Everything Burns
by LadyoftheSea

Summary

Miriam Kane is no stranger to the perils of Gotham City. After losing her mother, Miriam is left to move in with Bruce Wayne, her only living family. But when Bruce goes missing for seven years before returning under mysterious circumstances, a culmination of bad decisions leads to consequences she never saw coming.
It's irritating how difficult it is to resist the itch to tap my sneakers against the tile as the line ekes along at a snail's pace. Sneaking a quick glance at my phone, a frustrated huff escapes me.

2:45. Thirty minutes to get to class.

Counting the number of people ahead of me, a stray hair tickles my nose. When blowing it away does nothing, I shove it behind my ears.

Only three more. You can still make it.

A harried-looking businessman standing two people away appears to be having a harder time hiding his irritation than I am. His face is beet red, and he alternates his gaze from staring at his watch to glaring at the tellers.

Standing on my tip-toes and staring over the heads of the people in line, I peer at the two behind the counter. A blonde woman in a gray dress deals with an elderly man, a kind smile on her face and hair pulled back in an elegant twist. The other teller, an older man, pulls pamphlets for a woman in front of him and makes large, wide gestures with his hands as she nods emphatically. Gotham First National Bank's cheesy late-night commercial plays in my head: 'quick service every time, and always with a smile!'

Well, they got the smile part right at least.

Looking around the rest of the large bank to see if any other employees will come to my rescue, I notice an exasperated-looking man in a gray suit sitting in the large glass office in the middle of the foyer. The outline of his face is stone-like and abrasive, a balding spot shines on the crown of his head. Judging by the expensive gleaming silver watch on his arm, it's safe to assume he's the manager. He doesn't look like he's too concerned to help out his employees. He just stares at the papers in front of him, ignoring the line of people. The other offices lining the walls of the bank are empty, no other source of reprieve in sight.

An internal debate rages in my brain as I decide whether it will be wiser to come back tomorrow. If I'm late to class again, Professor Peterson will have my hide.

The time, blinking up at me from my phone screen, seems to be taunting me.

3:02. Better to come back tomorrow after advanced data mining, that should get me ahead of the afternoon rush...

Regretting the time wasted, I stuff my wallet in my bag, muttering quiet apologies to the people behind me in line, and weave my way through the red stanchions.

There are less than fifteen feet between me and the exit when a burst of rapid popping fills the room. Jumping back and twisting towards the sound, screams erupt from the group of people behind me. They dive for cover, but my own legs freeze.

"Get on the ground! Hands up and heads down!"

There are three of them, all wearing suits and clown masks. Swallowing the scream threatening to burst out of my mouth and raising my hands, I sink to the ground. My eyes stay trained on the
automatic rifles in their hands as they wave them in wide arcs. A loud crack fills the room as one of the clowns brings the butt of his rifle down on the neck of an overweight security guard, dropping him to the ground with a loud thump.

"I said hands up and heads down!" one of the clowns shouts as he shoots at the ceiling. The other people who were standing in line with me only seconds before rush to comply with the man's orders and my mind strains to process what's happening.

The clown furthest away from me, wearing a mask with a wide frown and furrowed brows, throws the large duffel bag onto a nearby counter and unloads its contents. An urgent and inappropriate thought grows in my mind: he looks like Grumpy from Snow White. My body shakes when he pulls out what appear to be hand grenades. The morbid thoughts solidify as panic overrides my brain. Mouth twitching, I struggle to suppress the irrational impulse to laugh at the new, unsuitable nicknames of the thugs in front of me.

"No, please!" The blonde woman is hauled over the teller counter by one of the shouting men. He throws her to the ground and continues yelling at us to stay down.

Grumpy picks up the duffel bag filled with grenades and starts heading toward the nearest hostage, placing one in their hands before pulling the pin. Bile climbs up my throat and I can't tear my eyes away.

The clown who hit the security guard, Happy, keeps his gun trained on us. The third clown, Sleepy, jumps behind the teller counter and begins typing on a keyboard.

"Obviously, we don't want you doing anything with your hands other than holding on for dear life," Happy announces as he stands over the unconscious guard.

Shit, shit, shit—

Scanning the room, I find an alcove by the door. Sleepy is behind the counter and staring at the screen in front of him. The other two have their backs to me as they force primed grenades into the other hostages shaking hands. Inching backward, aiming for the alcove, I stick my hand in my bag to search for my phone. Averting my eyes from the men's backs, and trying to ignore the whimpering coming from the others, my fingers tremble as I type a text to Alfred.

C'mon, c'mon...

My muscles freeze as a burning sensation creeps up the back of my neck. Looking up only to find Grumpy with the bag of grenades looking my way, his head cocked to the side, a cold sweat covers my spine. My hands ball into fists to keep them from shaking. His eyes are obscured by the mask, but that doesn't dissuade the knowledge that they are boring into me. Overwhelming dread floods me and I struggle to stave off an oncoming panic attack as he walks my way.

Abandoning my plight with the phone, I struggle to resist the primal urge to crawl backward as he closes in. He stoops over me and reaches out for my arm. A small sob escapes at the feeling of his hand on my body, and he drags me back towards the group, his fingers biting into my bicep.

Letting out a yelp as he wrenches my shoulder and tosses me against the counter, I hesitate to look at the mask and instead stare at his patterned shirt and gloved hands. The man doesn't move away, and after a minute I gather the nerve to look up at him. He's looming over me, his head tilting from side to side, examining me like I'm some kind of junior high bio lab specimen.

Nausea twists my stomach and I whimper as he reaches his hand out again. A quick flash of
movement turns my attention past Grumpy and finds the bank manager holding a gun and aiming it our way. A loud blast and shattering glass sends the clown scrambling behind a nearby desk. Crunching glass is replaced by another blast and the sound of Happy being blown off his feet. His back hits the side of a nearby table before he crumbles to the floor—a pool of blood blooms beneath him, his grinning mask still in place as his prone body faces me.

The gun's cocked again and another shot goes flying over my head. Throwing myself flat on the ground, I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for it all to be over.

One way or another.

The two remaining clowns dive away as the man from the glass office aims a shotgun at the robbers and fires.

"Do you have any idea who you're stealing from? You and your friends are dead! You hear me?!!" the bank manager screams at the two men.

Seriously, that's what you're worried about?!

The bank manager approaches the small desk the two clowns are hiding behind and fires again. The clowns continue to scramble away, attempting to find whatever cover they can.

Head tucked under my arms, I make myself as small as possible while the bank manager and the two clowns exchange fire. An unfamiliar scream tears out of my throat when a shattered curtain of glass sprays across my jacket.

You're going to die here.

There's a loud shout and the sound of a body hitting the floor before a short burst of shots. Someone lets out a weak grunt before something heavy smacks against the tiles.

After a moment of silence, my eyes force open and see the bank manager on his back, bleeding. Sleepy gets up from the floor and clutches his shoulder.

"Where the hell did you learn to count?!!" he shouts at Grumpy. The accused clown simply shrugs and moves towards the fallen bank manager, taking the shotgun out of his hand.

These people are insane.

Sleepy approaches us and hops back over the teller counter to continue his assault on the keyboard. Pulling myself into a sitting position, I bring my knees to my chest. The smell of gunpowder is overwhelming and turns my stomach. My head whips around at the sound of a loud clang and glass crunching. Grumpy is by my bag, crushing my phone under his foot. His mask is still in place, but I feel his stare again. My skin burns. Unable to ignore the fear filling my body, I avert my gaze to the floor in front of my feet and pray he leaves me alone.

"Fuck sakes. He killed the tech guy. We need to by-pass the biometric scanner, or our guy isn't going to get that door open," Sleepy states.

The other hostages and I give a quick glance around the room.

There's more of them?

Grumpy checks his watch and then looks from Sleepy to the group of us cowering together against the counter. "Well, he isn't going to be much help," he begins, walking towards the group, "I guess
you're going to, uh, _give us a hand_, blondie."

The clown reaches the bank teller in the gray dress and pulls her to her feet by the hair. Taking the grenade from her hands, he puts the pin back in before pocketing it, shoving her towards the entrance leading to the teller counter. She's sobbing; her chest heaves as she begs. My heart contracts at the sight of her face and the gun at her back.

"Please, I-I don't know—know anything. I swear I—"

She's silenced with a brutal hit to her back with the butt of his handgun. Crumbling to her knees before being dragged by her hair to the computer terminal, Grumpy lifts her up to her feet and shoves her towards the computer, sticking his gun to the back of her head. She cries out and shakes so hard she can't even raise her hands.

"If you're going to play around, then there's going to be a problem," Sleepy says as he raises his hand back to strike her.

Acting without thought, I pick myself up and stare down the clowns.

"Stop!" I yell, raising my arms in the air as the two clowns point their guns at me. My sneakers squeak against the floor and I swallow hard. Forcing the image of the two dead men lying behind me out of my mind, my throat constricts.

"I can help with the scanners, alright? I know how to bypass them. Just leave her alone."

I'm glad I at least sound braver than I feel. Sleepy lowers his hand down to his side. The woman looks visibly relieved and she lets out a loud, shaky breath.

The clowns turn to one another for a moment, mulling over my offer. Grumpy throws his arms up in a shrug, tilting his head in acquiescence.

"How the hell would you know anything?" Sleepy demands, still uncertain.

"I'm good with computers. I know what I'm doing." I say it with conviction, hoping they believe me and they never know the damage I'm capable of. The other hostages stare at me slack-jawed.

"You'd better, for your sake," Sleepy states.

Sleepy keeps his gun trained on the back of the teller's neck as Grumpy moves from behind the counter and comes towards me with his gun pointed at my chest. The bravado I felt just a moment before begins to fade as Grumpy walks behind me. He's too close. Close enough for me to feel the heat coming off his body as he leans his chest into my back, pressing the barrel of his gun to my head. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear that he's sniffing my hair. Suppressing a shudder, it takes everything I have not to drop back to the floor. He pushes me forward as we walk toward where Sleepy and the teller stand. Approaching the computer with caution, and minding the agitated clown with his finger on the trigger, I glance at the operating system set up and let out a small sigh of relief.

_You can do this. They probably haven't updated this since 2005. You've worked on harder OS in the seventh grade than this._

Turning to the woman next to me, I glance at the plated name tag on her chest. _Sarah_.

"Listen, Sarah, right?" The woman looks at me with wide, tear-filled eyes and nods her head. "You need to enter your username and password. Can you do that for me, Sarah?"
I attempt to ignore the close proximity of the armed clowns behind me and maintain eye contact with her. She nods again and begins typing. Within seconds the main system dialogue screen opens.

Shooting her a small smile and a quiet 'thank you,' I ignore the bead of sweat trickling down my temple. I work through the security firewalls of the dated system. Despite the gun at my back and the terrified woman next to me, a small part of me can't help but reminisce about the last time I did something like this.

**Focus, Miriam. If you get out of this alive you can think about that later.**

My fingers fly as I bypass the scanners completely and engage emergency override protocols to open the vault. The muzzle of the gun pushes against my hair and my fingers freeze on the keyboard.

"Hurry up. You'd better be doing exactly what you said," Sleepy says as he pushes the gun harder against my head. The threat is punctuated by the sound of the hammer being pulled back. It's a struggle not to move.

"I—I just need a minute. I promise—it's almost done."

The gun moves away from my head and I resume typing, trying to go as fast as my fingers will allow. Entering in the executing command, large spools of code begin to filter through the open dialogue screen and a pent-up breath escapes. More irrational, and impertinent, thoughts float through my mind again.

*Lucius is going to be pissed. Like, super pissed.*

Thinking about what he'll have to say about all this won't help me. Or the lecture he'll give.

**Focus.**

"The vault should be opening now," I say, twisting to face the two men and wedging myself between them and Sarah.

Sleepy shrugs and takes off for the back of the bank while Grumpy motions for us to move with the barrel of his gun. Wrapping an arm around Sarah, we walk back out to the group who look at us with a collective sense of shock.

Grumpy follows close behind and shoves us both back down to the ground. He doesn't move away and I'm afraid to look back at him. The burning sensation returns to my face and neck. No longer able to tell where my shaking ends and where Sarah's begins, I flinch when Sleepy comes running back to the lobby, straining under a load of large duffel bags.

"C'mon. There's a lot of bags to move," Sleepy says as he heads back to the vault. Grumpy's feet shift before he moves to join his partner.

"Th-Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you—" Sarah begins in a whisper.

"There's no need for that, alright? Thank me when we're all out of this mess," I say under my breath. Despite the strangling panic, I let a genuine smile come through and Sarah relaxes a little. The short moment of calm between us shatters when the two men come back from the vault and dump another large heap of bags in the middle of the lobby.

"If this guy was so smart, he would have had us bring a bigger car," Sleepy says. Grumpy turns
again to look at us huddled together and freezes when Sleepy cocks his gun. "I'm betting that the Joker told you to kill me once we loaded the cash," he continues.

They're killing each other now?

Sarah tenses up next to me again as we look on. Strain electrifies the lobby.

Grumpy shakes his head and glances at the watch on his wrist. "No, no, no. I kill the bus driver."

He side-steps the large hill of cash-filled duffel bags. Sleepy circles around, keeping Grumpy in his sights.

"Bus driver? What bus driv—"

Grumpy backs up quickly as the rear end of a yellow school bus tears through the entrance of the bank and sends the other man flying. He drops five feet away with a sickening crack as his head smacks against the tile. Everyone screams and the other hostages clutch their grenades tighter as the bus stops short a few feet away.

A small fat man in another clown mask opens the back of the bus. He belts out a loud peal of laughter at the looks of terror on our faces and the destruction of the lobby. Grumpy picks up the automatic weapon from the now-dead-Sleepy and turns back to the pile of bags. I jump at the sudden contact of Sarah squeezing my hand tight. A small whimper escapes her throat and I squeeze her hand back. Visions of further violence overrun my mind as Grumpy works to load the bus.

We aren't making it out of this.

"Those guys aren't getting up, are they?" The new clown lets out a loud chuckle. Grumpy begins tossing bags of money from the floor to the man, loading them inside. "Ooh, that's a lot of money. Hey, what happened to the rest of the guys?" he asks in an afterthought as he throws the last bag into the bus.

Grumpy turns away from him, pointing his gun over his shoulder, and, true to his word, he shoots the bus driver. We all scream again at the gunshots and the sight of blood flowing out of the man's body as he drops—just like the others had.

My throat is swelling shut. Breathing becomes a struggle as overwhelming despair pushes down on me.

This is it.

Grumpy strolls towards us, humming a low tune, and crouches over me and Sarah. She shuts her eyes and buries her face behind my shoulder, but I force myself to sit a little straighter and stare up at the man in the mask; I want my stubbornness and defiance to rule my last moments, not my fear. In a distant part of my brain, the faint sound of approaching sirens registers.

The man reaches up to the mask and slides it off his face, revealing a head of poorly-dyed green waves and a ghoulish painted face. Paling and hold Sarah's hand tighter, I can't pull my eyes from his scarred mouth, the jagged lines that curve upwards in a sick smile. I force myself to remember to breathe.

"Oh, don't look so glum," he laughs, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. "Y'know, they say that whatever doesn't kill you..." His dark gaze drops to meet my frozen stare, and, despite the curvature of his scars, he isn't smiling. "Simply makes you... stranger," he says with a forcefulness that makes me flinch.
As quickly as he was there, the man waltzes away from us, laughing to himself as he jumps into the back of the bus and slams the door shut. He jumps over the bus seats like a hyperactive schoolboy before the bus rips itself out of the entrance and speeds away. We're all left staring at the gaping wound left behind by the bus as the sound of sirens becomes a deafening cacophony.
A dull ringing blocks out what the detective is saying. Staring past his thin, wire-framed glasses and into his brown eyes, his mustache twitches as his mouth opens and closes, but the words he's saying don't reach me. Gunshots play on repeat in my mind; the strange, scarred man's manic grin haunts the inside of my eyelids.

People in uniform blur around in the periphery of the scene. The police rushed into the bank only minutes after the bus pulled out into traffic, but they weren't fast enough. I'm numb, but cold and burning zaps race down my spine. My head seems to float, unattached from my neck but tethered by the throbbing pain that pulses with my heartbeat, and I jerk away when the detective places his hand on my shoulder.

"Miss Kane, do you hear what I'm saying?" he asks.

He takes his hand away when I flinch. The sudden contact brings me back to the present. Keeping my focus on his eyes, I force my mind to wade through the cotton muddying my senses.

"No, I'm sorry." The only part I caught was that he's Lieutenant James Gordon. He helped carry me out when they cleared the bank.

His eyes are a pleasant shade of ochre, and I focus on the silly thought that there must be a lot of guys out there that are jealous of his mustache-growing abilities. My senses snap back into focus and I cast my eyes to the ground in embarrassment, as if he could read my thoughts and was scolding me. When I look up at him, I'm surprised to see him smiling.

"That's OK, a lot has happened. You're probably in shock." Nodding, I grip the space blanket around my shoulders tighter. The burning has left, but I can't stop myself from shivering. "One of my detectives called Alfred Pennyworth for you. Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? That's a nasty cut on your head—I think it wouldn't hurt to have a doctor look at you, just to be safe."

Touching the thick gauze bandage on the side of my head, held in place with thin strips of adhesive, I probe the scratchy padding. The cut escaped my notice until one of the paramedics slapped a cloth full of disinfectant on it. Other marks and scratches glare bright red along my arms, with little bandages covering the worst of them. Little dots of blood mark my shirt and blend in with the swirling patterns of blue, green, and pink. I'm not even sure when the piece of glass cut my face. The thought of spending more time with groups of strangers fussing over me is enough to make me shake my head.

"No way I'm going to a hospital. I've had enough of those to last a lifetime."

"No, no—really, I'll be fine. I just want to go home."

He shakes his head in agreement and rises from his crouched position. "You did a brave thing," he says as his mouth widens into a grin, and I open my mouth to protest. "Most of the other witnesses swear that, without you, a hell of a lot more people would have died." I shake my head.

"I just did what I needed to do." Gordon opens his mouth to disagree, but it's my turn to cut him off. "No, I'm serious. I helped them hack the bank's security system—doesn't that make me, like, an involuntary accomplice?"
The nausea I've been feeling for the past hour rises again and I close my eyes to keep myself from throwing up all over Gordon's shoes. His quiet laugh surprises me.

"This wasn't that clown's first rodeo, I'm afraid," he says, scratching his head. "Most of the previous heists have had a higher body count. You should be proud, not many people can say they have the stones to do something like that."

Searching his face, I see he's being genuine. It makes me shift uncomfortably.

"To answer your question—yes, you did help them, but it probably saved your life and everyone else in there. The bank, and its legitimate earnings, are insured. You didn't do anything that can't be fixed. You have a real gift it seems. Maybe you should think about joining the force," he says with a laugh.

The compliment brings a fresh blush to my cheeks, and I try to change the subject. "Do you think I could have my bag back now?" I ask.

Gordon looks down and pushes his glasses back up his nose. He gives a long sigh. "We looked through the lobby, but we didn't see anything that matched the description—" Gordon cuts himself off when we hear someone yelling.

"Miri—Miriam!"

Turning our heads and look past the open ambulance door, we search for the man calling my name. Alfred's wispy white hair, black overcoat, and navy cable knit sweater come into view as he pushes through the yellow police tape and past a group of unaware police officers. Ignoring the shaking in my legs, I rise to embrace Alfred as he trots over to me.

"Dear Lord. Are you alright? What happened to your head? Dear, bloody Jesus," Alfred says, touching the bandage and giving me a once over. Despite everything, I laugh and bury my face in his sweater, nodding as I discard the space blanket and grip Alfred fiercely.

I'm OK now.

Pools of tears rest on the edge of my eyes before cascading down in waves I can't hold back.

"What the bloody hell happened?"

I can't help but smile at Alfred's fretting. He hugs me close to his chest and begins a rapid line of inquiry with Gordon. My eyes close and their voices fade. Instead, I choose to focus on the familiar smell of leather and sandalwood coming from Alfred's sweater.

"Does Bruce know?" I ask.

Alfred's driving us through the evening rush of traffic, heading towards the penthouse downtown, and he sighs. "Yes, of course. Master Bruce will be meeting us at home."

Nodding my head, I stare back out the window at the walls of glass and lights as we crawl through traffic. A faint sense of comfort comes back to me as we pass the throngs of people in the heart of Gotham. Small groups of teen girls with their arms full of shopping bags, men looking at their phones as they navigate the busy street, and large huddles of people waiting for the next train to come, all heading to their destinations unimpeded by the knowledge of their own mortality. It's
nice to be reminded that the world really didn't start to end when the men took those first shots in
the bank ceiling.

"Is he upset?"

Alfred meets my quick glance in the rear-view mirror. He gives a familiar look: His eyebrows
raised, lips pulled into a half-smile that reeks of sarcasm. *Are you joking?* his expression says.

"Come now, why would he be upset? Master Bruce may be a great many things, Miri, but he isn't
callous." He smiles at me and I try to feel reassured. "He's worried sick. He would have rushed
over with me, but I asked him to stay behind." I nod, but it's hard for me to judge how Bruce will
be, and whether Alfred is glossing over how Bruce really feels.

When I was young, Bruce was like the big brother I never had. After Mom died and Bruce took me
in, I thought our bond would grow stronger. That was before he disappeared for seven years. For a
long time, everyone thought he was dead.

*Including me.*

Alfred's jacket pulls tighter around my shoulders as I tense and we descend into the private parking
garage. He pulls the car into an empty spot and parks. In the dim lighting, my mind wanders back
to the image of the man—the "Joker's" painted face hovering above mine. The look in his eyes as
he laughed at me. The feeling that, only three hours ago, I was convinced I was going to die.

I almost jump out of my seat when Alfred opens the door for me and his smile fades into a frown.
He recovers it quickly, but there's worry behind it. Wiping away the tears staining my cheeks, I
take Alfred's outstretched hand.

"Let's get you some tea and into bed. Lieutenant Gordon said that you could make your official
statement tomorrow, and I intend to take your mind off things until then," he says as he places his
hand behind my back, guiding me to the elevator.

We're quiet as we head up, and I'm glad for it, but even the silence doesn't muffle the sounds
replaying in my head, resounding in my ears. Bruce is waiting for us when Alfred pushes open the
large oak door. He raises his head and walks over before lifting me up into a bear hug, his embrace
knocking the air out of my chest. I can't remember the last time I saw so much emotion on his face,
or even the last time he hugged me like this. It takes a long moment before I hug him back.

*This is exactly what Mom would have done.*

It's embarrassing, but I cry into his shoulder. After a few moments, he withdraws and holds me out
at arm's length, and I wipe the tears from my eyes and my cheeks burn hot again.

*How many times are you going to cry today? Get a grip.*

Alfred is beaming at us in the corner of my eye and it makes the burning worse. Bruce's eyes
narrow and his jaw tightens when he sees the bandage on my face. "Did they do that to you?" he
asks, pointing to the cut on my head. His expression darkens, and I touch the bandage and attempt
to hide its bulk behind my hair.

"No. Well, sort of," I start. His frown deepens, and I rush to make it go away. "It happened when
the bank manager was trying to shoot them—the robbers, I mean. He missed, and it hit the glass
above me instead."

*How does he look even angrier than before?*
"The bank manager shot at you?" His tone is calm, but his hands grip my shoulders tighter.

"He wasn't aiming at me, per se. I was on the ground; it was a wild shot and some glass cut my face."

He gives a similar look to what Alfred gave me only fifteen minutes earlier. "Master Bruce, I believe she's been through enough today without your fussing. Come along now, both of you," Alfred says, still smiling.

Alfred squeezes Bruce's shoulder and they pass a look between each other I can't interpret. He nods and places his hand on my back, rubbing it in gentle circles as we walk through the long, wood-paneled hallway. The remaining tension from the past few hours drifts away as I lean into him.

Ever since he returned last year, it's like a part of him was stayed behind wherever he'd been. Having him here and actually being present brings back all the memories of the time we spent together as kids. Mom and I would stay at Wayne Manor with Bruce often after his parents, my aunt and uncle, were murdered, even when I was just a baby. I could relate to Bruce's anger, though mine was different from the rage that simmered in him. That anger grew when Mom was diagnosed with terminal cancer a few years later.

Bruce was angry at the world, for his loneliness and for taking away his parents and leaving him behind. For all the rage he had, he was never angry with me. I'd often forget that he's ten years older than me, and we'd act more like siblings than cousins, but now that age difference feels like an added distance in the gulf between us. Remembering things from before makes my chest ache because I don't know how long his good moods will last. Sometimes it's like he's his old self, where Alfred and I are the only things that matter, and then he retreats to some hidden place and is substituted with a cold, snarky man I don't understand.

When we reach the sitting area, I tug on his sleeve. "Bruce, I'm alright. It's just a few scratches, nothing that won't heal with time. You know me, I'm tough as nails." I try to laugh, but his frown remains. "I'll be OK, really." Smiling and staring until his expression lightens, he returns it, letting it reach his eyes.

"If there's one thing the Kane sisters were known for, it was their tenacity—and you definitely got your fair share," Bruce says with a chuckle.

"Well, you're not wrong." I can't help but think of how Mom used to tell me about all the trouble she and Aunt Martha would get into when they were our age. They were always in the middle of some mischievous game she dreamed up, and Aunt Martha was always there to keep Mom out of trouble. "I guess some things never change, huh?"

Bruce looks out the window and sighs, his smile fading. "No, I guess some things don't."

The familiar feeling of discomfort settles again. Bruce is drifting away, far from here. His demeanour wasn't the only thing that changed when he came back. He was no longer the tall, skinny teenager I remembered. He came back bigger and stronger, his face all angles and lean lines, and his arms sporting bulging muscles. I never asked him where he'd been all those years, and I'm not sure if Alfred ever did either, but he was always ready to accept Bruce's antics, and I learned to stop asking questions when I didn't want to know the answers. Bruce's transformation from my sweet and doting cousin to a hardened, stoic man who wastes his money, squanders his influence, and spends his evening hours at parties wasn't a tale I wanted to be regaled to me.

Looking out over the skyline of Gotham with Bruce, I feel sad for a whole new reason and realize how tired I am. A gasp of surprise catches in my throat when Alfred appears next to me with a tray
of tea and biscuits. Forcing a smile that feels false on my face, I grab the small teacup, grateful for its warmth and eager for the taste of peppermint, and a biscuit before settling on the nearest chair.

"Now you finish that up, Miri, and then it's straight to bed with you," Alfred says as he gives a reassuring pat on my shoulder.

Resisting the urge to comment that I am, indeed, no longer a child, I recline back into the plush cushions. Alfred's always been like a father figure more than anything, having been in my life longer than my biological father ever was. Although Alfred has a fierce paternal love for him, Bruce has barriers that are difficult to breach. Instead of making a smart comment back at Alfred, my attention's taken by the tall peaks of the skyscrapers as they blot out the setting sun.

Alfred and Bruce walk away from me as I tear into my biscuit, only haphazardly catching the crumbs as they litter Alfred's jacket. They're murmuring, which is never a good sign.

"...Did you see the footage I sent you?"

"Yes, yes, I did, sir. I don't like how—"

"He was staring at her? Neither do I. It was different from his last jobs. I've been keeping him on the back burner, but after today…"

"You've had your focus elsewhere. There have been more pressing issues at hand. Do we have any reason to be worried, Master Bruce?"

"No. No, I don't think so. But I'll keep an eye out, I'm monitoring the situation closely…"

Putting my teacup on the small table in front of me, I sigh. Rationalizing what I'm hearing is pointless; my body is too tired for it.

Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to.

I bury my face into the soft leather and close my eyes. They stay closed when Bruce picks me up from the chair sometime later. It reminds me of when I used to fall asleep during movies. Bruce would carry me to bed and I'd pretend to sleep—I liked the attention if I'm being honest, and it makes me happy to know that no matter how far Bruce drifts away, he's still there to catch me when I need him.

Some things really don't change at all.

Stuck in a state between waking and dreaming, what happened at the bank isn't part of my life anymore. Embracing more pleasant imaginings when my head hits my pillow, I allow myself to drift off to sleep.
Second Encounters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Any hope of putting what happened at the bank behind me is foiled when the morning newspaper waits for me on the table, my eye twitching as I read the article. Groaning, I smack my head against the cool tabletop.

"What's wrong?" Alfred asks from behind me. Pointing at the headline in an abject show of despair, he chuckles and picks up the morning paper. "I know you're given to be more hyperbolic, Miriam, but this isn't all bad. It's good to see Gotham appreciate one of its more upstanding citizens—especially one that doesn't go around in costume," he says with a wink.

My only reply is another dramatic groan. Lifting my head, I stare at the large photo of me plastered on the front page of the Gotham Times. They decided it would be reasonable to use one of the more recent pictures I posted online. It's a nice picture: I'm looking off-camera, a playful smile on my face, long black hair thrown over my shoulder, dark skin bathed in sunlight. I like it—even my outfit is nice, a long floral dress and over-sized cardigan—but the paper didn't ask if they could use it.

Alfred laughs again and places the paper down next to my breakfast plate. My cheeks flush as I read the article again.

LOCAL STARLET HERO IN GFNB HEIST

21-year-old heiress Miriam Kane and 12 other civilians underwent an ordeal of a lifetime when Gotham First National Bank's west-end location was subject to an armed robbery. Commissioner Loeb confirmed that six are dead and five received minor injuries. According to one woman, the body-count would have been much higher if it weren't for Kane's intervention. Sarah Maguire, a bank employee, describes Kane's bravery as 'extraordinary.' "I know they would have shot me if it wasn't for her. She saved my life." Sources say that when the armed men ran into trouble gaining access to the vault, Kane intervened and managed to de-escalate the situation. The exact circumstances remain unknown. Kane, primarily known for her familial connection to Bruce Wayne, has been a rising influence within the tech community as a brilliant programmer and innovator for Wayne Enterprises. Kane could not comment in time for this press release. The main suspect, who operates under the name "the Joker," remains at large. Please call Gotham Major Crimes Unit if you have any information in regards to…

Cringing at the paper, I shove it away like the action will make it spontaneously combust.

The article sounds more like something from a gossip magazine than a newspaper.

Alfred chuckles all the way to the kitchen. It's been less than a week since the robbery and the papers are publishing the same story on repeat. This was the first time they had so many details about me—and used such a personal picture. Twisting the gold band resting on my ring finger, I sigh. A cynical part of me disagrees with Alfred's sentiments. The article got it wrong; I'm not a hero. Gotham isn't lauding me because I did something brave, it's easier to sell papers when something exciting happens in connection to Bruce.
Another sigh comes out, and I get up to leave the penthouse, grabbing my bag and waving to Alfred. "I'll be back in time for supper," I yell on my way out the door.

"Do try your best to stay out of trouble now!"

Rolling my eyes, I close the door. He's teasing me, but his jokes don't quell my anxiety.

Turning Alfred's spare key in the elevator terminal, I head to the first floor. Alfred told me it was a temporary solution and that we were getting the keys and locks changed tomorrow. My wallet and keys went missing with my bag, and I had to replace the contents that constituted most of my day-to-day life: my cards, I.D., cash, keys, and my laptop. Gordon said the chain of evidence was compromised and my bag likely went missing on the way from the bank to the Major Crimes Unit. It was infuriating at the time that they could lose something so important, but by now the anger has dulled to a persistent irritation.

