on display at the zoo. "Bastard! Cop killer! Freak!" His high profile case was pushed ahead over less entertaining trials: Media vultures flocked and tore apart the Wayne name; headlines and news feeds he was grateful to not have to witness first hand. Then there was the public, the people he had fought for every single night of his life since he returned to Gotham. Their angry shouts greeted him with flashing bulbs as police and an over paid team of lawyers acted as his human shield, stalking up the courthouse steps. Pleading guilty by reason of insanity (the lawyers' tactic) and apparently "acting alone" slapped him with an indefinite stay in Arkham.

Bruce never had to take the stand.

From the courtroom to the asylum to this examination room; the vigilante's personal Twilight Zone.

"Mr. Wayne, how are you getting along back there?" His trance disintegrated; head swiveling and eyes absorbing his surroundings. He shook his head, grimacing.

"Just-" His throat surged with vibrations to fight back the swelling lump forming there. "Just a minute." He quickly stripped off his black suit -folding it carefully to eat up the minutes ticking by- and was left with black socks and matching silk boxers. He stepped around: Head down, clenched jaw, and high cheekbones were more prominent with his stoicism.

Nothing he was currently "feeling" could be considered anywhere close to an emotion. Yes, this day was eventually bound to happen, when the Batman could be no more, and he thought he would be prepared for it months ago like when Harvey claimed his title but after Rachel...

Rachel... no-... No, she wasn't to be thought of.

The nurse didn't notice the flash of fury that uglided his face as she went about the examination: Blood pressure, reflexes, breathing, heart beat, all that fun stuff she never really enjoyed performing on the patients here but since it was handsome billionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne, and the crime fighter,
Batman standing half-naked before her, she could definitely make an exception. Hiding her schoolgirl grin, she jotted down notes behind her clipboard.

Bruce wanted to hang up the cape and cowl in his old age, not to be taken into police custody. An "Anonymous call," Gordon had told him during the first interrogation. Beside himself, only three other people knew: Alfred, Lucius, and Ra---. Oh wait... Coleman Reese...

She marked on the medical form's sketch of a man's silhouette where on Bruce's body had cuts and scars so the staff could keep track if any new injuries occur (Self-inflicted or otherwise); Arkham did have its... incidents.

Coleman Reese, that fucking worm. "And after I saved his life!"

He turned slowly for her, stopping when he was told. Such a pale, finely sculpted physique shouldn't be so scarred and bruised. "A pity," she thought, making the last few dashes on the sketch's shoulder blade. "Alllrighty... now, Mr. Wayne, as a precaution for the safety of our staff and patients, I need to check you for any weapons or other contraband."

Bruce, uncomfortable with having his body poked and prodded, frowned at this and met the nurse's gaze. "I was checked by the police; you can go through my clothes if you like..."

She bit down on her lip to stifle a giggle. "A different, ahem, place..." Her pale eyes sank down his body.

"Where could-" Eyes bulged and thin lips stretched in panic, disgusted. His whole body had gone rigid. His buttocks automatically clenched.

"I'm sorry, it's hospital procedure." She smiled, setting the clipboard aside. "Please drop your shorts and bend over."

*Batman jumped off skyscrapers.*
*Batman played chicken with mac trucks with him only on a motorcycle.*
*Batman charged at men with guns and knives.*
*Batman was capable of anything.*
*Only bats frightened Batman.*

Body tensed to the point of stone, he shambled to face the opposite direction. His thumbs hooked and lingered under the waistband of his shorts. A poster of the proper way to wash your hands was pinned on the eggshell white wall: Cartoonish hands under a stream of water -smothered in soap- scrubbing each other- and rinse. This revolved around his fore thoughts; he focused solely on that every day habit.

"Relax, Mr. Wayne. This is nothing to be embarrassed about." A latex glove tugged and snapped onto a delicate wrist.

"Jesus!" he hissed; face, beetroot. For curiosity's sake, he chanced a look over his shoulder so he would know when the time came. "What the- is that a phone?!"

Pink blooming within her cheeks, she shoved the device back in her pocket. "Sorry..."

Agitation blistered across his muscles and pooled in his shaking fists. Whatever happened to professionalism? Whether he's Bruce Wayne or Batman, he's always the sideshow act. There's no escaping the critical stares and flapping mouths.

"Okay, please bend over and spread your legs."
Bruce gnawed on his bottom lip and flexed his hands in and out of fists. He'd report this nurse and she'd probably lose her job, but the damage was done.

"If it makes you feel any better, your friend did it without a problem. He dropped his pants and touched his toes before I said anything." She laughed, recalling the memory.

"My friend?" The only people considered friends were Alfred, Lucius, and Gordon.

"Patient J. It was pretty funny. He hopped around in all his glory and-" A tear strayed from her eye. "He even- he even sang a little about you."

His curious expression soured. Hate simpered just past his lips. "He is not my friend."

"Oh?" The nurse frowned. "He said you two were close..."

Bruce rolled his shoulders -visibly distracted by the "non-name" drop- and bent forward. ". . . of course, he would."

"I don't- I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers, no- no. No. See, you... complete me..."

"Of course, he would..."

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Flickering fluorescence humming a constant, numbing tune casted faint shadows ahead of the small group as they shuffled along the cracked tile hall. A Doctor whose name he didn't quite catch led the pack, listing off rules and spewing general information about how the institution ran, meal times, etc. Bruce followed him robotically, wearing an unflattering orange jumpsuit: "Wayne" stitched over his heart and "92071" stretched across his shoulder blades. Two heavy-set orderlies clipped Bruce's slippered heels. Paint chipped steel doors lined their path; Dark, crazed eyes watched through small, chicken-wired plates of glass. Others were empty, just lit blank pieces of padded wall. Ghosts of forgotten people tittering away in corners, some pacing, others playing along with their fantasies and perpetuating their sickness.

Bruce struggled to keep his faraway gaze on the floor: One foot gliding past the other, but he couldn't help but torture himself with sightseeing. Moans and cackling and cries found usually in a haunted house attraction swelled into fruition all around him. These were the people he pitied the most, despite most being murderers, rapists, and the like; if you didn't have your mind, what did you have?

These people locked behind doors and forced to bask in their misery were, to Bruce, this generation's martyrs. Out of their control, mental illness sparked from disillusion when that reality was rejected, so they desperately tried to reclaim it. Isolated, fractured human beings and now... Bruce was counted as the rest of them.

"Ah here we are..." The white coat came to a halt in the farthest wing in front of a padded cell, big enough for two but only one bed was set to the left; toilet, sink, and a shiny surface acting as a mirror. The high priority criminally insane were given the same luxury as the regulars, if you didn't consider privacy a luxury. Instead of a solid door, perforated plexiglass created the entire front wall for several cells down and across, designed to watch his every move."Mr. Wayne, do you have any questions before we part ways?"

"Yes, why am I here? How could I be here? I'm not crazy. Batman isn't crazy. Will you please let me
"Can I call Alfred and tell him not to come visit? He can't see me like this. Am I going to rot here? Am I as far as possible from that painted maniac?"

"None," he murmured.

Smoker's chomps flashed brightly at the billionaire, and the doctor turned to unlock the door with a key card and to punch in the code. Still the Batman, Bruce noted 8278 out of habit.

"Quite the security," he commented, wondering if being conversational would ease his nerves.

"Actually... the hospital was able to afford these measures with a more than generous donation from the Wayne Foundation." The doctor had his back to him, so Bruce couldn't tell whether he was being mocked. Maybe. Probably.

His calm face flushed, concluding that his theory was quite wrong, talking didn't help.

"We'll leave you to make yourself comfortable." The doctor stepped aside to usher his new, most promising patient inside the small room. "Michael and Jeremy will be back to escort you to dinner in a few hours, and I will see you for our first session Thursday."

Bruce drifted past, committing to this surreality was an out of body experience. The door slid and locked in place.

Just the beginning.

Sensing he was at last alone, he settled onto the edge of the thin mattress and tested the lack of bounce. Bleach, citrus disinfectant, and floral detergent assaulted three of his five senses, burning the edges of his pristine mask. Something dark and crippling lingered just beyond his mind's reach.

Despite everything he's done and tried to do for this city, Gotham got what it wanted; what the masses howled for...

A caged Bat.
A Clown and a Scarecrow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Clown and a Scarecrow

6:00PM, feeding time at the fucking zoo.

"Boys, could we perhaps, uh, pick up the pace? I've gotta -heh heh- dinner date. Can't have the lady waiting, now could we? Skip, yeah? Let's skip!" The wiry gentleman launched into long, dramatic skips: Popping bounces, swinging arms, and roller coaster humming. His personal set of babysitters broke into a sprint after their dirty blond charge. They all but tackled him: Each latching onto an arm and slowing. "Aw, you guys are no fun," he grumbled with a pouty, scarred lip.

"Sanity has yet to make an impression, I see?"

"Oh you would certainly know, Doc." The Clown's yellowed teeth stretched between the gnarled skin tracing up his cheeks. A genuine acknowledgment for the only other person within this nuthouse worth having a decent conversation with.

Ex-staff member and Asylum head, Doctor Jonathan Crane strolled towards him from the opposite direction with one lightweight orderly; the smallest size jumpsuit hanging off his skeletal form, answering why such little security. A natural smirk surfaced across his too pretty face. "Skipping is very unbecoming of you."

"Is it?" He held back a moment and frowned. "I figured if I, ah, started first," he paused to moisten his lips. "You'd join me, and- and then we would get to the, uh, Emerald City in no time and get you a brain right-quick, Scarecrow." Giggles bubbled through his mock sincerity.

"Ha, ha, ha," Jonathan responded dryly. "Are we finding you the testicular fortitude to go with that courage?" His expensive, rectangle frame glasses encased the malicious glint shining within those baby blues.

The trio of orderlies allowed the pair to fall in step with each other; the asylum knew better than to interrupt them when they were together. They plotted nothing but merely talked and more frequently now, did such things in the dark everyone knew better than to discuss, because honestly what else was there to do? Late night rendezvous were a great way to pass the time.

"How was art therapy?" Crane prompted, truly interested to know how the Joker's day was going. Despite the rapid change of psychiatrists for the man, one doctor -the best doctor- held a steady rapport and constantly compounded notes in his head on every move and word the clown offered. That first night when the Joker paid him a friendly visit, Jonathan was sure it was to benefit his study. The Joker was the most worthy case of his time...

...and not a bad lay either if Jonathan cared of such things. Merely a means to an end.

Tracing the interior of his scars -tongue rolling under the skin in the most provocative way - the clown sighed and shook his head, recalling the waste of a perfectly good forty-five minutes. "They won't let me use red anymore... my favorite color, too... well, one of them..." Next time he would just have to improvise. Where, oh where, on his person could he find the color, red?
What. A. Thinker.

"Is that because-"

"I didn't know you wore bug eyes..." he mused, butchering Jonathan's complete train of thought.

Adjusting the wire frames better on the bridge of his nose, the doctor grimaced at the bitter taste the clown knew so well to resurrect. "I wear them all the time. You know this."

Hands at eye level -thumbs and pointers kissing- the Joker stared through the hole and alternated squinting each eye shut. "I am, ah... dominant in my left," he snickered at the fluster in Scarecrow's normally pallid cheeks. The pretty boy absolutely loathed when he expressed boredom in his presence. "Now less about you and more about my new prison buddy. He landed in the cuckoo's nest just a few hours ago." A shiver ran through him as he licked his chapped lips.

"About time," was all Jonathan said in response. Babbling on about the Batman struck at the most inane times with the knave, and he had had his fill. He would get to the the juicy specimen that is Bruce "The Bat" Wayne, but in the meantime, this clown had more to offer than just some obsession over a rich orphan with a hero-complex.

The Joker kicked in the swinging doors to the cafe with a loud bang, snatching the spotlight. A giddy hostility infected the air around him.

"Was that really necessary?" Jonathan muttered and slipped past his colleague. Casting a careless glance at most of his old patients scarfing down in huddles, he headed towards the line and grabbed a tray.

Muddy eyes searched, scanned, and inevitably sagged. He swore under his breath and dragged himself over to where Crane waited patiently for salad.

"He's not here yet," he spat, brushing past and heading straight to the crowded section for sloppy joes. By the time he approached, it was deserted and all the crazies packed themselves around the salad bar. Twitching, suffocating bodies made Jonathan's skin itch. He scowled, elbowing for an inch of space. Inescapable whiffs of their united stink rubbed off on his skin. The worker couldn't have slid him the styrofoam bowl of meager greens fast enough.

"Mooooore," the clown instructed on his tippy toes, leaning over the sneeze guard and looking down his nose at the ruddy-cheeked lunch lady, a mound of sauced meat dribbling from the peak and completely hiding the bottom bun.

"Word of advice..." Jonathan watched in utter disgust.

"I'm lissssstenning... that's right, Sweetums, just a lit-tle bit mooore..."

"Whatever strategy you have for the Batman, forget it." Blue eyes roamed over the selection of sub par food, sneering at the mystery goops and lethal preservatives. Not for the first time, he regretted not improving the diet plan when he was in charge, if only to eventually benefit himself.

The Joker stared at him; a crooked grin twisting his scars. "Do I really look like a guy with a plan?"

"Yes," he deadpanned and moved to the other side of the knave. Fruit or no fruit? He pondered this; his mouth worked automatically. "You become obsessive-compulsive, fixating over every detail and running through every possible scenario, making adjustments and forming back ups. What you say is 'Going with the flow' is in reality, Plan B or C and etc. But each execution is remotely the same, so for whatever you have planned, you are going to get in the way of it."
"No, no, no! That is way too much!" the clown snapped, wagging his finger. The lunch lady froze mid-scoop; eyes wide and focused just to the side of the psychopath since no one in Gotham could properly look him in the eye. In the water, no one met the large, ink pits of a coming shark. Cold and ruthless. Prey is distracted with the teeth-like holding a nice, shiny knife- and they watch there for the strike but it all starts in those dilated eyes. That will save your life. "Dorris, are you trying to ruin my girlish figure?" He latched his hand onto his sharp hip. The man wore the grotesque orange with a super model air.

"Pardon him, Marjorie." Jonathan intervened and pushed the sloppy joe ala soup into the maniac's hands.

The pair weaved around tables until they settled at an empty four-seater in the far corner, The Cool Kid's table.

The Joker poked at the russet mush, imagining krovvy-slicked brains drop drip dropping from his spork. "As you were, ah, saying?"

"Hmm?" Crane looked up from his ranch packet: Blue eyes shining and an effortless pout on his full, pink lips. The Joker's porcelain doll, and God, he was gorgeous. "Oh, right... when you did that obnoxious entrance, you were hoping for him to witness it, correct?"

Thoughts on a short leash, he nodded. "So?"

"Your showmanship got a rise out of him, and yes, he briefly fulfilled your masochistic needs... yet whatever you're trying to get from your interactions hasn't yet occurred; therego your continuing infatuation."

"Like I told you, Bats is the yin to my yang; the cheese to my, uh, macaroni; the lighter fluid to-"

"Yes, I understood the first analogy, thank you."

"So your point is?" Tongue swiping erratically.

"My point is you dedicated a slew of terrorist attacks to the man. He hates you. I bet as soon as he got the verdict, his mind went immediately to you-"

"Aw, you think so?" the clown purred, batting his lashes.

Jonathan prodded at his meal with a sardonic grin. Would a burlap mask be enough to keep this man's attention for more than a minute?

"Jonny, imagine what this clown is afraid of. What makes him toss and turn at night; what makes him scream. Imagine the taste of that fear." The shrill cackle echoed throughout the far corners of his mind. Damn his toxin, and damn the Batman for spraying him a concentrated dose.

"As-I-was-saying, he thought of you and rightly assumed you'd gloat and bother him. You're too easy. He'll ignore you no matter what idiocy you enact."

What Crane was saying sounded feasible, though he wouldn't dare give the smaller man the satisfaction of agreeing in the slightest. Turning the spork over and over between his fingertips, he sighed with disinterest, "What do you propose then to win my Batsy over?"

"Other than a prayer and a case of tequila? It's rather obvious: People respond to the unexpected. He expects you to be up his ass-"
A naughty rush twitched inside the clown. "Up his ass..."

"So well then don't be. Ignore him, act like he isn't even there. Eventually he'll -what's the word..."

"Break," he breathed. An impish smile tugged at the corners of his ruined mouth.

Jonathan frowned at this, quietly hating the other man's excitement. "No... crack is more fitting. It's minuscule but it's a start. Let him appreciate life here: Let the orderlies knock the rose-tinted glasses off his face, the 'doctors' will do their share and wear him down... and I thought you were intelligent enough to deduce all this by yourself."

His smooth, articulated words sliced through the air and cut like a brand new Ginsu knife; The Joker let the insult slide for this reason. Face in palm, he sat hunched onto the table: Fixing adoration on the brown feathered haircut and blue silver dollar glare, and mindlessly stirring the sloppy mess around his plate. Crane briefly regarded him before digging into his rubbery carrot slices and wet lettuce fringed with brown.

"Speak of the ark angel..." he muttered.

The Joker, having his back to the cafeteria doors, didn't see the man of the hour, the name on everyone's lips, Bruce Wayne trudge inside with clipped wings. Like the first time they met -each technically crashing the party- his heart jumped in his throat, breath hitched, and a creepy crawly squirming snowballed his guts and burned with excruciating energy. Naturally The Clown Prince craned his neck -cracking from the force- and super glued his attention to the room's newest addition.

"And you're off to a promising start," the doctor mocked and took a sip of his water. A pale, crooked middle finger provoked his guffaw. "Yes, please do."

"When I feel like it," The Joker grumbled, still watching his bat. Without his painted face, he felt safe to study the tabloid billionaire. Taking in only the tiles, Bats shuffled over to the food as wandering crazies scurried out of his path. It was hard to believe his soulmate and a pretty buffoon were one and the same. He would definitely need a closer look, for the clown's laughable sanity. Yes, he put the pieces together: Expensive toys, reported mysterious injuries, and how Bruce Wayne and the Batman showed up in Gotham around the same time and took vacations on the same schedule. The cocky bastard must think him an idiot. The Joker was many things, but a fool was not one of them.

Stiff, combed back locks of chocolate, perfectly man-scaped, model looks, impeccable body. Batman couldn't really be that clean cut. An innocent philanthropist and one of the most eligible bachelors in the U.S. of A.

"Patty Cakes would just eat him up." He bounced in his seat, giggling.

"An imaginary companion, I presume?" Jonathan was admittedly sore that the clown could adore him one minute and easily toss him aside the next, so taunting him with stabs at his sanity (which the knave heavily detested) was cathartic enough.

Yet the man didn't react the way he'd hoped: Merely dismissing him with the wave of his hand and continuing on with Wayne always in sight. "This, ah... yuppy I came across years back in the big, old rotten apple. He, uh..." His attentive posture vibrated, his legs jittering under the table. "Looks a lot like our Brucy here -a vain fucker- didn't eat real food. One sick puppy; you'd probably wanna run off and marry him." The Joker shot a smug grin over his shoulder before going back to his creeper habits. "Nice suits, coke nostrils, an artist with a nail gun, shit taste for music, liked the girls a bit too much, but tellin' me he fed his girl a urinal sponge in a fancy schmancy restaurant made up for that returning video tapes bullshit- what- what is- what is he doing?!" He spun around, frantic and...
tense. His tongue worked over his lips as fingers twitched as if making rushed key strokes. Head snapping over his shoulder like a paranoid owl. "He's leaving! How come he gets to leave with his food. How will I- how will I watch him?"

Jonathan remained silent, chewing away with amusement shining in his impossibly blue eyes. "But I get to watch this."

Of course Wayne would do all that he could to stay away from the riff raff, Joker included. Patient or not, his money had major pull here. Hell, Jonathan wouldn't be the least surprised to find a king-sized bed with goose down pillows and sheets of Egyptian cotton in the man's cell. Too bad Wayne couldn't handle the stares, he was about to miss one of the Joker's long overdue fits.

Chapter End Notes

Patty Cakes is referring to Patrick Bateman from American Psycho.
Fascinate Me

Harvard, Columbia, Ivy League diplomas decorated the walls; their cherry wood frames and glass faces catching sick light and stinging his eyes. A desk far too large for such an already small space and a plush leather chair to boot pointed to a man with no sense of balance and quite obviously overcompensating for something. Thinning gray hair clung to a pale scalp, gold rim spectacles, and a smoker's smile. "Dr. Richard Horn," the gold name plate read, reflecting a blurred abstract of Gotham's Favorite Son. Minutes ticked by; the one hour session crumbling.

"So, Mr. Wayne, may I call you Bruce?"

With some determination, bordering on obsession, and just a dash of aggravation, the inner seam in the left cuff of his orange jumpsuit appeared ragged and thread picked. A meaningless project. Picking and tugging to keep busy. His finger twirled around a particularly long strand, twining till flesh bloomed purple at the tip.

The doctor's smile withered, adjusting the fountain pen in his attentive grasp and scribbling an initial note: Patient showing signs of depression. Extroverted behavior withdrawn.

"... Bruce? Mr. Wayne?"

Sharp angles of a handsome face remained tilted downward; absorbed in the task upon his lap, he could barely feel that finger anymore. A calloused plum.

Horn cleared his throat and added apprehensively, "... Bat-man?"

Dark irises tore from their concentration to aim a smoldering glare.

He had never been saved by the man in the cowl - the closest contact being grainy black and whites, the occasional two-second video clip, witness accounts- so meeting him personally wasn't the experience he had imagined. Blistering rage bottled in ink-black pupils, repelling all those inferior to his silent intelligence and brooding temperance. Just past the glitz and glam, a monster pulsed underneath the good looks. Idiot billionaire a facade? Strong eye contact established when called upon as dual personality. Signs of extreme abhorrence for it.

At the tail end of the note, he found his grip shaking. Fear crept up behind the leather backing of his chair and seized him by the shoulders, pinning him to his seat and forcing instinct to show the doctor his critical error. "My- apologies, Bruce."

Maybe he should have rethought leaving the captured vigilante unrestrained.

"Two days being apart of the Arkham family, how are you liking it so far?"

Lips sucked gently into his mouth, his teeth ground, blood eroding from the flesh. The familiar copper tang soothing.

Horn frowned at his unresponsive patient. It was quite clear the man was thinking, but of what he couldn't tell. Possible shock? "Bruce, do you know why you're here?"

The clock moved at a snail's pace. As nicotine disintegrated from his system with each second, the ash tray hidden in his desk drawer became more and more inviting. A sigh pushed from his weak
lungs as he slipped off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. Compared to his other sessions, his notes were basically a blank page.

"Bruce, the sooner you start participating in your recovery, the more better off you'll be."

The string strangling the tip of his finger snapped and spiraled to the floor. Bruce watched with detached fascination as circulation rushed back -throbbing red- around his nail. "Recovery" fixated in his mind like a tumor waiting to bloom.

Everything beneath the storage crate by the docks was seized: Computers, the batsuit, ashes in the furnace. The bright ceiling expanse -so cold and vacant- buzzed with life. The built-in elevator easing up and down to herd and release blue coats; what used to be a quiet ride, now groans with its constant over-use. Crime scene investigators dusted for finger prints, peered at pieces of nothing through microscope eyes, and played fashion photographer with the empty cowl perched atop the perfectly arranged kevlar plates; the exoskeleton of Gotham's nightmarish stalker exposed to trigger happy flashes. The fearsome ebony wings once soaring above the city -snapping open in wind-cut glory for the vigilante's descent- wrinkled by clumsy hands stuffing the fabric in an evidence bag. A long forgotten needle holds dearly the bit of black string cut from the hero's sewn flesh; its russet tip alerts the five o'clock news. Nothing is spared. Everything must go.

Shrill rings echo off clean walls and polished floors, between panic room cracks, and under closed doors. The stark silence of a mausoleum shifted airs, reminding the occupant just how far the outside world could rattle such a delicate state of repose.

"Wayne Residence," a normally crisp, light English accent croaked into the mouthpiece. "Please no more reporters, not at this hour."

"Hey, old top."

A sigh of relief rolled off the old man's chest. "Lucius."

"Have you got the television on?"

"Unfortunately." The GCN exclusive on Batman's Secret Lair Revealed played across the small plasma in the corner of the penthouse kitchen. Thank goodness the cave as well as Wayne tower passed under the police radar. After the fact, what did it matter? Just untouched hiding places left to gather dust.

"Was there anything down there that would..."

"I'm afraid I don't know," nor did he care. None of this was right.

Fox stirred him from his thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"I wanted to check and see how you were holding up." The CEO was lucky to find the time to call now with GCPD as well as the FBI launching their own separate investigations on Wayne Enterprises. Coleman Reese, once tight-lipped and terrified, now singing like a canary. This was one spectacular mess.

"I suppose they'll lock me up as your accomplice."

"Accomplice? I'm going to tell them the whole thing was your idea."
"I'm... enduring." His wrist ached, polishing the same square of counter top for the past half hour. Needless to say, the marble was sparkling.

"How's he doing?" The question struck the loyal butler in the chest, hitching his breath. Thoughts of Master Bruce and his current predicament triggered a bitter taste and his hair a purer white. The morose ghost of himself eight years ago creeping in and settling around crippling uncertainty. A frothing anger beneath the shell, gut-wrenching thoughts of abandonment pounding inside his skull. Just an old man looking after an empty house.

"Alfred, you there?" Lucius questioned with the utmost caution. Working with Thomas Wayne for years didn't necessarily mean Lucius knew the man running his household and looking after his only son; a man who so admirably dedicated his life to the grooming of one particular legacy and considered it more than just a duty but an honour.

What would it do to that kind of man if the life he so watched over was gone? What would such a man do with himself, now that his purpose no longer could accept his help?

"Alfred?"

Dull slits stung throughout the creases of his knuckles; crimson-cracked traces of long nights spent on hands and knees scrubbing the floors to a mansion pronounced his by the state. Their reappearance over clover granite under cold kitchen lights and television glow stirred a fear his excursions through Africa in the British military could not have prepared him for.

"Alfred, you're worrying me. Should I send some help?"

"No, sir. As I've come to learn your help has done enough."

"Pardon?"

His manners would not allow the flow of blame the man on the other end of the phone so rightly deserved to be subjected to. If not for Lucius and his "Help," Master Bruce's ambitions upon returning home would have settled to sane proportions like donations to the police department instead of this... mess.

"Now if you have something to say, say it. I didn't call to start any arguments with you; I wanted to check on how you were and if you'd heard from Bruce at all."

"I haven't!" the Englishman snapped, losing grip of his short leash of composure. The cool, placid expression buckling under the building pressure and smacking tides of emotions no one but the privacy of his quarters got to see. "He won't speak to anyone- least of all of me. Whenever he bloody hell came to you, you could have said, No. He's too young- why didn't you talk some sense to him? He could have had a wife, children, a family but no you had to tell him 'how this worked and how that worked when leaping off buildings.' Why didn't you turn him away, Lucius?!"

The other end of the phone was silent, waiting for the outburst to draw to an end. The harsh words were unexpected, especially coming from the normally polite butler, and he didn't know how to take them. The troubles at Wayne Enterprises bled into the remainder of his days, draining him of the energy to deal with the emotionally unkempt around him. That's why he had originally called Alfred; to interact with someone just as level-headed as he. The two closest to the fire without breaking a sweat.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Alfred was eager for the other man's stuttered reply, so he could counter with just as much fervor. "He could have had a normal life and I-..."

"And I could have done right by his parents for once..."
A sigh filtered through the receiver, making the distance and the seclusion all the more tangible. "Bruce... he's his own man." Lucius' soothing voice failed to live up to Alfred's provocation. Turning on each other was the last thing either of the lonely men needed. "He knew what he was doing. What's going on now-" Cops on the screen played target practice with the lifetime supply of Batarangs; "The Mechanics of Batman," they called it. A queasiness befell them both. "... he knew what he was getting himself into and compared to the good he's done, he'd say this was worth it."

Neither of them full-heartedly believed that, even though it had to be said because it sounded like Bruce. A small comfort for the obvious loss. In this case the ends didn't justify the means, and there in lied the lunacy of such a noble cause. That's where the most tragic insanity stemmed. Could Master Bruce belong...

"Forgive me," the old butler eventually croaked. To whom he was truly speaking to knew nothing of the apology.

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Blackened bread sandwiched hardened cheese; for once the aroma wafting up his nostrils smelling almost edible. His stomach turned at the thought of ingesting today's lunch special -squishing between his gums and somersaulting down his throat- but by knowing he was being watched, he regretfully motioned for a helping. Gag reflex tested once the sandwich flopped onto the styrofoam plate, he pushed it to the side of his tray and bee lined for the water.

"Now Bruce," Dr. Horn's parting words lingered. "I've been informed you haven't been eating. Must I tell you to? I rather we nip this problem in the bud instead of reaching the point of needing to use a feeding tube; don't you agree?"

The logic was there; there was no denying that. Food was fuel, despite the fact that staying awake wasn't much of a feat. If anything he merely expelled all of his energy pacing around his cell and trying to ignore all of the constant noise that managed to reach his secluded area.

Turning away from the water dispencer with two full cups, he remained rooted to his spot. He had yet to pluck his eyes from the cracked floor.

"One more thing: I know no one has said otherwise to you, but here at Arkham we find it important for all our patients to be treated equally. Even though you've been generous to our institution in the past, we can't be giving you special treatment and allowing you to dine in your room is unfair and to be frank, unsanitary. Besides, a little social interaction with your peers could be crucial to your antisocial behavior. Bruce, do you know where I'm going with this?"

So now he stood with his back to the exit and shifting his weight from one foot to the other, waiting for the lunch period to end or to be struck by lightening, whichever came first. With all the beady eyes sneaking glances at him, he prayed for the latter. Growing up as Bruce Wayne throughout his school years proved to be disgustingly easy, especially when it came to making "friends." He particularly never had any trouble finding a seat at lunch.

"They'll toss you out... like a leper."

Whenever an empty seat caught his eye, the inmates at that table would swoop upon the chair like vultures and peer over their hunched shoulders as a warning to him. Just when he was about to give up, several vacant seats in the back corner gaped at him. It was an unexpected blessing, and he wondered if they conspired to squeeze like sardines and sacrifice the extra space so that none of them had to eat beside the Batman.
In either case, whatever...

Taking a few hesitant steps into the pit -holding his breath, afraid that their collective insanity could be contagious- he readjusted his posture. If Batman was who they saw and avoided, then that's who they'll get. He rather be left undisturbed to rot in his thoughts anyway. Insistent on maintaining below eye level as he weaved through the throngs -monitoring the curious stares following his path and worrying over his destination- he noticed that his goal wasn't entirely his alone. Hiding well under the sea of heads, pouring over some book, sat a scrawny brunet. Their nose so buried towards the book's spine -face obscured- he wondered if the man was actively avoiding him or just that unaware.

Seconds went by, more like minutes in this one-sided stand off and the bookworm had yet to show any signs of acknowledging the billionaire's presence. It didn't much matter then, so he set the tray down opposite of him and sat. A short and painless process. Aside from the awkwardness, this was the best location he could have hoped for: Hidden in the corner would make it difficult for the orderlies to monitor how much he ate or didn't eat rather; that way Horn had less incentive to treat him as if he were three years-old.

"I don't believe anyone permitted you to sit here." A smooth voice startled him from his thoughts. He looked up to come face to face with a medical journal.

Put off and nervous that another faceless crazy had forsaken him, but no less offended by the brazen remark, he retorted, "Not as if I'm going to hold my breath for an invitation."

"So it's to my disappointment you won't be self-asphyxiating then?" Not a beat was missed. He could hear the smirk tugging at his expense on some face he couldn't see.

Hot spikes pricked up Bruce's spine. "I don't know who you thi-"

A sigh huffed from a locked jaw; bony fingers tightening around the book's binding and promptly snapping it shut. Immaculate glasses encased a frost bitten glare. Plump lips curled into a smug grin. "Thought I'd spare us the suspense."

The anger boiling in his gut sprouted nauseous bubbles. A familiar face was absolutely the last thing Bruce wanted. Teeth gritting, he focused on taking deep breaths to settle the alarmed thrumming in his chest. Of all the opportunities to present itself the only table vacancy would of course be claimed by the Batman's first masked enemy.

Crane studied the vigilante's rigid frame and white-knuckle grip on his lunch tray. He quietly regarded the very much human creature before him. It was hard to believe this mere mortal -a playboy no less- was the cause of so many headaches. The mindless prattle about his vast fortune and spoon-fed media lines was an effortless bid to spark a migraine in the ex-doctor's mind; between the stupid publicity stunts and black-tie affairs, seriously how could he find the time to run around in a cape? Jonathan's thoughts briefly flickered to the notion that the police had apprehended the wrong guy: Bruce Wayne couldn't be the Batman, because the Batman he remembered wasn't so passive and controlled. Jonathan was still in one piece for one thing. His mind had trouble wrapping around a healthy pallor and model good looks lying hidden under all that terrible, black armor.

To be honest, it repulsed him.

Then he focused on the harsh, cold stare. How could anyone forget those hateful eyes? Nightmare flashes of leather wings and molten sulfur dripping from razor fangs; sharp talons throttling him and a demonic rasp spitting venom in his face. Crane's subtle clinging to the medical journal hid the fact his hands were shaking and his pulse sky-rocketing. Some days, especially now, the anti-psychotics just barely kept reality in place, and he cursed the one responsible.
Maybe if he just ignored him, Bruce could get this over with. He didn't like the way Crane stared daggers at him one moment, then it was as if a silent understanding consumed him and his narrowed eyes widened and whatever words he had prepared swallowed themselves back down his throat.

"Pull yourself together, Jonathan. What we saw that night wasn't real. You're acting like a sniveling child. It's all just a chemical reaction; nothing a little concentration and composure can't fix." Scarecrow's confidence wrapped itself around Jonathan's racing thoughts like a safety blanket, yet now even his efforts seemed useless and threadbare.

Scarecrow feared the Bat, too.

Bruce repeatedly glanced over his shoulder -scanning the room and the faces of its crazed occupants- and sipped from his water; the in-between spent on shredding his napkin into snowflake bits.

This didn't go unnoticed by the pair though: Scarecrow perking up and seeking solace for the technical self disgust. "Do you see that, Jonathan? Without the armour and mask, he's no more frightening than you are." Of course he knew what the man's actions meant. The conventionally attractive face etched in stone was perhaps the only sign that didn't give the vigilante away, but then again body language was everything: The Bat, if not exactly terrified and cowering in a corner as Crane would have liked, was still very much inadvertently advertising his anxiety. A less than satisfying shiver ran down Scarecrow's spine, yet Jonathan still wanted the flying rodent to leave.

"Must I be more clear?" Crane slipped his glasses off his face, his blue irises shocking under the fluorescents. His grip on the book like a shield, but his expression was the epitome of calm. "Go. Find. Another. Table, Bat-boy."

The condescending pause between words achieved the desired effect the former doctor was intending: Unconsciously, Bruce's hands tensed to form hardened fists. Scarred skin stretching over adjusting bones; subtle cracks to calm him from the much smaller man's baiting. "I'm not going anywhere," he said quickly while the soothing effect lasted.

Crane's mouth -lips previously parting to reveal an amused grin- snapped shut. The protest in him dying under the warning flexes of his enemy's large fists. "Mindless brute." Jonathan sneered at the allusions to violence. "Can't anyone utilize their minds anymore, instead of beating each other senseless?"

"The most destructive element in the human mind is fear. Fear creates aggression."

The two sharing the same brain agreed bitterly with the other; a reproachful scowl twisting his full lips. Pure, simple hatred racked his narrow shoulders as the journal drew closer to his chest, muffling the humming bird flutter battering through thin layers of flesh and fabric. His body's reactions no longer under his control. The unappreciated grips of horror increasing.


Swallowing the lump lodged in his throat, he invested all of his efforts into forcing himself utterly apathetic. The mask of carelessness not quite reaching his wavering cerulean glare. "Once upon a time, you fascinated me."

"I take it that's no longer the case?" Bruce looked up from his lunch with a reluctant huff. And he thought this petulant exchange was about over. Without use of his fists, he hadn't ever realized how exhausting dealing with his enemies was.

Jonathan's large eyes burned with a quiet rage. "No, I'm happy to say it is not."
"Good for you." Bruce poked at the brittle crust of his grilled cheese.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. It's just that a pretentious, spoiled brat screaming for attention by dressing up as a flying rat to appease his deceased parents fails to keep my interest."

A thick vein in the vigilante's neck visibly pulsed. One punch was all it'd take. Sipping in stale air through flared nostrils he hissed out, "Is that your expert opinion, Doctor?"

A miniscule victory on Jonathan's part, but he'd take whatever he could get while the clown was locked up in solitary. "Yes."

Looking away from those venomous eyes, Bruce shifted his body so he could comfortably stare at the clock hanging over the cafeteria doors. His focus divided between the minutes ticking down till he could return to his cell and the triumphant smirk sitting across from him.

Bruce wondered how out of all the good he's done, a mad man like Crane could look upon him as if were a monster.
"Forty-six bodies in blood on the ground;  
Forty-six bodies in blood...  
Take one home,  
don't tell a soul.  
Forty-five bodies in blood on the ground!"

His singing was loud and in fact merciless to the padded walls built to not only prevent the patient from causing harm to himself but to be virtually sound-proof. So it would only be natural that the clown successfully and consistently hit the wall-piercing octaves to be coffin nails in a blender to anyone in the general vicinity of solitary confinement. The guards stationed outside his door cringed at the flat notes and pitchy yowling.

"Can't we just sedate him?" One whined to the other, covering his ears.

The other, struggling to hold out longer, shook his head and winced at a particularly sour chord. "No reason to; he's not hurting anybody."

"He is," his companion groaned and shot a murderous glare at the door, too thin to block the singing. His skull pounding with the annoying travel song cast in a nauseating light. "I swear my ear drums are gonna explode."

"Trust me, I'm right there with you."

"Ooooh... thirty-two stabs wounds by my knife on John Doe;  
Thirty-two stabs by my knife...  
Send 'em to the morgue and find thirty-three more,  
Thirty- uh, hmmm..."

A harsh kick landed just beside where his bopping head rested against the door; his back absorbing the blow with an amusing jolt. The smile on his face stretched around the words with new vigor. This was one of his more favorite games when locked up and his only playmate was himself. Oh, he wasn't a selfish man -not in the slightest- so he figured why should he have all the fun? Maybe his babysitters were bored and sad and wanted to play too. All the kicks to the door confirmed all the fun they were having.

Creeping on the fifth day though -at least by his count- he couldn't help but feel a little antsy with his Batsy in the building.

"Twenty explosives packed on the bus;  
Twenty explosives I packed...  
Uh...  
Sit one here, another one there,  
Eighteen explosives will blow at the grade school-  
Ooo, that doesn't rythme too well..."
Singing passed the time quite splendidly, and when you did it no one questioned what you were
doing. No one checked up on you or had any doubts about just what you were doing. Regailing
those around him in a happy tune meant he was only one thing, Happy. That little sunshine emotion
didn't keep you wrapped up in a buckled-fabric hug and left all by your lonesome for long. No bad
thoughts could be going on when you're beltin' your heart out.

"Thirteen people I kidnapped for fun;
Thirteen people I kidnapped...
Sit one down, knock 'em around,
Twelve people I kidnapped are... are stunned!"

The doctors and nurses and orderlies assumed not a rogue thought was swimming around in that
kooky noggin of his, what with being consumed in his gift of song and all. That was the problem
with people these days: They underestimate too much for their own good and the clown did know
what was best for his fellow man. Those in his line of work had to have great people skills, after all.
Ya gotta have that little something to bring to the table.

The mortality rate had really gone down since he came to Gotham, and he was quite proud to admit
that had all to do with him.

"Eight times I thought about the Bat this past second;
Eight times I thought of the Bat...
Take him down and roll 'em around,
Seven bones the Bat will break once we're done!"

The amount of times was a bit of a low estimate. It was next to impossible to not think about the
caped crusader trapped under the same roof as him. Almost unbearable!

What's he doing right now?
Is he sleeping?
Where's he sleeping?
Is he dreamin' a little dream of me?
How does he style his hair without the expensive gel or bat ears?
Is he talking? And to who?
Has he been keeping that temper of his in check?
Does he miss me?
Wait, who am I kidding?
Of. Course. He does.

Self-administered hellish torture but when it comes to his man it was definitely alright. If Bats hadn't
have left the cafeteria in the first place, then maybe the clown wouldn't have gotten... upset and
exchanged a few choice words with the orderlies and the whole smashing the sloppy joe in a
syringe-wielding nurse's face fiasco really could have been avoided.

Bats just loves to provoke him. He wanted to sneak into his room, greet him proper and then give
him a piece of his mind. "Did you not see I saved you a seat right next to me?"

"Five days, when can I come out?
Five days, this is a bit inhumane...
My tummy's growlin',
I have to go -oh someone- call my Harley-girl over!"

How very unfair! It wasn't his fault that Bats insisted on ruining his outstanding behavior streak. "I
can be a good boy too!" And that's what will secure his new privileges like day room mingling and
consciousness during the daylight hours. For some reason the doctors didn't like him spending time with the other patients. Why that was he couldn't figure. If there was one thing that could be said about the Joker, he most certainly played well with others.

"Two people that matter on earth;
Two people that only matter...
One is me, the other has wings.
One - aha- bottle of beer on the wall;
One bottle of beer,
take one-

Chapped lips clamped shut, cutting off any more bouts of song.

A minute rolled by. "... well?" one guard questioned through the door.

"Hmm?" His eyes danced across the ceiling; an innocent grin playing much too realistically for others to see without fainting. "I have no i-dea what you're talking about."

"What do you- I can't-" Voices argued in a static mush; the incentive to decipher the words spoken lost to the growling of his stomach.

"Shouldn't I be fed some time this week?"

"No, shut up, Dave!" Clarity burst above his head; the guard directly addressing the door. "You started from fucking ninety-nine bullets and you just stop at one?!!"

Coming to the end of a long string of giggles, he sing-songed, "Pisses you off, doesn't it?"

The guard, convinced the phantom wetness pulsing from his ears was his blood finally seeping to alleviate the off-key abuse forcing pressure on his brain, paused at the clown's curious lamb response on the other side of the door. He could see the yellow smile on that scarred freak locked safely in his jacket. "Pisses you off, doesn't it?" Teeth groaning from his restraining bite, a bark of laughter sputtered from his throat. The manic grin of a man that had reached his limit on his tired face. "Pisses me off? Pisses me off?! Of course, I'm fucking pissed off, you psychotic son of a bitch!"

"Now what did my mother ever do to you?" The clown grinned. He couldn't remember if he had one of those or not.

Before sensible thoughts caught up to him, the guard was fumbling with the key and code combination, ready to inflict more pain to that mouth than Mommy or Daddy or whoever the fuck gave him that wretched smile could ever dream of. His goal involved an ironed shut jaw and meals through a straw.

"What the hell, man? No!" His fellow guard broke into action, wrenching the keys away from the shaking, unrelenting hold and splaying a desperate hand over the pad of numbers to prevent his colleague from getting any further. "Stop!"

"Get off!" Anxiety clung to the fury clouding up his mind. The key portion was complete; all was left was the code, but flesh and bone stubbornly hid the ten digits from sight.

"You really gotta stop this. Don't you see this is what he wants?"

1-3-0-6 or 1-3-0-9? The numbers buzzed with uncertainty, further fueling the stunted rampage cramping up just because he couldn't get past one door.
"Do you wanna lose your job 'cause of him?"

"Because of little ol' me?" The clown prince giggled almost inaudibly. The two on the other side most definitely wouldn't hear. It was incredibly silly at how easily someone can be driven over the edge, pushed to the point that common sense alluded them. Crimes of passion committed by idiots. He was bored after all, yet... a small part of him wanted the crazed guard to listen to his partner and let the scarred man's taunts roll off his shoulders. Just, ah, let it go... As wildly entertaining the outbreak of anger was, it wilted the corners of his smile when his thoughts once again returned to his Bat. Everyone else simply paled in comparison.

"Damn you, Bats. You're not even here, and you're ruining all my fun... why can't you be here? ... for some proper entertainment," he silently amended.

"What is the meaning of this?" A female voice joined into the mix. Judging by the firm, authoritative tone, it was his Harley-girl come to set him free... ish.

He listened as the other side of the door went pleasingly still. Both guards probably scared stiff. The unemployment rate in Gotham was really quite deplorable.

"I asked you a question," Dr. Quinzel stated. His imagining of her vicious glare behind cheap glasses -far less interesting than Jonny's- with her arms firmly crossed over her alight chest wasn't far off the mark. Four months worth of therapy sessions in and he was quite sure she was madly in love with him by now.

"We were just uh-"

"You mean you were about to..."

Pushing a strand of blonde from her vision, she dismissed their fumbled starts with a wave of her hand. "We will discuss this later, but first you will return my patient to his room and be sure he receives his dinner and give him whatever else he needs. Do you understand?"

Defeated nods met her in response.

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Every moment of one's existence is growing into more or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit.

-Norman Mailer

The low dim of overhead fluorescents clicked and brightened, and with it came the angry buzz of fizzing filaments. The signifying of night to dawn. His pupils barely reacted beneath their glazed stare at the opposing padded wall; the dirty gray washing to ivory. The difference of a new day wasn't felt. The ceaseless two-tone carrying illuminations adding to the cruel cycle.

He knew night -its look and feel and what it was to be it- and that dull imitation spurned a longing for the real thing: Perched atop the tallest skyscraper, cloaked in the languid sheet of the deepest blue with swirls of amethyst slithering throughout burning clusters thousands upon thousands of miles away; and below his city -his Monet- simmering in sepia streetlights, where innocence slumbered and the filth worked in shadows -from high up just insignificant flakes of dust blown aimlessly by the wind in their misery; the air was so cool and cleansing. The night gave him everything and so much more. Now all he had was a lackluster substitute -a ten hour break from the normal, harsh lights- and this symbolism of day. He even forgot what the sun felt like on his skin.
"Oi! Get up!" Banging thundered against the plexi-glass, and the blur known as, Michael, had moved on to disturb someone else further down the row.

His eyes didn't stray from the russet spot directly across from him that looked too suspicious to be dismissed by his over-active mind, but his mouth did draw into a thinner line. He was reminded from his youth of a particular Twilight Zone episode where the frightened astronaut is taken in by supposedly friendly martians after his ship crashes on their planet, giving him a home in earthy fashion but to be betrayed, trapped in what was a cage and put on display: Homo sapien. Well in his case, Homo sapien Chiroptera.

"People are alike all over," even the crack brained.

Species of animal brought back alive. Interesting similarity in physical characteristics to human beings in head, trunk, arms, legs, hands, feet. Very tiny undeveloped brain; comes from primitive planet named, Earth. Calls himself Bruce Wayne. And he will remain here in his cage with the running water and the electricity and the central heat as long as he lives. Bruce Wayne has found Arkham.

He shivered; the words nailing him to his cot. He couldn't fathom getting up and drifting through another day, here, in a place so prone to suck the life out of you and the promise of a smooth isolation of rot. The sting of antiseptic forever drilling into your nostrils.

"Up and at 'em, Batman." The sarcastic slur stung more than it probably should have. So much training within the mind wasted to be bothered by his own choices of theatricality.

"To have my enemies share my fear- when did it become mock me at every turn?"

Michael had returned, waiting for his personal charge to rise and glaring at him because they really didn't pay him enough to babysit a bunch of psychotic over-grown children. " Didn't you hear me? Get up."

Sighing -eyes slipping closed for the first time in what felt like hours- his legs swung over the edge in their own habitual accord and urged him sitting up the rest of the way. Dull aches spread along his neck and spine, reminding him of pathetic spring support and lack of circulation from unfortunate lack of movement. He missed when those aches and pains resulted from a night of tackling thugs and deflecting bullets and knives in combat instead of this life. Back when the pain meant something.

"Come on. I haven't got all day." He really did take Alfred's warm and charmingly snarky wake up calls for granted, too.

The bathroom facilities at Arkham were nothing to write home about. Porcelain, antique fixtures, brown-tiled floors with dirty grouting and moldy walls. A lazy janitor's touch literally leaving finger prints. A heavy mist of Lysol floral air hovered over the stalls. Perhaps instead of exhausting his resources on security, he should have invested some of those donations to the living conditions so the patients would actually want to stay. He really couldn't have foreseen his residency though.

Bypassing the short hall off to the side, spewing steam and the insane's shouts and splashes, he headed for the row of sinks; setting his toiletries beside the one on the end. Michael hung back -keeping an eye on him in the reflection- and conversed with the other two orderlies in hushed tones waiting on their charges. Their curious whispers and prying eyes escaped his interest.

Bruce stood hunched over the sink -hands grasping the edges- and stared at the ragged man looking back at him. The fresh, boyish charm seen on tabloids and television interviews had withered and faded to a ghost. Dark circles surrounded sunken brown eyes, his lips lacked the color to be
distinguished from the rest of his complexion, stubble had sprouted in a uniform flourish, and his normally gelled back hair hung over his wrinkled forehead; frowning came so easy these days.

Light tapping and the swishing of water alerted him to another inmate's presence several sinks down. He swiftly set aside the morning's depressive episode and took up his tooth brush and paste, getting on with the task. Breakfast with Crane would sadly follow, so he decided to take his time brushing. Meal times were now known as hate-filled half hours. He snuck glances at the other orange suit: The man was shorter than him but not my much, leaner yes, and by far more paler; silvery scars littered his arms; dirty blonde hair hung in tendrils around his face; shaving creme smeared across the lower portion of his face. Shadowed eyes paid mock-attention to the razor caressing his neck; the lather on his face remained untouched. Bruce shot a fearful glance at the chatting orderlies, wondering if they were at all concerned that this patient favored his throat with a cheap razor.

They didn't seem to mind. The tiny blades in the disposable weren't worth the trouble, to be honest.

Tasting copper within the strings of saliva and mint, his face flushed as he spat out the pink suds. Aggravated with himself for getting wrapped up in the possible liability taking place, he tilted his head to catch the rush of cool water to fill his mouth and swished it against his bleeding gums. Be it paranoia or his own loneliness getting to him, he could have sworn the inmate's eyes were boring into him every time he wasn't looking. It felt too eerily familiar in the most unpleasant way. Wiping his mouth clean with the back of his tattered sleeve, he quickly gathered his things and left; one more look over his shoulder and out to the hall.

Michael caught up with Bruce as he deposited his toiletries to the nurse who kept up with the patients' belongings. "Thank you," she said with a sweet smile -which his charge ignored- then continued on their way. He fell in step with the brooding man, a little disappointed.

"That's it, huh?" he murmured after a few moments of only shuffling footsteps.

Still a bit weirded out by the experience, Bruce raked his fingers through his hair several times in rapid succession. "... I don't follow," he answered, his voice small and unused. Conversations between the patient and orderly weren't a common practice.

"Wow..." The orderly genuinely smiled. "The other guys and I didn't think the first meeting between you two would be so anti-climatic."

His frown creased further. "... I don't-"

"Good god, dude! That was The Joker," Michael crowed. "How could you not know?"

Heat rushed to his cheeks and the pressure in his throat swelled, choking him underneath his placid expression.

So the sick boiling in his gut did have a name.

"Guess who I just saw." An arrogant smirk was fixed upon the clown's cleanly shaven face when he approached The Cool Kids' Table and waited for the pending interest his companion would surely give him.

The young doctor didn't so much as look up from his mindless stirring of his oatmeal.

"Jonny," the clown tsked, "The game's no fun if you don't guess."
Tired eyes entranced with the gray lumps and soggy flakes, he quietly muttered, "I haven't heard from you all week." Jonathan could plainly hear the wounded lilt to his voice and immediately despised himself for it.

The Joker studied the glum indifference -sucking on his scars all the while- and sneered at the conclusion; "Really Jonny- you're gonna do this?" He took his seat opposite of the psychiatrist; his motions stiff and apprehensive. Matters like this called for a delicate touch. "Of course you didn't. It's called sol-i-tary confinement for a reason."

"That's never stopped you before."

Biting back a growl, he played with his spork like a mini-baton, maneuvering and flipping it between his nimble fingers. He missed his knives, because Jonny wouldn't be giving him this grief otherwise. "... like I told you: I'm trying to be an, uh, Arkham angel. Gain some freedoms and such."

Jonathan wasn't entirely convinced. The Joker had been up to this good behavior kick for the past month and during that time he had no reservations about coming to visit him late at night, solitary or no. He wasn't sex-crazed or aching for release -very far from it- but he couldn't help missing the clown's antics, distracting him from his night terrors. Even if he would have been walking with a limp today, at least he wouldn't have been alone last night: No rabid demons lunging from the dark, forcing him to relive his greatest humiliation.

"Aw, come on, Scary-"

"I'm Jonathan," he snapped; listless blue eyes sparking with life and burning holes into the other's amused stare.

"The nerve; I am definitely the better looking one, Jonathan. I think it might be because I have a spine." The young doctor's other half crooned inside his head.

"Whooooever then..." The clown rolled his eyes, grinning. "So I didn't come -boo hoo- get over it. Stop acting like a chick and guess." He sat back in his seat and bounced as he did so. His chipper mood wasn't about to be ruined by some jealous toy.

Jonathan didn't care much for answering. He really had had enough with "... the Batman," he grumbled and lightly stabbed the goop cooling before him.

"RightRightRight!" His lips curled back to bare yellow teeth; a victorious smile and a happy heart palpitation. "Did you know the Dark Knight brushes with colgate with baking soda?"

"Do I even care?" A bored yawn huffed and tears of exhaustion lined his icy gaze. He looked away from the man still talking animately about his "Bathroom encounter with the great, crime-fighting Bat" and idly wondered if the day was going to escalate its torture while it was still early. Wayne had been gracing him with his presence for the past week, three times a day. The Joker would probably have an aneurysm if he knew. Maybe today he'd get lucky and the playboy wouldn't show his face, most of all sit at their table again.

"Jonathan, think: When has something ever gone in our favor?"

And low and behold Scarecrow's cynicism rang true, because just as Jonathan hoped to have a day without the unmasked hero, he trudged into the cafeteria looking like he had taken ill. He stared daggers at the unwanted extra body in the room; hoping that if he invested enough hate into each second that passed without blinking the metaphoric daggers would come to reality shooting through the air and gutting the object of the Joker's obsession. Jonathan considered himself far too superior to
be subjected to the dick-in-hand rants of a sociopath about the bat.

"He didn't say much -well, uh, nothing to be exact- but his eyes were glued to Muah. Orange is not his, ah, his color. Black, yep, black. Hmmm..." The Joker's face fell into the palm of his hand and sighed dreamily with a faraway look on his face.

He finally got to see his Bat without the cape and pointy ears -Brucey was quite the looker- and he craved more. The visual wasn't enough; the physical aspect of their relationship couldn't go on ignored! Did Bats not recognize him and his needs? He surely would have been rushed to the infirmary by now, all bloodied and bruised and tickled pink to have his other half with no tricky toys or caves to run off to.

Jonathan monitored Wayne out of the corner of his eye -mindlessly nodding along to whatever the clown was going on about- as he drifted down the line. A slow moving process in the morning, and it appeared no one was scrambling to get out of his way. The others had been forced to grow accustomed to the vigilante's presence, and to gratefully note that Jonathan had survived a week in the man's company without bleeding profusely and nursing shattered bones was something to put their broken minds at ease. After all, Crane did try to kill the winged freak's girlfriend, but the Joker was the more successful; and maybe that's why Jonathan initially liked the man. How Jonathan's blue eyes shone bright dancing across the static-filled TV screen in the recreation room when the news report confirmed that The Assistant DA, Rachel Dawes, had been killed in an explosion rigged by the Joker.

Yet he was quite sure the Bat would not share his praise and perhaps that's why the atmosphere seemed tense: A Nice reunion of Lovers; Jonathan suppressed a snort at the thought.

When Bruce came to the end of the queue with only an apple and orange juice to show for his patience, he was mildly surprised to find majority sets of eyes focused on him. Normally none of them dared to risk being caught staring but now they were uncomfortably blatant. With the reputation he had -intimidating enough to be left alone- he couldn't afford to buckle under something as frivolous as their united gaze and compromise that. So when he started for the table in the corner and stopped dead in his tracks, he understood just what this was all about: Sitting across from Crane, the blond from earlier chatted excitably to him, making good use of his arms, and stabbing the air triumphantly with a piece of petrified bacon.

"No... that couldn't... really be..."

The small grin stretching Crane's plump lips told him the mad doctor was waiting for him to make the next move and that the clown was still blissfully unaware of his presence.

"Of course the two would find each other and join forces."

"Jonny?" Here the Joker was prattling on and on about his Batsy and he just now realized that the gorgeous azure eyes which should be trained on him were in fact narrowed elsewhere. He dropped his crumbling bacon and crossed his arms. "It's rude to ignore someone when they are talking, ya know," he said with a pout. "... Jonny. Jonathan." His teeth cut into his tongue as he sucked and licked every crevice within the cavern of his mouth, restraining himself from holding a spork to Jonny's jugular. "I wonder if I slice you open, will straw come tumbling out."

The other man simply nodded, ignoring him.

"Is- is Jonny boy **humoring me**?" His lips popped with the sudden jerk of his jaw.

Wayne appeared to be having some severe internal struggle, scanning for other options -the other
inmates saw to it there were none- but kept concluding the Joker. The doctor was literally torn on which outcome to root for: He wanted the Batman to disappear, but Scarecrow -as much as he loathed the pampered monster- wanted him to surrender his dignity and suffer under the clown's overbearing-

Cold goop pelted his cheek, filling his twin burn scars with the wet substance. He scowled and brushed away the trail oozing down with a napkin: Syrup and eggs. "What?" He glared, scrubbing at the residue.

Smiling, the Joker leaned forward -off his seat- and snatched Crane's chin into a vice. "Now what is so much more exciting than me?" The question sounded more of a hiss than anything any normal, spiteful human being was capable of.

Jonathan -unprepared for the attack- gaped in reply. Heart lodged in his windpipe, his pupils flickered off to the side, silently answering.

The Joker glared over his shoulder -expecting the second coming of Jesus- yet he was much more pleasantly surprised. "This morning just keeps gettin' better and better." Dropping Jonny, he put on his most charming show of teeth and slicked back the strands of greasy gold that had fallen. "Bats!" he exclaimed. His face illuminated to a thousand watts, brighter than the Bat signal in the dead of night.

The sick boiling in his gut returned full force at the sight of those ghastly scars. The vigilante's worst suspicions confirmed by those dark, deeply carved lines in puffed and mangled flesh. He couldn't fathom going through whatever this was as just Bruce Wayne. The Joker was Batman's nemesis. He frankly didn't have the energy for it.

"Batsy Baby, c'mere! I saved you a seat!" Hands banged on the seat beside him like a snare drum. The eager slaps on plastic filled the room and silenced all other conversation.

A blush radiated across his stoic face: One part embarrassment and the other familiar rage best saved for the cowl. He forced his eyes away. The tray in his hands felt like a ton: The OJ and Granny Smith apple nauseating to the eye. All he wanted was to flee to his cell.

"Bats! Over here!" A frown flashed across his face. "Jonny, why isn't he coming?"

Looking up from his work of scrubbing his cheek clean, a murderous glare met his confused puppy dog face. "You're coming on too strong."

"No such thing," Joker deflected with a chuckle. "The man leads by- by dramatic example." And with that said he sprang from his seat and skipped to the other side of the room -kicking up bad omens in his wake- where the brunet's back was turned, negotiating with the orderlies.

"Hospital regulations, you can't eat in your room."

"This?" Bruce held up the tray. "I have no intention of eating this. I just think it'd be wise to escort me back to my cell before-"

"Ding, dong..." Two sharp jabs in the back.

Except for his posture going impossibly more rigid, he ignored the advances and pleaded with a pained expression on his face. "Please, it would be in everyone's best interest..."

"Awww, Bats... are you afraid of hurting Yours Truly? That is our dance, ya know..."
"I'm sorry, rules are rules. You'll just have to-" An amused grin from the orderly as he nodded over Bruce's shoulder. "-deal with it."

"Yeah, Batsy, deal with me." Hot breath tickled Bruce's ear. The urge to chop it off and just hand it over to the clown -here, you've tainted it- was strong.

"No... no, I don't think you are grasping just what-" A chaste kiss to his neck shattered any and all self restraint. The bay of a wild beast tore from his vocal cords. No conscious thought went into what happened next: The tray turned in his grip -the juice and apple plummeting to the tile- and swung around and slammed the slab of plastic into the clown's smiling face, knocking him to the floor.

"How dare you?!" He towered over the man, preparing to bash him again. The white coats were on him in an instant though, tearing away his weapon and pinning his arms behind his back.

The Joker massaged his reddened cheek but appeared otherwise unfazed by the assault. He stayed on the ground and used the angle to his advantage, turning an innocent grin to something the Devil Himself crafted. "So I can see you're still a little mad..."

Bruce was seething. The stowed away adrenaline replaced the blood in his veins, and he had missed that feeling. Words escaped him, but he was already at a point where he didn't need them. Actions spoke loads. He pulled and tested their hold.

"Just so we can, uh, move on from this and grow." The clown had gotten to his feet. His tongue dug into the scar of his bottom lip. "When... I... terrorized-" He cringed at the word. "-Gotham, I just want you to know, it was nothing personal. Just all in good fun. Dent... he just got the joke faster than you. No hard feelings, right? Bats, I think we could be buddies." Like a gentleman, he held out his hand. "Whaddya say, B-F-F?"

In that moment, Bruce dropped down and kicked the orderlies' feet right out from under them; then lunged at the clown and tackled him by the waist. They slid across the floor on the Joker's back, him laughing all the while. "Look- at you go! So- graceful!" He choked out from having the wind knocked from his lungs. "Here's the Bat-man!"

All the crazies in the room were on their feet, some balanced on their chairs, all except Jonathan. He pushed away his bowl with a sour expression. He considered the outcome rather basic and most certainly boring.

No other sounds were made save the crashing of fist on flesh and the shrieks of utter glee.

Chapter End Notes

The Twilight Zone episode 25, season one, "People are Alike All Over." The monologue and summary came from as such. I don't know Latin so I guessed with the whole, "Homo sapien Chiroptera." I wanted Batman to come out of it.
The end of the day was always a blessing. A mountain of paperwork that could be left for tomorrow, and the rest of the evening could go to his wife and kids: A hot dinner with the family, watching a helping of America's Got Talent. He sighed in the utter bliss of the thought. 

"Dr. Horn! Excuse me, Dr. Horn?!" He looked up from his task of locking up his office. Hurrying down the hall was the Arkham staff's latest addition, Dr. Harleen Quinzel. Turning the key till it clicked, he sighed and waited for her to join him and catch her breath. "I realize you're on your way out-"

"What is it that I can do for you, Doctor?" he asked with a tired huff.

"Well I wanted to discuss the altercation today between our patients."

"I assure you Mr. Wayne is in solitary, heavily sedated. I'll be sure to make arrangements so he won't come in contact with your patient again."

She frowned, adjusting her glasses. He figured he probably wouldn't have ever taken her seriously without them; Even well-trained psychiatrists fell easily into the trap of stereotypes. "I actually wanted to discuss with you about taking the opposite approach."

"Care to elaborate?"