I sigh and rub my head, wincing when I brush against the cut on my temple. Adjusting my jean jacket and the strap of my bag, I pull out my headphones and placing them in my ears, cranking up the volume and try to block out my thoughts. I didn't want to admit it to Alfred, or Bruce, but leaving the safety of the penthouse has me trembling.

Breathe in and out. In and out. You're OK. No one can hurt you at work or at school. You're fine.

I repeat my mantra as I descend to the first floor, and the large, empty foyer is bright with the morning sun, large windows and white marble floor making the space seem bigger than it is. Waving to Mark, the building's full-time security guard, I move to leave the lobby. He's a short, stocky man with large laugh lines and crinkled green eyes. I always liked him—whenever his wife has extra baking, he would have it sitting out in a container on his desk and insist I take some on my way out in the mornings. Just I'm about to open the door, my body goes rigid.

Breathe. No one can hurt you now, you're OK.

"Are you alright, Miss Kane?" I hear through the music. It's Mark speaking to me, and, shaking my head and putting a smile I don't mean on my face, I pull out an earbud.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, lost in thought, I guess." Scratching my head, I force a laugh.

Mark looks unconvinced, but he still gives me a smile and tips his hat with a flourish, and I wave and force myself to leave the building.

C'mon, girl. You need to try harder. You don't need anyone else fussing over you.

I pray that Mark doesn't say anything to Bruce or Alfred. They didn't like me using the Skytrain system before what happened, and I don't want them to have any reason to insist on having Alfred chauffeur me around. Keeping my head down, I walk the familiar path to the Skytrain entrance. Heart rate accelerating as I stand among the morning crowd, I ignore the shaky feeling in my legs and pull out my new phone. Alfred picked this one up for me yesterday, but I'm still trying to restore all the data from my old one. His face pops up in my mind with the memory of my phone's premature demise, and I push the thought back down.

You're fine. Don't think about him.

My phone vibrates and a new message from Bruce pops up.

Are you on the train yet?
I thought Bruce was still asleep when I left, and I'm surprised that he woke up to check on me. Catching myself smiling and forcing my mouth into a straight line, I type out a quick reply.

**Two minutes away. I'll let you know when I'm at WT.**

Cold sweat beads along my neck, and I turn up the volume further and close my eyes, focusing on the lyrics of the song, trying to keep my breathing even as the platform swells with impatient commuters.

*I'm lost in the light
I pray for the night
To take me, to take you too

After so many words
Still nothing's heard
Don't know what we should do
So if someone could see me now
Let them see you

Tapping my foot to the beat, I grip my bag tighter as the train pulls up. Just as I leave the platform and enter the train, a familiar sick feeling pulls at my stomach and a burning sensation runs down my spine. Spinning around just as the doors close, I scan the crowd. My legs barely hold me up and I lean on a nearby railing, and I ignore the people bumping into me as they head for the back of the car and empty seats.


Peering outside again as the train speeds away, I search for... something. Anything out of the ordinary. But I don't see any traces of him.

It still doesn't stop the feeling of dread—instead, it seems to settle in my bones.

Rubbing my temples, I try to rid myself of the headache that's been throbbing for the past hour. I ended up being more useless at work than I imagined. If I was anyone else, Lucius would've been hitting me over the head with a rolled-up magazine. When I wasn't running to the bathroom every hour to stave off an oncoming panic attack, I stared into space, trying to rationalize away the burning sensations running through my body. I thought the distraction and having the project with Lucius would be enough to take away the racing thoughts and fear coiling into knots in my brain. Now I just feel useless both at work and at school.

After twisting my long hair back in a messy braid, I take the gold ring on my finger and turn the band back and forth, staring at the faint engraving and losing track of the sound of keyboards clicking around me. A set of hands land on my shoulders and I react on instinct. Grabbing the man's arm and twisting out of my chair, I shove him between the shoulder blades and slam him down head-first, on the desk. I'm about to knee him in the stomach when I realize who it is.  

"Shit, Parker! Do not sneak up on me like that!" I say, barely keeping the pitch of panicked relief from making my voice too loud, and release his arm from my grip.

The offending party lets out a strained cough and straightens. He rubs his elbow and gives me a feigned-wounded look. "Jesus, She-Hulk. You didn't need to get all rough and tough with me. This is my dominant arm, too, y'know." He wiggles his eyebrows at me and I smack him on the arm. "Ouch! For someone so small, you pack a punch. Is that any way for Gotham's sweetheart to
behave? *Ow!*" he yelps when I hit his arm again.

"Don't be a dick. I'm on edge Parker, and I don't need you trying to scare me like that."

I'm relieved that it was Parker. Even if he acts like a jerk, he's a jerk whose ass I can kick. Parker Kwan is a few inches taller than I am, thin and gangly, with long black hair, usually pulled back in a ponytail, and a complexion bordering on sickly. He spends more of his time hiding inside than I do, and it shows whenever he leaves the house. He hasn't changed at all since I met him freshman year seven years ago. He may have grown, but he and Alfred have been the only constants in my life since my Mom died. Parker's almost as good a programmer as I am, and one of my oldest friends.

He holds out his hands in supplication. "OK, OK, Miri. You're right. I'm sorry, it was a joke that was in," he lets out an awkward cough, "poor taste. It seemed funny in the moment. *Ah!* don't hit me again: I'll be good, I'll be good," he says, backing up and leaning against the desk. "In all seriousness though, how are you holding up? I tried calling you before, but I couldn't get through."

*Oh, right. I didn't text him yet.*

"I had to get a new phone, my other one was trashed. I'll text you later, so you'll have my number." I move to sit back down in my chair, but Parker's looking at me with his eyebrows raised.

*He knows me too well.*

Despite how I sigh and roll my eyes, I'm grateful that I don't have the bandage on my face anymore and my hair hides the cut along my temple. "I'm fine, Parker. It's just—it's been a rough week and I just want to move on, you know? Don't look at me like that, I know I'm tense. It's a work in progress."

"You mean like the rest of your personality?"

Stifling a laugh, I punch him again. He cackles in that signature, goofy way of his and sits next to me, filling me in on what I missed in class and succeeding in distracting me when nothing else could. We laugh until my stomach hurts and mutter jabs at one another under our breath all through our afternoon workshop, just like we did in high school. Parker dedicates all his time to school and developing new software for his parents' medical software company, and I split my time between the higher-level computer science classes of Gotham University and working with Lucius at Wayne Tower. Going here was one of Bruce's stipends of working for Wayne Enterprises. *"Do something useful with your skills,"* he said. I'm building up my technical knowledge, but Lucius has offered me a way to experiment with programs and new tech I would never dream of otherwise.

By the time Parker and I finish our labs and lectures, my shoulders are relaxed, and I feel like myself again. Parker is the one person in my life that can make me laugh without trying, and even his dumb jokes succeed in lightening the dark cloud that's been hovering over me. We walk out of the computer science building into the cold evening air, and I shiver as I button up my jacket.

"Come on, Miri. I'll walk you to your platform," he says as he also takes a moment to zip his jacket closed.

"Your station is the opposite way. No, Parker! Come back here!*" It's too late, he's slipped my bag off my shoulder and waltzes ahead down the sidewalk. I laugh and jog to catch up with him. *"I'm being serious.*"

"Yeah, and so am I. Don't be so stubborn for once. It's not that far and it'll give me some peace of
"Since when are you such a worry-wart?"

"Ever since you showed a talent for getting in trouble. Someone's gotta look out for you when Mr. P isn't around."

Rolling my eyes, I concede his point. Parker's usually the one to pull me out of the situations I get myself in, like that one time in senior year when I got caught smoking behind the gym and Parker lied and said they were his. He took the blame on the condition that I quit, and I haven't smoked since.

We walk in amiable silence to the train station. It's quiet around campus and the setting sun gives the old buildings and tall trees a warm glow as it filters through the fall leaves. The old tower spires cast long shadows along our path as we shrug our shoulders against an unseasonable evening chill. We pass other students as they head to their dorms for the night, and groups of friends chat noisily as they head into the flanking buildings.

It isn't long before we reach the edge of Gotham University's boundaries. The station is just within sight when the burning returns, and I stop in my tracks and search the darkening landscape. All the panic I had felt earlier returns in full force and my mind reels. The smell of gunpowder fills my nose and I can't tell if it's real or imagined. My legs feel like jelly, and I jump when a hand lands on my back.

"Miriam, what's wrong?" Parker's gaze flits from my face to the surrounding area, searching for what's upset me. I lean on his arm and try to breathe.

"I—i'm fine, Parker."

"Like hell you are, you're shaking like a leaf. Let me call Alfred."

Parker starts to pull his cellphone out of his pocket, but I grab his hand and grip it tight. "Please— please, don't. I don't want to worry him more."

He frowns, but he shoves his phone back in his jacket pocket. "Does he and Bruce know you've been feeling like this? You could've stayed at home, I would have brought you everything from class."

"No, I already feel like an invalid. The feeling will pass. I just… i trail off, unsure of how much I should reveal to Parker. He stares at my face and sets his jaw.

"That's it. It's been decided. I'll take you home. Hey—let me finish—I'm not just going to drop you off at the station when you're feeling like this. I can stay for dinner as payment for my chivalrous services," he dodges my incoming punch and continues, "and then I'll be on my merry way. " He's smiling his lazy grin and I decide not to argue. With the sun disappearing on the horizon, I would feel a lot better having him with me. Nodding my assent, he links his arm through mine.

We walk to the platform entrance and wait for the train, but I'm still struggling to breathe; it feels like my skin's on fire. Parker looks at me and grimaces. He removes his arm from mine and holds me upright. The train zooms to the platform and we fight through the lines of commuters to find a seat. It's only when we begin to speed towards Midtown that the burning eases, but the nausea and panic haven't subsided as they did before, and I close my eyes to stop the world from spinning out of control. I flinch away from Parker when he nudges me, my eyes snapping open and his brows
"We're here. Only a few more minutes and you'll be safe. I got you, Miri," he says, quiet enough just for me to hear. He helps me stand and we weave through the crowd, heading for the Wayne Holdings Skyscraper.

"You know, I don't think I've been inside your new place since you three first moved in," Parker says as we enter the building.

"You're not missing much; nothing's changed."

The penthouse, though lovely and large, still has a sterile atmosphere. Parker is the only one I've told about how much I miss Wayne Manor. Even though it didn't belong in Mom or Aunt Martha's family, it was still more of a home to me than anything else after Mom died. I was heartbroken when it burned down, and I'm grateful to have Parker to vent to about my frustrations with Bruce's life choices and dual nature.

Mark waves at us from behind his desk and gives us a warm greeting. As soon as the door behind us closes, the dread that had my mind and body in a vise seems to evaporate. Straightening a little and breathing deep, I catch Parker's eye and smile.

"Let's hope Alfred made enough for three tonight."

It's well past midnight, my stomach is full, and I feel safe again in the shelter of my room. Parker's gone home and Bruce's out at some party.

Again.

Alfred went to bed while Parker and I visited, and I find myself wishing I also went to bed early. The large amount of empty space in the penthouse and eerie quiet is enough to unnerve me, even with Alfred here.

Pressing play on my small speaker, I grab a towel and head for the en-suite, the music following me out of my bedroom. The bathroom is large, sporting a clawfoot tub, double vanity, a walk-in shower, and a soft blue that coats the wall. The bathtub is one of my favourite parts of the entire penthouse; it's large and deep—the perfect size for me to rest in without my long legs cramping up. As I pass the bathroom mirror, I squint at my reflection and frown. Large bags formed under my eyes and my skin looks sallow. Averting my eyes and combing the knots out of my hair, I huff dejectedly and turn to fill the bathtub. The drawback to this tub is that the temperature is hard to get right, and I want the water on the verge of scalding. Pulling my hair up and going back to the mirror, I find two small pills and a note on the countertop.

Some valerian tablets. Rest well tonight and take some time to recoup tomorrow. Love, Alfred

Putting the note down, I pick up the small pills.

It can't hurt, and you don't have any commitments tomorrow. This is just what you need. Relax.

I pop the pills in my mouth and take a quick swig of water from the tap. Stripping off my clothes, I cross the bathroom and ease into the large tub, letting the water envelop my body. As I dip my head under the water, I close my eyes. The sound of gunfire, the image of his face floating in front of mine... none of that can't reach me here. The strain of the past few days releases its grip on my body.
This is just what you needed.

It really is. Taking my time to wash my hair, fill the tub with scented soap and sinking until my ears lay flat against the warm surface, not quite dipping under, I float in the tub until the water grows cold. It takes a minute for me to summon the strength to raise myself out of the now frigid water and reach for a towel, and the sleeping aid lulls me into a haze, but I can finally start to forget about what happened, the stupid articles in the papers, the cut on my head. A fluffy towel wrapped around me, I walk out of the cloud of steam into my room, swaying my hips in time to the song booming out of the speaker.

But I find it soothing
When I am confined
I'm just fearing one day soon
I'll lose my mind

The haunting voice sinks my mind further into oblivion. Throwing on an old sweater and a pair of shorts, I wring the remaining moisture from my hair with the towel and prepare to crawl into my plush bed. The duvet is half-way up my bare legs when a loud bang echoes through the hallway. I stop mid-motion and strain my ears. A door opens and closes. Fabric rustles, and a faint tapping grows louder. Jumping out of bed, I put my ear against the door.

In and out, Miriam. In and out.

A door opens again.

I'm not imagining it.

I turn my light off and open my door slowly. Peering out in the dark hall, I can't make out any shapes. Moving slow, I look to my left, towards Alfred's room. The door's ajar.

If Bruce was home, the lights would be on. And Alfred never sleeps with his door open.

It's difficult to think. My body is exhausted, and the sleep-aid counters the adrenaline.

Think. Be smart.

There's nothing in the room for me to use, but if someone managed to get in here, I can have the element of surprise on my side.

Taking a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dark, I quiet my breathing and slip out the door. My bare feet don't make a sound against the cool stone floor, and I peer through Alfred's room, his bedside lamp giving a small pool of light. His bed lies unmade and empty. Abandoning the stealth approach, I turn on my heel and sprint down the hall.

"Alfred? Alfred!" I yell. Coming into the living area, a light shines by the door. A hunched, static figure stands partly illuminated. "Alfred?" The figure has a familiar head of white hair and wears stripe-patterned pyjamas.

It's Alfred. You freaked out for nothing.

His back faces me, shoulders hunched and shaking. "Alfred, talk to me, please. I thought I heard something—was that you?"

He turns and the light shows his ashen face. His voice shakes when he speaks. "Miri, go back to your room. The police are on their way."
He's almost tearing up and grasping something in his hands. When I draw closer, he backs away and blood rushes to my ears when I look at his hands.

"Alfred—Alfred, what is that?"

It's a rhetorical question. I can see it, even as my eyes deny reality.

He's holding a poorly wrapped purple box with a dirty orange ribbon. A small card sits on the floor. Only when I stoop to pick it up does he move.

"Miri, no, don't—"

But it's too late. I pick up the card and turn it over. The world seems to slow down when I read my name on the addressee line written in a messy scrawl, right next to a bright red outline of a pair of lips. The envelope is torn open and I'm reading the contents by the time Alfred draws near.

Thanks for the gifts, little Miri. You really made this too easy. You'd think a couple of rich kids like you could afford some better security. I hope this note finds you in good health; who knows how long that'll last!

I'll be seeing you soon.

-J

I can't control the shaking. Falling to the floor, I stare at Alfred. My mouth opens and closes, but I can't make a sound. He sinks beside me. "What's in the box, Alfred?"

He stares at me but doesn't answer. Without a word, he opens the lid of the box. A small key and a patch of fabric sit inside. The key has a familiar charm attached to it. It's a small turtle with a shell inlaid with turquoise stones.

Bruce gave this to me for Christmas.

I'm crying now. Taking the box from Alfred's hand, I examine the fabric inside. I recognize this, too. It's from my favourite dress—the one I was wearing in the paper.

My eyes lock with Alfred's as the box drops from my hands and hits the cold tile; the glimmering turtle's shell shatters, and the small gems inside dance across the floor as my body goes completely numb.

Chapter End Notes

The song lyrics that I use are from "Lost in the Light" by Bahamas and "Doing the Right Thing" by Daughter, respectively.
From Bad to Worse

Alfred sits next to me on the leather couch, holding my hand while Gordon's detectives scour the flat. He took the package from Alfred and me as soon as he arrived, and now he's in my room with a female detective. It takes a moment for me to realize that someone's calling my name. Someone—I think his name is Detective Stephens—stands next to us.

"Miss Kane? Could you come with me to your room? Gordon wants to see if anything is missing," he says, motioning to the hallway.

I remember Stephens from the bank, working in the background as Gordon asked me questions. He's a stocky man, a little taller than I am and thicker around the middle. His brown hair shows small streaks of white at the temples, and he has a genteel face, even if he looks perpetually worried. Wordlessly, I follow him down the hall, looking back at Alfred as he gives a reassuring smile.

He ushers me in the room before turning around to head back to the living area. Gordon looks at a file in his hand, a frown etching deep lines in his face. Clearing my throat, I glance about the room like it's foreign and not something that was ever mine. His attention snaps to me and he tries to smile, but it looks more like a scowl. He passes the file to the woman next to him before speaking.

"Miss Kane. I'm sorry about this, but can you put these on and have a look around? Is there anything missing?" he asks, passing me a pair of gloves. Putting them on, I take a cursory glance around the room.

The room isn't mine anymore. The barrier of safety I thought existed shattered when I saw the patch of fabric in the box. Moving slow and starting at my vanity, I search through the jewelry pooling out the black velvet box. The room is silent and the clanking metal echoes loud. When I open my ring case and see several missing, it's hard not to choke when I speak. "My rings are... some of my rings are gone."

Gordon gives a sympathetic nod before jotting something down in the notepad in his hand. "Can you describe them for me?"

Unsuccessfully, I try to clear my throat. "They—they were ones I would wear every day. Most of them were gifts. One had a thin silver band and my birthstone—sorry, turquoise stone, one was made of gold leaves interlocking, and my mom's wedding band. She gave it to me when she died. I—" The words won't come out of my mouth. Wiping the tears from my eyes in a swift motion, I jump when Gordon puts his hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right, I know this is hard. We will find him. He can't hurt you, I won't let him."

Searching Gordon's eyes, he speaks with a kind of conviction that reminds me of Bruce, but that also means he's just as liable to let me down. Walking out of Gordon's grasp into my closet, I move the full hangers, not even really sure what it is I'm looking for.

I have way too many clothes.

I coax my tired mind to think about what could be missing. There's the dresses I'd wear to Bruce's high-end parties, my large collection of blouses and t-shirts, and several outfits I use for project presentations. When I move to the dress section of my wardrobe—the ones I wear regularly—my blood feels like its pooling in my feet. Gordon looks at my clothes, being careful not to rub against
anything with his jacket. He stops when he looks at me.

"Miss Kane?"

"Most of my dresses are missing," I gasp, my chest getting tight. "What could he want with my things? How did he even get in here? Please, you need to tell me what's going on." My shoulders shake and I bury my face in my hands.

Gordon sighs. He puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me out of my room to Alfred, who's standing in the hall speaking to Stephens.

"I'm not sure why. He could be trying to scare you. You've been in the papers quite a bit since the robbery. Or maybe he's moving out of the bank robbing game into extortion—I don't know. We don't know much about this man, but—"

"Then what do you know, Lieutenant?" a voice growls. Both Gordon and I turn and find Bruce walking towards us.

He's furious. Arms loose at his sides, suit unwrinkled, hair in place, his hands balled into taut fists. The look on his face makes me shrink against the wall. It's like I don't even exist right now.

This isn't the Bruce I know.

Gordon straightens and appears undaunted by Bruce's venomous expression. "Ah, Mr. Bruce Wayne." Gordon looks between Bruce and me before continuing, "From what we can gather, the Joker came into the building through the maintenance entrance, killed the night guard, and used Miriam's key to enter the penthouse. While Alfred was in bed and Miriam in the bath, he snuck into her room, stole some articles of clothing and jewelry, and left a... a 'gift' by the door before making a noisy exit. The motive is still unclear at this point." Gordon takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Bruce doesn't look away from Gordon's face, but I don't like the look of the storm brewing in his eyes, and I flinch when his eyes turn to me for a moment. "What's being done?" he asks, addressing Gordon.

"Everything that can be done. We will be leaving a patrol car in the area for the next few days, to be sure he doesn't come back. After we finish gathering the evidence from your place, we will be continuing our investigation into this Joker character."

I don't feel comforted by Gordon's words. Slipping by Gordon and Bruce, I walk over to Alfred. He wraps his arms around me and I fold into him, shutting my eyes and trying to block out the nightmare unfolding around me.

It's another three hours before the detectives and police officers leave the penthouse. I know they haven't left the building yet, and I think of the dead man on the first floor. I didn't even ask who it was. Maybe it's best they didn't tell me.

Don't let it be Mark.

Bruce stands by the door, staring into space. Alfred sits beside me, his face pale and distracted.

How long are we going to sit around and not say anything?

My hand wanders to go to my ring finger, and I realize too late the band that usually sits there is
gone. I don't notice that Bruce's crouched down until his face is in front of mine, and I flinch away from him. His face falls, but he reaches out and takes my hand in his.

"This was my fault, Miri. I could have done better. I could have done more to—to protect you, and I didn't. I should have been home here, with you." His voice is a low tone I can hardly make out. Taking my eyes from the floor and meeting his, I see the vulnerable young man Bruce used to be. I squeeze his hand.

"This wasn't your fault, Bruce." My voice cracks and I clear my throat, willing myself not to cry. "You've done so much for me. Hey—hey, I'm still doing OK. What's a few years of therapy, right?" That earns a genuine chuckle from him. He hugs me to him and buries his face in my hair.

"You are my family. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Not ever."

We embrace for a long time. I didn't realize how cold I was until feeling how warm he is. He's holding me tight and I can tell he's trying not to squeeze too hard. I want to lean into it, to feel safe, but the violation of my room makes me feel claustrophobic. My hands press against his shoulders for a brief moment before I pull back. Bruce keeps a gentle hold on my arms and I look away.

There's no need to use Bruce's suit jacket as a personal snot-rag.

Rubbing my nose with my sleeve, I hold back a sniffle and look over at Alfred. He's smiling again. "Well, I, for one, am doing just fine. Thank you very much for asking," he says, feigning a wounded look. Leaning over, I hug him hard.

"Thank you, Alfred."

"For what, scaring the daylights out of you?"

"No, for scaring him away. You were my first line of defence, there. Oh, sorry. Too soon, too soon," I say, laughing, as Alfred pinches my sides.

"I swear, cheeky runs in the family." The three of us laugh and the pressure in the room dissipates. I'm the first to get up, my limbs feeling heavy, and the adrenaline my mind was riding burns away fast.

"Where are you going?" Bruce asks.

"To the guest room. I don't think I'll be able to stomach being in my room for a while."

"Alfred will prepare the guest room for tomorrow night. It's late, come to my room. I won't be sleeping for a while yet anyhow," he says, rising to walk ahead of me.

"Oh heavens, I'll be doing that now, will I? Yes, yes, right after I fluff your pillow and wash your feet with my tears," Alfred says with a half-smile.

I'm not sure if I should laugh or smack Bruce upside the head, but I'm too tired to protest, so I shoot Alfred an apologetic look and follow Bruce down the hall. Alfred smiles to himself before getting off the couch and heading to the far corner of the penthouse.

Bruce's room looks the same as it did when we first moved in, and it still has the scent of dust and floor cleaner. The lone white bed, partially hidden by folding glass doors, sits against the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Gotham skyline. The black walls, white stone accents, and dark floors reflect the light of the city around the room. Like the living area, the room looks like something straight out of an interior design magazine—pretty, but totally void of personality. Even
stretching my memory back three months, I can't remember the last time Bruce spent a full night here in the penthouse. I've considered asking Alfred if Bruce keeps another apartment somewhere for him to crash after a long night out, but I never bring myself to say the words aloud.

Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to.

The soft fabric brushes together as Bruce pulls back the duvet. He moves to the far-left wall and presses a small button. Dark blinds descend from the ceiling and hide the city lights from view.

"There. Sleep if you can, alright? I'm not going anywhere. I promise," he says.

I stare at his face in the dark of the room. His eyes don't waver from mine, and I choose to believe that he's being genuine, nodding my head and moving towards the bed. He gives me a brief hug before leaving the room.

"Everything will be alright, Miri. No one can hurt you here," he says before closing the door behind him.

His words don't comfort me. The Joker was already in my room. He could have done a lot more than take my clothes and jewelry. I didn't even know he was there—I would've never heard him coming. That's what makes me sick; my back was to the door when I was in the bath.

How long was he watching me before he left?

With a shudder I bury my face in the blanket, desperately wanting to feel safe in Bruce's room, but I still have an irrational feeling that someone's eyes are on me as I fall into a fitful sleep.

I haven't left the penthouse since the break-in.

I made it to the elevator twice before promptly pressing the emergency stop button and going back up to the penthouse to hyperventilate in the bathroom. Bruce and Alfred have been indulgent, letting me take my time to leave. But I'm starting to feel like the glass walls are closing in on me. Bruce hasn't allowed anyone other than him and Alfred in here, and I miss having Parker for company. The minimalistic furnishings, self-imposed exile from my room, and vast amounts of space in the penthouse does not lend itself to a stimulated existence. There's only so much I can do on my laptop without access to my projects before I get myself into trouble.

Again.

I miss working for Lucius, seeing Parker at school, feeling safe. But, most of all, I'm angry at myself for letting this man uproot my life so easily. Sighing, I look over at the clock.

7:45 a.m.

Bruce's passed out in his room and Alfred's out running errands.

Steeling my nerves, I go to the bathroom mirror and stare myself in the face. Large, dark circles sit under my eyes. My skin looks taut over my cheekbones. And when I lift my shirt and stare at my stomach with a frown, I see how my clothes sit too loose around my hips and shoulders. I was small before, but it's gotten worse. Looking down at my ring finger, it feels irrevocably naked without Mom's ring. My blood boils.

It's like I'm wasting away. Fuck this and fuck that clown.
Locking eyes with myself, I set my jaw.

*I will not be a prisoner in my own damn house.*

Walking from the bathroom, down the long hall to my room, I face the door that stands closed, untouched since the police finished collecting evidence. It looms over me, bringing back all the memories that replay over and over again when I try to sleep. Reaching for the doorknob, the cold metal bites my hand.

*Breathe.*

Opening the door, I step in the black room. The curtains are down, bed still unmade, piles of clothing litter the floor. It still smells like my room—faint remnants of detergent and lavender—but the space is no longer mine. It was taken from me the moment *he* murdered a man in cold blood and violated my home.

Digging through the piles of clothes on the floor, I pull out a white pinstripe blouse, long jean skirt, and my brown jacket. I strip off the ensemble of sweat pants, baggy t-shirt, and sweater for the new outfit. Changing as fast as possible and exiting the room, I head back to the main bathroom to brush my hair and put on some makeup. Appraising myself in the mirror, I give myself a satisfied smile.

*Passable.*

Trotting to the kitchen and writing a quick note, I post it on the fridge. They'd be blind to miss it.

**Don't freak out, but I'm going to work and school today. I have my phone with me and I'll keep you updated. Love you guys! –Miri**

Pulling on my boots, I hobble to the front door and press my head against the wood.

*Breathe.*

I pull it open, walk to the elevator, and push the button for the lobby.

*Just keep breathing, Miri.*

The doors open, and I walk with purpose to the front entrance.

Mark stands vigilant in the corner of my eye, his expression dark and skin puffy. Averting my eyes, I stare at the floor in shame. I didn't know the man that died, but Mark certainly did, and I don't know what it's like to lose someone in such a violent way.

"Have a nice day, Miss Kane," Mark says. He's smiling, but it doesn't reach his eyes. His normally crisp suit is wrinkled and it looks like he's been crying. His shoulders are tense and hands clenched. The usual baking that sits on his desk is absent. My eyes burn with unshed tears, and I smile as best I can at him.

*That's your fault, too.*

Joining in with the crowds of people as I walk to the station, the brisk wind bites through my clothing and I regret not checking the weather forecast. I pull my bag up my shoulder and hike up the collar of my jacket around my throat until I make it into the sheltered Skytrain station, and the constant nausea I've been battling since this whole mess started intensifies.

*Don't be such a coward. You're fine, even he can't hurt you in a place this crowded.*
My rationalizing is only half successful. Even as I'm leaning on a hanging grip in the train compartment as it speeds towards Wayne Tower, I can still see the Joker's words written on the note, the blood-red lips.

'I'll be seeing you soon.'

The shuddering ripping through me isn't because of the fall chill anymore.

*Focus on your anger.*

'The uncertainty of the future can't keep you from living your life,' Gordon said as he left the penthouse. There aren't many options, but I decide to keep my faith in him and his efforts to catch him.

*You're safe when you're around so many people.*

The train approaches Wayne Tower at break-neck speed and I pull out my phone, finding no message from Bruce or missed call from Alfred.

*They haven't realized I'm gone yet.*

I send Bruce a preemptive text to stave off the vexation he'll probably feel when he gets out of bed. That, coupled with whatever kind of brutal hangover he's going to have, is something I want to avoid.

Preparing to get off the train and pushing my way to a spot near the door, I brush up against a tall man with shaggy black hair, a thick beard, tan skin, and khaki jacket that reeks of cigarettes. The all-too-familiar burning sensation starts to bloom on my spine. The man is staring at me, his brown eyes moving up and down my body in a lazy arc. The unease raises my hackles, and I glare at the man, ignoring the half-smile tugging at his lips, and give him my best look of disgust.

Planting my feet as the train slows, I wait for the hiss of the door and bolt out of the train compartment, heading for the exit. I can feel the man's stare on my back as I take the stairs two at a time, putting my shoulder forward and weaving through the lines of people making their daily commute, trying to put as much space between him and me. I know I'm over-reacting, but everything in me is telling me to book it to Wayne Tower.

*Only one more minute and you'll be in the building.*

I'm within sight of the door when a small cry of panic escapes me. Pirouetting away from the hand touching my back, I raise my fists. The shaggy man from the train is standing behind me with a grin on his face.

"Easy, tiger. You dropped this," he says. The man has a strange accent; I can't tell if it's British or Australian.

It seems like he's being nice, but something's off. He raises his hand, palm facing down, and I lower mine and open them. He drops something small and cold into it. Drawing my hand closer, I feel my heart stop beating. It's the ring Bruce gave to me for my first birthday with him at Wayne Manor. A small silver band with a pear-shaped turquoise stone.

*This is one of the rings the Joker took.*

I back away and look up, but the man is gone.
"Miriam?" a voice calls from behind me.

Panic and fear hit me and freezes me in place, and it takes a moment to realize it's Lucius speaking to me. As always, he is wearing a suit and a look of faint-amusement. His eyebrows furrow when he looks at my face. My cheeks flush and I attempt to resume, what I hope is, a natural pose.

"L-Lucius! Um, hi."

_Idiot. You're a genuine idiot._

"Did you see a man wearing jeans, a khaki jacket, with shaggy black hair standing in this general direction?"

He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head. "Are you alright? Mr. Wayne said not to expect you for a few more weeks."

He motions towards the entrance of Wayne Tower and starts walking, leaving me to rush along behind. "What was that all about? Someone bothering you? Don't get me wrong, it will be nice to have you back at work, but I don't need you karate-chopping me in the face if I don't squeak loud enough for you," he says when I catch up to his quick strides.

"How much did Bruce tell you about what happened at the penthouse?" I ask, casting my eyes to the floor in embarrassment.

_Great job, Miriam. Now he thinks you're nuts._

"Enough. Did something else happen?" he asks. We've reached the large and ornate lobby and Lucius calls the elevator. Opening my palm, I reveal the ring sitting in my hand.

"The—the Joker stole this out of my room when he broke in. That man I described, he followed me off the train and said I dropped it. Then, he just… disappeared." My sentence trails off into a whisper, my throat closing painfully.

Lucius's expression turns into one of concern as I follow him into the elevator. He takes a small key out of his jacket pocket and twists it in the terminal before pressing a button for one of the basement levels.

"Aren't we going to the lab?"

"Yes. Just have one quick stop to make first," Lucius says as we descend into the lowest level of Wayne Tower.

The doors open to reveal a vast space populated by hundreds of support columns, filing cabinets, various workstations, and bulky objects hidden by tarps. I've never been down to this level or even knew of its existence. My mouth hangs open as I marvel at the sheer size of the place. Lucius clears his throat and I keep walking, catching up to his position near a stack of wide, black cabinets. He opens one up and pulls out something that looks like a silver handgun.

"I don't need one of those—I don't even have a carry license—"

He cuts me off with a look. "Miriam, come here a moment. This is a modified stun gun. Unlike most on the market, this has more than one charge. It fires small projectiles that latch onto the target and emits controlled electric charges for thirty seconds. It has enough stopping power to drop a horse." He walks toward me and places the gun in my hand. "Be careful how many times you shoot. Though meant to be non-lethal, it can still kill a man."
"Isn't this all sorts of illegal?" I ask.

Lucius gives me a half-smile and readjusts his bow tie. "Yes. But that hasn't stopped you before, no? I trust you to look after yourself, but a little extra help won't hurt," he says with a wink.

The cool metal weighs heavy in my hand, and I stare at the sleek design. After deliberating and deciding it's worth the risk, I look at Lucius and nod, reaching my hand into my bag and placing the gun near the top.

"Thank you."

He laughs at first before replying. "Thank me by not shooting me if I surprise you by accident."

The stun gun Lucius gave me has done more to calm me down than anything else has these past weeks.

I didn't look over my shoulder once on my way from Wayne Tower to Gotham University. Lucius was much happier with my productivity levels today than he was last week. My confidence slowly returns, and the Joker starts to fade from my immediate consciousness. Every time my bag brushes against my hip, I'm reminded of the comforting weight of the weapon within reach. Exiting the old brick building housing the computer labs, I zip up my jacket and start my trek through campus.

Still have an hour before it gets too dark.

A broad smile stretches my lips when I see a familiar face across the road.

"Parker!" I yell.

Parker cranes his long neck around until he sees me waving at him, his face breaking into a full grin and he jogs over to me. He's wearing his bright red bomber jacket and black jeans, his hair loose and falling around his shoulders.

"Look who's come out of hibernation! You look a lot better today, and you've got some colour in those cheeks. You even look half-alive. *Ow!* Don't pinch me, it's only been, like, twenty seconds," Parker says with a laugh, and I nudge him in the arm as we start walking.

"Ha-ha, Parker. I missed you, too. And I've always got colour in my cheeks—I'm brown."

"*Oh my*—I know you're brown, Miri. I was talking about the healthy flush of pink in those rosy cheeks of yours. Don't hit me for that, it's a compliment!" he says, dodging a half-hearted smack to the arm. "Seriously, though. It's good to see you. This place is a pit without you."

"Are you sure you're not describing your life before you met me? Ah!" Dodging his elbow and laughing, I continue, "So, are we going to wander around campus all night or should we get out of here?"

Parker raises an eyebrow at me. "You feeling up to being out tonight? We can hang out at my place if you want to." The traces of worry from when he took me home last time are still on his face.

Be brave. You've been fine all day... mostly.

I think of the man who gave me my ring, then of the Wayne Tech stun gun in my bag.

You'll be fine. That asshole can't ruin your life forever.
"Yeah, I'll be just fine. What do you say we hit up that Greek restaurant by your place? It's been ages since I had some half-decent gyros."

Parker stares at me for a long moment before answering. "Isn't Bruce having that big party tonight for Harvey Dent? Shouldn't you be there for that?"

*Shit.*

I totally forgot that was happening. That would explain why Alfred was gone and Bruce stayed at home.

"Bruce doesn't need me around when he's schmoozing his guests. It's a fundraiser, and I've already been in the papers enough; I don't need to be there. Besides," I say, ignoring Parker's arching brow, "a quiet evening sounds much more entertaining. Time away from the penthouse would be nice."

Parker nods and gives me a theatrical bow. "Your wish is my command, m'lady."

Swatting Parker's chest with the back of my hand, we giggle the whole way to the station. When we get on the train, I shoot Bruce a quick message.

*I'm out with Parker, so I won't be able to make it to the party. Hope that's OK. I'll let you know when I'm on the train home. Say hi to Rachel for me.*

I don't wait for a reply before pocketing my phone and continuing my conversation with Parker as we speed towards Downtown. Bruce doesn't know about the man from this morning, and I still can't decide if I should tell him or not.

*He'd only want you to stay at home longer, and you already had to convince him not to drag you out of Wayne Tower when he woke up and saw the messages.*

Bruce called no less than three times after he read my texts. He was furious, wanting me to wait at Wayne Tower for Alfred to get me. It took twenty minutes of convincing just to get him to calm down. He wanted me home tonight, and I forgot about the party he was throwing. He should be fine knowing I'm with someone. And I'm not breaking my promise from this morning, I've been keeping him updated, even if it's not what he wants to hear.

As we wait to arrive at our stop, I decide to tell Parker about my encounter with the man on the train, and about Lucius giving me the stun gun. Parker may always be blunt with his advice, but he's far more understanding than Bruce. As I talk, Parker's good-natured smile disappears, and he glances around the carriage before answering me.

"You're asking for trouble, carrying around something like that. This is just like it was back in our junior year. You're biting off more than you can chew, Miri."

"What am I supposed to do, Parker? This—this Joker guy means business for whatever reason. I'm not going to hide at home like a caged animal and wait for something else to happen or until he gets caught. How am I supposed to live like that? And I didn't ask for the gun, Lucius gave it to me."

"Just leave things to the police. Weathering out this creepy asshole at your place seems preferable to doing something stupid and getting hurt. Y'know, like this. I would have taken you straight home if I knew he'd started his own creep-parade. This is messed up, Miri. You need to be careful."

I look down at the filthy train carriage floor and struggle to find the right words to say.
He's right. As much as I want to prove that I'm not scared and I can live my life, Parker's right. I don't know what the Joker wants or what he's capable of doing.

"OK, OK. I get what you're saying. We'll get some gyros, and then I'll call Alfred. Sound fair?"

"I can live with that. But no more of these stunts when there are deranged assholes running rampant in costumes and makeup, yeah? I know you're a self-proclaimed 'free spirit' and all, but learning some patience wouldn't kill you." Parker's holding back a smile, trying to play the comment straight and push my buttons. He knows how I feel about self-descriptors like that, and I roll my eyes and laugh.

"I never said I was a 'free spirit,' Parker. That's the stupid result I got from that Cosmo quiz we took, remember?" He sniggers at the memory and my laughter grows with his. "If I was going to wait for the day Gotham didn't have a bunch of whack-jobs running around, then I'd die a hermit in that glass mausoleum. And I am a totally patient person. I haven't beat you up yet, have I?"

Parker's eyebrows shoot up in disbelief. "My poor biceps would like to say otherwise."

Laughing, I poke Parker in the side, making him pull away and laugh too. The PA shouts our station and we hop off the train, jogging to the little Greek restaurant two blocks away. The sun's disappeared behind the Gotham skyline, and the street lamps overhead turn on ahead of us, lighting our path. The blue banner of the restaurant marks our destination and we enter Niko's just as an icy rain starts pelting down.

The small restaurant is cozy and feels larger than its size, and the white and blue walls are filled with pictures of Greece and various pictures of the titular Niko shaking hands with local Gotham celebrities. My eyes roll when I find Bruce beaming in one of the pictures. Small, static-riddled televisions sit in every corner of the place, all playing GCN on mute. The place is almost empty, with only a few couples and a waiter reading a magazine behind the counter, which he hides under a pile of napkins when Parker and I take a seat in a booth by the front window.

The young waiter comes over to us, looking bored. His blond hair's tucked behind his ears and his white shirt pushed messily in his black pants. He opens his mouth to take our order when a woman from the other table shouts over to him.

"Hey! Something's happening, turn up the TV."

The waiter shoots us an apologetic look before complying. He pulls out a wooden chair from a nearby table, balances on top, and cranks the volume on the dated TV set. I catch the headline on the news ribbon: The End of Batman?

Parker and I exchange a look before standing to get a closer look at the television. A man wearing a Batman get-up is hanging from City Hall. The footage looks like it was taken earlier: the sun's still shining in the shot.

Why didn't they release this before?

My stomach drops when Mike Engel's face appears.

"As reports of the grisly murder started coming in, GCN received a video that we will play for you now. Sensitive viewers be aware: the images are disturbing."

The video cuts to an overweight man wearing a Batman mask and rudimentary body armour. He's tied to a chair.
"Tell them your name," a familiar voice says. Staggering back until my legs hit a table, I recognize it instantly. His voice reverberates through my mind.

'Whatever doesn't kill you...'

"Brian—Brian Douglas." His voice is quaking and weak.

"Are you the real Batman?" the Joker asks, stifling a child-like giggle.

"No."

"No? Then why do you dress up like him?" The Joker's voice is savage and deep, and his gloved hand snatches the mask off Brian's face and parades it around the camera before throwing it to the ground. He's laughing harder and my eyes can't look away from Brian's face.

"He—he's a symbol... that we don't have to be afraid of scum like you."

My heart rises at Brian's bravery. The Joker's hand reaches out and grabs Brian by the hair, and I wince at the look of terror on his face. "Oh, but you do Brian. You really do. Oh shush, shush, shush." The Joker caresses the side of Brian's tear-stained face and my sight goes blurry.

"Miriam, we need to go."

My eyes finally tear away from the TV and find Parker. He's even paler than usual. When the camera flips around to show the Joker's face, my attention is pulled back until the grainy video is all that exists. It's the same as it was when I saw him at the bank—a demon with black pits gouged into a chalk-white face. His red smile takes up most of the screen.

"... Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in. Oh, and every day he doesn't, people will die. Starting tonight. I'm a man of my word."

A hysterical peal of laughter drowns out Brian's screams as the shaky video cuts to black. Parker tugs on my arm.

"Miriam, I'm serious. We need to leave."

Waving him off and staring at the screen again with the rest of the restaurant, Mike Engel reappears.

"We've just received unconfirmed reports that both Commissioner Loeb and Judge Janet Surillo are dead in what appears to be a coordinated attack..."

"Oh my god!" someone cries. Everyone's eyes are glued to the television in fascinated horror.

"Parker, what's happening?" All the security I felt is gone. His hand tugging on my arm again and my phone buzzes. Pulling it out of my pocket, I see a message from Bruce.

**Where are you? You need to come home. Now.**

*Shit, shit, shit—*

Parker drags me to the door. Everything is happening too fast. As soon as we step out into the cool night air, I retch into the gutter. He doesn't stop, dragging me along the sidewalk.

"We'll go to my place. Bruce can get you from there," he says.
It sounds like he's talking through thick layers of fabric, but I don't argue, letting him pull me along. His only lives three blocks away, I know this—but it still feels like an eternity. The brown buildings bleed into one another and I try to keep my feet under me, but Parker is the only thing keeping me upright. I don't even notice we arrived until he starts pulling me up a long set of wooden stairs.

"Parker—Parker, wait." My voice doesn't sound like mine.

*He's taking everything away from me.*

"What does this mean? Do—do you… do you think he's going to…?" I can't even finish the sentence, just looking at his face and trying to subdue the wild and growing sense of panic.

"I don't know what it means, but you'll be safer with Bruce. We're almost in my place. Just one more set of stairs."

Parker rushes me up the stairs and pulls out his keys. His hands shake, and he drops them on the floor. Muttering a long string of curses before managing to get the door open, he pushes on it, herds me inside and slams the door closed, putting the deadbolt and chain in place before taking a big breath.

"Just sit on the couch for a minute, I'll grab you a blanket. You're shaking like crazy," he says, heading for his room.

Looking down at myself, I see that he's right and realize I abandoned my jacket at Niko's, which let the rain completely soak through my white blouse. Shivering, I cross my arms over my chest, sitting on the nearby armchair and typing Bruce a message.

*I'm at Parker's. Can you come get me? Did you see the news?*

A loud *thwack* and something heavy dropping to the wood floor freezes me in place. Gripping my phone tight, I reach down for my bag and, grabbing the stun gun and disengaging the safety, I hold it out in front of me and struggle to keep my hands steady.

"Parker?"

The panic makes my voice sound tinny and strange. I move away from the living room and go towards Parker's bedroom, and my path stretches out before me, elongating the short hallway until it seems like it will swallow me whole. My legs are blocks of stone, and it takes everything in me to keep moving forward. Parker's door is half open and most of the room is obscured in darkness, but I can see him on the ground, motionless. My mind stops functioning, and I sprint towards him and burst into his room.

"Parker!"

I don't make it. Something heavy hits me across the back and I fall forward, landing hard on my wrists and knees. Another blow hits me in the stomach and I fall over, wheezing. The stun gun falls from my hand and slides under the bed. Someone chuckles.

"Oh, *excuse* me. I don't know what happened to my, uh, manners." A man steps out from around the edge of the door. He looks like a shadow against the hallway light, but I don't need to see his face to know who it is. "Good *evening*, Miriam."

*No, no, no, no —*
Clutching my stomach, trying to catch my breath, I start to scream. The Joker lands on top of me and slams my head to the floor, and I cry out in pain and he slaps his gloved hand over my mouth. Using all the energy I have, I hit him in the face and try to twist him off me. He straddles my hips and lets out a loud cackle, leaning all his weight on my ribs, pushing the air from my lungs.

"Now, now. Don't make this harder for yourself," he says as he tries to catch my arms in his free hand. I punch him hard in the face again and his bottom lip splits. Blood dribbles down his chin but he's still laughing.

I reach for the stun gun but only brush against it with my fingertips. His free hand catches my wrist and uses the hand gripping my jaw to pick up my head and bring it down hard against the floor. Gasping for air, I can barely breathe with his hand over my mouth. He pins my arms to my chest with ease, but I still fight—trying to aim a kick at his back, but even then I can't do more than squirm.

"Ah-ta-ta-ta, careful. You know, it's a, uh, bad idea to get a guy, well, like me, too excited when you're wearing..." His eyes move down my body, tongue darting out of his mouth and trailing along his bottom lip, licking up the pooling blood. I realize with horror that my blouse is rolling up past my waist. "...So little," he growls in my ear.

How is he here?

Crying when I don't mean to, I'm terrified to move. The smell of gasoline overpowers my nose. My head pounds, and I can't stop myself from trembling and his eyes lock on mine and he smiles, the painted gashes on his face arcing like the grin of a devil. He leans over me until he's all I can see, and I try to free my arms but he pushes them harder into my chest.

"Oh, don't be like that. We're going to have a lot of fun, you and I." His tone's playful. It makes me close my eyes and sob. The Joker's body shakes above mine. "Where's all your bravery now, huh?" he asks, adding to the insult with a taunting laugh.

A quiet groan sends Joker's gaze over my head. The gloating smile disappears, and I strain to look at the source of the noise. I scream into his hand when Parker begins to stir.

"He just doesn't know when to stay down," he mutters under his breath, eyes darting back to me as he licks his lips. "You'd think your boyfriend would know when he's beat. You stay right there, now." He smacks my head into the floor again before pushing himself off me.

Sucking in long gulps of air and trying to blink away the pain, large black spots dance in circles along my vision. Rolling over onto my side and barely suppressing the urge to vomit, the Joker stands over Parker. He kneels, and a glint of metal is in his hand. Desperation trumps the panic.

"Pl-Please! Don't hurt him." The Joker's dark eyes snap to me, eyebrows raised. Crawling onto my hands and knees, I look up at him. My head feels disconnected from my body and I cling to consciousness. "I—I'll do whatever you want, just—just leave him alone. Please." He's staring at my face; his eyes catch the light and flicker with malice.

All I can see in the faint light of Parker's room and through my tears is Joker's black eyes and red mouth set against an orb of white. My arms won't hold me anymore and I slump back to the ground. He chuckles, raises himself, and steps towards me until his face is right in front of mine, blotting out the little light in the room and creating a faint halo of wavy green hair.

"Now, that's a really dangerous thing to say," he snickers. His hand slides through my hair and cups the back of my head. "Do you mean it?"
My eyes flit shut, but I glance over my shoulder. Parker's eyes meet mine. He shakes his head.

*I'm sorry, Parker. This is all my fault.*

Looking back at him, I nod as best as my aching head will allow.

"Say it." His hand yanks my hair when I don't reply, making me yelp. "*Say. It,*" he repeats through his teeth.

"Yes. I mean it," I say with as much conviction as I can muster.

His smile is something straight out of a Bosch painting and his manic cackle makes my blood run cold. He picks me up by the wrists and throws his arm around my waist. Pressing me to him, he drags me through the door, pulling me out of the room and away from Parker.

"*St-Stop! Wait!*" I shout when we reach the living room.

The Joker halts for a moment and stares at my face. The unspoken words die in my mouth when he pushes a wet lock of hair off my face, tucking it behind my ear. The contact makes my head scream and sets my skin on fire. I try to twist my head away and tear at the arm on my waist, but I only succeed in earning a jeer from him.

"Oh, don't worry. He's coming, too." He reaches up, undoing the locks on the front door and swinging it open.

Three men carrying handguns and red canisters of gasoline stand outside. The Joker motions them forward with a jerk of his chin and they enter the room. My vision's fading in and out; my head's in agony. Clutching the back of my skull, my hand comes away bloody. A small whine comes out of my throat.

"Go grab *pretty-boy* there and meet us downstairs. Make this,*" the Joker motions around the apartment, "*fast. We have things to do, people to see, buildings to burn to the ground.*"

"Wait—what are you doing?!" The sound alone is enough to make me reel and I stumble.

The men begin to douse everything with gas. The smell is enough to make me double-over and gag. Joker's arm leaves my waist and I fall against Parker's small dining table. Someone grabs my hands and forces them behind my back, securing them with a zip-tie.

"*Get off me!*" I shriek.

The cold plastic bites into my skin and I try in vain to twist away from the grip holding me. Choking back bile when I'm twisted around to look at the Joker, I find him grinning.

"Can't have you *spoiling* the surprise for everyone. *C'mere,*" he says, grabbing my head with one hand.

He pulls out a roll of duct tape with the other and tears off a strip with his teeth, slapping the piece over my mouth before I can scream and starts dragging me towards the door. The Joker threads his arm behind my back while tugging on my restraints. My vision darkens at the flights of stairs in front of me. The Joker is relentless, and I can't keep pace with him as he descends the stairs with a mad glee. The arm around me is the only thing keeping me from crumbling head-first down the wooden steps.

*I'm going to die, I'm going to die —*
Somehow, we reach the main level and he pushes me out onto the street where a large white van is parked. Two men stand beside it, peering around the road with their faces buried in their coats against the wind and rain. They stand at attention when they see the Joker, and he tosses me towards them.

"Get ready to roll," he says, jumping into the passenger seat of the van.

One of the men catches me in his arms, and I can hardly see through the mixture of pain, tears, and rain, but I recognize the man holding my arms. It's him. From this morning. The sick grin he had on the train is on his face again. I twist away and try to run down the sidewalk, but I lose sight of the world as a sharp shock hits me when my hair is nearly pulled from the roots. Dropping to the ground, a pair of hands hoist me up and drag me to the back of the van.

I'm trying to scream through the tape when a flash of fire, shattering glass, and a burst of heat cause me to look up. Parker's floor is totally engulfed in flames. The bearded man takes advantage of my inattention and throws me into the back of the van. My head smacks into the hard metal of the bare van floor and I can't focus on anything but the pain. Flinching when something heavy lands near me, Parker's unconscious body lays next to mine, a bright streak of blood pours in a steady stream from a large gash on his temple. A boot blocks my view of him, and it feels like needles are pushing through my eye, but I look up. The bearded man is standing over Parker, eying me like a trussed-up piece of meat, and a lopsided grin stretching across his face.

"This is going to be so much fun," the Joker croons as the van speeds off.

Losing the battle against the raging pain when a thick hood is shoved over my head, I block the world, and whatever the future holds, from me.
A Not So Warm Welcome

It was too cold to bury Mom that December. The wind and snow were oppressive, and Gotham hadn't had a winter that cold in decades. They had to wait two weeks after the funeral before they could dig her grave deep enough, and, to me, it seemed as though Mom and I were both stuck in a sort of limbo, leaving me trapped in place. I don't even know if I really believed this was true, but I felt that if Mom couldn't rest, neither could I.

I tried to take solace in the peaceful expression she had at the wake. It made it easy to pretend she didn't suffer in the end. Mom was dying for a long time, her passing wasn't a shock, but I felt an empty chasm open in my chest that I couldn't wish away. They tried their best to make her look like she was before she got sick, giving her an auburn wig that, although looked similar enough from afar, was just a cheap imitation up-close. Her skin was still pale and yellowed, her cheeks sunken in. I lamented, not for the first time, that I didn't look more like her. Not like she did at the end, but how she looked when she was healthy and happy.

Clever, energetic, and beautiful—Mom could be a force of nature: when she had her mind set on something, there was little that could stop her. I think the only thing I inherited were her green eyes. My brown skin, black hair, and angular face all come from my father. I was tall for my age, gawky and shy. Every picture I ever saw of her showed someone who could never have felt awkward or alone. Unlike me. I didn't inherit her self-assurance or grace; I never found the courage to take her example to heart either.

I remember sitting in my new room at Wayne Manor and staring out at the grounds, watching the snow cover the bare trees and blanket the earth. I twisted Mom's wedding ring over in my hands, ignoring how the gold caught the light and illuminated the engraving inside the band. This was the room I stayed in when Mom and I would visit, but, without her, it seemed much too large and had too many shadows at night. I didn't sleep well and stayed up with a light on until dawn would break. Bundled up in blankets on the large bed, I looked ahead through the windows. I don't think I even raised my head when Bruce came in the room.

"What, I'm gone for a couple of weeks and now you won't even say 'hi'?” Bruce asked, his tone light and joking.

I didn't reply, just kept staring ahead, even as my vision blurred. It wasn't until he dwarfed my hands in his that I realized I was crying.

Bruce stared at my face until I looked at him, his hair had grown out too long again; it kept falling in front of his eyes. "Miri, tell me what's wrong." He gripped both of my hands in his.

I knew he understood what it was like to lose everything that mattered, but he seemed to handle everything… well, better. Just like he did with most things. A small hiccup escaped my chest as I struggled to form the words.

"I—I'm all alone now. What am I supposed to do without her?” Ripping my hands out from his, I buried my face in them.

"Alfred and I aren't going anywhere, Miri. We won't leave you."

I shook my head. "You're going to leave me, too. Every—everyone always does." I cried harder, feeling stunned when Bruce pulled me into his chest and wrapped his arms around me.
“We're family. Nothing will ever change that.” I wanted to believe him, but my mind wasn't eager to trust—even as my heart was desperate for the reassurance. "Listen, Miri. No matter how far apart we are, or where we go, that won't ever change. I loved Kate, too, but you can get through this. You're strong, just like she was.”

Finally hugging Bruce back, I tried to believe what he told me. I always did. To me at least, he was as close to perfect as I could imagine.

"I know it's not quite Christmas or your birthday, but I want you to have something. Just don't tell Alfred," he said with a wink. Breaking away from the hug, I felt much younger then, like when I was a kid and Bruce would always have a surprise waiting for me when I visited.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small velvet box, and when he opened it and I saw a small ring. It had a thin silver band and a teardrop-shaped gem. It was turquoise, my birthstone. I took it from his hand and put it in my own, right next to my mother's wedding band. Bruce pulled out a long silver chain and placed it in my hand.

"The chain is for your mom's ring. It's too big right now, isn't it? Here." He picked up Mom's band and slipped it through an open end of the chain. Bruce motioned me forward, and I moved my hair out of the way as he placed the chain around my neck.

"There. Now you can keep her ring there until you get a bit of meat on those bones." He smiled, and it lit up his whole face. It felt infectious, and I smiled too. "Do you like it?"

I nodded and looked down at my hand. The ring fit on my finger with ease, and I felt a rush of blood in my cheeks.

"Did you mean it?" I asked. Bruce looked at me with a confused expression. "Will we always be a family?"

He smiled again, soft and comforting. "Yes. I swear."

My head feels like it's being crushed in a vise.

Moving my eyes behind their closed lids is enough to make me want to vomit. Breathing feels difficult, like something is wrapped around my torso and cinches tighter with every inhale. My right shoulder's at an odd angle, my arm asleep. Pins and needles run up most of my body and my tongue feels like a thick piece of sandpaper in my mouth.

How long was I out?

I know opening my eyes is going to hurt, so I try my best to breathe deeply through it. The urge to be sick is overwhelming, but so is the pain I feel when my body convulses. It takes me a long time before I can move past the block of agony and become aware of my surroundings.

The edges of my vision are still blurry, but I see the rough outlines of a rusted metal room. Blinking hard, everything comes in and out focus, going too sharp and then too blurry. Old white paint chips off to reveal a red undercoat. There's a window somewhere above me, and the faint light helps me focus. A large vent's above my head and the cover looks like it's about to fall and smack me in the face. Glancing down, I find myself on an old mattress. The room is freezing, the bed and I are damp, and the chill seems to be biting into my muscles, making them twist in on themselves.

Pain shoots up my arm when I move it from underneath me and try to push myself upright, but I
can barely manage to hold my head up. A faint whimper escapes me when I see my blouse is 
untucked from my skirt, most of the buttons are gone, and it's shoved up past my waist. Ignoring 
the agony shooting through my head, I raise myself higher to examine the damage. My boots and 
socks are missing, and my skirt is bunched around my hips. Dark bruises cover my calves and 
arms.

The Joker's face and the bearded man's smile float around in my mind. Hyperventilating makes my 
sight blur again.

_Calm down. Think. Get up._

Groaning and trying to stay quiet as I turn myself on my side, my throbbing head is excruciating 
and I bring my hand to the back of it. My hair is caked to the base of my skull, and bolts of white-
hot pain make my body seize again. Latching onto a ridge on the side of the wall and struggling to 
stand, I lean against the wall until my legs stop shaking. I close the buttons that still cling to my 
shirt with shaking fingers and pull my skirt back down. Any resolve I had crumbles and I bite my 
hand to keep myself quiet as I sob.

_You're OK. Find a way to get out._

Still staying close to the wall for support, I inch my way across the small room and reach the door. 
The handle is circular, large, and nearly rusted shut.

_It looks like something from a ship._

There's a filthy window that looks out into a hall, but I can't do more than distinguish between 
shadows. I try turning the hatch, but my energy is almost gone. There's nothing else in the room—
and the window behind me is too high up to see what's outside. Backing up, I ease myself down 
onto the mattress.

_I'm pretty sure I'm on an old ship... Alfred and Bruce must know I'm missing. They'll come looking 
for me._

I try not to feel mad at Gordon, at his inability to catch a man who's so obviously out of his mind. 
Wincing, I banish the thought quickly.

_This wasn't his fault. It's mine for being such a colossal moron._

If I am on a ship, then it can't be one that's still in use. By the look of the room, I'm surprised this 
thing hasn't been torn apart for scrap. A cold wind comes from some small hole in the wall, 
searing through my ruined shirt and nipping at my skin. A fresh wave of tears comes when I think 
of Parker.

_They dragged him into the van with me... He should be here, too. Another thing that's my fault. I 
got him into something too big for us to out-think. If anything were to happen to him... _

A slow grind of metal against metal makes me snap my head up and renews the aching pain. The 
sudden motion brings up a wave of bile, and I struggle to choke it down. Pushing myself into the 
corner of the room when the bulkhead door opens, a large man with greasy brown hair, a dirty 
sweater, and leather vest comes into the room. His eyes are fixed to the ground and he shuffles his 
feet. He looks almost… _bashful._ Eying him with suspicion, I pull my torn shirt closer to myself, 
crossing my arms over my chest. He doesn't even look in my direction.

"The—the boss wants to see you," he says so quiet that I strain to hear him.
Clearing my throat several times, I try to speak. "Where am—am I?"

The man shakes his head and inches towards the frame of the door, his boots grating against the rusted metal. "Boss said no questions. The lady isn't... isn't supposed to ask questions."

He's shaking his head faster and his hands ball into fists, and when he slams his large hand into the wall, the reverberating metal makes me jump. He still won't look at me, and he's whispering under his breath.

"I—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. My name's Miriam." Changing tack is my best bet, and the effect is immediate; his expression changes when I say my name. He uncurls his fist and drops it to his side. "Can I ask what your name is?"

The man's entire expression lightens—he looks like a child rather than the grown man he is. He turns his eyes to me, face going beet-red. There's something wrong with him.

**What's he doing here?**

"Boss said no questions..." the man whispers. He looks away and hesitates. "N-Noah," he says after a long minute.

**Something I can work with.**

Standing up, I lean on the wall-ridge and maintain my position in the corner, trying my best to smile at him. "It's very nice to meet you, Noah." His blush deepens, spreading down his face to his neck, and he nods. "I'm in a lot of pain. Do you think I could have some water before we go?" I'm trying to catch his eye, but Noah backs out of the room and slams the door behind him. "Shit."

**What am I supposed to do now?**

My hands tremble from the fear and cold, and I can guess who this 'boss' Noah's referring to. Touching the back of my head again, I hiss. When the door screeches open, I try not to throw myself back in the corner. Noah stands in the doorway again, looking away but extending his hand towards me. I step forward with caution and see he's gripping a water bottle. He thrusts it at me as I get closer, and, as I reach out to take it, my fingers graze his and he drops the bottle as if I burned him. He retreats further away from me, out into the hall.

Wincing as I lean down to grab the fallen bottle, doing my best not to cry out when my body protests at the movement, I grasp the bottle in my hand and twist off the top. It takes all my self-control not to chug the whole thing in one go—who knows when I'll get another. The little bit I do drink is enough to help clear my head, and I glance at Noah, who's still out in the hall.