"I think if we keep the two apart, we're encouraging this feud between their alter-egos. My patient is fixated on the Batman and as I'm sure Mr. Wayne isn't running around with sheets tied around his neck, the provocations from Joker is forcing out that side of himself. I believe the more time they spend with one another in a controlled environment, the more likely they'll settle their issues and no longer resort to violence. Take away the reason to obsess over the other, and I'm sure they'll be more apt to focus on their own treatment."

Horn's clinical mind had already clocked out and when she had finished, he could only grimace and toy with his car keys weighing down his pocket. "Quinzel, as interesting as your theory is, need I remind you it took seven orderlies to restrain Mr. Wayne and successfully fit him into a jacket and that was after two times the recommended dose of tranquilizer?"

"Yes, I'm aware of that, but if you worked with him on his anger problems, perhaps he'll show a more of a compassionate side to himself and put a stop to my patient's delusions he's built around him."

"And how would you propose we go about this?"

For the first time throughout the conversation, the young psychiatrist showed signs of doubt. "I... don't necessarily have that planned out as of yet, but if you promise now that you'll at least consider what I'm proposing, I'll have a rough outline on your desk tomorrow morning."

The keys to his Chevy Accord were calling to him. Regardless if Bruce Wayne was a high-priority
patient, all the Horn wanted to do was get out of here. "I'll consider it. Now if you excuse me, further discussion on this matter can wait till tomorrow." He sidestepped the young woman and headed as quickly as he could away.

"Wow- oh my- tha- thank you! You won't regret it! ... if you do accept!" She called after; a hopeful smile on her face.

Two days.

Two days since he'd seen another living soul, and two days since he had use of his arms. The sensation of needles digging into his skin from his shoulders down did nothing to lull him into a good mood, but the sharp aches in his fists did counteract the best they could; the memory that came with them soothed and rekindled apart of himself he'd been missing since the court proceedings. The nasty lies and false accusations pounded from his system into a smiling face, not that the clown wasn't deserving in his own right.

No, what he could clearly determine about these two days regardless of its obvious faults, was it was the most peace he'd gotten since being shipped off to this god awful place.

No meals to choke down. No one bothering him, save for an unsavory visit from Dr. Horn with his disapproving tone and furrowed caterpillar brow, and even that didn't last long, at least he didn't think so. For the past forty-eight hours they've kept him so doped up on tranquilizers that his mild insomnia seemed like a wild tangent of his imagination. Just himself in a chemical slumber. No questions or taunts. No people to pull from burning buildings or charity fundraisers to escape from.

No Bruce Wayne. No Batman. Just silence.

Though lately his thoughts had turned more acidic, and he didn't guilt himself over them. His mind was the one thing they couldn't touch. All the nasty things that would never make it past the tip of his tongue. Perfect.

The inmates just didn't realize how good they had it sometimes.

What is it they don't have here- decent food? Freedom? No, no, freedom was an illusion. There are always responsibilities and obligations. Then when you fulfilled your duties for the day -and you did the best you could- that still wasn't enough. Nothing ever was. You lay down in bed, close your eyes, roll over, open your eyes, sit up, and do it all over again.

No, thank you.

_Fuck you, Joker._

_Fuck you, Commissioner Gordon._

_Fuck you, Alfred; I don't have to endure shit._

_Oh what was that, Gotham? I made life worse for every single one of you?_

_Really? Well, that's too bad, because you sure as hell weren't complaining when I was running myself ragged saving your asses since the GCPD was in the mob's back pocket._

_I don't hear you screaming for their blood._
So what is it that I have special to say to you?


And fuck you, Batman… I'm done.

Yep, Bruce had it all figured out. His conclusions about the double life he'd been leading had come into perfect focus. It was all so simple! How come he couldn't see it before?!

His train of thought dwindled as sleep crept upon him once again. Snuggling closer to the corner - curling up in a ball from the cold- he happily allowed his eyes to fall closed and his breathing to slow.

Then like all good things… the drugs wore off.

He gradually came to. Not much could be recalled without a punishing migraine. His wonderful feelings dissipated into pure guilt, for what he wasn't sure but whatever chemical epiphanies did absolutely nothing for his conscience so he didn't feel such a great loss when he could remember none of them.

The rubber walls were closing in. How long were they planning to leave him in here? And with this thing on? He felt like an amputee with phantom limbs. The longer he was in there, the more he thought about being in there, and the less his patience carried on through the hours. That is, if it was hours. Thankfully he drifted off again before it became a more torturing dilemma.

"Mr. Wayne? Can you hear me?" A feather light touch gently stroked his bangs from his forehead. He opened his eyes to drowsy slits; the light pouring into the small room arrested his pupils, feeding his headache.

"Good, they didn't dope you into a coma…" Crouched beside him, a pretty young doctor smiled at him. Her tied back blonde hair and petite build didn't fit right for him. He briefly considered himself having a hallucination. Why did she look so happy? Sensing his apprehension, she playfully smacked herself in the head and subsequently readjusted the frames on the bridge of her nose. "Where are my manners? I assure you I'm not some wandering patient with a key card. Hi, I'm Doctor Quinzel." She offered him her hand, which he merely stared at. Seconds past until finally French-manicured nails curled back to her palm and roses bloomed in her fair cheeks. "… well, that's embarrassing," and she quickly went about undoing the straps of the jacket.

Bruce didn't particularly care who she was but when his arms wrapped around his chest fell away with a limp, he reverted to social procedure and carefully shook her offered hand. The blood flow bursting back through his veins in painful static.

"Mr. Wayne, in light of recent events-"

His preferred version of therapy.

"-we at the hospital feel it best to tailor your treatment to better fit your specific needs. You'll still have your weekly sessions with Dr. Horn, but I will be heading the rest."

His vision swooped and swiveled in his skull; the desire to sleep holding him in a vice. Her voice speeding and slowing simultaneously to his ears.

"Perhaps we'll discuss this further when you've got some food in you and have slept off the rest of the medication's effects…" She nodded -agreeing with herself- and patted him on the knee.
Everything went black before the door clicked its automatic lock.

So going ballistic on a small army of orderlies while the aroma of pancakes hung in the air did have its perks: 1) No more snickers about his nocturnal past times, and 2) No one had the sheer stupidity to mess with him in the shower; it wasn't necessarily a problem before, but it was nice to have an insurance policy nonetheless.

The heavy spray of nuke warm water was exactly what his sore muscles needed. A small grin could be seen on the billionaire's face if one looked hard enough.

Unfortunately the show of genuine emotion was short-lived. When his escorts arrived to take him to Quinzel's office, they dangled a strait jacket in his face; the one smiling was still nursing a black eye from the incident. After happily strapping him in, they took the long walk to her office which oddly was no where near Doctor Horn's; hers being far closer to maximum security. One of the orderlies ducked ahead to let the doctor know he'd arrived and to hold the door open. He could see her smiling and waving from her desk. He still couldn't figure out why she was so happy.

That is, until he stepped into her office. The reason he couldn't have use of his arms became infuriatingly apparent.

"Hiya, Bats!" The bruised plum face he had no desire to see lit up with his arrival. He tried to back out to the hall, but a human wall blocked him from doing so. "Look- we're twins!" The Joker bounced in a fitted jacket of his own.

He could only sneer in reply.

"Bruce, if you'd please have a seat…” Quinzel motioned to the only other vacant chair.

"I don't understand why he's here," he said, looking upon the seat if it were littered with tacks.

"Hey, I could be asking the same thing, Bat-Buddy. Harley-Girl is, after all, my shrink."

"Mr. J, please… Bruce, all will be explained if you stopped trying to elbow Alex out the door."

His eyes flicked over the key points: Over his shoulder to escape, the chair, the too happy blonde, and just stopping before the clown's feet. No matter which variables he switched around and how many times he calculated in his favor, their smiling faces cancelled it all out every time. There was no escaping whatever goal the young psychiatrist had fixed in her mind.

"Oh just sit your tight ass down!" The Joker huffed, blowing gold tendrils from his vision.

"J, please be quiet. I'm sure this isn't easy for Bruce and you have to be sensitive to his reservations," the doctor scolded; her empathetic tone injecting Bruce with detestation. It was just a matter of him taking a seat and wasting a small fraction of his life, here, with him; no great emotional struggle as much as she'd like it to be.

He plopped down into the chair; chewing on his tongue and ignored the clown's cheers. He stared back at her, challenging her with a quirk of his eyebrow. "Your move." Then again condescending only works when the one on the receiving end realizes it and if she had, Quinzel didn't show it. Her smile only grew in width and intensity.

"Are you sure you don't want us to stay?" One of the orderlies lingered in the doorway.
"Yes, I'm quite sure, just as long as these two promise to behave." She eyed the odd pair: One giddy and nodding vigorously in agreement, and the other sulked behind his playboy apathy; fists secretly flexing in their fabric womb. "I'll call if I require assistance."

The orderly grimly nodded and dragged the door shut behind him, not before issuing a warning glare to the two inmates.

Once they were alone, Harleen's breathing could do nothing but restrict and shiver out of her chest. To the left, the Clown Prince of Crime -a proud lunatic- with his laugh heard 'round the world; and beside him, the wealthiest bachelor by day and murderous vigilante at night. All the bruises that had bloomed and faded on her knees to get to this point were worth it. Any psychiatrist with an ounce of ambition would kill to be in her position. If all went according to plan, she could foresee a book deal.

"What's this about?" Bruce asked out of curiosity. Other than that he wouldn't contribute. He didn't even talk for his own sessions; here would be no different.

The doctor opened her mouth to answer but was of course cut off. "What, the Great Detective can't tell we're in couples therapy?" The Joker drawled, licking his lips. "Really, Darling, if you can't see that our relationship is in, uh, tumultuous waters, then you should listen and do whatever the nice lady says."

Brushing the maniac's words aside, "Doctor?" Bruce pressed.

"Well... that is essentially what we're going to attempt here. Dr. Horn and I discussed this and eventually agreed it would be beneficial to each of your own treatment to take away the cause hindering your progress."

"That is not the case," Bruce countered.

Joker tore his attention from the brunet and addressed his shrink. "Ya see, he's in denial. Seriously, Honey, try to have an open mind. This is why we're here." The clown chastised as if they were an old, married couple.

"He isn't hindering me at all. I've only been here for little over a week and I just met you. You can't just decide what's best for me and throw me in with him. I won't go along with this." If not for his arms already crossed, he would have done so and stared longingly at the door.

"See! I do believe we just had a breakthrough!" The clown leaned over the arm of the chair as close as he could, eyelids dropping low with a lecherous grin. "That's the most that's ever come out of that pretty mouth of yours, though I gotta say... I do miss that rumbly grumbles growl of yours."

"Mr. J, please? We've talked about this; personal bubbles, remember?"

An obnoxious, long-suffering sigh sounded his retreat. The Joker plopped unceremoniously down into his chair with a pout. He thought therapy was about positive reinforcement: Congratulating his Bat for the longest string of words uttered was quite the feat.

"Bruce--"

"Batman," the clown corrected, reveling in the goosebumps of that name and earning himself a glare from the other two parties. He smirked, content with the reaction… yet there could always be more.

"Whichever," Quinzel muttered and scribbled a few notes. "I would like very much to be able to count on your cooperation."
"No," Bruce spat. "What you're doing doesn't make any sense! You might as well pair me up with Crane or someone else incarcerated because of me."

A surge of jealousy forced acid on the Joker's tongue. Since when did Crane reside anywhere in the Bat's universe besides him?

"Me being here could 'hinder' their progress also, and I'm telling you now I'm not participating in this again. If you try to force this upon me, I'll call my lawyers."

A bark of amusement broke from the Joker's -surprisingly up till now- sealed lips. "Bats, don't act like one of them -talking like a spoiled brat- it nauseates me."

"Good," Bruce thought bitterly. Answering aloud would only encourage the mad man. "Maybe you'll leave me alone."

"… back to square one, are we?" Joker teased, inwardly sulking. "Why would He bring up Scary when I'm right here? Jonny, you and I are gonna have a looong talk after lights out."

Quinzel suppressed the encroaching panic. Lawyers, really? This wasn't supposed to work like this. They're supposed to spill their guts and unearth revelations about each other so she only had to sign the prescriptions slips and write the tale of her Case of a Lifetime.

She slid off her glasses and dropped them with clear frustration on her desk. "He's going to ruin this for me."

The Joker sensed the cute, little doctor was at a loss -poor thing- so he decided to take the reigns. Who better to run his Bat's therapy than him? So after clearing his throat and angling his body towards Bruce with the cross of his legs, he eyed (with the one eye not a swollen purple) his subject: White jacketed back, broad shoulders, a thick tanned neck connected to a mane of luscious brown.

Too...

Too perfect all over.

Too… human.

His tongue prodded his fat lip; the split flesh stained of copper and salt, that sweet flavor of pain.

"Do you wanna talk about your, uh, feelings?"

"You're a deranged bastard with nothing else better to do with his pathetic life but torment me."

Bruce quipped in the safety of his thoughts.

"Surely you can manage some, ah, unintell-i-gible grrrowl at me at least. Truly, Baby, this silence will get us nowhere…" His tone suggested a sincere disappointment, even though the cocky grin on his damaged lips said another thing entirely. "… I don't like to be ignor-"

"Bruce, if there's nothing to settle, you should have no problem contributing now," Quinzel quickly interjected, flinching under her own patient's piercing glare. Even without the grease paint, his eyes exuded a hateful tar-pit black. Harley-Girl wasn't going to get a tasty sob story out of him for a week; a harsh punishment but she had to learn. Interrupting depreciates the message.

His Bat remained unresponsive, keeping himself turned away, a migraine stirring and expanding behind his eye sockets.
Right now Joker would try to appease to the Bat's "better" nature: Reason and Logic and blah blah blah... Sheer madness to his ears especially coming from a cuckoo clown! So he cleared his throat, cracked his neck, and thought of that lovely example of a psychiatrist: Not Harley, not Jonny (too cold), and certainly not Leland. He knew the one but just couldn't recall the name. The old guy that ate people- The one in that movie with that FBI agent and that drastically misunderstood Cowboy Bill character. Perhaps with just a darker shade of lipstick...

He shook his head to re-jumble his thoughts, confident they'd fall into a more coherent order. "First try's the worst, second is the best-

"Third is the girl in the polka dot dress," he mumbled under his breath. It was the medication kicking in. It was becoming increasingly difficult to follow through.

"I think… this will be all for today," the Quinzel started, keeping her focus on her notes rather than the slack-jawed if not outraged expression aimed at her head. "You both need time to reflect on this new course of treatment… I would like you both, Bruce especially, to take what I have to say into consideration: Most… couples argue to waste energy instead of using their time for something more productive, instead of taking the courageous leap into an unknown they fear. Fighting serves as being a zone of familiarity into which you can retreat when you are afraid of making a creative breakthrough… Bruce, Mr. J, it doesn't have to be like this." She looked wearily between the pair.

Both were seemingly unmoved. Heaving a sigh, she buzzed for the orderlies to reenter.

Bruce might have rose from his seat perhaps a bit too fast, accenting his eagerness to leave. Anything to get away from this lunacy.

The Joker watched his Bat leave with burning irises. A snarl wrenched his scarred mouth open like a curling scrap of jagged metal. If he could, he'd wring Harley's scrawny, little neck.

"Get movin', clown," an orderly said with disdain.

Rooted to his spot, he struggled to reclaim his happy-go-lucky composure everyone in Gotham learned to love. His crooked smile sent chills throughout the female doctor's nerve endings. Bones cracked and shifted when he hopped to his feet. A delectable rage screamed under his pale skin. "A, uh, a word of advice," he chuckled, leaning over her stacks of papers and hovering inches from her face. He thought of being like that movie doctor more and just biting it clean off. "Maybe leave talking to Bats to me. We wouldn't want anything to happen to your pretty lil face, now would we?"

Say a knife, a wayward fist, or a random beaker of acid.

Frozen like prey, Quinzel nodded dumbly and ducked her head.

The clown's face lit up with satisfaction. "Gooooood. Until next time, doc!"

Case of a lifetime or not, Harleen knew better than to upset Mr. J.

Chapter End Notes

The movie referenced is Silence of the Lambs.
Poor Jonny

"When we are confronted with a perceived danger, our bodies respond in specific ways. Can anyone offer a few said responses?"

A sea of drowsy eyes avoided his own once he looked up from his leisurely pace. Their bored expressions met his small grin with welcomed contempt. The fools! With a short nod, he sauntered around his desk where his briefcase sat propped on his chair and rifled through it for several seconds.

"Bertrand Russell once said, 'Collective fear stimulates herd instinct and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd.' The animosity attached to said quote conjured an ugly sneer on his elegantly curved lips. No one noticed the seamless transition from bitter rage to relief once his fingertips brushed across the cool metal.

This lesson was for education's sake but he couldn't shed the shivers roaming up and down his spine for the coming reaction. "Be sure you're taking notes," he commented and with that, whipped out the handheld pistol and fired -BANG!- a single shot upward to the high ceiling. The unexpected thunderclap commanded every ounce of wandering attention onto the scrawny professor in his brown, moth-eaten suit. His usual lackluster eyes a blazing cerulean behind spotless lenses far too expensive to afford on his salary.

Shocked gasps, shrieks, and banging chairs of those jolting in their seats mixed to make the overture of a fine symphony. Narrow minds soaked in cheap beer drowned in their own toxins at the adrenaline rush. The students had no mind of their own as for what to do; but collectively, they acted as expected: A flock of paralyzed sheep.

The smoking barrel lowered gracefully and matched eye level with a fraternity ape gawking in the second row; the same boy so arrogant to think he could bribe his way to decent marks. How dare he think that an established mentor of his aptitude would sink to such lows? He'd have to make an example out of the moron, though others would assume the target random; the boy would know.

And oh how he did.

"I should be seeing writing utensils poised and taking notes as I instructed." His expression grew all the more fonder when pens scratched across notepads and keyboards click click clicked away in a frenzy. Their ever fearful gazes never once left the aim he had locked between the boy's saucer eyes. The fact the steel chamber held only blanks didn't -couldn't- subtract from this: His interest didn't lie in carmine splatters and rigid post-mortem.

Quivering lips and tear-rimmed eyes; shuddering breaths and erratic coronary pumps was what made this all extremely worthwhile.

His thumb angled to cock the hammer, but the result was only a squeak. He tried again and it happened again. As confusion swept up his calm satisfaction into a perturbed pout, grins sprouted across terror-stricken faces. With every failed attempt -pointing the gun at every smile and triggering a squeak- giggles from the ladies and hearty laughs from the men ensued.
“Stop- stop laughing at me!” The pitchy shriek of his pre-pubescence reclaimed his vocal chords.

Their laughter increased all the more: Exposed teeth chomping on hiccupped breaths was hot pokers to his brain.

“Stop it - Stop it - STOP IT!” Each shout was accented with a useless pull of the trigger. "What is wrong with this thing?!” He glared down at the pistol.

There, under the curl of his fingers and pinned against his palm was a fat, screeching bat writhing in his grasp. It's midnight fur and leathery wings itching against his skin. Tiny fangs snapping at the pad of his thumb, emitting the most ungodly of noises. A strangled yelp tore from his plump lips already parted in horror.

Gross caricatures of his former students howled their amusement and spat all those terrible insults that marked his youth. They fell short to the rabid cries mutilating his ear drums.

"Ga- ARRGH!” His arms pulled from his socket at the force he threw down the dark bundle and pitched only air. Only a flicker of puzzlement before the flapping of much larger wings drew his eyes ahead.

Black talons snapped around a hand full of hair and forced him back. The scene shattered like glass where his back should have hit chalkboard. Raining bits cut and nicked his skin. Bloody chips clung to the demon's flesh.

Jonathan's upper half seized off the mattress -tearing through the veil of troubled slumber- and gasped for air. Eyes pulsing from their sockets and heart pounding in his ears.

"'Despite alienating himself from patients and staff alike, subject has been interacting consistently during meal times this past week with'- guess whose name I'm gonna read."

He jerked and scrambled to the corner of the mattress, huddled against the joining walls. Terror still fresh in his system. Vision bleary as he squinted into the darkness of his cell: The over-dimmed lights revealed a fuzzy, carrot orange sitting cross-legged at the foot of his cot.

"Hmm?” he grumbled; just a little annoyed with the recognition, but mostly relieved. Fighting to regulate his breathing, he reached to where his glasses lay folded on his nightstand and jammed them onto his face. He blinked several times to wear away the lingering sleep and adjust to the night. He wasn't particularly in the mood, but some distraction would prove useful. If there was one thing the clown was good at, it was demanding all attention onto him.

Except there was no silhouette of an orderly standing guard outside like usual and the odd question that escaped his comprehension upon waking didn't follow along with protocol.

"Whose file is that?” he asked with pointed interest at the manila folder held open to the other man's observation.

"I'm, uh, asking the questions herre…” The Joker's narrowed eyes scanned from top to bottom on the page his thumb bookmarked. He had it all memorized by now. Every single stitch of ink and the bits of information gold amongst all the other B.S.

Sensing the subtle shift of weight across the cot as the small doctor tried to sneak a peak at the goodies, he promptly slapped the folder shut and tossed it to the side. He grinned at Jonathan's rapidly retreating form. Those bad dreams that had him wriggle and writhe didn't treat Jonny very well.
And he calls himself, "Master of Fear."

He indulged himself with a throaty chuckle. "Oh Jonny, Jonny, Jonny," he said, clucking his tongue and shaking his head. "Why'd you have to go and lie?"

"Lie?" Jonathan blurted without a thought. Reconsidering present company though, he swallowed his offended retaliation and avoided the nervous strumming in the pit of his stomach. "I don't recall lying."

"Lie of omission, Jonny Boy," the clown replied as a matter of fact.

"Who knew he was capable of such big words," the dry rumble of his other half filled his mind. The Scarecrow's voice, always a consistency of snapping blades of straw; always there and never changing. He doubted he could sufficiently divide his focus between the Joker, Scarecrow, and the words that will actually come out of his mouth. He didn't trust himself with such matters anymore. The Batman could be the one to thank for that.

"I'd advise you to, uh, shut-it in there, Crow." A crooked finger jabbed at his forehead, already creased in thought. Jagged scars stretched and puckered as they drew near. Jonathan shivered with the growled response confined to his skull. "I wanna have a lit-tle chat with Jonny." His head dipped to catch downcast blue eyes. "And only Jonny."

Other than the indistinguishable grumbling, Scarecrow hung back and listened; still weary of his last encounter with the clown. Jonathan's other half lacked the certain eloquence and tactfulness that dealing with Joker and surviving usually involved.

"I assume we have an understanding, yes?" He twitched a nod, saving Crane from making the decision and answering for himself. "Goooooo..." Yellowed canines bared in a warped likeness of a satisfied child. He shifted to face Jonathan on the mattress; legs tucked under him pretzel-style. Cold hands wrapped around delicate wrists and held them in a vice between them. The young, ex-doctor's pulse raced under his touch. He couldn't help but giggle at the little effort it took to terrify the doe-eyed man.

Jonathan's Adams apple bobbed against his heavy gulp. The fight for composure all the more difficult to attain at this point in the night when sleep fogged over his perceptions and the twitchy nerves of a premature wake dominated his system. The Joker's presence compared to the REM-thrashed encounters with the Batman was, of course, the lesser of two evils. The clown could be counted on to be unpredictable which in lied a certain, strained predictability to his actions.

He probably will have a nice, long visit to the infirmary in the morning.

That, he could be sure of in the very least.

"What.. did you do while I was away in solitary?" He'd start with a simple question - broad strokes so Jonny would fill in the blanks.

"I read."

Pale lips puckered as he sucked his teeth. Calculating eyes narrowed and scrutinized a terse, plump mouth. Sleepy blues bored into him without a shred of deception. "I'm sure... but who with, hmm?"

The realization struck him then. Jonathan inwardly groaned, longing to get his hands on Wayne's case file only feet away yet instantly resenting that it all, once again, came down to the flying rodent. He adjusted his glasses, though they were perfectly fine, just to have an excuse to aim his searing glare elsewhere. The night-time simulation throughout the cells could allow him to get away with
only so much under the clown's watchful eyes.

"What does it matter?" His voice was even and controlled; that perfect air of apathy mastered over years of studying human psychology.

"It matters when-" Joker's tongue traced and relished along his dry, cracked lips. Obviously too long since paint had graced them. "When my Bat, uh, mentions Jonny Crane during our couple's therapy."

Eye lids receded into his skull. A shrug drew close his bony shoulders. "What kind of treatment plan do they have you on? I'm not seeing how that has anything directly to do with me."

"Funny you, heh heh, say that because of how right. You. Are." His hold on the other's wrist squeezed, pinching skin. Thoughts dripping with acid from his session earlier with Bats.

"You might as well pair me up with Crane-" How long will it take till that happens?

An underlying growl strangled past his smile.

"Make. Him. Leave, Jonathan. Before he breaks both our wrists. He must think you and the Bat…" The implicating tone snaking through brittle stalks of grain repulsed him more than the bathroom facilities at Arkham.

"I would never!" Jonathan gagged. Just the slightest notion of such a- "Euugh!" He shook his head in utter disgust.

"Care to, ah, shed some light on what's goin' on in that big ole melon of yours, Jonny?"

Repressing his total abhorrence to Scarecrow's musings, he swallowed down the nausea and readdressed the clown. "Look I don't know what's written in that file, but I assure you that idiot, Horn, is just clutching at straws. Wayne just sat at the table. I didn't invite him and I made that quite clear." His answer would surely satisfy the madman, because it was the honest to God truth. "The bastard gave me brain damage. Why would I be his meal time buddy?"

"The clown's logic alludes us both, Jonathan."

Slanted, blue-inked cursive flooded Joker's thoughts; Horn's bunched, inscrutable writing painting a picture of what he missed during his absence of his Bat's virginal week of "Rehabilitation." So far black and white but the soon to be added red would make it all the more richer.

Subject, though heavily detested by Patient Crane, shows signs of curiosity towards his fellow inmate i.e. watching and insisting on returning to the same table, the same seat
My only possible explanation is the subject is seeking out familiarity in a new environment Possibly relying on Crane to remind him of his alter ego, the Batman But it seems to be to a limit, explaining his aversion to the Joker-nothing to remind him of his downfall perhaps?
Consult with Quinzel's notes and inquire further in therapy

Curious-with Crane?! How could his Bat find anything remotely mind-boggling about Jonny? Sure, Scaredy could be a real hoot if you got him angry enough… nothing else except those hypnotizing baby blues and that oh so tempting, fuckable mouth.

"-the file?"

"Huh-erm, come again?"
"Shows how much you're listening… may I see the file?" Sometime during his recollection, the smaller man had coaxed his way out of his grasp and assumed a more dignified seating farther from the Joker and legs crossed over the mattress' edge, hands clasped over the knee to disguise the shaking.

"Why sure," the Joker chirped and pointed at the folder tossed on the other side of the cell: The hallway's lights illuminating the label, Bruce Wayne, and peaks of well-organized documents. "There, you see it." His cheeky grin was received with an annoyed narrow of cerulean.

"Why don't you just leave?" He nodded stiffly at the door left cracked open an inch.

"We should leave right now, Jonathan. The Batman can't bring us back if he's already in here. We could get out through the basement." It took an entity as impulsive and primitive as Scarecrow to point out the most blatantly obvious. Jonathan bypassed the admonishing thoughts of declaring himself "Stupid," because he knew that simply wasn't true. Instead he blamed his amazing skill of adapting to tortuous lifestyles. So long at Arkham, in general, and leaving for good crossed his thoughts every once in a blue moon.

Admittedly Gotham with its decaying structures and bleeding heart citizens had found a special place in his soul. The disease inside of him for years regenerated and infectious on a large scale. Gotham was, for the select few like him, somewhere to belong.

"See you eye ballin' the door there, Jon."

Something plagued him though: The man beside him wasn't easily institutionalized, instead meant to burn them down with a whooping call and harvest moon smile. But why then… "Joker," he started and looked at his peer. His heart fluttering more over the prospect of freedom than a leather-winged dream. A frown tugging down his full lips. "If you can leave your cell without the guards, then--"

"Why am I still hanging around this dump?" He quirked a brow with an amused grin, even though jealousy was still very fresh on his mind.

"Well, yes," Crane huffed and looked on, disbeliefing. "No one can stop you. Why stay, and don't say it's for the food."

The clown chuckled in response to this. Jonny could be so transparent. Please, he could almost hear Crow whispering into the blue-eyed man's ear and filling his head with thoughts of escape. Frail limbs slowly tensing to make a run for it. "Uh, we're staying cuz Batsy is stayin'," he corrected with a flicker of tongue.

Laughter strained from constricted lungs; the clown's confidence filling him with dread. "You're joking," but as soon as the words left his mouth he wanted to beat them out of memory with one of his canisters of fear toxin. "Why- why should I have any reason to stay? Wayne is here-"

"Yeeeah… but Bats won't entertain me the way you do, so until then… you stay put." He would just have to keep the vigilante's attention on him -rightfully so- and make sure Jonny understands that he and the Bat are separately his.

"Why- why should I have any reason to stay? Wayne is here-"

Anger pricked across his skin at the clown's greasy words. White teeth glared in the darkness, a lip aching sneer. Long, skeletal fingers curled -nails dragging- atop his knee cap: Self restraint administered as to not lash out at the lunatic, so very pleased with his "Control." No, Jonathan wouldn't ever dare raise an ill-intended fist toward the Joker lest he had given up on life in general and wanted to meet Death with the most interesting story of his demise. He wasn't a fool.
Scarecrow on the other hand…

The demanding shouts to be released overwhelmed Jonathan's stubborn hold. "No, you would only make matters worse."

"At least I'm willing to do something instead of rolling over and being the clown's bitch!"

Sucking in the stuffy air to calm himself, he slid his glasses from his face with every intention to polish the already crystal clear lenses. A shaky smirk settled across his features. "… despite what you may think, Mr. Joker, I was not locked up in this institution to entertain you in- whatever ways I've consented to in the past…"

Jonny's snide tone, gentle but firm, grated on his nerves in the most pleasurable way. "Jonny and his illusions of control… this is my game. My rules (or lack there of, heh). And you, Crane, are going to play."

"Now that there's an opportunity to get out and stay out…" Jonathan's legs slipped from their crossed position, his hands braced on each thigh to stand. "Then I say there's nothing to keep me here."

A sly grin pulled garish scars, as the smaller man swept dark locks from his face and rose from the mattress with a resolute nod. Jonathan's insides screamed and boiled in excitement with each quick step. A sigh of relief gushed from him once his finger tips brushed along cool steel. Finally he can get back to his experiments and have a decent meal.

Low chuckles chased after in three easy strides. "Oh, uh, Jonny?"

The Joker's sure hand seized Jonathan by the hair -jagged nails tearing at the scalp- and tugged him back flush against his chest. Heart hammering from the nostalgic hold, his victim fell against him like a rag doll: Jonny's eyes wide and straining; the toxin's lasting effects immobilizing him in terror, save for his labored breathing, a horrible wheezing in the stillness of the cell.

Running his fingers down the ex-doctor's disheveled white undershirt, the clown nuzzled against Jonathan's neck -happy with himself- and teased the other's waistband, thumb rubbing circles against the tuft of dark hair trailing down to his groin.

"… what kind of citizen would I be if I just allow a mentally unstable criminal to escape?"

-----------------------------------------------------

Along with the rest of the asylum, Bruce jerked from his dozing at the sudden bout of screaming. Rising from his cot, he tilted his head with inquiring eyes as he tread carefully to the glass. A gang of orderlies rushed past and turned out of sight. He cringed and waited for the alarms to sound, but the cries and shouts and cackles of the late night were absent, save for the click of the air ventilation and that blood curdling scream.

Human beings shouldn't be able to make those noises.

He had the urge to break out of his cell (because he knew he could) and rush to the poor victim's aid. It was Batman's job to do such things.

But Bats you're in the loony bin!

As the wailing notes dragged on, they battered down the rusted shell protecting the small bit of him still a frightened child. The night back at the opera house.
Arkham, another waking nightmare.

He shuffled backwards to his cot -eyes trained on the outside- until his calves brushed against the iron frame. Lowering himself, his legs folded against his chest and, unconsciously, his hands slid up to cover his ears. Anything to block out the haunting sound.

"Please…” he muttered softly. Eyes shut and his body huddling more into himself. "Please, just- … just stop."

The screaming was trapped in his ears through dawn.

'T was once - and only once - and the wild hour  
From my remembrance shall not pass - some pow'r  
Or spell had bound me - 't was the chilly wind  
Came o'er me in the night, and left behind  
Its image on my spirit - or the moon  
Shone on my slumbers in her lofty noon  
Too coldly - or the stars - howe'er it was,  
That dream was as that night-wind - let it pass.

Chapter End Notes

The ending passage was an exert from Edgar Allan Poe's, Dreams, end of the first stanza
You Have My Support

You Have My Support

On Sundays from two to three thirty, just after lunch, was the weekly visiting time at the asylum. Patients and their loved ones would convene in a large room filled with chairs arranged for family and friends to bask in the illusion of intimacy. They can talk and weep over their predicament, but never touch. They were still criminals after all. It was a time most patients that still had attachments in the outside world looked forward to.

Maximum security patients though…

"Please sign here, here, and initial here." The chained pen hovered over the security waivers and scribbled where needed. When he was done, he gingerly placed the writing utensil back on the desk. The security officer double checked the signatures and smirked. "… 'Pennyworth,' that's cute. ID, please."

A Gotham driver's license was quickly presented.

"Dr. Horn will be with you shortly, if you'd please…" She motioned towards an empty row of chairs lined against the wall. He took his seat at the farthest end by the doors from which he came; skeptical to venture any deeper into the building with the horror stories about the hospital still fresh in his mind.

His eyes wandered around the reception area. It didn't appear half as bad as Master Bruce claimed it to be, just like any other waiting room at a hospital: Ivory-painted walls, not necessarily uncomfortable chairs with coffee tables littered with months old magazines. Seemingly innocent. He couldn't help but think his charge's obvious distaste for the place stemmed from a fear of knowing that if he were ever discovered under the mask, being sent to Arkham was the only logical course of action.

"Mr. Pennyworth?" A small sigh of relief slipped past his ever-increasing natural frown. The short doctor lingering by the reception desk saved him from sinking deeper into heart-wrenching thoughts and always present misgivings. So with a polite show of teeth, he rose and crossed the short distance to shake hands with all the usual introductions and pleasantries, that felt especially strained in such a situation as this.

"You've been checked by security?"

He replied with a nod and small blush riddled between set wrinkles and pallid flesh. The cursory frisk and confiscation of his car keys coming to mind.

"Good." Dr. Horn flashed pale teeth as he ushered the older gentlemen to follow him. With a swipe of his key card, the locking mechanism buzzed and the pair were walking through the actual hospital itself. The doctor overlooked his companion's weary appearance and pressed on with a conversational air. "Mind if I discuss a matter with you as we walk? The trip to high security can be quite tedious in silence."

Gaze trained several inches ahead of his shuffling black polished shoes, he only nodded with a murmur of possibly, "Of course." With all these questions plaguing his mind -ready to be delivered as a full blown interrogation- but held them back due to his strict upbringing. "How is he?"
"Er… healthy, though not eating as much as he should."

"That so?" The corner of his sagging mouth quirked at this: So typical of Master Wayne to deny the things that made him less than a symbol and simply human. Food and sleep. Then he wondered if his charge had been sleeping -adjusting to the abundance of rest he was being faced with. Running himself ragged till he forced the younger man to sit down in front of a steaming plate of food and then send him off to bed, if only it were for a few hours. Finally, as all of his reminiscing thoughts turned as of late, the fond feelings intertwined with the memories turned sour. The cement walls and steel doors lining their path drilling reality through his skull.

"But I wanted to discuss with you how we could improve his time here," Horn prompted; apprehensive of the subtle flickers of emotion through the other's silence. The impending conversation already showing signs it would not to be an easy one. He pushed on despite the man's reluctance to talk. "Am I right to understand you are Mr. Wayne's beneficiary and possess some level of control over his assets in light of recent events?"

Gray eyebrows stitched together, Alfred's head tilting to properly assess the doctor inquiring about such topics. Common decency deemed private talks of money and ownership unfit conversation in particular with strangers. But if the doctor needed to know in order to further help Master Bruce…

"Yes, to an extent…" Lucius maintained control over Wayne Enterprises -since that's where most of the fortune's revenue accumulated from- but major decisions were left up to him. He found the job easier eight years ago. The media just adored the idea of a billionaire butler and his patience and bravery to follow the whims of a crazy playboy.

"I apologize now for my forwardness, but Mr. Wayne's tailored course of treatment requires a fair amount of your cooperation as well as Mr. Wayne's."

"I'm listening."

From there Dr. Horn explained the conditions of this new "treatment" as they traveled in step down the long corridors of the asylum, neglecting to explicitly name the Joker. The butler -following along more like a concerned father than the hired help- had to hear the logic before becoming instantly biased and turn to ice at the mention of the homicidal clown. And he seemed to have really won the old man over once they petered to a stop outside high security visiting, but then-

"Who may I ask is the other 'willing participant'?" The Englishman found the withholding certain, glaring specifics quite suspicious.

The other man's flapping mouth settling into a hard line only confirmed it."Why don't… you visit with Bruce first." Measured words came out more as a gentle instruction instead of a suggestion. Horn not quite ready to admit the clinching aspect that made this plan so radical. Ushering the older man through and telling him to sit wherever -"Bruce will be along shortly"- Horn decided to wait in the hall unlike returning to his office to sign off on mounds of paperwork.

Just as the door clicked shut behind Mr. Pennyworth, "Well? What did he say? Do we have his support?"

He could recognize that squeaky, grating voice anywhere. Dr. Quinzel's eagerness shown through by the way she peered through the observation window as the butler sauntered to the farthest cubicle. Horn grudgingly shuffled out of the way of her small yet imposing form. Her calm, forced deeper voice cracked and whined when she was excited. The reagle psychiatrist lacquer not quite thick enough to hide the bubbly school girl better suited for pigtails. She lacked the respect of her colleagues for good reason. Giving her the Joker case was simply killing two birds with one stone.
Two individuals going nowhere in this institution.

"What brings you here, Doctor?" He tried to keep his voice low so as to not attract the attention of the only occupant on the other side of the door.

"It is my business to be informed of the progress of my cases."

"Excuse me but this is a joint case, and you would have been informed later today when I have an answer. In this respect, Mr. Wayne is strictly my patient, and I don't appreciate being bombarded with questions that frankly are none of your business unless I decide you need to know. Besides, shouldn't you be attending to other matters-"

"Such as?" she snapped, clearly not taken with his reprimanding tone.

"Such as deciding the proper punishment for your patient for 1) Somehow sneaking out of his cell; 2) Breaking into my office and stealing files; and 3) Assaulting a fellow inmate." A note of unabashed disbelief clung to his counts. How could she easily overlook a clearly serious violation and security risk?

"… I- I don't feel a punishment is appropriate."

"Your patient was found laughing at the scene!"

"No, no, Patient J explained to me what happened." There was no denying the desperate need in her voice. "He was feeling insecure after the session with Mr. Wayne yesterday, and he needed to talk to someone and he said since I had already gone home he figured it would be okay to confide in Dr. Crane, but Crane preferred to escape and Mr. J thought he was doing the right thing by preventing him from doing so."

"And that justifies breaking both his legs?!" Quinzel's exasperating naivety raising his volume enough to echo down the lightly populated hall and reverberate through the door loudly enough so the butler leaned back to look straight at him with concern. With an embarrassed huff, he slid out of sight and avoided the blonde's Did I Say Something Wrong snare of her lip. The one thing you don't do is lose your temper at work, especially when you're a licensed professional paid to help others manage their feelings.

"He realizes now that the situation could have been handled less… violently and he said he's real sorry.-"

"Enough," he sighed in defeat, massaging his throbbing temples. He could see Wayne turning into the same hall with his escorts and wanted to wrap this up. "Quinzel, hope Leland finds your excuses satisfactory, because Jonathan Crane after all is her patient. We'll talk more about Batman and the Joker when we both have time and in a more ideal seclusion. So until then, Doctor…"

Biting back another bout of defense over her top priority patient, Harleen reflected on her shallow breathing and the stray wisps of blonde clinging to her forehead. She prayed her passion wouldn't be misconstrued as anything more than the excitement over a legitimate bond with a man everyone else could only dream to attain. Horn, Leland, all the others were just jealous. With a sniff, she nodded and brushed past Wayne dragging to a stop. The click-clack of her heels on the linoleum flicking Bruce and his doctor in the ear drums. The two, big orderlies paid special close attention as she strutted out of sight. Like Horn, Bruce wasn't fooled by the beauty and sprinkle of intelligence the young woman radiated. Something was definitely wrong with her but neither had a name for it or a specific example to go on.
"Bruce." Horn threw on his best smile in the wake of the pint-sized, blue-eyed frustration. "How are you feeling today?"

Richard Horn's lackluster tenor became an incessant buzzing in the background of Bruce's thoughts. So annoying that his muscles simmered and twitched to reach out and swat the doctor away from him like a fly. His cuffed wrists wouldn't allow it even if he truly wanted to. All he really wanted to do was go back to his cell and remain there; the closest haven beside the cave where he felt safe and alone and the surroundings matched his insides. When they came to get him, he was propped against the wall waiting for the it to swallow him whole.

Anything just to disappear.

Breakfast and lunch were refused; the notion coaxing bile to rise in his throat. Third time was unfortunately the charm, saying he had a visitor. Only one guess who. He could have rolled over and died of embarrassment. Didn't Alfred know he couldn't stand to see him like this-here? He knew he owed his old friend as much, to let him know he was alright and put to rest some his (no doubt) worries.

Yet this was what caused his feet to drag a little more and his frown to set defined creases on his forehead and around his mouth; an illusion to some deeper thinking taking place when really that wasn't the case. He didn't want to lie to Alfred but not upset him more either. The fact of the matter was Bruce couldn't fathom saying he was fine-okay-alright, least of all to his oldest and dearest friend.

After last night… he just couldn't be sure.

Those screams, those horrible, skin-stripping screams: The shrill howls of a wounded animal, tearing from whoever's throat and screeching of absolute terror and beautiful agony. It was enough to lead the asylum into a chorus of woeful cries and shouts. Something more to the screams told of an honest rage that sung to the dark, burning depths of Bruce's soul.

The overhead lights now seemed too bright reflecting off his pale skin, clammy under the Arkham-issued uniform.

"Do you understand?" Horn's inquiring dip into his line of sight brought him back to the present. The time past was a list of dos and don'ts of visitation. When he was led through, he couldn't imagine how could he do much of anything; the set up was quite straight forward: A plain narrow room with individual niches lined to the right and a dividing sheet of glass; the jailhouse set up.

"Go on," Michael murmured, silently ordering the other escort to hang back with a sharp turn of his eyes. Something about the way his new charge was huddled on his cot this morning, staring intently at the wall; and for the first time here, bluntly refusing to follow procedure like going to meal warned him to take it slow today -not be so impatient- and strive to be something along the lines of gentle. Hell the man was pure muscle! The goddamn Batman. He wasn't fragile in the least. His eyes though… spoke magnitudes.

"'Member we're watchin,'" he tacked on in a gruffer manner at the questioning quirk of his colleague's eyebrow.

If Bruce was in a clearer state of mind, he probably would have noticed his handler's efforts and showed some sign of gratitude; as it were, it was all lost on him, hardly even noticing his wrists being released from the cuffs. His steps became more hesitant as he approached the occupied cubicle, steeling himself against this reunion.
Forcing his fidgeting hands to clasp in his lap, Alfred sat up a little straighter when a large, orange-clad figure came into view. He accidentally let slip a gasp, but at the sound of his own shock, his thin lips sealed tight. The heart-breaking state of "Healthy" easing down across from him threatened his tear ducts; eyes burning yet stubbornly staying open, absorbing each painful detail: The hunched posture - sickly complexion - insomnia-carved stare. The old man never felt so cold but at the same time over-heated with the sudden urge to wretch. Blood pumped in his ears. He could see that hard line of a mouth cracking and allowing a shot of beastly muttering escape but understood none of it.

"I-ehem-" He had to rid his throat of swollen emotion. "I beg your pardon, Master Bruce?"

Upon addressing the young man -through the glass barrier- a chaffed red wrist came into view as a telephone receiver eased to Master Wayne's ear. No traces of amusement at the slight flush of the Englishman's cheeks. A part of him felt guilty and disgusted when reaching for his own tool of communication. To talk to a loved one from opposing sides of glass -insulting himself and Master Wayne- like a filthy prison. He stifled a huff of indignation before hastily putting his own receiver to his ear.

Bruce could do nothing but squirm under the other man's scrutiny. Alfred had never looked at him like this before -not when he accidentally broke a dish or when the principal called to inform him Bruce had played hooky; not even when he dropped out of Princeton for no valid reason other than he "felt" like it. The closest he could compare it to was when he came back from the dead and decided he would be the one to save Gotham and everyone in it. And everyone in it.

His mind's eye briefly traced the jagged curve of red-painted flesh.

He internally flinched and shook away the thought.

"… come to say 'I told you so'" That small, low-strung mumble of words couldn't have possibly been his voice. At least the silence was broken and something could be reclaimed that Arkham confiscated from his life. Though he hated to have the old man visit, Alfred truly was a sight for sore eyes despite his pale face appearing waxen and his eyes lacking their lively spark.

"How are you?" the older man responded.

Even at the most undesirable times, the loyal butler had always managed to sneak in a witty remark and draw a smirk out of him. This was already proving that it won't be the same. So Bruce shifted in his seat with a sigh. "What did Horn say?"

"Said you were healthy but not eating -not sleeping much either by the looks of it. Then again you never did much of either." He mustered a weak smile, and for a split second it felt almost normal between them: That dose of father/son camaraderie they both deeply missed.

But Bruce knew better. His eyes darkened. Shadows crept over the sharp angles of his face, turning more to the mouthpiece. "Alfred, you have to get me out of here." Voice sharp and pleading.

Pursed lips went slack as well as his hold on the phone. "I could… see what I can do about getting you transferred to a different hospital if you wish-"

"No!" he sniped, quiet enough so the orderlies nearby wouldn't catch on to his distress. Leg bouncing under the counter; the frantic pace shaking the rest of his being. Bruce hardly noticed he was doing it. The pent up energy and frustration wracking his brains. Biting his lip and staring at a small crack in the corner of the glass. "No, you don't understand - you have to understand - I have to
get out of here. I've got work to do."

A strained chuckle met him in reply. "Master Bruce..." Pity was not far from the crinkles around his pale eyes. The young Wayne's determination -with all that's come to pass: The media hate, the pitchfork-wielding mob, the conviction- was something to be admired yet sadly lamented. When will it be over for him? "The company is doing fine without you," he lied; as if the billionaire needed to hear of the investigations. "And if you're referring to-"

"Yes!" the vigilante hissed. The pressure building against his temples subsided. The cowl always came before the man.

"Sir, you know that can't be." He cast a worrisome look towards the door. That Horn fellow couldn't be far. "The authorities cleared out the base under the docks. Reporters won't leave us the bloody hell alone. It's over-"

"But not under the southeast corner. I have to get back to the computers. Wonder if there's a match?"

"Match? This- this isn't about that creature, is it?"

"I need to have a name, Alfred - something, anything to have over him-an advantage."

"Oh," the butler murmured at a loss for words, shying away from his young master's skewering glare. "… oh."

The doctor's vague description about this new approach to therapy was inadvertently filled in. No wonder Master Bruce threatened with lawyers and refused to comply. There was no understanding that monster. There was nothing there to get to know or "settle differences" with. It murdered Miss Dawes and turned everyone's-especially Master Bruce's- life upside down. In Alfred's opinion, the psychopath should have been shot on site and a lot of this mess would have been avoided. Burn the forest down, he had said, knowing it wouldn't be taken in the literal sense. Bruce wouldn't kill him, no matter how much the cackling bastard deserved it.

Looking him over in a different light, perhaps… it was insane to think it, but perhaps Master Bruce needed to do this. Maybe he needed to talk to someone he didn't fully understand to get a better grasp on himself. He always seemed to struggle with himself. He could see the intense longing in the other's eyes to try but wouldn't dare for his own pride and obligation as a symbol for morality. This obsession -the only fitting title to explain his master's behavior and soul focus on the murderous clown after the fact- would have to get worse before it got any better.

He nodded with the solemn decision.

A burly, raven-haired white coat towered over his charge. Tired eyes looking down a hooked nose. "Sorry to break this up but we're cutting' it close to medication time."

Medication? Furrowed, gray brows shot towards his fraying hairline. This was a surprise to him and judging by the stormy-eyed brunette, it was to him also; though neither of them spoke out about it. The institution lifestyle was a foreign subject outside of their own individual vast span of knowledge.

"Yes, alright." The older man smiled politely at the orderly and rose from his seat, then turned his attention to the gaunt young man, silently kicking himself. "I'll be seeing you next week, Master Bruce."

Lips twisted tight over Bruce's teeth as it pained him to see his only tether to his old life, his only stability, be leaving so soon. This short time could have been spent on catching up on his deteriorating life and talking about something worthwhile to the man. How he longed to be able to
walk out of here with him. But no. That circus freak ruined it by worming his way into his brain and never being far from the tip of his tongue.

"I'm sorry, Alfred," he grumbled, bringing himself to meet the other man's kind stare.

"Nonsense, Sir." He grinned, wanting nothing more but to rest a reassuring hand on his young charge's shoulder. "We'll speak further come next Sunday."

A sad curl of his lips failed to reach his eyes. "You refuse to give up on me."

"To the very end, Sir, and now isn't it." The old butler nodded gently and placed the phone back on its cradle. A bright smile to convey his unconditional caring. He tried not to linger and dwell on the drawn face and cold atmosphere.

"It go smoothly I hope?" Horn was on him before the door closed behind him.

"… it's not about what he convinced me it was," he said with a remorseful tinge to his crisp accent. "It's about that... man now." Disgust rung clear as he shook his head at the thought of that rotted smile and those horrid scars. "You have my support. One chance. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Of course, Mr. Pennyworth, of course."
"Let's start simple: How did you two meet?"

A squeal of delight rang past dry, upturned lips. "Do you wanna tell it or shall I?" He leaned across the generous space towards his surly counterpart. A grimace to match the clown's grin. With no reaction other than his Bat pressing farther away from him and being silent as the grave, he brushed it aside and wiggled back into his seat. "He's shy," he told the pretty blonde like it was the only explanation for the other's stand offish behavior.

"Where. To. Start..." He flipped greasy gold tendrils from his vision and stared in concentration at the ceiling, watching with renewed enthusiasm as the scene took shape above him: A mildew stain bleeding black and spilling out to coat the canvas in misty twilight. The air moist and ripe with sirens and screams. He could almost feel the cold fire escape railing under his white-knuckle grasp. His fists absently clenched within the cramped pull of strait jacket sleeves knotted around him which reminded him of the present.

"It-tuh depends..." he baited with a sly glance at the man to his left.

"Depends on what?" Quinzel pressed, taking the bait. Pen poised and ready to recount the tale in shorthand.

Bruce could only fight the urge to roll his eyes at the young woman's idiocy. "Can't you see that's what he wants-to drag you inside his warped brain and make you play his games? Everything's a sick game to him."

"Depends on which version Bats wants to hear: When I met the Bat or when the Bat met me."

"There's a difference?"

"Big difference," the clown answered, smacking his lips and suppressing giggles. His Bat's head twitched a fraction of an inch towards the conversation. "He gets where I'm going. Did I pique your interest, Batsy? I'll laugh till I choke if you remember."

"... what are you going on about, Joker?" Bruce finally croaked. His better judgement screamed at him to forget about it and not play along, but the idea of having come across this monster before the killings made him uneasy; as if Harvey's fall and Rachel's death were preventable if only he had realized it then and acted promptly.

"You mean ya don't remember, Bats? You break my heart -really you do- surely you, uh, recall those good ole days... with the- the, er, Ninja Bat phase?" The accompanying image of black drobe with a knit mask tickled his funny bone. "Seriously, a ski mask? How droll."

"How does he know about that?"

"Could you elaborate on that, Mr. J? I'm not following." As if the teasing was for her! The female psychiatrist's presence was a regrettable condition of this beautiful arrangement with his flying rodent. He'd grudgingly accept it for now.

"No, I don't think I will, Harley m'dear. See this is 'Couples Couseling' and I can't be the only half of
"He does have a point, Bruce."

"Batman," the Joker interjected with a possessive snap of his jaws. His dark eyes narrowed at her startled expression.

"Ye- yes, sorry..."

Bruce found her recoil particularly odd. The look of fear and hurt was much to the likeness of a scolded child. How could that be though? She was the doctor here, the one in charge...

She pressed on despite it. Her voice weakened but recovering. "What is your response to Mr. J's comments about your lack of participation? Was he right to call you on that?"

Bruce's mind was too engrossed in old memories of the few times he ventured out into the night before kevlar plates, memory cloth, and skulpted pointy ears. All was a hazy blur. He remembered holding a stapler to Gordon and the brilliant stretch of bruises up and down his side the morning after. Could he have forgotten? No, no, information can not be forgotten, merely lost. Though he figured it hard to believe it possible to misplace the Joker anywhere. The man stuck out like an infected, oozing thumb.

"Batsyyyy," a nasaly falsetto sliced through to his attention. The Joker having grown frustrated with the other's tight-lipped passiveness. "Save your angsty moments of reflection for your time. This, this is our time. Now be a good bat and tell the nice lady how you met me. You're cramping our session." Muddy brown fixated on the clock. "Times flys... when you're having too much fun."

His lips pulled tighter into his mouth; teeth biting down to maintain his silence. How could Alfred knowingly put him in this situation? This couldn't be deemed humane.

"You can shut me out all ya want, but I'm not goin' anywhere. You and me-all we got is time, and hey I'll be the, uh... the understanding spouse and radiate patience. I'll wait til those pesky insecurities and niggling emotions building those walls around you weaken and crumble..." He sucked in a chilling breath, eyes slipping closed in the prospect of the sweet anarchy sure to follow his Bat's fall.

He should have tattled on the vigilante sooner. Having him within reach in this somewhat controlled environment would be, for now, the ideal playground. Outside Arkham walls, Gotham was an even crazier place to play; too many distractions. Here, Bats couldn't steal away into the night and hide in his cozy, damp cave. He'll have Nurse Joker 24/7, kissing his boo boos (most likely will be administered by his hand) and basically orchestrating Batsy's entire hospital stay so that it would a most pleasant one. Chaos in the midst of chaos isn't funny, but chaos spilling out like a sliced jugular onto crisp and clean order is.

Miss Quinzel, now he hadn't counted on her. She and her fresh faced optimism and googly eyes was a nice surprise. Wth maybe a flick of his wrist she'd break, easier than Harvey. Harvey, Harley, HA! She would take less effort that's for sure. Just a few choice comments and well placed, longing sighs and he got his time here. Now. With the best thing since sliced bread.

"Ready to, uh, shatter the silence?"

"He's just going to keep talking and talking and talking and he's not going to stop just because I won't reciprocate. He'll find something to say. He has the quiet and the time. We have the time. So. Much. Time. Oh god-" Stomach acids boiled and rolled in frothing fire inside Bruce at that particular
thought. His hand wanted to fly up and cover his mouth in reflex but low and behold the jacket held
his arms securely against his sides. He looked away from his orange-wrapped thighs with hateful
eyes, an unfamiliar wetness smearing his normally sharp vision.

Quinzel looked on with half-hearted sympathy. "I think that'll be all for-"

"No. No. No." The Joker ground out. "You asked us a question -a very simple question- and we
intend to answer it, isn't that right, Batsy Baby?" His voice had softened but hung on to that
authoritative edge.

"It's not fair to push."

"Tell her; it's not hard. I'm ashamed it's taking us this long."

Her pretty pink lips flew open to the likeness of a blow up doll but something deliciously unexpected
happened.

Brucey started to talk, albeit a flat, lack of pizazz speech but something worth shutting your trap
-"That means you, Harley-girl"- and listening closely.

"I saw that disgusting video..." The expression on his face matched his words, disgusted. "Then at
Dent's fundraiser I threw for him."

"Oh? And what happened there?" The Joker pressed, as if he didn't know.

"You know, so don't," Bats deadpanned, focusing on the grains lining the door. Any media outlet
could tell that story. The socialites sqawked about it for weeks after. How awkward it was to be
approached on his whereabouts when rumors placed him fleeing to his panic room and abandoning
his guests. Little did they know... well, now they do.

"Batsy, I just wanna hear your P-O-V of the encounter. Not too much to ask now, is it?"

Although the vigilante loathed to admit it, it felt good to be talking some again, having spent weeks
in basic silence. Having the harlequin near triggered something in him where the wariness and self
doubt evaporated away. A phantom cowl hugging his face and mostly filling the void inside.

"Come oooooon..." the clown groaned just to aggravate his foe.

"Fine," he growled. He had to give it to the jester, he knew how to prod at every last one of his
nerves.

"And there. You. Are." If he couldn't have his Bat in the hard rubber flesh, than he'd certainly get
him in spirit and provoking for sparing growls wasn't below him. A giddiness swept him up in the
ice-glazed recount of their glorious face-to-face all those long, boring months ago.

"You and your men poured out of the elevator, fired a single shot to the ceiling, and sought out
Harvey Dent."

"Yeah, I never did find that slippery, lil bugger," Joker reflected with a reminiscent grin.

"That's because I put him unconscious and hid him where you wouldn't find him."

"Ya did? Huh, that makes sense... but get to the good part already!"

But Bruce didn't want to think about "The Good Part," because that involved exposing a part of
himself Batman couldn't afford to have withering away inside him. He didn't trust himself to mention
a shred of her and not reveal some level of emotion. That devil may cry bastard was to blame. The relief to talk quickly turned on him too soon.

"Jeesh, you're taking too long," Joker griped; oblivious or completely uncaring to the shift in the atmosphere. He saw the tender nerve his Bat presented and pounced on it like a wolf on a limping lamb. Hopefully he'd come out of this tasting blood.

He'd have to continue for the sake of the tale.

"So then I'm asking quite nicely for the whereabouts of the late district attorney and no one seems to know. Well there I was stranded with no, ah, law book-thumping prize..." He paused to moisten his lips, uncrossing and recrossing his gangly legs. The casual gesture would just infuriate the brunet, brooding in his fabric hug. This next part could be handled in one of two ways; the thing was which one would be more painful and appealed to his style. "... so I settled for a loved one, and wasn't she a looker, though I've seen much, much better." He was feeling charitable, so he shot the blonde hanging on his every word across from him a wink.

The psychiatrist's cheeks heated to a most unbecoming beet root.

"She interrupted me you see, and I didn't like that... not at all in fact, so I tell her a little story about these." His chin lifted in the air to draw more attention to his scars. He wanted so very much for the Bat to look at him and see him smiling.

"Yes, go on..." Miss Harleen Quinzel appeared exceedingly interested. The excited flicker in her eyes was borderline disturbing.

"Well, I come to dis-cover that Harvey's bunny doesn't have much of a heart-see, she didn't care about my sad, sad story. She hit me and I -oh ho- and I replied, 'You got a little fight in ya..."' He said it just as he did all that time ago, with the amused growl and flirtation of a fat, pink tongue. "'I like that...' Then Batsy, you popped out of nowhere and said- no, you made that one, perfect promise that set my blood a boilin'." He shivered, imagining the cool moisture of face paint smoothing across his feverish skin. Much like how the Batman made him remember to feel. His ever-twitching tongue pushed past his lips and lazily traced the pale curves.

Air froze in Bruce's lungs. The sweet image of Rachel fresh and pulsing in his mind. She looked so gorgeous that night, "And I saved her then." He listened along with every ounce of his pained attention.

"And I do, Batsy," the clown groaned, wriggling in his jacket. The fabric binding him was suffocating. He needed a hit. "Believe me when I say I do."

The pen sank in Harleen's slackened grip. Blush raging. She glanced back and forth between the pair, getting the distinct impression she was intruding: Joker writhing in his seat, looking at Bruce with fierce adoration and smiling dreamily; Bruce hunched and stark still, shallow pants rushing in and out of his flared nostrils. His dark eyes boring holes into a scuff mark on the floor.

"Any- Any response to that, Bruce?" she asked feebly.

His rapid breathing cut off abruptly -scaring her- and forced a deep intake of stale office air. Skin bristled. His adams apple bobbed painfully under the emotional vice. "... I'd like to go back to my cell now."

The Joker burst into cackling fits as she nodded and buzzed for Michael to take him back. When the
tall orderly shuffled in and tended to the fallen hero. He expected as much that the freak would be laughing. He always laughs. Quinzel stood also out of respect for their departure. She never felt so small when the dark knight looked her square in the eye.

"... this is why good and evil don't talk things out."

"Oh no see I don't feel that's true, Bats." The Joker managed to control himself long enough to acknowledge his arch nemesis. Tears of mirth trickled down into his scars. Bruce couldn't even look at him; in fact not at all yet. "I don't believe in good and evil. People are either charming or tedious." [1]

Bruce quickly exited with Michael at his heels, ignoring whatever the clown had said.

Before Quinzel could do anything, Joker leapt from his chair and poked his head out the door. "And believe me, Batsy, you're my Prince Charming! Just some food for thought for ya, babe!" he called after. His laughter echoed down the hall -filling every crack and eardrum- until it bounded back around the clown. His scars hid his frown and furious stare as his handlers wrestled him for control.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Oscar Wilde
"He asked if my mother was home, and I said N- no…" "Then what happened?" "Then- then- he said- he said that I was pretty." "It's okay, you're safe-"

"Ohdeargod…" he gasped, cradling his throbbing head in his hands. This, this is what the great Batman had been reduced to: Forced to watch daytime talk shows on an itchy, beaten to lumps couch with a small cocktail of drugs swimming in his system.

Instead of isolating him, Horn figured most of the vigilante's problems stemmed from too much alienation from normal society, so here he was trapped with a small crew of stumbling, mumbling miscreants that would rather lose their right hand than have anything to do with him; no worries though, the feelings were easily mutual. Watching middle-aged women confront thirty year-old molestations with a box of tissues, a prying host, and a cooing audience must have been the orderlies' version of a joke. When he asked to watch the news or something else -anything, but he was above begging- they laughed and said, "No, doctor's orders." Asking how that could possibly be when GCN was only a click away, they happily told him he was the news.

"So this is how the Batman gathers animosity towards the wicked… he listens to sob stories."At the other end of the couch sat a grinning Jonathan Crane, strapped in a wheelchair with two plaster legs propped up ahead of him. His eyes, wide and shiny, couldn't be hidden behind the cold exterior of his spectacles; his wondrous gaze wandering to the TV and to Bruce. He leaned over and whispered in a whimsical tone, "Enjoying yourself?"

A week in the infirmary and doped on morphine up to his eyeballs, Batman didn't seem so terrifying and the drugs put him in a playful mood anyway.

Bruce didn't know this, drained of energy. "Cruel and unusual punishment," he grumbled with a shrug. Confusion as to why the ex-doctor would strike up conversation with him when he hated him would have to fall under the asylum's many quirks. "So… um, what happened to you?" He motioned at the two broken limbs.

Crane exclaimed a light laugh and smoothed his hands down his thighs. "Courteousy of your not-so better half."

Sad thing was Bruce didn't have to think hard on who the culprit was. His grimace spurned more titters of amusement from the multiple personality.