**Placing the bottle back down on the floor, I leave the potential safety of the room. With his eyes glued to the ground as I try to navigate the path, I don't notice when Noah stops. I slam into his back and avoid falling over by...**
grabbing a loose bundle of cables hanging low from the ceiling. Noah scuttles away from me as if I was the one who hurt him, looking at me briefly before opening the door to our right. He stands aside and stays motionless. I don't want to enter the room.

He notices me backing away and—quicker than I thought a man his size could move—Noah encircles his massive hand over the entirety of my bicep and pulls me toward the door. "Boss said he—he has to see you," he says, his voice quiet and quaking.

"Please, Noah, you don't have to do this—" I whisper to him, but he shoves me into the room and closes the door behind us.

His bulk blocks the exit and he studies the nearby wall. We're in a short, dark hallway, but I can see fluorescent light coming from around the corner. Noah's chest hits me from behind and I move forward, my arms circling my chest again. The corridor opens to an old mess hall. Worn leather peels away from the yellowed stuffing that makes up the rows of booths, the tables covered in a thick layer of grime, and only thin rays of light penetrate the wall of windows. By the entrance to the kitchen stands a man wearing a long, deep purple coat, his head bowed in discussion with two others next to him. One of them has thick cornrow braids and shifty eyes, and the other's a small blond boy who barely looks older than I am. Someone's sucking their teeth, popping their lips together and making me freeze.

The bearded man from before sits in a booth a few feet away. He's glaring at me, and his smile is different—it's angry, more insidious. One of his eyes is nearly swollen shut, the side of his face an ugly purple with three long gouges that stretch along the side of his head. My skin crawls when our eyes meet, and I back away a from him and Noah, giving my best venomous look to the bearded man. Noah's hand darts out to keep me in place, brushing against the back of my head and I gasp in pain.

The man in the purple coat turns slowly, showing a full face of makeup. Noah's hand grips me harder when I try to get away from the approaching clown.

"Look who finally decided to join us." The Joker's gaze focuses on Noah, the wide grin on his face belying the look in his eyes. "Didn't I ask you to bring her twenty minutes ago?" he asks. His voice is quiet and unnerving. "Was it too, uh, challenging to drag her down a couple of hallways?"

The Joker moves closer to Noah. Even though he's easily twice the size of him, Noah cowers away and tries to hide his face in his chest.

"I thought you wanted the voices to go away. Hmm?" Joker says, going on tip-toe and leaning in close to Noah's face. "I can't help the, uh, the incompe-tent, big guy." He speaks quietly—and sounds more dangerous than if he were yelling. Noah shakes his head and falls to the ground.

"I'm sorry, boss. I'm sorry," Noah whispers, hiding his face in his hands as the Joker's chest rumbles with laughter.

What the—?

"It was my fault."

I didn't mean for the words to come out of my mouth and my eyes widen at my mistake. The Joker turns away from Noah and glares at me. Buckling down, knowing it's too late to shove the words back in my mouth, I speak again.

You really are a genuine idiot.
"I—I asked for water."

The Joker saunters over to me and I involuntarily shrink against a nearby pillar. All the men's eyes are on me as Joker steps too close, his head leaning over mine despite only being a few inches taller than me and reining in my view. The cold's left me, and I'm burning up with a fever. His deadpan face breaks into a grin and he laughs, leaving me cowering against the wall and trying to make myself as small as possible.

"Was it now, hmm? I guess I shouldn't be surprised. It seems that you have a bit of a, uh, talent for getting people into trouble," he says, leaning close to my ear.

He raises an arm, places it above my head and props himself against it, effectively trapping me against the cold metal. I hug my arms closer to my body and attempt to move away from him, but his hand darts out and grabs me by the jaw. "Mmhmm, mmhmm," he purrs.

His eyes move to my mouth and then slowly down the rest of my body, and I squeeze my eyes closed when he lowers his arm from its position by my head. A small squeak I don't mean to make comes out when his hand brushes against my shirt. Wracking with pain as I try to hold back an oncoming wave of sobs, he moves away and releases my jaw. Opening my eyes to see him toying with one of my shirt buttons, the small white threads dangling from his fingertips, the Joker moves back towards the two standing by the kitchen entrance. The bearded man stares at me with an odd look on his face, and the other two men seem amped up—excited, even. Noah is still sitting in a far corner, his head downcast.

These people are sick.

"This simply just won't do." The Joker holds my button up to the light. "Get the box," he says to the blond boy, who leaves through the kitchen and disappears behind a set of bent-out doors.

My confusion doesn't last long. The boy comes back carrying a cardboard box filled to the brim with clothing—my clothing.

My dresses—the ones that went missing.

I want to scream at these men, curse their god-awful existence—claw their dead eyes out—and get the hell out of here. The pain and the deep fear of this man help bottle my urges.

Keep your mouth shut, Miriam.

"Go check on our other guest for me. We wouldn't want him running behind schedule," the Joker says.

Noah stays in the room, and the two men rush to comply. The bearded man is much slower to get up to leave. He's said nothing to me, but his expression is enough to make me feel like I'm in freefall.

The Joker may be the least of your worries...

He goes over to the box, now resting on one of the tables, and starts rifling through my clothes. I feel a misplaced sense of possessiveness as his hands glide over the different bundles of fabric before he drops them to the floor.

"Ah-ha!" he exclaims, pulling out a white dress with a flourish.

An involuntary groan makes me close my eyes and rub my head. The dress seems to haunt me right
alongside the Joker. I regret ever wearing it, and an irrational part of me blames the *Gotham Times* for the position I’m in—I wish they had never shown the picture in the paper. The white dress is dirty, and the red and pink flowers look too much like blood in the poor lighting, and the hem of the dress seems like it was hacked at with a dull pair of scissors. The Joker lets out a satisfied hum and looks back at me, bringing the dress to his nose and inhaling. Backing away from his approaching form until I nearly fall into the booth behind me, he stops inches away, but I still feel the heat coming off him.

"What do you want from me?" I ask through my teeth—it's the only way my jaw won't chatter. The Joker barks out a laugh. I'm unnerved, confused, and I know I'm crying—but my anger outweighs my fear.

"Oh, sweet little Miri," he says, brushing away a tear from my face. I bristle at the sound of my nickname coming from his mouth. "Does it really matter? It won't change much for you." His expression is light and mocking.

"Don't call me that," I hiss.

I pull my head away, but he responds by gripping the back of my neck, and I cry out when he jerks me closer to his face. His thick, corded scars are right at eye-level, but I find a sense of satisfaction at the sight of the deep cut on his lip that I gave him, even as I struggle to maintain eye contact.

"I told you. You and I are going to have some fun," he drawls. A giggle escapes his lips as they tug up into a sly grin. Bringing my knee up, I hit him hard in the groin. He releases his hold on me and staggers back, still giggling.

"Oh-ho-ho, there's the little fighter I like. Be careful." With a click he straightens.

There's nowhere to back up—I aim a kick for his knee, but he's quick. He jabs me in the solar plexus and shoves me flat on my back against the table. One arm pushes down across my collar bones and the other holds a switchblade to my lips. His waist presses against my hips as he pushes his weight across his arms.

"You've already forgotten what I've said about guys like me. It was funny—what you did to Vicky's face, but we need to develop a, uh, mutual understanding, you and I," he says, his tongue darting out of his mouth, wetting his lips and leaving me more confused than ever.

*When did I do that to 'Vicky's' face?*

The Joker pushes the flat of the blade harder against my cheek. I think of my clothes, the bruises covering my body, and his body pressing against mine. Self-preservation kicks in.

"Get off!"

With more strength than I thought I had, I squeeze my thighs around his waist, connect my fist with his jaw, and use the momentum to swing him to the ground. Ignoring the throbbing agony my body is feeling, I sprint for the exit. Noah doesn't move from his position on the floor and the Joker's cackle follows me out in the hall.

"Hahahaha! You can run, Miri, but you can't hide!"

I ignore the debris on the floors, turning at random, away from the heart of the ship to what I hope will lead me to the main deck. Searching for a floor plan or an indicator of where I am, I push away the pain of the glass on the floor cutting into my feet. Everything on the walls is so heavily damaged and worn-down that I can't make out what they say. Shouting and heavy footfalls echo
behind me. Panic clouds my thinking, and I make another random turn and find myself staring at a bent-out stairwell. Running for it and keeping my balance on the creaking steps, I hope that the screaming supports below me hold.

"She's up there!" someone yells. Stopping to look down, I find four men on the staircase behind me.

*Move faster, Miriam.*

Running until I'm out of stairs, I pull the door open and squint into the sunlight. Blinking hard and try to make out the shapes in front of me. Heaving in the fresh air, I see that I was right: I'm on an old ship—one that's surrounded by dozens of others, all in varying states of decay. Picking up a loose pipe near my feet, I jam it in the door handle, hoping to buy time. I jump back when something heavy slams into the door, cursing and pounding reverberating past the rusting metal. Bolting for the edge of the ship, being careful not to slip on the rain-soaked surface, I look for a way down. Gotham looms ahead, the skyscrapers looking small in the distant fog. Docks and metal warehouses are half a mile out, and angry waves beating against the hull, and, looking down, I'm at least 100 feet up.

*And you can't swim.*

Something snaps. The door bursts open and four men pool out of the entrance to approach me. The bearded man, Vicky, stands with them.

"Come on now, love. There's nowhere for you to go," Vicky says, stretching his arms wide and motioning around the deck of the ship. Backing up closer to the railing, Vicky's eyes follow me. He shakes his head. "Even if you didn't die on impact, you'd have trouble swimming with a pair of broken legs."

I glance back down at the water below. He's right, but I will *not* be dragged back down there with any of them. The men start circling closer towards me.

"Maybe I don't care," I say, gripping the edge of the railing and planting my feet on the bottom rung. Vicky's mouth twitches in amusement.

"Maybe you don't. Your *friend* sure would, though, wouldn't he? What's his name…?" The blood leaves my face. "Ah, yes. *Parker.* Y'see, he's in a bit of a tight spot right now. You wouldn't want anything to happen to him, would you?"

Vicky looks smug now—he knows he's got me. But I set my jaw and squint, my right foot rising up to the second bar of the railing.

"Don't be stupid, love," Vicky says. My skin crawls at his lascivious grin.

*No.*

A flood of images seizes my mind.

*Parker's next to me with his forehead split open, on the floor, reaching out. How happy he looked when he was next to me the first time we sat together in class, a big smile on his face after he told some lame joke.*

My mind is a battleground between my sense of responsibility for Parker and the primal urge to be as far away from here as possible—even if that means laying at the bottom of the Gotham River. But Parker's face isn't the only one I see anymore. Alfred and Bruce float in my mind's eye.
No... Parker's done too much for me to leave him now.

There's no real option at all. I move to put my feet on the ground, but my foot slips out from under me, making me slide against the slick metal until I tumble backward. I flip over the railing and fall. My stomach claws its way up my throat, and the Gotham River rushes up to devour me. I close my eyes and brace for impact.

A sharp tug on my leg stops my descent. My eyes snap open and Vicky and another man hold me up by the ankle. The icy wind snaps me against the side of the rusted hull, and I cry out in pain when my spine makes contact. I barely feel the metal railing scraping a layer off my skin as they hoist me back onto the wet deck. They drop me and double over, their hands on their knees as they breathe hard.

"Wowie! Wasn't expecting that, were we lads? Selfish and suicidal. Guess you don't fall far from the socialite-tree after all, eh?"

Vicky laughs as I struggle to stand, closing the space between us and backhanding me. White flashes fill my vision as I fall back to the ground. My cheek is warm and I reach up to touch my face, fingers coming away bloody. Hands grab and drag me away from the sight of Gotham and the sun. I kick out my legs and attempt to hit anyone near me in the kneecap, but the men laugh at my attempts.

"There's a good girl. Do yourself and Parker a favour and behave," Vicky says as the deck door slams shut, cutting off the light. A furious and terrified thought pops into my mind, and I hate myself for it.

*You should have just jumped.*

A different voice rings through me.

*You'll never change.*
It had been 68 hours since Miriam went missing.

68 hours since the Batman went to Parker Kwan's burnt-out apartment and searched among the piles of ash, rubble, and remains of those who didn't make it out. A manic fever seized him. He dug through the smouldering remains that burned his hands through the gloves, looking for any sign that she was there when it happened. Her last message was stuck in his head.

*Why wasn't I there sooner?*

They only pulled out four bodies. It was a family from what they could tell of the floor plan and the lease agreement. The Murrays. Their charred corpses were laying in the remnants of a bed; the smoke had gotten to them before the flames.

Alfred was quick to give Gordon DNA samples from home and copies of Miriam's dental records. He and Bruce had to be sure that Miriam wasn't caught up in the inferno. When the results came back negative, and sixteen hours of reviewing surveillance data and cellphone interception revealed nothing, a more terrible sort of fear latched onto Bruce. A sort of fear he thought he had rid himself of in the high mountains of Bhutan. The nightmares of his parents' murders flashed in his mind whenever he stopped long enough to think.

The media circus surrounding the life of Bruce Wayne on a normal day intensified a hundred-fold when the news broke that Miriam was missing—presumed dead in a fireball that consumed half an apartment complex. Miriam was beautiful and heavily contrasted as being a 'good girl' next to Bruce's wanton womanizer image. They'd focused different stories on her in the past because of her connections to Bruce, but never anything like this.

Journalists, paparazzi, so-called 'friends,' and deeply concerned coworkers hounded Bruce day and night for updates. All asking a hundred questions that they were impeding him from answering. Disappearing to rip the city apart brick by brick was not an option when the life of Bruce Wayne was turned upside down. When her body wasn't found in the wreckage, speculation grew faster than the blaze that consumed Parker's home.

Bruce was angry with himself. He'd underestimated the Mob's desperation, their willingness to inflict so much damage. He couldn't help but think of the times Miriam was small and stayed at the Manor, how she was afraid of the dark and would sneak into his room so he would scare the monsters away. Kate would laugh about it, saying how Bruce was the protective force Miriam needed. Bruce took the role seriously as a teenager, wanting to be what her father was not. Kate, Miriam, and Alfred were the family that filled the void left by the death of his parents. Now he had let a real monster permeate, destroy, those boundaries of safety. He had allowed a monster to come for her in the night, and there was nothing he could do to fix it. No guarantees of success, only the certainty of pain and misery.

Bruce's mind was rife with conflict. His guilt was clouding his next course of action. Any urge to sleep, any notion of rest was lost when the Joker rigged one of the caterer's trolleys with explosives meant to murder Harvey and the guests at the fundraiser. The burning fire of rage was lit when Miriam went missing. But that wouldn't help him find her. It wouldn't help him deal with the Mob, and it wouldn't help him catch the Joker.
'The training is nothing. The will is everything. The will to act.'

Ra's al Ghul's voice floated in Bruce's mind. He closed his eyes and focused on his old mentor's words. They still rang true, even though they came from a man ruled by madness and hate.

He needed to shove those parts of himself down—those connected to Miriam, to the visions of what kind of violence man was capable of that he was so well-acquainted with—deep under the cool shelter of Batman. He could not act when he was ruled by emotion.

He focused back on the task at hand. There was no doubt in his mind as to who had done this, but Batman could not decipher why. The police were hesitant to link her disappearance with the Joker, and the media hadn't yet made any connections founded in reality. He needed to be careful and to figure out quickly what the Joker's endgame was.

Was it because he met her at the bank?

It had only been eleven days since the failed seizure of the Mob's money. Six since the Batman brought back Lau from Hong Kong to Gotham. But the Joker had broken into the penthouse fourteen days ago. Batman doubted that the Mob was paying the Joker to rob their own banks, and he would've had no reason to terrorize Miriam. There was a part of the equation he was missing.

He sat in his chair in the bunker under the West Gotham shipping yard. The video of the Joker that played on repeat for the last 24-hour news cycle was analyzed, frame by frame, on his computer. Facial recognition revealed nothing. His modus operandi was totally unheard of or, at least, undocumented by any official law enforcement channels. There were no clues in the video that would betray the Joker's identity to the Batman. He stared, transfixed, at the images of the Joker's fiendish grin as it flashed back and forth across the monitor.

If Miriam wasn't dead yet, then she would be soon.

Miriam's picture popped up on one of the many monitors, right next to Parker Kwan's. GCN was making appeals to the public. They used the same photo that the Gotham Times ran. Alfred had taken the picture when they had made a trip back up to the Manor to check on its progress. She looked happy, her brown skin darker than it usually was. The summer had been warm, and Miriam always took every opportunity to be outside. She was looking off camera, at Bruce, caught in a candid moment where they felt at ease with one another for the first time since she was a child. It was the perfect picture to use to evoke the sympathy of the public. Thousands of tips were pouring into the Major Crime Unit's hotlines. All were useless.

Footage from the restaurant came up next. Batman had poured over it already, and watching the video was physically painful. Even in the grainy video, he could see the terror on her face.

Why didn't she stay in the restaurant where she was safe?

For all he knew, Parker had dragged her out to the Joker. Or something went wrong in his apartment and he set fire to the place himself. Bruce Wayne didn't mind the kid, even if he didn't like how attached he was to Miriam. But Batman could not afford not to check all leads. There were too many unknowns.

He felt his muscles coil in frustration. Batman wanted, needed, to do something. To be effective. The signs were there, but once again he had not done enough to act. He had seen, felt, the Joker staring at Miriam, hovering over her in the videos from the bank. Batman willed his shaking fists to be still. Self-control was all that stood between him and these men. He needed to think, to find any clue of where she could be, not slip back into a state of helplessness. Turning his head to the
sound of the platform dropping, he didn't tear his eyes away from the screen. Alfred walked quickly across the concrete expanse to Batman.

"Lieutenant Gordon called. Miriam has not been checked into any Gotham hospital, nor has she been… been found by any of the patrolmen, like the rest of this 'Joker's' victims. She and Mr. Kwan have disappeared off the face of the bloody earth."

Alfred's skin was blotchy and red from the lack of sleep. It pained him to see the dark, puffy rims around Alfred's eyes. His normally straight back was slumping, bowing under the strain of the last few weeks. His tie was loose and crooked, and his shirt wrinkled. Bruce suddenly felt caught in between, his connections to Miriam clouding what he needed to do as Batman. Alfred's presence only compounded the split in his nature.

"That means that either she's being held somewhere outside of the Mob's territory or she's dead and we haven't found her body yet," Batman said, sounding distant. Alfred stood still and stared. It had been a long time since he had seen that level of fury in Alfred's eyes.

"You will not speak that way, Master Bruce. Not until we know for certain."

Bruce nodded and hung his head. The weight of the tasks ahead felt crushing; he resisted the absolute certainty of Batman when he needed to embrace it. He stood and walked towards the centre of the room, activating the pressure plate that raised the cake holding the batsuit out of the concrete. Bruce tugged off the rumpled button-down that he'd been living in when he wasn't prowling the streets of Gotham for the last three days. The bruises and scars he had accumulated in the past decade shined bright against his tanned skin.

"This is different. The Mob's never resorted to blatant terrorism. They've gone too far," he said, slipping on his gear.

"You hammered these men to the point of desperation, and they've turned to a man they aren't capable of understanding. They've summoned a demon beyond their reckoning, and she is trapped somewhere with him! We knew there would be casualties. But not like this."

"I'll stop them, and I will find her. One way or another." He couldn't think beyond the maxim. He would explode if he did.

"Are you listening to yourself? This is Miriam you are talking about. A girl you have known since birth. She is our family. You made a promise on Katherine's deathbed. We both did."

"You don't think I know that, Alfred?" Bruce snapped. "I'm tearing this city apart trying to find her. More dead are being found every day, and—" He cut himself off.

Bruce felt small and helpless again, like the lost boy and murderous young man he used to be. Vitriol coursed through him like poison and he wanted to hit someone. Hard. He knew what needed to be done, even if he wouldn't admit it to himself. He tried clearing his mind, focusing on what lay ahead.

Batman clipped on his utility belt, moving swiftly. He didn't want to have this conversation. He sighed heavily and voiced the only point of optimism that he was capable of summoning.

"If he hasn't killed her yet, then he might be waiting for something. I need to find her before then." He knew his window of opportunity wouldn't last forever. Night began to fall, and he needed an effective plan of attack. "What would you have me do?"

Alfred considered for a moment. He didn't know if voicing an old hunch would bring about
anything useful.

"Have you considered contacting Jahan Shaddid?" Alfred asked. Batman froze mid-motion. He looked at Alfred and managed an incredulous look.

"What makes you think he would know anything? He hasn't had contact with Miri in over fifteen years."

"Well, running that gang for seventeen years would give him an edge on information on the scourge of Gotham's underbelly. Are you sure he wouldn't have been one of the people who hired this madman?"

Batman said nothing. It pained him to acknowledge it, but paying Jahan a visit was a good idea, no matter how much it intensified his wrath.

"I never told you this, because you were gone for seven bloody years, and Miri seemed to be doing much better with her leanings toward the maverick, but…" Alfred trailed off. He had struggled to find out what happened on his own and only dragged the entire situation out of Miriam weeks after it happened four years ago. "She demonstrated, in quite a brash fashion, her growing skills as a hacker to a decidedly unsavoury group of individuals." Alfred looked hesitant to tell Batman the rest.

"What do you mean 'demonstrated her skills'? What did you leave out when I asked what happened while I was gone? I thought she was just messing with the school systems."

A trace of Alfred's old smile came back. "Another story for a time when matters are not so pressing. Perhaps exploring what previous connections she had, as well as, erm, persuading those that have a potential vested interest in her well-being may prove beneficial. Start with Ivan Dimitrov and Jahan Shaddid."

He gave Alfred a rueful smile.

_Leave it to Alfred to tell me to beat a man to a pulp in the most tactful way imaginable._

He donned his mask and remote-started the Tumbler. As it growled to life Alfred shouted at Batman over the noise. He kept his back to Alfred.

"You bring her back. I'll stay plugged into the computer. But we will not rest until she's home and that animal is put down," Alfred said.

He said nothing as the cab of the vehicle lowered and he tore out of the bunker. If he was going to be effective, he had to stay numb. Letting his mind wander the possibilities of what was happening to Miriam would be enough to break him. He had his targets, and now it was time to make them talk.

Finding Jahan wasn't as hard as Batman thought it would be. The Djinn had once occupied almost the entirety of South Channel Island up until last year, before Batman, and intense gang competition, succeeded in beating back most of their operations. Now, most of their dealings were tied up in laundering money through legitimate businesses, and their practices were harder to catch outright.

Jahan Shaddid was an intelligent man, but he was known for giving in to his impulses. Hot-headed, ruthless, predisposed to unpredictable bouts of violence, and had a weakness for women. And he was one of the last people Batman should have encountered that night. Batman needed to maintain
a firm grip on the sense of control that was slipping through his fingers, not be tempted with a legitimate opportunity to enact the punishment he had wanted since he was a young man. The memories of Jahan's thinly veiled threats to Kate, Bruce's anger at how a man could abandon his family so easily, and the knowledge that Jahan spent nearly two decades unleashing death and pain on the weak and vulnerable unchecked weighed heavily on Batman. This would be another test in a series of ordeals.

Jahan used his last base of operations as a permanent fortress. Batman stood watch atop the apartment building opposite one of the only legitimate businesses Jahan had left—the Amaseena. Two armed men stood outside the entrance. They had beefed up security in the last three months. A territorial dispute with the Free Men made them go on the defensive. From comm surveillance and visual observation, Batman estimated that there were at least twelve on the first floor and nine on the second. Including the two outside, Jahan, and any possible reinforcements brought the total to no more than thirty.

He had spent two hours on the roof and three hours previously finding and interrogating Ivan Dimitrov. He was only mid-level in the Dimitrov crime family and appeared to have no part in any plan to hire the Joker. Ivan remembered Miriam vividly, but not as the girl Bruce Wayne knew. He was more than willing to tell Batman all about his interactions with Miriam four years ago when he was dangling by his shoelaces from a ten-story building and nursing several broken ribs. Ivan was a dead-end; he knew nothing of his own family's deal with the Joker and was a low-life drunk. Batman ruled out Jahan as the possible abductor of Miriam, but he couldn't waste any more time on surveillance, doing nothing. If Jahan knew anything, Batman would wring it out of him. At any cost.

He rose from his crouch and jumped from his position on the roof, activating his cape and gliding to the top of the Amaseena. Jahan would be on the fourth floor. Batman moved to the fire escape, climbing down and sneaking through the unlocked window. That was the thing about criminals—they learned to protect the obvious points of entry but failed to expect attacks from above. Apparently, Batman had not instilled enough fear in the last year for these men to change their rudimentary stratagem.

All the more to my advantage, Batman thought.

The upper floor of the club was quiet compared to the commotion coming from the lower floors, which would create a necessary sound barrier between him and Jahan. It was a Thursday, but that didn't stop the throngs of wayward Gothamites from looking for a place to party, get high, and drink until morning. This place was on Batman's list, but it wasn't the night to raze it to the ground.

The window led Batman into a large common room. The place smelled of spilled bourbon, cigarettes, and cheap drugstore cologne. A locked metal door led to a staircase for the lower floors. Blinds were drawn, and the men were on the lower floors, were out of sight. Black leather couches and blue walls overlaid with Moroccan tile were the room's main decorative scheme. Small rays of light penetrated through the room and highlighted wooden columns holding up Berber-style ceramics. It was a striking room, and Batman would almost regret destroying it if Jahan put up a fight.

He didn't make a sound as he moved across the room. No noise came from the other side of the door. Batman would have the element of surprise—if he acted fast enough, Jahan wouldn't be able to call for help. Reaching for his belt, Batman readied a batarang. His muscles tensed, waiting for a release—almost savouring the moment between anticipation and action.

Batman stood, and with intense focus taking over, he kicked open the door and threw a batarang
into Jahan's right shoulder. The man dropped his radio with a thud and a cry. Abandoning any attempt to call for help, Jahan clumsily reached for his gun with his left hand, but Batman was too quick. He cleared the short distance between them, hurdling the desk and pouncing on top of Jahan. Batman knocked him out of his chair, pinning him to the floor.

Jahan was once a handsome man, with angular features, brown eyes, and a tall, lean figure. Except for the eyes, Miriam was his spitting image. Jahan hadn't aged well since Bruce Wayne interacted with him last. He'd lost his suave charm and youthful grin. Now, his eyes looked hollow and dull. A thick stubble coated his face and neck. Extended nicotine abuse rendered the corners of his mouth and fingertips yellow. Batman felt more disgust for the man.

He was one aspect of Miriam's life that wasn't well-known to the public. Kate left Jahan early enough and never mentioned his name aloud—he wasn't even listed on Miriam's birth certificate. Bruce Wayne and Alfred swore to Kate to keep Miriam from harm and from repeating the mistakes of her father. They had failed on both counts, and Batman's own impotence created a dangerous mix of intense rage and extreme, and for now, non-lethal prejudice.

Batman connected his fist to Jahan's face over and over again, savouring the feeling of the skin swelling underneath his hands. The noise wouldn't go unnoticed, Batman needed to be quick and brutal.

Batman moved from his face to his collarbone and snapped it with one well-placed punch. The bone jutted against his skin and showed through his polo shirt. Jahan screamed.

The tough façade Jahan maintained slipped as Batman's fist drove back into his face. He didn't even have time to move, to think. He cowered and attempted to shield his face with his one good remaining arm from the blows. Batman thought of what he did to Kate and Miriam and forced himself to stop. Batman's body was a tight coil waiting to spring. His body shook with a fury that bordered on madness.

Self-control is what separates you from them.

"Tell me everything you know about the Joker," Batman said, his voice like metal scraping against concrete.

Even with his battered face and blood dribbling down his chin, Jahan regained his guise quickly. He laughed and spat a mix of blood and saliva on to the wood floor.

"I don't know shit. I don't run with those clowns. You're barking up the wrong tree, I haven't done anything wrong, sadiq. Even if I did know something, why the hell would I tell you?"

Batman said nothing, and instead placed his thick-soled boot on top of Jahan Shaddid's knee, which Batman knew had several reconstructive surgeries from a recent motorcycle accident and getting kneecapped during his time as a low-level thug. Batman put all his weight on the joint and felt the kneecap slide out of place. Jahan shrieked out in pain.

Two minutes.

"Maybe knowing he has your daughter would change your mind," Batman said. Jahan's mouth popped open, showing his blood-coated teeth. His dark skin visibly paled.

"Ya Ibn el Sharmouta. What the hell do you mean by that?" Jahan was growing louder in his panic. By his reaction, Jahan knew she was missing. Batman needed to speed up the process.

He punched Jahan in the face again, feeling the crack of bone under his fist, and threw a batarang
at the window, shattering it. The cold fall air blew over all the paper on the desk, creating a small
cyclone. He grabbed Jahan by the collar and dragged him to the window, placing his neck close to
the jagged edges of glass.

"You—you wouldn't do anything. Everybody knows you're soft." Jahan had the gall to curve his
beaten lips into a half-smile. Even all these years later, he was still scum-faced vermin.

Batman put his face close to Jahan's, lowering the pitch of his voice until it was a guttural growl of
menace emanating deep from the back of his throat. "I won't kill you. But I will cut the tendons
attaching your skull to your spine." Batman lowered Jahan towards the glass while holding his
head down further against the glistening edge. Beads of blood dripped down Jahan's hairline before
he relented.

"Stop! I'll tell you, I'll tell you!" The thought of living the rest of his pathetic life like a literal
bobble-head was enough to crush all resistance in the man.

Batman pushed down a little harder for effect.

"I'll only ask once: tell me what you know about the Joker."

"O-Only rumors. I know some of the guys who work for him—they said something about a big
meet-up going down by the Bowery tomorrow night. Some time after midnight. I don't know
anything else—I swear!" Batman said nothing in reply. Instead, he lifted Jahan's pierced skin off
the glass and threw him to the floor. Jahan lay there clutching the back of his neck and groaning.

Heavy thumping on the stairs piqued Batman's ears. The thugs downstairs had finally decided to
check out the disturbance. Batman climbed onto the sill and prepared to glide out the window.

"You'll find my girl, won't you?" Jahan asked from the floor. Batman stayed silent, only feeling
contempt for the groveling man. He jumped from the window as the group of armed men stormed
the floor.

Yes. I will.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again so much to all of those who are reading and leaving comments. You
have no idea how much it means to me! I thought occasionally alternating to Bruce's
perspective would give some needed scope on the happenings of Miriam's limited
view. This one was a bit of a challenge because of how Bruce splits his given name
and identity with that of his self-made persona. When Bruce is feeling vulnerable, I
refer to him by his given name. When he draws on the more calculated and strategic
alter-ego of Batman, he is (attempting) to be more distant and regain control of
something that is beyond one man's grasp. I hope that came through in the writing. If
it's at all confusing, please let me know.
Bruce changed that spring.

He took an extended hiatus from Princeton for my first Christmas at the Manor without Mom. It was an occasion of threes: Mom's death, my birthday, and Christmas. The mood was somber, and it was rare that the three of us would laugh or smile at the same time. But Alfred and Bruce were determined to forge the familial bond Bruce spoke of.