Now don't misconstrue Jonathan's giddiness for forgiveness: Him as well as Scarecrow still seethed over the clown bastard when he was lucky enough to have spells of lucidity. The humiliation and pain caused would not go unpunished. He vowed he would develop a toxin to have the scarred bastard laugh to death. The young psychiatrist's ranting and raving earned him another dollop of medication in light of his plan of vengeance. But he's oh so pleasant at the moment, so why not send him to the unmasked hero? The billionaire seemed to have a keen, unspoken interest in his first costumed villain, something to get them both to open up.

"Now how are the joint sessions going?"

"That's - really none of your business." Only two sessions and Bruce was ready to lose his mind. It was bad enough another was scheduled in two days.

Pushing his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, the smaller man mocked a serious tone. "As
head doctor of this hospital, I'm well within my jurisdiction to be updated on your progress."

Bruce's mouth popped open; an incredulous stare tracing the tremble of Crane's plump lips from a stern line to a flash of sorrow to a recovered smile. "You aren't the head doctor anymore, you were fired for good reason… you realize that, don't you?"

A breathy round of giggles ensued. "I may be held here against my will, but I am not stupid. Terminated or not, I'm the only capable doctor here. Horn, Leland, Quinzel, Arkham himself- hacks, all hacks!" He threw his head back and laughed.

Bruce blanched at the soft stuttering breaths, having grown tired of the act of laughter in general. With bleary eyes, he tried to focus all his efforts on the fifteen inch screen mounted overhead: Snowy images flickering through a thick film of dust, sounds sloshing together, and none of it registering in his mind. "Just a few minutes of the news," he mentally begged, squirming in his seat and itching in his own skin. Not knowing what was happening in his city without his protection was the worst torture imaginable he had known thus far. Wait. He had to back track on himself: Odd how he didn't immediately name the prescribed time with the Joker the worst yet.

That. That was the worst part.

… he must not be getting enough sleep. That must be it.

Unbeknownst to him, the chirping of a certain effeminate inmate had petered out minutes ago and was currently -happily- studying his enemy. "Of course the brute would have to be handsome," he thought bitterly. Eyes roaming over the other man's sharp features and tousled hair: A mess from anxiety combing fingers and frustrated tugs. The mad vigilante would have to shave soon; the careless stubble was most unbecoming. He rubbed absently at his own jaw line and cheek, coming to discover he wasn't that much better off. Another slippery giggle broke through the sedative haze. It was the perfect excuse to think such thoughts, because if he were in a right state of mind he'd deny and gag.

"I've always wondered…" he prompted, feeling loose enough to move closer but the chair prevented him from doing so.

"And for the best," Scarecrow rasped from a repressed corner of his conscious. More of an incessant whisper with no clear translation, than his usual overbearing self.

"I've wondered, B-man-" Jonathan snickered at that. Nothing like a bunch of pain relievers to lighten his mood. "When I… dosed you with my toxin, whatever did you see? … just for curiosity's sake," he quickly tacked on once the harsh glare the man in question pinned upon his goofy grin. His puppy dog, cerulean eyes widened in a mock-innocence as he awaited the answer- any answer would probably do at this point. To have a conversation outside of hyena cackles or the insulting inquiries over his mental state was actually… quite nice.

The vigilante blew out a gust of air he didn't realize he'd been holding. Crane's unfocused gaze settled his nerves and lowered his guard enough that for once something resembling a decent exchange could occur. His voice came as a croak when a wry grin snuck its way on his normally grim face. "Thought I don't 'fascinate' you anymore, Doctor."

"No, I ummm just about figured you out." The blue-eyed man nodded his assent. Bruce briefly wondered if it'd be unethical to drug the man all the time if he was this agreeable. "Bastards like you are a dime a dozen."

"Spoke too soon."

"… a bit more delusional." Jonathan's eyebrows knitted together and he frowned. "With a Jesus
"A- a Jesus complex?" the Batman sputtered, unconsciously lunging forward in shock and ending up a cushion square from the smaller man's sated smile. He didn't know whether to be angry, insulted, or in awe of this rare insight into a relaxed and seemingly childlike Jonathan Crane. Bruce would have to settle for the latter, finding the experience eerily warming. Maybe not everyone here was entirely damned. "How do you figure?"

"Subconsciously or -god forbid- you're aware of it, but doesn't it sound utterly pretentious that Gotham's favorite son exiles himself for years with no word to anyone, till he returns to this cesspool all righteous and full of hope in his fellow man, then launches a crusade to defend the innocent and smite the sinners? All that self-sacrifice… now, this… you're here." Crane indulged in a satisfied curl of his lips. "…condemned by your own people. Crucified."

Maybe it was the drowsy lilt, but Bruce wasn't as annoyed by the ex-doctor's theories. In fact he was oddly enough amused and comforted that someone around here was tactful with their logic (though horribly mistaken). It was extremely refreshing, all things considered.

"Your silence tells me I'm right." Jonathan smirked, flicking a lock of chestnut hair from curtaining his left eye; Scarecrow hissing, "Insolence," in his ear all the while. For the first time Jonathan briefly questioned just who really was the stronger one of the duo. Jonathan was after all the one conversing with his enemy with fear drowning in morphine. Scarecrow couldn't say that; well, he couldn't say a lot of things anymore actually, the new medication having built up in his system. A reason for being so eager to talk to someone -Batman included- was the creeping loneliness he felt for his silenced companion, though the meds did a much better job of counteracting the toxin's lasting effects.

Minutes passed amicably in the quiet buzz of television and the other inmates puttering about aimlessly; Crane humming and picking at his cast; Bruce staring at the young psychiatrist without an ounce of self-consciousness. He knew next to nothing about this man who so blindly hated him, other than that he was once the head of this facility and poisoned innocent people for his fear experiments, oh that and somehow he knew Ducard/R'as well enough to work for him, but that was still a sensitive subject for the former student so he pushed that aside for another day's turmoil. But there were so many other things Bruce didn't know. Batman left him where he dropped him in the hospital basement and didn't look back. Same as the parking garage. What of the man's motivations - why? He never did ask. One thing could be said about Arkham -positive or negative- it provided plenty of time and quiet (depending on one's definition of quiet) to think over a lot. For one, "Am I really that black and white?"

"Pull his string, he's not talking," Jonathan stage whispered and giggled. Later on when the drugs wore off, he would be appalled by his behavior in front of his most loathed enemy; but for now he'd enjoy the floating sensation.

Bruce opened and closed his mouth, unsure of what to say. What kind of conversation was he supposed to have with a psychotic with a degree? He hated to admit and was shocked to realize but he couldn't help but be a little intimidated: Harvard-certified versus a Princeton drop out. In a place like this, brute strength meant absolutely nothing. He had little over the frail man: No fists, no darkness, no cowl and armor, just Bruce Wayne.

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?" Crane griped, having grown impatient. "You should be able to hold a conversation- like at those snobby, rich person balls-" He paused and silently mouthed his last words. Then his large eyes crinkled at the edges, his hand flew up to cover the sound of his snort, and his pale complexion flushed a violent red. Chest shuddering with repressed laughter.

Frowning, Bruce allowed the explanation to dawn on him and of course rolled his eyes subsequently
after. Maybe if he was eleven he could see the humor in such childish jokes, but he was a grown man and the god damn Batman. Jokes and fun just weren't his thing; he's come to accept that. But a man with such intellect of Crane's caliber busting into hysterics was something to see.

Then the laughter cut off abruptly and a paled Jonathan Crane sat still in his seat. All traces of glee vanished.

"Are you… alright?"

Melted blue locked onto him. The shielding fingers over his mouth clenched and dug into his flesh.

"Uh… someone?" Bruce scanned the room for an orderly or nurse, someone, anyone. There was no one. What the hell? "Er, can someone help-

"Don't- don't tell him I spoke to you," the smaller man hurriedly said in a hushed tone. His eyes focused on the fidgetting in his lap.

"Tell who and why?" Jonathan fixed a stern look upon Bruce, because the answer was painstakingly clear and he shouldn't have to ask. The vacant yet thawed glint in his normally sharp, frostbitten glare shone with something a touch more disconcerting to the fallen vigilante: A silent, rage-laced fear.

"But why though? What does he care if you talk to me?" As if this isn't weird enough.

"That's the point: He cares." Bruce's mouth wrenched open for a rebuttal, but Crane was no longer in the mood for roundabout questions. The combination of paranoia and mild stings of pain shooting up his legs were slightly sobering. "Don't you get it? You're his, as far as he's concerned. Probably the only thing he won't put to risk." Full lips wrinkled in an attempt of a sneer; frustration, disgust, and perhaps a good likeness to jealousy dripping from his voice.

"I'm not anyone's property, especially that cackling psychopath's." Bruce's thick arms crossed over his hammering heartbeat. He directed his narrowed eyes elsewhere, subconsciously hiding something he didn't want the ex-doctor to see in them. He was sure it didn't have a name. "… I don't get it. It's bad enough I have to do therapy with him for our… relationship." That nasty word might as well have been soaked in vinegar. "I don't know if I can take this much longer-" Tense eyelids receded in self-surprise, worriedly checking if he was heard. That admission of weakness and doubt shared by Bruce Wayne and Batman both toppling from his lips without a thought.

Crane in fact did hear him and stored this gem of information in his muddled brain for a more lucid savory. "You have it sooo easy now. You've dealt with him, haven't you? You should know better."

Yes, Batman only knew too well that the Joker's lack of effort still resulted on a catastrophic scale.

"This is him being subtle." Jonathan winced at the dead weight ache of his legs. "You're welcome for that."

"Why would you say…?"

"Because I'm the one who told him to reduce his efforts. If he had it his way, he'd of crawled into bed with you stark naked your first night here. He could come for you anytime, but he hasn't, correct?"

Bruce shook his head in a curious daze. When did the pair find the time to discuss him -why him?- since he had yet to see them together. Scarecrow and the Joker, an insane odd couple that had to be seen to be believed.
"Well then he has more self control than I thought." Memories of a determined clown coming to his cell most nights and ravishing him with savagery and a bad limp the next day pummeled Jonathan's thoughts. He found them nauseating if not exciting, and all around infuriating.

Luckily Bruce didn't know what images were plaguing the other's mind, and probably if the time came to it he wouldn't want to. All he could wonder if there was a goal to his strategy. "Why would you tell him that?" It felt peculiar to discuss the Joker as an actual person, a thinking, feeling human being.

"You rather him come on strong?" the other asked in a dry tone.

"No… no." Heat bloomed in the billionaire's cheeks. Why was this conversation sounding of more implications than he cared to ever entertain? "I meant why would you tell him how to act in general? That doesn't sound like you."

A narrow eyebrow arched. "As if you know anything about me. Don't presume things about me you will not in a lifetime come to understand, Bat-man." And there he was, the Dr. Crane with the sarcastic bite and cold exterior Gotham knew. The pain having returned and slicing through the morphine cloud. Till the next dose he would be oh so unpleasant now.

"Try me, Crane," his enemy snarled after the sensed change.
Jonathan's plump lips busted apart in a cynical laugh, then gone as soon as it came. With the receding fog of glorious morphine, he couldn't be sure but did the big, bad Batman honestly just tell him to "Try me"?


How… very tempting.

Something feral licked at his grin.

Okay so some remnants of the drug still lingered atop his inhibitions. Self disgust plagued him then. "Honestly, Scarecrow, have you no better taste?"

Bruce ended up being taken aback. Such an amused, bitter outburst from the usually impassive doctor couldn't have been aimed in his direction? That's more Joker than Crane, and right now the vigilante wanted to be far as physically possible from the -thank god- absent clown. That little bit of knowledge was a relief in and of itself, but when an arrogant little man whose torso's width could easily match one of Bruce's flexed biceps? Sorry, but no amount of sedatives in his system could muddle the all too familiar blistering stings of anger.

He found himself teetering on the edge of the lumpy couch, its threadbare arm contracting and groaning under his tightening grip, and an ache in his tensed jaw. He was sure he'd been doing that compulsively since the trial. All he was doing was being civil and he gets laughed at in the face?

Basking in the strongest emotion the drugs would allow him, it came as no surprise that the soft tenor of Crane's voice went virtually unnoticed for several tries.

Jonathan contemplated smacking the deaf brute, but then again he had no desire to touch the man. As if millions of squirming microscopic bacteria waited to leap from the surface and multiply on Jonathan's impeccable hygiene. With a pinched expression -narrowed eyes suspiciously scrutinizing the other man's lightly tanned skin- he asked in a firmer, more measured tone, "What drugs do they have you on?"

When the vigilante looked up into that curious, icy stare, he'd almost forgotten that this man was the cause for the strong distaste. But like the pleasant starting of a dream or the answer to a burning question on the tip of his tongue, the upside to his anger was quickly lost and so was his focus. His mind, like a television with bad reception, going in and out of focus.


Brows knitted together. He released the couch arm and tucked his clawed fingers into his lap.

Jonathan huffed an exasperated sigh. For the first time in a very long time, he felt like he was talking to himself. He couldn't imagine any other madness more bothersome.

The disoriented billionaire carefully replied, "I… don't know…. No one told me." Humiliation burned in his high-cut cheeks. What kind of careless idiot was he to not demand the knowledge or at least find some other backhanded means to obtain the information? He had just assumed that if he
asked, Horn would just deliver that condescending smile and tell him not to worry about it.

"How could that be?" The haughty professional in the ex-doctor emerged in full, unanticipated force. Mostly the not knowing bugged him. "It's a patient's right to be fully informed of their treatment plan, meaning medication and therapeutic measures. I knew Horn was a bad hire. Incompetence, malpractice-" Crane ranted.

Bruce wasn't sure he'd done it until the tirade got caught in the other's throat and Crane gaped. It was a wry, tired utterance but the fallen hero had actually chuckled.

"Great, the clown is sure to kill me now," Jonathan automatically concluded. "I think I just heard the Batman laugh."

"Let me see if I understand you correctly," Bruce started slowly with hints of a soft, bitter smile.

-"Shit now I've seen him smile."-

"You're going to sit here and preach about the proper behavior in which a licensed doctor is to behave -you of all people- when you were the one to abuse your power and wrongfully diagnose guilty thugs in exchange for drug shipments from the mob. Then- then you were experimenting on - no- poisoning your patients with a toxin designed to terrify them into a greater level of insanity, all for your sick pleas-"

"Not pleasure," Crane snapped, lurching forward in his chair and subsequently wincing from the discomfort of his broken legs. His mask of cold indifference was hastily fixed upon his face. Deep breaths… Maybe he did get a small thrill when people -arrogant, worthless imbeciles who thought they were better than him: Richer, better looking, happier but never smarter than him- crumbled before him in fits of terror. Sobbing, retching, screaming, cowering from a simple blast of his genius. That was only a perk, mind you; he was more productive than that, and that's all the Batman needed to know. "The formula was meant to induce fear so that I could study the effects, then possibly some day concoct an inoculation." [1] Jonathan didn't know why he was even telling the spoilt brat that much, but though it was difficult nowadays to hear Scarecrow properly thanks to the new meds Leland forced upon him, he could sense the defensiveness and the need to correct a glaring misconception.

Another dry chuckle, sardonic in its delivery. "Right... was this plan to save the world from fear before or after driving innocent people who came to you for help further out of their minds-"

"I had consent-" A bleary-eyed, half coherent nod but consent nonetheless. But the larger man didn't slow for this.

"Or when you were poisoning the water supply for months-"

"That..." Jonathan didn't really have a rebuttal for that. A smart man like him knew vaguely his efforts were building to something, but he couldn't figure out why introducing his toxin to the Narrows' water was so important when it was only effective airborne. The mob activity was funding his experiments though and doing so in the asylum's basement was convenient enough so he found little reason to refuse the men with guns, though before he knew the plan it all seemed like such a waste of his perfect concoction.

"Tell me that wasn't you who had sprayed me in the face and set me on fire, because you were up to such noble causes. Or Rachel-" Bruce's voice caught. "...what did she do?" He didn't mean to mention her.
Jonathan quirked his lips. "Oh, you mean Miss Dawes…" And here he was getting nervous when obviously there was no need to be. The Batman was clearly still bothered by the few encounters they shared, and that put the small, frail doctor back in control. The fire and later watching that irritating woman's self assurance crash and shatter to sheer terror was one of his very few fondest memories. Seeing the fear was the only thing that made that bitch tolerable. So with a sigh slipping past a delicate grin, he rolled his cold cerulean eyes to meet the burning, expectant brown of his current annoyance. "She would have ruined the operation, you understand. Why was she-" He stiffled a snort, which would have been uncouth otherwise. "-special to you?"

An abrupt snarl. That's all it took for Jonathan to realize he had said the wrong thing. The surest movement from the hazy ex-crime fighter was a viper strike grip on Crane's white tee and an attention-snaring jerk. Fire shot up and down the fragile doctor's shins as he was pulled face to face with a very unhappy Bat.

"Were you-" Jonathan gagged slightly, "Expecting an apology?" Touches of pink emerged in his usually sallow complexion. His hands were the only anxious tell, giving him away as they scrambled and gripped the wheelchair's slick armrests.

"Let 'im go, Wayne." The absorbed pair looked up in unison to Michael, Bruce's personal babysitter, towering over them with a stern expression.

"But he insulted Rachel!" Bruce wanted to say, but how childish would that have sounded? Just more incentive for Crane to overanalyze and scoff over. As well put together Bruce Wayne was and as calculative as his alter-ego was, articulating much of any of his more colorful thoughts was a real struggle. Just tongue-tied anger. So with one last threatening glare at a patiently waiting Jonathan Crane and a flair of his nostrils, he dropped the smaller man back into his seat. If anyone outright asked, he'd deny the bitter satisfaction he felt when the doctor's smirk withered into an agonized grimace as he clutched at his casts.

"Thank you." Michael nodded his appreciation and sauntered back to his post on the other side of the room with the other newly returned orderlies who watched the exchange with mildly curious expressions.

A grinning red head guarding the door appeared startled. "What? That's it?" he asked incredulously in a loud, mocking tone. "No Kung Fu? No swooping down and beatin' the shit outta him?"

Snickers followed and Bruce recoiled, having grown tired of the insults.

"Gregory," Crane unexpectedly spoke up. His glasses righted and his legs adjusting to a throbbing ache. He looked as if what had just happened hadn't. "Where, pray tell, would he 'swoop down' from?"

Coincidentally the red head was Jonathan's assigned sitter and the staff's certified idiot. His proud grin from the less than impressive jibe at the fallen hero soured under the doctor's calm scrutiny. Several beats passed, which in normal verbal sparring was a more than accommodating amount of time for a suitable response, but Greg's obnoxious retorts dwindled to a wonderful imitation of a goldfish. His freckled cheeks burning in light of his colleagues' looks of expectation sinking to disappointment. Outsmarted by a loon. Tsk. Large fists balled at his sides but really nothing could be done. "Shut up, Crow" was barked as a last minute ploy.

Jonathan merely smirked, all too pleased with himself. Even on thought-blurring drugs, he was still sharper than these knuckle-dragging barbarians... but still, defending the Bat Man? He could feel Scarecrow scowling to distract from the gagging.
As the dayroom gradually returned to its normal, empty drone, Bruce shifted in his seat in more discomfort than could be blamed on the old couch. Lowered brown eyes cast uncertain glances at the well-composed doctor currently sneering at the television set.

"What?" Crane bit out, not fully acknowledging the other man.

Bruce quickly looked away as if slapped. All that comforting rage now a sick, forgotten sludge in his veins. "I don't understand," he said quietly.

"Why does that not surprise me?" quipped Jonathan in a bored tone, dragging his blue glare back on one of the several banes of his existence.

"I just throttled you, and then you defended me just now." The words were difficult to get out: 1) Because they filled him with self disgust; and 2) He never thought he would utter anything of the like… to the Scarecrow of all people.

"I didn't defend you," Jonathan replied haughtily. "I just can not tolerate stupidity."

For the most part, that was true. The orderlies in all their unfounded arrogance needed to be reminded their place was at the bottom of the asylum hierarchy, the obedient gorillas that hardly deserved the acknowledgement. They came under the rapists and child molesters lucky enough to have their insanity plea work. People of Crane's caliber -the Idealists- was of a very small margin but very much at the top, even the doctors put them there as highest priority: There was him; No matter how outrageous, the Joker; and Wayne, who's just as blind as the Bat he emulates to the way things really are.

Arkham was breaking him down faster than he or Scarecrow estimated, wearing him to a cracked shell oozing drugs with the sporadic sparks of his old self making their appearances. Jonathan couldn't hate him properly, because he'd be no better than those who made majority of his own childhood Hell. At the moment the man presented himself as a lost little lamb, and Jonathan felt like the wolf playing with his food. As the clown would so helpfully point out, where's the fun in that?

No Challenge to it. So he would allow the Bat to rot properly without the daunting touch of outside forces. Fools, like Gregory, didn't have the right to feed on the sick hero when that satisfaction solely belonged to him and Scarecrow. Perhaps what the Bat needed was... a friend. Sometimes the best revenge stemmed from a feeling of trust and security. He remembered from his past open clinic sessions that the sobbing, scarred wrecks he had no choice but to deal with were agonizing over the hurts from a loved one.

The Batman would trust him up to the end and then… well…

An ice-carved grin flitted through his pouty lips. Something sadistic and deliciously ugly rumbled like a contented cat in his chest. He would have to be careful. His eyes flickered to the heavy casts on his legs. The clown wouldn't appreciate his little Jonny's plans.

"Fuck him," Scarecrow's rasp surged in his thoughts and only confirmed what Jonathan had in mind as the most suitable path.

Turning back to the suspicious glances from Wayne, he mustered a less devious smile on his face as something close to warm and inviting. "...now, let's talk about less sensitive subjects, shall we?"

He didn't wake up on the floor this morning. Today was going to be a good day. He could just feel it.
"Afternoon Mr. J," Dr. Quinzel greeted with a bright smile, seated behind her desk. Only the smile, albeit a scarred and stained and by far more disturbing version, was reciprocated. The clown wasn't going to utter a single word until the final player had arrived. He had so much to say and if he started now he knew it'd be awhile before he'd stop, and he didn't like to repeat himself.

As she went about asking the preliminary questions: "How are you? Please describe what you're feeling; here's a word chart if you're having any trouble. How did you sleep? Did you dream? What did you dream of?" He was staring intently at the door, attuned to the sounds of the hall for the shuffling of approaching footsteps.

"… you two don't have a session today," Harleen muttered, turning disappointed eyes down to the notepad in front of her and jotting the appropriate observations.

For a brief second the vigor in his smile drained and the corner of one of his insomnia smudged eyes twitched, but it was quickly masked with an unbothered shrug. The muscles confined in his strait jacket coiled in a pulsing knot; she wouldn't see that though. The perky blonde didn't see a lot of things it would be in her best interest to open her eyes to. She looked upon him as if he hung the moon and his smiles fueled the sun.

"Silly girl, everyone knows Batsy does that."

"So how's your day going so far?" she started brightly.

... Twenty two minutes later.

"Please, Mistah J, say something!" Doctor Quinzel pleaded; her girly whine revealing a woman much at the end of her patience. "What did I do wrong? Why won't you talk to me?!" she screamed inside her skull; her plastic pen bending within her trembling fist.

Grinning pleasantly, the Joker sat with remarkable posture in his seat, very pleased with his adopted role as a mute. If he'd known the silent treatment produced more favorable results than his abusive father scar story and tales of his rocky childhood (all made up, mind you) than he would have given it a shot ages ago. … Well, perhaps not. He first had to gain her sympathy when all the other shrinks considered him an incurable animal, otherwise he wouldn't have as many nifty privileges he has now.

Women were easy like that.

He did though find his silence tough to contend with: The words tickling his throat but only to be simply swallowed and wasted. Sometimes it almost became too tempting. Like asking, "Hey whatever did that pen do to you? Oh, oh, are you going to show me a magic trick?" That thought made him perk up some. Or shushing her when her voice hit some of those borderline unpleasant, high anxiety pitches. These times and others were bothersome to pass up, but then he'd take into account the harsh lines creasing her smooth, little girl face and the well-being of that poor pen, and he'd bite his tongue, holding out just a smidge longer to see how far he could push her. The results could be… entertaining.

"You don't wanna talk about your week. You don't wanna talk about your mother, your education, the- the weather-"

"As if I would know." Muddy brown eyes casually did a sweep of the windowless office. Out of all of his newly acquired privileges, time outdoors was still out of reach.

Short of being on her knees, it was a sorry sight of begging, near tears and hair mussed. What a sad
day for psychiatrists everywhere. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Nocturnal flying mammals on two legs and covered in golden skin, of course!" He wanted to say but refrained from such. In a matter of seconds he had grown extremely bored. Or perhaps he'd been bored all along and was only trying to play it up as more of an entertainment than this actually wasn't. "Oh the dredges of being the greatest show on Earth," he thought in tragic parody, his grim smile twitching at the corners. How much longer was he due in here?

"Please, Mr. J." Her too pink lips barely moved, staring at the virtually blank slab of paper before her. "You always talk to me," her New York candy apple voice cracked at the end which mildly surprised him. She wasn't due for emotional exposure (especially desperation of all those nasty, filthy chemical burps) for at least three or four more one-on-ones. Though she should know better to get this attached at all.

If, of course, she was trained properly at those fancy schools she attended. In this case, knowledge probably didn't matter - it crumbled in fact- because it was pitted against him; he realized all this with a smug satisfaction that didn't surface on his stiff grin expression. The satisfaction was there all the same: A warm, almost soothing veil covering the exterior but never quite emitting enough heat to penetrate the cool skin and icy veins and soaking the dry, brittle core-

"Whatever that is," he mused vaguely with the brief narrow of his eyes, tongue idly tracing the smooth dips curving up and rubbing his gums. The right side still ached from his mindless chewing at last night's dinner. He was watching the Bat on the other side of the room pushing around his soggy carrots and dry chicken and refusing to acknowledge the clown (which rightly irked him) when his absent chomp chomp chomping resulted in a sudden splash of hurt: His sharp teeth biting down on the old, uneven scar. Schiff had noticed his flinch and shakily asked if he were okay. Schiff slept in the infirmary that night if he remembered correctly.

"If I've done something-just tell me, okay? We can work through this-" Her shifts in attitude were making him dizzy. "Say anything, please? Please?" She really would be that dramatic. For all that her PhD was worth, Harley Dear really had only mastered the capacity of a needy child. A naivety so fragile that even the kindest of men would be curious to break, just to claim a wisdom only true horrors could teach- not to mention it involved a good deal of fun. The fact that she was a gorgeous, little thing didn't hurt things either.

Her eyes simply lit up behind those ugly glasses when his chapped lips parted for the first time in this ill conversation, relief soaring at his impending words. Higher, higher…

The Joker heaved a deep, back arching yawn.

The eager curl of her mouth withered and died into a tight line.

But sometimes she moved past the needy child and onto the uncaring teenager: A just as needy age but acted otherwise, yet expected the same hugs and kisses result. It was darkly funny really, when her French manicured fingers steepled on her desk top and she sighed. Uh oh, the glasses were coming off, too.

"Fine," she huffed, mustering authority when she was staring at a spot somewhere above his cocked head. Slowly her sternness faded: Shoulders hunched, she dropped her head into her palms, cradling moist eyelashes and trembling lips. "Sometimes," she strangled out but paused to compose herself, taking in a deep breath and shakily releasing it in such a way that made his eyes involuntarily roll. "… sometimes, I wonder if this- if this joint therapy whatever is a good idea."

He scowled, wondering where the hell she thought she was going with this and silently urging her to look at him. He could read those watered down blues like no other. When she did eventually peek
out between her hands, he knew there was nothing to worry about. She wouldn't take Bats from him.

She carried on, voice small but steadier when she in turn saw nothing in his dark stare to be buzzing in the orderlies over. "... I know you told me being with him would help you, and when you explained it to me I understood - I still understand, that's why I pushed Horn into this, but... but you don't talk to me anymore, only when he's in the room and even then no progress is being made."

He tilted his head, licking his dry lips and sharply raising his eyebrows in a silent gesture for her to get to the point.

She might have realized she wasn't going to get anything out of him, because she sat up - carefully taking measured breaths - and smoothed her hair down. One dainty finger pressed the buzzer. Her smile was watery and brilliant when the pair of orderlies shuffled in. "See ya tomorrow, Mistah J," she chirped, the orderlies not knowing any the wiser. "Before our next talk, you might wanna consider the fact that I have the power to decide whether or not your sessions with Bruce continue, yeah?" She would sneak that in. The snide, cowardly bi-

As the pair of white coats dragged him to his feet, he gazed intently at her, grin mocking but filled with warning. Crushed between two unyielding meat walls, he leaned as close as he could towards her which wasn't all that close considering. Head cocked playfully, shadows cast his scarred face in blood-draining malice. Cold eyes glinted madly with the imagery of her spread eagled and skewered on a rusty pipe, her baby blues popped out and sticky stuck together in his pocket made the tongue swipe of his lips more than just a tick.

"... funny," he muttered darkly, though his smile - all fangs - said something else entirely. He didn't wait for the first, frightened tear to slip down her cheek; the orderlies being so confused and concerned for her that they had to chase him down the hall to catch up with his brisk gait out and away from that too cramped room. Once he knew he was well out of her hearing range as the trio strolled down the hall, he sang song, "Where to now, boys?"

Briefly, he concluded that Harley girl would get a sob story from him tomorrow. He couldn't have her doubting him when the games were just about to begin.

"Now where's my Batsy?"

Chapter End Notes

[1] I know somewhere, a newer comic I think, had this as that version's Scarecrow's motivations. I found it interesting and even more fitting than the common bully trauma and evil grandmother, though I'm throwing those in the mix.
Horn stared from his cozy leather seat, a speculative expression on his pointy face. On the other side of his large desk was the hunched over object of his scrutiny. His patient had shaved which sparked a small glimmer of progress but taking in the more pronounced circles around the downcast eyes and all around defensive aura radiating off him in a tingling pulse made his notes less optimistic than he hoped.

"How are you doing today, Bruce?" And even maybe that quick flicker of eye contact could be considered an improvement since their last session when the other man could hardly keep his eyes open, so doped up on sedatives and mood stabilizers he was practically drooling. Horn had immediately cut the relaxants in half and, in a show of good faith, allowed the patient use of his arms despite recent offenses. Doctor/Patient trust needed to be established. And soon.

When Bruce was escorted to his session without being strapped into a jacket, he could tell Horn was trying to subtly manipulate some trust out of him; the decrease in meds said as much. Bruce doubted he could ever be that desperate to put much of any trust into Horn. Though thankful he was for the fog to recede, he hated the revelations that came with the clarity: One being the reminder of his surroundings; the worst being the disgusting realization that the naked feeling he felt when Michael told him no strait jacket was required of him was... loss.

Unimaginable, vulnerable, horrific loss.

He was sadly used to the confines wherever he went. He could trust the jacket to keep his temper under control, and good god wasn't that humiliating enough? For one frenzied moment he wondered if Horn knew this and was taking away "the crutch." But no, that couldn't be. This place increased paranoia tenfold. Bruce resolutely decided the extra awareness could only be beneficial. He had to be more alert.

Fighting a frown, Horn looked down at his notes: Except for the short hand description of his patient's appearance, it was crisp, white, and disappointingly blank. Quickly the pen scratched out, Subject is refusing to respond, even though it was needless. "... Would you perhaps like to talk about your parents today?"

Bruce's jaw twitched.

Yesterday he had lost dayroom privileges (not that it particularly mattered). Someone, probably that asshole ginger orderly that taunted him at every turn, had left that day's front page of the Gotham Gazette on top of his pillow. With a blank expression, his eyes had lazily traced the bold, black print: Deceased Parents to Blame for Batman? Reading that, it felt like his ribs had shrunk three sizes and vice-gripped his lungs, heart squeezed and near bursting. Bruce remembered Michael tearing through the doorway soon after cursing the locks and wrestling Bruce's arms behind his back. Bruce had been too exhausted to easily maneuver out of the hold. His throat sore and eyes suspiciously wet. Flakes of black and white snowing down around the pair.

Bruce had been accused of stealing the paper, knowing full well he wasn't allowed any items then those appointed to him under supervision, and there went his short time in the dayroom. That ginger orderly had been snickering the entire time, and Bruce was too drained to have pointed that obvious giveaway out.

Horn had felt mild guilt when he was alerted to his patient's outburst, having contributed several opinions to the article. Had Wayne seen his theories? The journalist had praised him for his cooperation; after all "the public has a right to know," and the few extra Benjamins in his wallet didn't hurt much either. Commissioner Gordon's infuriated phone call disagreed with the sentiment and threatened to suspend his medical license.

"Perhaps we'll discuss them some other day, hmm?" He flipped through the copies of notes Dr. Quinzel had given him on the joint sessions. Though there wasn't much, never before had he read analytical scribbling coming across to be so utterly biased. He wouldn't be surprised if he found doodled hearts around her patient's name. *Mrs. Narcissistic Antisocial Psychotic Murderer*, written with flourish in the margins. This could turn into a real problem. He would have to bring this matter up to Leland.

"Bruce, care to tell me what's been going on during your sessions with Dr. Quinzel?"

Bruce looked up sharply without realizing, blame evident in the shadowed depths. "Are you inquiring about sessions with her or sessions with *him*?" His graveled voice sounded rarely used.

Frown emerging, a wrinkled hand pushed aside and rearranged papers just so his eyes could be occupied with the task and not be drawn to the man who had beaten hardened criminals to a whimpering pulp in his free time was sitting across from him. "If I was inquiring about Patient J than I would have asked you so, but if you wish to discuss him then we shall. Bruce, I am here to listen to whatever you have to say."

Bruce's knife edge gaze slid to the side, grinding slowly into the plain file cabinet in the corner until they lost focus and softened. His rigid spine relaxed into a frighteningly natural, exquisite posture. Tense fists loosened atop perfectly spaced kneecaps. "I won't talk about him."

"I'm so sick of thinking about him." That defeated thought only served to rekindle his anger at… everything.

At the pursing of his patient's lips, Horn decided to apply a small nudge. "Fine then, tell me about Quinzel. Are you getting along with her?" It really wasn't appropriate to be leading the conversation -suggestions were one thing- but not leading, especially in regards to digging for information about another doctor when there wasn't a sound reason for such. "I understand you had a one-on-one with her just last week."

Bruce simply nodded.

He was leery of being relieved when he was physically shoved into Quinzel's office -having dragged his feet all the way there- to find only her bright smile greeting him. No sick, twisted yellow parody of a smile. Sitting in the one chair across from her, she immediately started in and he could marginally breathe easier. No clown this time, and Bruce was instantly curious as to why.

"How ya doin' today?" she had asked before moving on. After all, Bruce had Horn to attend to his singular problems. He didn't answer though, too busy shooting suspicious glances at the door and listening carefully for the telltale echoes of laughter through the door.

"He's at art therapy right now, just you and me today. So let's get down to business, yeah?"

His brows furrowed. What business could they possibly have outside of that clown? And how sad was that that he was acknowledging any business there at all?

"I have you here today so I can get your views on your relationship with Mr. J; thoughts, feelings,
whatever you want to contribute." A minute ticked by of solid silence and she was still smiling. He wouldn't be a once very successful vigilante if he didn't notice the obvious strain in her lips and the tremble in her cheeks or the upturned corners of her eyes pinched more into a glare.

He thought he'd chance it. "Is-something wrong?" He'd found when it came to deflecting questions about himself, people were more eager to talk about themselves.

The smile shrunk a fraction. "Why-" She cleared her throat. "Why would there be something wrong?"

Too carefully she placed her pen meticulously down in front of her newly clasped hands, more like shaking white-knuckled fists. "Why do you think there's something wrong? I mean, does it look like there's something wrong?" All too quickly the cheap Bic pen was back in her grasp; a small blue chunk visible between her balled fists. "Because if you think something's wrong with me, you are sorely mistaken because there is nothing -absolutely nothing- wrong with me." Voice taking on a hysterical bite; pen bending dangerously. "I'd like to point out you're on the wrong side of this desk- there's something most definitely wrong with you and I'm-"

A sharp crack and navy ink sprayed into the air, coating her hands and paper with fat drops. She looked down, startled at the jagged pen halves clutched tightly in her fists. "Perfectly fine," she finished shakily. When she looked back again -ufocused eyes blinked- it seemed she forgot he was there. Her spine snapped ramrod straight with a smile packed full of sunshine burning through the O-zone -so bright and assuredly bad for you- she heaved a perky sigh. "So, what's your perceived role in your relationship with Mistah J?"

Bruce had been too dumfounded to deny any so-called "relationship," so he answered her questions with wide, alert eyes and a reserved air. Though he couldn't outright admit to himself, she had scared him. No, he wasn't worried about her in a fight: She was small -a doctor- and he didn't hit women. He was more rattled by the crazed glint in her blue eyes; even diluted by glasses they were more unsettling than Joker's. They hadn't held an out and proud madness like the clown paraded around- no, something much worse though for the life of him he couldn't fathom what.

This place was messing with him, drugging his mind and slowing his body- restricting his movements. Alfred was coming later today; he would try again to subtly plead for his old friend to get him out of here. Hell, he'd even settle for a transfer if freedom was that much of a far cry.

"Bruce." Dr. Horn's clinically impassive voice tugged him from the weakening confine of his thoughts. "Something is obviously on your mind. Care to share?"

Torn between the sense of duty that played havoc on his conscience and the small but growing bitterness against, well, everyone that was considering letting the warnings go and wait for another Arkham mis-hire to blow up in their 100 percent sane certified faces, he swallowed a long-suffering sigh. The good always won out.

"I don't- consider Dr. Quinzel to be… entirely… stable."

The broken pen lying in some waste bin could attest to that.

Horn had been grudgingly ready to move on, but as soon as he heard the one voice in this quiet room that wasn't his own, never before in his last twenty years of practice had he tuned in so rapidly. Finally the biggest case of his lifetime was speaking! Even if it was gossip over a colleague.

"When you say 'not entirely stable' what do you mean by that?" At Bruce's dubious look he was quick to amend. "Don't worry. This is strictly off the record. You can speak plainly." As a show of
faith, he sat his gold fountain pen off to the side and folded his hands.

Bruce didn't like how his professional psychiatrist was eager to discuss a fellow doctor. "Er, shouldn't we be talking about me?"

Horn sat back a little. "Would you like to?"

With a grimace, he stiffened his spine and settled his jaw. He didn't say another word for the rest of the session.

"Wakey, wakey…"

Awareness came slowly, eyelids receding to uneven, wobbly droops. Hot pain radiated from the back of her skull. Light danced at the corner of her blurred vision and the more she watched it, it settled into the familiar outline of her desk lamp.

"Good, now that you're up." The world abruptly sloshed in her stomach as her high-backed swivel chair she belatedly realized she was slumped in spun a sharp, tilt-a-whirl 180 and halted. She groaned -eyes squeezed shut- as the little bits she ate of lunch threatened to make a come back.

"Awww," a bodiless voice crooned above. Suddenly a warm weight plopped down onto her lap.

She grimaced with a breathless oomph! Head and stomach throbbed out of sync to each other. Her eyes wearily slit open, the sight clearing away the murky confusion into crystalline shock.

"Did I hit you too hard?" Pale lips pouted between stark pink grinning scars, empty dark eyes penetrating under the guise of mock-concerned wrinkled brows, all coming together in sugary earnestness.

Muscles, lungs, thoughts, the scream in her throat froze. Arkham director, Doctor Joanne Leland was promptly terrified. Appropriately so.

And here the clown was thinking he hadn't hit her hard enough! After a few seconds of her petrified state, his face lost its soft edges; so much for thinking women cooperated better if you pretended you actually cared. It worked on Harley-girl after all.

The shaky movement of a dark hand darted, frantically smacking under the edge of her desk and just missing the red panic button installed there. Just as easily he snatched it into his grasp and yanked it back, ignoring the whimper of an awkwardly twisted shoulder. "Do you write with this one?" At the twitch of her head, he grinned, reaffirming his grip on those delicate fingers. "Good or otherwise it would make the means to this end totally moot." And with that cryptic comment, he successfully jerked the four fingers held in his fist clean from their sockets with spine-tingling pops.

Her blood-curdling screech, though loud it was, would be lost to the screams of the lovely establishment placed in her handi-capable hands. There were no worries as far anyone coming to interrupt.

As she thrashed and bucked to dislodge him -wet bulging eyes and the broken digits curled and cradled to her chest- the Joker squirmed in the quaking seat of her lap. He'd sat on better: The woman was squishy so that appealed in general to a bony arse but they were unstable so he sunk into her. Men's thighs were firmer, toned and muscled, and there was something more substantial between them, but they had such knobbed knees that dug into his ass.
Agonized shrieks ringing in his ears, he wondered if he would have that problem with his Bat… no, and even if he did, he could always work around it. For a split-second, muddy brown eyes took on a longing glaze, staring at the lush leather upholstery over the wrong thrashing head, and he wanted nothing more than to ditch this and dash to Batsy's cell, tear his way inside, rip off those Arkham-issued pajama bottoms and sit on those tension-thick thighs.

Just for shits and giggles.

A wistful smile curved the beginnings of drool. He looked down and it appeared the tent in his own Pjs were all for that plan. Apparently Leland also noticed, gaping in horror at his groin, snot and tears stringing her chin to her shattered knuckles. Absolutely beside himself, the Joker tossed his head back and laughed.

"Di-did you honestly think-" Cackling subsiding, his -well, not little- problem relaxed more the farther his thoughts drifted from the velvet overcast of all things Batman. With one last chuckle, he eyed the graying psychiatrist. "I think I'm banging enough, ah, shrinks in this loony bin."

That last bit remarkably made it through the burning ache in her hand and the paralyzing fear of this entire situation. "What?" she started. Did he just say…?

He ducked closer and invaded even more -nose to nose and eye to cringing squint- when she only plastered herself to the chair in an effort to get away from him. "No, I want you for something more important to me. Do this and you make me a very happy man. That's your job, isn't it, to make sure all the patients under your care are happy as can be?" A jagged nail doodled irregular circles on her sticky cheek. Eyes too hard to make the coy expression fixed on his marred face convincing; and even if it was, his captive wouldn't blindly agree to whatever he wanted. If she did, then the knave would openly weep for the poor state of Gotham's medical system.

Nose clogged and whistling with each inhale, Leland swallowed down the unhelpful lump in her throat. She was a professional and knew how to handle hostile, unstable people, but this man- this creature was different. For one she knew in her gut there was no helping him and she had never felt that calm acceptance for such a hopeless outlook before. Though she stayed far away, Joanne knew the level of extensive security put into place around him and yet here he was, out of his cell, unsupervised, and had obviously ambushed her when she was locking up her office for the night. Her dislocated fingers said enough for his casual prowess for violence.

Her insides shuddered. Calm. The ocean-blue waters rolling and lapping at a white, sandy beach. Sea gulls and sunshine. Cool breezes… okay, deep breaths, eye contact, don't aim for control but equality.

"What do you want?" Her voice held little authority and she flinched at how utterly shaken it sounded. To be fair, her abused hand made it incredibly hard to do much else besides whimper and dwell on how much it hurt. She'd never broken anything before, and it was not only one but four fingers. They twinged as if they heard her thinking about them.

"Well, now that you ask- redeeming almost that you did by the way, since you were skipping out on our appointment so I had to keep it for the both of us, you didn't even acknowledge me till you woke up -how rude!- and then- and then you even had the audacity to sit and not invite me to take a seat. Ugh!" He issued a disgust snort. "The nerve!"

He held onto his offended air a moment longer -hands on his hips- until her blank expression indicated she wasn't going to play along or in the very least apologize. Sure he wasn't at his best at the moment since his bubbly nuisance of a doctor had upped his sedatives (out of spite- women) and not to nit pick but come on- Leland wasn't exactly light for his institution-softened muscles, having to
drag her then heave her limp body onto her chair.

"Fine," he gritted and slipped off her lap. A yawn swelled in his chest as he made his way around her desk but he effortlessly converted it into a deep exhale through his nostrils. Insomnia and sleeping pills were a tricky business. He perched himself opposite of her and shot a pointed glance at the hands she carefully planted atop the gleaming wood surface and not anywhere near her panic button; but then again he supposed she could always hit it with her knee, though it wouldn't make much difference. The reaction time to this wing of the asylum was a horrendous snail's pace.

"I want to be moved," he finally announced, tonguing his scars and keeping his hands free in case things got... unsavory.

Her grimace twisted at the heavy, dead feeling in her legs. "Why and to where?"

"To hyper-paranoid security, where all the other real psychos are at, because you know as well as I do that it'll keep me in." He winked. He was just as insane after all but, nuh uh, no, they didn't like him near the population. One whispered conversation and he gets sent away. It wasn't his fault that Weisker didn't like the clown's thoughts and chewed through his wrists!

"And this wouldn't have anything to do with the fact Mr. Wayne currently resides in that area?"

The greasy blond gasped, clapping a palm to his mangled cheek. "Does he really?"

"Yes."

At this he dropped the act and fiddled with a paperweight of a brass doe. "Now that that's settled, I want the one directly across from him."

If she didn't move her hand, she could forget it was there. Quick blinks ensured no tears would fall. It wouldn't do to let the mad man know that she was willing to give him whatever he wanted as long as he stayed away from her and to please, please not hurt her again. She may have taken an oath but personal safety outweighed the welfare of their resident vigilante. It made sense, weren't they in joint therapy after all?

"Will you write it up now or will I have to smash up your other hand and stick the pen between you teeth?" Lamplight caught on pale fangs and cast shadow on the sharp arch of a golden brow. "Well...?"

For being injured, the woman's movements were impressive in speed. She grabbed the necessary paperwork one-handed and then proceeded to fill it out vigorously, splattering ink here and there. He didn't care what it looked like as long as it did what he wanted it to, and that was to be near his Bat twenty four-seven.

Eventually Leland's trembling alto spoke up, focus still on his golden ticket. "Since your effective stay in isolation, I need to put down a valid reason for your transfer."

A rubber band smacked against the far corner's clock face. "Change of scenery. I get bored."

Leland scowled but immediately yelped, jumping a foot from her work and clutching her throbbing hand that was now stinging white hot. Another rubber band lay innocently on her desktop. No, she wouldn't get mad or upset or even look to see that ugly smile. Instead she took a deep breath, added the remembered taste of a piña colada to her beach scene, and gingerly resumed her writing. **Reason for transfer: Extra security and supervision needed.** She just wanted this done and him gone, though her cheeks burned with humiliation throughout this whole scheme.
Usually she was the one receiving these sorts of requests from the lower-ranked doctors and simply signed off on them. Though consistently erratic as the Joker was, the reports about him from Quinzel seemed to be promising in the sense that she wouldn't be quitting or getting maimed like her predecessors. Why hadn't he just asked her for this? Why go to this trouble? How in the world did he get out of his isolated cell without being caught?

She couldn't ask all that. From the corner of her eye, the lunatic seemed to have taken an interest in her small container of paper clips.

"Done. You'll be moved Tuesday at the latest." Her hand shook, placing the finished forms into her Out box. Breathing scant and heart thudding in her throat.

"I want sooner." He plucked the sheets from their place and scanned them quickly. When he tossed them back, it was with a nod of satisfaction. "Gotta love that bureaucracy," he exclaimed and jumped from his seat. "Pleasure to do business with ya, Lady Head Honcho." He reached purposely for her bad hand, squeezing and jostling it in a rough handshake.

She bit back a scream and had no choice but to accept it. At least she did it. She'd take care of this tomorrow, and he wouldn't bother her again.

"Until next time." He punctuated with a slashing salute but paused just outside the door, sticking his head back in. "Oh, and in case you change your mind, your mother -Katherine, is it- still lives on 1580 Wabash Street, apartment 2E, right? Some of my boys are keeping an eye on her for ya since you're busy and all. You're welcome, doc. Nighty night!"

Swimming vision saw him out; a blurred smirk was the last she saw before she blacked out and didn't come to for a couple more hours.

Not once did she consider halting the transfer and having the clown thrown in the asylum's deepest, dark hole.

The devil always finds a way to crawl out of hell.
"Okay, so I learned a great deal from our individual interviews concerning the nature of your relationship." The corner of Quinzel's smile twitched.

Both of her patients appeared decidedly disinterested with her opener: The brunet, silent and brooding like usual; and her Mr. J seemed to be lost in his gazing at the brunet, every now and then the edge of his scarred grin curled a bit tighter as if he just thought of something particularly amusing. Whenever that happened a red scream rung in her ears, and she had to look away with a more durable, replacement pen in her hand.

"From what I gathered, your perceptions on what you two share run in completely opposite directions. While J claims to be fully committed to rectifying your issues-" Her jaw tightened when the clown loudly snickered in the tick tock silence of the room. "You, Bruce, say there is nothing more than the simple roles of criminal and law-enforcer." Except for the tense crack the Joker made in his neck while staring at the other man's blank expression, nothing else happened in response, and the pin-up blonde's bubbly demeanor deflated faster than the delicate swell of a Bazooka gum bubble.

Two minutes in and she already wanted to hide under her desk and beg for the two men to just get along! No one told her this was going to be so hard! Before no one cared about her scant reports concerning her tragically misunderstood clown, but ever since Wayne joined their happy twosome, it seemed like everyone was breathing down her neck: Leland, with her calm comments about more progress and intimations of "If you're feeling overwhelmed, I'm sure Dr. Horn would be more than willing to help…" and Horn! That- that slime! Thinking she didn't know of the snide comments he was making about her to their colleagues and sending back her files with obnoxious red ink corrections- the nerve! But the infuriating truth of the matter was that she was feeling overwhelmed. She couldn't do this, and when she told Mr. J her doubts he'd listen and hold her hand and tell her she was doing beautifully as long as she provided enough to the powers that be so that he could have this time now.

"As long as I have that, we won't have any problems."

She hadn't believed that until she threatened to end the joint sessions, and Harleen never ever wanted him to look at her that way again. She had realized soon after that she was wrong to resort to such pettiness. Mr. J relied on her, trusted her. He needed her. To attack his few sources of happiness when his life had already been so horrible… she was absolutely disgusted with herself.

Briefly she and Wayne's dark eyes met, but they quickly resettled on some infinite point in the distance past the plain wall. She noticed the few times the object of her patient's interest did look at her, it was with caution and never did last more than a second or two.

"Why don't- why don't we try… something-new, uh… ac-active listening." The look of excitement and a quick nod as if she were confirming with herself if it was a good idea bode little comfort. "I want each of you to take turns telling the other something they consistently do that bothers you. Now who wants to go first?"

As expected the clown appeared to be the only one to outwardly register the new approach, pivoting in his seat to fully face the quiet billionaire.

"Mr. J, would you…?"
"My pleasure," he purred. A tongue snaked along a pale bottom lip and flicked at the small scar slicing down the middle. The unashamed up and down appraisal of the other man was enough to have Quinzel regretting she suggested this at all.

"Good," she gritted out, turning away from her patient and focusing instead on the one entrusted to her. "See Bruce, Mr. J has already accomplished one of the easiest steps: Adjusting his body language to show he's investing his attention into the conversation and willing to be open."

Consequently the Joker's legs fell open in a wide spread. His smirk predatory.

The vigilante's pupils snapped away from their spying periphery, eyes widening under the safe cover of overhanging dark strands. The momentary shock passed into disgusted indignation. The clown could actively listen to himself. Bruce wasn't interested in anything he had to say.

Harleen was going to push for him to face Mr. J as well but she instantly dropped it. She would consider the day, from a professional point of view, a success if the silent man would actually say something. Instead she went on to explain that as the listener, he should be suspending emotional outbursts and refraining from prejudices or opinions but intent on "Listening for meaning." Little did the doctor know her explanation was falling on agitated ears; Batman knew how to listen. He had two functioning ears, thank you very much. This was bad enough. He did not need to be patronized on top of it.

"Bruce, you should be able to repeat back in your own words what Mr. J says. It doesn't mean you agree but understand."

When Quinzel finally nodded for him to start, the knave was practically bouncing in his seat. He wasn't exactly sure what he would say -no obvious grievances came to mind- but he was so so sooo eager to talk to his Bat- without the telephone game bullshit even though Harley was around to "mediate." This would be better if they were alone, unrestrained, and if the room had a few more sharper edges… but he could work with this.

A deep breath. "… we never go out anymore," the Joker stated with a thick whine.

The Batman had been expecting a number of complaints, ranging from bitterness about foiled plans or leaving the clown strung up on the side of a building, but nothing could have prepared him for an answer so asinine. Flabbergasted, he forgot about his resolution to deny acknowledging this spectacular feat of organized idiocy and turned to gape at the very serious lunatic. "… you're not serious." And as soon as those incredulous words left his mouth, he could have smacked himself; he would have if not for the jacket confining him.

But the Joker didn't falter under the delightful burn of that dark glare. He inwardly reveled in it actually. This might have been the first time since his Bat came home that he centered those black eyes solely on him. He shivered at the attention. Yet just as real enjoyment was seeping into his veins, Bats was turning away; his jaw locked and his head slowly shaking in a *Fuckin' Typical manner.*

Violent red heat surged inside ultra-focused muddy eyes. His elbows jerked against his fabric hold in a vain attempt to bust out, to hurt. The hungry urge to smash things and tear till it bleeds- until anything bleeds- he bleeds. A chuckle popped unbidden from his twisted lips.

You're not serious.

You're not serious.
More. He wanted more. More of that voice with its hint of surprise. He had surprised Bats. A momentary flash of interest. Days he had been waiting and it was here, here, here! Just two words and it was gone. Back to square- what number was he on?

A growl of frustration rumbled in his throat, his grin sour and sad? He was acting more like his Dark Knight than the quiet man -this quiet disappointment- next to him. It was disgusting. The clown was wasted- oh shit, he was on the edge of bored! He knew that heavy, sludge feeling. Normally he'd put it out of its misery by carving up some stranger like a holiday turkey with all the intestinal trimmings and have himself a good ole impromptu Christmas- y'know, how it's supposed to be and not what he vaguely remembered it being.

"What's today's date again?" His head whipped around the small office to catch a glimpse of a calendar. Harley used to have one with kittens and degradation.

By now Bruce had finished listing off the twenty-three consonants of the Chinese alphabet and was now halfway through the vowels. Perhaps by the time he was done with that, this session from Hell would be over -the clown's answer whining in a background loop- and if not then he would go through the merits of learning Russian compared to Turkish. After that, mentally disassembling then reassembling the engine of the Tumbler if he must. There was no limit to the amount of subjects his mind could fixate on, none of which including Quinzel's simpering voice fishing for explanation for his statement; definitely not the Joker's burbling throat or the sudden odd grunt he just emitted. Bruce didn't care enough to wonder if he had imagined the distinct yet muffled pop underneath the scarred man's heavy breathing. What was the point to give the Joker more attention when his painted face and gutting laughter infiltrated the vigilante's REM, oozing like spilled oil, corrupting and staining? The only reason Bruce surrendered to the tainted sleep at all was the medications Horn prescribed to adjust and regulate his sleeping patterns to a more "Normal" schedule.

Harleen looked helplessly between her two patients. Poor Mistah J. Cornflower blue eyes traced the twitching of a messily shaven jaw. Gray-pink scars sucked into hollow cheeks like the bitter reaction to a lemon. Plump lips pinched. She wanted to hug him, the way he was squirming in his seat, a vaguely pained expression on his face. The Bat just wasn't listening, and she could tell it hurt her patient that the dark-haired man brushed the admission aside so carelessly- so, so coldly- because her patient didn't like to open up to just anybody about his feelings, except to Harleen (he had told her so himself). So telling Bruce was a big step. How dare Bruce be so callous!

By now her palms were sporting pulsing crescents from her pretty pink nails. Mistah J always said that his Bat understood him "Like two peas in a pod." So when her clown says, "We never go out anymore," it's a true to form grievance. Joker was a- a free spirit! This being locked up for so long was really taking a toll on him. It must really be bothering him, but the fact was he liked to hurt people too much.

And if Harleen were completely honest, she wanted to keep her clown close by in her Arkham toy chest for as long as possible. Forever, if she had it her way.

She couldn't understand why he insisted on putting himself through this. Why did he have to have his enemy come along? The Bat couldn't see how wonderful he was. Mistah J was smart and funny and handsome and sooo sweet, soft and loving when he wanted to be. He was like her twice a week, mid-day dessert. Her- … puddin'.

Harleen kinda liked that. Mistah J, her Puddin'.

At just that moment, dark eyes wet at the corners seared into hers and their message was quite clear.
Her fingers prickled at the rush of circulation as they uncurled and pressed the buzzer. "I suppose that's enough for today, though it could have been more productive." She shot a dirty glare at Wayne, but of course the arrogant bastard would be looking away, no doubt mentally counting the millions of dollars he no longer by law had access to. Michael was swift with rounding up his charge and leading him out of her office. Her worry for her own patient stunted the polite smile she usually flashed him in return. It was cute to think that maybe he shoved Wayne out the door in honor of her dour expression.

Once the two were gone and the door clicked shut, she turned back around, asking, "Are ya okay?" Her surprise was instantaneous.

Grumbling graveled words slick with acid, the clown's crooked fingers worked the last of the strait jacket's buckles. It hung off the shoulder of one limp arm, pooling in the other side, while he pulled the prominent strap snug between his legs left off center with a satisfied grunt. He stood up with an odd jerk -the loud pop and grind instinctually sending an uneasy shiver down her spine- still mumbling to himself. She reached out a hand to him though it froze in the air, knowing the gesture would be ineffective. Greasy gold tendrils cut through the vision of feverish, darting eyes.

Her unfinished question of "How did…" fell lost amongst uneven pants and guesswork mutterings of "Red and green-red… twinkle lights… merry x-ma- blue, blue-" His body twitched like a shivering dog come in from the rain. His low words running together; hands flexing open and closed, his neck stretched away from her.

"… there- there-" Jumping eyes stilled and lit up. "My Porcelain Doll." His mind clicked and a miniscule grin pulled the very corners of his cracked lips. He knew just what he needed.

"Mistah J-"

Papers and picture frames were knocked over in his haste to grab her abandoned pen. One second it twirled in his palm and the next its tip was inches deep into his thigh, a column of blue plastic protruding securely from twitching, orange-wrapped cotton flesh. Glossy pink lips split open in silent horror, Harleen listened to his strangled yelp and high-pressured inhale and exhale. Dark eyelashes brushed against scarred cheeks in a slow blink until his grin widened into a dreamy slash of teeth.

Harleen's legs gave out from under her, and she toppled into Wayne's vacated chair, coming eye-level with that clean protrusion.

The muffled noise of her landing called his attention. His wisp of a smile melting into a childish pout. Eyes bulged in innocence.

"I think I need to go see the nurse," he said with earnest.

The community of Arkham could only be considered colorful, to say the least. With everyone's differing psychoses, it's difficult for even the simplest of things to be agreed upon: The sky can't be blue, not if it's erupting lava and spitting out the four horsemen of the Apocalypse; there's no one in the corner; can't you hear them? The voices, they won't stop; etc. Some lucky few weren't even aware they were in a mental hospital, simply somewhere else better or much, much worse.

Yet for those in the know, two places could without hesitation be agreed on: 1)You don't ever want to be escorted to the basement; when the lights flicker, the whole asylum knows. The second was unanimously the infirmary. When one is sent there, it's for a definite and gruesome reason. Otherwise the necessary medications could be brought to their cells as a quarantine; Illness in Arkham spread like
wildfire. The infirmary was nothing like the nurse's office from school where it was a free pass if one's fake stomach ache or fever was decent enough. It was meant for Diagnosis, Treatment, and then Observation, to make sure the patient doesn't... pick at things.

Patients shudder the approach to the innocent-looking double doors with the chicken-wired windows. If anyone thought the halls of Arkham reeked enough of air freshener and cleaning chemicals, then they had yet to experience the dizzying blast of bleach and anti-septic upon entrance into the long, open rectangular ward. Patients and Orderlies alike dreaded the long trip to the Eastern wing.

As for Doctor Jonathan Crane, he adored it.

The clean, somewhat efficient environment was a step-up from his small, cushioned cell. He was fairly sure a spot of mold was growing on the ceiling just over the door, and he was glad to be away from it. The harsh aroma of chemicals infused with the air, that if he closed his eyes and pretended, reminded him of his lab; though the medically-approved concoctions had an entirely different smell than what he was used to. The best part of it all was his spectacular view of the doors: The varying states of terror etched in sharp lines on each face was...

As Scarecrow faintly and succinctly put it, "Mmmmm."

"Find someone else to make your damn tea. I am done!" The infirmary nurse, Molly, (or Jonathan's preferred "Empty-headed Cow") shrieked from the foot of his bed, throwing her arms up and stomping away but not before yanking the partition in place and grumbling how she didn't want to see his face for several hours.

He grinned and sat the cup of luke warm tea on the bedside cart with the rest of the rejected lunch, then laid back on the stack of four flat pillows (three of which he demanded for decent comfort alone). To be fair, the Empty-headed Cow had mixed the tea impressively close to his very, very exact specifications after her third try; he could taste it after the first sip and subsequent, restrained spit-back into the cup. And the problem wasn't even that no matter what came out of that cafeteria, it would taste like excrement; no, it just was he didn't drink tea. Personal preference, though the small staff that waited on him didn't need to know that. There was just a certain satisfaction in being needlessly difficult.

He had found after he first came to and discovered the plaster results of refusing the clown was that if he decided to be particularly disagreeable, they would pull out the partition and leave him be. The only downside was he couldn't see who came and went. Sacrificing the little entertainment inadvertently allotted to him was a flimsy price to pay, increasing now that after his little chat with Wayne made Leland rethink the extent of his "Vulnerability," and in doing so confined his movements inside the infirmary, from the bed to the bathroom directly across. He didn't mind so much for the fact he was left alone and for a few more weeks no longer subjected to meal time noise and unsavory social interactions in general.

And besides... Leland had to come to him for their "sessions."

A frown pulled at the corner of his full, upturned lips as he toyed with one of the worn leather straps that dangled from the bed frame.

His last appointment with her had been... stilted, was the best word for it. The woman barely made any effort in the conversation. Gone was her cool prodding and was replaced with curt words and jittery silences. Her frequent glances all around the ward and constant move to rub her eye abandoned due to the reminder four of her fingers were in awkward metal braces irritated him more than her usual incessant stream of questions on his childhood and his relationship with the Joker- as if
what he shared with the clown was substantial, as if it were intimate and meant something to him— it didn't. It was only a matter of convenience: Joker had found a willing participant for his carnal urges, while Jonathan received an interesting subject to whet his high intellect's appetite whom at the same time served as a distraction from everything else, internal and external. Before Leland was hell-bent on getting an explanation as to why his mostly amicable encounters with the clown had turned physically debilitating. During the session though, it appeared she couldn't even maintain a single string of thought, as least none that she could share with him. He had asked, just to be polite, but she was still sharp enough to insist that they were focusing on him.

It had been a curious forty-five minutes.

A commotion loud enough to penetrate the infirmary walls—shouting and squeaking sneakers on linoleum—sounded just outside. Jonathan glared up at the plain white ceiling once the bang of the double doors being thrown back shattered the blissful silence. Pursed lips hiding the vicious grit of white teeth.

"-get back here!"

"Grab him-shit!"

The Empty-headed Cow shrieked.

Long pale fingers curled into bone-jutting fists at his sides. For once in his miserable life, Jonathan hoped he was wrong.

"Oooo I want this one!" The aged metal frame of the next bed over groaned as someone leaped on top of it.

Jonathan's hiss of breath went unnoticed as what sounded like to be several orderlies running over from the other side of the ward. "Each of you take a limb." Then there were grunts and snapping buckles.

"No need to be rough, boys. I bruise easy."

"Shut up." An elbow bumped into the partition.

The Cow stepped into view, arms crossed tightly over her chest and an unattractive mix of worry and nausea on her round face. She looked and saw narrowed blue eyes watching, then hastily stepped back out of sight. "What- erm, what happened?" Her voice trembled with apprehension and a hint of astonishment.

His head inclined with interest. The nurse had seen a lot here at Arkham, what could the clown possibly had done to put that edge to her tone? Then again reputation meant a lot and the Joker had horror stories to spare. "And to think, I was the latest," Jonathan thought with a detached vehemence.

"Dunno," one orderly answered once the struggle of restraints seemed finished and left all of them panting.

"Ahem… I believe she was talking to muah,' the clown cut in. "It's fairly simple-" The definite click of a tongue. "I fell on a pen."

"H-how?"

"Well, there's this nifty force called, Gravity, and if one loses their footing-"
"Enough. Another word and we're gagging you."

Scandalized chuckles went undeterred. "Quite the, uh, kinky fellow- to be propositioning me now…"

"Propose- don't you ever shut your mouth?"

"Stop, man," an obviously calmer orderly spoke over the amusingly enraged one. "Nick, Chris, you guys too, go on back to work. He's restrained."

"Fine, see how you like it when he gets started on you."

"No, I'm just used to it," he answered with a resigned gust of carbon dioxide. Jonathan frowned slightly at this: He didn't know something like a level-head orderly could exist. He'd demand Leland a trade next time he saw her. Anyone would be better than Gregory- an orangutan would be better than Gregory. Sometimes Jonathan wondered if he was paired with the ginger oaf out of passive-aggressive spite. Most likely to damn him for having been more concerned with efficiency than striving to be every one of his employee's friend when he ran the asylum.

Footsteps marched out of the infirmary and the squeaking wheels of a cart were heard.

"Time to patch me up, eh? Oh-oh, do ya have any of those Hello Kitty band-aids?"

Jonathan had hoped the gag wasn't just an idle threat. The clown wasn't about to say anything of importance, this was idle chit-chat that the psychiatrist could do without.

The Cow was tearing off pieces of medical tape once the debate over whether or not to just pull the pen out ended with a girlish gag and raucous laughter of "You should see you're face right now!" Then there was the worry over ink poisoning, because apparently the clown stabbed it in fairly deep. Jonathan wondered where, yet unfortunately nowhere fatal since the Joker's crude commentary went unhindered. The ex-Arkham head listened to the back and forth inanity for all of thirty seconds before pinching the bridge of his nose and interrupting.

"If it was a common ink pen -and knowing the clown prefers shock value over quality, it was-- then there is no reason to be concerned. They're almost entirely non-toxic: The basic components being solvents, dyes, pigments, and water. At the very most there might be some skin irritation, and I highly doubt even that would occur. Now, please, hurry up and be done with it. Your ineptitude is giving me a headache." At the Joker's hyena cackle, he added, "And by the way, muzzle him while you're at it."

Needless to say the clown was left use of his mouth, even though the Empty-headed Cow quickly retreated to the adjoining office at the other end of the room just to get away from him after thoroughly disgusting her so.

"Does anything else need attending to?"

"Yes, now that you mention it... Just up a little more and leave the gloves on." Lips smacked lewdly behind the partition.

"Ew-Pig!" Heels clicked angrily away. The orderly must have followed, leaving the two inmates alone.

"Alone with the psychopath that crippled me and whom obviously embedded a pen in himself just to see me. Brilliant."
At that depressing thought, Jonathan realized they would probably keep the clown over night. Scarecrow's comforting rasp had faded so much that, independently, nothing would keep Jonathan from hearing whatever Joker had to say.

"Probably more rambling about the rodent vigilante," he thought with an irritated scowl.

"… do ya think I should mention I dislocated my shoulder and it's startin' to smart a little?" the Joker asked with a casual air on the other side of the stretched cloth of white.

"Of course you did," Jonathan grumbled under his breath, twisting uncomfortably on his side with his casts pulling just to face the wall. He wasn't about to answer. He hoped the other man's shoulder hurt like hell, though he couldn't help that small nudge of curiosity. He liked to think the small flicker in his mind was his other half agreeing and that provoked a small, warm smile on his face.

It lasted for seconds until the clown opened his mouth again.

Grin souring and bearing teeth, the young doctor heaved a fiery huff and maneuvered two of the four pillows he had and smashed them over his head.
Jonathan and the Clown

Insanity comes in two basic varieties: Slow and Fast.
Viscosity and Velocity are opposites, yet they can look the same.
Viscosity causes the stillness of disinclination;
 Velocity causes the stillness of fascination.
An observer can't tell if a person is silent and still because inner life has stalled,
Or because inner life is transfixedingly busy.

-Susanna Kaysen

There was a black scuff mark on the wall. A dirty smudge on pure white padding. He couldn't have done it; he hadn't made it a habit of high-kicking the walls. It had to be new; he couldn't have missed it after all this time- had someone else been here? Who?

Perfectly eye level with unblinking dark irises.

Maybe it had always been there, and before he never spared enough time to notice it? A vague memory of noticing something much like it his first day here flitted through his mind. That was the thing about being here: Outside life and everyone moved so fast, there never seemed to be enough time. In Arkham, well, all one ever had was time.

There weren't any clocks- well, none they allowed him to see, so he had to measure by meal times and therapy appointments; even then it seemed like Horn liked to switch it up just to confuse him. After each dosing of You needn't concern yourself put him in a hazy state of disorientation, he tried not to think or do much of anything at those times, only pulsing founts of anger too muddled that ached inside his skull and the burn of his throat when he lost the meager portions of food he couldn't keep down.

A harsh buzz and steel click disturbed the silence of Max Security. His head rolled from its prop against the wall towards the sound. A pair of maintenance people were entering the cell directly opposite of his. One immediately began dressing the small bed with a blanket and fresh pillow, while the other went about the cursory wipe down of the entire room. He watched them work with a blank expression; sometimes briefly matching gazes. It was as if they made an agreement with each other before coming that at all times at least one of them had to keep an eye on him, as if he went unmonitored for a second he would slip from his cell and attack them. They both appeared terrified just by having to look at him.

The realization came to him with a slow blink. Someone was moving in across the way. The news came and drifted from his thoughts with little fanfare. It really didn't matter anymore. Everything was decided for him either way. He had no control. Perhaps the only thing he could decide was the regulation of his breathing and the lucid thoughts that struggled to take root before they were swept away by little pale blue pills and dripping syringes. The only time they didn't seem to drug him was on Sundays when Alfred visited him.

Alfred. Bruce didn't want to think so much on him. The last visit left the brunet with a churning stomach and unnamed thoughts of hopelessness. A waxen-stiff face staring sadly at him through a plate of glass, a white mouth telling him in few words that no, he wasn't to be transferred from the asylum anytime soon and next week the old butler wouldn't be coming; He'd still call of course, but the trip was becoming more and more of an unnecessary hassle. Reporters were going to more drastic measures to get "The Inside Scoop," and as Alfred so plainly put it, "I'm getting much too old for such foolish behavior." Bruce had murmured he understood, ignoring the pang as he did so, and
then went on to suggest that the older man take a vacation, get some sun- it's not like he didn't have the money for it, but the weak joke had only provoked a tight grin and a softly replied, "Perhaps."

No doubt Horn would ask about the visit next session, and thankfully Bruce hadn't made it his goal to contribute anything because he wouldn't know what to say about it regardless. It was better to not think about it.

Sometimes it was better in general to close his eyes and forget, pretend that this cell with the click-dim lights and its thin cot was all he'd ever known. That he had no past or name, nor even knew what fresh air smelt like or how moonlight shone. That he never knew such things as good food or fast cars or Choice. That he didn't know what it meant to try and fail- that mistakes couldn't be made because he didn't know he could do more than eat and sleep and breathe. All he had been and who he'd ever be was Patient 92071.

The grayscale illusion was calming. His eyelids fell a little lower -black scuff blurring- until it wasn't long before he drifted off to sleep.

-------------------------------------------------------

Jonathan's patience had lasted for all of five minutes since the nurse had abandoned him to the Joker's morbid prattling until he was calling for her back, complaining of leg pains and demanding Morphine. The throbbing in his head had become bothersome, and he was unconscious moments after her all too eager needle.

Whisperings in the dark, then a too loud snick throughout the quiet ward. Awareness came slowly.

He guessed it was safe to assume dinner had come and gone, not that his empty stomach truly lamented that fact. He just felt fairly indignant that no effort had been made to wake him and serve him his slop… of course if he had been disturbed from his medicinal sleep, then he surely would have scolded the Empty-head Cow. So perhaps there really was no succeeding with him.

Blinking away the last remnants of sleep -head stuffed with cotton- he reached for his glasses on the nightstand out of habit but instead only brushed across cool faux-wood. Alright, so the ache around his eyes had an explanation. The bumbling nurse had made sure he passed out before taking them off. If he wasn't so convinced the woman was a complete imbecile, than he would think she planned it. A slow, heavy sigh from his nostrils was the only outward sign of his aggravation.

Unfortunately it was just enough.

"Awww, and here I was about to come watch you sleep…” A black outline of a head with scraggly hair peered from the end of the partition.

And here Jonathan thought he had conjured up the clown's arrival as some distasteful nightmare.

"Aren't ya gonna say Hi, Jonny?"

The clown must possess little to no consideration. The last time the frail psychiatrist had seen him was in a setting much like this one: Waking up to a dark room with the maniac lurking somewhere near by; the only great differences being the new dividing wall of animosity Jonathan felt, and back then he didn't have to wait weeks to walk uninhibited again.

All a matter of association.

Light bouncing off white tiles spilled out from the private bathroom opposite, filling Jonathan's dark corner with a bright glow. A narrow silhouette stretching up the wall and bending backwards on the
high ceiling. The clown's mangled grin was easier to see despite the shadows, tongue swiping at the sight for sore eyes vision that was his porcelain doll: A round snow-white face and silver dollar eyes carved from ice, deceiving full lips hiding a sharp tongue. The smaller man could pass for a girl.

Judging by the utterly cold expression, it would probably be best not to tell Jonny that.

A cracked grin would alarm most, but his Jonny barely bat an eye, face calm in a fixture of total disinterest and disdain. The clown hadn't really come for a staring contest though catch him on another day pitted against those clinically bored baby blues and he would be more than happy to do so.

"You can't still be mad."

Barely a ripple on that pale surface.

"Come on that was weeks ago!" His voice rose in a smiling whine but not too loud; the nurse might have left but one can never be too sure who could be dithering about. But it didn't seem the phobia-obsessed doctor wasn't going to play along as easily and that was a shame in and of itself. With an utterly put upon sigh tinged with a Don't squeeze Jonny's trachea growl, he plopped down on the foot of Jonny's bed, the nine inch rip in his uniform pulling taut against his bandaged thigh.

Jonathan bit the inside of his cheek to stifle the yelp caught in his throat from his clumsily bumped casts.

"They were clean breaks, weren't they? And I bet you've been getting pampered- so, uh, you're welcome on that front." At the sudden narrow of cerulean and white press of pretty pink lips, he decided some backtracking would have to be in order. "Er- not that that excuses one loony from uh attacking another, but I'll have you know it was all in the name of the, ah, greater good."

The clown ended with a harvest moon, angelic smile that if Jonathan had the advantage and strength, would pummel into a black crescent maw, all bleeding gums and loose clattering teeth on his oil slick tongue. Yet as it were, he merely sat with nothing to offer in response. It was amazing how the clown could portray an apology with his greasy words and earnest tone without actually saying anything that indicated regret. Truly a skill all master manipulators possessed, but surely he could do better? Jonathan honestly expected more. Insulted was one way of describing his disappointment.

"Whatever you hope to achieve with this pointless babble, I assure you, I'm not about to be swayed," and with that came a condescending quirk of a plump mouth. He had done a lot of thinking since being bedridden, and he realized the Joker was one of those who hid their weaknesses in the most clever way: By broadcasting it, by making it apart of the invincible image and asking for- nay, demanding it. What does the knave say he wants from his victims, his audience? Why, he "wants" them to laugh! Though nothing could be further from the truth. He likes to think of himself as a performer, and performers fancied themselves in control of their show; this line said in this manner or that kind of action garnered a certain response. If even one spectator laughed when they were supposed to cry marked the beginning of the breakdown.

It was one thing to wish for Chaos, but it was quite another to rather be its King.

And that was this scarred monstrosity's punch line.

The Joker doesn't like being "a joke."

It took too many hours of observation and even more of reflection before Jonathan saw the obvious, since the other man may be patchwork but his presentation was utterly seamless, but once he had it
was a revelation best ranked with his fear toxin. This wouldn't matter so much if it were anyone else because the tactic was so disgustingly human, but in the clown's case… delectable.

And he had no one to share it with now. Times like this made the absence of the Scarecrow more like an exposed, gaping hole in his head than a faded entity slipping in and out through the cracks of awareness.

"He's not, uh, talking to you anymore, is he?"

"What?" Jonathan asked absently, but once he had his hands curled into the blankets, straining under the scratchy fabric. He knew all this information to damage the clown but was essentially powerless in the ways to utilize it. Scarecrow would know. He had such a barbaric, impulsive way about him Jonathan couldn't begin to imagine himself exercising.

Skeezy gold tendrils fell across a marred cheek, the expression curious. Even more surprisingly so, it was sincere. "Crow. Your eyes tend to- ah, to slide a fraction to the side whenever he chimes in and so far you've been consistently burning holes in my skull-"

"And neither him or I are any of your business, so kindly return to your own bed, clown," the doctor replied coldly, a touch unnerved he had distinguishing habits when it came to his other half.

A nimble eyebrow rose into a sharp arch accompanied by a crooked half grin. "Jon-nnny… of course ya both are. You and me, we take care of each other-"

"You broke both of my legs."

"And it hurt me just as much as it did you." A dry palm smoothed over plaster. "Imagine how hurt I was when you were willin' to up and leave me. Honestly you should have been more sympathetic to my needs. I mean- good god, Jonny! I'm in a mental institution! I'm unstable. Abandonment issues are just one of the many cute quirks I have. So in any case, I think it's safe to say we're both square. My emotional damage, and you're, ah, physical."

The Joker released a smug grin when Jonny's blasé attitude cracked into squeezed shut eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. Grinning penance was a bit of facial strain anyway.

Wasn't the first half of his life wretched enough? What had Jonathan done to deserve this leech-like company of a narcissist (that just being another one of his many "quirks")? Using sexual relations as a distraction had too many infuriating, spectrum-grossing connotations; all of which the twenty nine year-old doctor could eagerly do away with. But for as long as he stayed in Arkham, his struggle against the clown was best embodied by a hamster running endlessly in a wheel. Pointless to fight and stopping would allow the momentum to spin a bruised and broken body, a cracked and oozing skull.

Too engrossed with his strike of maudlin fury, he didn't notice when another body crept into the infirmary. He only looked up at the Joker's high-pitched croon of praise and the dry friction of his rubbing greedy hands. Standing at 6'1” several feet from the bed was an orderly: Peroxide-damaged hair, a sharp chin, and guileless green eyes darted between the two inmates. Except for the bleached hair, there was nothing eye catching about the man. Jonathan remembered him at the Joker's side only a handful of times, but he knew instantly this was the one whose calm demeanor that impressed him this afternoon.

"I have it." That's when he noticed the manila folder in the orderly's hands. The man hardly jumped, cool as a cucumber, when the Joker snatched it from him. The clown only checked the name tab before pushing the folder into Jonathan's hands and received a blue-eyed look of bemusement.
"What's this for?"

"A, ah, token of my affection- a present expressing my most heartfelt regret."

"… right," said the small doctor blithely.

The orderly spoke up, "Would you like more light?"


It was painfully obvious at that point the clown was set on stroking his ego with an insistent fist, one part for forgiveness and perhaps the other to humiliate him. But when he matched gazes with unremarkable green, they snapped off to the side, spots of color blooming in the orderly's cheeks. Jonathan's brow raised in speculative amusement. That little give right there could be very useful if handled correctly.

One glance down confirmed what he already knew: In his lap sat the cause for his crippled state, a tad heavier than it was a few weeks ago, but it was Wayne's file nevertheless. A vague idea of the Joker's motivations for giving this to him streaked through his mind in blurred understanding he didn't want to explicitly explain to himself at this time. The gist was sufficient.

"Considering my suppression of disgust and animosity aren't bought that easily, what else are you willing to give me to ensure I won't systematically tear you apart piece by piece the first opportunity I get?" he pondered aloud, his stare purposefully lingering on the fringe-covered forehead of the orderly. He wondered only in the confines of his thoughts if the old saying of "Kill two birds with one stone" could be adjusted, interestingly, to three.

"Well…" the clown drummed his crooked fingers on the closest leg cast. He wasn't sure if he should be annoyed Jonny was wanting more when he was being gracious enough, or instead be proud that his doll was made of more than just porcelain. After seconds of tongue-lolling thought, he settled on the latter. Forces of nature like himself insisted on the best of the best, and Jonny Crane was top-ranking- well, he was a distant second to his Bat- but right now he wasn't going to think about him. The indignant rage that would surely bleed through his happy face would be most counter-productive to this reunion. His muddy eyes flickered to darkened blue irises fixed elsewhere and, worse, not on him. They ended up on Spencer's young, blushing face.

Jealousy was secondary to the solution.

"You can have Spence here," he murmured decisively.

His back-pocket Arkham employee started from his not-ogling, but Jonny appeared pleased. What the knave misconstrued as Desire-Made Possible in that minute smirk was in reality the plummet of three metaphorical birds by the proverbial stone.

"And what of my watcher, Gregory?" Jonathan's current fiery-headed babysitter, ecstatic as he would be to be rid of his charge's acid-laced insults, didn't have the authority to watch over whoever he chose.

"I'll take of care of him," Spencer piped up, "An easy switch."

"Ol' Greg should make for some interesting company," the clown commented idly, face up-tilted and pensive. Spencer just sounded way too eager to be taking over watch duty of Jonny's back. Jonny was and would always be His, to be used at the dirty blonde's discretion. And yet… the small sacrifice would be just that, small. Starting tomorrow, he'd leave the infirmary and be escorted to his
new cell, and then he would be much too busy getting to know his new neighbor to be concerned with the blue-eyed man sitting before him. Jonny and Spence could have their fun together, because tomorrow the clown prince would be having some of his own and then some.

"I don't mean to cut this short, but the night nurse is going to be starting shift any minute, and it was hard enough to get the first one to leave early."

The Joker nodded that he had heard; he figured as much. He turned back to Jonny casually fingering the folder's edge but leaving it closed, his round face a bland mask. "You might want to hide that. I gotta feeling Horn's not gonna be too happy to know his prized patient's file is gone again. So then… all's forgiven?" His bottom lip pouted, eye lashes fluttering a superficial sweetness.

Jonathan sneered at the cavity-inducing expression and wholly ignored the other's question of forgiveness. "Did you do something to Leland?" At the clown's pale glowing smile and the dainty wave of his four crooked fingers, the brick wall of loathing though still very much solid, became marginally translucent. The emotional traumatizing and physical harm of his successor was a sure way to gain a modicum of his favor. "… I'll think about it," he muttered. By the time the words had left his mouth he was being jerked forward by the shoulders and wet, sloppy kisses were battering his scowling face. With a burst of muscle-straining strength, he shoved the giggling man off and withheld a gag at the feel of saliva drying on his skin.

"That's my doll," the knave sat back, grinning and unbothered from being pushed away.

"I am not your-"

Heels click-clacked in the hall outside.

"Gotta go, sweet dreams." A quick press of moist lips stamped his forehead, then the clown bounced out of sight and onto his own bed waiting to be strapped in.

Once gone, Jonathan snatched up a corner of his blanket and scrubbed at the stickiness on his cheeks. Mid-scrub, his eyes drew up to the orderly still standing at the foot of his bed and staring dumbly at him. Could the man be anymore grossly obvious?

Well, then again, when one inherits a dog, one expects that dog to be trained.

"Facial astringent," he spat and the orderly jumped to comply instantly. He slapped the switch to the restroom -plunging their end of the ward in total blackness- then scampered off to meet the night nurse just as she was walking in.

Their conversation was brief and swiftly executed by his new dog: His lies smooth and believable, the authority exuded when questioned of his presence (orders to stay watch from "the Bigs") and even his acting was passable when his calm voice hardened and cracked like a whip against the clown's rousing attempts to make noise. Sure the Joker wouldn't have quieted otherwise if only not to draw attention to his yet-to-be redone restraints, but the other's try was respectable. The orderly even steered the nurse away from her bed-checks and into the office instead.

Jonathan could almost feel the clown's smug grin slightly stir the chemical air; "We're even now. I gave you one well-trained pooch."

And that was the most damaging thing the clown could do to himself at this point. His arrogance wouldn't truly see the effects of his "Charity." First, he gave up a flexible tool and in fact gave him to Jonathan, who the good doctor would utilize to the fullest. And lastly, knowing of the clown's lack of knowledge when it came to healthy, functioning relationships (at least Jonathan was PhD-
certified), the Joker truly believed he and Jonathan were peachy keen now. Joker only confirmed it when the ward went silent after the orderly left on his errand and he expressed in a yawn, "Just knew you couldn't let me go."

Full lips pulled into a cutting smirk under the cover of darkness.

One, Two, Three twitching crows in a dead, muddy field and the blood-spattered stone that ended them all laying innocently amongst the brittle cornstalks.

The sharp aches in his legs were dull compared to the warming knowledge that yes, with some careful planning, things just might go Jonathan Crane's way. Picking up Wayne's file on his lap and slipping it under his pillows, he pondered on his new green-eyed acquisition. Perhaps if Jonathan didn't mangle it too much, a smile aimed at the man would get him a reading light and a decent cup of coffee, among other things.

Hopefully the act of baring teeth in a pleasant manner won't strain his facial muscles beyond repair.
"No- you can't! I-I won't allow it!"

The voice was hysterical and borderline prepubescent. The clinical calm mask had long ago cracked and splintered, revealing flushed cheeks and swimming baby blue eyes. Limbs shaking and French-tipped nails biting angry red crescents into her palms.

"Please, Doctor Quinzel, reclaim your seat," her superior, Joan Leland, said gently over the younger woman's hyperventilating, though the steel glint in her dark eyes brooked no argument. With a huff, Quinzel threw herself into her chair and wrapped her arms around herself in an unsettling likeness to the standard-issue strait jacket. "Now…" Leland started, eyeing both psychiatrists seated before her and making sure neither would interrupt, again. "The suspension is just as its definition implies, temporary. Some troubling realities concerning your patient have been brought to my attention-"

The two didn't notice when her set of four broken fingers slid off her desk and rested on her lap.

"- and the incident the other day was the final straw. Changes will have to be made-"

"What happened wasn't my fault!"

"You might not have released him yourself, but Patient J is -was- under your charge and therefore your responsibility. I can not fathom how he would have escaped his restraints without you noticing, and the only information we have of the event is your account. No one is accusing you of anything, but I have no choice but to have your performance put under review until such a time myself and your colleagues are confident with trusting you with the patients. Must I remind you that Arkham is unlike the psychiatric wards you would find at Gotham General. The men and women here are criminally insane. Precautions must be made and procedures must be adhered to. Your inattention makes me question your capability. You were lucky he only harmed himself; he could have just as easily caused you injury or anyone else for that matter-"

"Patient J would never hurt me!"

"Be that as it may, my decision is still final: Your patient load will be divided amongst the other doctors and as for Patient J, his treatment will continue. As for his joint sessions with Mr. Wayne, they will be put on hold until such a time a more efficient course of action is presented by Dr. Horn if he so chooses to pursue it."

"Thank you, Dr. Leland," Horn replied, smiling graciously with a smugness Harleen's watery blue eyes narrowed at. "I would have to decline the joint therapy at this time. The execution thus far, I fear, has caused more harm than good. Perhaps in the future but for now my main concern lies with Bruce and the potential progress that could be made with him over more… far gone patients. And before you interrupt, Miss Quinzel, I do recognize the benefits of resolving the destructive issues between the two, but for now distance might be the best course of action."

Harleen was fit to burst. Her whole face was throbbing with blood and under the frantic pants through her nostrils was the distinctive chewing gravel slide of grinding teeth. How dare that wrinkled, pompous-

At Horn's words, Leland shifted uncomfortably in her seat and cleared her throat. "Not that I
disagree with you, Richard, but that course may not be entirely effective at this point."

-smug, yellow-toothed, inbreeding-

"Oh?" Horn sat forward, self-assured grin shrinking into a quirked line. "How so?"

two-faced, impotent-

"Well, um, you see due to recent events…"

repulsive, hook-nosed, son of a-

"Patient J has been moved to high security, effective yesterday."

"And how does this interfere…?" He understood the need for more restrictions given everything but
there were at least ten cells, plenty to be away from his own charge.

-scrawny, Napoleon-complex-

Leland's next statement was quiet and bracing against the upcoming onslaught. "He will be directly
across from Mr. Wayne."

Silence met her, but her broken fingers twitched a reassuring ache in support.

The two psychiatrists sitting still before her -both very different in background and mindsets- were
for once in union with their shocked reaction: Same baffled expressions fixed on their superior; their
thoughts zipping down the same confused paths and asking the same questions. After a long pause,
the same word was uttered though not at the exact same time.

"… What?"

No. Just- … no.

The only words his drug-hazy mind could cling to.

This honestly could not be happening to him. That, over there, had to be- what? A joke?

Squeezing his eyes shut then opening them changed nothing. Nothing at all. A white washed world
with that pale face and those scars.

He didn't realize he had moved until his knees banged against the floor and his head was bowed
towards the toilet bowl, puking what had to be his guts out. Eyes burning, the pressure threatening to
split his skull, the acids rushing up his throat stripping the slick, tender flesh of his throat layer by
layer until all he tasted was bile and sour blood. He simply dry heaved for dragging minutes after,
occasionally gagging on the stench of soggy, cardboard food and barely dissolved pills. He dizzily
thought he felt better -head throbbing and stomach roiling- this cathartic purging of his system.

But when he sluggishly rested his red, sweaty face against the cool rim, he stared blankly at the
piercing set of eyes across the way. His breathing ragged.

"Not the, ah… reception I had envisioned…" A wry grin caught the shadows in black stitches. The
faint stink of vomit had drifted to the other side of the hall. "Mind flushing that?"

The jabs inside his temples settled into an aching heat across his forehead. Sweat cooling and tremors
calming into a sporadic shiver. The unwanted nasally voice had slithered to his eardrums, and he barely winced at it. Something impossible like concern colored those few useless words that he was sure he imagined, but when he focused his blurry vision upon drawn eyebrows and the slant of a frown, it sobered some of his disorientation.

Yet as soon as he recognized it, it was gone, swept away by a chuckle and spindly fingers brushing lank, blond fringe aside.

"You know… I haven't seen those eyes in so long- no, not like that. I don't mean as if you plucked 'em out from some collection and interchange them like- like cufflinks." A bark of sudden laughter burst past his lips as the image sprung to mind in crude, squishy detail.

Bruce tamped down a surge of nausea, having followed the psychopath's train of thought with little effort. He didn't realize he'd been staring at the other's mangled maw until he wondered if the clown was nervous judging by the erratic tongue-swiping. But that couldn't be, right? He was fairly sure his enemy didn't know fear of any kind. Had Crane…? To be honest, Bruce wouldn't mind front row seats to that.

Was the clown still talking?

"-the uh, unexpected crinkle of pain pinching the corners, the panic. You were such an amateur then."

"What-" he rasped and swallowed to assuage the burn hindering his voice. "What are you talking about?"

"'What-What am I talking about?' About the first time we met of course!" White, skeletal arms littered with pink and silvery lines flung themselves out in a manner of grandiose. The clown's height folded into sharp, poking bones pretzel-style, making the two men eye level. Bruce eyed the torn pant leg and unraveling bandage and wondered. The corners of the Joker's mouth slowly curled into opposing tight coils. When Bruce heard the faint inhale for a long breath, he knew everything after that he could do without.

He liked it so far.

This legendary city with its old buildings and even older name, but it was all brand new to him.

The streets, the faces, the oppressive misery clinging to every frown he had so far come across.

A morose lip sheen for him to wipe away and paint a little more color into their lives.

It was all just a matter of… Inspiration.

Long fingers curled around the iron handrail of the fire escape, stinging his skin with its rusted edges and icy bite. The other hand brought a cigarette to cracked lips. Nasty habit smoking, but that burn was too much to resist, like inhaling a controlled fire that with a flick of the wrist in the right circumstances could do so much more.

For a moment the flare of tobacco embers was the only light on this dark street, tricking the drunk bums sifting through the trash below that it was Haley's Comet. So bright way up above them on the fourth floor with its glowing trails from the journey to his lips and back down onto the railing. Then the honor was taken and replaced by blue and red glinting purple in his eyes. A long wailing parade. Down below, catches of flesh and rags skittered away like cockroaches.

No one felt safer setting up camp beside the police station, listening to a scanner with a map of the
city, and recording the response times, be it from the station or on patrol. All tedious but necessary math. Fun-Fun-Fun! Right now was break time, and he wondered now what emergency required a grand total of eleven squad cars. Probably that pathetic excuse of a mob. "Organized crime," he murmured with a derisive snort before taking a drag from his cigarette. Experience was relative and not something he possessed a high amount of (in the spotlight to be more precise), but he was quite sure this city would be his in a matter of days...

Once he was adequately inspired, of course.

But then again, he had a funny feeling control wouldn't be all too simple.

Seconds later he was proven right when his absent gazing at the shining beacon that was Wayne Tower in the distance was interrupted by a slam of metal and skidding footsteps kicking up gravel. Auditory localization locked in just in time to watch a black silhouette dive from the roof of the police station. He giggled. The moment was like something out of a cartoon: Those few seconds in the air where the wily coyote was sure he had made it, but then gravity popped her head in and reminded just how cruel of a bitch she could be in these situations. The moron wrapped in black started to drop like a stone, his arms clawing in front of him and smack!

A pained grunt. A heaving figure clung for dear life onto the railing perpendicular to him, legs hiking themselves up instead of dangling in the air.

He took another puff and figured Gotham didn't skimp on interesting happenings. He had needed something to break up the gelatinous-feeling of monotony. "Hi there."

A masked head snapped up and wide, dark eyes centered in a slit of pale skin met his. Shock, the pinched corners of pain, and an underlying ferocity he wanted to poke at with a glowing hot iron rod.

Another slam of metal followed by smaller multiple ones. A small gang of cops stormed the roof; one in particular shouting, "Where did he go?"

The dirty blond watched them charge the edges and stare impotently into the dark, ignoring the orange fleck of his cigarette. They stayed up there for minutes until filing back in, reeking of defeat.

"So what did you do?" he asked as he turned back to his ninja-like visitor who had apparently melted into the shadows, but they weren't there. His adjusted eyes searched the darkness for any movement. He whipped around when he heard a barely audible click of the front door to his dingy apartment.

Weeks later and he still couldn't get the strange encounter out of his mind. When the papers came out with its blurred image of a solid shadow going by the name, "The Batman," he sat back and grinned.

He was well on his way to becoming Inspired.

"What? Thought I was lying before?" The clown clucked his tongue. "I knew about you looong before your big debut…"

Dark eyes stared at half mass; fluorescent dully stabbing at his retinas. The side of his too, too heavy head had warmed the stainless steel. His mind was processing faster like a computer purged of viruses, and for once he didn't jump to analyze the memory of where he unknowingly went wrong. He remembered, had damned himself soon after the incident for his clumsiness, and moved on from it. Now at least a mystery was solved, but it didn't matter in the long run.
Knowing all this wouldn't bring Rachel back.

Fuck... He was tired.

"I bet it's killing you, isn't it? That I was right there in the beginning, so close and so harmless- well, maybe harmless isn't the right word. If you hadn't been so quick to leave, the bodies on the couch would have been an excellent, ah, tip-off to you." He chuckled. "The Great Detective."

Lips sticky with bile split apart as his tongue fused to the roof of his mouth peeled back. "… you're out of your mind," he croaked, not knowing what else to say.

"Now that doesn't make sense, Batsy." The Joker frowned deeply, wrenching his scars at a fascinating angle. "If I was out of my mind… couldn't I just as easily step back in? Like 'you're-you're off your rocker!' Why not get back up and plop your fat ass down? Or 'he's lost his marbles!' … Go. Find. Them. This one- this one's my favorite, 'he's a few cards short of a full deck' … well, we both know what card really matters…"

Bruce disgusted himself, because he was actually listening to these mad ramblings and worse yet they were making sense in some cruel way.

The knave grinned slowly as he seemed to stare beyond the floor. "See, they make it sound so simple, don't they? Fixable? 'The human mind is kind of like… a piñata. When it breaks open, there's a lot of surprises inside…' [1] And you know what I like most about the Piñata Perspective? Hmm?"

He leaned forward with a conspiratorial left/right dart of his eyes.

The psychopath leaned so close that his breath fogged the plexi-glass and obscured his ruined mouth.

"… there's no fixing it."

Chapter End Notes

[1] Partial quote by Jane Wagner
"Are we ready to talk today?"

Bloodshot eyes remained low in their sockets, ready to glaze over in introspection. He wouldn't though. He had to stay awake. There was nowhere left to let his guard down anymore.

"According to your monthly physical, you've lost eleven pounds since arriving here." Doctor Horn flipped the medical report closed and settled back in his cozy chair. Bushy eyebrows furrowed over the gold frame of his glasses as he mentally compared his once essentially healthy patient to the gaunt figure before him now.

The silence stretched on like it always did. Bruce didn't know what to say to that.

"Okay? He knew he'd been eating less, but he figured the lack of exercise would balance it all out. Eleven pounds was a bit disconcerting… if it actually meant something. Weight loss like this was just a prelude to rotting after all.

"Bruce, do you have anything to say to that?"

"… no," he replied slowly. "No, I don't."

Surprise flitted briefly over Horn's face at his patient's unexpected response. "And why don't you, Bruce? For a man who indulged in a hobby dependent on physical fitness, one would surmise he would be concerned over such a change."

His teeth bit sharply at the inside of his cheek. "Hobby? His hands coiled into shaking fists on his lap, out of sight of those prying, bespectacled eyes he so wanted to bash in at this moment. How smug would Horn be with those gold frames hanging off one ear and prescription glass shards protruding from his torn, gushing eye balls? A hobby?"

Sensing his patient's offended anger and feeling a touch vindicated by it, Horn set aside the short report. "If you don't want to discuss your physical well-being, perhaps the subject of your new neighbor? As you know your joint sessions have been discontinued."

Bruce, if possible, sunk lower in his chair. He had felt nothing but relief when Michael came and took him from his cell -and away from that unwavering stare of those dead eyes- for this current appointment.

It had been two very long, sleepless days. Since the revelation of their true first meeting, the clown had not spoken another word to him; he simply watched and snorted in amusement when Bruce did something human, like yawn or blink. And he had thought the GCPD holding cells or the trial was his own personal freak show; he apparently didn't know what it was to feel like his skin was tender and the slightest caress of another's eyes was scalding. The last forty eight hours did little to help him to acclimate to the sensation.

Thankfully Bruce had been taken out of his cell yesterday for a half hour so that maintenance could fix a privacy screen to the wall, Leland having taken pity upon him. It came no higher than his waist and left the door clear to view the cot, but it blocked his neighbor from gazing at his more private moments and allowed the passing orderlies and nurse to check in from their standing vantage points. It wasn't ideal, but it made the situation and burning humiliation ever so slightly less unbearable. He
did notice the Joker, however didn't receive the same luxury.

"Come now, you have absolutely no input about your change in company?" Horn grinned, tilting his head with an inquiring raise of his brow. When Leland had told him and Quinzel the Joker's surprising move from the basement, he was appropriately shocked. There was no reason for it, but as soon as he returned to his office and thought about it, he concluded the move could be beneficial with time. The close quarters would take care of the two mad men's problems, saving Horn the aggravation... and if not, they couldn't get to each other.

"Well, if not that, then what would you be interested in discussing?" Horn rose from his seat and moved over to his filing cabinet, Wayne's health report in hand. The session with his last patient had run long and left him little time to prepare for the next. "We can't always spend these in silence," he murmured, flipping though the S and Ts. His eyes flickered up to see the other man was barely listening.

Vistra, Walker, Watson, Wintz-

Small grin falling flat, he sorted through them again more carefully. Wayne, where was it? He checked one-two, three more times, even to see if he misplaced it after a long night of working. It just wasn't here.

His inner panic didn't reach his features. The smallest hint of anything being wrong was the sour pinch of his lips and the careful placing of the sheet of paper atop the cabinet. The drawer closed with an unintentional slam. "I think this'll be enough for today. You may leave."

Bruce stood up and left in no big hurry. It was nice, those few feet walking unassisted, but it ended all too soon upon stepping out into the hall with Michael there waiting for him.

"Nope." The orderly canted his head in the opposite direction Bruce was facing, away from High Security. "You got a visitor."

The stoic mask on the brunet's face remained the same as it always did.

Visiting day was Sunday, and today wasn't Sunday.

-----------------------------------------------

Police Commissioner Jim Gordon looked like hell.

His whole body sagged into the chair and spilled over onto the strip of counter partially mounting the barrier of clear, perforated plastic. His suit wrinkled, skin waxen, and salt 'n pepper hair unkempt.

Nothing was said for long minutes, only simple staring. Perhaps not. There was more concentration centered in his sunken gaze. Cataloguing, assessing, almost fooling himself into seeing he saw it: Him, the man he'd worked with, the mystery that once skulked the shadows, the Dark Knight.

But truth was… Gordon couldn't see, not like he did briefly that cold morning he arrested him. The long days on a strict caffeine diet made even yesterday a blur. Apprehensive, but hope was a vague gnawing in his chest.

Nicotine-filmed fingers carded through his limp, graying hair, slouching into a jagged hunch as he did so. "I- I'm not sure what to call you."

Bruce sat there, disinclined to answer.

"Batman" sounded sarcastic and fantastical and odd to be addressed in normal conversation.
"Bruce" portrayed an intimacy that didn't exist; they didn't know each other outside of rooftop meetings that lasted only minutes, seconds at a time. And "Mr. Wayne" was probably the most appropriate, but it seemed to ignore the -figurative- giant bat in the room. It'd also further prove he and Gordon only helped each other, his being here not making sense since they never cared enough about the other outside of a law-enforcing capacity.

… names were irrelevant anyways.

When it was clear Bruce wasn't about to kick-start the conversation, Gordon shifted uneasily. Recognizable or not, those dark eyes skewered whether they meant to or not. "… er, how have you been?"

"What are you doing here?" the vigilante spoke over him in a flat tone. Gordon's squinted gaze widened in surprise, probably expecting words to come from a torn-throat rasp or billionaire superficiality.

"Just came to visit… I would have come sooner but... I wanted to see how you were holding up." He stopped short at the scathing glare aimed his way, his uncombed mustache twitching. Just by looking at the visibly rundown man, Gordon could tell how he'd been fairing. He had been sent to a facility called, Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane. A miserable place with an even more miserable reputation. By logic, Batman would most likely do better at Blackgate: He'd be constantly fighting for his life, but at least he wouldn't be drugged while doing so. Batman thrived on the physicality of such grunge, modern warfare, but this dull existence filled with persistent prodding at his psyche and medication diluting his quick thought process was something more detrimental.

Bruce pulled back from his thoughts to notice Gordon's silence involved a steady, almost cautious stare, as if they were both thinking the same thing. Jim had filed appeal after appeal, but each attempt was met with a firm refusal. No transfers, no chance for parole, and no reduced sentence. A convoluted sentence since the court did not specify anything past a sane diagnosis. The commissioner's power only extended as far as the cops he looked after.

A shadow passed over Gordon's face as his sharp gaze roamed over the sterile room around them and lingered on Michael's -just pretend I'm not listening- hulking presence. He leaned forward, his face an inch from the glass. The conversation that has yet to be started already taking a serious turn.

Bruce blinked. The medications toyed with his faculties: The fuzzy edges of 20/20 spurned by exhaustion. Just now upon watching Gordon's mouth puff a bit of moisture onto the glass, that twitching mustache had curled into a crinkled, Glasgow smile and the words, "There's no fixing it" snaked into his ears. His nails bit at the material covering his knees.

When Gordon finally spoke, his voice was low. "Let me fix this."

Keeping his handler in view -he knew Michael was greedily listening to every word despite his turned back- Bruce tore down the commissioner's earnest expression with a slow, definitive shake of his head. What Gordon wanted to do would destroy everything they sacrificed the night Harvey died, and the fallen hero wouldn't have it.

"Why not?" Gordon responded in an explosive whisper, lunging forward and at the last minute reigning himself in and rubbing his mouth. The dark bags under his eyes made the fluorescent lights glint more harshly off his glasses. Michael had abandoned all pretenses now of giving them a private conversation; he blatantly studied them from his post at the door, curiosity warring with the first signs of suspicion. "I can help you."

"Don't. It won't make a difference."
"It won't immediately get you out of here, I admit, but at least the homicide charges would be dropped."

Underneath the placid surface, a muscle in his jaw jumped. "And who would take the blame?"

Gordon shot a glare at the orderly before ducking his head and spitting out, "Dent" under his breath, as if that one syllable was soaked in vinegar.

Bruce was already shaking his head before the older man had finished. His voice was quiet yet made of iron. "It has to be me. It's like you said, all the good he's responsible for will be undone if the truth ever came out."

"I know what I said," the commissioner cut in fiercely. "His good doesn't matter anymore. It just paved the way for new players to fight over territory."

"The people's hope is anchored to his memory."

"There isn't any hope left! The streets are overrun, crime rate's skyrocketing- I have more fingers on my left hand than the number of clean cops on my force, but I can't fire the corrupt because we need the manpower. Harvey didn't get results. You, you are the one who changed Gotham; you made her a little better. The people need to believe in you, not Harvey, you."

"They needed me out of fear. They need to see him as the hero."

"Dent's gone, and you're the hero we deserve."

Bruce didn't know if it was the fervor in the way Gordon spoke or the words themselves, but regardless he instantly decided this conversation was over. He'd rather be in his cell being stared at -because oblivion didn't involve this challenging logic-anything to be away from that familiar expression on Gordon's face -kind but pitying- that made Bruce feel nine years-old again.

Besides, "... Batman isn't a hero. He never meant to be. There's no going back now." The listlessness was there in large, empty doses.

Michael wasn't particularly surprised when his charge stood up and made his way over to where he waited by the door. They hardly spoke, but he had gleaned enough from the silent vigilante that if he couldn't control the situation, he could -and would- most certainly walk away from it. The orderly wasn't sure of what had been said or for what reason the police commissioner was visiting the man he had publicly hunted and deemed a menace to the city, but the heated exchange proved to be too much regardless.

"Bruce," Gordon boldly called out, standing from his chair and looking at the tall, brunet's stiff spine. "It doesn't matter if he intended to be or not. I know of one little boy who thinks the world of him despite what the TV set says. You may not think so, but one of the things it 'takes to be a hero is a little bit of innocence inside of you that makes you want to believe that there still exists a right and a wrong, that decency will somehow triumph in the end.' [1] And it will, the truth will come out eventually."

Amidst the ensuing silence, serious eyes pinned Michael's split attention and silently commanded it was time to leave. As Michael warily stepped out into the hall to hold the door open, his angle afforded him the commissioner's haggard form dipped in steel. His charge was still far enough inside that Michael would have to step in the doorway to see him. His confusion distracted him enough from doing so. If he had, he would have -in all these weeks- Bruce Wayne, the infamous Batman, at
his most vulnerable: The posture was still perfect; head held high; but the eyes were squinted - burning- nostrils flared; his mouth a bloodless line; and shaking from his fists up to his drawn shoulders. Once a few breaths heaved from a barely moving chest, he opened his mouth and color flooded his thin lips.

"If the truth-" His voice cracked for the first time since Rachel's death. "If it comes out, then the Joker wins."

Gordon's reply was quick on his tongue. "If you were outside these walls, you'd realize with you gone he already has. Bruce… you don't deserve to be in here."

Bruce didn't stay for any more words to be said. He was halfway down the hall in heartbeats.

Michael, already being a fairly tall man, had to lengthen his strides in order to keep up.

"The truth?" he huffed, curiosity winning out over his breath. He had to quit smoking. He didn't think the other man would answer, and he was correct, Wayne kept his pace with determination, pulling through the visible shackles of his medications.

The only thing that truly shocked Michael at the moment was the concern carving lines into his forehead; never before had he cared about the state of his charges -they all were here because they did something bad, right?- He only cared to the extent if their condition docked his pay, but this -the worry niggling in his chest- was different. Perhaps it wasn't entirely impossible: The dude was Batman, and before all the shit went down Michael thought he was pretty cool; crazy for doing what he did, but his friend avoided a mugging because of him. He felt as if -no, he fucking knew- he had witnessed an important conversation he shouldn't have. Maybe it'd be good to mention this to Dr. Horn; he would know better after all when it came to Wayne, but at the same irritating time he didn't trust the doctor. Sometimes their smoke breaks coincided, and the prick ignored all attempts of small talk, pretending Michael and the other orderlies didn't exist, and usually made quite a show of checking for his wallet after walking by. The fact the guy bred children into the world made him shudder. Being one's superior didn't necessarily make you superior.

That settled it. Mike wouldn't say anything to anyone yet- well, maybe his girlfriend, because she always seemed to know when something was on his mind and wouldn't leave him alone until he told her. According to her, intimacy involved more than just sex, but he'd endure the necessary evil.

He looked away from the billionaire at his side to pay attention to where he was going. He needed time to think about what he witnessed so that-

Oh. Shit.

It was too late. Before he could guide Wayne into an intersecting hall, the group of three was upon them.

"Aw, Bats, why the long face? … Did'ya miss me? Well, darling, I won't be too much longer." That horrible grin drew close despite the barrier of the other orderly's thick arm.

There was no warning, no twitch or growl, no sharp intake of breath. One moment each small group was passing the other in the hall; and the next, the orderly in the way was on the floor screaming and cradling a crooked arm, Michael was falling by a swift back swipe of his charge's leg, and Wayne had the clown up against the wall, fist swinging like a steady sledge hammer slamming into the laughing man's clothed flesh.

Thud-Thud-Thud
"Holy fuck!" Greg squealed, tripping over his own feet to distance himself from the lightening quick attack. His face paled so rapidly the ginger speckling on his skin looked like drops of blood. Before Michael could open his mouth to shout for the idiot to go get help, the other man was tearing down the hall, a red-headed streak of squeaking sneakers. Michael could only watch helplessly from the floor, knowing as well as Greg that even the two of them combined stood no chance of breaking this up and trying to on his own meant he might as well be swapping his white uniform for the Arkham red.

The clown hoot and hollered, staying pinned against the wall and accepting the onslaught for all of fifteen seconds. Laughter spilling out between blood-glossed teeth caused enough distraction for his slippered feet to gain purchase on the wall and push.

So lost in the red haze, the unmasked scowl on Batman's face slackened in surprise as 160-sum pounds bared down on him, forcing him backwards. He quickly recovered by rolling with the extra weight and slamming the knave against the floor.

Oxygen rushed from the Joker's lungs in a whoosh; they burned and ached under his gasping chuckles. Through greasy blond tendrils, he could see the fire smoldering again in those eyes, and it was so much better than breathing.

He and Bats were dancing again.

Freckles. The bastard had freckles. A light spattering of them across the bridge of his nose -Crack!- now broken and swelling a hideous eggplant color. The lips framing the vigilante's bared teeth twitched into a feral grin. Another stamp of his fist and scarlet was washing over the discolored skin in a warm, slick layer.

His mind latched onto these details, desperate to ignore the rest. Conscience still reeling from Gordon's visit, his trained reactions had acted before he realized he needed to hurt: Disabling outside intervention and striking out at the enemy. Life was instantly simplified: Mangled smiles deserved to be broken all the way, and it was his job to do so; narrowed down as it was to his own harsh breathing drowning out the constant wailing of the other residents; his knees digging into the tile; the warm body wriggling underneath his own as his arm fell into the familiar rhythm of withdraw and surge forward; eyes locked and burning on that soundlessly cackling blur of red disappearing and reappearing behind his fist. He shifted to relieve the pressure on his kneecaps -such things didn't matter in the Bat suit- and froze, knuckles dripping beside his jaw, plopping to the bleached floor. Shock receding his eyelids.

Apparently there were other benefits to thick Kevlar protecting him from big dogs and bullets.

The fingers squeezing bruises into a jumping, pale throat loosened as his focus trailed down the Arkham uniform to the shadow of a bulge that had grazed his inner thigh. Charred copper irises pierced manic, glittering eyes.

Then his heartbeat-clogged ears were flooded with the sound of yelling. A jab in his side, and his muscles were seizing, straining and coiling until they just might snap and break his too tight skin. Thankfully, after forever passed and started all over again, the pain stopped and he slumped over in a cramped hunch. Like his thoughts were paused, they resumed drowsily as if the agony hadn't occurred: Those eyes should be black, empty pits like a shark's, not molten hazel.

Instantly, he passed out.

Chapter End Notes
[1] An altered quote from Lise Hand
The more one analyzes people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called 'Human Nature.'

-Oscar Wilde

And that's exactly what it was coming down to, and oh how he loathed it.

It was admitting defeat, conceding to an elementary answer. Almost as artless as to reply "I don't know" and leave it at that. Despite the many times he had read and re-read Bruce Wayne's file, Jonathan refused to resign himself to ignorance.

Yet as his frustration ticked higher with each crisp flip to the next useless page, his own human nature wanted to do just that. He kept at it though, because there were no relevant questions that the answer couldn't be found in a book. There were no mysteries that couldn't be solved with patience and research. If only he had just a bit more information then there was nothing left to do other than arrange the pieces and complete the puzzle. He had inferred and concluded plenty, no doubt about that, but he knew there was more. There always was in these special cases. This was the tip of the iceberg, sharp and obvious, above the water's surface; then another ten percent could be discerned just below; and another ten could be shaped with his own cleverness and experience as a practicing doctor. It was already an impressive feat and most would leave it that… if one was sub par.

There was simply so much to learn and the bare bones Horn drummed up could only go so far. Jonathan was quite sure Horn copy and pasted the information from the billionaire playboy's Wikipedia page to his file. The shiny plastic veneer wasn't important -what the world wanted, needed to see- it was nothing compared to the ugly brutality underneath, and that's what he needed to know. Well, perhaps not need.

He knew the only reason the clown gave him the file was the motives akin to handing over the ammunition to the gun pointed at the Bat's head. To tempt him so Jonathan would submit to his baser urge of vengeance. Fear toxin was his physical weapon, yes, but it was more of an instigator, a hallucinogen bringing to the forefront volatile emotions that were already there. Before he had perfected the formula, before he had entertained notions of its creation and before that creation adopted darker intentions, he had only his mind and a sadistic thirst to drag out a human being's motivations, their wants, their fears with surgical precision and dissect them like one would a scalpel and living brain, uncovering their secrets and putting pen to paper. Never for blackmail, but a transition of power. That was Doctor Crane's specialty, Cunning; 'The art of concealing his own defects and discovering other people's weaknesses.' [1] Scarecrow never much appreciated it, only salivated over the blubbering and screaming end result.

And this was what the knave expected of him, to take the bare bones and give them flesh, to devise a plan (the clown wanted him to fail) so that Jonathan would be branded the villain. And in the Joker's twisted logic, there could only be one villain per tale and if that role's already taken by the good doctor, well that would leave him the role of one better, that one tie closer to the Hero, the confidante in a world full of enemies.

Heavily flawed, but that was the Joker for you.
Unfortunately for the grinning maniac, Jonathan had little to no intention of attacking the broken man behind the Bat. Yes, he was bitter about the inelegant dose of his own medicine and the conditional, long-term side effects that came with it. After an episode when only his body was left shaking, heart still racing, the terror slowly releasing its poisonous grip on his brain, he wanted nothing more than to disembowel the rodent-inspired vigilante with the dullest of serrated instruments for inflicting this humiliation upon him.

It was only natural.

This studying of his file was only a matter of pride. He had no real aspirations to invest his genius into orchestrating a nefarious plot to punish the Bat. Jonathan honestly couldn't think of a worse fate than to have his wings so publicly clipped, be sent to Arkham's glass cage, and be subjected to Richard Horn's amateur fumblings, all with a deranged jester acting as his merry shadow- perhaps being struck deaf, blind, and dumb but even that sounded merciful compared to the former since it entailed a special lack of awareness. No, the Batman was suffering in his own customized Hell Jonathan didn't much care to contribute to. If anything all he felt was a vague pity and disgust for the man. This aggravation over his file was merely the stubborn refusal to give him the unknowing satisfaction of being labeled "complicated." He wasn't. No one ever was.

Well, Jonathan was the exception; he had Scarecrow after all.

Oh, and the clown.

Jonathan would admit, albeit grudgingly, he still found the psychopath still intriguing in light of everything, but solely from an intellectual stand point. The physical side of their arrangement was a necessary evil - a distraction from the hallucinated, hungry demons in the dark corners of his cell- and Jonathan was glad to be rid of it. His interest in fornicating only went as far as the chemical changes in the brain and how easily arousal could be twisted into anxiety. He was still a healthy, young man and the occasional, wayward erection was inevitable, but he had better uses of his time than engage in messily primitive relief. How could a sweaty, panting, short-lived surge of endorphins be considered superior to say, concocting a medical breakthrough; or curing a hopeless patient only to systematically tear them apart from the inside out; to permanently warp arrogant king pins like Carmine Falcone into petrified, drooling wimps in a padded room with barely a lock because one of the most dangerous men in Gotham was considered less than a threat? He didn't see the point in the whole "sex" affair.

He had never enjoyed what the clown did to him, and Scarecrow - crude shadow that he was- preferred to be the one doing any sort of "fucking," as he had put it so eloquently many an occasion. Though the connection had faded due to the switch in medication, Jonathan knew his other half was equally -if not more so- grateful that their rendezvous were a thing of the past. Sometimes insight into such a unique mind just wasn't worth it.

The clown was not yet aware of this dissolving alliance, but the silently seething doctor would soon make sure the message was crystal clear. He just needed the time, time coupled with a brilliant plan. Because of course while the clown's sure his Jonny boy was devising an attack on the Bat, Doctor Crane had plenty of opportunity to turn the tables. He'd been a fool to sacrifice his dignity for so long. He should have been busy with finding a way out of here; as much as he had invested into Arkham when he was working as the Director, it was quite a different experience when you're on the wrong side of the cell door. As fond as he'd grown of Gotham, he could easily start over somewhere else: A different name, some doctored papers, the nest egg of saved money and toxin under the floorboards in the closet of his old apartment, and all he needed than was a ticket to anywhere—perhaps Europe?
But first there was a certain Punchinello [2] he wanted to make cry.

In actuality, the most pertinent obstacle at the moment was-

"Spencer, what are you doing here?" The Empty-Headed Cow's pleasantly surprised exclamation interrupted him from his lull of thought and reading. And she was doing so well at remaining quiet. A shame, really.

True to her word, gelled white-bleached locks bobbed into view over the partition and paused where the nurse had been partaking in her pointless straightening of worn bed sheets. Jonathan was a firm believer in tidiness - make no mistake- but he could admit such a compulsive act was a useless endeavor in this place. When a patient was rushed in here, choking on blood and the chunk of flesh he'd bitten out of his cell mate's arm, would it matter if the sheets were neat? There were more important things to do, like sterilize every surface and be at his beck and call. Jonathan had tried telling her that, but then she had happily denied him his pain pills.

In that moment she had reminded him of his grandmother.

He withdrew quickly from his thoughts when the orderly's coolly confident voice answered. "I had nothing to do so I just thought I'd drop by and check on Doctor Crane-"

"That man is no doctor," the Empty-Headed Cow spat with more vehemence than a couple weeks of his company should entail. Needless to say that brief recognition that had filled him with smug satisfaction vanished with the nurse's words, involuntarily curling his fingers, quietly crinkling the case file in his hands.

"Degrees don't simply disappear, you un-educated shrew."

Most of his rancor was lost when the agreeing snarl in his mind reasserted its absence more glaringly than it had actually been there. He tucked away the file under the pillows at his back, and - in a show of uncharacteristic weariness- slumped back against them, fingers pushing his glasses high on his forehead to massage the aching bridge of his nose, stemming another headache.

And it was a headache, not loneliness despite the palpable isolation.

His fuzzy vision snapped up at the prickling awareness of another's presence. With an irritated flare of his nostrils, he adjusted his frames properly and the soft edges of the pale silhouette waiting at the foot of his bed sharpened.

"There is nothing for you to do here. All is well if we're measuring by abysmal standards. You may leave now." Unless of course you want to make yourself useful and refrain from all but shoving down my throat the nameless pills suppressing my other half.

The orderly given to him was disdainfully neutral, even while in the clown's employ. Jonathan should have known escaping wouldn't be so easy.

The blue-eyed doctor's clipped dismissal stole the afternoon's greetings out of Spencer's mouth. Easing his fallen jaw shut with practiced composure, he fought to keep his hands relaxed at his sides and not to fidget. Working for Gotham's #1 Maniac in such close proximity had taught him no reaction was the best reaction, and he assumed Jonathan Crane appreciated no different, although it was difficult when the smaller man before him was decidedly easier on the eyes than the Joker. He never had a thing for scars.

"When I say, 'You may leave' that's my not-so-subtle way of directing you to go. Now." Laid up with two broken legs surprisingly did little to diminish the severity of Crane's glare and his agitation
The fingers of Spencer's left hand twitched, the only outward sign of suppressing the sickly delighted shiver still crawling under his skin. Unfortunately heat bit at the sharp edges of his face, ears already engulfed in a humiliating red against bleached hair. Guileless green eyes slid smoothly over the top of the privacy screen to find the nurse puttering around in her office, needlessly shuffling papers and shooting -he couldn't think of any other word but- smoldering looks his way. Though it wasn't well known, Spencer didn't necessarily bat for her team. Looking back at the man shooting daggers at him with his stunning eyes, well…

Well, it should be obvious.

Even though Jonathan was above childish acts such as chucking the half empty cup of cold coffee the young orderly had brought him no more than two hours ago, the total lack of vacating his eyesight and standing there like a blushing buffoon who seemed to have abandoned all understanding of the English language was hard to resist.

Each ticking second of silence wore away at his mature resolve.

All this paid dog seemed to only to be good for was acting as means to attain coffee, decent food, and books of irrelevant subjects with minimal entertainment value. Perhaps the clown's charitable donation was of a literal, benign worth, useless enough where it was no hardship to do without. Jonathan's goal was foiled before it even got off the ground… Typical.

"I just thought-"

"Now that's a surprise." Cerulean pinned the orderly with an expression of fierce dislike, causing Spencer to gulp and focus past the annoyed psychiatrist's shoulder.

The blond was a waste.

"I thought it would be of interest to you that the boss and Bat have both been confined to their cells, unconscious."

… alright, maybe not a total waste.

Dark eyebrows rose slowly as anger bled away to be replaced by curiosity. "… unconscious?"

"Wayne attacked him in the hall after a visit from the police commissioner, and the orderlies on the scene had to resort to tasering them both."

The "Cattle prods" as they were so aptly nicknamed, aside from their more P.C. title, "Stun batons," were only used in emergency situations, such as riots. If used incorrectly, they could do severe nerve and tissue damage.

Plump lips -that Spencer most definitely wasn't staring at- pulled into a faintly amused smirk. It must have been quite the show. Jonathan wished he'd been there to see it.

After a minute of indulging his imagination and no more information seemed to be forthcoming, a sneer replaced his barely there grin. "Well, go on. Tell me more," he snapped at the blond, his desire for solitude temporarily pushed aside.

Thrown off, Spencer quickly caught on, standing straighter and his chest puffing out, and, wow, was this what it was like to feel interesting?
Regaining consciousness was anything but a slow drag. It was a jarring blink, in one moment and transported to another, where each of his muscles were hardened, tender lumps under his skin, arranging his body in a position embarrassingly fetal in nature.

Eyes taking in the dark, blurry underside of his cot, he tried shifting his head to alleviate the crooked angle of his neck but pain flared and his head dropped those two scant inches with a choked, "Gah!" followed by a soft thud.

"I know, it's -er- *shocking*, right to, ah, discover how much of a wallop those taser do-dads can pack?"

His careful, steady breathing snagged to stillness at those raspy chuckles. His muscles contracted impossibly tighter but the cramping that entailed forced him to do nothing but relax. If he remained still, that thing across from him would believe he'd succumbed again into a world of blackness and give up bothering him for now… but self-scrutiny was a meticulously cruel and vigilant spotlight, illuminating the cowardice in his reluctance with scathing clarity. It seemed okay with Gordon but not with that psychopath.

When the all over agonizing contraction settled, he could trick himself into believing if he didn't delay it and sat up quickly, it'd hurt less. No counting, just go.

And he did.

And it fucking hurt. A lot.

Any exclamations were locked in the bulge of his throat and reverberated in his head, painted in the black spots erupting across his vision. The pressure in his skull almost unbearable for a split second. Dizziness assaulted him as his back hit the wall and his head bounced just as hard.

Skin-pinching giggles filtered in through the perforated glass. Over the three-foot privacy border, his squinted eyes slid to the side and went through an evolution of sorts: Squinted, narrowed, to widening in something akin to bewilderment.

Bruce knew, with all his extensive training, how formidable in a fight he could be, especially when his anger played a role. This knowledge was never written so clearly than in his torn and bleeding knuckles aching in his lap. He'd just never been faced with his own, literal handiwork. It had always been dark, and he never stuck around long enough for the bruises to form or opponents to come to consciousness.

But here he was now, and the fluorescent lighting was excruciatingly bright.

There was more bruise than pale skin.

Reclined against the opposite direction, two swollen shut, dead -no, not dead, hazel, he knew that now- eyes gazed steadily back at him. Shattered blood vessels of violet and vermilion blotted and stretched from the right of a square jaw up around the brow of his black left eye. A masquerade mask of welcomed rage. A messy gash spanned across the bridge of a no doubt broken nose, crudely reset and discolored. The puckered flesh of his scars -one tender purple and the other grey pink and untouched- pulled into a grin, revealing a thin crescent of copper-stained teeth.

"Now if you keep making that face, it'll get stuck like that and you're far too… pretty for that to happen."
Bruce's eyes flitted away from the battered man and consciously took notice his own jaw was tightly hinged off-angle as his mouth was compressed into a bloodless grimace. He couldn't keep looking away for long, pupils drawn back like helpless bits of metal against a grossly powerful magnet.

Horrified wasn't the right word for how Bruce felt; Disgusted wasn't either. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit he was more fascinated than anything. Using his fists was a means to an end: Subdue and disable the assailant so they were no longer a threat to others. They were never a threat to him. But that clown, that... monster. It always was more with him. Always different.

It was necessity and anger. Control and desperation.

Rinsing his gloves of red and white smears, convinced there was nothing underneath. Only mirth and twitchy smiles. It was almost... satisfying to see -to know- he had such a marring effect.

A sharp exhale escaped him as he tried to scoot further up the wall to relieve the pressure on his tailbone. The tension had eased some, but plenty remained where only regular motion and careful stretching would cure.