Bruce would surprise me with trips to Gotham's museums, sledding down the many slopes that encircled the Manor, watching my favourite movies on repeat, and trying his hand at baking and failing miserably. The six weeks we all spent together helped alleviate the crushing despair I felt. I started to feel like what Bruce said would be true after all: we were becoming a family. Alfred and I were sad to see Bruce leave for his second term at Princeton, and we had no way of knowing that would be the last time we would see Bruce as we knew him.

It was that early March when we heard Joe Chill would testify against Carmine Falcone.

The bell rang throughout the entire house. I was eager to greet the unknown guest, and I raced to beat Alfred to the door that Saturday. It was an entertaining game with a house that big, like a race, except I'd always win because Alfred said he didn't have my "youthful zeal." That took some of the fun out of it. When I ripped the door open, I didn't expect to see Rachel Dawes there.

"There's something—oh. Sorry. I'm looking for Alfred, can I speak with him? It's urgent."

Rachel's long brown hair was pulled back from her round face; it made her blue eyes look bigger. I remembered she was working in the district attorney's office, and I imagined more of a severe haircut, snappy business coat, pencil skirt, and high heels. Rachel didn't fit the bill of what Law & Order taught me to expect. Instead, she wore a sensible pair of dress-pants, flats, and a patterned blouse. Rachel's cheeks were flushed—I suspected that it was from the surprise of me being the one at the door and not from the little bit of winter left in the air.

She didn't recognize me, and I guess I couldn't blame her; I hadn't seen her since I was eight. I thought, bitterly, that it must have been strange to have a brown girl you don't know answering the door to a billionaire's home whom you hadn't visited in years. It was either that or she was still holding a grudge from that one time I spilled grape juice all over her new white dress at Bruce's birthday party and was choosing to be cold. I didn't hold it against her; I forgot I was related to Bruce most days too. I didn't belong at Wayne Manor.

"Miss Dawes, what a pleasant surprise." Alfred had a knack for approaching without a sound and I jumped at his voice. "Miri, let's get Miss Dawes out of the cold."

Rachel blanched at my nickname. "Miri? Oh, God, I hardly recognized you. You must be, what, twelve now?"

She was trying to smile, but I took it as a slight. I was fourteen then, and I felt very grown-up. Especially with Mom gone. I said nothing but let her through the door. My mood soured, and my mind turned to immature thoughts of finding some more grape juice. Alfred, being Alfred, could sense the tension in the air.
"Join me for some tea if you would, Miss Dawes. Do you still take it with one sugar?"

He led Rachel down a long hall, their heads bent down together like co-conspirators, and I stood by the door and waited until they went around the corner. Instead of going back upstairs to where my homework waited, I turned down another corridor. They were heading to the kitchen, and there was more than one path there.

Alfred was careful about what he discussed in front of me. Whenever my father came up on the news or Bruce didn't return my calls, he'd change the channel or distract me without my noticing. He was good at it, and I loved him for the effort he made. Alfred had taken Rachel to the kitchen because he knew she was there for something I shouldn't hear.

Rachel hadn't been to the Manor in years. When she and Bruce would meet, it was in Gotham and, even then, I knew he hadn't seen her in a long time. It was obvious to everyone that he loved her, but something was always in the way for Bruce. Something in him that he held back from everyone, even me.

"When is this meant to happen?" I heard Alfred ask from my vantage around the corner, next to the old servant's stairs.

"Two weeks from Wednesday. I wanted to tell you sooner, but we had to finalize the deal. They—they're going to ask Bruce to attend the hearing."

"It's best that I should tell him. This will be... difficult news for him. He'll want to know why. Can you tell me that much?"

Rachel sighed, and I easily imagined her rubbing her forehead in thought. "I'm only telling you this for now. Chill shared a cell with Falcone in Blackgate. He has information that could put Falcone away for a long time—it was too good of an opportunity to pass." I didn't have to see her face to tell that she wasn't convinced, and I could tell Alfred wasn't either.

Risking a glance into the kitchen, tendrils of steam rose up from the untouched floral china cups that sat on the island. Alfred was looking down, and Rachel stared at his face, pleading for understanding.

"I'll ring him tonight."

I wanted to run in and hug him.

"I'm sorry, Alfred. I thought you both deserved to hear it from me." He nodded once, and Rachel leaned over and gave Alfred a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving the way she came.

Bruce came home the day before the trial. I made sure to be at the door when he arrived, taking the day off school to be there. He gave me a brief, tight smile and then I seemed to disappear into the walls.

He looked taller, gaunt in the cheeks, and his eyes seemed void of the young man I knew. He scared me, seemed to forget I existed—looking through me and never at me those last two days. I only heard him speak when he was arguing with Alfred. When I would approach him, he would grunt in reply and stare out at nothing, and I was too timid to try anything else. He was pulled into his own little world, and I could sense the hate rolling off him.

"Give him time, Miriam. Master Bruce just needs a little more patience from all of us," Alfred said.

He left for the trial without me, opting for me to stay at home with Alfred. I sat at the top of the
stairs, like I would when I was little, and watched him leave the house with Rachel. She had made more of a show of talking with me that time around while she waited for him. Bruce walked out the door. That was one thing he always did: he always looked forward, never back at those he left behind. Gotham would remember that day as the biggest mystery and scandal in recent memory—where on earth did Bruce Wayne go?

_I remember that moment when he walked out the door and slammed it shut as the day Bruce Wayne, the one I knew, died._

I expect the men to throw me back in the small rusted room, or worse—back in the mess hall. Instead, I'm taken to a new level of the ship, one floor below the main deck, with walls covered in blue paint. It's well-maintained and much more livable than where I was before. The air smells clean and crisp, and the walls are coated with less rust and grime. There's nothing here to further shred my feet, and the arms dragging me along don't stop until we come to a long stretch of corridor. A red door sits at the end.

Vicky walks ahead and spins the wheel of the door, opening it with a gap-toothed grin. One of the men holding my arms shoves me towards the entrance, and I stumble over the threshold into a small bathroom. Turning swiftly, I stare at the group of men still standing in the hall. Vicky enters the small space with me, and I back up until my head smacks into the mirror. The angry red claw marks on his face stand out even more in the harsh light. They're raw and deep, covered with a clear sheen of ooze.

He moves his hand toward my head and I swat it away, not breaking eye contact with him. The smell of sweat, booze, and bleach make me want to gag. Faint traces of scars creep up his neck, just peeking up past the collar of his jacket. He drops his hand and chuckles, staring at the gaps in my blouse.

"Probably for the best, eh, love? Joker says you're off-limits for now, but we'll see how long that lasts." One of the other men snickers in the hall. "He gets bored easy, yeah? All I gotta do is wait my turn—"

"Get away from me. Unless you want both sides of your face to match," I snarl.

He says nothing. It isn't annoyance I see in his eyes. Not even amusement. No, it's a promise of something to come.

_How can any of it be worse than what they've already done?_

Vicky backs away, only giving me space an inch at a time. "Just wait, love. Soon, you'll just be another tally on my canvas. Don't you worry—I'll be the one to put you out of your misery. I'll try to be gentle about it." A wicked smile breaks out on his face and my surge of aggression drains out of me, replaced by something I've never felt in my entire life.

His threat is clear, and I don't know how long I can keep one psychopath from tearing me apart, never mind two. My legs visibly shake, and I realize it's naïve to think that they wouldn't come up with something more inventive. If there's one thing I took away from history class, it's that mankind has no shortage of imagination when it comes to inflicting suffering on others. My eyes flick down to my clothes and I try not to cry.

"C'mon, Zsasz. We got work to do," one of the other men says.

"You have thirty minutes," Vicky says before slamming the door shut in my face.
The wheel spins and lock. There's no way for me to open the door from the inside, but I push on the door anyway, trying to get it to budge.

Zsasz.

The name is familiar, but I can't place it.

Breathe, Miriam. Crying will get you nowhere.

The bathroom is old but clean. A small shower with a moth-eaten curtain stands at my right and the mirror and toilet on my left. A rush of blood and a sharp sting hit my cheeks when I see the dress hanging from the wall. Reaching out and touching the once-soft fabric in my hands, it feels like it was left out in the rain and dried against a hot sheet of metal. It doesn't even smell like me anymore —my lavender perfume replaced with the smell of cigarettes, sweat, and mildew.

Forcing my eyes away from the despondent dress and back at the shower, I find the brand of shampoo and body wash I use sitting along the shower's edge. Bile rises in my throat and I heave into the sink. The pounding headache and stress are enough to make me want to sleep for a week, but more lurid questions keep me alert.

Why does he have so much of my stuff? Why go through all the effort?

My thoughts wander to the possible outcomes lurking within the back of my mind.

None of these are helpful, Miri.

All I have to do is think of the bruises and my clothes and I vomit in the sink again.

Rinsing my mouth, careful not to swallow the water, I slowly start to take off my blood-soaked and tattered clothing. I try not to think about how my shirt only has three buttons left, how much blood coats the back, or how it sticks to my skin like velcro. Closing my eyes, I shut out the dark patterns of blue and purple swirling over my body, the smears of blood left behind by my feet.

What have they done to me?

My limbs feel heavy, weak, and I have no memory of the last time I ate. The thought of being able to stomach a meal seems unreal, and constant nausea makes my mouth salivate.

You'll be OK, Miri.

I'm lying to myself.

You'll feel better when you wash off the blood.

It takes a minute to figure out how the taps of the shower work, but when I finally get it to run, the water never reaches anything past a lukewarm temperature. The water has a rusted tinge to it, but it's better than nothing. When I finish stripping off my dirty skirt and ruined blouse, a realization makes my hands stop. My underwear is still intact; they're the only things not torn up. I think back to what the Joker said about me messing up Vicky's face, and the deep gouges trailing the length of it. Vicky's threat of violence to come clicks in my mind.

I still don't remember what happened after Parker and I were thrown in the van, but I must have done enough to...

I can't finish the thought, but I feel so relieved I could fall to my knees.
Breathe. You can get through this.

I try not to think too hard about why they want me clean and changed.

One problem at a time.

My skull burns at the contact of the water, and I reach back and probe the source of pain emanating from my head. Two large swollen masses throb at the pace of my pulse. A long cut, now scabbed over, reaches from the crown of my skull to the end of my neck. With care, I pull the matted hair away from the scab. The pain is intense, and I whimper at the sight of blood washing down my arms and legs. Shampoo sears painfully against my scalp, but I keep going, wanting to wash off the filth and dirt from me. I almost fall over when someone pounds on the door.

"Five minutes," a voice says.

Turning off the taps, I grab the small blue towel from the floor, drying off as fast I can. Putting my underwear back on and slipping the dress over my body, I ignore how it hangs looser around me than it did a month ago, and how its length stops well above my knee now.

What happened to the rest of the fabric?

Keeping my ring with me and twisting it around my finger, I jump back into a corner when the door opens. The shifty man from the mess hall stands in the entryway. He stares at me for a moment before tossing me a hairbrush, and I catch it just before it hits the ground.

"Hurry up," he says.

The man is tall and rail-thin with tight cornrows and his gaze is wild, eyes looking almost black and reflecting no light. His dark skin looks pale and sickly, nose crooked and bent at an odd angle, like it's been broken several times and never been set correctly. Something about the way he looks so… vacant makes me wonder if he was as crazy as the rest of them. It's like he's only seeing a shadow of me, eyes only tracking my outline but unable to register anything else.

Joker's personality seems to attract minds just as damaged as his own.

Nodding and trying to work the brush through my hair without crying out or wincing, I somehow manage to get the worst of the knots out. I give up on the rest of the black mass that reaches the middle of my back when the man starts into the tiny space.

"I—I'm done, OK?" I say, keeping my arms wrapped around myself. My wet hair and the invisible draft ripping through the halls leave me shaking and rubbing my arms for warmth. The man shakes his head and grabs my arm; his fingers press into the existing bruises, and I pull at his hand. "Stop, I'll come along. Let go—"

I bite down hard my tongue when his hand darts out and hits me across the face. He doesn't hit as hard as Vicky did, but it's still enough for me to slump over. The man tugs on my arm and forces me to walk along the corridor at a brisk pace.

"Shuddup. We're runnin' behind schedule." The man doesn't even sound angry, just irritated.

Bringing my free hand up and massaging the tender skin around my cheek, my fingers press around the side of my face, and slick drops of warm blood seep out of the existing cut across my cheekbone. It isn't long before we are back on the old, creaking staircase, and I pray this isn't the time the thing decides to collapse. At every screech in protest under our weight, I prepare for a sudden drop. The rough grates cause jabs of pain in my feet with each step, but the man walks
faster and hauls me down the stairs. Somehow, the old supports hold our weight as we descend and we go down several flights, getting close to what must be the lowest level of the ship.

Shrieking when my legs plunge into freezing water up to my ankles, my feet slide under the slimy floor as I struggle to find purchase. The man lets out a dry laugh and forges on, his grip tightening at my resistance. The smell of mildew, rot, and rust are at its worst down here. Only half-burned out fluorescents guide our way down the narrow halls. The swirling water looks black; I can't even see my toes in the shallow depths.

A door opens ahead, the hinges creaking in protest under the weight and years of neglect. The Joker's voice emanates through the dark and my hackles rise. Goosebumps erupt all over my body.

"Oh, you made it! I'm so thrilled. The party's just getting started."

I wish I fell into the damn river.

I'm afraid of the man holding my arm, but I'm more frightened of what will happen once I'm in the room.

You don't know the way out and Parker is here somewhere.

The room ahead acts like a vortex sucking me in. Any warmth left in my body seeps out through my feet, and the cold tendrils of the water act like spikes of ice in my veins. It takes all I have to not beg this man to let go of me.

He walks us through the door and around a corner. A lone light flickers from the ceiling, but its weak rays don't illuminate the entire room. All I see is an old chair with leather restraints, and I dig my heels in and resume my attempts to remove his hand from my arm. The man says nothing, and he grabs my shoulder with his free hand and forces me to sit in the chair. When I try to stand, I fall back down when another blow lands against my face.

"Careful, Lewis—we don't want to damage the merchandise. Well, any more than, ah, strictly necessary." The Joker steps out from the shadows and stands in front of me. He's ditched the long overcoat for a purple dinner jacket and green vest with a white daisy pinned on his lapel, and I shudder.

Daisies are my favourite flower.

The Joker seems taller than he did in the mess hall. His shoulders hunch and neck cranes forward, creating black pits where his eyes should be. The light reflects down the sharp edges of his cheekbones, highlighting the scars spiralling out from the corners of his mouth.

Lewis begins tightening the restraints around my arms before forcing my legs into the ones attached to the base of the chair. I'm shivering, and no amount of willpower I possess can make it stop. He gives the leather straps a final yank before stepping away.

"'St-Strictly necessary'? You sick, twisted fu—"

"Do you really wanna finish that sentence, Miri?" the Joker asks, cutting me off.

I don't hesitate. "You're a sick, twisted, fucking megalomaniac—"

He cuts me off with a loud peal of laughter, doubling over and clutching his knees, and I'm left with nothing to say. As quick as he was braying, he snaps up and inserts himself in my space faster than I can blink. His warm breath and small drops of spittle hit my face.
"Y'know, I'm starting to think you're a liar." He wags a finger at me, eyebrows raised and head cocked to the side. The Joker purses his lips as if he was a caricature of a disappointed parent. "After all we've shared, too."

'Shared'?

The Joker leans over until his face is level with mine, gripping my forearms with his hands and looking off at the ceiling. He starts chewing on his bottom lip, reopening the cut I left and sucking on the small drops of blood. I'm about to spit out a curse when he speaks again.

"You said—and I believe your exact words were—'I'll do whatever you want, Mr. J. Oh, just please leave my little boo alone!'" he says in an exaggerated falsetto, clapping his hands together and batting his eyelashes. The white makeup on his face almost glows in the light, and his dark eyes flash with the swinging bulb above our heads. The image is like something out of a comic, and I watch him in dismay as he drops the act and giggles.

"Y-You're crazy if you think—think for a minute—"

The Joker grabs my chin and shakes my head, silencing me with the pain the movement creates. Bringing his head closer until his lips are only a few inches away from mine, his eyes bore into me. "If I think what, hmm?"

He waits for an answer, but I stay quiet. He licks his lips again, and he's close enough that I can feel the movement. Dread coils in my stomach like a snake, tensing up before getting ready to smother me.

"As far as, uh, you're concerned—I own you. Unless, of course, your little friend's open season now. Hmm? In which case, things could get a lot more... interesting." The corners of his scarred mouth quirk up, and I focus on breathing through my nose and slowly shake my head. "Didn't think so. Who woulda thought you would be so... forgetful. You talk a big game, but we need to work on your follow-through. Bring him out," the Joker says, snapping his fingers twice. Water splashes in the distance; someone's struggling and groaning.

Parker's dragged in the room by Vicky like I was moments before. Half of Parker's face is a mass of purple, green, and yellow bruises. His pale skin highlights a pattern of knuckles imprinted on him, a large cut on his temple is half-scabbed over, and his hair is loose and stringy around his head. He's gagged and his arms are tied behind his back. He fights harder when he sees me, shaking his shoulders. Vicky stands there, gripping Parker by the neck, and leers at me. Vicky's just wearing a t-shirt now despite the cold, and dozens of intersecting scars reach from his wrists and disappear into the confines of the fabric. The scars on his neck look more prominent than they did in the bathroom.

They look like... tally marks.

I turn to ice and my head spins.

"You rudely interrupted our conversation about reaching a, ah... a resolution, of sorts," the Joker begins, turning and giving me a sympathetic smile.

I snap my attention from Parker and Vicky to the Joker as he twists quickly, landing a savage kick in the middle of Parker's chest. He falls over in the water and tries to curl into a ball. Joker kicks him again and laughs with a vicious glee that shakes my bones, and I feel desperate.

"I—I'm sorry! I get it—I understand! What do you want me to do? I—"
The Joker presses a finger against my lips and glares. Vicky pulls Parker out of the water by the hair and sits him up on his knees.

"The time for our mutual understanding is over, Miri. You broke your promise. Now we're doing things my way." Joker moves to stand behind me, putting his hands on my shoulders and sliding them down my arms, burying his face in my hair, close to my neck. "I'm a reasonable guy, but you're making this much more... difficult than it needs to be." His mouth hovers by my ear, and I scrunch my shoulder up, trying to move his face away, but he pinches my arm until I drop it.

Parker looks like he's barely managing to stay conscious, but his fury is palpable. He's kneeling in the cold water, and he can't keep his own head up straight. I know this is my fault. Just like last time.

"What... what do you want me—me to do?" I ask through my chattering. The Joker snorts out a laugh.

*This isn't real. It can't be.*

The Joker adjusts his position behind me, and Lewis leaves the room—returning soon after with an old video camera, the kind that still uses tapes. He sets it up on a tripod in front of me.

"Whatever I say." His voice drops an octave and rumbles deep in his throat.

"Why—why do you need a camera?" I whisper.

Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to.

"I don't think Batman got the, uh, message the first time 'round. You're going to help me get it through, hmm?" He gives my shoulders a squeeze.

Moving from behind the chair and straightening out my dress, he pulls on the cloth around my shoulders. Leaning down in front of me, he starts arranging my hair—it's still damp and growing rigid in the cold, but he continues fussing over it. Taking the glove off his right hand, Joker sticks his finger in his mouth and starts wiping at the cut across my face. I try to move away from him, but I'm held in place by the restraints. Every time he touches me, it feels like a hot flame pressed against my skin. Closing my eyes, I try to shut out the sensation of his bare skin on mine. Eventually, he pulls back and squints, turning his head and examining me. After a minute, he plucks the daisy from his jacket.

"Come here," he says when I jerk away from him, but I can't move far. He tucks the flower behind my ear, smiling again as he moves away with a satisfied hum.

"Tell the good people of Gotham your name," he says, leaning down and speaking in my ear.

I don't want to answer; I can't. My constricting throat won't let me. But I see Parker on the floor, his eyes glazing over.

Don't let Bruce and Alfred watch this.

It's the closest I've come to praying earnestly in my life, and I never take my eyes from Parker's face; our eyes stay glued to one another. He keeps shaking his head.

"Tell me, Miri, are you the sweetheart Gotham thinks you are?"

I think about the articles in the papers, and the stupid things I did up until last year. "No. No, I'm not." I'm quiet and plan on keeping my answers short.

Where is he going with this?"

"Ooh! So… honest."

The Joker lets go of my hair and moves out from behind me, toward the camera. He picks it up off the tripod and moves it closer until all I see is him standing in front of me with the camera pulled close to his face, smiling like he's filming a family vacation.

"Do you think you've done a lot to help the people of Gotham?"

"No, I haven't." Looking over at Parker, I focus on flexing my extremities, which seem to be going irreparably numb.

I don't want them to see me like this.

The Joker laughs, tears the camera away from my face, and focuses it on his.

"It's only been three days and ten people have died! How much longer are you gonna make me wait, Batman? All you have to do is take off your mask and show your face to the world—your real face—like me."

The camera shakes as he spins around the room with manic energy.

Wait, three days? How much don't I remember?

The Joker stops and walks back to me, turning the camera until it points at my face again. He puts his hand on my neck and rubs his thumb up and down my jugular.

"The problem with Gotham is that you all idolize the wrong people. Little Miri, here, has a nice face and a lot of money—and you all fall over yourselves to shower her with praise—but how well do you know any of these people, hmm? But, you all don't really care. You just tune in for the story, right? The hot gossip of the night! And, I gotta say, this is a juicy one." He wiggles his eyebrows, and a sick realization hits me.

He's going to kill me on camera.

Parker tries to yell through his gag. Vicky kicks him in the side and plants his foot on his back, leaning his weight on his leg as he fights to keep his head above the water.

"You all have to wait for a—a guy dressed as a bat to clean up your act! And now you're dying for these, uh, better citizens to raise you out of the mud you've plunged yourselves in. Well, embrace the monster you see in the mirror, Gotham. No amount of pretending is going to change that ugly face of yours. I know it. I can see it. It's all just so… crazy."
The pitch of his voice alternates from a high nasal pitch to low, rasping growls. I'm drawn in by his words, even as my stomach drops in horror. He twists around again and takes the camera away from my face and points it back at his.

"As long as we're going to keep up this little game, I'll just keep picking you all off… one by one." The sound of a metallic click fills the room.

The Joker's holding a knife in his hand. He belts out a loud, exaggerated string of laughter before coming toward me. I scream and snap my limbs against the bindings. They don't budge; my skin tears.

>This is it.

Shutting my eyes, I wait for the knife to plunge into me.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! A big thank you again to you all who have been reading and following along with the story.

Part of what's influencing me to write the flashbacks is a desire to explore the reactions and feelings someone would go through if they were close and dependent on Bruce. In Nolan's films, Rachel has a life of her own--goals that she works hard to accomplish and relationships she maintains outside her relationship with Bruce. Alfred cares a lot for Bruce, but he has a different sort of faith in him that transcends his worry for where Bruce is. We see him take Bruce's reappearance in stride, and only get really upset when he sees Bruce deteriorating in *The Dark Knight Rises*. I think having someone younger, from before any time Batman would have taken on proteges like Robin or Batgirl, is interesting because it leaves room for a more realistic vision of what it would do to a person to have someone like Bruce in their lives.

Those are just my thoughts, anyways. I'll see you all next weekend :)

Worry, anxiety, and agony turned into hate after Bruce was missing for three months. I didn't hate him, not yet—it was directed inwards, at the shortcomings I didn't know how to fix. But my anger was a metaphoric rock that I could lob at his imaginary being—a useful scapegoat to rage against—one that prevented me from accepting hard truths: I wasn't enough to keep Bruce around and nothing I did would bring him back.

But these weren't truths a fourteen-year-old would know or understand. In those first weeks, Alfred and I combed through the East coast, looking at any place a man like Bruce could hide. Everyone in Gotham knew Bruce’s face, so we deduced that it would be unlikely for him to hide, or disappear, there. The police still searched the rivers and bays of Gotham. They found bodies, just not Bruce's.

Alfred and I called everyone Bruce had ever spent time with, every distant relative on the Wayne family tree, and we had nothing to show for it. Those first few weeks were also filled with wild stories on the news: 'Billionaire Wayne seen at Scientology meeting in Los Angeles' or 'Bruce Wayne Sighting in the Polynesian Islands.' Those were my favourites. They were easier to accept than thinking he was dead. At first, anyway.

Bruce didn't reach out to us once. No signal, no shred of evidence that he was dead or alive. Just a familiar and unwanted limbo. The ordeal brought painful flashbacks of Mom in a crypt-keeper's basement while she waited for the ground to thaw enough for her to lay to rest. I was stuck again, floating in a space where I knew the walls were closing in. This time I didn't have a tether to ground me.

Alfred bore Bruce's absence largely in silence. "He's a big boy, Miri. He'll turn up, sooner or later," was the most I would get out of him in the beginning.

It was hard to comprehend how someone as famous and, well, rich as Bruce could drop off the edge of the world. When no body was found, Alfred told me once that he thought Bruce had escaped the cruelties of Gotham for a place where personal history and memory wouldn't follow. I don’t know if Alfred actually believed that or not, he refused to tell me otherwise. Another way for him to protect me from things I shouldn't know, even if it wasn't a choice he should make.

But Alfred had more battles than he could have anticipated. He was steeped in a legal debacle for guardianship over me. Mom named Bruce as my godfather in her will, thinking she wouldn’t have to make a stipulation that Alfred would need to be Bruce's back-up. Bruce's unknown status kyboshe a lot of things, but declaring Bruce dead was an unspoken taboo between us. Instead, we suffered ahead—Alfred filling out stacks of paperwork every week and me, a terrified teenager, dreading becoming a ward of the state.

He decided that there was no need to maintain the whole house when it was just the two of us, and we would close up the Manor over the summer. Shrinking our living area and shutting out the spaces I spent the most time with Bruce was a welcome idea. Alfred wanted it to be a summer project, and I only had two weeks of school left of my freshman year at Gotham Academy. Moving my room to the East Wing and cleaning seemed preferable to picking a partner for a summer reading project.

I was struggling with school and hated reading. Doing something with my hands seemed the better option—making something come to life after long hours of trial and error. Reading stale old books was boring compared to the breadth of information you could access online with the right
knowledge and some coding skills. I kept my grades high enough that they wouldn’t call in Alfred and hoped he wouldn’t look too hard at the year-end report card.

I was by no means an idiot, but school was tedious. Sitting still and listening to someone talk at me instead of with me was enough to shut my brain down before class even began. My problems with school, which I could overcome with longer study sessions, intensified that spring. I let my good habits die, retreating into myself and the reality I created where Bruce wasn’t part of my life, Mom was off on a European adventure, and my father was someone I was proud to know. Most days my visions settled on it just being me and Alfred: always had been, always would be.

I wanted to skip the last two weeks of class and show up for the exams. I thought it a better use of my time. Alfred thought otherwise. "Due diligence, prudence, and follow-through are skills all successful people must learn. That includes you." I silently cursed him for his sound advice and damned Bruce for not following it.

It was by accident that Parker and I became friends. Or a weird twist of luck.

Ms. Li was dividing the English class into pairs: with a partner, we would have to read one book a month over the summer based around a central subject and create something representing the three books and their main themes. Ms. Li was always coming up with ideas, and this was one of her better plans. I would have done fine with the project on my own, but the notion of completing it with a random partner was enough for me to reject the proposal outright. Despite my silent protest, Ms. Li put all our names in one of her large, flamboyant hats that she kept for theatre class and drew names. Parker and I were the last pair.

Like my other classmates, I knew Parker's face well but had never spoken with him. I saw him smiling and joking around with his friends on the soccer team the whole year and found it irritating how he always laughed the loudest. He hadn't had his growth spurt yet, so his cheeks were still round, his hair a short and respectable length, and his clothes muted. He was a couple of inches shorter than I was then, and he looked more boy-like than a kid on the cusp of sprouting into the tall, lanky man I know.

Parker didn't look impressed to be my partner at first. His nose does this funny thing when he's mad but doesn't want anyone to know. The tip wiggles a bit before twisting off to the right, like a rabbit. Little 'arnab I'd call him. But when our eyes met, the apprehension and distaste I felt faded. Parker looked like an earnest kid, honest and bright. Though he was loud, he didn't annoy me as much as the others. Trying not to let my expression give me away, I gave him a quick once-over and quirked an eyebrow. My power over my classmates was thinly-veiled hostility and broody silence. That kept them from intruding on the daydreams I passed as reality. I tried not to get my hopes up when he beamed at me. It seemed his reservations about having me as a partner vanished.

"You're Miriam, right?" Parker asked me.

He knew who I was, so I don't know why he asked. It was impossible not to know who was rich, important, or the subject of hot gossip in that school—Gotham Academy was as much about networking as it was learning. I gave him my best icy glare, certain that questions about Bruce would be the next thing he asked.

"You're the big-mouth soccer player, yeah?"

I was intending to be snarky, to shut down any invading questions before they even left his mouth. His mirthful laughter surprised me.
"That's me! Say, do you have any preferences for the books we read? I was really hoping to do something around The Haunting of Hill House. You live in that big house in the Palisades, right? We could totally do something about real-life hauntings and—"

I couldn't believe it, Parker was talking like a ten-year-old boy. His fervour and enthusiasm were peculiar to me. He was unfazed, or just didn't care, about anything I had done in the last year. He just kept talking as if we knew each other since we were kids, and my surprise was hard to hide. Parker was good at catching me off guard; it would be something he would hone over the years.

"Oh, sorry. Umma says I talk way too much. Am I talking too much? Do you have a book you want to read? I'm totally open to suggestions—"

"Woah, there. Who's Umma? Yeah, you do. And no, I don't care what we read." Giving short answers seemed like something his brain had a hard time computing.

"Wha—oh, right. Umma is my mom. You sure you don't have a book in mind? I don't mind choosing something you'd like."

"I don't like books." Parker looked properly horrified at that.

I choked on my own giggles at the look on his face. I could see why he did so well in theatre—you'd have thought I told him Manchester United was a terrible team. I saw someone say that to him before, and I tried not to laugh when he defended them so ardently.

"OK, listen, if this is going to work, then we have some serious work to do," he said, and then I truly let out a loud burst of laughter.

Parker and I spent almost the entire summer at the Manor. He was like a tick that wouldn't let go, but I didn't mind him. He was a jabber-mouth with too much energy, but he taught me to appreciate being around others again. I even liked the books he picked. The Haunting of Hill House, Dracula, and The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories became not only the basis of our project, but also the source of all our adventures.

Wayne Manor was old enough to have had its fair share of paranormal phenomena if you believed in that sort of thing, and Parker was dedicated to brushing up against the unexplainable. I liked believing in what I could see, and the thought of having forces or realities running parallel to ours was something I wouldn't convince myself to put stock into. But everything with Parker was a fun game, an adventure. I would look up old ghost stories and urban legends buried on the internet, and Parker would dig out the most random gadgets and repurpose them for "recording our findings," as he'd say.

Alfred held off closing the Manor entirely until the fall. There hadn't been so much laughter in the house since Bruce was a teen, and I don't think Alfred wanted his own false visions of happier days ahead to end either.

When school was a few weeks away, I had a crisis of conscience. I enjoyed the time I spent with Parker, and he was my first legitimate friend, but part of the safety that kept me functioning in school was the distance I maintained between myself and those around me. It was easier that way. No one could hurt me if I didn't let them in. Parker made me believe that things could be different, but I had believed in people before.