"... what happened?" he asked himself in a barely distinguishable croak, his throat twinging in thirst. He was sure he slept through lunch, possibly dinner, and the sink appeared much too far away and stooping over to drink from the faucet screamed of an effort he wasn't ambitious enough to pursue.

"What, you've never been spark plugged before?"

Biting back a retort he didn't have, merely a growl of agitation, he did muster a glare for the curious wound raising a dark blonde eyebrow his way.

"Wow," busted lips mouthed obnoxiously. Mild surprise pulled at every laceration, and dried blood stretched the skin tight. Sucking on the wet, furrowed skin lining the inside of his mouth in thought - traces of iron tingling where fists had mashed teeth against fragile skin- the Joker's mind shot back to that night Harvey had decided to play a mean trick on him: One of his goons -how did he not die when the truck flipped over?- had decided to lay his grubby paws on what was so inherently his that he got zapped for his audacity.

And how could the Bat have that thing attached to his neck and never been shocked before?

Giggles rumbled past his wistful grin, interspersed with chirps of mock-execution. "Really never ever? You'd think it would be in the, uh, 'How to Become a Super -duper- Hero Handbook.'"

Bruce's glare withered to baleful. "I'm not a super hero." The term repulsed him. He wasn't even a hero.

"Nah... I don't believe that," the Joker replied with a smack of his cracked lips, simultaneously shaking his head and stretching his neck, baring stark shadows of steel fingers. And if Bruce happened to have stared too long at them, it meant nothing. "Let's seeeee-yuh... You wear a cape - a mask - you have the whole... tragic past to point your, uh, moral compass - you have, well, you had a secret identity - you beat the gooey stuffing out of, heh heh, bad guys - you... uh, you rescue damsels in dis-tress. I'm- I'm shocked you don't have some, some secret communication with the mayor like a tiny, red phone. The Bat-phone!"

He threw his head back and howled something high-pitched and horrible.

Why he had been angry -Gordon- it was coming back to him, and he didn't care how sore he felt now, he wanted to beat that cackling face in all over again, even if it ended with him unconscious. Again. And again. And again. Vicious cycles were starting to make sense, and knowledge's
pragmatic generosity reminded him 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.' [3]

He went to scowl but realized he already was.

The greasy-haired man across the way was over his laughing fit and was babbling on about assorted "Bat" gadgets Bruce didn’t see the realism or functionality in -Bat Shark Repellant? [4]- and the fantastic science of energy transference from one being to another when an electric cattle prod was jammed against one's side. Bruce was barely listening, catching the odd word now and then, and allowing drawn out vowels, lilted consonants punctured by chuckles, and the hypnotizing erratic rise and fall of his pleased voice fill his ears while he thought. Oh, he'd forgotten: Rachel had tried shooting electrodes at him once when he helped her at the train stop stairs but his suit had absorbed it. He almost turned to tell the clown this but gently shut his mouth. That would dredge up more than he ever wanted to deal with.

The talking settled yet at the same time fueled his anger: It reminded him of the other man's atrocities and everything Bruce had lost, including Rachel. It was scarily soothing because the face of madness chatting of innocuous things compared to death threats and explosions was considered aurally better than the evidence of Insanity screaming and shouting in echoing intensity throughout the asylum, distracting him from it. If he closed his eyes than he could try to pretend that voice belonged to someone sane, and normal conversation was waiting for him to join in.

"But as I was saying, sweetie, you really should work harder on your violent outbursts… you simply don't have them enough."

Bruce squeezed his eyes shut regardless, though not with the intention to fool himself. He was far too aware for that. It was a testament to how disturbed the other man was that he enjoyed the beating. The stinging, crusting blood circling his nostrils and streaking down his face, filling grooves and distracting the eyes.

The cracked and bruising of his own hands, the webbing between his fingers dark and tacky with blood. They throbbed and disgusted him.

The man was sick, masochistic and vile. Wanting Bruce to hit him and liking it when he did. Going as far as to get an- an erection from it. Fucked up and just plain nauseating.

Sliding lower against the wall, he raked sticky fingers through his hair and expelled a breath deep from the bottom of his lungs. Stomach acids roiling. Heat pushing to the surface of his sallow complexion.

Bruce had liked it too.

Chapter End Notes

[1] William Hazlitt
[2] Punchinello is the name of the clown in the classic opera, Pagliacci
[4] A reference from the campy, "Batman" film, starring Adam West. The whole scenario was ridiculously funny.
The lights had gone through their day and night cycle before anyone had come around to check on him.

It had been relatively peaceful balancing on the hazy, swooping precipice between wakefulness and sleep. He had essentially stayed up all night lying still and waiting. For what he couldn't say but didn't look deep enough to, but the taut line of anticipation quivered in the back of his mind like an itch just out reach.

He received his answer in the form of a small army of men in white coats.

That precarious peace became an almost humorous illusion.

Buttons were pushed, a harsh buzz vibrating the air, and then his small, padded space was flooded with hulking bodies and the smell of sweat and Axe body spray. His loosened muscles tensed as four figures loomed over his supine -uncomfortably vulnerable- position. Just as the calculations on how to separate and overpower the gang in sixteen different combinations were in place, hands were seizing his arms and legs and hoisting him off the mattress. Bear-trap grips wrenched tender limbs in four different directions, causing him to clench up further and bringing pricks of wetness to sting his eyes.

Twisting his weakened arms and legs out their grip was futile as long sleeves were yanked down his arms. He froze when a strap was roughly shoved between his legs and tightened at his back, squeezing and pinching his privates. His arms were wrapped around his torso and buckled at his spine. Some test pulls from foreign hands jerked his entire frame, and he was finally set down on his feet, the ache in his temples flaring.

Before Bruce could recuperate, he was being dragged, tripping over his feet, from his cell.

And through the tangle of thick arms and pinched, nameless faces was the steady, calculating stare of blacked out, hazel eyes. For once no smirk or smile or crooked grin curved the very flat line of those split lips. When Bruce's shoulder clipped the door frame with a meaty thud, the clown's bandaged leg jerked in reaction.

A soundless snarl was lost under the scuffling of feet.

"Hey, what about little, ol' me? Big, bad bats and -ah- handsome harlequins are a- a package deal. Where's my escort service?"

The Joker went unacknowledged. Bruce craned his neck to keep that snag of blood-crusted lip baring off-white teeth and piercing eyes in sight -fascination gleaming and sudden warmth flaring throughout his system- but the parade through maximum security ended with the slam of a steel door and the madman's muffled yells pummeling against it.

The next thing the vigilante knew he was sitting in a large room reeking of bleach and antiseptic. The gray light filtering in through the high, barred windows agitated his eyes. Surrounded by orderlies on a thin cot, the nurse who had checked him over upon arrival (the one who had sent a picture of his backside forever to be wandering cyberspace) was perched beside him, dabbing daintily at his swollen knuckles with cotton balls soaked in alcohol and making idle chit chat he didn't bother
listening to.

He missed when people were too petrified to utter a syllable in his presence.

Senses floating on the pungent, medical smell, he barely felt the sting as blood was slowly cleaned away only to be replaced by a greasy layer of Neosporin and wrapped carefully in gauze. Too absorbed with fist-ravaged flesh and satiated smiles, he didn't even notice the strait jacket had been taken off so his hands could be treated before he was being wrestled back into it.

Shamefully what felt like a blink later, he was being shoved into a chair. A door slammed, and he was abandoned in Horn's office with said man standing idly beside the window wearing an easy smile.

"Ah, Bruce, here you are. I hope you slept well." The doctor moved away from his view of iron bars and the ugly rottng of the Narrows and moved behind his overly large desk, pushing in unevenly pulled out cabinet drawers just to get by. "Now that your injuries have been seen to, is there anything you would like to share with me regarding yesterday's... attack?"

The bound vigilante stared placidly at the stacks of manila folders blanketed across the surface of Horn's desk. He could tell they were hastily arranged into neat piles at some point before he arrived because most of the edges didn't match up and the papers stored inside protruded messily from their mouths.

The doctor had lost something and -judging by the new lines of strain framing his smile and the sweat darkening his graying blonde hairline- he had yet to find it.

"Bruce..." Horn coaxed gently, planting his open palms on the edge of his desk -the only open area- and leaned forward. He had to bite back more, because snapping at your own patient just wasn't done. Hours he had spent methodically searching his office for Wayne's file until a call from his wife ordered him home to a cold dinner and another argument. Whether or not his children had heard through their bedroom walls, he had had to once again explain to his wife just how important the opportunity to be the sole doctor to examine such a unique, high profile specimen truly was. Why, it could make his career!

His recent short temper towards his loved ones came with the job. The stress in obtaining some sort of breakthrough was a means to a noteworthy end. Couldn't she understand that? Apparently she could not since his back still ached from his clandestine night spent on the couch. Today he had headed straight back to the office and desperately tore apart his workspace to no avail. His patient's violent outburst yesterday made him itch to write down the details but nowhere to file it.

First, of course, he needed the details from the steel fortress of a man. One step at a time.

"Bruce," he started again, straightening his posture. Looming over someone after a night on the couch aggravated his back. "Do you realize just how high a priority you are, not only to me or this hospital, but to this city?"

At this, the other man's dark eyes drew up to his own, and he continued on with more confidence. "Surely you know by now -if not at the beginning but since your trial at least- how even more important you made yourself? Being a well-known billionaire philanthropist would make you national news instantly, but discovering that same billionaire to be one and the same as Gotham's most wanted -the Batman... the world is clamoring to know all about you. Like vultures." He paused his pacing around his office and grinned wryly. "They want to pick apart your dark secrets and call you a monster... and we both know you're no such thing."
Even if Bruce could see past the cold light reflecting off the doctor's glasses, he doubted he'd find the warmth the sympathetic tone suggested. Before he'd always wondered if his dumb playboy persona hadn't been good enough with all the close calls in the past, but sitting here now with Horn essentially cooing to him he wondered if his act had been too good. Too believable by its utter stupidity.

"Let's prove them wrong, shall we? Since they know so little about you, they think of you as a pure work of fiction to slander and take creative liberties with. Not a day goes by that you're not mentioned in the media. But, Bruce, I'm your doctor. You can trust me. Everything you say to me is safe with me," the older man implored as he settled against the front of his desk and gestured with dry and nicotine-stained fingers.

"Work with me so we can tell people the truth."

When "the truth" oozed from Horn's mouth, never before had Bruce been more thankful for the restraints. "Truth" was a relative thing. Malleable as he had come to learn one night in what felt like forever ago. "The truth" wasn't good enough when it came to the greater good. This disgustingly insincere man knew nothing of the sort.

"Now I know in your mind you have a perfectly good reason for killing those people-"

The hard press of his lips loosened and filled with blood. His mouth slitted open but nothing came out. He wanted to say there was never a good reason for murder, but it just didn't happen. He was a murderer.

Wasn't that what he wanted people to believe?

"But you have to tell me that reason. It's obvious yesterday's altercation was an outlet for the stress and guilt you must be under." Here, Horn paused and gazed thoughtfully out the window, steepled fingers tapping slowly against his chapped lips. "Maybe... maybe that's my fault."

If his face wasn't fixed into such a disinterested mask, Bruce's eyebrows would have risen in surprise. Out of all the things Horn could have said -out of all the misguided dribble- claiming any sort of blame wasn't one of them.

Unfortunately Bruce thought too soon.

"You're a healthy, young man. An athlete, judging by your extracurricular activities. Being cooped up like this is giving you an excess amount of energy you only know one way how to deal with. We're just going to have to sublimate the violence." His tobacco smile emerged through that convoluted thought process as if he'd stumbled across the scientific breakthrough of the century and directed itself at Bruce's utterly blank expression. "Yes, we'll halve the sedatives and schedule daily exercise. Perhaps without that pent up energy, we'll be ready to talk, yes?"

All the "Yes"es and "We"s upped the tempo in Bruce's ticking jaw. If his mind wasn't clouded with such indignant rage, he'd realize the hot creeping sensation dominating his senses was, in actuality, burning humiliation. In a matter of six sentences this professional stranger had reduced him to no more than an animal -a wild thing in its cage snapping at the zoo keeper's fingertips reaching through the bars- or a hyperactive child who only needed to run around outside for a bit in order to tucker himself out and become more pliable.

More obedient.

If it weren't for the strait jacket containing the furious knot of pure muscle his entire upper body had
become then he would have a hard time not crippling the man and telling him to take a jog around the building to feel better.

Without the physical restraint, it would be hard to resist the violent urge but not impossible. A smaller, though just as strong, part of him recognized the brief satisfaction wouldn't be worth the guilt of thrashing a technically innocent man and it'd make him no better than the doped up, true fiends drooling in musty corners of the asylum all because they couldn't discern the difference and control themselves.

Bruce Wayne swore to be better than that.

"You are truly incorruptible, aren't you? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, and I won't kill you, because... you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever."

"You'll be in a padded cell forever!"

"Maybe we can share one."

And he could still hear it itching in his ears. "You're just a freak, like me."

Batman had sworn the same, but he didn't know if he could be better.

"Bruce? Is this plan pleasing to you also? You are, after all, in the driver's seat on this road to recovery."

"... and what exactly am I recovering from?" His voice was low and distant.

Though Horn was gaping at him as if he'd just been treated to a cold slap in the face, the fallen hero genuinely wanted to hear an answer. It was more intellectual curiosity than a real need to have a name for what's supposedly wrong with him. A definition found in a book that just happened to explain everything.

"Well-" Horn eventually sputtered as if the answer was obvious. "Your illness, of course."

"Does my 'illness' have a name? Surely my psychological evaluation concluded some sort of diagnosis?" He knew the doctor had no answer when he avoided that eye contact he was usually so keen on achieving and gazed about the room in search of that something that tore apart his office to begin with.

Horn's mind had completely blanked. He hadn't been the one to perform the court-appointed examination, and the findings were nothing if not the indications of a morally-confident, sane man. No obvious disorders. So those records were conveniently expunged.

Tugging at his too tight collar, he said the first thing that came to his stuttering mind. "I- I'm not at liberty to name any specifics. It would- would stunt the healing process if you were to focus on certain areas in need of improvement."

Bruce didn't need to hear anymore. They'd done to him what they'd done to the clown. He only knew this because a disguised Bruce Wayne had sat amongst the audience of that one-man circus of a trial and planted monitoring devices in all rooms of prominence to ensure any sort of corruption wouldn't interfere with the maniac's due punishment. The formal evaluation fell through for obvious reasons. Merely a simple five minute interview between doctor and jester had officially deemed the latter certifiably insane. Not that it was up for debate to begin with, but in most cases a vague diagnosis was made. The Joker seemed to possess every disorder and at the same time none of them.
A thick, rubber stamp of bold red, bleeding letters spelling out "INSANE" settled the issue and no one -not even the Batman- thought to question it. Until now, but not for the knave's sake. Bruce had undertaken the formal route: Questionnaires, surveys, interviews and when the question wasn't too ridiculous, he had replied with undeniably sane answers. He was healthy, but -like his painted enemy- a simple stamp labeling his mental stability tipped the scales.

Dedicating his life to save a city not beyond redemption was apparently too outrageous a notion for some.

With the brunet's lack of immediate reply, Horn was looking at him with more confidence as if his response wasn't the weakest deflection ever created. Bruce's desire to attack the man had lost its urgency and in its stead was a resignation.

"Well, I'll allow you to go get some sleep and food in you. Tomorrow we'll start your new schedule and that should improve your mood." A wrinkled hand reached out and uncertainly patted his shoulder.

A spike of red anger briefly pushed aside yesterday's exhaustion enough for him to glare and shake off Horn's hand. He rose out of his seat, towering over the suddenly petrified doctor.

"My mood," he snarled and quickly stopped himself, his voice having fallen too easily into that lower register of something furious and animalistic. One, two slow breaths and his next words adopted a paper thin calmness. "... my mood has nothing to do with this. There's a reason why I've sat here so many times watching you listen to yourself talk and you've yet to build a rapport with me: I'm not insane, and you're incompetent. Don't ever condescend to me again."

It was the most he'd ever said to the smaller man, and if Bruce could have it his way it would be the last. Yet as it were, he could admit when a situation wasn't entirely in his control no matter how affective his size, reputation, and precise words; they wouldn't be enough to repair the shambles his life had become, save for some impossible time machine. His self-sacrifice had landed him here now and forced him to play a certain role, but he didn't have to sit here for this.

So he walked to the door, and -arms pinned against his torso- used his foot to kick lightly at the door. It opened immediately. His small squad of escorts reeled back in surprise at having his imposing figure being so close on the other side. The one with his hand still on the knob recovered the fastest and stepped up, taking Bruce by the jutting, clothed elbow.

"Back to his cell, Doctor?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Horn seemed to have finally come back to himself at being formally addressed. He ran a near imperceptibly shaking hand through the neat part to his hair. He straightened his dejected posture and sent a superior nod to the orderly. More hands latched onto Bruce, but Horn piped up and for those few seconds the assault slowed.

"Take him to the cafeteria first. Make sure he eats. Bruce, we'll continue our... conversation in a few days." It almost sounded like a threat the infuriated billionaire didn't much care to pay attention to. He was more concerned with keeping his balance as several different men hauled him away.

Once they were out sight, Horn sprung to close the door -slamming it so hard the frame rattled- and flattened his spine against the sturdy surface. He slumped against it -breathing too fast- as his eyes darted about to random areas of the room.

He just had to find that file.
Thirty six minutes later Bruce was back in his cell, pacing the few feet the incommodious space afforded him. He was still stretching his arms and rolling his shoulders, the phantom feel of the strait jacket still lingering even after releasing him at an empty table in the cafeteria, a tray of unappetizing food and juice set out before him. It must have been an early or late lunch judging by the few inmates present, muttering to themselves, watching him with zombie-like ease, or ravenously devouring their meal, some laughing or sobbing while they did so. Maybe he could have guessed by the temperature of the food but that would involve touching it with the intent to ingest it. Horn's demeaning suggestions had squashed any appetite he may have had.

With the orderlies surrounding his table, they had gone from serious orders to eat to jeering about fillet mignon and "es-car-got" and chatter about bats and feeding tubes as if he were deaf and it was okay. Eventually they had grown bored, dumped the cold and congealed mess, and brought him back here. They had felt it safe enough to lunge and raise their fists at the glass when Bruce was locked on the other side of it, laughing as they walked away.

He couldn't help it. He was angry at... everything.

"Should I be... jealous?"

The unexpected question -so casual and innocent sounding- interrupted his seething thoughts. He-whirled around, eyebrows drawn together, and the hard clamp of his lips cracked open in working confusion. Quickly his brain clicked back and he spat, "What?"

Long legs stretched out, pale arms folded underneath his head, the clown watched him through purple, half-lidded eyes.

"Well... luh, if I may be so bold." He sat up and pulled in his legs in one fluid motion, save for a split second hitch. Bruce knew he hadn't limited his rage to the scarred man's face alone, and that rush of interlocked memory and sick revelation brought hot blood biting at the razor edges of his face. He watched as a pink tongue broke out against a canvas of white, black, and blue skin and wet his ruined mouth. "You look to be in quite a, ah, tizzy, and -me- I've been right here sittin' pretty the whole time, so it only begs the, uh, question of who else is vying for my Bat's affections? Whooo do I have to have a little chat with, and by that I mean gleefully stab in the face..."

"Wait, it isn't Jonny, is it?" His tone sharpened, eyes piercing the vigilante's wrapped knuckles, making the wounds itch under their bandages.

Bruce could only stand there -harsh pants still huffing from his nostrils- glaring at the other man staring right back at him as if he were- as if the Joker was serious.

"I don't understand."

"I'll break it down for ya into bite-size pieces: Do-I-have-to-tear-the-stuffin'-from-a-Scarecr-"

"No. I don't understand why I'm here. With you-"

"I'm mad. You're mad..."

"-All I wanted to do was help Gotham. I didn't kill innocent people-"

"Shhh, they might hear your dirty secret."

"-I didn't blow up a hospital. I'm nothing like you-"
"I think the Batsy doth protest too much," the Joker claimed with a pitying sigh, reclining back on his cot. "The face of the enemy frightens me only when I see how much it resembles me.'[1]" He lifted his head and looked down his bruised nose at the furious man. "Hey, I read, and I must say... Best. Mirror. Ever." He snickered, dropping his head back and gazing at the plain ceiling, happiness curving his lips as he listened to his Bat rant and reason. It would be even better if-

"I don't belong here," Bruce's steely voice curdled into a frustrated growl.

And there it was. His stern sweetie had a lovely singing voice.

"I'm not insane," his Bat went on heatedly.

The disdain. The clean-burning disgust in his tone.

The grin melted from the Joker's battered face like creme-based face paint exposed to heat. He sat up again -ignoring the delicious ache of his fist-tenderized abdomen- and loudly cracked his neck. Dark, hazel eyes surveyed the other man through two sets of bullet-proof glass, his tongue clicking inside his locked jaw.

"... you -uh- you disappoint me, Bats. You didn't do this. You didn't do that... You're twisting it. Twisting yourself into something you're not. You're not. 'The distance between insanity and genius is measured only by success,' [2] and you, my dour-faced dumpling, are better than Da Vinci."

Bruce opened his mouth for a vicious denial, but the jester's psychobabble continued on without opportunistic pause.

"'You think it all breaks down into symbolism and structures and hints and clues. No, Batman, that's just Wikipedia. Would you actually believe a few chemicals, a couple of days of drug-induced isolation, and a cheap, little nervous breakdown over these scars and you'd have me all figured out?' [3]"

"Is that what happened to you?"

"No." A sly grin tugged his unbeaten scars into a silvery pink knot. "But that sure would make one helluva origin story, wouldn't it?" His eyebrow quirked, crooked fingers toying with the large rip in his pant leg.

"You'd like that wouldn't you? How bout this: Little Brucie watches Mommy and Daddy die in some dank alley, and he grows up to be a sad, sad, angry man. Brucie is also very, very rich and has a lot of free time on his hands. So, with a vow to apparently destroy 'evil', and one too many karate lessons, some military-grade toys, aaaand an erotic fixation on bats thrown on top of everything else, he himself becomes a crime-fighting creature of the night." He nodded, face solemn, until his mouth twitched into a smirk.

"... see, it's not so fun, is it? To be simplified like that? You and me... we're what I like to call, more. We don't evolve, nor do we necessarily deteriorate either. We kinda just are... 'One should either be a work of art..."

A skeletal hand waved at Bruce's person.

"'Or wear a work of art.'[4]"

The same hand's fingertips brushed along discolored skin and dried blood and dipped into the jagged scar marking his Glasgow smile.
For a moment his keen eyes grew distant, expression contorting to something foreign and wrong, and it was all instantly wiped away by an abrupt chuckle, his gaze clearing and focusing intently on the brunet.

"... you're here, Batsy babe, because this is a museum."

It was as if he were speaking a different language Bruce wasn't exactly fluent in and it took a few seconds for his mind to convert the words into English. There wasn't much to say to that mad reasoning, so he didn't try. He was just so tired.

Tearing his eyes away from the clown, he sat heavily on his cot. The gauze's tight wrap cut off the circulation to his fingers, making them prickle, and in a fit of needing something to distract himself he tore it off. A smidgeon of blood streaked the inside, and he tossed the unraveling cotton across the cell. Flexing his fingers -watching the scabs pull taut- he hardly felt it. The muscle memory of harsh punches already fading. The medical attention hadn't been at all necessary.

Something niggled at him. He took in the physical disaster sitting across the hall from him, no bandages, not a speck of blood wiped away; he was just as he was yesterday, only less vibrant and more unsightly. After several moments of contemplation, he reluctantly opened his mouth. "... how come you haven't been taken to the infirmary?"

The Joker's eyes widened -pleasantly surprised his shy bat spoke yet dismayed because he changed their conversation to something so menial- and he licked his lips. "And why... why would I be? ... awww, Batsy, see I knew ya cared."

"I don't. It's simple curiosity."

"Ohh, is that what the kids are callin' it these days? Well, if you must know..." An over dramatic sigh billowed from his narrow chest. "Some people just don't care for clowns. Coulrophobia, they call it. Wounds the heart, it does."

"Shut up. That doesn't answer my question."

"That's not particularly fair. You never answered my question. Quid pro quo, Bats."

"Fine," Bruce sighed, massaging the bridge of his nose. "And that question was?"

"Should I be jealous. Your little, uh, episode of er... inner angst," he coughed out the last, an invisible fish hook tugging down the corner of his mouth as if he were embarrassed for the other man. And, yeah, he was just a bit. "That should have happened like... a month ago. Something must have happened, and skyrocketing your blood pressure is my specialty. So tell me about this nasty usurper."

Dark eyes scrutinized that bruised face. "I know what you're doing. If I'm not talking to Horn, you're the last person I would discuss anything with."

"Oh, so it's Little Richie. D'ya want me to have a talk with him, dear? Slice 'im up good and show him what's what?"

"Don't mock me," Bruce muttered tiredly. "I get enough of that as it is."

"Not to burst your, ah, bubble but... you do dress up as a giant man bat and beat the snot out of rapists. Not the best mockery defense, but then again I personally find that sexy in my mammals, flying or caped-"
"Please." The vigilante's hand flew up in half-hearted defeat. "Just... stop. Why haven't they come to get you cleaned up? That must..." He grimaced, an unstoppable flush painting his diamond-cut cheeks. "Hurt." Even though his mind screamed that the bastard deserved it.

"It does," the clown purred, stretching and arching his back and smiling softly at the aches and pains so beautifully making themselves known. Once he'd successfully cracked his spine and popped that last stubborn vertebrae, he slumped forward with a satisfied grunt. Blackened eyes closed in sick bliss. Eventually they slitted open and surveyed the -oh dare he think it- the red-faced Bat still expecting his answer.

"Seriously, you can't figure this out for yourself? The world's greatest detective? ... Fine." He blew out a long-suffering sigh. "See to them, it would be the bee's knees if I croaked. The nurses and orderlies are probably hopin' I have internal hemorrhaging or something fun like that so they won't have to deal with their favorite court jester anymore."

"But that's not-"

"What? Fair? Of course, it's fair. Their trying to control their sterile, lock-click world and bringing me into it would be an insult. They don't get to try and fix it. Trying to interfere with you and me. No... this..." he angled his head at just the perfect angle for the light to paint his battered face the most horrifically. "This is nature at its finest."

"That isn't nature that did that to you. I did."

"Why yes, you did. You hitting me was a natural response, was it not? Just so I know, what did I do that warranted such a, a passionate response, or am I just that ir-re-sistable you just couldn't keep your hands off me?"

_Fingers squeezing bruises into a jumping, pale throat loosened as his focus trailed down the Arkham uniform to the shadow of a bulge that had grazed his inner thigh. Charred copper irises pierced manic, glittering eyes._

Frustration tore from the Bat's throat in a stressed snarl. He rubbed at his face harshly. Bruce sat back -his shoulder blades thumping against the wall- and glared at that damn black smudge. The thing morphed into a lopsided smiling face before his very eyes; he was sure of it.

"Quid pro-"

"Stop talking to me."

And by some miracle for the next few hours, the clown did.

His smug grin knowing and his eyes once again glittering.

Chapter End Notes

[1] A quote from Unknown
[2] Bruce Fernstein
[3] Altered quote from Batman #681
[4] Oscar Wilde
The madness of depression is the antithesis of violence. It is a storm indeed, but a storm of murk. Soon evident are the slowed down responses, near paralysis, psychic energy throttled back to zero. Ultimately, the body is affected and feels sapped, drained.

-William Styron

He didn't know why, but he had always been sure that the next time he'd be outside would be a momentous occasion of some sort.

It wasn't.

The sun was overly bright and forced his eyes to a throbbing squint. The stench of bleach had instantly transformed upon a single step over the threshold into car fumes and sewage. It wasn't fresh air, but he hadn't envisioned it to begin with. He knew what the Narrows smelled like; though harsh and off-putting the reminder was, it was still familiar and sorely reminded him of burning exertion and staggering heights, wind whipping his face and fulfillment.

The breeze forced the dark hairs of his arms to stand on end. He had refused the offer of the rented uniform sweatshirt, stained and ripped as it was. Proper coats weren't allowed: Patients could choke on the buttons; strings could strangle; and zippers could break the skin at the right angle and if one were persistent enough.

The asylum's reasoning, not his.

The courtyard, or to be accurate, a large patch of cracked concrete, was located near the center of Arkham, surrounded by bare brick on all sides, the windows to those buildings high up and barred. In the middle, he supposed for a touch of liveliness, was a tree. A truly ugly thing with its lower branches cut so the inmates wouldn't have a readily available weapon. The rest of the area was barren.

"Well, have at it, I guess." Michael stood uncomfortably by the only door. Three of yesterday's orderlies waited inside behind him. He had been tense since first arriving and escorting Bruce from his cell since the last he saw him he was a terrifying punching machine, but Michael had relaxed some once the clown was out of sight and well out of earshot. The billionaire seemed to be less prone to violence when the cackling maniac wasn't around, so the orderly was confident enough to undo the buckles confining the tall man and remain unharmed.

"Er... have fun?" he added, eying the empty space and receiving a withering glance in reply. He shrugged helplessly. 'Doctor's orders, man. I've got no say in this.'

Doctor's orders, indeed. True to Horn's word, the shot injected into Bruce's system was noticeably less than usual. The invisible chains holding down his limbs were lighter and the serene grip on his brain remained at bay if he focused hard enough and kept up an endless string of thoughts. One thought considered it counterproductive to administer a sedative (no matter how weak) and then send him off to exercise, but he supposed they weren't going to take any chances with him. Arkham didn't boast a gym of any sort since tranquilizers and muscular atrophy were heavily relied on in their containment of the inmates. Now that he was out here, he didn't want to be; it was a bland tease of what he used to have and at this point, he rather just forget.

Half of him wanted to take the opportunity presented to him and run and run and pretend he wasn't
literally going in circles and finally have a good reason to be tired. He couldn't give up. He had to stay sharp. He had to stay at his peak.

But the other half was convinced his peak had come and gone. He didn't want to be faced with the inevitable: If he started running or did push-ups or sit-ups and he got winded... his too red cheeks, his pounding heart, and shrunken, burning lungs would say more than he was willing to accept.

This hanging in mind, he sauntered towards the nearest wall and slid down against it, sitting on his haunches. His eyes grew unfocused, his mind losing itself to the gentle haze. He could see through the gray rock and look down upon his city -thousands upon thousands upon thousands of lights and from up here it all was so beautiful, so peaceful- but soon he had to blink and the image was ruined by concrete with dark fissures.

Distantly he realized it shouldn't be that easy to imagine things that weren't there.

"Is he just goin' to sit there like that?"

Leaning against the door frame -his eyes riveted on the down turned face of Gotham's number one celebrity- Michael didn't even bother with looking over his shoulder to see which one of the three other orderlies spoke. They were jackasses anyway. "Looks like it," he murmured in reply.

It was almost funny. He used to be so jealous of the much richer, more handsome, sports car-driving, super model-dating Bruce Wayne, but now watching as the man stared unblinkingly at the ground, Michael was sure he was seeing the sad, lonely man behind the shiny veneer and all he felt was pity.

And the nagging feeling that this somehow wasn't right.

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"So what's the occasion, if I may ask?"

"Please have a seat, Richard." Leland's face was a stone mask as she sat behind her desk.

Horn's insides squirmed as he took a seat, his eyes ignoring the office much larger than his own and struggling to keep his expression pleasant. He made a small show of comfortably settling in his chair, crossing his legs, and straightening the fall of his suit jacket. Unfortunately his boss was more than patient and waited until he looked up with passable attentiveness.

"I asked you here to discuss your patient."

"My patient?" he echoed in a weak effort to stall under her serious gaze.

"Mr. Wayne. I haven't received a progress report for awhile now..." she drew out, Horn looking back uncomprehending. "And I want to know why that is."

"Oh... oh." Horn nodded. "Yes, about that..." He adjusted his spectacles and thought of a way to maneuver around the reason he hadn't sent a report was because little to no progress had been made. Oh, and Wayne's file had been stolen again. But nothing short of "My dog ate it" came to mind.

"I understand that you may have a lot on your plate with getting Mr. Wayne to open up, but you still need to keep me informed of everything that occurs during his stay here. I say this, because I shouldn't hear about the 'epic smack down' between him and Patient J from a group of orderlies on my way in from the parking lot. When anything important happens involving two of our most notorious inmates, you have to tell me, as your superior and as the director of this facility."
Horn had to bite his tongue. If he had it his way their positions would be switched. The only reason this woman got this job was by default when the former director was locked up himself. It wasn't about merit. Nothing in Leland's career put her at an advantage over him; then again he hadn't a notable success to boast over either. That's why he needed to get through to Bruce. Then we'd see who would answer to whom.

The miniscule smirk fell from his lips when he finally deigned to listen again to her droning voice.

"I've received many calls of interest concerning Mr. Wayne from nationally-renowned and even a few international doctors hoping to interview him. One in particular..." The fingers of her good hand pushed aside some papers. "A Doctor Hugo Strange is willing to pay top dollar for a mere thirty minutes-"

"Just wait a moment here. You aren't seriously considering whoring out my patient."

Wine-red lips pinched together in distaste. "When putting it in such a vulgar manner, it sounds horrible, but the city can only contribute so much to Arkham and the main source of our donations is... coincidentally now in our care. We need the money-"

"No!" A wrinkled hand slammed down on the desk, rattling the trinkets arranged just so as Horn shot to his feet. "Bruce Wayne is my patient only. He was assigned to me, and I'll be damned if you think you can pass him back and forth to the highest bidder!"

"Richard, please calm yourself-"

"Don't 'Richard' me! I am a doctor, and I have the right to be addressed as such, Joan."

Leland sat back in her chair in mild shock, gazing at the beetroot face of her normally quiescent colleague and wondering if she would need to surreptitiously press the emergency call button mounted under her desk top. Her mind went unbidden to clowns and broken fingers, and she felt unexpectedly at ease when realizing Horn was no Joker. This she could handle.

"Just give me more time with him," the older man implored, having come back to himself and mortified of his outburst yet panicked indignation still ran thickly through his system. His stark expression softened, the red of his face fading to a sun burnt pink. "Wayne is completely closed off. At the very least he knows me."

"That may be, but funds are running low-"

"Yes! But think of the benefits all around if Arkham alone succeeds in solving the mystery of the Batman. Think of the acclaim-" * That will be all mine. "Those other doctors can have him when we're through. Let's keep this a Gotham affair, then everything this hospital needs will be taken care of."

The director didn't look entirely convinced, but she would have flat-out refused already if she meant to. This boded well, but little did he know his eager proclamations of grandeur worried Leland. "Bruce Wayne's mental health is our main priority though, correct?" she coaxed in a low and hesitant tone.

"Right, of course it is."

"Then... he's all yours, provided you keep me up-to-date."

Horn smiled, earlier's snap of fury might as well never having happened. "Thank you."
She wasn't sure if she had made the right decision, but the other man hurried out of her office as if he also knew her mind wasn't entirely made. She sighed, shifting to the edge of her seat and turning back to her paperwork. If something went wrong it would be more than Commissioner Gordon and Alfred Pennyworth coming down on their heads; a bat didn't stay dormant forever, and she had a feeling a certain clown would pack a punch of vengeance of his own.

If that happened, Joan Leland was going to make sure she wouldn't be around to suffer it.

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Richard Horn was moving aimlessly through the halls of Arkham, his speed competing with his own racing thoughts. He liked to think he salvaged whatever dignity was lost in Leland's office with his optimism, but he knew deep down by her unimpressed look that he hadn't been a sterling success. The billionaire's succinct dressing down had left him more uneasy than he had been willing to let on, but Leland's consideration of deeming it open season on his own patient had pushed him over the edge. No more dawdling; he had to make some head way with Wayne, but he knew -grudgingly- that he couldn't do it on his own. He needed help, an outside opinion that if he were to be triumphant they couldn't possibly claim any of the credit.

And just like that the light bulb went off over his head.

He doubled back and took several left and right turns until he came to a door no different than the others in the row but the person behind it would make all the difference. He stopped short when a tall orderly with platinum hair appeared in the doorway. Bright green eyes registered Horn's presence, and twin dots of red burned through the pale skin of his cheeks. Quickly, without a word, the orderly shot an inscrutable glance over his broad shoulder before moving out of the way and continuing on down the hall. With caution rushed by the excitement over his plan, Horn moved into the small cell and pushed the door ajar behind him.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Richard? Here to attend my Welcome Back from the infirmary party?" Jonathan Crane's frosty blue eyes were piercing from his recline on his cot, both casts missing from his legs.

He couldn't believe he was going to do this. It was stupid. It was reckless. It was something he had to do.

"Yes?" Crane raised a contemptuous brow. His bony finger tapping the opened page of his book.

Horn took a shaky breath. "... I have a proposition for you."
"I have a proposition for you."

Jonathan's brow quirked with the unexpected but altogether not-surprising conversation starter. It not only beautifully stroked his ego, but he could imagine the idiotic man before him would later be cowering in his overly small office and biting his nicotine yellow nails, desperately awaiting Jonathan's reply. He just had to discover what it was he was would eventually reply to.

"A 'proposition'? Isn't that too big of a word for you, Richard? Do you even know what it means?"

"Of course I do," Horn snapped, his voice quivering through his gritted teeth. The agitation was something to note, but Jonathan dismissed it as something frivolous, like another failed attempt at solving the crossword in today's paper.

"Then by all means," Jonathan conceded graciously, smirking as he settled as comfortably he could manage amongst the stack of pillows Spencer had brought him. "Let's hear it then. What propositions could the all high and mighty doctor possibly want to make with a lowly patient such as myself?"

At that, Horn's skin might as well have boiled clean off his face at how red it was. Finally here was someone where Jonathan's precious sarcasm wasn't wasted like it had been on the always stone-faced but perpetually blushing Spencer all those weeks in the infirmary. Sure there was the empty-headed cow to take the brunt of his vitriol, but he could have her running away in angry tears and a splotchy, unattractive flush to her cheeks without even trying. The clown hadn't come around since bestowing the dreaded case file, and Jonathan had been quietly grateful over that absence.

"It's Leland," Horn started. He was glaring at the corner, his hands fidgeting and his lips were pinched. "She's threatened to rent Wayne to outside psychiatrists if there isn't any improvement."

"And you barged into my room, because...?" Jonathan already knew; he just wanted to hear the other man say it.

"I-" Horn's pale tongue flickered across his scaly dry lips, the saliva quickly wiped away by his wrinkled hand. The tremor in his next string of words cracked them into agonized syllables. "I ca-can't do it on my-... my own," and it must have been the hardest admission for the prideful man to utter because a harsh gush of air tapered the end with a pained cringe. He looked like he was going to be sick.

Jonathan felt nothing but sadistic glee. "Of course, you can not. Your point?" Underneath the innocently curious mask lay a smug cruelty.

The stop and start explanation interspersed with heavy, audible gulps that grudgingly ensued from Horn's pursed mouth had been laughingly pathetic. Basically, from what the blue-eyed doctor could gather, Horn had finally come to the glaringly obvious realization that he was a moronic fool and didn't have a clue as to what he was doing -at all- and he had come to the best possible source for help. It was the smartest decision the man had made, but that didn't mean Jonathan had to agree to it.

Since his unfortunate imprisonment, Jonathan's few interactions with the still subordinate had been wrought with arrogance and thinly-veiled disgust; Horn acted as if the ex-director was a disgrace -no better than some lowly pedophile- and Jonathan's predicament had only been a matter of time. One high-profile patient later and Horn was begging the perceived scum beneath his shoe to aid him, to
grace him with Jonathan's prized intellect and expertise. If the case centered around anyone else, Jonathan would have rebuffed the old man immediately with his effortless brand of sharp-tongued malice, but as it were...

"You'll help me, won't you?" Horn took an earnest step forward, his lackluster eyes imploring.

"You keep repeating, 'Help me, help me' but what do I get in return if I do?"

"In- in return?"

"You don't honestly think that a man as intelligent as myself wouldn't expect some sort of compensation in exchange for my professional advice?"

Horn's chin dipped towards his chest. "... what do you want?"

At that, cold satisfaction curled the corner of Jonathan's plump lips, his mind racing and alighting on a number of things, majority of which were advantageous to his goals. He could list off fifteen different demands minus the overly bold and obvious freedom, but instead he nodded once and returned to his book. "I'll consider your offer."

Horn took the lack of demands as there being none. A shaky sigh of relief escaped him. His stomach still roiling and a crushing pressure on his temples, but his pulse had slowed into a tentative calm. A semblance of control returning to him by finding a solution to his greatest problem, no matter how degrading and most likely illegal that solution may be. It was all ruined by the smaller man's nonchalant address.

"Oh, and Richard?" Jonathan tilted his head just so, his eyes still scanning the page as if he couldn't be bothered with looking at the man any longer. "I'll want plenty in return, so don't mistake my silence for charity. Blurting out my payment when it's far from a yes is just simply poor manners. I'll need his file before I make any final decisions, you understand." Vindictive cerulean peered through long lashes to observe the rapid paling and sudden angry fluster of Horn's face in a matter of seconds to go along with the choked noise that would be hard to miss in the small room.

"Problem?" Jonathan looked up, his smirk had vanished and was replaced with innocent curiosity on his round face. A corner of the manila folder in question was grazing the base of his spine, and he almost wanted to lie back and see if the other man would notice the distinct crinkle of paper, but the risk-taking (petty or otherwise) belonged to Scarecrow alone.

"No! No, of course not... I'll- I'll get that to you soon as I am able." Horn's voice almost sounded normal in its steady delivery, but Jonathan could detect a weak stalling tactic when there was one. He let it go without comment though; he was done. Anymore prodding and it would be too much. Instead, he returned to his book, dulcet tones of indulgence spilling from his lips.

"You do that."

Horn didn't linger even though it was something he was notoriously known for. It was obvious he wanted to by the tight, odd angle of his sagging jaw and his jumping, intense glare between the reading doctor and the door. His skin was crawling with the paranoia that Crane knew his possession of the Wayne file was mere posturing. The creeping humiliation of the thought had him quickly fleeing out the door, just barely remembering to engage the lock with the swipe of his ID badge.

The book in Jonathan's hand was gently closed and set aside; it would hardly keep his attention now. After all, he had so much to think about.
"Ask again and you will sorely regret it." Crane's hissed words cracked like a whip against his pointed face. Seeing the effect they had, the blue-eyed doctor returned to facing forward once again, satisfied.

Spencer was frustrated. Ever since he came back immediately after Horn had left his charge's cell yesterday, Jonathan had been especially tight-lipped. Usually the smaller man would ask Spencer idle questions about subjects the bleach blond had never heard of just to hear the wrong answer so the doctor could correct and lecture. It cheered Jonathan up so naturally the besotted orderly didn't mind the consistent blows to his intelligence. This silence though, that constant smirk gracing those full lips that Spencer knew with a sinking feeling he had nothing to do with bothered him more than he would ever admit. Now he wasn't under any delusional insecurities that something in the slightest romantic sense could be going on between the two psychiatrists. The thought tempted his gag reflex even now as he and Crane traveled slowly down the hall. He just knew something surprising and most likely nefarious had been discussed, and Spencer was desperate to know what that was. Something with the Bat most likely.

"Spencer." Another whip against his eardrums. He paused, and his eyes cleared from his ruminations to find they had stopped. His charge's narrow frame was still and tense, his thin arms locked at his sides. "... take... your hand off my person."

Green irises lowered to discover his square palm was warm against the small of Crane's back, his fingers tangled in the rough material hanging loosely off a bony hip. For a split-second the realization was irrationally the best thing in the world, but then Crane's flat demand took on meaning and the frosty rigidness to his whole profile was embarrassingly obvious.

"Now."

His hand retreated in a snap back to his chest, his fingertips tingling with the friction. Blood boiled under the surface of his skin as apologies spilled from barely moving lips as he kept his stunned gaze down. "I- I didn't realize. You looked like you were having some difficulty-"

"Of course, the casts were taken off just days ago. There's bound to be some stiffness and weakness, but if I need assistance then I will ask for it so until then, keep your filthy paws to yourself. Do you understand me?"

Spencer nodded mutely, but the other man was already continuing his slow journey down the hall. His bottle green eyes were fused to the floor until Crane's steps were far enough away that he could breathe again. He looked up and around to find a mix of dull and feverish eyes staring back at him from their cells' small, observation windows. Forcing his open expression back to its normal, blank mask, the orderly took long strides to catch up to his charge, mentally berating himself along the way. When he finally caught up at the entrance to the high security day room and came shoulder to shoulder with the frail doctor, he watched with a small frown as subdued anticipation marked the edges of Jonathan's features and followed the path leading to where those shielded, cerulean eyes were centered.

Another sinking feeling dragged his gut down to his knees.

It was raining.

That was basically all Bruce's mind could focus on at the moment. Before that it was the absent watching as a short, stocky inmate at the window repeatedly tried to force his face through the bars, the tip of his tongue barely grazing the fogged glass in long stripes until some orderlies dragged him
away. His stubbly chin shiny with drool, the inmate kicked and thrashed, screaming obscenities about thirst and God's tears. Perhaps it was the drugs but when all that occurred Bruce was torn between the vague grin tugging on the corners of his chapped lips and giving into tears of pure frustration. Luckily the conflict had passed before he had to make a decision. He was grateful for that.

It had to be the drugs, he decided as he sat as close as possible to the vacated window and stared down at the courtyard he would be occupying if not for the weather. The forty minutes of "fresh" air wasn't considered a total loss since he was performing the same amount of nothing only three stories up and indoors. This opportunity for "socializing" came with the regular strong dosage, making his thoughts light and inconsequential; the most cheering so far being the freedom of his arms so he could drop his heavy head on his palm and rest. His perfect posture, at the moment, was a thing of the past.

He hardly noticed when another presence sat down across from him. It was a game at mealtimes for the more coherent prisoners to dare each other to sit at his table and chant his name three times as if he were a girls' slumber party's urban legend made flesh for their entertainment. Only once did an inmate try to touch him and that ended in a commotion of shouting and blurry movement and at the center of it all was the bold inmate cradling a ripped, wet sleeve and protruding bone.

Needless to say, no one tried again after that.

Fingers drumming on the small table top crowded with old magazines reached his ears and he looked down to make sure it wasn't his own hand doing it, but it was still and resting in a loose fist while the other was mashing into his cheek. Eyelids drooping, his dark eyes trailed over glossy prints of smiling faces-all he saw was smiling- and landed on the long, delicate looking culprit.

"I see little has changed since we last spoke." Bruce hardly reacted when he realized a now fully-mobile Jonathan Crane was sitting almost calmly across from him; the irritated rhythm of his nails was the only thing that gave him away. "Well?" Crane's eyebrow rose sharply above the frame of his glasses.

The tired vigilante wasn't sure if he missed something and was reluctant to say much of anything - because he couldn't hear anymore laughing at him- so he muffled a yawn with the hand supporting his jaw and turned back to the near-invisible droplets streaking down the glass. His irises lighting up when a particular drop merged with the trail of another and disappeared entirely. The process was quick and started over and over again.

Peaceful. Perfect.

When the other man turned away and had the gall to yawn in his face, Jonathan had to bite back razor-sharp words. Once again he had to remind himself that the file sequestered in his cell was useless -though the sections noting how much the billionaire had watched him those first few weeks came as a mild shock- and he had to interact with the man in order to steer Horn's ineptitude in the right direction. Two minutes in and this clearly wasn't a good start. A genius he was, but Jonathan knew his bedside manner left much to be desired. His brilliant mind had moved him forward in life, not making friends. Then again the bullies dominated much of his social time, and Grandmother believed the only friends he needed was God and his Holy book during those key years of development. There were only fools, subordinates, and enemies. The clown wasn't anything more than a volatile character study. The only true companion Jonathan had ever found, had found him in the shadowy entity of the Scarecrow, but he was... unavailable at this point in time. The blue-eyed psychiatrist was working on correcting that, yet before any real progress could be made there, Jonathan had to make nice with this... shell.
His lips pulled into a sneer as he observed the all-mighty Batman stare intently at a large fly hurling itself repeatedly at the window glass with a tap-tap-tap, an indiscernible expression on his gaunt face. The lack of emotion was the only thing saving him from being disgustingly pathetic.

Psychiatrists were almost like clinical poets; they had to find the symbolism in everything.

His bespectacled eyes moved carefully between the determined bug and its spectator (who really wasn't all that much different) then sharpened with a speculative gleam. "... quite sad, isn't it?" he asked softly, seemingly gazing out the window but in actuality was burning holes into the other man.

Starting slightly at the subdued and astoundingly sympathetic tone, Bruce drew his focus away from the fly and settled on the ex-doctor, missing the shadow of a smirk crinkling a corner of the flat line of his mouth. "... what is?" he murmured, surprisingly himself by showing any sort of interest in anything the other man had to say. After all, what more was there to say? Bruce was stuck here, wasn't he? It was a bit late to gloat.

 Apparently there was plenty left judging by Crane's decision to come near him again since his legs were first broken. The only troubling difference between then and now was not his healed limbs, but the lucidity in those clear, azure eyes, untouched by the effects of morphine.

"That." Crane nodded his head in the direction of the bug in question. "Trapped in here and so desperate to get out... but even if it were to, the force of the rain would smash it down, drown it, yet... it doesn't realize that. It just wants to be outside. The windows are a horrible tease, don't you agree? Deceiving the deluded?"

"What's your point?" The larger man bit out, having caught on awhile ago that the conversation wasn't truly about the persistence of an insignificant housefly, although he didn't much care for the comparison.

As if that one agitated inquiry was all that was needed, Crane snapped his gaze from the water-streaked glass with a distantly triumphant expression. "Fear. 'Fear drives everything, Mr. Wayne. Why does one get married, because they're scared of dying alone. Why would anyone have children, because they're scared of leaving behind nothing that really matters. One goes to the doctors, because they're scared of dying' [1]... The fly, in its single-minded pursuit, is scared of being trapped. And you..." Jonathan leaned forward, his large eyes fervent and serious peering over the frame of his glasses. "Even with a competent doctor, you won't say a word of import, because you're terrified they're going to discover what you know is already there, what you are: a monster, a maniac, a freak. Someone simply sick... Face it, you're scared of yourself-"

"Stop it," muttered Bruce, glaring at the rain dotting the glass rather than the dark, chaotic structures of the city beyond since his vision tended to blur and lose clarity if he tried. The fly had moved on if the panicked shriek from the other side of the room was any indication and the pleased grin Crane shot in its direction. Bruce's mouth remained open as if he were about to say more, but the words had gotten lost in the rush of denials swirling inside his skull -a monster, a maniac, a freak- causing his head to ache. He knew better than to put any stock in anything the other man had to say -especially when it came to his favorite obsession- but in the soothing haze of what the dripping syringes had to offer had twisted his drawling rhetoric into indistinct logic. It made sense -he knew it did- but he wouldn't be able to break it down and explain how it did.

And that scared him, how so easily he could accept it as some sort of bastardized truth.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, employing his full, dwindling upper body strength to push up from the table and away from the ex-psychiatrist before he delivered anymore of his diagnosis. He had gotten no more than a step away before Crane stopped him with a simple question.
"You do realize he hasn't even started, don't you?"

The initial reaction without even fully comprehend the words was a faltering step, a wobbly knee, and a curdling in his gut because Bruce knew exactly who "He" was. Then the rest sunk in, and he found himself sliding back into the rickety chair, eying the placid look on the other man's impassive face as if it would spontaneously morph into something horrific, like the ghostly pallor of the clown prince's and laugh.

"... what do you mean?" he whispered without realizing and dropping his gaze beneath the heavy droop of his insomnia-bruised eyelids. He was sure he didn't want to hear it.

Seeing this meek version of Jonathan's nightmare was an unhealthy cross between smug satisfaction and disgust, because honestly this was the thing that writhed in ebony scales and sprouted leather wings and bloody fangs? The incongruity of it prodded at a long-buried place of doubt inside him that questioned his innate ability to dissect the frailty in humanity, estimate the weight of its weakness and time the fall of its resistance; perhaps not broken but seriously close to, and Jonathan had genuinely expected the vigilante to have held out a fair bit longer. He almost... pitied him for the next thing he was about to say.

"He talks a lot, does he not? About you and him; the ruin of Gotham and memories from a past he can't or won't remember; I'm positive he's even mentioned here, Arkham. How you to... belong?" he questioned, drawing his glasses off his face and retrieving the silken handkerchief with his own initials embroidered onto a corner that was given to him by Spencer. Jonathan wasn't accustomed to receiving gifts of a pleasant nature, but it was practical and better than having to resort to using the edge of his over-long sleeve like some uncouth slob.

"Allow me to guess: He compared you to works of art displayed in a museum." His brow arched in confident inquiry as he glanced from his meticulous cleaning of his spotless lenses.

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "How-"

"It's his favorite. He does enjoy his grand analogies."

Crane's voice held an almost bitter fondness as he inspected his work in the fluorescent light. Seconds passed of heavy scrutinizing before he resumed his intricate polishing, and in that space of time Bruce remembered that the two rogues were acquaintances of a sort, but now it seemed to be a friendship. Were two psychopaths capable of such a kinship? Then again Bruce couldn't recall having more than one friend in his life, and even that had been tainted by painful, romantic aspirations.

"... are you and him close?"

Sliding his spectacles back on, a wry grin spread across Crane's plump lips. "You could say that," the ex-doctor replied cryptically.

His fingers were twitching, and he hadn't yawned in the past few minutes. The fallen hero shamefully found himself hanging on the smaller man's every word.

"He'll talk your ear off, but eventually he'll do more than just talk and when that happens it will be with the intent to dismantle you piece by piece." Crane spoke with a finality to his voice, one that screamed of experience and a warning Bruce was acknowledging without a doubt as truth... yet it could very well be a sad ploy for sympathy – a way to trick him- and Bruce wasn't about to fall for it.

"Yeah, and what do you expect I do? What advice does the great Dr. Scarecrow have for me?" he
Supercilious amusement eased over Crane's previously serious countenance. "Sarcasm... I didn't think the Batman capable of such nasty, social repartee without resorting to fists."

And wasn't that so incredibly true? His arm had jerked in reaction to the taunting rise of Crane's brow to strike and blacken his eyes and bust that smirk bloody, wide open-

But that would turn him into a pretty yet crude imitation of the clown, then the angry energy mustering in his veins dissipated to a dead weight. His ire had drained away only to be replaced by a conflicting, hollow sensation. Something dark and desolate. His mouth had opened to prove he was more than debilitating punches, but nothing came out. Helplessness surfaced over his stalling thoughts, sinking him deeper in his seat. Whenever he felt almost normal again, reality was happy to remind him otherwise.

"Acrimony aside, I do have some words of advice, unless of course you have this situation completely under control which is evident by the drastic weight loss and obvious lack of sleep. Tell me, when was the last time your being has come into contact with soap and water?"

"I get it," Bruce grunted. "What-..." A sharp pain had started to blossom behind his left eye, and he refused to rub it in front of Crane. "What's your advice?"

It was barely audible but it was music to Jonathan Crane's ears, almost as delightful as the fantasized screams of terror squealing from the Joker's ruined mouth like a pig at the slaughter, but Jonathan could settle for the dark knight grudgingly seeking his council.

"The clown's correct on one matter: You do both belong here." The billionaire visibly bristled at the casual pronouncement. "But this isn't Home, Sweet Home. You aren't meant to stay here indefinitely."

"Lie" hissed so quietly inside Jonathan's head that he quite possibly could have imagined it, but he imperceptibly shivered nonetheless.

"The painted menace is a lost cause... but you don't have to be," he stated pensively, drawing small circles with the tip of his bony finger on the tabletop as he struggled with the discomfort of playing "coy." Fortunately it paid off by the piercing attention the vigilante focused on him like a laser beam causing his skin to crawl and his pulse to quicken in something he refused to call anxiety. His freedom, Scarecrow, everything rode on this delicate foray.

"You could be released if the board of directors found you certifiably sane."

Long, dragging moments passed in a tense silence between the pair. The day room carried on as it usually did, filled with strange samples of life and equally dead spots. Inmates crowded around the television set as a children's puppet show sang a cheerful yet instructional song on how to tie one's own shoes, some grown men humming along and others blinking owlishly down at their slippered feet. One inmate stared at the wall while another chatted excitedly to a lamp about his most depraved fantasies that in actuality had happened, thus his residency at Arkham. No one noticed the unmasked foes sitting abnormally still opposite of each other, not even the orderlies who watched the other inmates like hawks, save for only one.

From across the room, Michael studied Wayne as he glared at his old boss from under his growing fringe. A frown etched deeper and deeper across the orderly's face as the frozen scene stretched on. Just as his unblinking eyes were so dry he had to look away for a split second, he saw it. Wayne's chiseled jaw shifted and the terse line of his thin lips cracked open and a single word slipped out that
Michael couldn't hear over the shouts of a commercial break, but whatever it was brought a triumphant flicker to Crane's large, blue eyes and an ounce of dread wormed its way into his chest.

"... how?"
Bruce had asked to go outside after that conversation. He just needed to be somewhere he could think, much less breathe, because he couldn't do that here with all this noise.

With the downpour outside and the lack of permission from Horn, Micheal had been torn, but if there had been any other orderlies assigned to Bruce's detail his murmured request would have been met with a laugh and probably a smack to the head for appearance's sake, yet circumstances as they were...

"Wanna tell me what all that was about?" The orderly leaned against the door to the courtyard with his thick arms crossed, effectively blocking his charge's path. When a disinterested stare was all received in reply, he shifted his stance into a more comfortable one and raised his bushy eyebrow in expectation.

Bruce keenly felt the gravity keeping him rooted to the floor. He felt heavy, all of the weight centered in his head being crushed under his thoughts and the drugs in his system. Despite all that though, his body was statue-still and his fingers were twitching in such a manner that he needed to move. Too much information -mostly questionable- was crammed inside his skull; he'd listened and absorbed and didn't know what to do with it. The hour-long lecture from Crane had put him on edge, farther from falling into the abyss but closer to pushing him into a frenzy of frayed nerves and moralistic disgust.

Micheal couldn't have known all that was boiling just beneath the surface of the other man's placid expression, but he freed up his arms as if he knew he could be very well need them if he pushed. Yeah, it seemed like him and Wayne had come to some sort of understanding -possibly even something resembling respect- but he remembered crashing backwards with the wind knocked out of him and how easy it was for the vigilante to put him there when he was determined to beat the snot out of the clown that day. He shivered with the memory of fists and all that blood. Micheal had seen worse and definitely more gruesome, but he had never before felt fear in regards to the inmates though. Strength in numbers, the use of restraints, his own physical strength, and clear, rational thinking had always put him at an advantage, but here, now, in this cramped, little hall by himself with the world's sought after Batman with cold, dark eyes piercing through him with his twitching arms unbound... Wayne was just as big as him and was convicted of killing people. Cops. With guns.

Just as he mentally ticked off this information, Micheal realized Wayne appeared just as unbalanced by whatever Crane had told him than he first realized. He looked like he did after Commissioner Gordon visited-

Bruce's eyes latched onto the bit of gloomy daylight over the orderly's shoulder and took a small, absentminded step towards it.

Pain flared in the back of Micheal's head as he jerked back in reaction. "Fuck!" He felt stupid as he rubbed the tender area of his scalp and glared at the vaguely curious arrangement on the other man's face. He scowled and punched in the door code. "Just fucking go."

The immediate cold draft of air that flooded the hall washed over Bruce's skin and the resulting shiver was internalized. The stark gooseflesh that erupted up and down his arms made him almost
feel human again.

"Well?" Micheal's aggravated question was cut off in surprise as his charge bolted past him in full sprint.

Having declined the ratty, foul-smelling Arkham-issued sweatshirt, Bruce was drenched within seconds. The heavy material of his uniform was soaked and weighing him down. His dark hair was plastered to his skull and hanging in his eyes. His shoes skidded on the asphalt as they filled with water. He never felt more refreshed.

"Why are you telling me all this? … helping me, I mean."

"If you have to ask then you obviously believe you don't deserve my expertise, but if you're receiving it anyway, why question it?"

Of course it had to be questioned. "Crane" and "help" do not belong in the same sentence unless the mad doctor was assisting with Bruce's demise, and that could very well be the case. At that time he hadn't asked, feeling it best to keep his apprehensiveness to himself lest Crane stop talking, and Bruce had found himself oddly fascinated by the nuances of sanity.

It disgusted him, how easy the system could be manipulated by whomever's in power, like it once upon a time had been Maroni and Falcone. Crane's testimonies had gotten goons that should have been on death row into the Asylum so they could be stationed where they could still be of the most use while incarcerated.

"Don't fret, Dark Knight, I... corrected the ruse myself."

His lungs burned, shrunken and aching inside his chest.

"Look at yourself. You're too still. Normal people fidget, even if it's rubbing your eyes or scratching the back of your neck. Robots are unnatural, and animals stay locked in their cages. For the love of god, Do. Not. Ever. Twitch."

He couldn't breathe but forced himself to keep on running.

"Communication is a necessary evil. Silence suggests a reluctance and secrets. Opening up the slightest bit shows vulnerability which Horn will simply eat up. Conversing with clowns is just as bad as talking to yourself, remember that."

He plowed through rain puddles, running his square of the courtyard.

"If not for yourself, do it for the rest of us that still have to look at you and, by proxy, smell you: Shower and shave. If you appear functional, no one -especially Horn- will think anything's truly wrong."

Running and running, round and round. With each foot pound, his body vibrated with it, clacking his teeth until he clenched his jaw but the motion and lack of oxygen caused his head to ache.

"Start small. Sanity isn't an overnight success, and no one would believe you if you blurt it out like some sad, desperate creature. It's proven through actions, and you've shown more than once that you're a man that likes to take action."

He saw nothing but flashes of lightening splashing across gray stone vertigo, all blurred by the water swimming in his vision.
"Remember: With every lie comes some small grain of truth. Horn's inelegant and capricious; he'll demand the most obvious and painful. Be prepared to answer questions Vicki Vale would ask. Your dead parents, your nocturnal alter ego, your rage... the clown."

Thunder erupted over the barely noticeable ringing in his ears.

"Don't think of it as lying per se, think of it as 'acting as a form of confession.'[1]"

A painful stitch sprouting in his side had him slowing a beat until he took deeper breaths through his nostrils and pushed himself past it. He was so out of shape.

The icy splatter of the rain had either lost its bite because he had been subjected to the elements for so long he was numb to it or the exercise had him so incredibly heated the pelting down and around his squinted eyes felt especially hot and oddly itchy.

"Oh, and if you really want to have an effect..." Crane's lips pulled into a pleased smirk. "Instead of using fists, try using tears."

Micheal's shout was drowned out by an ear-splitting crack of thunder. So much like a gunshot, Bruce missed a step and grunted as the flesh of his arms and knees tore open as he crashed and skidded across the wet concrete.

"You all right?" shouted the orderly from the edge of the doorway, reluctant to subject himself to the storm. He knew this was a bad idea from the start.

Heavy pants tunneled in and out through Bruce's nose -his face screwed up at the effort- he cocked his head to glare but all he could see through the thick sheets of rain was the white glow of the door broken by Micheal's shady silhouette.

"It's total shit out here. Get inside!"

The ringing in his ears had dimmed into a low hum the more oxygen filtered into his brain. It took him several demands from the other man before he climbed to his feet and swayed dangerously, grimacing as the damgaed skin of his knees beneath the blood spotted material of his pant legs pulled taut.. He could see the wave of halting pain that swelled inside his skull and painted his vision an all-consuming black before it faded rapidly into gray static and nausea. He blinked, trying to moderate his breathing. A split second of stomach-cramping fear assaulted him before he took that first hesitant step and when the wrenching feeling didn't return, he pressed on, a gust of relief escaping him. His face squared easily, he made his way to the entrance with a quick and even gait despite the stinging of his legs.

Crane's advice would rot inside his head before the fallen hero would sink so low.

Back in his cell, Jonathan lazily turned to the next page of the smuggled medical journal. "Splendid news, Richard. After some deliberation, I've decided to give into my better nature and help you with your flying rodent problem." He scoffed under his breath at the utter tripe he was reading.

Horn sagged in relief, feeling muscles achingly relax. Everything would be all right, he just knew it. But after long seconds passed of the other psychiatrist perusing the book cradled in his hands and not doing much else, Horn began to fidget once again. "... well?"
Bored blue eyes met his before blinking and sinking back to the pages. "I think we should first discuss the initial fraction of my payment."

"Excuse me, but did you say 'fraction'?"

Eyebrows raised into a high arch, condescending. "Did I stutter?"

"But that's preposterous!"

"Goodness, was that the word of the day on your tear-away calendar?"

The two doctors were soon locked in a silent battle of wills: Horn glaring in fury while Jonathan stared coolly back, a ghost of a smirk on his round face. It didn't take long; the older man looked away with a beet-root scowl just like Jonathan expected of the amoeba-like man.

"What do you want?" he forced out through clenched, nicotine teeth.

A cold smile flashed in reply. The book in Jonathan's hands closed with a snap. "So glad you asked."

Even though many ideas instantly came to mind -mostly luxuries- one stood out amongst the rest, and it happened to be the most important. Horn couldn't know how much this meant to him or this whole deal would be lost.

"It's the small matter of my medication. I've grown awfully tired of pills. My first request is for this to be remedied."

Horn gawked at him -probably still deciphering all the "big" words- then eventually sputtered. "No that- I can't- that's not within my authority! Leland-"

"Writes the prescription, yes, but the last time I checked you are capable of doing the same." A black scowl flitted beneath his mask. "But you have access to the medications."

"What-" Horn cleared his throat and lifted his sagging chin. "What are you implying I do?"

"Pity, I thought it was obvious: Pills are a risky business. They can be misplaced and replaced at anytime really and no one would know the difference as long as they appear similar."

"You want me to switch them? I can't do that!"

"You can, and you will."

"You want me to try and switch your dose? I'll be caught."

"My dose?" scoffed Jonathan, "You're replacing the entire bottle with placebos."

For a moment, the task appeared easy and a small price to pay. The old doctor could do it, but a glaring fact struck him. "You're not the only one that takes that medication."

"Yes and?"
"And"?

"Allow me to enlighten you on something: In today's mental health field, we rely too heavily on pills. Anti-depressants, anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers, mood inhibitors, relaxants, and much more. People would be a lot better off if they go straight to the core of their problem. Their Fear. Denying them an unnecessary solution is a civil service."

"I won't do it. I'd lose my job."

"And you'll lose your job if you don't make some progress with Wayne... of course if that happens you won't be losing only your job, isn't that right? It'll be your wife and children, your two-story house, your expensive car, your reputation, everything."

With each listed asset the red of Horn's stubborn face gave way to a gray pallor. "You need my help, Richard, but everything comes with a price, you and I both know that. Now doesn't my request seem small compared to what's truly at stake?"

"It... does..." Horn hedged.

Jonathan's knuckles drained of blood as he gripped the tome in his lap, squeezing and imagining it was the idiotic man's neck. He had to have Scarecrow back. "This offer won't last forever..."

"I'll do it," Horn muttered despite his misgivings. Crane was right, there was too much at risk and he didn't have a choice. Wayne was the case of the century.

Color flowed back into the blue-eyed man's hands. "Smart choice... now let's get down to it, shall we? What's been your strategy thus far?"

Lines riddled the other psychiatrist's forehead as if Jonathan had spoken a foreign language. "I've just been asking him how he's doing. Our sessions don't progress much farther than that."

Jonathan's mouth pinched. Reading such poor practice in a file and actually hearing it aloud turned out to be two very different things: One exasperated him while the other offended his very existence. He had to swallow the venom pooling in his mouth with a strained gulp. "Do you have any notes?"

At once Horn immediately perked then deflated. "The notes are in the file... which I am going to get to you," he tacked on nervously. His searching was still a work in progress.

Face placid, Jonathan's gaze flared, bewildered. The notes... were in the file... Every time stamp was followed by one or two sentence fragments recording the billionaire's number of blinks to minutes ratio. The shallow observations were a waste of ink. Horn had accomplished absolutely nothing after all this time. The man may be a cretin, but Jonathan had foolishly thought he would have gathered something.

"Why?" Horn added when Crane only stared. "Is that wrong?"

Jonathan had to visibly distance himself from his perplexed thoughts. From a professional standpoint, he itched to correct Horn and take over the case himself; the patient would be in capable hands then. Thankfully his bitterness kept him and his impulses rooted to reality where the fact the poor patient was a loathsome Bat and Horn was only good for extortion.

"That's-" Jonathan braced himself for the way his insides curdled and screamed, "Brilliant. Cou— couldn't have done better myself. Continue to do so." He could have cried.

He had to change subjects fast, because if he had to watch Horn's head balloon anymore Jonathan
would surely vomit.

"I heard the clown has been relocated."

The swelling of Horn's cranium paused long enough to respond. "Yes, to Maximum Security, coincidentally right across from Wayne."

"'Coincidentally'?"

"Yes..." Doubt crept into smug features. "Why?"

"Out of ten cells, two mortal enemies -a highly volatile pairing- just happen to be directly across from one another?"

"Yes... Leland explained the move from isolation would lessen Patient J's behavioral issues," Horn recited dumbly.

"Isn't that suspiciously convenient for the clown? What does that tell you?"

Horn's face remained puzzled, and Jonathan's diminished hope for the human race was obliterated completely. He pulled off his glasses - he couldn't look at the man - and squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the stem of his nose. An impatient gust of air heaved from his narrow chest.

"How you function without a brain astounds me... Something's happened between Leland and Joker. She's in his pocket."

It took far too long but once understanding emerged within Horn's pale eyes it transformed into shock, quickly snuffed out by greed. "If that's true then- then I could get her fired. If she's fired, this asylum would finally be run by someone competent, someone worthy, not some... woman."

The delicate frames of Jonathan's spectacles creaked ominously in his hold. The polishing of the lenses becoming that much more vigorous.

"Yes! I'll go straight to the press. An investigation will be launched-"

"A bit premature, don't you think," drawled the smaller man as he studied his work. His perceived boredom over the scandalous revelation poked holes in Horn's excitement. He dropped worriedly back into his chair.

"What do you mean?" His leg bounced rapidly.

"It won't stop there. One investigation will lead to more investigations, and I highly doubt you want our agreement coming to light. Running an asylum is complicated, if you're not me," he muttered with a sour look. "There's no guarantee you would even get the position. You have to have proven yourself to the board. You've yet to have done anything noteworthy."

"But Leland."

"Has given you a prime opportunity. There are certain... benefits to the living arrangements she orchestrated." He slid his glasses back onto his face. "The Batman and Joker are a pair. They have an almost symbiotic relationship. They practically feed off each other."

"So?"

For once he wished the geriatric buffoon would keep up.
"What better way to learn about your subject than to observe his interdependent interactions?"

Horn's jumping leg stilled. He leaned forward in his seat, shamefully attentive. "How?"

The corners of Jonathan's mouth twitched in satisfaction. He was quickly becoming fond of that word.

His teeth were all but chattering by the time he traversed the drafty halls and arrived back to his cell. His sopping Arkham reds had been exchanged for a fresh, dry set, but the moist chill still clung to his skin and his frame jerked when the cold won out over his concentration.

"There's my special boy," an oily voice crooned at their backs but it went ignored as Micheal made quick work of the lock and door. Just as Bruce was brushing past to enter, a tentative nudge of the orderly's elbow gave him pause. Anything to delay going in that cramped, padded cage a moment longer.

The orderly's face was twisted, and he cleared his throat in apparent discomfort. "Uh-... you sure you're -um- okay, man?" he questioned under his breath.

"Why wouldn't he be?" sliced like a searing blade between the exchange, earning a glower from the whitecoat for being overheard showing concern. Bruce's posture tensed and he hurried inside. "What are those for?"

Bruce could almost sense when those eyes sharpened on the bandages taped to his arms and wrapped around his raw hands because the broken skin underneath prickled and burned under the scrutiny.

"Did the big, bad Bat get a boo boo?"

Pink tinged his sallow cheeks at the derisive tone. It wasn't like it was his decision -or even his choice really- to go to the infirmary and be patched up again. They were just scrapes, but Micheal had insisted and the nurse had squealed loudly over the sight of blood under the harsh fluorescent lights. It barely hurt now. He could hardly lift his gaze from the towel-dried curtain of his fringe in renewed embarrassment at the fact that a bowl of soup was on its way.

"We can't have you catching a case of the sniffles." The flighty nurse probably would have pinched his cheeks if not for the withering glare he shot her. Nope, we couldn't have him getting sick; his mere existence within these walls most likely made up a huge chunk of their paycheck.

And it wouldn't do well for the main circus act to be out of commission.

"Bats, if I can't trust you to not hurt yourself."

"Quiet in there!" Micheal's palm smacked the glass of the clown's cell, but that and the scowl he leveled at the psychopath only provoked a hint of a smirk on his mangled face.

"You're cute. I feel like I don't see enough of you, but-tuh..." Air hissed through his split lips.

"Now's not the, ah, best time, so run along now so I can visit with my wounded heart across the way. Go on, shoo!" A boney wrist attached to an equally skeletal hand waved him away.

Micheal remained defiant in his position as buffer between the two inmates for all of twenty seven
seconds. He glanced over his shoulder to find his charge sitting calmly on his bed before turning back to the grinning man staring steadily at him. After a beat, he bared his teeth and pushed off the glass. "I'm not paid enough for this shit," he spat and stalked away, not before shooting one last look of uncertainty and frustration back at Wayne.

Listening to all that, how could the man run in the rain like a maniac for nearly forty minutes without stop then sit there and be so fucking... blank?

It just didn't add up.

"There's a good dog." The door to Max Security slammed. At that, the Joker sat up a little straighter against the wall, and his Bat stiffened.

The side of Bruce's face was tingling as hazel eyes bored into his locked jaw like a dull, grinding blade. There was one bit of Crane's tips he could happily follow which was maintaining silence with murderous comedians; that, he could wholeheartedly commit to.

"Got you too, did they?"

Except when they're being cryptic and a tone resembling sympathy hung gratingly in the air.

Before he realized that it went against exactly what he decided not to do, Bruce's head was turning and he was quietly acknowledging the clown. His pupils zeroed in on tangled, glossy hair as water dripped from dark spirals, then the absence of blood on battered skin, lastly the red of the inmate uniform was now a burgundy.

For whatever reason, the Joker was drenched from head to toe.

"What-" his voice cracked, his fists balling in his lap. "What happened to you?"

The slow, triumphant grin that slithered over the jester's black and blue face was camouflaged by the jagged lines of his scars. No matter what he was always smiling.

"I received a, uh, riot bath."

The billionaire's head cocked to the side a fraction of an inch. The clown's stare was so fixed on the other man that he easily noticed the miniscule inquiry.

"I think when they realized I wasn't about to die from internal bleeding and my gorgeous self wasn't about to be dolled up and stuck in a coffin -purple, I want a purple one in case you wanted to know- Leland, my bug-eyed, chocolate goddess, ordered for yours truly to be cleaned up. Let it never be said that Arkham neglects anyone. The boys turned the hose on me, badda bing, badda boom, here I am clean as a whistle. Quite striking, aren't I?" he preened, flashing his bloody smile.

That's when Bruce noticed the swelling to the clown's jaw, the eggplant color of bruises that should by now be a light indigo, and the bright red of his left eye where blood vessels had been viciously ruptured.

"I suppose water did that to you?" Bruce blamed the shivers still sporadically wracking his frame for the edge to his voice.

"Oh it did pack quite the punch, but so do, ah, gingers with GEDs."

"What?" he bit out, his own problems forgotten.
Narrow shoulders encased in soggy material shrugged. "People are too... sensitive nowadays. Oprah's had a harsh impact on this generation-"

He just wanted a straight answer, not this rambling mess-

"So I may have sorta kinda killed one of the orderlies. People shouldn't cry over spilled milk."

"You- ... you killed..." The vigilante's face slackened in bemusement. The casual way with which the Joker mentioned fresh homocide wasn't what shocked him, it was the fact that something as serious as murder could occur within the padded walls of this mad house. Heinous crimes were meant to stop behind locked doors and iron-wrought fences. Where had his money been going?

"You sound surprised. I thought with how close we were and all the quality time we've been spending together you'd know me better."

Bruce's expression might as well been one of pure disinterest if not for his stiffness and the annoyed twist to his mouth. "Why?" He expected the obvious answer, but really the Joker was right: Bruce should know better.

When he saw his beloved Bat wasn't about to rush to reassure him of his no doubt fascinating nature, his mock-outrage eased into a sweet smile. "His nose was too straight."

His steady inhalation stuttered inside his throat, but his voice fell flat. Deadly low. "What."

"Like yours is straight but the teensiest bit off as if it's been broken a few times, but his..." The harlequin's eyes darkened, the red of the left one was practically glowing around the dilated pupil. "His was perfectly straight..." he husked. Bruce unconsciously squirmed at the lurid tone, causing the support of the cot to squeak and focused the Joker's glazed stare onto him.

"Have you had work done, or are you naturally that pretty?"

The vigilante was taken back. The madman's beaten face wore a crookedly pleasant expression. He looked attentive -his brows curved- like he genuinely wanted to know the answer to such a ludicrously spontaneous question. Luckily he was saved from his shock by the door to Max Security opening and his promised soup arriving.

Watery and bland, he gulped it down, watching the clown out of the corner of his eye staring back.

At that moment, Crane's advice appeared more of a prescription for his mental health than the pure poison his words had initially come across as.

He wrung his hands in slow pulls as he gazed deeply into the wall, convincing himself the action was practice of his fidgeting.

The Joker was mesmerized by it.

Spencer paced in a short circuit outside the cell door. He'd given up straining his ears through the three inches of steel fifteen minutes ago when he'd been baffled to find his charge with company once again and for himself to be banished from the small room. He knew for sure now the two doctors were conspiring and it had to be about the Bat. Other than being desperate to know what that
was, what was really bothering him was that he should have told the boss days ago, and he hadn't. Joker had made it abundantly clear at the beginning that any and all information concerning his enemy was a top priority news delivery. That was probably the easiest of his tasks, and he was avoiding it.

Oh it wasn't for the rich boy's sake -Spencer couldn't care less- it was for Jon-

His pacing halted as he rubbed at his brow. He was good at his job, wasn't he? He had always been good at following instructions. This inner conflict felt like nothing new.

Spencer had grown up comfortably middle class with his father and two younger sisters. His mother had dropped he and his sisters off at school one day and didn't return. He'd taken it better than the rest of his family. Spencer had often caught the way she looked at her husband and children like she was wondering how she'd gotten there and when she'd be happy with it; he knew this, because in the years after he began to look at his sisters, father, and friends much the same way.

Thanks to his military father and unlike his mother, Spencer understood the importance of duty. Their small family worked like a well-practiced unit, while he balanced the roles of second parent and perfect son. Well, almost perfect. Despite his 4.0 GPA, his star athlete status, his upkeep of the house and raising his sisters, none of that mattered if he was a faggot. His father had made that perfectly clear upon catching him with his hands down his pants and the J. Crew catalog splayed on his lap by beating the shit out of him and chasing his limping and broken body from the house.

After that it was bouncing from town to town and picking up the odd job until he arrived in Gotham, his hair bleached a vision-burning white. By then he'd healed and could look in the mirror and not see his father staring back at him. He'd never sunk as low as selling himself, but petty crime wasn't below him if he wanted to eat, so it had been drug-running and theft mostly. His keen mind, boyish good looks, agility, calm demeanor, and his ability to follow orders had him quickly recruited into a new unit all its own, one he excelled in, fag or not. Despite his often deadly moods and dangerous quirks, the Joker had been good to him, which usually meant Spencer got to live to see another day. He knew he had made it when the boss handed him falsified documents and had him stationed at Arkham after the Dent fundraiser. The Joker knew it would only be a matter of time, and he trusted Spencer to do what no one else in his employ could and not ask questions.

That's why it came as a bit of a shock when the boss traded him off to Jonathan Crane. Unfortunately it wasn't something Spencer could argue with. Being an errand boy was all he could handle around the lithe man, but that wasn't his job. He was failing the clown like he did his father. Yeah, and even he knew that that comparison was fifty different ways of fucked up.

So lost he was in his introspection, he didn't notice he wasn't alone until a throat loudly cleared.

Horn stood in the open doorway, trying to look down his nose at him which was made ridiculous by the fact Spencer was at least half a foot taller than him. "Do you mind?"

Wordlessly, Spencer moved to the side, all too eager for the other man to leave. He stunk of cigarettes and bad cologne. Once gone, the blond wasted no time dashing into the cell with his green eyes darting and the upper half of his body a knot of tension.

The ex-doctor glanced up from his reading and smoothly returned to it once seeing it was just the orderly. "In polite society, knocking generally preludes barging into one's personal quarters."

"You're up to something."

Crane's brow arched towards his hairline. "Am I?"
"I know it has something to do with Wayne. What does Horn want from you?" He towered over the sitting man and felt like a force to be reckoned with. He was bigger, stronger, faster, and -even better- determined.

Except when gorgeous, sapphire blue eyes lock onto him, reducing him to a small, curious specimen meant to be be dissected and crumbling his resolve. His mouth suddenly felt dry.

Jonathan should have known his good mood wouldn't last. Preying on Horn's fears without a drop of toxin was gratifying, but the fact he had ensured the return of his other half had him smiling softly into his book as soon as Horn had left. He just thought his triumph would have lasted longer than fifteen seconds.

"What does Horn want from you?"

With a quiet sigh, his eyes met resolved green. "Now what could an esteemed doctor possibly want from insignificant scum like myself?"

The bleached blond's cheeks flushed a splotchy red. "You're not insignificant scum," he hissed through his teeth, startling Jonathan, and started to pace which shocked the brunet more. "You're the farthest thing from insi- no! Just answer my question."

It took a moment for Jonathan to comprehend the last; his mind had been stuck on what the irate orderly almost said. His face slackened. He shook himself out of it, intent on ignoring the outbursts of an amorous fool, even if no one had said anything like that to him before. Well, except Scarecrow.

"Answer me."

"I assure you, whatever villainous plot you've dreamed up is non-existent." The lie fell absently from his lips.

"Then I'm sure it won't matter if the boss hears about Horn's visit and your hour-long conversation with the Bat," responded Spencer angrily but the reluctance dimming his glare before turning away lessened Jonathan's strike of alarm.

"Wait... Spencer." The name tumbled awkwardly from his mouth. It might have been his first time using it, but it was enough to stop said man in his tracks. Jonathan didn't allow himself to relax just yet; if anything his sudden tension worsened for what he realized was necessary. "Don't go."

Guileless green peered uncertainly over a broad shoulder. "Stay here... with me."

Behind prescription lenses, large, cerulean eyes framed by thick lashes widened innocently. He plucked the offending frames off as an afterthought, then set them and the book off to the side. With a stiff spine, he reclined back on his palms, hyper-aware of how the fabric of his uniform pulled and slid over his skin. Was this an alluring pose? Never before had he felt so uncoordinated and just plain stupid. It also didn't help his confidence much that the man he thought had been looking at him as if Jonathan hung the moon was just staring at him. Hadn't even turned back around.

Filled with uncharacteristic doubt, he nervously wet his lips.

Blown pupils tracked the movement of a slick tongue swiping over a plump mouth and leaving a glossy sheen behind. The way the normally icy man looked at him, arching back and asking him to stay had broken his brain into Need, Now, Want, Stay, Lick, Go. Spencer felt consumed, and he was terrified to move an inch because of it. He was afraid he'd pounce, and Jonathan was too delicate for that.

That's right. He blinked. Jonathan had proven how delicate he was. Spencer could still hear his
screams after his legs were snapped like toothpicks. That memory was like a bucket of ice water, drowning his earlier frustration. The boss would flip over the slightest inclination of the psychiatrist and Wayne coming anywhere near each other. Spencer knew the graceless seduction was meant to distract him; it was too convenient for the circumstances and the stunning man before him wouldn't ever be interested in him that way, not with the way the boss claimed him.

But still, he realized with a jolt, he couldn't risk Jonathan's safety like that.

God, he was fucked.

Discomfort radiated from the ex-doctor, and Spencer had to discretely press his palm against the bulge in his pants.

"I've -uh- I've." He cleared his throat. "I've got rounds to make. Din- dinner will be soon." His head dipped and he all but ran for the door. At the last moment, his hand hooked onto the frame. Shy green touched regretfully onto frozen outrage and confusion. "I won't say anything... yet," he said softly before disappearing and the door replacing him.

Jonathan remained in that position for long moments after, barely recognizing the fact he got exactly what he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Altered quote by Tallulah Bankhead
"It appears you've chosen to give up eating all together." Alfred's voice dragged with exhaustion, and Bruce winced at the underlying disappointment the old butler did nothing to hide.

Bruce bit the inside of his cheek and forced himself to keep his gaze locked onto the pained look of the man that practically raised him. Something sharp in his chest twisted. "How was your vacation?"

Alfred grimaced, obviously not fooled with the weak attempt to change the subject but decided to go along with it anyway. "Pleasant enough, thank you... Wilfred and his wife send their regards."

At that, the billionaire's mouth curled ruefully. "I doubt they would if they knew."

About his alter ego, about his humiliation and the fact he was confined in a mental hospital for the criminally insane.

"Oh they're well aware of our situation," the older man corrected mildly. "It seems you're just as popular across the pond than here in America. They still hope you're doing well."

He fleetingly thought "doing well" depended on one's own definition, but Bruce remained fixated on the fact the elder man said "our situation." For a brief moment it warmed him because Alfred hadn't deserted him yet; Bruce wasn't alone in this. Then just like that he went cold. Alfred didn't have to stay here day and night, his brain poked and prodded and everything he did or said questioned like yawning had some deeper meaning. Alfred didn't have to deal with half the things Bruce was beginning to find normal.

Bruce was alone in this.

"That's..." His eyes pricked and -taking Crane's advice- swiped his fingers over them. "I'm glad you have them-"

"What in the blue blazes are those from?" Alfred snapped over him, lurching forward in his chair. His keen eyes narrowed at the sorry state of Bruce's hands. The one hovering over his brow was scraped raw and its knuckles were a purple scab. "You've been fighting." It wasn't an accusation, just a blandly expressed fact. His weathered face was pale and stoic.

Burying his hands into his lap, Bruce glared at the floor. He knew by the other's sharp intake that he had also spotted the shadow of a bruise along Bruce's working jaw. "It's not a big deal."

"The hell it isn't!"

Pursed lips twitched with the harsh words struggling to escape.

"Pardon me, Master Bruce, but you want to be transferred to Blackgate when you're hardly surviving
Here?"

The instigating fist to this whole conversation slammed down on the counter of the dividing glass, souring the old man's expression. "Don't tell me how I'm doing when you're not here living it," Bruce spat, glaring underneath his fringe. His chest was heaving, his hackles risen.

Alfred gazed back from the other side, unmoved by the violent outburst. "... I apologize for my assumptions. I-" Here, his whole being visibly softened, allowing the hidden sadness in his eyes to gleam. "You're like a son to me- ... the center of my world since you were a boy. I just care for you." His colorless lips trembled into a grin.

Shame squeezed Bruce's eyelids together, dousing the reality of his reaction for long seconds. Slowly his fingers curled into his stinging palm. "Don't worry about me."

"Tell me what happened."

It took minutes, minutes that crept uneasily from one to the next in silence. Finally, after several, he came to a decision.

"... I don't know what you all thought would happen, forcing him on me... Therapy sessions, sharing, talking. He lives across from me now, did they tell you that? Directly across... always watching." A quiet laugh escaped him. "I can't do anything without those eyes tracking my every movement, but do you want to know what scares me about it? What I find absolutely terrifying?"

Out of sight from those dark eyes, Alfred's wrinkled hands held a shaking grip on the edges of his seat. His Adams apple bobbed convulsively. His throat closed and burning. He didn't know this side of the other man or where he'd come from. At this he was both grateful and despairing, wishing to be struck deaf and blind so as not to be forced to witness more.

"... he may be the only person -no, not a person, a thing like me- that understands... exactly what it's like. This... this hell." A line formed between his brows as he stared pensively down at his flexing, tender knuckles. For weeks, through the day and remaining still in the night, he could be the unshakable monster, the blank-faced novelty, but here in front of Alfred, the only person that loved him, never so keenly did he feel his fatigue, the heavy chains that ran with him. He may as well confess the truth to those who mattered before he started the lies. "I could have been him, and... he could have been me-"

"Don't say that," Alfred implored, "We both know that's not true. That man is a monster-"

"And so am I." Bruce shrugged. "I may not have committed half of the atrocities he has, but... I know -if I'm pushed far enough or it fits into my justice- I'm capable of them, too. I know this. He tells me like I don't already know, like it's meant to be some huge revelation. It isn't." Unfocused, brown eyes traced the red lines of his palm. "I'm going to fight it though." He nodded, fixing his haunted gaze on the butler, promising him more than himself. "Between us, in the end, I made the right choice. I will do better and get myself out of here, because at least I know at Blackgate, this... He couldn't specifically gesture at what "this" was: his mind, his soul- did he even have one of those? Did he ever believe he had one to begin with? "This will be safe. Alfred, I need you to trust me."

Shell-shocked, the old man sat completely still, white as a ghost. His mouth hung open; croaked syllables crawled out but didn't have enough air or thought behind them to form actual words. Eventually, painful inch by inch, his head was shaking in dazed denial. Alfred had thought, with the life he had, he'd seen and heard it all or maybe enough. Perhaps any other time he would have been pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong, but this wasn't that time. He thought the therapy would
help, that being here would help. The billionaire was worse, thanks to that scarred lunatic, and it was Alfred's fault. He had given permission on the whole bloody mess, Thomas and Martha forgive him.

Finally, the right words -the only words- came to him. "... I am so very, very sorry, Master Bruce."

It was really all that could be said.

Alfred couldn't get out of that room fast enough, couldn't wait to get out of this building, but no sooner had he exited, he was being accosted by the smell of tobacco and an eager smile.

"Mr. Pennyworth," Horn greeted jovially, holding his hand out.

Still shaken, the old butler disregarded his manners in favor of a single nod. Horn was one of the people he could do without seeing at this moment.

Smile falling a fraction, Horn withdrew his hand."So good to see you again. How was your visit?"

Or perhaps, Alfred was in the company of the first person he should be talking to, Bruce's doctor.

"You want to know how my visit was?"

Horn's face brightened with interest.

"Well, I want to know what treatment you're performing that's warping his mind! Think you could answer me that?"

The cheerful man deflated. "P-pardon?"

"You heard me. What's this about putting them right across from each other? You told me there would only be supervised sessions."

"Leland, she-" Flustered, Horn bit his tongue.

"She'll be hearing from me, but at the moment I'm talking to you."

The psychiatrist fumbled for words.

"What's the bloody meaning of this?" The normally genteel Englishman was outright shouting now, his composure lost under the cruel memory of a gloomy, handsome face resigned and devoid of life and those blasphemous words hanging over his head like Poe's pendulum. Then again Master Wayne must be very familiar with the horrific tale, his frenzied thoughts supplied for him.

"It's part of the process," Horn responded weakly, a poor imitation to Crane's commonly used, deflective explanations. "Trust me, I'm a doctor." He flinched when a wrinkled fist rushed at his face and halted nary an inch from the cringing psychiatrist's thin, crooked nose. When he realized impact wouldn't be made, his eyes squinted open and raised warily to the red-faced, white-lipped visage of the butler glaring at him with barely restrained fury and contempt, both his arms rigid at his sides. Horn straightened and lifted his nose with a sniff. "I could have you arrested and sue you for assault."

Alfred's self-disgust sweltering underneath his skin would have to wait until later. He wasn't a pacifist, but he was a gentleman, and gentleman didn't settle disputes with fisticuffs. Although in this case he probably could have easily forgiven himself for the -no doubt satisfying- transgression. "And trust me when I say I could do much more to you, Mister Horn."
"Was that a threat?" sputtered the other man.

"I suppose that depends on you. It could be a threat... or a promise." He allowed time for the implication to sink in before delivering a stilted nod. "Good day."

Horn could have ripped out his hair. The old butler hadn't gotten more than ten paces before Horn's desperate shout erupted at his back. "What did he say?"

But Alfred ignored him and kept walking. He had some phone calls to make.

Horn spun around and started charging off in the other direction. There was no time to wait; he had some purchases to make.

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Down a separate hall, Bruce and his assigned sitter were oblivious to the argument between the two older men. Bruce followed along mindlessly, so absorbed as he was in the tender emptiness of his recent purging. Later he would feel a great many things: Regret at having divulged all that to the old man; mortification because the putrid weakness had spilled so easily from his lips; and denial because certainly none of those things he said were true, right? They were said in a peak of detached hysteria-

But for right now, all he could be bothered with was the curious lightness he felt. It wasn't a good feeling, nor was it particularly bad either. Just... different. He studied it as his slippered feet scooted the simple left, right, left, right across the linoleum.

Michael had no such internal dilemmas unfortunately. He felt only too aware of his surroundings where once before it was all a pleasant blur more or less. He was noticing things, little details and subtleties that he caught onto but didn't know what the fuck to do with. As his girlfriend often put it, "You're not the shiniest penny in the fountain, but that's okay, I'm only with you for your money anyways." Yeah, he got it. He wasn't smart. There wasn't much he could really do about that, but that didn't mean the jumbled puzzle pieces his wandering eyes and stupid brain latched onto didn't bug the hell out of him.

For fucking example.

Coming from the other direction was Spencer and Crane. Neither of them had ever done anything to him, but the pair made him uneasy in the sense where he was weirdly reminded of high school, of the losers he used to beat up with his friends and the geeks trying to get the girl. That was the only way he could put it even if it sounded like the dumbest comparison ever. It fit as long as he didn't think too hard on why it did. It was awkward at best and downright fucked up at worst.

Michael didn't know much about Spencer. The bleach blond mostly kept to himself, not that Michael or the other orderlies made much of an effort themselves. Quiet and serious, an unlikely match for dealing with the Joker, but after months going unmutilated by the cackling freak, the guys assumed something must be equally wrong with him too. That's why it had come as a surprise when one day Greg burst into the break room ranting and raving about how "that little shit" was trying to kill him, because their assignments had been switched. Greg was known to bitch constantly about their prissy, ex-boss, but at least then he wasn't really at risk of getting gutted like a fish like he would with the clown. The fact that the loud mouth ginger was still alive was a surprise to everyone.

Michael had never dealt with Crane much, even when he ran the asylum. He didn't interact with the orderlies unless he had to and even then those times were brief and contained few words. The only reason Michael had gotten to keep his job after Crane's arrest was because the operation in the basement had come as a shock to him. Usually seen from a distance, the man was cold, aloof, and
very snooty if the other guys' stories were to be believed. The scrawny psychiatrist was smart - younger than Michael- and he had to be, right, to have once been running Arkham?

The orderly knew these things as facts and accepted them as face-value truth, but today the pair seemed different and -f*ck my life- Michael noticed it.

Instead of Crane leading the way with his nose in the air like usual, he lagged behind the blond, his chin low, and his sharp, blue eyes contemplating the man walking ahead of him. Normally Crane acted like Spencer didn't exist, and the exact opposite would apply to Spencer. The guy did take the job too seriously. Crane was harmless; he didn't need to watch his charge that closely. Yet this time - as crazy as it sounded- the dude looked like he was walking to get away from Crane, even though he appeared calm as a cucumber.

Michael noticed and it didn't make sense, but it wasn't as if he had someone to talk to about this because the words would come out wrong. There was his girlfriend -maybe- but she didn't like hearing about his work and each small mention was met with whiny wishes of him quitting and doing something less dangerous, so she wasn't much of an option.

The other pair were so occupied with their weird, little... whatever that they breezed past him and Wayne without so much as a glance, and he was beyond okay with that. He didn't have the energy to find out what would happen if that wasn't the case. Michael's eyes darted between Wayne and Crane.

Nothing, thank god for small miracles.

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Closing your eyes and imagining doesn't work, not for him at least. His thoughts get too... distracted with the blackness there. The dark void and possibility of it all. They wander and lose their way and then he can't quite focus on whatever it was before. Normally, that didn't bother him, because he wasn't a dreamer or a schemer and his fantasies only lasted as long as it took him to make them a reality.

Only this time...

Dilated pupils rolled to the empty cell across from him. Yeah, he definitely needed this time now.

White-washed brick. The metal table cold under his arms and cuff-bitten wrists. Look left and right and there his proper face grins back in dark reflections.

His cracked fingers knead his forehead in remembered pain. The world had been dizzying and bright. The smack to his own furrowed brow did nothing for him -not enough- and his chapped lips pulled into a silent snarl.

A voice shredded by glass and dragged through the mud fills his head -the words aren't important, only the sound- and a black devil sweeps into his vision. A gorgeous yet terrible sight.

He fast-forwarded through their little chat, paying interest to thin, pink lips framing too perfect teeth but unwilling to dither over it. Wait... wait... Pause. There.

His collar chokes him as he's yanked forward -marveling, yes, marveling over the lightening strike strength- the table digging into his lower half. Bruising.

His hand skimmed over the sharp bones of his hips, the twin aches and purple splotches long healed. Fingers pinched and pulled at the taut, white skin, ruddying it. With the top half of the inmate
jumpsuit twisted around his thighs and cool air prickling over his torso, Good Ol' Lefty gave into temptation—the impatient bugger—and slithered downwards, roughly pushing aside the tattered sleeve hooked onto his dick. A hiss escaped him as fingers curled around himself and squeezed.

He didn't do this often, but by Chaplin he was going to enjoy it.

*Thrown against the wall, spit sprays his crooked grin.*

His tongue flickered across his lips, tasting nothing but traces of copper from barely healed scabs. He hadn't tasted much then, but the memory of the foreign moisture from that stern mouth had him shuddering and his hand to roughly slide up and down. The friction dry and painful and perfect. He wriggled against the thin cot as if fireworks were exploding down his spine and across his shoulder blades. It wasn't often he'd been literally swept off his feet and slammed down onto a table.

A tortured groan tunneled through the tight clench of his throat. As one hand flew over his cock, the other formed a fist and proceeded to hammer down on random parts of his supine body, striking bruises and creating more, sparking hisses and giggles to sear through his heavy breathing.

*Such rage...*

The pleasure coiling low in his stomach was sizzling like a lit fuse of dynamite, burning close to its end. Almost. Almost.

"ComeOnComeOnComeOnComeOoonnnn, mmmmm, yeah, Come On," he growled through his teeth, his hips lifting off the mattress. His own ragged nails clawed down his chest, leaving four raised, red lines in their wake. Just one more thing to put him over the edge. Just one—little-push. He needed—He needed—

The buzzing door lock to Maximum Security sounded, then footsteps. His Bat was back.

No sooner had he thought this in the mounting haze of suffocation, the fuse met its climax and his eyes were flying open and a grunt was punching out from his mouth. His hand sped up to the point of pleasure overload until he abruptly let go of himself and flopped backwards.

A Cheshire grin stretched his lips and puckered his scars as two men walked into view with their backs stubbornly to him and his tastefully lewd display. The orderly carried on with the cell door while his charge stood rigidly at his side. Once the door was swinging open, his Bat was about to step in when he paused. His brunet head tipping to the side, the vigilante's nose lifted into the air. A beat, then a loud sniff wrenched the too quiet.

The Joker waited, sweating and panting with his uniform dangling from one leg and his softening prick twitching in a sticky, white mess. His Bat craned his neck to follow the scent over his shoulder, his face already twisted in a mask of curious disgust. When dark eyes landed on the clown and widened in abject horror, the Joker's head fell back with a snort.

He could only laugh.
A shrill scream pierced the abnormally silent night, cutting him off from his radio conversation with Alfred. He knew what the old man had been communicating was important, but then his head lifted to peer over the industrial landscape and the voice in his ear crackled and dissolved into static, and he promptly forgot about it. He was jumping and running from building to building, grappling off rooftops in hot pursuit of the blood-curdling siren.

Without hesitation he propelled over the edge of one roof, diving into the dark alley the screams were coming from. As soon as his boots touched grimy asphalt, all went quiet. He turned in a slow circle, observing nothing but trash and stained brick in the darkness the streetlights couldn't even touch. Where? Where?

Maybe he had misjudged the location, but he was sure it'd been here. Or maybe... maybe he was too late.

He frantically began to scan the ground for any signs, then proceeded to knock over garbage cans - ignoring the metallic clang of aluminum - and sifting through mounds of stink and finding nothing. He made it in time; he was in the right place, the right time so where-

The blackness muted the pale white of a limp hand as it peeked out from behind a dumpster. He leaped towards it. The hand led back into the narrow space between wall and dumpster where the shadows were too thick to decipher. Closer inspection revealed the hand as feminine with delicate fingers curled upward in natural repose. They twitched and relief spiked in him. He reached out, grabbed, and carefully pulled. Out of the dark mouth came an arm, a head of long, brunette hair, and a dress of midnight. A face turned and lifeless blue eyes stared up at him.

He dropped his hold as if burned. "Ra- Rachel?" his voice croaked with its gravel veil.

"You said you loved me," she stated in a serene, almost dazed tone.

"I do! I do love you!" he sputtered, insides writhing.

Her torso contorted and her arms planted themselves at either side of her, bent at spider leg angles as she dragged herself the rest of the way out. "But you didn't save me. You chose Gotham over me. You chose Him." In a blink she was standing before him, as small and frail as he remembered, her cloudy gaze pinning him to the spot.

"Bruce, you let me die."

"I tried to save you! I didn't know-" He choked. "I didn't, I didn't know they'd been switched."

"But you suspected, and you knew deep down that they had been. You let me die so you could hold onto this." Though her lips didn't move, he could hear the word, "Monster" hissed at him from all directions.

"I-"

She took a staggering step closer. "He killed me, and you saved Him." It didn't need to be said she wasn't talking about the dead D.A. "You should have let him fall, but you didn't."

"..."
"You didn't!" she shrieked, bursting into flame.

Gloved hands flying up to protect his eyes, he tripped backwards and slammed into something solid. An ear-splitting thunderclap sounded, and he whipped around in time to watch Joe Chill's stony face disappear into a silvery vapor and his father to fall. A familiar haunting cry erupted from his mother's mouth as she dropped to her knees by Thomas Wayne's side. Tears glistened like diamonds as they painted her face, and her hands shakily hovered over her husband's convulsing chest and the small rip in the fine material of his suit as red spread like an infection.

Icy cold fingers snaked through kevlar plates and into his chest. "... Mom, Dad?"

Accusing eyes leveled at him. His mother's beautiful face uglied with hate and revulsion. "You," she gasped, a horrible, guttural sound. "This- this is all your fault."

The icy fingers sunk through skin, muscle, bone, and snatched his heart. Frozen. He couldn't breathe.

"If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have-" Her words halted, lines creasing her face as she coughed and choked. Slowly and smoothly, like it was always meant to be there, blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Both sets of eyes drew down and landed on the scarlet rose blossoming across the silk of her blouse. She shot him a look of shocked betrayal and pointed an unsteady finger at him.

His head was shaking, slowly at first but gaining speed -wrenching his neck- as he backed away from the scene. "I didn't- I'm sorry. I'll get help. I'll fix this."

In a flash of flames, Rachel was standing by his mother's side. Hair singed; skin blackened and bleeding pus; the dress -the same one from Harvey's fundraiser- was burnt and torn. "It's all your fault."

With a flicker, both women were standing inches before him, chins tucked and staring at him menacingly. He jumped back, trapped against a wall that stretched to the sky and went for miles both ways into pitch black. He shoved against it, desperate for it to give. He needed space to think, to fix this-

"Your fault," they chorused in dead tones.

-to get away.

"You killed us."

"No!" he shouted, panicked when a set of rotted and another set of charred hands reached for him. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean for any of this!"

Rachel's melted face filled his vision. "It doesn't matter," she whispered.

His knees buckled beneath him, his arms coming up and locking over his bowed head, gauntlets sharp and protective.

At the first phantom touch, he screamed.

He looked up. He was huddled against a storefront at one of Gotham's busiest squares. It was daytime as people flooded the sidewalks and crowded the street corners waiting to cross. He rose uneasily to his feet and looked around. The citizens went about their business as if he were a ghost, a dark specter staining the pleasant picture of shopping, talking, laughing, life. His eyes slid across the crowd and latched onto someone -a stranger- staring unabashedly back at him. He tore his gaze away and found another person watching him, then another and another until the sun seemed to grow
brighter, blotting out all color with spills of white and strokes of black. He blinked.

"It's him!"

"Cop killer!"

"Weirdo!"

"What gives you the right, huh?"

"Ruling over our lives!"

"Freak!"

"Get him!"

He was running, somehow the crowd surrounding him before now behind him. The street was empty in front of him as the population of Gotham pursued him in rolling waves. The heat of the sun baked him in his heavy armor as he ran. The fitted plates groaned and cracked like clay. All of the gadgets to aid him were gone from his belt, leaving him only with his intense need to keep going, to keep his legs pumping.

The mob was at his heels, chasing him for miles -he looked up- chasing him to the shadowed asylum on the hill. He didn't think as he allowed his legs to carry him towards it. The closer he came, the farther it was until his arms and feet were scrambling up the muddy incline in desperate tandem. Gravel tore at his bared skin, caking under ripped and bleeding nails. Sinking and slipping. From the corner of his eye, the sun was setting and glowing dots of torches marked the shrinking, faceless crowd below.

He was near the top now, panting and sweating. Salty dirt clung to his unmasked face and seeped into his mouth. He reached for the edge of level earth, but his fingers sunk in and the chunk broke off in his hand. Then he was sliding, falling into waiting arms happy to tear him apart. Something scalding clamped around his wrist. Crooked, bony fingers dug into his skin as he was pulled up, up, up until he was tripping onto flat ground, the enormous asylum looming over him. He caught a glimpse of black pits for eyes and a red, crescent smile curling up to corpse-white temples before he was flung forward -spinning- and landed in a chair.

A blinding spotlight shown down upon him as leather straps bound his wrists and ankles in place. Muscles flexed and limbs jerked. His head surged forward in his struggles and froze. Poised over his pupils were twin metal rods. His blinked -eyelashes brushing the sharp points- and he knew what they were and what they did. Behind them stood a black silhouette hidden in shadows.

Sliding into the light with a cold, playboy grin was himself, a hammer in his other hand.

He swallowed hard. "Please."

With a swing and a clang of metal striking metal, the rods' points drove through his watery retinas with a squish---

Bruce sat up in his cot, panting and drenched in sweat. The whites of his eyes stood out in the semi-dark as they darted around his surroundings, seeing but not registering any of it. The phantom stab aching in eyes kept his heart racing overtime when it was only drops of sweat. Afraid to blink, he wouldn't wipe them away as his fists were knotted in the scrap of blanket the asylum provided.

"... Freddy, uh, after you?"
Pinprick pupils snagged on a shady outline propped against the far wall opposite of him. The low light played off black eyes that glittered like spilled oil and a slick tongue that toyed with the dip where mouth extended and twisted into scars. For a split second a lightening strike of terror struck him -his mind thrown back to the ghoul at the top of the hill- before logic came to consciousness and his whole being stilled. His jaw tightened and the rest of his muscles fell in sync until his shaking became a reluctant, sporadic twitch.

Just a dream. He repeated to himself, even though his heart insisted on pounding against his ribcage as the shadows playing at the corners of his vision wreaked havoc on his nerves.

This had been something of a trend for close to a year now. Nightmares were nothing new in Bruce Wayne's life. The last bit, the climbing and everything else was different and brought a whole new brand of horror with it, but he could swallow it down or keep it confined to the throbbing in his temples. Either way as long as it was away from the surface and not right there waiting for him.

"Well I'll take the, ah, sickly, bug-eyed, seen Elvis' ghost impression as a resounding... sure..."

"Shut up," he croaked, the hundred ton weight of his head was cradled in his palm as he found himself buckling under the loss of night terror adrenaline and slumping forward.

"It speaks!" the clown crowed, triumphant. That's the fastest he's ever gotten a response from his Bat not involving a well-aimed fist. This was going to be a novel experience, but then again it already was. To watch perfect monsters sleep was one thing -you could do that at the zoo- but to find they could dream. No, have nightmares... well, that was a grand discovery!

"I gotta say, watchin' you thrash and groan and, a ha, whimper..." Air hissed between stained teeth. "It was giving me the vapors."

The husky edge cutting deep into the psycho's voice bristled across Bruce's skin, splitting droplets of cooling sweat. The incident from earlier had been ignored by him for the most part, and he was doing all he could to repress the image of the scarred man splayed out, his long limbs spread and limp, pale skin and rainbow bruises bared and leading down to-

The pure white of ejaculate and that lazy grin had taken root in his mind like a road block to the rest of his thinking. The lingering musky scent was all Bruce's stilted breathing took into his lungs.

He wished he'd stayed asleep.

"So to what ghastly images do I owe my sincerest thanks to, hmm? Goblins or zombies? Oooo, it was zombies, wasn't it?" The Joker stated with an overly sympathetic nod.

"Something like that," Bruce thought, callused fingers pressing against his closed eyes, but the rasp he belatedly heard had him realizing he'd spoken aloud. It had to be the exhaustion, and the small comfort of almost darkness. Everything in Arkham was so bright and bleached and deceptively sterile. One of the light bulbs must have burnt out, and he hoped the maintenance staff was still too terrified to venture this way to fix it. He hoped for a lot of things, Alfred's weathered face springing to mind.

"Well don't keep me in suspense. Do tell."

His head inclined slightly, his ear as the lead. Not watching those split lips warp around greasy words, he could better decipher the quality of sound coming in cracked, lilting chords. They sounded different, off. Wrong, but it was always wrong, so maybe right? A huff escaped him, dragging over the dry stretch of his throat.
"Seriously, fuck my life," he thought aloud, knowing he did so this time and simply not caring that he had as he swept his hair back from his face and scrubbed the uncovered skin, hiding the sliver of teeth that broke apart his lips in wry wonder and possibly sadistic amusement, because sometimes he believed this really couldn't be his life.

"Are you talking to me, because I'm pret-ty sure I've already done a bang up job of that."

Curiosity. God, he could hear it now. He'd always thought it was childlike glee or insanity found arrogance, but fuck if the curled notes weren't inquisitive. Bruce had heard it far too much. He didn't like the fact that he could differentiate this; it scared him, and he dragged the safe haven of his hands away in hopes sight would dominate sound again.

"Oh, don't shut down on me now, dear." The clown scooted from his recline against the wall to perch on the end of his cot, arms wrapped around folded knees like an eager child ready to hear a story. "I felt like we were making some real progress."

Teeth chomped down harshly on the meaty inside of his cheek. Once the nuances were heard, they couldn't be unheard.

"Is this about your, uh... little REM scare? Talking helps. I would know, I've been through a ton of therapy. Come on, you tell Doc J every last detail, and you'll, heh heh, feel loads better."

"... he may be the only person -no, not a person, a thing like me- that understands... exactly what it's like. This... this hell."

His words from earlier that day lingered behind his lips. It felt like forever ago since he'd said them. They had flowed easily off the tongue, indistinguishable from a lie or the truth. Faced with the scarred subject, he was reluctant to admit either way, preferring to deny they ever came to existence. But they lived in his recollection and Alfred's, which was more damning.

A throat forcefully cleared. Dark eyes dancing with faux sternness flicked up to him as the clown pretended to adjust a pair of glasses on the tip of his nose, crossing his legs and poising an invisible pen over his open palm. "I'm waiting, Mr. Bat. May I call you Batsy?"

"I could have been him, and... he could have been me-"

The terror of that statement didn't strike him with its accuracy and the impossible possibility until that very moment.

"I know all the, uh, meanings of dreams. The intricacies. For example, dreaming you're falling means you don't have very good balance; flying means-"

The sweat coating his body had cooled into ice, shrinking his skin tight over muscle and sinew. His ripe-smelling, soaked t-shirt clung to his chest, compressing his lungs, breathing becoming that much more of an effort.

"-teeth falling out indicates you've got halitosis. Being eaten alive is well, uh... repressed sexual urges. It was zombies you said, right? Hmm..."

Bruce's eyes trailed the twitching, ticking choreography of spidery fingers in the air as the Joker's rambling sounded far away. He tried to focus on oxygen sipping through his nostrils and between chapped lips and filling his chest, expanding and pushing against the second skin of fabric, then flowing back out the way it came, converted into carbon dioxide. Again and again. The static of this process was magnified in his ears, interrupted by the occasional gulp popping throughout his ear canals.
"What body part did they start on? Toes? Biceps? Neck? If it was all over in one rotted teeth-chomping swoop then I think you're gearin' up for a good ol' fashioned orgy, Batsy." One bruised eye flickered with a salacious wink. Then the Joker's crooked leer bent into a perturbed pout. "Wait... that just won't do. I don't share. I guess I could forgive you if they were all cannibalistic clowns with very striking handsome features, but that's a very big IF."

As the basic process of breathing faded into the background as a mindless habit, the tunneled quality of the other man's voice returned to a normal volume and he found himself lost and at the same time disturbed by the one-sided conversation. The palm acting as a notepad returned to rest on a scuffed knee poking out from a torn pant leg, having been lost in the fluidity of illustrating his words. He was staring expectantly up at Bruce like he honestly wanted an answer to the pure psychobabble he'd been spewing, as if Bruce had been following it all along.

"Do you-" His chest flared and his Adams apple stuttered as an unexpected, breathy chuckle escaped him. The upturned corners of his mouth strained. "Do you ever listen to the shit that comes out of your mouth?"

The caricature of innocence melded with surprise. The blackened corners of dark eyes pinched slightly as they stared bemusedly at the alien, crescent shape of the vigilante's mouth.

"I tend to, ah, check out after the first syllable or two. Stifles the poetic genius, you understand." Surprisingly in that instance the lie became a brief truth, because it rolled off the tongue without thought and without going through the fun house mirror filter. The clown was far too distracted with the strip of white teeth slicing through the dark.

"No, I don't," Bruce scoffed, tearing his eyes away and abstaining from futilely rubbing the ache burrowing in his forehead.

The Joker snapped out of it when the angle of the other's face changed. A shark's grin emerged across his face. By now most of the swelling had gone down, leaving dried blood and broken vessels the color of his sorely missed suit. "Tell me I don't make more sense than Dick Horn then."

"Horn's incompetent. There's a difference."

"Ah, but you didn't say I was wrong either."

"No, because I shouldn't have to point out the irreconcilable difference between sense and nonsense."

"'The nonsense that charms is close to sense,'" [1] the clown lazily shot back despite the sharp gleam in his eye.

Bruce aimed a skeptical raise of his brow at the corner of his cell where tile met padded wall and bullet-proof glass. "That the poetic genius?"

"Nope, that was me talkin' outta my ass. See, there's a fine line."

The billionaire hung his head with a rueful quirk of his lips. Bruce was caught between the entertainment produced from pretending he was talking to someone else and the hysteria over this conversation taking place, that he was participating in it at all.

"It's all your fault."

The easy bow of his lips flattened into its familiar line.
"He killed me, and you saved Him."

That wasn't true; it couldn't be. The utter wrongness of such an idea settled in his gut like a lead weight. He couldn't believe he'd let himself momentarily be distracted from the dream, that he'd let this mad man unintentionally help him forget. It'd just been easy, seamless. Guilt wracked him again. He blinked and could almost feel the piercing ache of twin rods driving through his eye sockets.

The satisfied grin twitching one of Joker's marred cheeks froze as he could virtually watch the other man's eyes flicker and dim like the buzzing overhead light that had gone out between their cells forty two minutes ago.

"No, uh, sensible rebuttal?" he tried, but the Bat didn't seem to notice, too caught up in whatever that was now spoiling their good time. The lack of fists was new and odd but weirdly refreshing, and he wanted to see how far it could go before he'd lose interest. He suddenly found himself quite jealous of whatever was putting that despondent glaze to his Bat's stare.

"You killed us."

And that was true. The blood may not be slick and dripping in a heavy coat from Bruce's hands, but he'd always been coincidentally close enough for the violent splatters to blanket him in red damnation. Before he had always made it a point to avoid examining the horror reel that spun behind his closed eyes whenever he managed to steal some sleep, but now, for the first time, certain aspects were clicking in gross pop psychology clarity.

Was this penance? Was he always meant to be here?

"Earth to Bats. We were gettin' so good at this conversing thing."

Did it even matter what he did anymore? His earlier promise to Alfred to do better, to get out, and all the subterfuge Crane had crammed into his head in dulcet, drawling tones became suddenly overwhelming in this tiny cell across from a psychopath. It was an impossible feat to achieve when the world was against him, and he could curl up into a ball and sob in laughter over the fact that that wasn't an exaggeration at all.

"C'mon, don't leave me hanging," whined from the other side of the hall. "I'll, er, resume my professional role and we can get back to our riveting session, eh?" From his periphery, he watched as the clown mimed putting on a pair of spectacles and taking up his pen and notes. "Where were we? Oh right... really, really ridiculously good-looking clowns eating you alive. Alright, now go."

Pandering eyes peered over invisible frames in wait.

"I may not have committed half of the atrocities he has, but... I know -if I'm pushed far enough or if it fits into my justice- I'm capable of them, too. I know this. He tells me like I don't already know, like it's meant to be some huge revelation. It isn't."

His eyes lifted from their blank inspection of the floor to the man sitting across from him. The differences were obvious but were mostly based on the surface. The thing across from him was a broken, twisted creature somehow functioning in a world of dysfunction, unstoppable in chaos where broken glass replaced green grass and the sky was made up of fire. Batman was the unmovable object struggling to retain order where he crunched over the glass as he ran to put out the fire and lock up the cackling beast with the matches.

Yes, the choices make the difference, but no one ever mentions the decision rests on a razor edge. Bruce had made the right choice; he'd only made sure the sloppy patchwork concealing his own broken nature was hidden well behind plastic charm and a cowl, but the warped creature with
gnashing teeth was still there, just beneath the surface.

"I'm waiting..."

Different choices, different intentions, but they had both still ended up here: Same Arkham red jumpsuits; same cells with the same fixtures; same meals; same time constraints; the same Maximum Security unit. With it all laid out like that, he felt the same rage and hate for the jester like always, but it was watered down by the perpetual exhaustion that had been accumulating for weeks and something else. He couldn't pinpoint what that something else was though.

"Oh, and if it wasn't clear before, there's a major difference between circus clowns and, uh, mimes. One's perfectly normal, and the other is just plain sick-

"It wasn't clowns or zombies or... any of that," he interrupted quietly. His voice had wavered as fingers ground into his palm with a rolling rhythm. Images of Rachel and his mother hung in his vision but now at a distance, one he could deal with and treat with technical apathy. "... what does your dream dictionary say about lobotomies?"

The Joker looked up from his imaginary notes. His brow quirked and a smirk wiped away the frown that had unknowingly formed the longer the silence had dragged on. He shrugged and simply answered, "Erectile dysfunction, of course."

Bruce gazed at him for long moments until his bland expression shifted and cracked into a pained grin.

As the clown threw his head back and hooted, he sighed and shifted into a more comfortable position than his hunching. He had a feeling he wasn't going to get any sleep for the rest of the night and would probably regret this, but at the moment he couldn't find it in himself to care. It didn't matter what he did right now, so he settled in to interact with the one person he hated most that was looking at him now like he was the best thing the world had to offer.

The reason for his waking slowly ebbed into a distant memory.

The person who tries to live alone will not succeed as a human being. His heart withers if it does not answer another heart. His mind shrinks away if he hears only the echoes of his own thoughts and finds no other inspiration.

-Pearl S. Buck

Chapter End Notes

[1] Mason Cooley
The smooth edges of the spork whispered against the calluses of his thumb and pointer finger as it rolled in a slow rhythm in his grasp. The sound of it was lost under the cafeteria's usual commotion: chairs scraping against tile, trays slamming, plastic silverware scratching styrofoam, slurping, chewing, huffing, talking, gulping, shouting, and -if he strained enough- he could hear only one person crying today.

All loud but muted as he'd grown used to it. Like snake scales, the tiny vibrations of whispers grazed his skin.

His heavy-lidded eyes were trained on the salt-shriveled slugs that he assumed were once intended to be scrambled eggs. There was a black flake sticking out of the tip of one that he wanted to believe was just pepper.

"Well, I see you have the fidgeting down, but I think I mentioned something about the normalcy of actually eating."

He had smelled Crane coming before he'd even sat down. The frail doctor must have somehow acquired shampoo with an actual pleasant scent instead of having to use the white, generic bars of soap that served their purpose but left behind the smell of man and mold from the showers. Crane smelled almost like baby powder or vanilla; Bruce couldn't be sure of which, it'd been awhile since he'd encountered either of the two.

"Not that I particularly blame you," the smaller man continued as he directed a sneer down at his own tray. The apple held loosely in his fingers was bruised and shined with wax. When close to a minute passed without a reply, he muttered, "And we've also yet to grasp the concept of conversation."

The vigilante's eyebrows stitched together as the tines of his utensil snagged a bit of egg. "I do, unfortunately," he murmured.

"And that means what exactly?" Jonathan pretended to inspect the brown spots of the apple's overly glossy, red surface. He knew the other man clammed up under direct scrutiny. Something had happened to make the surly brute look so bemused, and he had to know what it was. The answer he received made his blue eyes snap up and his nails bite into the fruit's skin.

"We spoke last night. For hours."

It took a concerted effort to force apart the flat line of his lips to form the needless words, "With who," because it didn't take a genius to guess; he just really hoped there would be a different answer. The baleful glare he received was enough to chase the cerulean flare of his eyes throughout the rest of the room. The apple was lowered gently to the table with his hand and wrist sticky with its bled juices.

"I could have sworn I said conversing with clowns would be detrimental to your health."

He would have liked to see, out of the corner of his eye, the other man look abashed or at the very least regretful, but the spoiled playboy merely frowned while continuing to toy with his food.
"It was... strange," the tall brunet eventually said after seeming to carefully choose his words.

Jonathan wanted to spit that he'd done a poor job choosing as his eyebrow arched sardonically. "And that surprises you?"

Oh, if only looks could kill.

"Fine," the ex-doctor relented, "Tell me about it." At the instant signs of doubt, his unsoiled hand went up in a placating gesture. "I'm harmless, and it'll be good practice for your next session with Horn."

If anything the pale skin of the vigilante's mouth whitened more as his thin lips drew inward, throwing his stubble in stark contrast. Dark eyes narrowed, steady and scrutinizing the ex-psychiatrist. It was a visually explicit assessment; one watered down by dark circles and the yawn bulging in his throat.

"Didn't get enough sleep last night?" Jonathan pointed out innocently, because it was all about filling the proverbial silence and the very human need to divulge.

Well, we can be patient.

The rim of his cup of orange juice hid the small tug of full lips. Scarecrow had yet to return but in the face of the mounting days without the medication, Jonathan was uncharacteristically optimistic. It was very odd but welcome.

Wayne shifted in his chair, the points of his spork puncturing the plate. It was debatable whether thought was taking place behind those dark eyes as they stared at the shallow holes like the occurrence was highly fascinating. Jonathan only watched dispassionately when the plastic utensil was dropped. The billionaire readjusted in his seat, this time firmly smoothing his large hands over his angular face, taking an audible breath.

"What do you know about his treatment here?"

Bruce might as well have spoken Yiddish going by the bemused sheen to Crane's stare and the sharp angle of his brow.

"... Come again?"

"His treatment," he cut in, the repeated words coated in frustration, either with himself for his inability to get his meaning across or his corrosive curiosity in regards to battered flesh and off-key laughter.

"How he's treated," he tried again, "By the doctors and orderlies."

Understanding finally dawned and slid into a half-lidded smirk.

"Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane's mission is to provide the highest quality mental healthcare to the widest ranges of issues and ages. We strive to utilize treatments with the best evidence of effectiveness. We will treat patients with dignity, respect, and hold their confidentiality to the highest of standards while also ensuring the safety of others and themselves. [1]" Crane droned like he'd memorized a script.

Bruce recognized it as a fragment of the facility's extensive mission statement. The former Arkham head would know the generic platitude by heart, but the inherent sarcasm in the delivery had the vigilante gritting his teeth.
Something in his expression must have encouraged the frail man to say more, because words spilled after a reluctant roll of his crystal blue eyes. "The beatings are new if that's what you're wondering. Not because none of the orderlies had the particular urge to, but probably they've all been too afraid to. You most likely opened a floodgate and made it acceptable. Under Leland's oblivious rule, the clown's free game if you're stupid enough. The only thing that had been protecting him from such justified conduct was Quinzel, and wasn't that such a curious relationship?"

The dry implication sent unexplained prickles across the broad span of Bruce's shoulders. He'd had his suspicions, but to hear them from another person didn't reassure him. It made his eyes itch and his jaw clench and his skin to feel several sizes too small. Blatantly ignoring the unwanted comparison of his similar reaction to seeing Rachel on Harvey's arm, he focused on the blasé accusation of him being the one responsible for the Joker's current situation. He didn't make the Joker murder some faceless orderly. The Batman didn't make him do anything. Crane assumed a lot.

"It's not as if the few injuries went unprovoked. He's very trying on the best of days with half a bottle of Prozac and Ambien. It's also not as if he can't defend himself; he's told me in great detail all about your early physical interactions, so whatever wounded animal act he's putting on currently should inspire nausea, not sympathy."

At the delicately spat "sympathy," Bruce went eerily still. Through his teeth he responded in a low voice, "You think I would feel guilt over anything that happens to him? I just asked you a question; I wasn't looking to be accused of caring. It's called Curiosity."

"I-" Crane bowed his head as if chagrined. Bruce didn't really buy it, especially when a muttered apology sifted through the noise pollution of the rest of the room. "I'll just listen, but I do have to ask: What is it that he did last night?"

The taller man shrugged, hunched over the table. "He talked."

"Shocking."

Dark, set brows pulled together and wrinkled the skin of his forehead. "It was different."

Still outrageously insane but less homicidal maniac.

"I think he was trying to-" A disbelieving, crinkled grin sliced open the tight seam of his lips as he scrubbed a hand over his eyes. The word he could only think to use caught in his throat by its sheer absurdity.

"Trying to what?"

"Comfort me," he sputtered quietly, his head hanging forward with a raspy chuckle. From the pinched corners, he could spy the gaunt, haggard faces of a few of the other inmates watching. Always the spectacle.

Jonathan unconsciously sat back in his chair with a thump, his expression shocked if one had a keen enough eye to dissect the placid surface. He didn't think the clown could work so fast and effectively in just a single night.

One damn night.