Parker had a knack for reading me. He never asked about Bruce, and I only volunteered bits of information at a time. He was the opposite of me. I knew all about his family: the heavy expectations of doing well and constantly proving himself—needing to be the best at everything, his
insecurities, embarrassing moments, times when he was afraid. Parker told me his secrets, his struggles with staying positive. In return, I skirted the truth and hid behind ambiguity. I wasn't a good friend; I didn't really know how to be one.

Parker still held on to our friendship, even when I grew distant right before the start of classes. He said something to me that I didn't know I was waiting to hear. Something that made me realize Parker wasn't someone I could leave behind.

"You don't have to disappear too, you know. If you open your eyes a little, you'd see—everything you need is here. It's all right here in front of you."

The pain I'm expecting never comes. I'm sobbing, heaving—bent over at the waist and crying uncontrollably. My ears ring, but I can still hear the crackling laughter echoing around the room. Words are spilling out of someone's mouth, a torrent of repeating nonsense.

"Stop... please stop..."

You're the one who's talking. Calm down. You have to breathe.

But I can't. Everything is black—I can't see—I don't know if a shroud's been pulled over my eyes or if this is what death feels like.

You're dead and you just don't know it yet.

I've never been this cold in my life.

"That wasn't so bad, hmm? You were perfect, too. Have you ever thought about acting?" Joker asks.

I didn't realize that he came up behind me, and I recoil so hard the chair almost falls over when his hand lands on my back. The life I felt leave me comes back like a clap of thunder. Every nerve feels alive and humming. Fury bubbles over and I can't stop the words hurtling out of my mouth.

"Keep your filthy hands away from me, you—you freak! You think you're some big tough guy? You're just a psychotic, cut-rate poser in a Hot Topic get-up. If you're going to kill me, then do it already, you fucking coward—"

A fist connects with my face. A burst of blood explodes in my mouth.

"Stupid bitch! No one talks to the boss like that," Lewis yells.

It feels like a hot brand is pressed against my face, and I look up just in time to see Lewis raise his hand again.

If I was dying, that wouldn't have hurt so bad.

Warm liquid fills my mouth, and I cringe and brace for another blow. Instead, I hear a gut-wrenching crack.

My eyes open with trepidation. Lewis' wrist is bent at an odd angle. He's sucking in harsh breaths that verge on screams. Joker mumbles something about 'damaging the merchandise' and 'Hot Topic' followed by something sounding like incredulity. I failed to notice he's moved out from around the chair. His head is tilted off to the side, gaze shifting from Lewis to me. It seems innocent and reasonable, curious. I know it's a lie.
"'Freak,' huh? 'Cut-rate poser.' That's just—not—just not a kind thing to say. Not. At. All."

His voice drops from a mock-ingratiating tone to a deep rumble, his eyelids droop, narrowing in anger. My blood rushes to my ears, muffling his voice. He starts laughing—but it's different, more forced. He draws out each breath until he's just speaking out the individual ha-ha's.

Lewis drops to the ground, cradling his hand. The clarity rage brought him moments before shrivels and dies. He looks like a scared boy—his mouth opening and closing, but he's struggling to form any words. Zsasz adjusts his stance, shifting between moving forward and going back closer to the safety of the wall.

"Boss, I just—"

"You know what really just tickles me?" Joker pulls up the knife still gripped in his hand. It's at least six inches long and wicked sharp. He's staring at it with something bordering on adoration, resting the end against his fingertip. "After all this time and effort, nothing seems to sink in with you people." The words come out in a snarl, his eyes rolling and upper lip curling.

The tension is thick enough that not even Zsasz moves. For the first time, I see something like fear flicker in his dark eyes. I try to catch Parker's gaze, but he's staring at me—at my arms. I look down and whimper. Little beads of blood leak out from under the leather and new, bright red starbursts embellish the white of my dress.

"Did they tell you what I did that night? To the guard."

The Joker's voice has changed—he's emphasizing the consonants, making them sound like snapping toothpicks in his mouth. I know who he's talking about. The man who died when he broke into the penthouse. The man whose face I can't even remember. But I don't know whom he's addressing—me or Lewis. The blood leaves my ears and sears my cheeks instead.

"Y'see, he wasn't even paying attention. All those big paychecks weren't gettin' you much," he says conspiratorially, staring at me from under his brows with his chin tilting towards his chest, as if we were sharing an inside joke. "It was easy. Too easy, really. He was reading some kiddie comic, not even watching the screens. I just had to... walk up behind him." He's talking quietly, but each word hammers in my ears.

I pull at the restraints, deepening the cuts I created. My nails dig into the wood arms so hard the splinters bite my skin.

"I start small at first. Just a quick jab to the larynx. That kept him quiet. I don't usually like that—I prefer screams to silence, y'know. But that didn't spoil my fun. No, no."

He circles behind Lewis, staring at me all the while. I'm reminded, somewhere in the back of my head, of a time when I visited the zoo and watched a python squeeze a rabbit to death.

"Have you ever seen a man trying to scream with a hole in his throat?" It's a playful whisper that turns me to stone.

The Joker raises his arm, still holding the knife. Lewis just stares ahead, I can see it coming. I don't know why Lewis won't move. He can see it too.

He stabs the knife in Lewis' throat, right below his Adam's apple. The knife leaves the opening quickly and Lewis curls in on himself, clutching his throat as a small stream of blood pours from him. Above the noise of Lewis thrashing in the water is the sound of something like air moving through wet pipes. I realize that Lewis is trying to scream.
There's nothing left in my stomach to throw up, but I still double-over and gag.

"Yeah, Lewis. Just like that." The Joker hooks his foot under Lewis' stomach and rolls him over to his back. He's laughing again. "What's that, Lewis? Cat got your, uh, tongue?" he sneers.

The sounds I make are beyond my control. I don't want to watch this, but part of me knows what's going to happen next. Like a bad movie, I can't tear my eyes away. The Joker looks back at his knife, grinning at the dripping blood on the blade.

"It's hard, hitting the right spot. You wanna miss the jugular. Don't wanna end the fun too soon, and you can't go too deep—that's when they start coughing up blood all over your new shirt. We don't want that." He bends down and hovers over Lewis, soaking his pants and the edge of his jacket in the water, "Not yet."

Lewis is still trying to speak, but he only succeeds in creating a wet slapping sound. The Joker moves Lewis' hands away from the wound, smiling like he just won a prize. It feels like I'm choking too—I can barely get enough air in my lungs.

"They always overreact about the small things, don't they?" he says to me as an aside. I can't even blink. Joker's knife moves down along Lewis' chest, pressing the tip against his stomach. It breaks through the fabric and punctures the skin. "The next step also requires a, uh… delicate touch. There's a soft spot, just below the breastbone. If you're not careful, you'll hit some important thing or another—but if you do it just right—"

I don't need to hear Lewis to know he's in agony. It sounds like air being sucked through a wet plastic bag. His terrified eyes stare at the Joker with the same adulation they did before, like he can't even register who's inflicting the pain. The Joker's eyes roll up until all I can see is white set against the black. He groans in a mix of pleasure and amusement.

The progress of the knife stops when a loud yelp tears out of me, like I need to make noise for Lewis, too. I don't care that I'm crying, I can't make myself watch anymore, but my eyes refuse to tear away from the look of bliss on the Joker's face. I can't even glance at Parker, can't acknowledge the truth in front of us. I can only be a passive spectator in a moment that haunts my waking eyes.

The Joker shakes his head as if he's coming out of a pleasant dream, his hair falling in front of his face in green stringy waves. He pulls out the knife with a wet schlick and wipes the blade against Lewis' shirt. Blood envelopes the rest of the fabric quickly. He raises himself from his position over Lewis and comes over to me, and I cower into the chair and close my eyes.

"Look at me, Miriam."

I don't like how he says my name, how he turns it into a form of insult, how he rolls the syllables around in his ruined mouth. It's worse than when he uses my nickname. I keep my eyes closed until I feel warm leather on my bare knee, gliding past the fabric of my dress and resting on my thigh. His grip is gentle, almost tender. The muscles that peek out from the purple gloves pulse with tension and restraint. His hands are big, and he doesn't need to apply pressure for me to know their strength. I stare at the Joker's hand and the trail of blood he leaves behind, willing it to go away. My breathing becomes shallow.

"Look at me."

My eyes snap up. His face is too close, his nose is almost touching mine. I can feel his breath on my face again, warming my skin.
"No more… please." I can only manage a whisper. I sound so pathetic, weak.

A smirk stretches the Joker's lips. I feel naked, like he can anticipate what I'm feeling before I know it myself.

It hurts to look in his eyes this long—the black pupils lead my mind to places I don't want to follow. He's become a demon from my most vivid nightmares. It's like he's trying to unravel me, strip me down. I feel like he's succeeding. What little composure I have left is evaporating.

*Look away, Miri. At anything else.*

I look down at his lips, at the spider-webbed scars. Staring at his ragged maw is a welcome reprieve until I see the tip of his tongue peek out and run around the edges of his mouth. Joker's hand, the one still holding the knife, cups the back of my head. The other starts to move along my thigh, back and forth, tracing some invisible pattern.

"I hope you're paying attention, Miri."

The Joker's voice mingles with Lewis' struggling gasps, creating a terrible timbre of moist hissing and throaty growls. He tilts his head back and forth, as if he was announcing an important proclamation. Every hair on my body rises in alarm.

"You see, like fools, I will not tolerate... insubordination. But, you're young—and I'm feeling very, ah… magnanimous."

His face splits into an awful grin.

"You have a lot to learn, and I'm gonna teach it to you."

I never thought I would be happy to see the room I woke up in a lifetime ago again.

I'm thrown into the damp space and the door slams behind me, extinguishing the light from the hall. All the pain my body was holding at bay comes crashing down on me, turning my knees to jelly. I just make it to the dirty mattress before my legs give out, and I vaguely notice the rough wool blanket next to me and don't bother questioning why it's there. I pull it around myself and cover every inch of exposed skin, ignoring how the bristled threads burrow into the cuts on my feet and arms.

*Crying won't help you now, Miri.*

That doesn't stop my head from aching and the hot tears pouring out of my swollen eyes.

*He's going to kill you. If he doesn't, then Zsasz will.*

I'm not sure which option I prefer.

It's dark out now. A few faint rays from some far-away light refract into the room. It's just enough that I can see the puffs of air leaving my lips. I bury my nose in the heavy fabric, trying to shiver feeling back into myself. It feels more like January than it does October. My body's still numb from the residual cold of being in the water.

*I don't know if I'll ever remember what it's like to be warm again.*

The one benefit of the cold is how it slows my overworked brain. It makes it easier not to focus on how Lewis rolled around like a beached fish, his fingers pressing the gaping wound in his throat.
closed. How the Joker ordered him to clean himself off and deliver the tape to the GCN. Or how willing Lewis was to do it, like an eager puppy hoping to please his master. His undying eagerness was more disturbing than the horrifying action against him was. I don't have to think about Joker's hands on me, or the glint I still can't decipher in his eyes, why I'm here in the first place.

Or, at least, I try my best not to.

Between the shaky breaths and hiccups, my teeth chatter so loud I almost miss the sound of my name. I stop shaking. The voice sounds like it's coming from inside the room, but it's faint, like a murmur. I wait for more noise, but now all I hear is my own ragged breathing.

You're hallucinating. You need sleep. And food.

"Miri," the voice says again.

I crush my face into the mouldy mattress.

You're alone and you're OK. You're alone and you're OK. You're alone and—

"Miriam, say something for Christ's sake." The voice is a little louder this time, and I risk looking out from my thin barrier of protection and scan the wall next to me. Where the wall meets the floor is a larger section of rust that's eaten through the painted metal. With effort, I move towards the gap, feeling apprehensive. The voice still doesn't sound familiar.

"Who—who's there?" I whisper. My eyes are too tired to adjust to the dark.

"Miri, it's Parker. Can't you see me?" The voice doesn't sound like Parker—not how I remember him. It's more throaty, deep and uncomposed.

I reach out my hand and rest it near the opening, but I keep it far enough away that whoever's on the other side can't grab it. My vision is slow to take in the hand that slips through the opening. In the dim light, I can see it belongs to a man. It's scraped up and bruised. I search along the wrist and find what I'm looking for—a small triangle tattoo. Parker and I had our first tattoos done after graduation. I unconsciously touch the spot on my ribs where I had mine done and cling to Parker's hand. I'm crying harder than I have since Mom died. His hand grips mine. It's warm, and I welcome the heat.

"What did they do to you, Parker?" I'm glad I can't see his face and the damage they've done.

"I—I'm fine. Just had a few thorough beatings from some of the meatheads. Nothing worse than what my brother's done." I don't believe him. From what I saw before, half his face is a swollen mess, and who knows what his chest looks like under his shirt. Parker isn't weak, but he has no muscle to protect himself. Remembering the sound he made when the Joker kicked him and the memories I refuse to recall are enough for me to sob. "Are you OK? You've been... out of it for the last couple of days."

I sniffle a few times before I can answer. "What do you mean?"

"When you weren't sleeping you were rambling, like you were drunk or something. You couldn't even stand up, and when that fucking creep Zsasz came in there, I..." He trails off. I know I heard his voice break at the end.

Maybe this is something I shouldn't know.

I ask anyway. "What happened? I can't remember anything since—since we were thrown in the
van."

Parker squeezes my hand and I return the pressure. "You—you completely lost it. Like you were a feral cat or something. Your head was bleeding a lot—I think he thought you wouldn't do anything when he..." I hear him swallow.

He doesn't need to say it, but he confirmed what I assumed.

Zsasz tried to rape me.

I'm glad I don't remember, that my mind has finally given me a gift.

"You were wailing on him and screaming. It took two guys to pull you off. That—that Joker guy dragged him out and—and—"

"You don't have to say anything." His voice was pained, but it's nothing compared to the constricting of my own heart. I don't have to see Parker's face to guess what it looks like. He was always the pacifist. He never did well with violence, even when it was fictional. I'm glad he can't see my face buried behind the blanket.

"No—no, you have to know. Joker just kept telling him not to touch his—his toys. He said they needed you for something, needed to wait for you to be coherent again."

My stomach rolls.

'I'm going to teach it to you...'

This really is some sort of sick game for him.

"Did... did they say what they want? Why they're keeping you here? If they just wanted me for the video, then why aren't we dead already?" I ask. His breath hitches. He begins whispering so quiet I have to press my ear closer to the freezing metal to hear him.

"They... they had me setting up computers, accessing hospital files. They're trying to get me to do massive data breaches from different companies and networks, and I don't have that kind of skill set... but they know you do."

"What do you mean?" It's a silly question. I know what he means.

"Ivan talked to someone. The Joker knows what you did four years ago, what we did. He knows you work with advanced tech for Bruce, and that you have access to a lot of things you shouldn't."

A new wave of nausea hits me like a cement truck.

You fucking idiot, Miriam. And you showed the Joker exactly what you could do at the bank.

I rip away from Parker and dig the heels of my hands into my eyes.

I wish I was dead. That would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.

"This is all my fault," I say. Parker tries to speak but I talk over him. "Look, the next time we're in a room together, I'll distract them. I'll claw their goddamn eyes out if I have to. Do you remember how they got us in, where the exit is? You have to run for it when I—"

"They're not going to stop, Miri. They know where my parents live. They know my niece's name. If I do anything, he said..." I can hear Parker crying. "He said they'd kill them. Cut them up.
And he said he would let that— that monster be alone with you and I can't—" He cuts himself off, his breath hitching and heaving.

Parker's right. For whatever reason, these men made sure to know our weak points. My mind goes back to my own family.

What would they do to Alfred and Bruce?

Thinking about it is enough to almost break me.

"If we are getting out of this, we have to do it together. The way I see it, we have three choices."

Parker sounds like he's recovered somewhat, and the faint feeling of hope fluttering in my chest is tempered by the knowledge of what happened the last time Parker said those words. "One: we do nothing. Do what they want and hope for the best." I can't help but snort at that. Parker lets out a strained chuckle. "Option two: we wait for an opportunity and run for our lives. Personally, I don't like that one very much."

"Neither do I."

Beyond the total deterioration of my body's ability to function in the cold, the knowledge that I'm probably going to die and that these men will make me suffer first, Parker's words make me cling to the jocular familiarity of him and I trying to hatch a plan together.

"That leaves option three."

Parker's hand stretches out from the gap, and I see a glimpse of silver metal.

The stun gun Lucius gave me.

Parker places it in my hand and folds my fingers around the rubber grip.

"How did you—"

"The Joker left me alone when he dragged you out of my room." Parker's voice sounds darker now. Murderous. "I saw where it fell. Thankfully, they weren't very thorough in their search." I can imagine the scornful look on his face.

"So, we fight then," I say. Some of the bravery I used to feel before all this happened returns.

"Hell yeah, we do. We have to put them down first, either permanently or long enough for the police to get to them. By my assessment, there are about ten charges in that thing before it's useless. We make it count, and we both get the hell out of here."

I shove the gun next to my thighs and try not to shriek at the feeling of the burning cold metal against my skin. Reaching out, I grab Parker's hand again.

"I promise, Parker. We're both getting out of this. No matter what, OK?"

I want this to be true so desperately. I won't let him down this time, I can't.

"OK."

We don't let go of one another as we wait out the night, and his presence next to mine is the only thing keeping me from losing myself entirely.
Batman had five hours to prepare for the meeting at the Bowery. Though the night before yielded results, there were too many questions left unanswered: Where was Miriam? What was the Joker planning? How was he managing to remain undetected amidst such a prolonged assault of brutal violence?

Batman still didn't know anything useful about the Joker, other than he was a sadistic maniac who carved his demonic visage on eight different people and had a penchant for murdering keepers of the law. But none of them were Miriam. He needed information, but most of all he needed an expanded arsenal. And he needed them before Commissioner Loeb's memorial parade tomorrow. He needed Lucius Fox.

The paparazzi and try-hard reporters who plagued Bruce Wayne had mostly disappeared, moving on to demand greater action from City Hall against the Joker. Many of his victims were police officers, and Gotham was about to descend into a city-wide panic. The Joker named Mayor Garcia next, and Batman was still unsure how to keep hundreds of people safe at once during an open-air memorial service. It was a massacre waiting to happen. There were talks of calling in the National Guard. Public demand only increased by the hour for Batman to turn himself in.

But he couldn't. Not yet.

Bruce had just met with Rachel. When the Joker took Miriam and started placing his hit list in the papers, Bruce insisted that Rachel stay with him. He failed to protect Miriam because he didn't keep her close, and he wouldn't make the same mistake again. Rachel wasn't happy about the arrangement, and she insisted she continue working with Harvey Dent at the DA's office, which was part of Bruce's worries. The Joker had tried blowing Dent sky-high only three days ago, so Bruce had taken the incentive to put a tracking device in Rachel's coat. It was mid-October, she wouldn't go far without it. Now he had to trust that Gordon, Rachel, and Dent would extract more information about the Joker from the men they had in custody. Whether they would live up to his trust was another matter entirely.

Bruce pulled up at Wayne Enterprises in his Murciélago, donning the face that would never feel like his own. The financial centre of Gotham remained untouched by the worst of the rising terror, but the streets stood empty. The food vendors that served much of the area were out of sight, the dying roar of the engine was the only sound; the boisterous crowds that tracked up and down the main street receded down to a trickle. Even in front of Wayne Tower, small clusters of employees sat out front, drinking coffee or smoking cigarettes. Despite the relative calm in the air, they were sticking together in groups. They didn't trust the still atmosphere either, not when there was so much hiding in the shadows.

The men and women in their smart business suits dropped their mouths at the sight of Bruce Wayne. It was a rare occasion if any of them saw him on a regular day at the company, seeing him at a time they assumed was filled with extreme personal turmoil was unexpected. Bruce dropped his shoulders and ignored them, much like he would any other day, and walked through the entrance. He could feel their eyes on him, on his casual attire and his bruised forearms. He kept his expression neutral, but there was no hiding the purple circles and dark look of frustration in his eyes.
Bruce let out a palpable sigh of relief when he entered the building. Lucius stood at the front desk, waiting for him. He looked haggard and thin. Miriam's disappearance and the onslaught of violence against the citizens of Gotham were taking its toll on the man. Lucius' usual spry smile was gone, and so was his usual bow-tie. They exchanged a solemn look between one another and walked in unison to the elevator. Bruce was eager to see what enhancements Lucius made to his suit and the new gear he developed. Batman needed an edge if he was going to succeed.

"How has reconnaissance been? Anything we can work with?" Lucius asked as they descended to the depths of Wayne Tower.

"I have a location. According to my source, it's supposed to be a large gathering—Joker's men and a group of unknowns. I need extra firepower, as it were."

"I can abide that, thankfully." Lucius quirked up a smile, but it was hollow.

It wasn't long before they reached the hidden treasure trove that allowed Batman to be as successful as he was. The vast expanse of the sub-basement floor greeted them, but it looked different to Bruce. More items were uncovered from their previous positions behind tarps, and a long line of items covered rows of tables. The air tickled Bruce's nose; all the displaced dust from Lucius' fervent activity played in the subtle breeze. Lucius walked to the closest cabinet, which was a dark navy with thick metal drawers, and began pulling out pieces of armour before handing them to Bruce.

"Kevlar-woven fibres and separating magnesium alloy plates. This will leave you more vulnerable to knives and gunfire where they separate, but it'll stop a bullet from a direct shot."

Bruce ran his palm over the smooth surface. The chest plate had slight ridges interwoven throughout and had more luster than his current suit. Touching the plates and picking up the armour, he found it to be significantly lighter, even with the metal enhancements. His brows shot up, and Lucius was quick to pick up on Bruce's reaction.

"Magnesium alloy is the lightest and strongest metal out there, Mr. Wayne. I still have more." Lucius walked to the first table. Batman's gauntlets sat spread out next to a series of sharpened blades. "These will fire out and bite into any target that gets too close. It responds to a trigger on the side of each wrist brace. There are four rows of teeth in each, with additional refills."

Bruce was still taking in the tech in front of him, but Lucius was eager to continue, picking up a strange-looking object. It had a similar grip to his grappling gun, but this had two pressurized components sitting atop the firing mechanism.

"A line-launcher. Aim the front and back at a solid target and it will shoot out a cable sturdy enough for you to hang onto. Careful though, it's maximum distance is sixty feet." Lucius set it down and picked up another item.

The new, glistening metal caught Bruce's attention towards the vast array of weapons. Several bolas, batarangs, EMP grenades, and a silver taser that looked like a handgun laid out in front of him.

"I'm going to need a bigger belt," Bruce said.

"Hell, I haven't even shown you the two main events, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce raised an eyebrow, and Lucius tossed him what looked like, from a distance, a long-barrel rifle, and he caught it with ease. The front of the weapon was longer and wider, and instead of a
barrel for bullets, Bruce was looking at a series of canisters glowing with blue light.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"Why, yes. That's a long-range EMP rifle. Anything with a perceptible electric current gets hit with that, it's done. Should prove helpful, I'd imagine."

"What's the other 'event'?' he asked.

A mischievous grin spread across Lucius' face.

"Well, I know it's more your style to beat men with your bare hands, but I cooked this up. Just in case." Bruce knew what that meant.

*Lucius has more fun with these projects than he lets on.*

Lucius handed Bruce two thick metal rods. They were about two feet in length, had rubber grips that formed to Bruce's hands perfectly, and possessed a comforting heft. Small switches were placed above the grips. When Bruce pressed them, the metal hissed to life with crackling electricity. The blue sparks gave a dangerous light to his expression. He had enough tech here to make several dozen men hurt. *Badly.*

"How long were you holding on to these, Lucius?"

There was no way he developed all these in just three days. He had to have been sitting on it for a while.

"I put them into development not long after you proved serious about taking down the city's organized crime. I knew it would come to an ugly culmination, I just never thought…" Lucius looked away from Bruce's face, off into the empty expanse of the basement. His mouth formed a hard line that deepened the grooves in his face. Bruce knew what he was going to say.

*No one thought it would come to this.*

"She's a good kid. Sure, she's made mistakes, but I—" Lucius shook his head and gave a mirthless chuckle.

"You find her in one piece, y'hear? I miss having her around to berate."

It was Bruce's turn to chuckle. "There's enough here to invade Quebec. I can—" He was interrupted by the loud and insistent shrill of his cellphone. Bruce looked down. *Rachel.* Giving an apologetic look to Lucius, he answered the call.

"Rachel, what's wrong? I thought—"

"*Bruce, are you near a TV right now? You need to turn on the GCN.*" Her tone of voice was enough to stop his heart. His mind was racing and he struggled to stay calm.

"What do you mean?"

"*It's Miriam.*" Bruce shot an alarmed look at Lucius.

"I'll call you back." Ending the call, both men half-sprinted towards the elevator. Lucius had a television in his office.

It couldn't have been more than a minute since Rachel's call, but each second felt like a thousand
lifetimes. They came through the entrance in Lucius' bookshelf and scrambled to turn on the screen. Mike Engel's placid face appeared, along with a thumbnail of what looked like a terrified Miriam.

"—GCN has only just received the video, along with a written threat that if it isn't played, three people will be murdered within the hour. In light of recent events, we take these threats seriously. Sensitive viewers be aware: these images are disturbing."

The video was grainy at first, unrefined. It cleared quickly, revealing Miriam strapped to a chair. If it wasn't for the violent bruises visible along her legs and arms and the cut along her cheek, Bruce would have thought she was heading out for a party. Her hair was curling in on itself, and she was wearing that dress she liked, the white one with all the flowers. She would wear it all the time on warmer days, but Bruce noticed that it was considerably shorter than he remembered. His eye twitched when he saw the daisy in her hair. It felt jarring when he noticed the Joker standing behind her. His green hair glowed under the proximity of the light, and he looked ghoulis, a wraith waiting on the edge of shadow.

Bruce fought down perilous thoughts. Thoughts about what he would like to do when he had his hands around the Joker's neck. But he couldn't fight the creeping imaginings of horror that permeated his mind: The images it conjured, unbidden, at the sight of the severity and placement of Miriam's bruising. At the strange possessiveness of this psychopath.

It took everything he had not to destroy the screen when he saw the Joker's hand wrapped in her hair. Or when Bruce looked at Miriam's eyes, bright green in the poor light, filled with a level of fear he hadn't seen since he rescued Rachel after she'd been poisoned with Scarecrow's toxin. When the Joker leaned in towards Miriam, saying something in her ear that Bruce wasn't capable of hearing, his blood was set ablaze.

"M-Miriam. Miriam Kane." Her voice cut through the chaos, clear as a bell. What he would have done to have her home.

Visions of the Joker choking on his own blood, Bruce squeezing the air out of his lungs, beating his face until it was nothing but a crushed husk of—

Detachment was the only thing that could salvage Bruce's mind. He was on the edge of making several decisions he would regret. Bruce wrestled with himself, with what every instinct, every impulse, was driving him to do—and the cool impartiality of Batman. The latter won out, filtering the experience through a distant third party.

Batman didn't need to hear the Joker's taunts towards Miriam. It was a ploy. An attempt to rouse the terror of Gotham's citizens. Gotham would think of Miriam's smiling face in the gossip columns, of the girl many went to school with, and the idea of Miriam—the idea of happy affluence, vicarious wish-fulfillment, and the natural feelings of envy. Having her there, trembling and crying, her body bruised and subject to such an open promise of violence would be enough to shake Gotham to its core. A piece clicked in place for Batman.

Would that be the only reason he'd need to do this?

No, there was another part he was missing. As Batman was beginning to realize, nothing was simple with the Joker.

"How much longer are you going to make me wait, Batman? All you have to do is take off your mask and show your face to the world—your real face—like me."
The Joker was focusing the camera on his own face, just like in the last video, making sure to highlight the scarred mouth. He was feeding off Miriam's reactions to him, and the reactions he knew this would illicit within the city. Batman analyzed the background, finding three others blurring with the erratic movements. When the camera spun back to Miriam, a sharp pain went through his chest, a powerful pull that made him feel heavy in his feet. She looked like the kid Bruce knew once, before he left. Frank and open, scared and vulnerable. Feelings he hadn't experienced in a long time buoyed up to the surface—shame and regret.

It seemed as quick as the video showed what might be his last look at Miriam, the camera twisted back to the Joker.

_He really can't resist showing his face. When I'm through with him, there'll be nothing left._

He understood intimately why some men were driven to murder and had successfully resisted it for years. He wouldn't kill the Joker, but he'd make the man wish he'd never been born.

"As long as we're going to keep up this little game, I'll just keep picking you all off... one by one."

The only sound in the room was echoing screams of alarm erupting from Miriam. They only saw the twisting distortion of Miriam as the camera spiraled into static. Neither man heard Mike Engel when he reappeared onscreen; his face was sweaty, whether from nervousness or excitement was unclear.

Lucius felt a cold sweat crawl down his back. He was alternating his gaze from the television screen to Bruce before the video ended. He could see Bruce's muscles spasming, tensing and jumping through the material of his long-sleeved shirt. Bruce suddenly stood completely still. Lucius didn't even see the miniscule movements of his chest rising and falling. Lucius felt sick and afraid for Miriam—afraid for the entire city. If the Joker was going to keep killing off cops, soon the only thing left to defend Gotham would be a man driven insane by grief.

"Lucius." It was more of a demand than a name. "I need you to get ready."

"Ready for what, exactly?" Bruce's entire demeanor changed, and it almost seemed unwise to say anything at all. Lucius was never intimidated by anyone, but the cold energy pouring from Bruce was enough to make him inch away from the man.

"The Joker wants to launch an assault on Gotham. It's time I met him in kind."

Before the recession hit, the Bowery used to be one of the most active commercial districts in Gotham. Some of Gotham's oldest shopping centres, banks, and historical sites were located there—until rival crime families like the Maronis' and Falcones' moved in. The entire neighbourhood descended into a popular battleground for shootouts, arms deals, and prostitution rings. Many of the old buildings stayed standing, but they were decayed from years of mismanagement and abuse. Old neon signs flickered across the various rooftops, highlighting businesses long gone and showering the dark streets in blinding hues. It was only a small distance north where Park Row lay ahead, and the Monarch Theatre stood in shambles.

Batman perched atop an old tower adjoined to the Natural History Museum. People had stopped coming years ago, and most of the exhibits were either stolen or relocated to the newer locations in Midtown and the city mainland. It was the perfect location to scout for his targets. The crescent moon was only a small sliver in the sky, and turbulent clouds enshrined the city in darkness. Though the city's skyline winked ahead, it wasn't enough to illuminate the streets below. Switching on his thermal vision, Batman waited. It didn't take long for his comms to intercept what he wanted.
to hear.

"Fuck, I'm freezing my balls off out here."

"Shaddup, Vinnie. No one wants to hear you bitch. Warren said to wait out here for Joker's guys to show up." The man spoke with a heavy Bronx accent and sounded more aggressive than the other man who spoke first.