Jonathan stared unblinkingly at the man across from him, aware of the diminishing curve to his chapped lips but unknowing of the sobering flashes taking place in Bruce's mind of split-lipped, salacious grins and crooked fingers framing a shiny-
"Comfort how?" Nose wrinkled, the ex-psychiatrist forced out the words like they personally offended him. "Well? Answer, because you're going to have to be more specif-

Large hands came down to slam on the table top, but they stopped just before contact, fingers curling into fists -almost strangling the air- until settling down into his lap. The chair screeched against the floor as Bruce aggressively leaned forward. "I don't know. It just was. It. It felt that way," rushed through bared teeth.

Crystal blue eyes gazed at the agitated man and eased into a slow blink. "... You do realize that that's fundamentally impossible."

Wayne looked like he wanted to hit him.

"Walk me through what happened."

A muscle in the vigilante's strong jaw ticked. His gaze steady. "How insane would you say the Joker is?"

Jonathan's reaction was precise and near nonexistent as his mind raced. "Extremely," he stated simply and watched as the other man wilted slightly and looked away. "But even though insanity warps or limits comprehension, it doesn't necessarily affect the ability to empathize."

When dark eyes landed back on him, Jonathan had to stifle the sudden urge to laugh because he now recognized the odd glint to them as hope. He had to squash it. "Unfortunately the clown is a sociopath, thus incapable of such emotion. Whatever you believed to have witnessed was only a simulation meant to manipulate you."

And just like that the fallen hero's eyes dimmed. The cut of his cheeks colored as he nodded slowly.

At a convenient crack of thunder reverberating through the walls, Jonathan pushed away his mostly untouched tray and moved to stand. "I'm going to assume your outdoor playtime is canceled. You wouldn't know how to play Chess, would you?"

His attention seemingly a million miles away, the billionaire nodded again.

"Splendid," exclaimed Jonathan with a plastic smile, wanting nothing more than to crack open the Bat's skull and take a look inside.

What had the clown done to inspire such conflict in his nemesis? Whatever it was, it was damning and the man before him was intent to keep it to himself.

Jonathan's neck twisted and stretched to ease some of the tension thrumming through him. "Well, come along then. Stanley has a habit of trying to swallow the pawns if the board's left unattended for too long."

The ex-psychiatrist walked away, knowing the other man was following judging by the venomous flare of Spencer's too green eyes as the pair approached the exit where he stood refusing to chat with the other orderlies. Behind plush lips, Jonathan's teeth ground into an enamel grit as he tried to quell much of the same unwanted emotion.

Jealousy was for the undisciplined and petty, but he was exasperatingly helpless against it at the undeniable evidence that the clown was putting more effort into the angst-ridden man behind him than he ever had with Jonathan. For granted, attention from the Joker was worse than a death sentence, but it was the principle of the thing.
Heading towards the Day Room, Jonathan focused on expert strategy for the impending chess match, because it was better than surrendering himself to the creeping bitterness of feeling replaced.

Joan Leland glanced up from her forms at the gentle but insistent knock on her door. She blinked, her eyes aching from hours of scanning and digesting the tiny print, thankful for the interruption no matter how frequent they were starting to become as of late.

"Yes?"

An auburn head poked into the small crack, Audrey's heavily made up eyes pinched with apprehension. "I'm sorry to bother you again, Dr. Leland, but she's calling again and insisting that it's urgent."

"Let me guess," she replied with a tired huff, "Doctor Quinzel?"

At the suspended psychiatrist's name, the secretary's glossy lips pulled into a sympathetic grimace and she nodded. "It's the seventh time today."

Joan didn't even need to look at the small ticking clock on her desk. "It's not even noon yet. She's never started this early. What did she say the emergency was now?"

"She wouldn't say."

Cheap, wire-framed glasses were dropped carelessly onto the desktop as her fingers massaged the agitated throb in her head that was slowly starting to become synonymous with Harleen Quinzel. She blew out a slow breath. "The last emergency was forgotten paperwork and the time before that was all her patients desperately needing her. What part of Suspension is she not understanding?" she asked herself more than the other woman waiting patiently at the door. "I, for one, would enjoy the vacation..."

"What should I tell her?"

"Just... tell her I'm out to lunch and the rest of my day is booked full with meetings. I'll return her call as soon as I'm able."

"She's going to want a time," Audrey pointed out matter-of-factly. The frequent calls from the persistent blonde had become old hat, but the latest call was discernibly different.

"Tell her around six," Joan threw out with a wave of her hand with no intentions of actually following through. She was leaving at five as per the new usual; staying after the sun went down was no longer much of an option for her well-being, physical and mental respectively. She no longer felt safe at the asylum she ran.

The secretary nodded again and moved to leave but paused, an unsure frown on her face. "Um, Dr. Leland? If you don't mind me asking... but when are you going to talk to Doctor Quinzel? It's been weeks since you put her on suspension, and I don't think you even told her for how long. I know it's none of my business, but she sounded... um, she sounded really frantic on the phone, and I think it's only a matter of time before she'll start showing up here."

The more Audrey said, the more tension ratcheted through the older woman. A long moment passed before she looked up from her blank staring at the sea of words swimming in front of her and treated her secretary to the same stoic gaze. "... You're right, Ms. Morgan, Doctor Quinzel's suspension and the length of its time is none of your concern. It is at my discretion. Now I would please appreciate it
if you would return to your work and inform me of all important calls via intercom. I'm much too busy for these face-to-face visits, I'm sure you understand."

Eyes wide with surprise and hurt, her secretary's auburn head bobbed and she hastily retreated from the open door, pulling it closed behind her.

"Oh, and-" The Arkham head piped at the last second before the door clicked. It paused, the younger woman listening on the other side but reluctant to reenter. "Please don't mention her again. That will be all, thank you."

The door clicked shut.

Ashamed of her cold dismissal, Joan jammed her spectacles back on and straightened the stack of papers waiting for her. Audrey had a point: It was unfair to put off the other psychiatrist, but she simply didn't want to think of the matter any more than she had to. Childish, yes, but the young and naive woman fought to give Patient J too much freedom, and Joan -she looked down at her damaged hand- just couldn't have that.

Later, as Jonathan was stepping into his cell, he tried to remain composed when he felt a sudden presence at his back, a brick wall of heat he'd come to associate as Spencer. His mouth pinched into a displeased moue. He was still seething at the fact that after two long games, him and the playboy billionaire had each won. He headed straight for the modest stack of books atop his nightstand and sifted through them, waiting for the other man to leave and knowing he most likely wouldn't. The looks the green-eyed orderly had steadily shot him and Wayne all afternoon had been dark and monotonous in nature. Nothing to be concerned over.

Eventually though the expectant silence got to be too much.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked through clenched teeth.

A deep breath gusted near the door. "I demand-"

"You demand."

"-that you tell me what you're doing with him."

"With who?" He tipped his head down at the out of place, mystery novel in his hand.

"You know who, the Bat."

"Oh my, do I detect a note of jealousy in your tone?" The corner of his mouth quirked, finding satisfaction in the rage the question would incite. Bitter and entirely too human emotions crept on the prickly edges of his mood at the memory of the yet to be forgotten rejection, even if it did end in his favor.

The only audible response from the seething orderly was the snapping of teeth.

Scanning the titles again, Jonathan frowned realizing he'd read them all. Well, there were the few fictional works the bleach blond had tried sneaking in amongst the actual literature, but there was no chance Jonathan would actually waste his time reading them. "I'm going to create another list of books I want you to acquire for me."

He glanced over his shoulder to find Spencer openly gazing at him, his face flushed an unflattering
red. Half syllables choked out of him. It was quite sad, he thought behind a faint grin.

"Problem?" he asked with an elegantly raised brow. After waiting a beat, he swiftly continued. "No? Brilliant, now be on your way." As he turned back, his hand moved to wave the orderly away with a dismissive flick of his wrist. The small brunet froze when a painful grip latched onto his arm.

In the brief seconds it took to test the hold of the other man's large hand and to be forcefully spun around, his mind raced through the lightening fast terror encouraged by the toxin's damage and forced itself into a relative calm. There were advantages to having the orderly on his side and the best way to go about that -his gag reflex lurched- was through sympathy.

By the time he was staring up into Spencer's heated glare, the pinch of Jonathan's eyes had relaxed into round, watery orbs that he knew would reflect well under the fluorescent lights. His chin dipped with lips pouted. He might not be able to manage trembling, but he'd studied enough pathetic patients to know how to imitate vulnerability and fright. Jonathan hadn't had much practice, but judging by the softening of green eyes, his efforts were sufficient enough.

"Just," the orderly's uncertain start conflicted with the harshness of his expression. "Just tell me whatever it is you're trying to do. Between your secret meetings with Horn and, of all people, talking to the Bat, you're not leaving me much choice but to go to the boss."

Jonathan fought the urge to snap that if the bleach blond was going to tell on him he would have done so already, but he could acknowledge the threat as still very much valid, so instead he made his eyes a little wider and awkwardly tucked his bottom lip between his teeth.

"... Is it so wrong to want to have someone to talk to?" His voice sounded disgustingly breathy and small to his own ears. "I'm not up to anything, you know that." And, damn it, that was the wrong thing to say. Too much. He should have stuck with the mute, doe-eyed creature ploy, because now the orderly was shaking his head like he was forcing away the effects of a spell. The punishing grip on his arm disappeared.

Guileless green dropped away. "Bullshit" was spat at the floor.

The pitiful act fell away like a snake grateful to shed its dead skin. The dewy sheen to Jonathan's blue eyes was eradicated with a simple blink. "Fine," he conceded flatly. "This incessant interrogating of me out of a sense of duty for an employer that would sooner flay you alive than listen to your excuses of why it's taken you so long to mention my perceived extracurricular activities or if it's some twisted, ill-founded jealousy, but in either case it's going to end now. Why, because as far as I'm concerned you work for me. The clown gave you to me, like property. Are we clear on this, or must I repeat myself more slowly and in smaller words? Perhaps include some illustrations?"

The larger man stood completely still. The only visible reaction to the acid hissed from the reemerged snake was the uneven patches of blood burning under the pale skin of his narrow cheeks. His bleach blond head ducked and his gaze trained on the ex-doctor's slippered feet. After several strained, soundless breaths his head twitched in the approximation of a nod.

"Yes, you understand or that I need to repeat myself? Use your words."

If Spencer didn't look at him, it was easier. "I. I understand."

The sneer distorting cupid's bow lips smoothed into a satisfied smile. "Wonderful. Now that that's settled, you can run along. I've better things to do than have you stupidly gawking at me."

Another grudging nod, this one made different by a flicker of eye contact. No humiliation, only
something foreign that withered the content quirk of Jonathan's mouth. Disappointment. It was hard to recognize, but he was sure of it. No one had ever been disappointed in him before. Fear, disgust, envy, hate, respect, apathy, but never that. It implied caring and expectations, and it made something he insisted labeling as Pity to swoop in his gut.

He found his mouth opening and spilling words at Spencer's retreating back before the message could be clearly formed in his brain to do so.

"If it's any consolation, what I'm doing is a more merciful and humane way of breaking his toy before he really has the chance to play with it."

The orderly stopped and turned, peering uncertainly at him, the disappointment fading somewhat. "Isn't he already? Playing, I mean."

Full lips twitched and bent as if torn between what expressive shape to adopt, eventually settling on a warped excuse for a grin.

"... You don't know him like I do."

When the first graze happened, he didn't even notice it.

His bare feet were firmly planted to the slimy tile; his body near unmoving under the cool spray of water overhead as it varied between drilling like nails into his skin and a messy, spitting trickle; olfactory fatigue made the pungent smell of mold unnoticeable; the static of water and his own breathing filled his ears; and his eyes had fallen closed awhile ago as his focus internalized to the disturbing nature of his thoughts.

They were clashing as it were.

What had happened the night before wasn't syncing as perfectly with Crane's negative assurances despite his very own logic being in firm agreement. He hadn't been joking when he said it felt like comfort the scarred psychopath had been trying to offer in the form of distractions and morbid slapstick humor, so it was difficult to disregard as easily.

Or perhaps he was softening the edges of the occurrence and adding more to it than what it was: latching onto the curiosity and ramblings of a madman. Oh god, was Bruce that starved for any sort of affection?

Was he that pathetic?

The nightmare had shook him down to the core, and, now that he was alone, the faintest recollection had to be quickly repelled to the darkest corners of his mind, because he just couldn't -couldn't- think about it. Not now, not ever.

His faraway expression cracked into a self-deprecating grin. For a second there he almost associated a reassuring presence with the Joker-

At the second touch, he felt it and jerked violently from the unexpected brush against the nape of his neck. He whirled around -almost slipping and getting a mouthful of metallic water- to blink away the drops clumping his lashes.

He found himself no longer alone in the shower room.
"Couldn't resist, but a bit-tuh skittish. Don't think I like that all too much..." The contemplative words rose barely above the patter of water.

Dark eyes flared and strained in their sockets. His skin numb to the blast of boiling water against his side from the temperamental shower head. He remained rooted to the spot, stubbornly keeping his gaze from drifting any lower than a busted smirk.

"Now don't let me interrupt; I'm just here to, uh, enjoy the show."

Bruce couldn't help it: His trained stare flickered downward, quickly digesting snatches of rainbow-bruised flesh; a jutting hipbone that looked as if it could slice clean through the pale, paper-thin skin stretched over it; twitching fingers brushing the line of a skinny thigh; battered, knobby knees; and touching on the thatch of dark blond hair (why did he think it would be green?) and the intimidating length hanging soft at its center.

Confusion drew his brows together until his eyes started to burn and he realized he'd been staring, so he forced himself to turn away. Training and instinct instilled in him to never turn your back on your enemy, so his body angled itself towards the wall while he kept watch from the corner of his eye. With the psychopath's own wandering gaze in sight, the vigilante just then became horrifyingly reminded of his own nudity. His large hands casually moved to block the other's view of his privates.

"Wh..." His voice failed on the first try, completely at a loss for what to do. Michael had promised him he'd be alone. An outright physical attack Bruce could handle, but this quiet observation that had been going on for who knew how long while he was off in his own little world sent his pulse racing and a disconcerting rush of self-consciousness he didn't recognize at first cloud his thinking. Not many people had ever seen him this... exposed.

"What are you doing in here?"

The last time he and the clown had been in the same room without barriers, it had ended in split knuckles, fried nerves, and blood. Last night might as well never happened at that moment.

From his periphery, wiry arms flung themselves outward in exaggerated innocence. "Can't a guy come... and get clean?"

Bruce's hackles rose more if that was even possible, especially eying the beatific smile that might have once been pleasant if not for the lack of hygiene and the scars twisting out from each corner, marking the madness underneath. His lips tucked together in a flat line as he tried to carefully slide a little farther away, his eyes darting to the exit.

"And what can I say? I'm a social creature. I like to talk, but who do I converse with when you're away, Batsy? I'm, ah, self-actualized, so there's not much for me to say to me at this point, but I suppose I could- I could try to muster a little conversation there... so aside from myself, Gross Greg, and a little green spaceman named, Kazoo [2], there's only you to, uh, fill the void."

His hand came up to shield the side of his warped mouth as if telling a secret. "And just between you and me, I think Greg tossed me in here so you could, ahem, teach me a lesson -the kinky bastard- but little does he know how you and I are practically BFFs now."

At that horrible smile, Bruce more than found the motivation to leave, having slid far enough away that an attack from behind wouldn't go undetected. He tentatively started to make his way to the blessed exit. He couldn't believe what he'd been thinking before as madly twinkling eyes crawled over his retreating back. The unnerving sensation sped up his feet slapping wetly against the tiles.
The Joker's voice rang proudly over the showers. "If I'da known you would be so much fun, I would've ratted your pretty ass out to Gordon sooner."

The vigilante stuttered to a halt. His naked silhouette stark and imposing in the fog of steam. Hands balled into fists at his sides, he craned his neck and glared menacingly over his shoulder. If one listened closely enough, they would hear the crack of his jaw as it shifted to allow grated words to sift past bared, perfect teeth.

"... You did what?"

Smug Cheshire grin in place, the clown could only fit in a loose, helpless shrug before a roaring, pale blur rushed forward, slipped, and dragged him down. The air was squeezed out of him with the weight of the tall brunette and the hard impact of the tiles as they skidded across the floor. Welcomed blunt fingers dug close to his jumping throat. With a breathless laugh, the Joker blinked repeatedly and strained to peer through the downpour of water from the shower head they landed under.

Bruce's dark hair hung forward in a dripping flop while a solid stream of water framed his angular face from the water raining down upon his back. This hardly bothered him, glaring down at the scarred psychopath beneath him.

"You! You did this to me?" he shouted with a shredded voice.

"Well, technically, you did this to you. I just told people about it," answered the jester with a happy grin.

All this time he'd been convinced it was Coleman Reese that turned him in. All this time he'd been silently cursing a practical stranger under his employ; a life he didn't have to save and almost regretted doing so if it would have kept his secret that much safer. Now Reese's name had never been mentioned in relation to his arrest, the court proceedings only stated an "Anonymous Tip," so Bruce had only assumed it to be the greedy, little man considering all that Lucius had told him of their encounter. The anger over such a betrayal had been reconciled for the most part. Bruce understood human nature and all the faults that came with it. If Lucius (and by proxy Bruce) wasn't going to bow down to Reese's extreme demands, it only made sense he would take his blackmail material elsewhere for a profit.

Bruce had come to terms with the fact that everything he'd built had fallen down around him in exchange for petty money and maybe even a little notoriety, but for him to find this out now... to find out how grossly mistaken he was. His life didn't end for a hefty payday.

It was ruined for the fun of it.

"You... you really didn't know?" The Joker lifted his head at a curious angle, straining his neck and squinting up at him in disbelief. "Really?"

Whatever answer he discerned from the sharp lines of rage carved into the fallen hero's face, his head thumped back and a drawn out "Wow" lagged dryly from his throat. "I just assumed... well, you know what they say when ya assume: You make an ass out of you and... heh heh." He didn't finish due to the surge of strength squeezing finger-shaped bruises onto both of his narrow shoulders. A responding groan curdled deep in his chest, the tingling from that even more acute lower down, twitching and swelling.

"And here I-" His tongue swiped along his lips, tasting an imagined flavor from the water that drip-dropped from his Bats snarling mouth. "Here I thought you were being rude. Well, in that case then, it needs to be said: You. Are. Welcome."
The fury-numb stupor he'd fallen into broke, and Bruce's head reared back in shock. "What?"

"You're welcome," the clown helpfully repeated. "Now you say 'Thank you.'"

"'Thank you'? Thank you for what?"

"Why, thanks for this and that and here and there and us everywhere." Flashing a stained smile, the Joker bucked his hips without warning.

Bruce's temper sky-rocketed with the clown's candid claim for gratitude, mercury shooting up to the thermometer's bulb and exploding through the fragile glass, but, after the sudden movement beneath him, it froze in icy shards prickling across his bare, wet skin.

Something blood-warm and slippery poked and skidded against the sensitive skin behind his sack.

Slitted eyes sprang open. Chilling awareness of their positions and extreme lack of clothing sliced through the red haze, and dread formed as a nauseating knot in the pit of his gut. Right then he damned his ability to come to fast conclusions, because that really could have been only one thing. His findings were confirmed by a crooked smirk and another quick jab to the hard muscle of his inner thigh.

The Joker hummed as their eyes met and together their synchronized gazes trailed down between their bodies. Bruce held himself up rigidly, feeling a foreign warmth flood through him and watching in dawning horror as his own prick started to harden just above the clown's lying red and terrifying against his flat, bruised stomach. Only an amused snort from the man below him tore his saucer-wide eyes up to that forever smiling face to find smug eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

The steel grip of the brunet's fingers released the mad man as if burned. Bruce could feel the blood pumping through his veins heating and picking up speed and the burning beginnings of a cramp building with the instinctive need to thrust.

When curled lips parted, he panicked.

Frantically grabbing two fistfuls of slimy hair, he slammed the knave's head against the tiles with a sickening crack. Instantly that scarred face slackened and hazel eyes fell closed.

Sure of the other man's unconsciousness, the vigilante scrambled unsteadily to his feet. His legs wobbled, and his head spun as he staggered back from the prone, naked body on the floor. Synapses were firing in a frenzied, aimless rush that threatened to split his skull if he stood there staring any longer. In mechanical, jerky motions, he turned and ran from the crushing static and steam of the showers.

Cold air enveloped his body upon exit, but he hardly noticed, slipping and sliding into the connecting bathroom area of sinks and stalls, clutching his rolling stomach as saliva pooled thickly in his mouth. Thankfully no one seemed to be around as he crashed into an empty stall, catching himself on the grimy pipes above the toilet and dropping to his knees.

Behind the door that banged closed behind him, the sound of retching and dry-heaved sobs disrupted the quiet and mixed in ugly harmony with the soft roar of the nearby showers.

Chapter End Notes
[1] Taken and adjusted by the Behavioral Health Center's website
[2] A character from the Flintstones cartoon
"What's the fucking point of decaf?" Michael grumbled, glaring down his nose at the cup of black coffee in his hand, its surface rippling as he leaned against the small kitchenette of the orderlies' equally small break room.

A new hire, Chad or Shane or something, grunted in possible agreement from the end of a lone fold-out table, barely glancing up from his phone.

Not that that really bothered Michael. It was just nice to have someone to indiscriminately bitch to that wouldn't try to one-up his misery, namely his girlfriend, even if said someone wasn't paying much attention.

After deciding against another sip of the useless, bitter brew, he tossed the rest onto the near to overflowing trash can, unconcerned by the fact majority of the remains splashed onto the wall and floor. The place was a dump anyway.

"Like non-alcoholic beer, fuckin' pointless," he added with a yawn.

From the other side of the room, a more enthusiastic snicker was heard, either because of what he said or from what the younger guy read after the ding of a new text; it didn't matter much.

"Later, man," Michael tossed over his shoulder, heading for the door and ignoring the distracted farewell he received in return.

The short, unscheduled break was over. Time to retrieve his charge.

His steps slowed upon turning down the hall that led to the bathroom facilities. Thick eyebrows drew together at the small crowd gathered outside the entrance, he realized with a sinking feeling, to where he was headed.

Where he left Wayne stupidly unattended.

Shit. He needed this damn job.

With that thought on repeat in mind, he picked up the pace and pushed through the mix of low-level inmates holding their toiletries and the few orderlies needed to handle such a group. Cursing and shoving, he broke through the last gawking wall of bodies just inside the large bathroom; their heads angled this way and that, the stalls and the showers, but giving both areas a wide berth.

"Get outta the way! Move- fuck..." He came to a halt as his eyes swept over the form of a pale, limp body on the floor of the shower room -relieved to realize No, it wasn't Wayne- and continued on to the stalls, praying he was there.

Tuning out the murmurs of the men gathered around, he moved slowly to the only closed door, pressing his fingertips against its paint-chipped surface. Save for the steady, wet patter of the showers, the room instantly fell silent at the rusty whine of the door's hinges.

Michael didn't know what to expect as the door ground open -his brain went a bit wild- but it wasn't... that.

Face set, lips pinched, he glanced inside once more before he drawing it closed again. He walked over to the cluster of voyeurs straining their necks to peer around him. "Everyone needs to get out,"
he directed to the crowd at large.

Amongst the confused stares, Ben, another towering colleague in white, stepped forward. "We're on a schedule, man. What the hell's going on?"

"You know about as fucking much as me, but I still need everybody gone."

"Dude, not gonna happen. These skeazy fucks only shower twice a week. Show some fuckin' sympathy for me. This is happening. Besides, the clown's knocked the fuck out in there." He thumbed at the still figure in the adjoining room. "Could be fakin', who knows. I got no idea where the hell Greg is or how you guys let whatever this is happen, but I still can't leave you alone."

Michael had to swallow back the reflexive bark to tell them once again to get out, because Ben was actually being the reasonable one here. Luckily, he wasn't being protocol-heavy, and the "fast-paced" world of being an orderly wasn't a particularly competitive one since Ben could easily fuck him over with this and he didn't seem like he was about to do so.

Where the fuck was Greg anyway? This was more his fault.

"Fine, can you just-" He raked his hand through his hair. "Just clear a path or something?"

"Yeah, Mike, sure," Ben answered quickly, looking at him with a strange expression. "I sent Steve and Joey to look for Greg and to grab a gurney to clean up that thing." From this distance, the circus freak looked dead, not that they would be heartbroken over it if it happened to be true. Jared's death over seemingly nothing was still a bit too fresh in all their minds.

With a grim nod, Michael strolled over to where he could see the modest stack of clothes and towel Wayne had brought in with him a mere twenty five minutes ago. The orderly was dreading this. He paused to watch Ben hustle the convicted rapists into the farthest corner with their hands and noses pressed against the wall. They were main priority, and the rest were ushered to the side, some even out the door for space.

The cursory image his eyes caught had stayed the same, but this time as he slipped through the groaning crack in the door, he could take in the details. It was funny, just this morning they were advertising on TV an in-depth exposé on billionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne, this upcoming Sunday night. As Michael cautiously eased inside the stall -brushing his hand against the taser on his belt- he was pretty sure their hour-long special wouldn't cover anything like this.

Wedged between the wall and grungy toilet, putrid vomit left fermenting in the bowl, curled up in a disjointed ball of dripping, naked limbs was Wayne. Bruised knees hid his face from view as his fingers knotted in the almost black tangle of his hair, pulling and tugging. Stretches of waning muscle and pale skin appeared dull and sticky in the industrial light.

Michael tried to mentally superimpose the image of the cocky, charismatic asshole Gotham would have bent over backwards for with this huddled inmate sitting bare-ass on black-sludge tile, rocking and unaware.

"Damnit," cursed the orderly under his breath, flinging the clothes he brought with onto his shoulder and leaving the towel in his hands. "Wayne, get up."

The guy might have twitched, but that could have been paranoia seeing things. Unfolding the towel and holding it in front of himself like some lame, threadbare shield, the orderly inched a little closer. Two big guys in a dinky stall, one being an unstable crime fighter who was -oh yeah- fucking buck naked and unresponsive wasn't doing much to keep him cool.
"Come on, man, let's get ya covered."

Still nothing. The other man's broad shoulders tensed, having sensed his growing proximity, but he didn't even move much more than that. Michael immediately nixed the idea of actually touching the dude; Wayne could dislocate his arm and -once again News Flash- Michael wasn't going to happily put his hands on a naked guy. Awkward. It was hard enough looking at him without, like, looking at him.

He could hear the shuffle of numerous feet and grumbling just outside and sense Ben's impatience by his snapping voice. Michael's fists curled into the towel -straining the material- because anything that happened to Wayne was on his head. If the higher ups heard about this, Michael wouldn't know what to say and any explanation would be met with immediate termination and a severance check (if he was that lucky).

A steady paycheck was worth more than a few broken bones.

"Fuck it," he huffed before stooping down and basically taking his life into his own hands by gripping Wayne's shoulder and tugging. His skin was cold and clammy to the touch. "Up. I'm not gonna tell you again." The demand would have been more convincing if not for the slight tremor in his voice and how quickly he let go when the muscle under his palm jerked. Feeling the sudden pounding of his heart, he struggled to get a hold of himself with a mental shake of his head and a scowl.

Despite popular belief, Michael wasn't as dumb as he appeared.

"Look, I don't know what the hell happened here -and yeah, that's partly my fault- but I really doubt you wanna still be here when they wake up Chuckles out there, so how bout you pick your ass up and we'll go somewhere else?"

After what seemed like forever passed and he was convinced his words had fallen on deaf ears, the vigilante slowly moved his head revealing dark, shell-shocked eyes. There was no more of a response from him save a painful cracking of joints as the large man unfolded from the tight squeeze he wedged himself in and stood up on shaky legs. The orderly was too amazed by the sudden movement to avert his eyes.

Michael was struck by the weird, random thought that the man reminded him of his girlfriend's kid when he occasionally slept over and woke up in the middle of the night from a bad dream: his shoulders drawn, eyes a blank terror, looking small and pitiful, and making Michael feel just as at a loss and useless.

"Come on." His harsh tone from earlier softened as he wrapped the towel around his charge. The towel wasn't exactly big enough but it covered everything that counted. The walk out would be bad enough; the least the orderly could do was preserve what little dignity the fallen hero had left, right?

With one arm holding the towel closed, the other draped over hunched shoulders, he guided the other man carefully out of the narrow doorway. The utter stillness that took the room upon their shuffling exit was eerie. The lack of noise was almost deafening, but Michael could feel the numerous pairs of crazed eyes crawling over the man at his side and by proxy himself. Not that Wayne noticed, fixing glassy eyes down on the ground.

It took firm urging on Michael's part for the vigilante to move like a rusted, mechanical doll, dragging his feet and seemingly oblivious to both orderlies' barked demands for the other inmates to stay back. While passing, out of the corner of his vision, Michael registered the unconscious clown hadn't yet been moved from his pruning sprawl in the showers. Needless to say he kicked up the pace through
the small, parted sea of criminals just in case the maniac was faking.

Once out in the hall, it got at the same time easier and harder. The journey, though slow going, wasn't particularly long or complicated. It was the unavoidable obstacles that came in the form of people: Doctors, patients, nurses, other orderlies, and a lone janitor. They all halted their activities in order to stop and stare. Michael wished the towel was bigger or that he had pushed more to get Wayne dressed. All of them gawking at the stunned hero like he was a fascinating freak show exhibit... it was enough to make him sick.

The population hindering them dropped off to nothing once they reached the Maximum Security wing. Michael left Wayne leaning precariously against the wall as he fumbled with the key card and security code. As soon as the buzzer sounded, he reached for the handle to only find it already turning and the heavy door swinging open. He stumbled back with a cuss.

Doctor Horn stood in the gaping doorway, clearly startled, his pale eyes bypassing the orderly entirely and widening upon Wayne.

"What-" He paused to clear his throat. "What's wrong with him?"

"Shouldn't you be telling me?" Michael wanted to retort, but all he could manage was a low, "Um..."

"Well, what on earth happened?"

"Uh..."

"Never mind. Get him decent and bring him to my office." The older doctor moved past, careful not to brush against the orderly and still remain on the opposite side of the hall from his patient sinking slow inches to the floor.

"But-" Michael whirled around to follow, but stopped short at the fleeting sight of the small, nondescript bag Horn was trying to hide behind his back. Hiding it not from Michael but from Wayne. Nonplussed, he narrowly dragged his gaze away and focused on the psychiatrist before he ran off. "I-uh- I don't really think that's a good idea. Wayne, he... I mean, look at him. I think he should just chill out and get his shit together before you go poking him or whatever."

At that, Horn paused to shoot him an offended glare. "Excuse me? Last time I checked, I am Bruce's doctor and as his doctor it is in my opinion that he is in need of an emergency session to express himself while his thoughts and emotions are still fresh."

Wayne looked catatonic and a little gray around the edges.

"Now get him dressed and then straight to my office." Horn snapped before departing.

Michael was a twenty five year-old college drop-out surviving on just over minimum wage. He didn't really have much in him to argue with the man.

So with a tired sigh, he used all of his strength to hike up the unyielding sack of muscle and bone that was Wayne. "C'mon," he grunted, taking on more of the billionaire's weight than previously. Michael was sweating by the time he hobbled them just inside the door of Max Security. Already feeling overheated and sore, he considered that privacy to be enough and decided to dress Wayne right there in the hall.

Thankfully this time Wayne remained upright against the plexiglass of one of the cells, the side of his face mashed against it. Michael focused on busying himself with shaking out the inmate uniform he'd brought with, between the glass and the weight of his head, Wayne looked as if he were
smiling a rubber-stretching half smile, exposing teeth and gum and the wet insides of his cheek.

Inching the uniform onto the bigger man was like dressing an over-sized Ken doll, not that Michael would admit to knowing such but he did grow up the only boy amongst four sisters so that was the best alternative compared to them ganging up on him. Wayne's limbs were stiff and unaccommodating as the orderly got more creative than he thought covering a dude's bare ass warranted. Most of the time he scowled and muttered, "Work with me here" and "Are you fucking kidding me," especially after he couldn't resist glancing down between the billionaire's legs with an assessing eye and feeling a little less sorry for the other man. When you're that rich, it's only fair to have a small dick. Life wasn't fair.

Finally finished, Michael rose from his crouch, sweating and irritated. He gave a cursory glance over his work. "Well..." His eyes traveled from Wayne's bare feet up to the visible fistfuls of fabric yanked over wet skin and where the moisture bled through the bright red material like bullet wounds, landing on his still empty expression. "... shit," he finished with a resigned sigh.

---------------------------------------------

Richard Horn was struggling to stay in his seat after fifteen minutes of anxiously flitting around his office adjusting anything he could get his hands on from the bronze bust of a man whose name he didn't know to the neglected files of other patients on his desk. He was fiddling with his fountain pen, indecisive of whether it should be parallel or perpendicular to the new, anorexic replacement of Wayne's file when that long awaited knock came at his door. When it opened, he only had eyes for one of the two, tall men standing there.

"Bruce!" He smiled. "Please, have a seat."

The orderly at Bruce's side looked at his charge uncertainly before nudging him with his shoulder. Nothing happened for dangerously close to a minute -Horn's smile twitching- until the billionaire moved a halting step inside the room and stayed there. Dark eyes staring through the floor and his mouth a flat, colorless line.

"All right, if you prefer to stand..." though he didn't care for it. After aiming an impatient glare at the orderly to leave, Horn focused all of his attention on the man blocking the now closed door.

"So," he started and cleared his throat, ignoring the prickles of discomfort across his skin. "Bruce, would you like to tell me what happened earlier?" The condescending inflection to his voice came natural to him even though the older doctor genuinely wanted to know. He had no idea. He probably should have interrogated the orderly a bit more, but Richard believed in having as little contact as possible with the gigantic guards and he was sure they disliked him just as much he disdained them.

No, it was better to hear it straight from the patient even though it was disregarding the fact the narrative would be wholly unreliable.

But the angle was all wrong: his neck was craned all the way to the right where the door was and where Wayne stood dauntingly tall over his seated position.

"Bruce, won't you please take a seat?"

How was he to continue otherwise?

When the other man did little more than stand and breathe, Richard cast a nervous eye to the slip of neat, compact writing partially hidden under his waiting notes. Something Doctor Crane had stressed to him came to mind.
"Now you must be firm with him. His vigilantism stems from a certain lack of respect for authority figures, most likely due to his parents' deaths at such a young age." Crane had paused, his ever present smirk deepening a darker shadow. "His life currently lacks direction. The curtain has fallen. The safety net has snapped. The spell is broken. He needs to be told what to do."

"I'm going to have to insist you sit down."

Nothing.

The psychiatrist wet his lips, seeing another session slipping away before it even started. Worry raced through his veins in an itching rush.

"Dominance must be established."

"Bruce. Sit. Down." The demand tore from his throat like the beginning burn of a coughing fit. He breathed and struggled to swallow around it. Then again the scratchy, near unbearable feeling and the bit of sweat forming at his brow could be that very same fear he felt that first day when he called the man before him a bat and here he was- shouting? Ordering him about?

The older doctor didn't dare move as he watched the intimidating lack of response to his outburst. What had he been thinking, listening to Crane- the Scarecrow?- of all people? Believing all that psychological jargon about Wayne possessing a lizard brain disguised as an analytical mind. It was outrageous, absurd, Freudian. Crane was obviously wro-

With a forced bob of his head, the tall vigilante shuffled to the open chair and dropped down into it like a puppet with its strings cut. Slumped forward and listing to the side, his exhaustion-bruised eyes focused on the awkward angle his long legs had carelessly folded into as his hands held a white-knuckle grip on both sides of his seat.

The shock of his compliance was written plainly on Horn's face. The old man could only manage sitting and gaping at the abrupt turnaround this session was from the last.

"There's a reason why I've sat here so many times watching you listen to yourself talk and you've yet to build a rapport with me: I'm not insane and you're incompetent. Don't ever condescend to me again."

Then Horn had run to Crane. He could recognize that as the turning point from then and now. The older man glanced down at the list of questions written by the mad scientist's hand and pulled it closer like it was the New Testament.

"Where shall we begin, hmm?" He scanned the list of somewhat brash questions. As an after thought, he picked up his pen and scribbled down a single -but promising- line in his notes, grinning proudly as he did.

The vigilante didn't seem to register the doctor's apparent excitement, his arms straining as he held himself in the chair. They were the only force opposing the gravity that wanted to drag him down to the floor and keep him there.

Face empty. Thoughts empty. Eyes empty.

Pen still held at attention, Horn started at the top of the list with -in his opinion- the most simple question, but as they penetrated Bruce's ears as a garbled echo, it was the most complicated.

"How are you?"
The corner of Bruce's eye pinched, and the pursed muscles around his mouth flickered into a
damaged grin before his face went inevitably slack again.

The pen sagged in Horn's grip. He knew he very well couldn't continually yell commands at his
patient, but with his back metaphorically against the wall with Leland and that rich, old butler
breathing down his neck... The prospect of straining his vocal chords like a drill sergeant and
demolishing all sense of propriety for just the slightest bit of progress was becoming more appealing
with each passing, silent second. Re-reading the list of questions that literally built off of each other,
he began to panic.

And with panicking came sweating and a healthy dose of helplessness.

At the bottom of Crane's list was a tiny sentence marked by an understated asterisk. He had to adjust
his glasses and squint to make it out.

*When all else fails, re-introduce the possibility of couples therapy with the clown.

Would that even work? Horn wasn't sure what circumstances would call for "When all else fails,"
but at this point with his patient appearing a million miles away, now was as good as time as any.

"Bruce," he started, rubbing nicotine-stained fingers over his mouth, breathing in the chemical odor.
The speculative look he shot at the other man was delivered through a hard squint. "How would you
feel if I were to reinstate the joint therapy sessions with Patient J? They would be supervised by me,
of course-"

The words had barely left the psychiatrist's mouth before -with a glimpse of pure alarm- the stoic
billionaire was up out of his seat and over the large desk. Horn could hardly spare a glance for the
knocked over lamp and papers once his world exploded into black spots and blinding white pain. His
high-pitched yelp was drowned out by the crisp crack of his nose, the cartilage and bone clashing
and splitting skin into what had to be his forehead. The force of the blow knocked him back into his
chair sending both to flip to the ground. The scent of calming tobacco clinging to his hands flying up
to his face was smothered by the blood clogging and gurgling in his airways.

Over his own shocking agony, Richard could hear faraway shouting, the commotion of different
pairs of feet and feel the corner of his desk ram into his hip from someone banging into it. It went on
for minutes packed into several, frantic heartbeats before the thrumming in his skull and his own
whimpers were the only sounds in the room.

It also didn't escape his attention that, with all of the orderlies that had just been in his office, none of
them had stopped to check on him.

Eventually, once he realized no one was coming to help him, he weakly pulled himself up with the
aid of his desk -his wet hands clinging to some papers- and staggered to the Infirmary, having the
nurse there squeal and clean him up. Later he'll return to his office and put his desk back in order,
gathering up the papers from Wayne's file and cringing over the notes with the single line he'd
written with pride not too long ago now smudged and spotted with carmine.

Patient is finally showing signs of cooperation.

But for now he was reluctantly making his way down an increasingly familiar row of rattling and
howling doors to the only quiet one. He had to inform Crane the device had been installed in
Wayne's cell, but its usefulness would have to be put on hold until his patient was out of Solitary
confinement.
With a throbbing headache and his nose a poorly bandaged, smashed tomato, it turned out the Joker wasn't the only one in the asylum prone to bust out into fits of laughter. And since it was the often grim Jonathan Crane doing the cackling, it was all the more terrifying.

-----------------------------------------------------------------

The orderlies hadn't been gentle. More punches to the gut, kidneys, and his "pretty boy face" were thrown than necessary, but then again he had to put up enough of a fight to be removed from the populace but not so much that tranquilizers or -never again- tasers had to be used. He struggled for show when they wrestled him into the increasingly familiar binds of a strait jacket, and he only relaxed when they unceremoniously dumped inside a padded room.

With his legs tangled with each other -arms useless- and his cheek mashed into the semi-soft floor, breathing in the musty scent, Bruce felt the safest he had in a long time.

Not only did these four walls insure he couldn't get out, but with the dangerous implication of being in Solitary, it warded others from coming in.

The bitter taste of adrenalin was slowly fading from the back of his tongue. He lifted his head only to let it thunk back down to the floor. The move did nothing for his headache except settle the panic still sending small micro bursts throughout his system. That's what he'd done in Horn's office. Panicked. It's what he'd done in the showers-

He wasn't- No, he wasn't going to think about that.

Glassy eyes traced the seams where wall met wall and wall met ceiling, all the while under the layer of nothingness were flashing images he didn't allow himself to take a closer look at.

Fingers squeezing bony shoulders; a water-blurred grin; droplets puddling in the shadowy divots of scars; the poke of something hot and foreign against frighteningly sensitive skin-

More images came with the ghost of sensations, and he could almost feel his blood cells tear apart in their confusion to rush to his face and plummet downwards at a dizzying rate. The more he tried to ignore it, the more the strap between his legs secured by the buckle at his spine cut into his circulation. Teeth clenched, he wriggled into a sitting position, eyelids slamming shut with the sloshing in his head and him grunting pathetically from the painful -good, really good- friction from the strap cradling his balls and shifting and pulling against his embarrassingly-sprung erection. His pinned arms jerked reflexively within their confines, struggling, fingers cramping in their fists to touch or claw his own skin off, he didn't know. Bolts of anger flared in his temples and zipped down his spine forcing him to wiggle and fight the unyielding material thereby making the pressure that much worse. He growled and pulled and bit at the air.

Acidic emotions swirling in his chest ate away at his calm, his common sense, his self-restraint until, at the pinnacle of his exertion, one curious, nagging question popped in his head:

What would have happened if he hadn't knocked out the clown when he was beneath him, prone and vulnerable but the one in total control?

The thrashing vigilante instantly stilled, the spikes of heat unexpectedly generated from such a thought still prickling across his sweat-slick skin. He laid there, red faced with a string of drool connecting his panting mouth to the floor.

It was the fluorescent lights that made his eyes sting and water like that.

At least, that's what he told himself.
Since he was orphaned, sympathetic well-wishers had made it a common theme to tell him that his parents weren't truly gone, that they were always watching over him.

Never before now was he so grateful that he never believed it.

The picture he must make at that moment.

"Why do we fall, Bruce?"

Craning his neck and burying his face into the padded floor, he gave up and simply let the tears fall.

"I'm losing my goddamn mind," he admitted to the empty room, a raspy chuckle escaping and scraping his throat raw.

O, hark! what mean those yells and cries?
His chain some furious madman breaks.
He comes-I see his glaring eyes:
Now, now, my dungeon grate he shakes.
Help! Help! He's gone! O fearful woe,
Such screams to hear, such sights to see!
My brain, my brain,-I know, I know
I am not mad but soon shall be.

-Matthew Gregory Lewis, The Maniac
"Just to make myself clear," Leland started, "Incidents such as this are to be reported to me as soon as they occur."

Richard could feel his face grow hot and his broken nose twinge. "What, this?" He cleared his throat and struggled with the pathetic whimper that tried to escape when he pasted on a nicotine grin. "This, this was... I was unfortunately a victim of a mugging on my way home last night. What this city has come to, absolutely dreadful. Well, while I do appreciate your concern..." He rose to his feet, eager to be out of her office. "The experience has left me terribly drained, and I have plenty of work to be done. Good day, Doctor-"

"So I'm to take it as pure coincidence that Mr. Wayne was sequestered in Solitary and two orderlies had to be rushed to the Emergency Room yesterday?" Her tone was unimpressed and just this side of disappointed. The sound of that low pitch grated on him like scratching nails on a stretch of sensitive, rash-ravaged skin.

In brash defense, he whirled around and spat, "I'll have you know that this," he gestured vehemently at his face, "is progress."

That was actually the last thing he would call it, but Crane had chortled and insisted otherwise.

"Progress?" Leland parroted and aimed a dubious eye at the bold, multi-hued bruise that enveloped his nose and spread to the inner corners of his eye like a Rorschach inkblot. His wife had screamed when she saw him and his youngest had wanted to poke it.

"Yes! By initiating physical contact, Bruce revealed to me some of the triggers to his rage thereby giving me a starting point in which to, um, penetrate and explore."

Leland's dark gaze studied his red, almost panting face; a stare of perturb and skepticism. All Horn saw was a dumb look on her round face. "Richard, if that's the case, why lie about it?"

"You may be the administrator of this asylum, but Bruce is my patient and I refuse to violate his confidence just because you have nothing better to do other than breathe down my neck."

Leland sat there in silence not looking the least bit offended or irritated. Finally she sighed. "You know who else made it a poor habit to withhold information about their patient? Doctor Quinzel. I would truly hate to have to suspend, or worse, fire, another one of our limited staff."

Horn’s mouth flew open with a cut-off gasp of outrage. He didn't know whether to pounce on the thinly veiled threat or challenge the woman on how dare she compare him to that blonde, bouncy, bubble-headed bimbo. He keenly felt the throbbing vein in his wrinkled forehead. Insults cluttered his throat, none of them separating and coming through. The infuriating thought of if he hadn't lied, Crane's explanation might have worked cut through the sexist slurs. Then he remembered an interesting little tidbit the mad doctor mentioned of his undeserving successor.

"Mighty convenient wouldn't you say for my patient to have such a new, close neighbor when said neighbor was mandated to be kept down in the basement and have minimum contact with the rest of the Arkham population."
At that, Leland showed the beginning hints of alarm in the whites of her eyes.

"I wonder how Patient J managed to move on up so fast and easily. Do you have any idea, Joan?"

Wine red lips disappeared into a frightened line.

"No?" Horn bared his teeth. "Then I suggest you ponder that while I continue on with my work, uninterrupted. Have a nice day."

And with that there wasn't much more left to say.

--------------------------------------------------------------

Two weeks later.

The slot to the observation window opened with a metallic shriek that made him cringe.

Michael's curiosity had been overwhelming by the time he returned to work after a too long suspension without pay. He'd clocked in this morning, grunted a few hellos, sneered at Greg (the fucktard), sat through a stern warning from his supervisor about slacking off, and then he immediately found himself heading towards Solitary to check on Wayne.

When the quiet seemed to easily swallow the sound with no repercussions, the first thing he registered was his nose huffing and rejecting the stench of sour meat. The orderly pulled away and glanced down, noticing a corner of a cafeteria tray peeking out from the meal delivery slot. The Salisbury steak, spotted vegetables, syrupy fruit cup, and juice remained untouched. He knew all the restraints had been removed. Yeah, the food was nasty, but the guy had to be a little hungry. The substitute orderly assigned to the vigilante reported returning full trays.

Michael wanted to keep his distance from the open slot and try to see inside that way, but he only managed a narrow view of the padded walls and no glimpse of Wayne. Frustrating as that was, there was no way he was going to press any closer. He'd seen enough movies to know better than to stick his hands or press his eyes up against any holes where you're not sure what's on the other side.

"Wayne?" he called out and wasn't surprised when he didn't receive an answer, though he was actually kind of thankful for that. What was he doing here anyway?

Just then the desolate glaze to the fallen hero's eyes that had been haunting him for the past two fucking weeks came to mind.

Michael turned to leave, wanting to walk away more than anything, but he held himself back. This wasn't him. This wasn't what he did. He'd rather be elsewhere. He wasn't the guy who cares.

"You should... should eat or something. Talk or do something, okay? They're not gonna let you stay in there forever."

------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"They're not gonna keep 'im in there forever," Spencer reassured for what felt like the hundredth time; the irritation he felt bleeding just the slightest bit into his tone.

Sharp, black eyes -the red of one's broken vessels now a light pink- stared at him, appraising. The Joker nodded wryly, sucking on his cheek and warping the jagged scar. "Yeah... you might have said that once or twice."
Try the fifty or so times you've asked! The lower lid to Spencer's left eye twitched. He felt hot and itchy all over, his calm always a tenuous, fractured thing when he was away from Jonathan for an extended amount of time; the separation only worsened by where the small doctor currently was and Spencer wasn't there to keep him safe. Instead he was here, reporting to the boss and giving answers to questions he didn't know the answers to or didn't want to answer. Sometimes he felt like he only referred to the knave behind the glass as "Boss" more out of habit than any real title that held any weight. Those times filled him with a mix of liberation and betrayal.

"I've been asking around and keeping my ears open, but no one seems to know much of anything. I already told you what I was told after Wayne left the showers."

"Mmm yeah," the Joker hummed with a satisfied grin. He wiggled on his cot like the reminder of the stilted, third-hand retelling had a physical effect on him. "Like Shakespeare. Tell me, mm, tell me that one again." He drummed his crooked fingers on his chest in anticipation.

The orderly nodded jerkily, resisting the urge to check the time. With an irate flare of his nostrils disguised as taking a breath to recite the unexciting tale once again, he spoke in a calm, steady monotone. "He was found hiding in one of the bathroom stalls. The orderlies there had the other inmates moved out of the way. He was then escorted away in only a towel. I assume he was taken elsewhere to be dressed then met with Doctor Horn. It didn't last long. The Bat snapped for whatever reason and punched Horn. Five orderlies came in, two were sent to the hospital, and he's been in Solitary Confinement ever since.

"The end," he tacked on snidely, not that the other man noticed. The clown's bruised eyes were closed in sick bliss and his scabby lips curled. Spencer wasn't too reassured by his apparent distraction, he was sure the boss heard the trace of sarcasm. The boss never reacted well to attitude, so the only thing really saving him was the barrier of unbreakable glass between them.

Both of them knew it. Neither of them acknowledged that fact. It just went unspoken.

"And you're absolutely, one hundred percent HIV positive I can't go visit my Sweetums?"

"Yes, it's too risky."

The scarred man hummed like he was agreeing.

"You look like you have ants in the pants," the Joker stated lazily. Reclined back, his eyes were still closed and the foot propped on his knee bobbed without rhythm. "What's the matter, Spence? Bat's not your favorite subject? Too boring for you? Oh, oh, wait, I know... how is Jonny Boy doing these days?"

Spencer's blood ran cold.

"I feel like it's been far. Too. Looong."

"He's fine," he said without inflection.

"Keepin' ya awfully busy, huh?"

Alarm spiked under his calm facade. "Sir?"

"Well, I hardly ever get to see ya... it's like pulling teeth." Dead eyes opened and focused on him with meaning before slipping closed again. "Not that I blame you. My Porcelain Doll can be a rather, uh, demanding little bitch."
All Spencer could think was Thank God for the clown's shut eyes or otherwise he would have seen the ripple of something that shouldn't be there in his expression. "Can I do anything else for you, Boss?"

"Next to a Bat in lingerie," he started, grinning and licking his lips at whatever image he saw behind his eyelids. "I want to, no, I gotta know A-SAP when my Batsy is leavin' the rubber room."

The orderly's bleached blond head twitched into an approximation of a nod, his feet ready to carry him away.

"And tell Jonny I'm gonna wanna see him soon. Certain, ah, points have to be made."

"Boss?"

"Carry on, my good man."

Spencer hurried out of the Max wing with a feeling of dread festering in his stomach.

-----------------------------------------------------------------

Depression is not sobbing and crying and giving vent, it is plain and simple reduction of feeling... People who keep stiff upper lips find that it's damn hard to smile.

-Judith Guest

"You look tragic," Jonathan stated blandly, feeling a tad petulant over having to break the silence in the first place. He only had so much time until Spencer came scampering back.

Slumped artlessly against the padded wall opposite of him, Wayne didn't even blink as he gazed catatonically into the corner. His greasy hair hung into his bloodshot eyes. An unmaintained outgrowth of facial hair framed his chapped lips. His uniform was wrinkled and loose on him compared to when he first arrived. It was better to not even get the ex-doctor started on the smell of the other man's unwashed body that radiated and permeated the small space.

It had taken a lot of sneering and arguing on Jonathan's part for Spencer to finally give in and bring him here. Having the Bat isolated and vulnerable fresh off a trauma was a prime opportunity. With the green-eyed orderly away most likely paying lip service to the clown, Jonathan wasn't about to just sit and stare and waste precious time. And in either case, he'd been struggling with boredom waiting for Horn to finish playing errand boy, so he figured why not do the poor idiot's job?

"Something happened. You were at least functional the last time we spoke." After a beat he added, "About the clown."

He was disappointed to see that hardly garnered a reaction.

"Fine then. You'll have me guess," Jonathan announced, adjusting his glasses over icy, critical eyes and sitting up straighter against the wall.

" Majority of the people who would put that comatose look on your face are dead, and you're too practical to allow that plain fact break you down. That butler of yours hasn't been around in awhile and the Commissioner should inspire more resentment and anxiety if anything, but just listen to me talking away, explaining a process of elimination Richard could deduce equipped with a few choice hints." He smirked, watching closely.

"I know the clown just as well as you think you do, and I can safely assume what his latest
interaction... entailed, but anything he did wouldn't result in this so the real question is... What did you do?"

Previously glazed dark eyes focusing on the corner seamlessly snapped to him.

Jonathan did nothing to hide his triumphant grin. Yes, the astounding leap in progress the clown had made didn't make him all too happy, but it wasn't something he couldn't spin in his favor. He knew pitted against the Joker and the vigilante's basic nature, it was a lost cause if he had really intended to keep the Bat sane. Well, lucky for Jonathan...

"I can tell you're truly hoping I reassure you that it's perfectly natural; you can't be blamed for your body's reactions, after all who knows how long it's been. Oh don't look so surprised. I'm well acquainted with the clown's intentions concerning you." And the other man could take that however he liked, but judging by long fingers curling into frayed sleeves and the hint of pink highlighted by unforgiving fluorescent lights, he knew they were both on the same page. "But I'm not going to pander to your supposed needs. I'd be telling you things you already know, and that's what's really bothering you. If you believed it was just hormones mixed with physical stimulation, you wouldn't be here brooding. Deep down, whatever happened means more to you than you want, and do you know what that means, Bruce?"

The vigilante staring at him wasn't breathing.

"It means that you're way more defective than even I could have predicted."

Despite the casual delivery, the words were like a physical blow. Bruce could feel the air stop circulating in his lungs as his heart pounded frantically nearby.

"I mean, how utterly depraved. The clown, really? The man that's slaughtered countless people, murdered your precious Miss Dawes, and single-handedly ruined your life. That is the man that arouses you? My, what would your dearly departed parents think?"

The plain disgust twisting the blue-eyed doctor's soft features was more than Bruce could bear to look at. He should be the one looking at the other man like that, the Scarecrow. Batman was- he was-

"You may be just as bad as that perky dimwit, Quinzel. At least the clown has a fairly clean track record with her..."

Fingers twitched and palms became slick with sweat in his concentrated effort to resist slapping his hands over his ears and blocking out the clinically smooth cadence of Crane's cruel voice.

"I'm afraid my previous advice to you won't be of much use now in light of recent events." Full lips pursed in chagrin. "Considering your deviant desires I fear even a simulation of sanity may just be beyond you."

Bruce wanted- no, he needed the smaller man to leave. Now. He could smell and feel the sweat clinging to him like a cold, second skin and seeping through his clothes. He wasn't very curious as to how the ex-psychiatrist came to be here. All Bruce could dwell on was when Crane was going to leave and the crawling violation Bruce felt by his space being invaded by another so easily to begin with. Was it too much to ask to feel safe somewhere?

As if Crane knew his already lack of welcome was thoroughly worn out, he eased slowly to his feet, dusting invisible dirt off himself. The door to the padded room was already flying open with that vaguely familiar white blond orderly looming in the threshold. Dull green eyes looking over the frail
brunet barely spared a glance for the huddled vigilante.

"We need to get you back," he said with an edge to his voice and wearing a frown. At this point, Bruce wasn't surprised or angry to discover the former Arkham head had a pet orderly. He was more relieved to see Crane leave.

"So long for now, Dark Knight. I hope to see you out and about soon." Crane waved and departed with a grin.

The metallic lock of the door was a morbid blessing and the silence even more so, but it was already too late. Crane's assessment had done its intended purpose; each word of abhorrence and reason had latched onto him like ticks in unreachable, sunless places, sucking away the blood and leaving a poison to fester and thrive in their wake. He could almost feel the moment something collapsed and shriveled up in him. It wasn't painful. His head still ached and the cramp in his stomach where food should go persisted like his own steady, damning heartbeat, but he could feel a little emptier - lighter - with the understanding that came with it.

Crane was right. The evidence was there in the traces of congealed release in his underpants and his own self loathing.

The persisting curiosity and the want and the horror.

"This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object."

Something had to give.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Jonathan felt a decent amount of satisfaction striding a moderate clip down the hall after leaving the Bat in his rubber cave. Spencer was crowding him as usual, yammering on about the clown and his suspicions and the orderly's own worries, but Jonathan ignored him as usual. His mind was back in the padded room with Wayne, reviewing every word and action and deciding he was content with what occurred though the results would for however long remain to be seen.

That was fine with him or otherwise he wouldn't have made a very successful scientist nor doctor. This was all the more interesting without the strict order of experiments and chemical compounds interacting, but the complexity of mere words affecting a troubled mind.

Back to basics, as it were.

Just the thought of a time back when things were different and complete and right made the ache of loneliness - he was smarter than others to acknowledge - that much more tender. It made him want to toss a can of spewing toxin in an unventilated room full of toddlers and watch them all scream.

By now Spencer had given up his nagging and went on to walk ahead of him. Jonathan had to stifle the urge to roll his eyes at the bleach blond's stiff gait, because a bratty adolescent he was not. He supposed the overbearing orderly might have a point. The clown didn't do well with waiting, and Jonathan shuddered to think that with the psycho's more or less unsuccessful attempt to lure in the Bat Jonathan would be on the metaphorical chopping block to relieve the frustrations. It would be worth it though to see the less than pristine condition the fallen hero would be in if he ever came out of that padded room.

Despite past indiscretions, Jonathan Crane was a brilliant psychiatrist; he knew what words helped and the ones that irreparably crippled.
Oh to see the clown's face!

"Humpty Dumpty lay in a beck..."

His steps slowed to a stop as he looked around him, frowning. The words were a faint, croaked hiss. The locked, steel doors stood tall around him, their occupants behind them innocent.

"With all his sinews around his neck..."

Louder now and Jonathan could barely feel the wetness pricking his eyes at the realization of what this meant.

"Forty doctors and forty wrights..."

"Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty to rights, [1]" Jonathan echoed, his knees buckling under the added weight in his head and the sheer joy of that sensation crushing his chest. "... Crow?" he whispered shakily, afraid -yes, afraid- to hope in case he was mistaken.

His hands smacked over his upturned mouth to smother the uncontrollable hiccup of emotion when the hoarse reply came inside his head clear as a beautifully rusted bell.

"I've missed you, Jonathan."

Mind racing with solace and opportunity, the doctor happily surrendered when everything went black.

Spencer stuttered to a halt at the sense of wrongness prickling at the back of his neck. Panic raced through him upon glancing behind him, and he ran the way he came, dropping to his knees. "Jonathan?!" Large hands grabbed onto skinny shoulders. The doctor sat slumped on awkwardly bent legs. He swayed under the orderly's grip, head lolling. "Jonathan." He shook him, frantic.

Suddenly the lax muscles under his palms went tense, and a rasp resembling a death rattle expanded the frail man's chest. Normally well-kempt hair in sudden disarray, his slowly lifted face seemed to absorb the shadows thrown by the overhead lights.

"Hey," Spencer tried uncertainly. Something was off and it wasn't just the odd gleam of bright blue eyes behind crooked glasses. "Are you alright?"

The ex-doctor's stare settled on him with half-lidded interest. The out of place smile that eased across plump lips was like dragging a razor through a jagged seam, popping the stitches and revealing white teeth underneath. The voice that came out of such a pretty face sounded hoarse with disuse.

"Everything is more than all right."

Chapter End Notes

[1] James Orchard Halliwell, 1842
Another couple days of hardly leaving that room did the fallen hero no favors.

Michael had yet to stop cringing at the sight of him. The orderly had had to hold his breath from the smell as he hiked Wayne to his feet, because the once athletic man couldn't (or wouldn't) stand on his own. Considering the many rejected trays of food, it had to be an inability to, which didn't make him feel any better when the taller man swayed on his feet and refused any more assistance as he took unsteady steps outside the room. Michael could only follow on Wayne's heels if and when his shaky knees should buckle or the hand he had white-knuckled around the hall's support rails would slip.

Michael sort of missed the scary bastard that ran outside in circles during a downpour for hours and beat the shit out of anyone that pissed him off. The man with the hollowed out stare and careful movements blanching at the raucous sounds of the other inmates made Michael's skin itch and the corners of his wide mouth weigh down in a frown.

Throughout the snail's pace trek, Michael attempted several sad starts of conversation, offers of food or to clean up. Needless to say none were successful. Michael already knew the vigilante wasn't much for talking, but he thought it was worth a shot. Wayne had been plenty silent before, but it was always coupled with an air of awareness; he was present and constantly assessing. Now... well now the orderly would almost pay the guy to say something, even with that smug, game show host voice his girlfriend used to swoon over. That's how unsettled he was.

Everything about the other man was quiet. Absent. Final.

Michael avoided looking into those insomnia-sunken eyes afraid he would find no one was home.

With delicate nudges, the orderly directed his charge towards the bathrooms. He figured a thorough cleaning would help, but as soon as the innocuous entrance came into view, the other man's shuffling locked into place. Wayne just stared and the railing under his grasp groaned. Michael then remembered and had to bite back the annoyance his oversight incited.

"Food then?" he tried. The cafeteria was back the other way.

Tense seconds ticked by in complete stillness. With no discernible difference from one moment to the next, Wayne pushed on as if he had never stopped walking and had stood like a statue for damn near a minute. His pace was hitched but faster with his face carefully angled to the wall, his callused palm hissing along the rail. He didn't slow until he had put the bathrooms -and more specifically, the showers- well behind him.

By the time Wayne led them both to that familiar corridor to Maximum Security, Michael wanted to hit him. This zombie bullshit was downright creepy, and hey to be honest, before all this politics crap Michael thought Batman to be pretty fucking awesome. A verified badass as well as an insane one. Just the thought of a real life super hero had brought out the pudgy, little boy obsessed with comic
books in him. It had been nice to have something to make you feel like a kid again, especially in a
city like Gotham.

Now just look at him. He glared at Wayne's scruffy profile. Michael wanted to get something out of
him, for him to say something, do something even if it ended in fists.

"Y'know," he bit out as he moved to the heavy steel door.

Wayne didn't even appear to be listening.

"Sometimes I think you're too much of a pussy to have killed anyone. Stringing up rapists but
gunning down cops? It just doesn't fit."

The vigilante's balance wavered, bleak alarm entering into his bloodshot eyes. By the time Michael
whipped a severe glare over his shoulder, the panic under a thick sheet of ice had been slow to
recede. Their gazes matched, and a weird sinking feeling smothered the orderly's bitter aggravation.
His mouth hung open, but no words came out. He had to visibly shake himself of the implicit
possibility hanging over the moment.

No, that's... no.

With a scowl, he swiped his badge and ground his teeth even harder at the harsh buzzer; his reason
for doing so evident as soon as he yanked the door open. Loud, broken humming slithered through
the stale air and down the empty hall, crawling into both men's eardrums.

The dull emotion spanning Wayne's mien shifted at the chilling notes bobbing mockingly around
him. His knees shook. His apprehension was clear especially when the oily purrs grew into words.

"Flutter, flutter little bat,
How I wonder where you're at.

"Swooping through the darkest night,
You find your way without a light," that honey sulfur voice crooned.

The orderly and his charge shared an uneasy stare down the rows of empty cells to one whose angle
afforded no view.

"Flutter, flutter little bat..." the clown continued to warble.

The deep breath Wayne took was barely noticeable before he pressed forward, but Michael's hand
shot out and snagged him by the elbow. Between the drugs and exhaustion, his reaction was only a
twitch and a wary glance instead of the cleanly broken arm twisted behind the attacker's back it
should have been.

The orderly leaned in, oblivious to the risk he'd just taken, and said in a low voice, "Look I wish I
could give ya a different cell, but Leland is one strict bitch which tells me she's got some kinda
torture kink. I'll come and take you out as much as I can, okay? But for now I can try to sneak you
something to help you sleep. Anything's gotta be better than him, right?"

"... how I wonder where you're at." [1]

"I can't get you anything legit here, but plenty of the other guys' girls are addicts and put out for
anything they can swallow that'll fuck'em up. It's no problem. Sound good?"

Throughout his rambling, the vigilante's placid expression hadn't shifted until the very end where a
sharpness that hadn't been in his dark eyes for weeks broke through. With a heavy, decisive nod, he agreed.

"Can-" he croaked. His throat shuddered. "Can I wait somewhere else?"

After conquering his own shock, Michael smiled eagerly, for once feeling like maybe he was actually helping. "Yeah, yeah, sure, man. You can wait in the bathroom if you can stomach it."

At the familiar slam of the steel door and there was still no Bat to gaze adoringly at, he sat up from his artful recline, his ears perked and his eyes darting like a confused dog. He swung his legs over the side of his cot and stood up, twitching and looking around in the silence. Previously grinning lips curled into his mouth as teeth chewed on them. The plexi-glass was cold under his palms and the side of his face as he pressed against the clear barrier, its chill bleeding into his skin and sparking goosebumps up and down his bruised arms. All he could see was the next two cells across from him. With a low growl, he pressed closer, mashing the slick, uneven line of scar tissue stitching his cheek against his grinding teeth.

Eye lashes brushing the surface, he just stood there, staring at nothing and hearing nothing except the agitated huffs of his breath fogging up his vision.

No one. There was no one there.

No one. There.

But he heard them. He may be insane, but he wasn't crazy! After so long his Bat had come, but he'd left again.

"Can't- He can't just do that!" He hissed, his tongue lashing out across his lips like a whip and tasting the nothingness of the glass.

For who knew how long, he waited drumming his fingers next to the place his mostly healed face pressed oily imprints onto the pristine surface. Go figure, a clown trapped in a clear box like a fucking mime. He fucking hated mimes. Now if he screamed and shouted till he was blue in the face but there was no one around to hear him, did he actually make a sound?

His chortle was high and grated.

Finally that wonderful buzzer sounded again and dragging seconds later produced his Bat staggering into view. At least, he thought it was his Bat. The pretty boy face was almost the same; where there had been fullness of another life plastic smiling there was now sunken hollows under his eyes and above his jaw that shadows poured into. His high-cut cheeks were sharp as razor blades. The barely there slits of his eyes were glazed and unfocused and flickered to the scarred maniac pressed against the glass; the Joker felt the uncomprehending glance ghost through him and inject a nauseous weight in his gut.

Crazed hazel latched onto the movement of his fallen hero's right hand as it lifted to his gaunt face. The last time he'd seen that hand it had shot out sure and strong gripping his hair and cracking his skull against the shower's tile floor. As soon as he had woke up back in his cell and the memory returned, the clown had touched himself and pressed on that goose egg his Bat had left behind until he came and blacked out from the rush. Now that hand shook and moved like molasses, long fingers scrubbing sloppily over blank eyes and a slack mouth.

The scars twisting up the Joker's face were the only things that kept him smiling.
Too busy watching his Bat, the clown didn't notice the orderly watching him, his eyes steady even as he worked the cell door open. It was the first time since the clown arrived at Arkham that there was no smile or mad glint in his eyes to be seen, and when Wayne banged his shoulder on the door frame and face planted onto his too thin cot, the mad man winced. Locking up and walking away, the orderly still went unnoticed; the clown only having eyes for the tall man sprawled out on a bed too short for him.

The meaty insides of the Joker's cheeks were shredded and all he could taste was blood. The comforting copper flavor mixed bitterly with sour saliva. His eyes itched; they hadn't blinked in awhile, intent as they were on the unmoving figure across the way.

After aborted attempts to say something that resulted in staining the corners of his colorless mouth red, he swallowed painfully and rasped, "Restful vacation?"

He waited on sharp pins and delicious needles for the longest time eventually not even expecting a reply but just for a sign the other man was actually breathing. When a broad shoulder shifted, the Joker didn't even register his own sigh of relief.

His quiet voice muffled by the pillow, his Bat slurred, "They don't ever shut... the lights off."

The Joker nodded and clicked his tongue, moving back from the glass.

Click. Click. Clickclickclickclick.

He then proceeded to tear apart everything that wasn't nailed down in his cell and he beat himself against the things he couldn't budge.

Later, panting and bleeding, his body throbbing, he slid down against the glass, watching and waiting.

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At the first loud crash, Richard Horn had to tug the headphones off his ears and fumble for the volume dial; throughout the very brief exchange he'd turned it up higher and higher to the point breathing filtering into the listening device was thunderous static. Once the cacophony of destruction from what had to be Patient J (and he'd be more interested if that were his responsibility) was mostly muted and Wayne's soft snores were inaudible, he paused the tape and rewound it. This time with his pen at the ready, he pressed Play.

Seconds went by of shuffling then a mumbled voice dangerously close to where Horn had installed the device.

"They don't ever shut... the lights off."


"-ever shut... the lights off."


"-shut... the lights off."

Wayne's honest rumble was devoid of life.

The doctor smiled.
Time passed in one continuous blur.

He never was awake long enough to contemplate if it'd been just hours or days or, hell, even weeks. He slept, and when he was sporadically roused to semi-consciousness, he'd hold his hand out waiting for the next pill to obediently swallow dry. Michael was turning out to be dependable in that aspect.

Between stretches of blackness, images occasionally broke through the void: Michael's frowning face; a rush of water from a moldy shower head; Alfred's sad eyes watching him through a window; a spoonful of oatmeal hovering in front of him and nudging his numb lips; and a scarred mouth moving behind fogged glass. That one was the most consistent. The stream of sound flowing from them couldn't be separated into words, so they easily lulled him back to warm oblivion.

The routine was one he couldn't find in himself to argue with until his eyes slipped open -red and gritty- and there was no pill dropped into his palm. The lights stung, even though they seemed to be set on nightly dimness. With each passing second of staring at the wall and nothing to pull him back under, a vice-like ache took hold of his brain; it throbbed in time with his slow heartbeat. He waited and waited, sleepily thinking the orderly must be running late.

Just as his eyes were slipping closed with the heavy promise of staying closed, he heard the grating buzz of the door. One, no, two sets of footsteps? His ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton. He could tell at least after a click of the key card, and the tap-tap-tap of a security code, and the whoosh of pressure of a vacuum sealed cell door that wasn't his own, that whoever was here wasn't here for him.

"Jonny Boy! Long time no see."

Bruce flinched at the oil slick sound of the Joker's voice. It took a moment, but by the time the man referenced responded, the greeting clicked.

"It's been entirely far too soon, clown. What do you want?" The cell door clicked shut. "I prefer not to be locked in here with a deranged psychopath if it's all the same to you," the former doctor droned.

"Ah-ah, now don't play hard to get. That, uh, act only works the first ten or so times. Nice try though. You know how flustered I get when you bat those long lashes at me."

"It's called blinking."

"One man's flirtation is another man's essential function of the eye."

"How silly of me to know the difference." Jonathan grimaced. He kept his back close to the door where Spencer was just on the other side. Bored blue eyes remained steadily on the man perched on the end of the cell's lone cot.

"You're vertical again. Good. It means you can bend your knees without those pesky casts in the way."

"Yes... those pesky casts. Tell me, isn't this even beneath you with your supposed soul mate unconscious not ten feet away?"

On his side with his arm tingling, the vigilante tensed.

Jonathan eyed the broad back to them, knowing somewhere in there was the recording device he had Horn install. That could ruin things in a way he hadn't foreseen.
"Yeah, about that... I was, uh... curious if you knew anything about that. He's been dead to the world an awful lot."

"Are you suggesting that I had something to do with his lethargy?"

The Joker eyed him like he expected Crane to confess.

"Boss, it really wasn't him," Spencer spoke up, eyes wide and helplessly drawn to the ex-psychiatrist despite their efforts to remain trained on the clown. "The Bat's been sleeping through his sessions, so Horn cut his sedatives. When that didn't work, one of the other orderlies caught Mike slipping him pills."

"Mike? Who is Mike?"

"The Bat's assigned babysitter. After some investigating, he was fired."

And with that news, the slowly returning strength in Bruce's muscles drained away and his body sunk even more against the unyielding cot. Now he had no one left in here.

He was truly alone.

"Such a shame, the rate of unemployment in this town. I woulda just carved 'im up and save everyone the trouble of another welfare check."

"You do know that your obsession with knives and penetrating the flesh would suggest impotence?" Jonathan muttered thoughtlessly with a small yawn. He hoped the more bored he appeared the faster he'd be free to go. Unfortunately, he should have known that would only spur the maniac on like a challenge.

One moment Jonathan was standing upright frowning at the length of his nails and the next the wind was knocked out of him and his nose was throbbing as he landed face down on the clown's cot. When he tried to recover, a sharp knee pinned him at the small of his back. He coughed and struggled for air when the weight increased and the Joker's breath puffed against his ear.

"Let's test that theory, shall we?"

Glasses crooked, cerulean lashed over the ex-doctor's shoulder like a cat-o-nine tails. A throaty voice snarled, "Get off us!"

"Scary!" the Joker crowed, leaning back and seating himself proper on top of Crane. His face lit up. "Now when did you blow back into our Lil Jonny's melon?"

To spare him and Jonathan the indignity of fruitlessly wriggling, Scarecrow stilled and quietly huffed. "That is none of your concern, Bozo."

"Awww, that cuts me deep. Real... deep." The knave punctuated with a sharp thrust. He grinned when the thin body beneath him stiffened further.

"... Things have changed. We both say No," the smaller man ground out, glaring down at the spotted mattress.

Lips smacked unperturbed in reply. "Well two negatives make a positive. Ipso facto, you need to, ah, run along now, Spencer. Go get your own three-way."

The orderly had forgotten how to move. Guileless green lingered on his charge tense and face down
on the cot. He didn't fully realize the chasm between the doctor and the Scarecrow; to him, it was still Jonathan's face mashed down and his fragile body pinned beneath the boss like a particularly beautiful butterfly collected and put on display, the clown's spidery fingers gathering oxblood cloth into his fists. Spencer had always known the jist of their nights together but not-… not like this.

When the first rip sounded, Spencer couldn't make himself stick around.

Bruce's hearing was divided between the footsteps hurrying away and the jarring sound of fabric tearing; he flinched like it physically ran up his spine like a sharp icicle.

Hazel eyes easily caught onto the movement and sparkled. The perpetual grin on the Joker's face split apart to reveal stained teeth; it almost felt foreign. My, had it been that long since he last smiled?

"There... You. Are..." the clown cooed, unsure if he was talking to his Bat, the exposed line of vertebrae undulating so prettily like a snake before him, or his long lost smile. In either case, his marred cheeks pulled wider when Crow bucked, hardly unbalancing him and only accomplishing to shove his still clothed ass against the stirring of his groin; it now finally taking a real interest now that Sleeping Beauty was awake.

Sorry, Crow. You always knew my dick and my heart were spoken for.

"Off, you fucking comic!" Scarecrow shouted awkwardly over his shoulder; his hoarse voice only about to become more shredded in a matter of minutes.

As the Joker danced callused fingertips down the string of writhing bones beneath paper-thin skin, he began to hum, low and cracked, deep in his throat. Once his fingers ran out of warm flesh, they curled around the crude edges of previously torn material. The lean muscles of his arms bunched tight, grip readjusting, and he jerked his fists apart bearing more smooth skin all the way to Jonny's thighs. The exertion wrenched the next crooked musical note through his clenched teeth.

-can thrill me like you do
and fill my heart with love for only you...

By now the struggling body beneath him could have been cold and lifeless and he wouldn't have noticed. The rusty growls and threats might as well have been white noise. He only had eyes for the too still outline of darkness and shiny happy rage in the cell across. The romantic melody taking shape in his meticulously chaotic head practically vibrated through him.

Only you can make this change in me,
for it's true, you are my destiny...

Like a blind man well-practiced in the most mundane routine, he drew down the standard-issue underwear and snapped the elastic band in the adorable curve where Jonny's tiny ass became thigh.

The vigilante's eyes squeezed shut and jolted at the loud squawk from Crane. Except it didn't sound like Crane; it had, before, but now he sounded off like his vocal chords had been scrubbed with sandpaper and his broad vocabulary was reduced to animalistic expletives. Bruce knew he was missing something important, but he couldn't mentally grab hold to analyze it like he once could have done. He was fighting to remain still and block out the bark-hiss-spit of a trapped animal.

Since that day in Solitary when Crane had visited him, his hate for the ex-doctor had solidified into one of many smoldering coals seated in his chest, but the din -how could no one else hear that- across the hall was tearing him apart. Civilized horror and primal reveling; he could feel it simmering in the pit of his gut. Something in him craved for this.
And also standing out in the maelstrom, like a sickly green beacon boiling at the root of his throat, was jealousy.

He ground his teeth together and pressed his feverish forehead against the coolness of the wall.

There was no ignoring the noises, and the puzzle piece images in his head automatically trying to match each rustle of clothing was an effortless combination of imagination and life experience. Frustration was a spreading itch crawling from the base of his skull and outward to the wings of his shoulders.

Before he realized what he was doing -a puppet of his own curiosity and no longer a precise and calculated machine- his spine was twisting and bending and his imagination wasn't needed. Bleary eyes eased closed to aid the way his stomach plummeted and his cheeks burned. They didn't stay shut for long though despite his mouth going dry and sour. Both villains were facing him, and he couldn't look away. The option of not looking at all didn't exist anymore, he realized, growing hot.

His tongue absently swiped to soothe his cracked lips.

Sharp eyes tracked the movement of that tongue. His scarred mouth positively watered. This. This was starting to get interesting. The clown grinned, watching his Bat watch him, and he pressed the saliva-slick fingers hanging from the corner of his smirk without ceremony into a familiar hole he knew better than slipping his hand into one of his plum leather gloves. He was just that nice to even use them in the first place.

Crow froze for the briefest of moments before his thrashing renewed with even more vigor.

"I swear you will fucking pay for this!"

"Shshshsh shhhhh... I swear with the way you keep teasing me... You know I love 'em with a little fight in 'em." His fingers were quick and sticky.

"You sick fuck!"

"Oh just keep sweet talkin', baby," he crooned, eyes fixed on the vigilante. The fly to his uniform parted open easily.

"No." The small voice could barely be heard over Scarecrow's fit, but when the Bat's head started to whip from side to side he weakly repeated, "No, don't."

The Joker's smile grew. His fingers withdrew with a slimy pop.

"Stop. No-"

Staring steadily into the fallen hero's wide eyes, he shifted into position. He wasn't as "all-aboard" as he'd like to be, but damn if Crow's squirming and Bat's conflicted face weren't helping.

"Joker, no." Bruce scrambled clumsily to the end of his cot. "Don't do this. No... NO!"

Hunched over, through strands of oily gold hair, the clown's eyes pierced through the vigilante. "My one and only you." [2]

With no more, he shoved himself forward and in, tearing.

Bruce lunged closer to the glass like it would make a difference and shouted, but it was all drowned out by Crane's inhuman screams.
Later, when it was all over, Spencer -his pallor green and eyes stinging- had to carry his charge back to his cell; whether it was Jonathan or Scarecrow that hoarsely whispered to him upon laying him down on his cot, reminding him to retrieve tonight's tape from Horn's office and destroy it, Spencer didn't much care. All he concentrated on was cleaning up the blood and redressing the naked skin already turning black and blue.

Every time he blinked all he saw was the Bat's horrifyingly vacant expression gazing at the clown and the clown's Cheshire grin as he gazed at the tent in the Bat's lap.

Spencer and Jonathan might as well have never been there.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Leane Guenther
[2] "Only You” by the Platters (Sung in the credits of Arkham City by the Joker)
Hi there, just wanted to thank everyone who has taken the time to read, leave kudos, and/or had even left a comment. I'm not the best at responding back, because I feel like I come across painfully awkward or stupid. So I just want you all to know I really appreciate it all.

Spencer's sneakers barely made a sound as he flew steadily down one of the less used stairwells, mainly because it was far too narrow to safely transport patients and too dilapidated for state standards even though the state had yet to fork up any money to get them repaired. Shocks of pain zinged up his legs from jumping over four crumbled away steps and landing on the final platform, but as long as the package in his arms was undamaged that's all that mattered. He couldn't risk using the elevator.

Strips of crime scene tape hung in dirty tatters along the corridor he hurried along. At the end of the hall it would open up into a chamber with the newly patched water main that had been in all the papers after Gotham's Night of Terror. Thanks to Jonathan, all inmates were strictly barred from the basement and the asylum outsourced the laundry to local laundromats.

In this instance he was headed far from there -going left and right and on and on- until he ducked inside an old storage room. Immediately he was assaulted with the stink of what he can only say was chemicals. He didn't know what exactly was bubbling in different beakers, but he wished the small wired window high up over where the work table was situated under was bigger to help more with ventilation, even though the small man hunched over a legal pad didn't appear bothered by it.

With his back to the orderly, Jonathan didn't even flinch at the door opening as his scribbling came to a pause and his pen tip tapped at the end of his last equation. "Did you bring it?"

"Yeah."

Cerulean peered over one shoulder with an apprehensive arch to his brow. "Intact?"

In answer, Spencer held out the brown paper sack he'd brought with him from the Narrows. The key to his charge's storage unit was burning a hole in his pocket despite the fact he should have returned it to the inmate's stored personal affects. Crane had sent him there with specific instructions to go straight to the freezer and back. If Spencer had lingered a little longer than necessary and snooped through things he probably shouldn't have, Jonathan didn't need to know.

Jonathan straightened from his hunch with a pained grimace. His crystal blue gaze sharpened to daggers seeing Spencer jump to help which froze the orderly in place. Only satisfied as far as accepting nothing could wipe off that dumb, pitying look on the taller man's face, Jonathan limped across the room and took the package, pulling out the plastic container. Through the condensation fogging the insides of a florist boutonniere box was three vibrant azure flower heads, once pristine but now showed signs of decay along some of the petals. They were all he had, so they would have to do.

Hobbling back to his sad excuse of a lab all the while listening to his other half curse raping clowns,
he carefully sat down the box and reached for a pestle and mortar but stopped himself. He couldn't grind the petals yet. What was he thinking?

"What's wrong?"

He snatched up his pen and returned to squinting down at his notes and diagrams. "Nothing."

"Did Horn not get everything you asked for?"

Annoyance pricked at him. "Of course, he did, to the best of his lame ability. He was so ecstatic over a simple surveillance bug, I think he would have killed his wife and gave me his first born if I had asked."

Spencer fell quiet upon hearing the edge to the other man's tone; he'd learned after all. He moved to the side of the room where outdated medical equipment and random junk had been pushed against the wall (all thanks to him) and plopped down on a stack of crates. The squeal and groan that produced earned him another disapproving glare to which he shrugged innocently. He'd been working under bad men long enough to know his limitations, and a hard glare was nothing compared to a bullet in the leg.

Minutes ticked by of the orderly watching his charge's shoulders draw tighter and tighter together until he tore his glasses off with a huff and tipped his head back.

"... can I help-"

"No," snapped Jonathan, massaging his eyes in broad circles.

"Did you forget how to make your...?"

"No."

"Is there something wrong with-"

A boiling mercury gaze scalded him. A raspy voice snarled, "Jonathan's formula is perfect!"

Spencer straightened like he'd been slapped. He blinked several times until he nodded with a swallow. "I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm sure it is. Perfect, I mean."

It felt like forever with that sudden rage hyper-focused on him, but finally the ex-doctor's contorted expression eased. His bared teeth were hidden away by pursed, full lips and bright blue eyes dulled. Jonathan's chin dipped, then with a minute shake of his head, he turned away.

Even though the silence felt heavier than before and Spencer still wasn't sure what the hell all that was about, he never claimed to be stronger than his curiosity, especially when it came to pretty faces.

As soon as he cleared his throat, the waif-like man visibly bristled. "Then... what is bothering you? Is it... what happened the other night-"

"No," his charge cut in softly, only turning his head so far to put the side of his face in profile. "It's not that at all, and I would very much appreciate it if you'd be wise enough to never mention it again."

Eager to do something right, the orderly's bleached head was already bobbing before Jonathan had even finished speaking. "Yeah, I can do that."

Spencer wasn't the Let's Talk About Our Feelings type anyway. Hell, even though he was a
"faggot" just like his daddy said he was, most times he preferred to act as if he didn't have any emotions to speak of. The only problem was he couldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time without waking up to the sound of Jonathan's screams echoing in his skull, but he'd make himself deal with it. Not a huge leap from what he had been doing for the last seven years.

The faintest sense of gratitude filled Jonathan at the younger man's easy compliance. He was no longer being paid to talk about people's traumas, especially never his own. He was still alive, wasn't he? He had all he needed with Scarecrow; he's kept Jonathan sane since childhood. The fact that the orderly was listening to him without protest nagged at him, and he almost felt obligated to throw the clown's dog a bone.

Impossible as it sounded, maybe even trust him.

"I'm changing the formula," he started haltingly. "I need it to do something different."

"Different how?"

"Different as in being far more complicated than the original." He kept talking despite the hissing in his head insisting he stop. "I'm having trouble creating a feasible chemical combination that would trigger the microcircuit in the Amygdala, the Temporal Lobe, the Hypothalmus, and stimulate a small area of the Left Superior Frontal Gyrus, all the while maintaining the hallucinations." His eyes ached staring at the rough sketch he'd drawn of the labeled anatomy of the brain.

Spencer shifted uncomfortably. It was like the other man had lapsed into a foreign language. The fact that he didn't so much have a GED had never bothered him, but now he felt the ignorance keenly. He knew Jonathan was smart (a doctor and once a college professor) and enjoyed rubbing his IQ in people's faces, but at the moment Spencer thought himself so lacking. So dumb.

"Yeah... that-" He fidgeted. "That sounds hard. What's- um, what's all that supposed to do?"

"I'd rather not say."

*But we can't wait till the clown gets a face-full of it.*

The orderly nodded, not all that surprised to be kept in the dark. He was lucky to even receive the scraps just tossed his way. All the medical jargon along with the chemical smell was giving him a headache, and luckily he glanced down at his watch. "Hey." He stood up. "I have to get you back for your session with Leland, and we can't have her comin' to get you and find out you're not outside with the others."

Jonathan didn't move immediately, hoping the pressure to leave would spark some epiphany but it didn't. All it generated was more frustration. Blowing out a terse breath, he nodded and reduced the flames of several of the Bunsen burners. Then he headed in tiny steps towards the door with his notes tucked against him, absolutely dreading climbing up all those stairs.

Watching the bowlegged gait with a sick twist in his chest, Spencer wasn't thinking when he reached out and caught his charge by the elbow, handling him like cracked china.

Jonathan's startled expression gradually morphed into a sour mien once Spencer started talking.

"Okay, this isn't easy for me to do, but just let me say this one thing and I promise I'll never bring it up again." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry that I let that happen to you. I knew what you guys did, but I didn't know it was like- that. If I did, I never would have- … I wish I could just fucking take it all back-"
The ex-doctor's bruised face was unmoved. "I'll stop you right there before you embarrass yourself any further. What I do with the clown or anyone else is none of your concern. It's unfortunate you had to witness that, but do not come to me as the guilt-ridden hero here to save the day a tad too late. The world had a flying rodent for that and now his latest fashion is a strait jacket instead of a cape and cowl. I don't want your 'If Onlys' so never speak of this again or I'll take it upon myself to ensure you won't have the mental capacity to."

With that said, he wrenched his arm out of the orderly's grasp and proceeded out the door with a smaller hitch in his step.

Spencer felt even more like an idiot.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had to wit to win,
we drew a circle that took him in.

-Edwin Markham

Unspoken rules had long ago been established:

Do whatever the fuck you want, and we'll leave you alone.
Kill each other and if you're the one left standing, you're fucked.
Anything else, well, accidents do happen.

The rules were reliable. They worked.

Each equipped with a button-up coat (no, never the lethal zippers), inmates from each wing were forced outside at differing times of the day for a bit of "fresh air," even though the weatherman stated today's high was 32º. The orderlies didn't care, remaining inside where it was warm and the television flashed explosions, loose women, and other forbidden images deemed too violent and stimulating for their charges. It was okay for them since they weren't fucking crazy.

It only took seventy five bucks for the two lone occupants of Maximum Security to be included. Spencer hoped bad things happened to them.

Bruce had barely registered the shadow that sliced across his sun-filled vision before mildly bewildering pain whited everything out. The force of that sudden fist knocked his head back into the building-side he had been reclined against, too tired to properly hold himself up. Now, dizzy, his knees buckled under him.

When the jeers started and the rain of punches and feet came down on him -the bursts of pain at the same time numbing and shocking- he just decided not to get back up.

All the men in the yard had been instantly drawn to the first sounds of violence. The pummeling of fists cracking against the slight give of flesh; the hollow thuds of feet kicking a halfheartedly protected stomach. The smell of blood in the crisp air was a dinner bell for a pack of ravenous hyenas. Inmates pushed and yanked each other out of the way just to get a chance at getting a single hit on the man at the center of the fray; the fact he just laid there made their frenzy all the more palpable.

Through the crowd -parting it like a literally red sea- came a whale of man, well known throughout the general population as Cisco the Curber, cousin and loyal goon of Maroni, famous for splitting
jaws along Halstead Avenue. The Bat had put him in the hospital with a broken tibia, a few sprained fingers, a wounded reputation, and eating all his food through a straw for a solid month. If he hadn't insisted he heard voices, he'd be in Blackgate. His beady glare blazed with this history as he effortlessly shoved aside two inmates currently having a go and slamming one of his meaty fists down on the crumpled hero's kidneys. The numerous blows before had been sloppy and hadn't caused much damage, but Cisco had been in the business long enough to know where to hit to make the body feel it. The Bat's back bowed in reflex from his fetal position, leaving his stomach vulnerable to the impending stomp to his gut. The grunt from the crumpled man left a scarlet vapor clinging to his lips.

Cisco's tree trunk of a leg drew back -his teeth bared into a grin- but he froze. Twitchy fingers danced up his arms and squeezed his flabby shoulders in a tight grip.

"Y'know..." A wisp of smoky breath tickled his ear like the buzz of a passing fly. "In extreme cold weather, if one happens to come across say a large, fat animal, it's -uh- perfectly acceptable to..." A bare, wiry arm reached around his considerable girth and dragged a bony finger down a bloated stomach. "Slice open its belly and burrow yourself deep into the stinking, steaming guts and rearrange the organs all soothing Feng Shui-like to keep warm..." A skeletal hand seized a handful of lard, and the goon's heaving lungs stuttered. "And right now I'm freezing," the nasally voice dropped into a menacing growl.

Fight or flight, Cisco tore himself away from the clown's hold and ran away as fast as he was able, pushing through a crowd of onlookers who followed not long after. They very much liked to be alive.

Bruce didn't notice much more than the ringing in his ears and the various aches that made him think of long days of learning in the frigid air of remote mountains and the smoke of a beautiful blue flower polluting his brain, so when the blows came to halt it took him a few moments to realize it. The ice of the concrete was seeping into his side, his breathing shallow. His eyes shot open -the gray light stinging- and winced as foreign hands reached for him. He was hauled up, limbs stiff and balance off. Glinting eyes and a long, hooked smirk filled his vision and gave him a surge of equilibrium.

His chapped lips moved uselessly as he tripped over his own feet under the insistent dragging to a shaded alcove in a corner of the yard while the faces of parting inmates blurred into mere scenery. As his back thumped hard against one of the shadowy brick walls building the narrow space, the impact slapped out the bewildering words sticking to his throat.

"You helped me."

The Joker's smirk curled into a full-blown grin. "Hel- heheh- help you?" A peal of misty laughter blasted from his mouth. "No, no, no... no. The problem is I'm the only one allowed to do that." And without further ado, he struck low into the vigilante's gut, knocking the wind out of him. The clown fistend overgrown brown hair and leaned into the bent over hero gasping for air. "See?" He cooed humid words into his Bat's ear. "Now doesn't that feel better? Now that it's coming from someone who cares?"

Eyes wide and watering, Bruce stared sightlessly at the wall trying to catch his breath, his deep lungfuls taking in the cold air tainted with the scent of the man whispering into his ear. The words said at first didn't register, him too busy recovering from a hit that would have once felt like nothing to him, but right when they did, something dark and nasty dormant inside him reared its head and its awareness exploded.

The loose curl of his fingers tightened, and he pounced. He grabbed the scarred man by the neck and
crowded him against the other wall, crushing him into it, and his rage merely increased when the clown went willingly.

"Care?!" wheezed Bruce. "You don't have the capacity to care!"

Their noses brushed as the Joker loftily bobbed his head. His hot breath smelled sweet like rotted meat. "Sure I do. Ya make my heart sing and melt my loins to butter, Batsy babe. Now tell me that isn't love."

"Lo-" He started but the preposterous word devolved into a growl. His narrowed eyes couldn't seem to focus, darting along features on the jester's face he'd been avoiding since that night because all he saw was that laughing visage as Crane cried and screamed himself hoarse under him. Dark sunken eyes; the fine lines branching from a scar; a raised brow; he looked like the Hell Bruce felt; and finally his attention landed on pink lips with a tongue flickering out to wet a fresh scab. His glare caught and stayed there without realizing.

He suddenly didn't feel all that cold anymore.

"Come on," the Joker huffed, eyes half-lidded and simmering with challenge. "I wantcha ya to do it. I wantcha to. Comeoncomeoncomeon."

When he finally thought there wasn't anything left in him to break, Bruce found it there buried deep and as frail as gossamer. It took almost nothing for him to destroy it.

As soon as Bruce slammed his mouth against the Joker's like a car crash -all twisted metal, shattered glass, and gasoline caught fire- something inside him died.

And all at once something staggered from the wreck, mangled and bloody and tired but alive.

A sudden giggle/groan was shredded between teeth that bit at lips as the clown pushed back. Tongues played a game of tag while trying to bite each other. Red-tinted saliva traded the taste of pennies back and forth between warring mouths, surging and drawing back only to slam back into the other even harder. Hands roamed aimlessly across shoulders, down arms, tangling in hair; pushing and pulling and pinching skin under fabric. The smaller man was content to let himself be crushed into the wall, blood working its way up his scars under the sloppy mashing of lips, all the while fighting a grin.

Somewhere along the way the fallen hero had forgotten how to breathe, lightheaded and his face flushed. The stubborn seal of his eyelids were wet as a tension headache started to blossom from trying to keep them squeezed tightly shut like he was forcing himself in the dark about what exactly he was doing and with whom. Then again, how could he forget as his tongue grazed the slick, uneven insides of a Glasgow smile and the breathy laughter muffled by his mouth.

It just didn't occur to him to stop.

When sharp hips ground into his own, he reacted to the hot brand he felt like a sting of a hypodermic needle and jerked back; to let the surge of yesfucknow fill his veins like a burning drug couldn't... fuck, just couldn't happen.

He tore himself away from the scalding suction on his jaw, chest heaving. His itchy gaze trained on the ground. Fingers hooked into the clown's shirt released with a creak as one hand rose shakily to his swollen mouth.

Knowing immediately what was happening, the Joker let his head thunk back with a long suffering sigh. "And there it is, that -ah- rock solid moral code. Well go ahead." His goose pimpled arms
opened in supplication. "Hit me cause that's how you make it all better again."

He waited -really hoping for a mean southpaw he'd feel for days- but nothing came. The Bat just stood there, staring at nothing. His keen vision caught the meandering foot traffic wandering too close by the mouth of the alcove, and he mentally tagged every face that peered inside so he could stab them later. He snapped back to watching the other man, arousal still lingering in him but his grin flickered in and out like bad television reception.

He didn't know quite what to do with this.

"Uh... Bats?" He started in bare bones discomfort. "Did I break ya?" He reached to touch or get his hand broken -he didn't know- but the vigilante stumbled backwards before contact could even be made.

"I-" croaked from bruised and sticky motionless lips. "I have to go." And with nothing more, the dark knight staggered as fast as he could out of there -banging into the rough brick- like the devil was chasing after him.

And just this once, the Joker decided not to.
He couldn't. Couldn't breathe. His chest tight and his skin slick with sweat.

His vision blurred in and out, swimming and stinging. A sea of scarlet and caricature faces streaked past him in watercolor.

All he could really see, all he could focus on, was a door. If he got passed that door, everything would be fine. It would all be okay. He kept telling himself that despite the hands pawing at him and the legs trying to trip him, trying to hold him back.

He was running in quicksand, his head attached to his body like a balloon on a string.

*Just get there, get there. So wrong wrong wrong.*

In a blink, he was there. Steel cold like a soothing balm and spot rusted. It scratched his palms and rubbed them russet. Both hands fumbled with the handle, but it wasn't- wasn't opening. Locked. Of course. Of fucking course.

*Stupid. So stupid.*

He gulped in air, trying to calm himself. He stilled, his tongue pressed tight to the roof of his mouth. Oh god. That taste. Under the tang of blood was something else, something foreign. He knew what it was, but he wasn't going to put words to it or a name.

*Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.*

He didn't. He hadn't. He couldn't have done that.

He tried looking back the way he came, but his eyes got lost in a mess of red and sunlight. No smiles. His stomach turned.

Solid force banged into his back, and he flew forward, crashing into another inmate at least a half foot shorter than him. Staggering and wearing a look of angry disgust, the inmate easily shoved him away and he tripped backwards into a wall. Addled, he looked back from where he'd been and saw the door open.

"Alright, fuckers, line up!" shouted an unfamiliar orderly.

Legs buckling, Bruce slid down to the ground and watched as chaos became order. The insane were quick to arrange themselves single file and shuffle inside with an eagerness to get out of the cold. His bleak stare wavered between the anticipation in their eyes of food and warmth and their freshly split knuckles. Bruce felt their memories along his side like a nothing ache, and realized he had saw no different in their bright eyes when they were beating on him.

No one paid any mind to his huddled figure. Even in a world that deemed him mad, he was a misfit among the lunatics.

Wetness clung to his cheeks like ice, and he hoped it was simply drying blood.

*I used to be something.*
There was a light smack to his arm. He turned his head and jolted to attention, watching with round eyes as the source of everything wrong in his life plopped down beside him.

"Y'know you should smile more. It's been, uh, scientifically proven to improve a dark and dour mood." Shooting a demonstrative grin, the Joker glanced at him from the corner of his hooded gaze. Lips puffy as traces of vermillion clung to the sweeping lines of his scars. Bruce didn't know when the scars became the last thing he noticed when looking at the maniac.

Muscles in arrest, bloodshot eyes stared at the sticky film of evidence on that Cheshire grin, knowing now what it tasted like. How could the clown be so cavalier about this?

"All those gears whirling whirling in there. You think definitely far too much. Do you never smile? It's hard to trust a guy who never smiles. Come on, just give it the ole clown college try. Smile."

Bruce's gaze dropped down to his torn up knees, his mind whirling whirling like the other man had said. It had always been that way -whirling whirling- and he was just so tired of it.

"Just try. Just-" Fingers entered his field of vision reaching for his face, aiming to pinch at the corners of his mouth. He slapped the hands away without a thought, his lips quirking. "See!" the Joker crowed. "There's a start. Not as stunning as yours truly but still a decent start just the same. Now with a nice toothy finish..."

It started in the twitching, squinting corners of his eyes and worked its way down to the razor sharp apples of his cheeks. He didn't know where along the way an action so easy to flash in its plastic simplicity became so difficult. So unnatural.

With some effort his lips dragged stickily over his teeth and revealed them in a strained crescent. Skin tight from the cold. He didn't feel any better.

Overenthusiastic clapping and whistling erupted beside him, drawing the attention of a few inmate stragglers. The clown bounced in his squat like a child with sugar frothing at the mouth. "Not so hard, is it?"

"Hey freaks! Yeah, you two, inside. Now!"

The awkward grin collapsed with the orderly glaring at them from the door, grumbling and rubbing warmth into his arms. Unfairly, just at that moment Bruce remembered the feel of sinewy arms riddled with petal soft scars and rough with scabs under his hands. He blinked. There in front of him was one of those arms attached to a spindly hand that had scratched and hit him held out to him.

"Shall we?" The clown waggled his crooked fingers as he stooped down into a bow.

The fallen vigilante could only stare at it like it was a morbid science experiment gone terribly wrong... yet it held a gross appeal.

"Word of, ah, advice." That naked, ruined face dipped closer conspiratorially. "'Madness is the- the, uh, emergency exit. You can just step outside and close the door on all those dreadful things that happened. You can lock them away... forever...'[1] So quick recap, up is down, left is right and right is wrong, and 'you're never fully dressed without a smile.'[2]

"And outside is... inside. Get it?" The psychopath's smile was bright as shadows pooled in the palm of his proffered hand.

"What's the hold up over there?!!" called the same orderly impatiently.
Eying those bruised lips and reluctantly meeting those manic hazel eyes, a different sort of resolve eased over Bruce.

"Us freaks gotta stick together, right?"

"... yeah," he croaked. His large hand slapped into his enemy's and held on tight.

With a giddy slash of teeth and a shocking dry peck on his raw knuckles, the Joker yanked him up and almost dislocated his arm in the process. Bruce found his feet and shoved the shorter man away with a snarl. Shoulder joint aching, he stalked to the door where more orderlies had gathered in anticipation of a confrontation. When a wiry arm draped itself over his broad shoulders, it was met with a stifled flinch.

"Aw, don't ruin such a grand moment with one your, uh..." That spidery hand bobbed and rolled until it plucked the words right out of the air. "Bat bitch fits." Hot breath tickled the vigilante's ear.

Ignoring the shiver that went all the way down to his groin, Bruce shook off the arm. "Don't touch me."

The slight warmth indoors was slow to penetrate his skin as he limped as steadily as he had in awhile down the hall.

"Batsy, you coy minx, you! Ya don't have'ta play hard to get." The Joker appeared beside him, a skip to his step. "I'll still respect you in the morning," he assured with a too serious frown that looked all wrong on him.

Bruce, side-eyed him, seeing earnestness clash with a dirty grin in a face that he's seen more than his own in the last few weeks. "Shuddup," he murmured and bumped his shoulder against the jester's. The Joker simply beamed beatifically in response.

Together, bat and clown walked back to their Max wing with a team of orderlies equipped with tazers and syringes following warily behind.

Change was coming, in more ways than one.

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Across town outside a tiny one bedroom apartment, the landlord of that building was pounding on the front door of 7C and shouting for rent money. Same as the many times before that, there was no answer and the notices shoved under the door appeared untouched.

"Fuck this," he grumbled and decided to leave, the word "Eviction" reluctantly coming to mind. As long as there were no funky smells freaking out the neighbors and that hot, little blonde was alive and well and open to work something out to pay off her debt... well, he could become very accommodating. But until then there were plenty of other deadbeats to shake by the ankles.

Inside the apartment was a world of devastation and static. Daylight strained around the edges of hastily thrown curtains, two of its rungs hung bare where the material had ripped. Shadows danced and staggered in the white glow of a grainy Saturday morning cartoon flickering on the television; the monochromatic seizures had been muted for weeks.

For the first few days bottles cluttered the counters and circled the couch like a security fence but by now were reduced to broken glass and sticky patches of pungent liquor. The rest of the apartment was a whirlwind of destruction from the overturned lamps to the scattered papers bearing the Arkham seal.
A long dead cell phone lay in pieces in the kitchen, thrown in a fit of rage when Leland wouldn't return her calls and Puddin' stopped calling for their late night heart-to-hearts. All infuriating dial tones and empty phone lines.

A trail of shredded tissues led to the lone bedroom, the walls painted a luminous blue under the rolling waves of light from the overturned laptop overheating the foot of her bed. Old GCN footage played on an endless loop, once for research purposes but now... she just wanted to see his face again.

And again. And again. And again. And again.

Sue a girl for havin' needs.

Dull blue eyes stared fixedly at the too bright screen, the skin around them a mottled gray with tear-clumped lashes with that last day of work's mascara crusting messy black veins down her cheeks.

Shriveled rose petals littered the mattress around her slumped perch.

He loves me... He loves me not... He loves me...

A card scribbled in red ink turned endlessly in paper cut fingers.

Come down and see me some time! [4]

Lips cracked with worn lipstick moved soundlessly.

Comedownandseemesometime. Comedownandseemesometime.

A vague image of red and black and bells was taking shape in her mind.

Don't we all go a little crazy, when you're in love? [3]

"So, do ya think Horn's decided you're a lost cause?" Joker asked out of the blue a couple days later. "Just like me." He smiled proudly.

The billionaire sprawled on his cot shrugged, letting his eyes draw pictures on the ceiling. "... don't know. Probably got sick of wasting his time... Why do you ask?"

Tendrils of oily hair grazed the floor as the upper half of the clown's body hung off the edge of his own bed. His mouth contorted into a sturgeon's frown. "You're his, uh, his great claim to fame. You'd think he'd be a bit more... devoted is all." The madman's suspicion hid behind a veil of nonchalance.

Pupils paused their tracing of a familiar signal in his rubber sky and fell down the length of his body to the other man. "You think I'm the one that needs therapy?"


Shifting, Bruce looked away and ignored the greasy words. These, what he could almost deem conversations, had become a new, albeit stilted development; awkward, but there filling the maddening silence. They didn't talk about the incident, though the clown's many innuendos said enough. It was all the fallen hero could think about. There was a strange understanding -a truce almost- that he didn't want to examine or mess with.
"Whatever happened to Doctor Quinzel?" he said suddenly, anything to change the subject. Regardless it was something the vigilante should have noticed awhile ago -instantly- but he was just so grateful to have the joint sessions stop he hadn't questioned it.

"Harls?" Huh, the clown hadn't really given the bubbly blonde much thought since her weepy goodbye. After all he had everything he needed right here. "Suspension, I believe."

"Suspension?"

Thin arms flopped to the floor, framing the Joker's scarred face. "Well, you know what they say about staring into the abyss and all that... Can only imagine what riding it like a bucking bronco would do to ya," he added with a sly chuckle and a wink.

The vigilante's loose limbs stiffened. The implications were right there. "Clarify," he ordered, eyes hard.

Stained teeth flashed in a lecherous, upside down curve. His brow wriggled suggestively. "Gentlemen don't kiss and tell."

The Joker breathed lies, but Bruce knew deep down in his gut the other man was telling the truth in this instance. Whatever would hurt more. He just didn't know why the unprofessional, illogical, suicidal, just plain stupid fraternization bothered him so much.

"But for you, Bats, I'll tell ya every squishy, dirty detail." The clown's voice strained for a moment as he flipped onto his stomach, grunting under the nauseous swoop and all the gathered blood rushing from his head. "You dog, you."

"I don't want to hear it," Bruce bit out while ignoring the sinking burning in his gut. He turned over to face the wall, wincing at the movement because his ribs ached even days later. Of course he didn't want to hear the details, because he didn't care. He didn't have interest in that. He loved Rachel, and that was it. Any hope for himself had died with her.

Never mind that with each passing day in this place, his memory was losing the exact color blue of her eyes to shades of glinting hazel; and the misery over her departed, sweet existence was slowly giving way to ambivalent nostalgia. He thought it'd been hurting a little less each day, but the feelings he was experiencing now and for who forced it all back in a rush. He squeezed his eyes shut under the onslaught, disgusted with himself.

The salacious edge to the knave's grin faded at the hunched back, sad angle presented to him. He had really liked that open, forward-facing lounge. It wasn't trusting, wasn't vulnerable, but it suggested something he tried to convince himself was merely provocative. A body of rage to pounce, but now it was closed off to him because once again his Bat was too sensitive.

It was just Harley! She couldn't hold a sputter of a match's flame to the volcanic eruption that was his Bat.

Thinking fast, he opened his mouth and said in over precise pronunciation, "Homo sapien sapien Chiroptera."

The approaching dark clouds of the vigilante's brooding quickly dissipated in his sudden confusion. His eyebrows stitched together, he blinked at the wall. "What?"

The Joker grinned. "If they opened up our cozy, little security wing to the public, it's what would be on your, ah, information plaque. It means."
"I know what it means," the other man cut in quietly yet instantly his mood was easing back into that safe and familiar ennui, back to that wild thing in its cage too wary to spit its venom and gnash its teeth. His purple eyelids slid closed.

The clown flopped onto his back and glared at the ceiling. So much for some meaty conversat-
"... Homo sapien sapien Hyaenidae."

Ears perked, he propped himself up on his elbows with a creak. "Hiya-whatsit?"

The dry, split corner of the fallen hero's mouth quirked. "Hyaenidae. Hyena."

"Bat..." the Joker started, cocking his head to the side like a curious pup. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you just made a joke."

Wry amusement faded away to a flat gaze at the wall. Chest sinking, Bruce buried his face into the lumpy pillow smashed beneath his head. He couldn't let this mad man twist and toy with his moods. But that was a declaration without weight; it just made him feel a little less guilty when a small part of him tried to resist, that he wasn't so broken he didn't even have himself anymore.

"Be honest, am I the only one monstrously, uh, proud at the fact that 'homo' was said so many times and not once did I give into comedic temptation?"

There wasn't anyone else there for him, but he did have the clown. And maybe, considering all that's happened, it was enough.

Unaware of the barest hint of a grin visible from a long angle on his stubbornly stoic face, sharp hazel latched onto it like a shark scenting a drop of blood in briny water miles and miles away. A distance to go and a struggle to be had, sure, but already he could taste the rewarding burst of copper. A promise of awesome violence and good times. His forever smile turned predatory.

I'll be the one to protect you from a will to survive and a voice of reason. I must isolate you, isolate and save you from yourself. [5]

Chapter End Notes

[1] The Killing Joke (with a few small changes)
[2] I believe it's a lyric from a song in Annie.
[5] Select lyrics from A Perfect Circle's "Counting Bodies Like Sheep to the Rhythm of the War Drums"

Please forgive the Latin if it's wrong! I did the best I could with what Google had to offer.
"It's been awhile, Bruce. Good to see you up and about after the deplorable behavior of one of our own. You should be happy to know Mr. Slone has been let go."

The vigilante put Doctor Horn's amicable, nicotine grin in sight after shifting in the uncomfortable chair he'd been dropped into by his newly assigned orderly whose name he didn't know but recognized as a bouncer to one of Gotham's mafia-owned gentleman's clubs. The fixed scowl and the perfunctory, one-sided wrestling match into a strait jacket indicated the silence between them would happily remain as such. Bruce was more than okay with that; though the straps were too tight, he could walk on his own without being strong-armed.

"Thankfully there looks to be no ill effects. How are you feeling?"

"Swaddled like an infant," was what he would like to say, but his glare aimed at the ground and the sardonic arch to his brow probably said enough.

"Once again I do apologize for the restraints, but I'm sure you understand given our... history."

Broad shoulders rolled and pulled the ivory material taut.

Seeing this, Horn's thin lips twitched with a grin. His previously useless writing hand moved into action. Patient is more responsive, despite evidence of a recent physical altercation. Outdoor exercise apparently lacking the fulfillment of violence. Inquiries to follow.

"I see you've been involved in yet another... disagreement. What happened this time?" He needed an answer in case Leland saw the bruises or -God forbid- Wayne's butler came to visit and started spouting questions and threats in equal measure. There was no explanation in the tapes.

Ah, those golden tapes... They had been so informative that he'd forgotten he still had to physically meet with Wayne. Patient J, of all people, mentioning it reminded the good doctor.

Dark, brooding eyes lifted up some and to the left focusing on the tweed jacket thrown over electrical equipment. His gaze followed the wires jammed into the outlet. Hiding something, no doubt, considering the coat stand was beside the door. He couldn't determine what exactly all that was.

"Bruce?" Startled, eye contact was fleetingly made. The encouraging smile only came off as mocking. "Your injuries? Care to explain?"

The reply was plain and hollow. "I fell."

The smile became strained. "If there's no honesty, then how are we to proceed?"

"We don't."

That... that effectively poked a ragged hole in the swell of progress Richard had gradually been feeling after weeks of headphones fixed on his head and acting as an aural voyeur. He'd forgotten just how uncooperative the billionaire could be, but the black eye he'd gained their last meeting should have tipped him off. Even though not an open book, conversations with Patient J had revealed an astounding intellect and a dry wit deep rooted in warring realism and optimism. Who would have guessed?

The psychiatrist was getting none of that here.
"No surprise there," he could almost hear Crane say. The sneering man had become steadily more unhelpful now that he had his kiddie chem lab. Given the ex-administrator's track record, a man with better ethics would have thought twice before providing such supplies, but Richard simply didn't care. Wayne was the priority, and Crane was a consultant well-compensated.

Casually nudging aside his notes to catch a glimpse of bullet points he'd scribbled down of interesting sound bytes, his gaze lit upon the last item listed.

"Bruce, I know our relationship thus far leaves much to be desired." He pressed on despite the quiet, derisive snort. "I know these little talks have done and will continue to do nothing for you. I admit I've been a tad... insensitive to your unique character. The staff here at Arkham -and even myself- are guilty of treating you, say, less than a cognizant human being..."

"More like an exhibit in a zoo, a Homo sapien sapien Chiroptera, if you will."

The vigilante looked up sharply at that.

"I promised you real social interaction and so far all I've given you is more damaging isolation."

There were no such things as coincidences, especially here. "What's your point?" Bruce bit out, his mind racing. Play along or they'll resort to drugs again.

Horn's overly emphatic mask tired. "My point is, Bruce," he enunciated, "That I'm going to put a hold on our sessions in favor of providing you more freedoms and activities."

That... was the last thing Bruce expected to hear after that eye roll worthy speech.

"Well?" The psychiatrist leaned forward, beaming. "What do you think? Exciting, isn't it?" Horn was certainly excited to pawn the recalcitrant billionaire off on others and no longer have to keep reliving the resounding failure of their meetings.

"... yeah, sure," Bruce responded without much reaction. The doctor's cheerful resignation was cause for suspicion, but he didn't care enough to dwell on it. Getting to watch lousy daytime television and eating meals in the cafeteria all by himself again didn't seem much of an improvement. He had kind of grown impossibly to tolerate spending time with--

His stomach rolled when he called to get Horn's attention. What he said next was supposed to be a confusing stipulation, but his all too generous doctor was happy to grant it, beaming and nodding along and all but rubbing his hands together in glee.

1, 344, 007 views and counting, jumping higher and higher every few seconds.

The numbers on the screen ticked away in the cold reflection of his scuffed glass lenses. With a lazy push, the frames slid down the bridge of his nose and clattered onto the keyboard.

What a god damn mess. One that refused to go away.

Even after several injunctions to have the video removed, it was too late. The media had gotten hold of it, and thanks to modern technology, it consistently reappeared like an unrelenting hydra: Take down one, three more would pop up with even more humiliating and wildly uncreative titles. The one on his screen read, "Bare-assed Bat."

Viral didn't even cover the half of it.
Thankfully there have yet to be any crude parodies or nonsense remixes. The fifty six second video was still entertaining enough without the unnecessary flair.

The first time he'd seen it was after clicking a link in a mass email and feeling the bottom drop out of his stomach and to know absolute failure tasted like burnt coffee and bile on his tongue. This was his crowning achievement, his greatest sin, what he would forever burn in Hell for. Like a compulsion, his hand sluggishly found the mouse and clicked. He didn't need his glasses; he knew what he'd see.

The beginning seconds started in blackness accompanied by microphone thumps and rustling. A flash of industrial light fixed into a too white ceiling until the picture lowered, shaky and frustrating. The bottom half was obscured by a sleeve. It looked like the hall of a hospital. Cold. Washed out. Mostly deserted.

Mostly.

Two men were walking toward the cell phone recording. Both tall, one clean-cut and all in white while the other...

On impulse, the finger resting on the mouse twitched, pausing the video. Jim had learned of the extent of his cowardice when he needed a moment -like he always did- before the over saturation of light dimmed and the resolution sharpened, throwing the other man in clarity. He took a breath and let it out. Behind his tightly closed office door, the chaos of the precinct droned on like a never-ending song.

He hit play again and withdrew his hand entirely from the mouse so he wouldn't be tempted to stop it again.

Each viewing was a process of recognition, because that was not the same man he had sat across from behind a plate of glass at Arkham for what seemed like so long ago. The handsome playboy image made more powerful by a cape and cowl had been obliterated, eclipsed by a shambling wraith clutching onto a too small towel barely concealing his dignity.

Jim's poor eyesight followed the slow and ginger steps, feeling that knotting in his stomach. Longer hair hung in dead eyes set in hollow sockets that gazed sightlessly ahead of him. Wet paper for skin stretched tight over poking bones and long limbs. Where there had to have been healthy muscle was now a perfect picture of hunger and deterioration. The sharp jaw Jim had come to know framed by a black mask was lost under dark, patchy stubble.

The vigilante was an aged shell.

What stung the most, what most people fast-forwarded to, what many late night hosts made tasteless remarks about was the last few seconds where a leg gave out and the empty expression flared with panic before hands caught him and the towel slipped. When the orderly's eyes cut to where the camera phone was barely hidden, it ended. The image frozen on screen, ready to be replayed or abandoned. Like the numerous viewings before, Jim could only stare at the motion-smeared fallen hero and the black bar tacked over revealed flesh. The last time he'd seen such a bewildered look was years and years ago when a quiet, young boy had just lost his parents and -being new to the force- the best he had to offer was a careful smile and an over-sized coat reeking of cigarettes draped over scrawny, shivering shoulders.

Vexed, he pushed away from his desk and scrubbed at his eyes, pacing the small, cluttered space.

This was all his fault. How could he have gone along with this? How could protecting Dent so his posthumous act pushing for legislation be worth this?
The commissioner had instructed not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency, so when there was a small knock on his door his scowl deepened and a barked "What" prompted the intruder on the other side to enter. It wasn't one of his officers though.

Straightening up, he forced his stance to be more relaxed and friendly. "Hello?" he greeted, hoping this wasn't another reporter asking for his opinions on the rise in crime or the controversial video and the legal battle brewing from Wayne Enterprises because of it.

"Hey- um, hello," responded the tall, young man dressed in street clothes, shuffling uncertainly. "Sorry about, uh just-" He thumbed over his shoulder. "Everyone looked really busy so I thought..."

Patience already short, Jim cut in. "What can I do for you?" He reached for his glasses and glanced uncomfortably at his computer screen.

The stranger opened his mouth a few times and aborted each try with a snap of his teeth. His severe features were flushed.

"Listen, son, I've got a lot of work to-"

"Yeah," the younger man bit out, nodding as he ducked his dark head. "This was a stupid idea anyway. Sorry."

Just as he turned away, his eyes finally met the commissioner's and that frown triggered familiarity.

"Wait!" Jim exclaimed as he tripped out from behind his desk, heart in his throat. His eyes darted in disbelief from the face hovering in concern behind the vigilante onscreen to the one staring at him in alarm. "It's you. You're." He motioned at the monitor.

The orderly from the video shrugged with a sour purse of his lips. "Yeah, that's me," answered a voice shot with nerves. His hands squeezed tighter around the ball cap and shades held in front of him like a shield.

"What -er- what is it can I do for you?" Jim asked, puzzled.

"I came here, because uh..." The orderly kept checking behind him at the crowded bullpen. Finally he huffed out a breath and stared hard at Gordon, steeling himself.

What he said next drained all the blood from the commissioner's face.

"I saw you. That day you visited. I mean, by all rights you should hate the guy, right? But... I heard some of it. I didn't get it then, but now I think I do. Wayne -the Bat- whoever you think of him as, didn't really kill anyone, did he? He's innocent and taking the fall for someone... and I think you know that."

"Shut the door."

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Bruce couldn't decide if it was his own karma at work or pure irony that he was sent to the cafeteria after his session with Horn -still feeling a little green around the gills- to find that flash-frozen fish fillet was on the menu. But then he remembered he didn't believe in such things, and he was never one for poetry, justice or otherwise.

When the gray strip of fish flopped onto his plate and the bright orange breading crumbled around it, he either stifled a laugh or a surge of vomit.
Karma and irony aside, his other, much more logical, theory was he was going insane and the paranoia he once valued was having him see the absurd.

That almost gave him comfort.

Acrid smelling coleslaw and a bread roll that landed on his tray with a solid thunk completed his balanced meal. He turned to survey the large, bustling room raucous with noise and various sets of unflinching, predatory stares. Squaring his shoulders, he forced one foot in front of the other, watching for any juvenile attacks, and found himself heading to that lone table in the back corner. "Social interaction" involved separate parties engaging and he had no intention of participating, especially after that day in the yard and these animals converged upon him like a crashing wave of wrath and savagery.

Except his plans for solitude were dashed when cold blue eyes watched him from the very seat he'd had in mind. His march slowed but he pressed on regardless of the clenching shock in his gut. Crane had already seen him and retreating would be cowardice. The last time Bruce had seen him was...

The lunch tray slid onto the table with a carefulness he only treated active explosives.

Crane's soft features were as hard and as smooth as marble and just as unchanging. Crystalline eyes tracked his slow movements with a detached deference. When he spoke his voice was a dull steel blade that cut off Bruce's motions. "Not even going to ask for my permission to sit there? Oh, that's right. When it comes to Gotham's Dark Knight and his cackling jester, I don't even get the luxury of an illusion of having a choice. Silly me."

The table jerked from the vigilante jumping to his feet and grabbing up his tray, eyes downcast and his mouth a pale line.

Satisfied, full lips curled. "Bat."

Bruce froze in place, body hunched forward reaching for his food. He was actually afraid to look higher than the other man's fingers loosely holding a plastic spork.

Jonathan outright smiled at this. Inside him, a croaking voice crowed with the small victory, even if it all was guilt based and not necessarily unadulterated fear. His hands beckoned. "I was only jesting. After all it's not like you were the one that held me down and painfully violated my person."

"Join me. Please."

The tall brunet swayed between hesitation and his own reluctance before easing down into the chair, his head bowed.

"You only watched and did nothing to help, the true act of a hero."

Shoulders flinched inward, and the vigilante moved to leave again.

"Jokes," Jonathan piped, leaning forward and catching shuttered, dark eyes. The curve of his grin all scabs and hard plastic. "All jokes. One adopts a special brand of humor over time in Arkham. Just jokes, I assure you."

He wasn't joking. Not in the least.

Expression unconvinced and weighed down with guilt, Bruce sat with the intention of staying and surrendering himself to Crane's justified jabs. Just get through this meal and be done with it.
Grinning, Jonathan turned back to his barely touched food and allowed a relative silence to settle between them. At least for a few minutes. Then he cocked his head, dropped his utensil, and folded his arms on the table top. His gaze shrewd on the taller man's cuts and bruises.

"Whose work is that?"

The vigilante stared at his plate, having yet to take a bite.

"Oh Bat, come now," Jonathan tutted. "I was under the impression we were developing a rapport. Am I suddenly not worthy enough to be in the Great Caped Crusader's presence, let alone deserving of eye contact?"

Challenged with nerves prickling, twitchy brown and twinkling cerulean clashed before hastily disengaging.

"There's the intrepid hero," the smaller man cooed as Scarecrow tittered like a sputtering exhaust pipe. It was hard to believe that this sad creature was the beast with dripping black fangs that would plunge into nightmares on leather wings of endless night. This retrogress couldn't rectify the irreparable damage done to his psyche, but this moment right now -the disturb coming off the man responsible in waves- was enough for a genuine smile to light up his face.

From across the room, guileless green eyes flared with poisonous jealousy. The bleached blonde orderly's hackles had risen so taut his muscles ached. Despite the puzzling fact Jonathan seemed to be at ease and even amused, he didn't trust the close proximity, and when an open, beautiful smile graced the frail man's face... Spencer was paralyzed with rage.

Bruce's sunken cheeks were burning in lieu of Crane's needling comments. It was true; he was nervous to be around the ex-doctor, but not for the reasons he knew the other man craved. Crime fighting hadn't involved much interaction with the innocent bystanders when the criminals were there to be apprehended. For lack of a better term, his "bedside manner" left much to be desired. Though Crane was certainly no innocent, he was a victim of something horrific and Bruce didn't know how to handle it.

He didn't want to look at him, because he didn't know what to say.

He didn't want to look at him, because it would remind him how useless he was.

Bruce didn't want to look at him, because what did it say about him that things with the Joker had inexcusably changed and were not as they should.

And lastly, he couldn't look at Crane, because the verdigris he'd felt as the clown touched the other man that night could return in a red-splattered rush. The simmering in his chest whenever he had looked at Harvey and Rachel together was a faint prickle compared to the all-encompassing sick feeling waiting in the wings.

And he was terrified of feeling that again.

"Well he's definitely done a number on you," Crane stated with a speculative narrowing of his eyes. "I must say I'm impressed. I told him acting like a blunt, little instrument wouldn't be successful, but it seems to be breaking you down like a wrecking ball against plywood."

Jonathan smirked while his voice grew heavy with chagrin. A learned skill from years of being on the right side of the desk. "His greasy fingers are wriggling so deep inside your head that you can nary think about anyone, let alone anything else. I can see it in your eyes."
Feeling bold in light of the visible shrinking to the vigilante's frame, Jonathan stood and planted both hands on the table, caging the larger man in. "Appearing sane really would be acting for you, wouldn't it? The Big, Gallant Batman harboring such warm, fuzzy, nasty feelings for the murderous psychopath in the asylum, having Mummy and Daddy just spinning in their graves. Oh... how the mighty have fallen."

The crash of a chair toppling backwards sucked all the sound from the room like a vacuum. Over six feet of trembling, deteriorating muscle stood over the ex-doctor, onyx glaring ferociously at a bleached china face. Fists balled, Bruce shook with a fury he didn't know what to do with. The regular brutality felt tired and misdirected. Before any sort of move could be made though, a blur of white coat and even whiter hair swept in and pulled Crane away. Just as the smaller man was at a safe enough distance away, acidic green eyes filled Bruce's vision. Both men were almost nose to nose.

"Come near him again, and I swear I'll fucking kill you," was hurled at him with a spray of spit hitting his cheek. The orderly stormed away, taking his bemused charge with him.

Bruce just stood there with all eyes on him, waiting for him to do something. To be the predator or prey. To entertain them. He sorely wanted to give them the blood they craved, to pay back in kind what they had done to him and then some.

His mind was pushing and pulling him to do a lot of things.

Eventually with stiff joints and brittle nerves, he put his chair to rights and sat down. Air was pumping in and out of his lungs as if he'd just run for miles. Staring down at his plate -the crisp edges blurring in and out- he kept swallowing the pain and defeated anger and thought of dark corners and bright smiles and slowly started to not feel much of anything at all. To just shut it all down was a cool balm.

His parents were dead, and he was here. What did it matter what he did anymore?

Maybe sometimes it was just that simple.

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