The name Warren was familiar to Batman. Warren White was a known fence with low-level mob connections. He had a reputation for selling illicit materials in bulk. The meet up was happening much later than he thought it would. It was approaching 2:15 a.m. and the Joker's party was delayed in their arrival. Batman could feel the time slipping through his fingers. He needed to know where Miriam was. Where this demented freak was.

Patience, he reminded himself.

He needed to be logical. Batman couldn't afford to make any mistakes. Not if he wanted to succeed.

"I don't get why we need this prick anyway. I thought we was doing just fine without making deals with crazies like this."

"You fucking obtuse or somethin'? Boss told us to get this done. They give us the cash, we give them the shit in the back, and we're right as rain."

Batman pinpointed their location. There were five men standing back-to-back next to the old Stacked Deck club with a large black van parked next to them. The club was abandoned last year when Batman took out the managers and most of the Dimitrov family. The men were dressed in thick parkas and knitted hats, their semi-automatics peeked out of the waistband of their jeans.

Batman moved from his position and raced along the rooftops, jumping and gliding from one to the next in smooth arcs, until he was directly above the group, hiding in the dark. Their voices carried up the building and echoed through the empty street.

"The freak's not coming here, is he? I've heard stories. Fucked up stuff he does to his own guys, for Christ's sake. Like Gerry. You guys hear what happened to him?" This was met by silence, but Batman could see a small, but noticeable, drop in the men's body temperature.

"Don't talk about it, alright? Just keep an eye out for the Bat. We get our money and we get the fuck outta here." Now that Batman was closer, he could see that the man was taller and bulkier than the others. And he could also see how the others hid behind his shadow, deferring to him. It hadn't taken long for the Joker's reputation to proceed him, even among the criminal element.

Batman spotted a beat-up white van as it careened around the corner and stopped a few feet away from the group of men. Three men exited and walked up to the gathered group, holding two large duffel bags and TEC-9's. The men looked different from Warren's group. They were dressed in long-sleeved shirts and ripped jeans, despite the temperature sitting close to zero degrees Celsius. They sauntered up to Warren's group, their fingers never moving from their positions by the trigger. Warren's men inched their hands back to their own firearms.

"You have the stuff?" one of Joker's men asked. He was short, thin, and blonde. He didn't look any older than eighteen. Batman took pictures of each man and sent them remotely to Alfred.

"Yeah, but money upfront first. Just like our bosses agreed." The more sensible of Warren's men were taking charge, trying to ensure no one took a wild shot.
The blonde boy smiled, but even from above it looked empty. His eyes were focused, but his face seemed stiff. The boy took the two duffel bags and threw them at the feet of Warren's men.

"Load it up," the boy said, motioning to the white van. The large man stooped down and opened the bag to reveal stacks of rolled up twenty-dollar bills.

The remaining men opened the back of their own van, revealing large barrels and canisters. Batman took out his scope and zoomed in on the labels. Ammonium nitrate, methylammonium nitrate, RDX, and smaller refrigerated canisters of nitroglycerin. There was enough there to do some serious damage.

Batman couldn't believe the idiocy of these men. Did they not realize the lethality of the materials between them? Or how dangerous handling them was? Batman made a measured judgment call. He couldn't risk attacking them outright, he could cause a chain reaction that would take out the entire neighbourhood. No, even though it made his body shake in anger, he needed to wait and follow. Taking out the silver gun Lucius gave him that evening, he fired a small tracking device onto the roof of the white van.

The van was nearly loaded, and Warren's men were filing into their own vehicle. The blonde boy stood and watched with a new smile on his face. This one transformed his features into an ugly mask of hate. He gave Warren's men a two-finger salute and lobbed an object towards the vehicle.

Batman realized too late what it was.

No—

The van containing all five of Warren's men burst upwards in a shower of fire. Batman rushed to switch off his comms—the ear-piercing screams of both men and metal were deafening. Doors burst off their hinges, and money shot out of the openings like cannon fire. The van upturned on its side and crashed down with a loud thud. The white van, in the same fashion it arrived, sped off around the corner.

Batman had no choice but to follow. Firing his grappling gun, he shot out after the van. Batman would need backup to deal with the fiery slaughter behind him. He put in a call to Gordon as he kept pace along the rooftops with the van below.

These men will pay. They all will. Or I'll die trying.

Batman followed the men for hours. Swinging from building to building, navigating the narrow streets, and waiting for the men to return to their base of operations was a physical trial that lasted well into the early hours of the morning. He didn't want to admit it, but he was growing weary. His muscles were aching from the lack of sleep, the pent-up stress, and the untapped physical release was taking a toll. But he kept going, his determination greater than his exhaustion. He kept his mind on finding Miriam and stopping the Joker. There simply was no other option.

The sun was breaking through on the horizon, and the van pulled up along the eastern docks of Gotham. It was a salvage yard, but in the last twenty years it was a place where ships went to rot into the ocean and Gotham rivers. The men drove further along the pier and stopped at a dock where a small tug boat was tied. Batman looked ahead. A large freighter sat a half-mile out. It was less broken down than the others, and he could see activity on the upper deck.

A vengeful smile broke out on Batman's face, a plan of action formed in his mind.

Got you.
I'm sorry that I'm leaving you guys with another cliffhanger! But I promise that Batman is getting another feature chapter soon. I hope you keep checking back for more updates!

I owe another big thank you to everyone who is reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. It makes me really happy to see people are enjoying the story and my writing. Thank you again!
Parker and I stayed awake late into the night talking through how to get out of this mess. He remembered what floor the exit was on, where the loading dock was, and approximately how many men were roaming the ship. We tried to build our plan on that, but there's a lot that can go wrong.

"We hit Joker and Zsasz. If they're down, the rest will have no one to direct them," Parker said.

His plan will work. It has to. In a way, Zsasz is right. Who knew when the Joker would get bored of keeping me and Parker alive. We have to be gone before that happens. The stun gun is tied snugly to my thigh with a strip of my dress. Having it there restores some of my sense of security, but I don't want to sleep—I don't want to deal with what tomorrow will bring.

My body doesn't give me much choice. I fall into a fitful rest, and my dreams came in bursts of images and varying levels of coherence. I'm given another gift—I don't remember most of them, but I sleep deeply, my body caring more for rest than vigilance.

I'm somewhere between nightmares, dreams, and waking. I see Bruce and Alfred, standing just out of reach. Their faces are fuzzy; I can't make out their features clearly.

"Wake up."

His voice breaks through, adding red, glowing pupils to their faces. Their cheeks split open across the middle and curl up toward their eyes, revealing long rows of white teeth.

"Wakey-wakey, sleeping beauty," they say as their teeth fall out of their mouths.

My eyes snap open. The Joker is kneeling on either side of my waist, hovering enough so he only brushes against me. The half-light makes him look hazy and I have to blink a few times to realize this isn't part of the dream. His suit jacket is gone, and he's wearing just a gray shirt and green vest. Hair sticks to the sides of his head, black greasepaint runs down his cheeks, and his eyes are bloodshot. He has a childish grin on his face, and, judging by the light, dawn is almost here.

Patience is what will save you. Keep your strength for later.

I say nothing and try to calm my heart and the wild impulse to leave a carving of my own on his face.

"You're so cute when you sleep. Has anyone ever told you that? There's something about such open ah—defence-less-ness that just... gets me goin' in the morning, y'know?" he drawls.

He likes to talk with his hands, gesturing them emphatically—like he's putting on a show and needs to prove a point. Every time he opens his mouth he leans closer and closer to me. Trying to press myself further into the mattress, I freeze when I notice a familiar chain hanging around his neck. That's what Bruce gave me to hold Mom's ring.

Fear and fury fill me.

I need to get up and away from him.

My throat is dry, and I take a moment to clear it and choose my words carefully. I still remember what happened to Lewis, and what Parker and I need to do. I can't let my anger get the best of me.
"I'd like to sit up now, please," I say, making sure to keep my expression neutral. My voice is hoarse and quiet—scraping against my throat—and my head hurts more now than it did yesterday. A small grumble escapes my stomach as it clenches into a fist.

You need food and water, but how do you ask a psychopath for any of that?

He ignores me and begins humming a familiar tune. I remember hearing it play at a Halloween carnival in my senior year, and I hadn't thought about it in years, but the sound brings it all back like I'm there. It was playing out of these speakers at the merry-go-round, but instead of plastic galloping horses, they were replaced with dancing clowns caught mid-motion. They had red smiles and big white costumes that billowed out to form seats. You had to cling on to them as the ride spun faster and faster, with the song speeding up along with it. "Little Blue Man," it's called if I remember right.

One morning when I was out shopping
Though you'll find it hard to believe
A little blue man came out of the crowd
And timidly tugged at my sleeve

That song was stuck in my head for weeks afterward. Parker would sing "I wuv you" at me until I hit him hard enough to stop. He didn't know that the song seemed to echo through the Manor when I was alone, or how it would start up again when I'd wash my face at night and the bathroom mirror was pointed down the darkened hall.

"I wuv you!" He loved me, said the little blue man
And scared me right out of my wits

Joker picks up my arms from the tangles of the blanket and I try to stay limp as he twists them. For some reason, he's being gentle, but his bare hands are enough to brand my skin. He examines the red grooves left by the leather restraints from the day before. He won't meet my eye, and my discomfort deepens.

For weeks after that I was haunted
Though no one could see him but me
Right by my side was the little blue man
Wherever I happened to be

He traces his fingers over the cuts, just enough to skim the surface and make me shudder, his eyes never leaving the lines. They run up and down the marks like he's found an auspicious sign. He brings his nose closer to my skin and inhales. My stomach drops and I tense. The song never stops, and my fingers begin to twitch and curl into the beginnings of a fist. Every part of me is screaming to rip my arms away, grab the stun gun, and watch him writhe in agony.

One evening in wild desperation
I rushed to a rooftop in town
And over the side pushed the little blue man
Who sang to me all the way down

The humming ends before the song does, and I can't bring myself to remember the last verse.

"Tsk, this won't do. All your foolish, uh, rebellion isn't gettin' you very far. If you're not careful, all this is going to leave a mark." He tilts his head down to stare at me from underneath his quirked
brow. His mouth widens to show a licentious grin. Heat burns my cheeks. The thought of him
taking of me that way—or the way he keeps touching me—is enough for every instinct to scream
at me. "Wouldn't want that, would we?"

That's the problem: I'll never know what you really want.

The Joker stares like he's expecting an answer. Looking me in the eye, his expression darkens by
the second. I have no idea what to say.

'You're right, Mr. Joker. I was trying to hurt myself before, but I'll sit and be good, honest.'

Sarcasm won't help me. I settle for shaking my head and whispering, "No."

My answer seems to satisfy him. The Joker drops my arms and springs up from the mattress, and I
pull the blanket and my knees to my chest and back-up until I hit the metal wall. He stands by the
open door and glances down at me, snapping his fingers and Lewis, this time with a large bandage
strapped across his throat, appears at the edge of the door frame. His eyes stay down, and the blind
adoration I saw before is mixed with undiluted fear. I feel pity for him—for being so damaged that
he can still stand to be near the man who nearly killed him. The Joker grabs two bags from Lewis,
one dwarfing the other, and throws them at my feet.

"It's time to get up and smell the roses," he says in a tinny sing-song voice.

I don't move from my position against the wall, and I don't acknowledge the packages at my feet. I
have every intention of not moving from the spot until he leaves. It's a naive thought.

His smile dims. He squints and looks me up and down before letting out an exaggerated sigh and
walks back into the room. His eyes roll up to the ceiling as he digs his hand in his pants pocket. A
corner of his mouth pulls back into a frown like it's attached to a string; his chin drops down
towards his chest as he glances at me. There's nowhere for me to go, so I press my back into the
thick bolts in the wall. He pulls out a knife, this one smaller than before, but it's enough for me to
shake. He drops to his haunches next to me and tosses the knife from hand to hand.

"Look, I have some, um... errands to run. There's a big party happening soon and I have a, uh—"
He breaks off in a series of giggles. It shakes his whole chest to the point I think he's going to fall
over, the paint on his face forming deep lines as it scrunches up. As quickly as he started, he breaks
off with a smack of his lips. "I have a very, ahem, special gift for our precious Mayor." His tongue
drags across his bottom lip. I can't help but think of Commissioner Loeb and Judge Surillo and
what kind of surprises he had for them.

He stops tossing the knife and brings it up to my neck. The tip moves down from the bottom of my
jaw until it hits my collarbone. The sounds Lewis made yesterday is enough to bring me to the
verge of hyperventilating. He arranges his hair behind his ears, wets his lips, and leans forward. He
takes his time speaking, enunciating each word with care.

"While I'm gone, Vicky's going to babysit. Now, are you going to do what you're told, or do I need
to teach you a new lesson?" he asks, draping an arm over my knees. A sudden feeling of panic
floors me.

What if he finds the gun?

I pray to whatever divine being that's out there he doesn't decide to throw off the blanket and get
too close to my thighs again. The thought of it is enough to make bile rise in my throat.

"No—no, I—I'm sorry. I understand. I do. I—I'm just not feeling well and—"
"Do you want to make me angry?" he asks as if he was talking to a child. I shake my head, conscious of Zsasz's words about the Joker's moods. "Do you want me to hurt you?" The lids of his eyes droop, and I'm left with the distinct impression he wants to do just that.

"No," I whisper.

Joker's eyes narrow to slits and he lowers his chin again so he's glaring down at me. Irrational thoughts flood my mind, and I'm almost convinced he knows what Parker and I talked about last night. The weight of his arm on my legs, the knife pressing into me, and those black pits for eyes almost make me crumble and start begging for mercy now.

*Hold your nerve, Miriam. Use your goddamn brain. Breathe.*

I take in a slow breath and return his gaze. The sudden jerk of his body makes me flinch and rush to guard my face with my arms.

All I earn is a chuckle from him. "That's the *spirit*. Be good while I'm gone. I expect a lot from you, but I don't want to come *home* to any, uh, *surprises,*" he says. His big grin is back, and he exits the room in the time it takes me to start breathing normally again.

His choice of words makes me shudder. It's too reminiscent of some 1960's suburban cliché. If he thinks of this rotting hunk of floating scrap metal as a home, then I don't want to know what he thinks of me.

No purple or green overshadows the doorway, and a large weight lifts off me knowing Joker's gone. Lewis still stands at the edge of my vision, his skin and muted clothes blending in with the dark. His eyes are still cast downward, and now that the bags are gone I catch the silver gleam of the 9mm pistol sticking down the front of his jeans.

I move from my spot against the wall and open the smaller bag that the Joker threw. Inside are a Gatorade and sausage and egg sandwich. My mouth waters instantly. I abandon all sense of decorum and shove the sandwich in my mouth as fast as possible. My throat is too dry to swallow, so I open the Gatorade bottle and finish it in three gulps. It takes a minute for me not to choke, but food has never tasted so good. Searching the small bag for more, I'm disappointed and frustrated to find nothing else. Cursing, I open the larger bag and find more of my clothes. This time a couple pairs of leggings and a few old sweaters.

*No wonder I didn't notice these were missing, I haven't worn any of this in months.*

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. Moving closer to the door, careful to keep my dress covering the gun strapped to my leg, I go to close it when Lewis puts his hand on the gun and shakes his head. The cut on my cheek throbs at the memory of his fist connecting with my face.

"I… I just want to change."

Lewis tries to speak, but only wet rasping sounds come from his mouth. He looks down the hall and shakes his head again, slower this time. *No.*

I rub my hand against my forehead, trying to think. "Can you turn around at least then?" Lewis says nothing and turns his gaze back to me. "Please?" I try again.

This time he complies. Once I'm sure he won't move, I pull out the clothing and change faster than I ever have in my life. It takes me a moment to strap the stun gun to my stomach, and I find myself praying again it stays undiscovered long enough for Parker and me to use it. As I step out of the room to join Lewis, Zsasz walks down from the end of the hall. The growing dawn filtering
through the dirty windows highlights the markings on his bare arms. I'm hit with a sudden realization.

'Another tally on my canvas'...

I know where I've heard his name before. They called him the 'Bowery Butcher' before he went to Arkham last year. He killed seven girls before they caught him. All had their throats slit and had their blood drained before he'd pose their bodies in public spaces. It was an open secret that he did hits for the Mob, too. He was in Arkham for three months before most of the population escaped during Jonathan Crane's mad attack on Gotham. Falling back against the door, I nearly throw up my breakfast.

*That's where Joker's getting these guys. Most of them must be loose Arkham patients.*

I don't have much time to process this revelation before Zsasz is standing at the door, and I see him differently now. He seemed thin before, but now he looks wiry and agile. His eyes are empty, and his grown-out hair only hides what I should have noticed before—the marks creeping from the back of his neck and up to his scalp. The thick beard and full head of hair did a good job of making him almost unrecognizable. The cuts down his face are scabbed over now, and I can't help but marvel how I'm not dead yet.

"See something you like, love?" Zsasz asks, splaying out his arms in a wide arc.

It was a lot easier to have a smart mouth when I didn't remember what he did; when I didn't remember the pictures on the news of naked girls my age sitting at park benches and school playgrounds. It was all people would talk about on news forums for months. Averting my eyes, I say nothing. Zsasz doesn't like that. He grabs me by the arm and tosses me against the wall and I only just pull my arm up in time to keep my head from smacking into it.

"Move it. We've got a long day ahead of us." Zsasz sounds annoyed. I'm too afraid to look back at him, but his voice is different than before, tense and deep.

Lewis takes the lead in front and I follow close behind. The hall doesn't seem as dirty in the morning sun, but the cold floor sticks to the still-wet cuts on my feet. Without turning my head, I see the adjoining room next to mine is empty. Panic starts to rise again.

*Where's Parker?*

I jump when Zsasz speaks, sounding too close behind me. "You kids have it easy these days. The world hasn't seen such an explosion of technological industry in over three hundred years. So much tech, gear, and opportunity."

*What the hell is he talking about?*

"So much power at the tip of your fingers, and yet you lot sign away your life and privacy with a quick tap of a few buttons and ruin lives with a few keystrokes."

We're on the stairs, heading up. My feet are too numb to hit the steps in time and my ankles hit the metal edges as I attempt to stay upright. I try to speed up when his breath moves my hair. We only go up a few flights before we enter a new part of the ship.

*Where is Zsasz going with this?*

"That's where you come in. You and our friend," Zsasz says.
Lewis walks me into a room filled with monitors, computer hubs, and dozens of CAT 5 cables. Most of the tech looks older, it's bulky and elementary. The whirring of fans trying to keep the room cool is nearly deafening. Parker sits at one of two workstations, staring into space. It takes me a moment to notice the chain around his leg. His normally straight posture is slumped, and he looks dejected and lost. I don't see any of the strength I heard in his voice last night, and there are fresh bruises forming on his face and neck.

"You're going to be part of the revolution," Zsasz half-yells.

The room is boiling compared to the frigid cold below, and the sudden change pricks at my skin. A particularly large fan oscillates in a corner, trying, and failing, to bring down the heat. Both stations come with small stools bolted down and chains snaking out from the steel floor. A large sweating man with an M-16 and corded muscles stands inside the makeshift computer station, near the door. Zsasz jerks his head towards the exit. The man gives a dry chuckle and rolls his eyes. He exits the room with a wave and a shouted "have fun" that I almost miss over the noise.

I turn and face Zsasz. He's standing by the door, and he doesn't look happy.

"Listen—I don't know what you've heard, but I can't do what you think I can."

I don't even know why I think bluffing will get me out of this, Parker said they knew all about me already. Zsasz shifts from his place against the door frame and advances forward.

"That's funny. You came highly recommended by a good friend of mine. A guy down in Little Russia. We used to work together. He had so many interesting things to say about you, and you proved yourself so capable at the bank, didn't you?" I pale and give myself a mental kick. Some things really don't change at all.

Zsasz gives a dismissive wave about the room. "Our friend Parker set all this up. He just couldn't stop singing all about your talents when I was through. Joker was right about him. Squeals like a canary, that one."

I look at Parker. He's sitting still, but anger colours his cheeks. I know Zsasz is lying, any other answer wouldn't make sense.

"You've heard of GM, I assume?" It takes a minute for the name to register.

*Gotham Mingles*, an anonymous secret-sharing app. It's been around for a couple of years. People use the app for hookups, mostly. But I know there's a large following that uses it as a tool for bullying, buying drugs, and running escort services. I heard rumours there are a few hitmen for hire on there—this is Gotham after all, not a whole lot is outside the realm of possibility. The GCPD has been trying to shut it down ever since it started, but the company touts 'free speech' whenever it was brought to court. No one even knows who started the app.

"Yeah, why?"

"You're going to pull out some information for us. Who runs it, who uses it, private messages and everything of note ever posted."

Why would they want that type of information? The sheer amount of data would be insane.

If any of that information got out, illegal or not, people would lose their minds. The riots after Crane's attack last year nearly tore Gotham apart, who knows what they would do after a cyber attack this large—I need excuses. "Apps like this are heavily encrypted. I can't just access
information without time and preparation, it would take any team weeks just to find a back door. I'm not some black hat who can—"

"You're saying it can't be done?"

"Well, theoretically it can, but not under the conditions you're asking for. I would need weeks—"

"Oh, shut your fucking mouth." I flinch from Zsasz, but he shoots an arm out and grabs me by the throat. His teeth are clenched, and a vein throbs on his temple, pulsing all the way down his arm. "Is that all bitches like you do? Lie?"

My hands try to pry his from me. Black rings encroach on my vision.

"This has been fun, but I'm gettin' really pissed off. You've done nothing but stall, and if you won't do the work then what's the point of keeping you around, eh?" I try to speak, but he blocks my windpipe with his thumb. "You see, love, I've done some of my best work on rich sluts like you. If you're as useless as you say, then I don't think dear ol' Joker would deny me my fun. You little cunts are only good for one thing, frankly." My toes only brush against the ground.

"Stop it! You're killing her!"

Zsasz doesn't stop. He squeezes until I'm sure my head will burst, my arms too weak to tear his hands away. "Finally have something to say, eh, kid? Don't worry, pups like you don't do it for me. I'll get to you soon enough."

Zsasz's laughter pierces through the pain. I abandon my attempts to remove his hands. The pressure on my neck is enormous, but I manage to pull the stun gun away from my stomach. I fumble with the trigger when my body hits the ground. An ear-splitting boom and earth-shaking rumble drown out the struggling computers. The entire ship groans and shifts at a hard angle. Flashing red emergency lights flood the room. I cough violently and try to catch my breath. Familiar hands grip me by the shoulders and hoist me to my feet. Parker holds me upright as the ship tilts further on its side, and Zsasz looks around in panic.

"What the fu—"

Zsasz is cut off when the boat goes the other way, tipping so far that Parker and I lose our footing and slide down towards the door—but the chain on his leg stops him short. He reaches out for me before I fall through the opening, and I clench onto his hand with everything I have. Zsasz lands hard against the wall and is pelted with flying debris.

"Don't let go, Miri!" he yells over the screams of metal beating against metal.

Parker's face contorts with the effort of holding my weight. I scream when the towers of computer servers and monitors slam into the floor and hurtle towards us. One of the thick screens misses our heads by an inch, and his grasp loosens. A computer tower falls and smashes against Parker's ankle; the crack is loud enough to drown out all other noises. He screams and releases my arm just as the boat moves again, leaning back to the centre enough that I can findpurchase against the steel floor. He clasps his leg and groans.

"Hang on, Parker! Just—just hang on!" I need to find something to break the lock open. The ship gives a shuddering heave downwards and throws me back to the floor.

We're sinking. How the hell did this happen?!

I tear at the leg on one of the metal stools, now dangling precariously by a few bolts in the floor. I
can't get it to move.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I don't see anything else that could bend metal around me until I catch a glance at the stun gun still in my hand. "I'm sorry, Parker. This is going to hurt, but we're going to get this off, OK?"

Parker says nothing, but he clenches his teeth and nods. I bring down the butt of the gun on the locking mechanism twice before Parker starts to scream. I keep trying, bringing it down again and again. It barely even makes a dent. The sound of him in pain trumps my desperation, and another great shudder rips through the ship.

We're going to drown.

"Go, Miri. Just leave," Parker says through gritted teeth.

"No, you idiot. We made a promise. I'm not leaving, not like last time." I can hear the roaring of Gotham's rivers filling the floors beneath us. "I can't swim anyway, remember?" I force a laugh, but a knife twists in my heart.

A rough voice resonates behind me. "And you won't have to."

I spin around and see a towering figure in black. I'm so frightened I react on instinct—pointing the gun at the looming demon and pull the trigger in rapid succession. I miss every single shot.

After the blind panic subsides, I can see now that it's just a man, if Batman even counts as that. He stares at me holding the gun with a, from what I can tell, bemused expression. I can't help but think of how different he looks from the snapshots on the news. He seems much taller in person, more muscular. Part of me didn't think he was real, but his commanding presence is enough to instill a sense of calm. Batman is the person you want help from, if what they say about him is true.

Parker and I may make it after all.

"Move," Batman says.

I don't have time to even open my mouth before Batman is crouched down next to Parker. My eyes can't track his quick movements and within a second the chain around Parker's ankle drops to the ground. Batman picks him up with ease and props him against his side. Blood rushes to his ankle, making it swell like an overripe grape.

"Can you run?" Batman asks.

"I—I think so." I don't actually know if I can. The energy from the Gatorade and the sandwich is fading fast, and it still hurts to breathe. I shake as I stand to my feet, and I catch Batman staring at my neck. "I'll be fine, just get us out of here, yeah?"

The scowling expression engraved on his face and the firm, straight line of his mouth exudes a rage-filled aura. "We only have two minutes before this thing hits the bottom of the Gotham River," he says, nodding toward the door and we start to run as best we can.

I don't have the same adrenaline rush I did when I made a break for it yesterday, and Parker's trying to contain his shouts with every step. It's not until we get to the stairwell that the ship starts leaning again. It sounds like the ship is going through its death throes—like the roaring of a great beast. We rush up the stairs as water licks our heels, and I grip the railings as the boat tips almost completely upwards. Batman is further ahead of me, but he doubles back when he sees me struggling. Somehow Batman has the strength to yank Parker and me up the final set of stairs and
kick the door open. The hallway is almost at a complete vertical incline. Rushing water consumes the staircase.

"Whatever you do, don't let go," Batman says.

Parker's unconscious, the cuts along his face have reopened and blood covers most of his face. I know Batman's our only chance out of here, so I wrap my arms as best I can around his chest. Hanging onto him is like gripping a wall, and I pray my grasp holds. He doesn't smell like anything I expected him to, there's just a lingering scent of what reminds me of new sneakers. I blush when I realize that feeling up Batman wasn't bad enough, I had to smell him like a creep, too. Batman secures his grip around Parker and fires something up the hall. My faith in Batman starts to falter.

"What the hell was that suppose—" The three of us lurch upwards with an unexpected force that nearly breaks my grip, a cable whirring as we shoot upwards. The end of a hook attached itself to an opening that leads to the upper decks, where I almost fell the day before. Batman grasps the ledge.

"I need you to climb," he yells down at me.

He doesn't need to ask twice—using his body as a ladder, I grip his shoulders and reach for the ledge.

_Crossfit seems like a really good idea right now in hindsight._

My arms aren't used to holding my weight and they shake from exhaustion, but I claw at anything I can until my torso is over the edge. Breathing is more difficult than it should be. In the time it takes to raise myself to my knees, Batman is next to me again, wrapping an arm around my waist and holding me up with Parker. The ship is almost completely nose up, and I can see the piers and Gotham shoreline through thick tendrils of black smoke, but no boat's left to get us there. There's a group of men rowing away from the wreckage towards the docks and my breathing goes ragged.

_I can't swim—I can't swim and one of us is going to drown. It's going to be me and I'm going to die this time._

"Miriam, I need you to trust me." I whip my head to look at Batman. His voice has lost its edge, and I see his eyes for the first time—finding a familiar shade of warm brown. "Can you do that?" he asks.

_You're hallucinating. This is all a dream, you'll wake up and you'll be just fine. None of this is real._

I don't have time to nod my head before he launches us over the side of the boat. The Gotham River bites into us with an icy embrace, and I'm torn away from Batman and swirl downwards, caught in a current that drags me away from the surface. I try to kick my legs out, but I can't even tell which way is up. My lungs feel like they're about to burst. Something hard smacks into my head and back, all the air leaving my chest and water fills my mouth and throat as everything else fades.
I can't stop thinking about what I did.

Junior year was when things started to fall apart, and Bruce was long gone by then. Resentment rooted deep in my heart and turned into something ugly. Anger burned in me and it was more than I could stand.

Alfred tried to help; he signed me up for MMA classes after the second time I was suspended for attacking David Greene. I busted his face after he made some lewd joke about what I wore to a party the weekend before. Alfred wanted me to have a channel for my aggression, but it didn't work out the way he wanted. The classes just gave me the tools I needed to inflict more damage. My rage was good in rapid spurts, but when that burned up I was left feeling empty and hollow for days after.

Resentment made me mean. Mean to Alfred, to Parker, to my teachers. But I didn't see that, not until later. There are a lot of things I'm good at not thinking about until I'm laying in bed, staring at the ceiling and hoping that sleep will come and I can forget.

I never do.

"Is it done?" Beeker asked. This was before that night.

Nodding my head, I took a drag from my cigarette. I thought it made me look older, cool. I also enjoyed how much it pissed off Parker every time he saw me light up. Beeker and I were standing a couple blocks away from school, outside a popular café. It was early fall, but there was a frost in the air that would nip at any exposed skin. I was impatient to get home where it was warm. Fishing my hand into my wool coat, I pulled out a flash drive.

"All of McCallum's tests and answer sheets," I said.

Beeker and his friends were paying me to help them pass their finals, and I say 'help' generously. I didn't need the money, but it beat twiddling my thumbs at the Manor. There was only so much private school could offer in terms of entertainment, but even that was growing boring. It didn't take long to outpace the systems at school and I started to look for challenges elsewhere.

"Here. As agreed," Beeker said as he pulled out a small brown bag and handed it over. He adjusted his scarf, and a large part of me wanted to wring his neck with it. I opened the bag and checked the amount. Somewhere in the distance, the Gotham Clock Tower tolled, alerting the apathetic citizens of the seven o'clock hour.

Tommy Beeker was a good-looking guy. Tall, blonde, athletic, and an asshole. He was one of the school's best football players and had a natural confidence that kept his back straight and his chin high. But he, and a lot of other athletes, were usually up to no good. If it wasn't starting pseudo-fight clubs, it was suspected date-rape and minor drug dealing. Beeker didn't like me on the best of days—I think he didn't like girls who were smart—and I wasn't quiet about the fact I thought he was a knob. But he paid on time and didn't try to cheat me. What he did in his free time didn't concern me.

Our arrangement worked fine, at first.
“What’s your boyfriend doing here, Kane?” Beeker said, his lip curled like he just smelled something nastier than what came out of his own gym bag.

I stiffened. Parker wasn’t my boyfriend. We were friends, some might have said we were attached at the hip, but I never let it go beyond that. I stopped letting Parker come to the Manor that summer, and I spaced out our hang-outs until I was avoiding him altogether. Instead, I spent more of my time in front of my computer screen in the solitude and safety of my room. I turned to look down the end of the street. Parker was standing on the corner, fuming.

"Don’t worry your pretty head about it, Beeker. I’ll see you around." I walked away before Beeker could reply, grabbed Parker by the arm, and walked us both around the corner. He was rigid, and I didn’t fail to notice the drawback of his body when I touched him.

"Miriam, were you doing what I think you were?" Parker asked. He doesn’t use my full name often, only when I’ve done something stupid. He sounded like dad’s do on TV. I shook my head and laughed.

"No, Beeker and I aren’t dating, Dad—"

"That’s not what I meant, and you know it," Parker said as he pulled me to a stop. I shrank back when I saw the scowl on his face. "What you’re doing is so, so, stupid, Miriam. You’re playing with fire. If you get caught you’ll be expelled, not to mention charged—"

"No one cares about what I do, ‘arnab. I’m not hurting anyone."

"Not yet, anyway. And cut the shit, I care about what you do. Me. And you’re forgetting about Alfred." Parker smacked my arm when I rolled my eyes. I tried not to laugh when I saw his nose twitch.

I didn’t think what I was doing was a big deal—I was just trying out a few new skills and getting paid for it. It wasn’t like the big-wigs could tell someone was infiltrating their servers to begin with. At first, it was just me working around the firewalls to look at restricted websites on school computers, and then it turned into something else when I started going through the teacher’s files on the shared server. Like me changing my grades when I couldn’t be bothered with class, or anyone else’s who’d pay enough. Even that was starting to become boring, and I started fooling around with Wayne Enterprise’s systems. Those posed the type of challenge I was craving. I really wasn’t hurting anyone —that’s what I told myself, anyway.

"What could happen, Parker? If this is as bad as it’ll get, then I’m not too worried about the rest."

"This isn’t a joke, Miriam. Someone could get hurt—including you." I was tired of listening to him lecture me. I huffed like a petulant child and tried to walk away. Parker grabbed me by the arm and held me in place, and I glared at him until he let go.

“What is wrong with you? I don’t know what’s happened to you this last year, but I’m starting to think you’ll never change. Yeah, your mom’s dead, Bruce is fuck-knows-where, and your dad is scum—but that doesn’t mean that you get to act like a moron and not think anything bad will happen. You’re smart, Miri. Smart enough to know better. But you’re selfish, too. You need to grow up."

"You don’t know anything about me, Parker. I’ll be fine—I always have been," I spat. My temper flared at the sound of Bruce’s name. I wanted someone to hurt just as much as I was, and I didn’t stop the stupidity from flowing out of my mouth. "Why are you here, anyway? No one asked you."
"Go play Jiminy fucking Cricket for someone else. I don't need you here. Nobody does." I felt a rush of blood in my cheeks when I saw his eyes well up with tears.

Parker was good at hiding it, but I knew he was battling depression, had been since he was a kid. It was one of the first things he told me about himself. We were spending the night in the basement of the Manor, and Parker wanted to see if we'd experience any 'paranormal phenomena,' as he called it. I couldn't sleep, but I didn't want to tell Parker it was because I was scared. He knew, but we both pretended he didn't, so we stayed up the whole night talking. We shared things we would never tell anyone else and made promises I thought I would never break.

All those promises we made meant nothing to me at that moment. The words came out of my mouth like vomit, and I couldn't take them back. I was being cruel, and I tried convincing myself I didn't care.

I should have cared a lot more.

"Is that what you really want? For me to go away?" he asked.

"Yes." The only noise between us was the whistling of air down the street and the faint murmuring of voices drifting out from the café.

I had to look away when a tear spilled over and rolled down his cheek. He swiped at his face and looked away too. When I peeked back at his face, I could see his jaw clenching and the tendons in his cheeks jumping up and down. I knew he was chewing on his words, deciding how far he wanted to go.

"You know, Miriam, for how much you hate your dad you sure aren't turning out to be much different."

I was stunned. Being compared to my father was the worst insult he could have ever lobbed at me, and he knew it. Walking away, I said nothing. I didn't turn back to see if he was still standing there, or if he looked back at me as I stormed off. I didn't even have a reason to say what I did to him, but some insane urge wanted to make all of it worse. I waved my middle finger in the air and walked from him in silence, like a punk-ass kid.

A few blocks away Alfred was waiting to pick me up.

"How was studying with Mr. Kwan, Miri?" Alfred asked as I ducked into the backseat of his favourite car, his Rolls Royce Phantom.

"It was fine," I said. Alfred looked at me from over his shoulder as he merged in with on-coming traffic. I could tell he didn't believe me, so I stared out the window to hide my expression.

"It may be none of my business, Miri, but good friends are hard to find. And if you're not careful, you won't be left with many." He sounded sad. His British accent leant well to making me feel guilty. Alfred was the one the school would call in for my 'anti-social' behaviour. He knew Parker was my only friend, and he bore my moods with patience, which was more than I deserved. I wanted him to be angry with me, to smack a sense of decency into me when I wasn't willing to do it myself.

"You're right, Alfred. It's none of your business."

We rode back in silence all the way to the Manor. What Parker said made me livid. Furious. What
right did he have to say that to me? Parker didn't know anything. He might know facts about my life, but he certainly didn't know enough to judge me, I thought. But Alfred did. He knew me better than anyone, and I felt like a massive disappointment to the two people who mattered most.

I knew, deep down, that both Parker and Alfred were right. I got away with too much, most people gave me a free pass because of Bruce and the possibility of money attached to his name. I was complicit and exploited people's leniency, and I knew I just wrecked my friendship with Parker and was driving Alfred away. I just couldn't bring my self to care.

I waited outside an old brick building. It was only a five-minute walk to the core of the Bowery district. For the sixteen years I'd lived in Gotham, I had never been there before. From what Mom told me, it used to be the place to be. All the fancy artisans, museums, and high-end restaurants were there. That was before the recession gutted the place, leaving nothing but scraps for gangs to tear each other apart for.

Some of the upper windows of the old warehouse had been smashed, and bright lights strobed from inside and the heavy bass shook the building. I recognized the beat: "Sin City" was an apt song to play in that part of town. The only sign on the building read "The Stacked Deck" in half-lit neon throbs. I'd never heard of the place before, but I knew if it was in the east side of the city, it meant trouble.

A bald, bulky man in a fur-lined jacket stood at the caged metal door that served as an entrance to the club. He looked at me once and ignored my presence. Occasionally groups of two and three would come by and be waved inside. I kept my distance from the door and lit up a cigarette, letting the flame of my silver lighter warm my fingertips. Rubbing my hands together, I looked down the streets, scanning for Beeker, or anyone else, coming up the street.

On my way there, I passed groups of people who looked like they were living rough. There weren't many homeless people around school, and it was easy to forget about the scores of addicts and mentally ill filling the streets outside of Midtown. Dozens of seedy bars and strip clubs filled the old historic buildings. All of this was something you heard about on the news and filed away in the 'irrelevant information' folder until it hits you straight in the face. It was easy when you didn't live in the festering wound consuming Gotham every day. As I stood there, it seemed like Gotham didn't want me to forget anything, but to bear witness to the rot that had always been all around me.

I felt the gazes of the small groups of people huddled in boarded up doorways and the groups of people smoking outside the different bars as I passed, assessing if I had anything of value. Slipping my rings off my fingers, I left them tucked in my jacket pocket. I kept my head down, jacket collar up, and made my hair cover my face.

I put a lot of weight in the fight training I was doing. I thought it was my ticket to keep me out of trouble, but my skills were largely untested in a real combat environment and I had no idea of knowing if they would be effective. Even through all my arrogance, I was smart enough to feel wary as I stood there in the dark. Sure, I could throw a punch, but that wouldn't save me if someone had a gun. I tried not to think of Aunt Martha and Uncle Tom.

Gotham had not been kind to its citizens, but I didn't think about that then—not until the Narrows tore itself apart in a mass psychotic episode four years later, and hundreds of people were left to fend for themselves and after the doctors had declared them 'untreatable.' "The symptoms will worsen before they get better." That's what the doctor's had said about Mom's cancer. In a way, it applied to what happened in Gotham when the Batman came. The phrase didn't prove true for Mom, and I suspected it wouldn't for Gotham either.
Beeker and his friends were late. Looking at my phone, I saw it was well past midnight. I lied to Alfred and told him that I was at Parker's. We hadn't spoken since the start of the fall term a month ago. Instead, I used the cash I had accumulated and put myself up in a hotel for the night. I felt bad about lying to Alfred, but the rush of a bigger job was something I couldn't pass up.

Looking down the street again and seeing no one, I pushed myself away from the building and started walking back the way I came when the metal door slammed open and smacked into the brick wall. Murmured voices came from behind me and I turned to look at the source.

Beeker was standing with Leon, one of his friends who looked like a shorter, dumber, clone of him. They didn't seem to know what to do with their hands, they kept stuffing them in and out of their coat pockets. A man I didn't recognize followed close behind. He wore a dark pair of sunglasses, despite the time of night.

Staying still, I considered my options. I could slip away then and pretend I never thought about doing something so blatantly idiotic, or I could grow a pair and approach the group with as much bravado as possible. Before I had time to think, Beeker saw me and waved me over. I chose bravado.

I lifted my chin and joined the group. Beeker looked nervous, his eyes darted all over and he kept running his arms up and down his sides. His eyes were red and bugged out of focus. I didn't like the look of the man next to him, and the feeling grew when Beeker smiled at my approach.

That should have been the first red flag: Beeker never smiled when he saw me.

"Miriam. You made it," Beeker said.

That should have been the second warning: Beeker never called me by my first name.

I nodded in greeting and mirrored the body posture of the men in front of me, trying to seem bigger than I was. Being the smallest person there made me uncomfortable. Taking a long drag of my cigarette, I tried not to choke. I would never admit this to anyone, but I didn't know how to properly inhale the smoke. I usually gave myself a headache and an upset stomach.

The man with Beeker turned to me and gave me a once-over, but it didn't feel creepy. Rather, it was a quick assessment. I had recently cut my hair to my jaw to seem older, and I was wearing a knee-length wool coat and tall boots. I saw Sofia Boutella wear something similar once in a magazine, and she had the type of sophistication I wanted to emulate, but I probably looked like a kid who raided her mom's closet—which wasn't entirely far from the truth.

The man raised his eyebrows and motioned to me but addressed Beeker.

"Come on, she is your hacker? You are kidding, no? Boss won't like that." The man spoke with a heavy Russian accent and thick mumbling. His teeth were sporadically covered in silver and gold. I almost spat out an insult, but I bit my tongue. The Russian's hand and knuckle markings screamed 'prison tattoos,' and Beeker and Leon were high out of their minds, likely.

"I promise she's as good as I say. Quiet too, right, Miriam?" Beeker spoke quickly, and he was sweating. He and I both knew that was a lie—one of Beeker's most frequent complaints about me was my smart-mouth.

A bad feeling was starting to grow in my gut, but I ignored it, out of some stupid sense of pride. I opened my mouth to answer when the Russian addressed me.

"Inside, then. Mr. Dimitrov is not patient man." He nodded his head towards the door where the
bouncer stood guard. The men spoke together in Russian before the bouncer waved us inside with a frown.

Bodies were packed inside from wall-to-wall, gyrating together in one massive movement to Future blaring out of the speakers. Blinding beams of red, blue, and green alternated from the spotlights above, turning the partiers into spectrals of black against a strobing sea of primary colours. Dance cages hung from the ceilings above the crowd, holding girls in lingerie and glowing bars. Women in small dresses and high heels threw their hands in the air and swayed their heads to the beat, their hair sticking to the sweat on their backs and faces. The men who were drunk enough danced with them, and those who weren’t stayed along the edges in velvet booths, watching the dancers with hungry eyes. The flashing lights and misty atmosphere gave the scene a dream-like feel. I looked at them all with envy. I couldn’t let go of my sense of control long enough to be uninhibited and dance. I had never been completely drunk before, not enough to lose control, and the idea of it terrified me.

Glancing at Beeker’s face, I saw that he wasn’t any different from the other men who were watching. He had an empty smile, and the look in his eyes was carnivorous. When the Russian touched my arm, I was torn away from my thoughts. I couldn’t hear what he was shouting over the noise, but he nodded towards a door that almost blended in with the brick. I followed along, wanting to get away from the music and Beeker. The Russian swiped a keycard and swung open the heavy door, and I was disappointed to see Leon and Beeker following behind. I had enough sense to feel afraid, but not enough to walk away.

When the door shut behind us, only the dull throbbing of the bass was any indicator of the party on the other side. The Russian took us upstairs to a private lounge. A muscular man sat on a leather couch surrounded by several women and men in suits. Mahogany pool tables covered in green velvet, Soviet Union era memorabilia, and expensive-looking artwork depicting shrouded landscapes and holy figures filled the space. I felt like Beeker then: I didn’t know what to do with my hands. My nervousness made me nauseous and these people were adults, not kids playing at being one. The Russian man waited for the conversation to quieten.

The muscular man sitting in the centre of the couch was wearing a red shirt that was unbuttoned far down enough to show his heavily tattooed, and hairy, chest. Shapes of birds, skulls, and saints peeked out from the opening. The markings spread out to encompass his hands as well, so much so that the skin underneath took on a blueish hue. He wore a pendant with some sort of animal’s tooth, his hair was slicked back, and he sported a thick goatee. He acknowledged us with a flick of his eyes and the conversation around him died.

So this is Ivan Dimitrov, I thought. He was more terrifying in person than he was on TV.

“Sergei, you are being rude. Take our guest’s coats, da?” Ivan spoke with a heavier accent than the man wearing the sunglasses. He spoke slowly and took his time to enunciate before speaking.

The man wearing the sunglasses, Sergei, hurried to take my coat. I was glad that I wore an oversized sweater dress, having my body hidden helped me feel secure. I knew who Beeker wanted me to meet, and I didn’t put a lot of stock into GCN’s crime bulletin, but I also wasn’t a complete fool. Most of the time the Dimitrov family was fighting with the Maroni’s, and both had a reputation for not caring who got caught in the crossfire. The city was dying, and it didn’t seem to matter who you talked to, everyone had their secrets and problems. Some were just better at hiding it than others.

“You look like kid,” Ivan said, looking me up and down, just like his lackey had. He was frowning.

Yeah, well, you look like a geezer. I didn’t say that, though. I just really wanted to.
“How old are you?” Ivan seemed to think better of his question and flapped his hand, motioning me to sit at an empty chair in front of him.

“If you do what he says you can,” Ivan said, motioning to Beeker, “then how old you are no matter—even if you are related to a Wayne.” I glanced at Beeker, unsure of what he told this man. I didn’t like that Ivan knew who I was. There was too much he could do with just with a name, I knew that well. Ivan stared at me intently, and I tried not to squirm in my seat.

“Sergei get another drink—and juice, or something, for the ditya.”

I can’t speak Russian, but the word felt like an insult. I tried to let it go with a slow exhale. I was sixteen, but I didn’t know if treating me like an adult would help or work against me there.

Beeker and Leon stood like awkward stiffs by the stairs. It was strange seeing Beeker look so uncertain. He was usually over-confident to a fault. Seeing him act so feeble threw me off. He wouldn't look at me, and Leon kept his eyes trained on some far away spot ahead of him. They were both acting weird.

“I am Ivan Dimitrov, and you are Miriam Kane, da?” he said as he stuck a hand in his jacket and pulled out a cigar. It was a rhetorical question. Ivan wanted me to know who was in charge, and we both knew it wasn't me. He put the cigar between his lips and one of the women next to him rushed to light it.

“That's right,” I said. The people sitting around Ivan sniggered and gave me appraising looks. I tried to keep my chin high, but a sudden feeling of embarrassment came over me. It was becoming very clear I did not belong.

“Miriam. That is Hebrew name,” he said, taking a heavy drag from the cigar. He didn't mean it as a question. A look of distaste crossed over his features. Sergei handed Ivan a glass of whiskey and me a glass of what looked like cranberry juice. I didn't plan on swallowing any of it, but I played at taking small sips.

“It's also Aramaic. My mom liked the other spelling more. My father is Algerian.” Anti-Semitism wasn't something I expected when I agreed to the meeting. Almost no one knew that my father had a crime ring of his own, and I thought it was best to keep any other information about him vague. He also didn’t need to know that my mom was, in fact, Jewish on my grandmother's side, but my answer appeared to alleviate some of his worries.

“Ah, apologies. I like to know who I do business with.”

Sure you do, pal, I thought.

"Why agree to meeting, eh? I thought someone related to Wayne would not need cash."

It was a valid question, and one I didn't even think about. I didn't have any real reason to do this at all; I couldn't even use boredom as an excuse. No, I was looking for a thrill. Something to knock away the apathy that was consuming me. I wanted power where I felt I had none. But, if I'm being honest, I wanted Bruce, if he was still out there, to notice what I was doing. I wanted him to be worried about me.

I didn’t say any of that to Ivan, of course. Instead, I chose to play the haughty rich girl. Arching an eyebrow, I smirked.

"I like a challenge. There isn't a whole lot that can keep up with me now. I was hoping you could alleviate the problem for me."
Ivan let out a short bark of a laugh.

"You have dangerous tastes, ditya," Ivan jerked his chin at the groupies around him and they sat up and left the room quickly. "What has this pridurok told you?"

I thought initially he was referring to someone's name. It took a minute to figure out he was talking about Beeker. From his tone, I don't think he was calling Beeker 'friend.'

"He said you needed information."

"Da, da. This is true." Ivan reached into his shirt pocket and held a folded piece of paper between his fingers. Sergei appeared and took it from Ivan to hand to me. I met Ivan's gaze before reading the long list. It was a series of names. Most of them I didn't know. Other ones were right from GCPD's most wanted list.

"These names, you will take care of them. I want all information," Ivan said. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Are you talking about banking information, social security numbers, emails, internet browser history—"

"Everything. You have one week. Then I give you next list. You do well, I will pay."

I didn't think of the names and the people attached to them. I even had the gall to smile.

"You got it, Mr. Dimitrov."

Things carried on that way for weeks. Every week a new list was delivered to me. It didn't take much digging to see that the men whose lives I was digitally pilfering were rival crime family members to the Dimitrov's. Ivan was building up a blackmail list, and I tried to not feel bad about helping him. What did I care if a bunch of gangbangers were blowing each other away?

It became harder to pretend it didn't bother me when the names belonged to civilians. Most of them were government or public service workers, some of them were just small business owners. They were harder to find dirt on that didn't make me feel like scum for finding.

Ivan's rivals tended to be more diligent with hiding their information and speaking to one another in code. It was fun breaking through their encrypted data and rooting out their secrets like a voyeur, like I was hosting my own episode of Dateline or something.

The new lists I received were different. Ivan wanted their whole lives laid bare for him to see. It felt wrong. I tried to fudge some of the information I gave him towards the end, just giving him surface-level stuff. But I was never a good liar, and it was never enough for him.

I still hadn't spoken to Parker. He never gave up trying to reach me, sending me messages and random pictures of things I knew were supposed to remind me of the inside jokes we shared: a box of cheerios, weird parodies of shaving commercials, and out of context memes. I didn't reply to any of them because I was embarrassed and ashamed of what I said. I didn't know how to fix what I did, so I did what I knew best: ignored it and hoped it faded away into oblivion.

It was early December, only a week away from the anniversary of Mom's death, when Ivan called Beeker and me for a meeting in a restaurant somewhere in Little Russia. That winter was cold like it was when she was buried, and the early afternoon light was not enough to warm the biting air. I skipped school and took the Skytrain down to the west side of the city. I hadn't missed class in a
while, and I was confident the school wouldn’t call Alfred. My anxiety rose to a crescendo that almost made me crack and tell Alfred everything as I sat in the grafitted train car. What I had been doing was weighing heavy on me and I needed to tell someone, anyone, what was happening. But I knew it was too late—I had finally let things go too far.

"The Red Square" is what the scarlet canvas banner read in golden cursive above the restaurant. I was across the street, trying to work up the courage to walk up to the two men standing at the doors and be shown inside. I didn’t want to do what Ivan asked anymore, and I even started leaving what he paid me in stuffed envelopes for homeless shelters and in SPCA donation boxes. Even doing that didn’t scrub the feeling of guilt that coated my skin. All of it needed to come to an end, I just wasn’t sure how.

Courage found me, and I walked across the street where the two hulking men stood at attention. I expected them to question who I was and found myself surprised when they opened the door and ushered me out of the cold without a word. Beeker was already there, sitting uncomfortably across from Ivan and a blonde woman.

The large booths were covered in bright red leather, a mossy green covered the walls, and shining white table clothes sat crisp and sharp atop the tables. Gold, like the lettering outside, embossed the walls like living vines and acted as the highlighting feature for the frames and metal-work birds that decorated the space. Most of the restaurant was empty, save for men in suits who occupied various positions around the restaurant exits. My hands began to shake.

"Ditya! You finally show, eh? I start to worry you forgot your, eh… how you say, obligation.” Ivan's accent was heavier than it was before. As I approached, I glanced at the table. His glass of whiskey was full and the decanter in front of him was almost empty. My stomach sank deep in my torso. Ivan motioned for me to sit next to Beeker.

Beeker didn’t look high this time—he looked afraid. He was shaking harder than I was, making me become very conscious of all the men around me.

"Otlichny! You’ve done well, ditya. Time we upgrade list, eh? We would not want you to…” Ivan threw his arm around the blonde woman next to him, and as she readjusted the collar of her dress he seemed to lose his train of thought as he stared down at her cleavage. Her blonde hair was long and wavy, eyes were an unsettling blue that seemed to peer through the layers of my winter clothing and see me from within. She was gorgeous, and apparently relaxed enough that she ran her fingers through the hair on the nape of Ivan's neck. I had to clear my throat before he answered. "Would not want you bored, da?"

I said nothing but bowed my head in what I hoped Ivan would take as supplication. He let out a boisterous guffaw and reached into his jacket pocket.

"You take care of these, eh? You prove so helpful," Ivan took out a folded piece of paper and flipped it casually between his fingers, "I may not let you quit." He looked at me from the corner of his eye then. I couldn't tell if that was supposed to be serious, but his words chilled me. He flicked the list towards me and I began to read.

James Gordon, Anna Ramirez, Aaron Cash, Renee Montoya, Carl Finch, Rachel Dawes…

When I read Rachel’s name, I understood. I knew she was still working in the district attorney’s office. Ivan wanted dirt on these people. I thought, even in a place like Gotham, police and lawyers would be off limits from Ivan. I went off the childish notions that the respect and fear people had towards police officers was universal. I knew nothing of how the criminals in this city operated, and I was going to receive a cruel lesson on reality.
Swallowing hard, I tried to think of something to say. I couldn't refuse Ivan outright, but I knew I could throw enough jargon at Ivan to throw him off; buy me some time.

"OK. OK... Look, um, Mr. Dimitrov, I need time to do a list like this. I would need their personal IP addresses, either download malware onto their computers myself or get them to accidentally download it, have access to their work servers, find any back doors or bugs with any work programs they use and spend a few weeks dumpster diving—"

Ivan cut me off, "You say it cannot be done?"

"No, not at all, Mr. Dimitrov. But this isn't something I can just do from any old computer. I would need at least two weeks of prep—" Beeker interrupted me next. I was beginning to be sick of not being able to finish a sentence around these men. I glared at him, hoping it was enough for him to know to shut up. It wasn't.

"Oh, Miriam, you're selling yourself short. Just do what you've done before for Leon and I—" It was my turn to interrupt. Beeker was flapping his gums about something he didn't understand.

"Mining out tests and answer sheets from a rudimentary school network and giving you dirt on a few rivals is a lot different than hacking into a bunch of, I'm guessing, cops and lawyers' personal computers and government regulated networks." I took a deep breath tried to stay calm. Ivan looked amused, but he drummed his fingers against the wooden table. The woman next to Ivan rolled her eyes.

"These idiots cause trouble," Ivan said, pointing at the piece of paper in my hands. "I need, eh... leverage." Ivan jerked his chin at the men standing behind us. They grabbed Beeker by the shoulders and shoved him away from the booth, gripping on his jacket as they moved him towards the door. I followed suit and got up, taking his forced exit as an opportunity to leave. Taking the piece of paper in my hand, I and shoved it in my pocket.

"You have one week to give what I want. Once finished, debt is forgiven—and I will pay," Ivan said, motioning with his hand to Beeker then me. Beeker opened his mouth to argue but was shoved out the front entrance before he could make a sound. I went to follow when Ivan spoke to me again.

"No funny business, da? Rich kids always have something to lose. Like nice house, or old man. Just do job, and there will be no trouble." Ivan was smiling, but it didn't reach his brown eyes. He leaned back in the booth, threw his arm around the blonde woman, and made a shooing motion at me. Nodding, I gave an awkward thumbs up before brushing past the men at the entrance and exiting out on to the bright and damp street. I waited until the door closed to lay into Beeker.

"What was all that about? That is not what I signed up for. I'm not some black hat that can just break into fucking police networks all willy-nilly, you fucking idiot!"

I always swear a lot when I'm scared. What Ivan wanted was beyond everything I ever thought I would do. Ivan mentioning a debt could only mean one thing. I wanted to clock Beeker in the jaw, but I needed to hear what he had to say first.

"Can you do it or not, Kane?" Beeker asked. He wouldn't look at me, and his voice was shaking. For the first time since I'd known him, he looked genuinely terrified. His eyes were wide and he was sweating.

"How much do you owe him?"

Beeker snapped his head up at that. He looked at the restaurant door before moving away a few
"Fifteen grand. And these are the type of guys you wouldn't want to borrow a goddamn quarter from. Jesus fucking Christ."

I shook my head and decided I didn't want to know how he managed to rack up such a substantial amount of debt. Somehow, I guessed, Beeker had leveraged my skill level against the debts he owed Ivan.

"No. I can't do it. I would need longer than a week, and I'm not giving him a bunch of information on lawyers and cops, Tommy. We can go to the police together—"

"Are you stupid, Kane? People like him own this city. He wants info on those guys because they don't play by the rules. We can't go to the cops; most of them are on his payroll! I'm fucked! He's going to kill me." Beeker's eyes were wild, sweat and tears intermingled as he paced up and down the sidewalk. My stomach sank.

Beeker was right about the cops in Gotham. If he was this dumb to owe so much money, there wasn't much I could do. Except Ivan knew who I was, where I lived and went to school. Stepping close to Beeker, I sluged him. His nose broke when I hit it right in the centre, and I started walking down the street while shaking out my hand. His thick skull broke two of my knuckles.

"You—you bitch! What are you doing?!” His voice was muddled and he spat blood on the sidewalk. "You're just as fucked as I am, Kane!" Beeker yelled at me as I continued walking away. I whirled on him and he flinched.

"I'm going to figure out a solution to our problem, since your bloated muscles are useless without a spine, and you seem to have killed off any fucking brain cells that may have inhabited that damaged head of yours," I snapped back. He said nothing as I walked around the corner.

I followed the signs to the nearest Skytrain station and hoped my seething anger was enough for anyone I encountered to leave me alone. There was no way around it—I was completely screwed. Parker's warnings had come true—I was in too deep to get out of the mess I made. I needed help, and it was clear that Bruce wouldn't be the one to give it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Thank you all again for checking in and reading the story (and leaving such lovely comments, thank you!!). I know I left the last chapter in a tense spot, but I think having the basis of this part of Miriam's past is important for future chapters. "Haesit Memoria" (if the translation I used and the person who checked it for me are correct) means "trapped in memory," which is what has happened to Miriam. This is the first part of an event that causes Miriam to view Bruce, Alfred, and Parker differently than she did before and was a major influence in developing the person she is in the present tense in the story. I won't do the second half until later, but hopefully this fills in some of your questions about who Ivan is and how it fits in with Miriam's background.

I'll be updating again next weekend and I would love to keep hearing from all of you! Your opinions and insights are wonderful and I love reading them. Until next time :)
Bend or Break

Life pools back into my limbs. It's slow at first, starting with my toes and the tips of my fingers.

The first thing I feel is pain. A deep ache sits in my bones, vibrating at a frequency that stretches my muscles and grates against my skin. I can't open my eyes, they're too heavy. My tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth. I must have swallowed sand, the air passing through my throat is enough to convince me that it's scrubbed raw. Air boils hot in my chest and against my skin. Something heavy pins me down to a soft surface. White-hot agony blooms in my brain when I try to move my head.

"Thank the bloody lord almighty—Miri, can you hear me? I'm right here."

Someone clutches my hand, it feels like they're cracking my bones. The voice is too far away to recognize. It's different than the others I remember, this voice is soft and soothing. I concentrate hard.

*Open your eyes.*

It's an intense effort of will, but my eyes flutter open. Warm light emanates from some corner just enough to highlight white walls and blue sheets. My eyes begin to shut again. I want to go back to oblivion.

"Miri, open your eyes for me. Wake up, sweetheart."

The voice sounds closer to me now, more familiar. I finally open my eyes wide and try to take in my surroundings.

I'm in a white room on a bed. Blue blankets are pulled up to my chest. Thick gauze covers my hands. Red and white tubes are coming out of my arm and there's a mask pressed against my face. Memories of Mom strapped to her hospital bed, the struggling and screaming from tumor-induced hallucinations crashes into my mind with the fear of that monster in purple and green.

*Get up. You need to get away.*

My body attempts to fly forward, but a hand shoots out and pushes my shoulders back towards the bed. I gaze wildly around the room.

*I need to get out—I need to leave. I have to find Parker. Where's Mom?*

There's a voice in my ear. It drowns out everything.

"*Someone over here's a little loopy, hmm? Did I tap your head too hard?*"

Laughing. All I can hear is *him* laughing.

*Why is he here? Where am I?*

The room is changing. I'm on the ship, in the rusted-out room. Joker's standing over me, his mouth split in a false smile.

*Everything hurts. I need to get away. I need to get away. I need to—*

"*Miriam! Miriam, look at me. It's me—you're alright. It's alright.*" Alfred's next to me. He hasn't
seen the Joker yet.

"Alfred! Alfred, we have to go. No—no, he's going to hurt us! He's here, we have to go—" My voice is a hoarse whisper, it hurts just to try and use my vocal cords. The mask muffles my protests. I try to rip it off, but gauze keeps me from using my hands. Alfred tries to hold me down. The Joker waves at me from the end of the bed and grins like a kid on Halloween.

I need Alfred to understand. He can't be here, he's in danger.

Alfred's face crumbles into tears. A woman in lilac scrubs and a white coat rushes into the room.

"Miri, you're safe now. You're in hospital. I'm not leaving you, you're going to be alright." He's holding me too hard, pushing me back into the mattress. He doesn't understand.

"Whoopies. Don't you die on me now, we've got too many items on the agenda before you bite it," the Joker giggles.

I try again to get off the bed. Alfred's struggling to hold me down.

Why can't they see him?

"Miriam, you're in Gotham General. I need you to calm down, OK?" The woman has a syringe that she injects into the IV line.

"No! No, you have to listen to me—he's here, we need to—" A heavy weight pushes down on me. "Al-Alfred, you have to… listen to me…"

It's hard to talk all the sudden. I slump back on the bed. My brain is awake, but everything comes through a thick layer of fuzz.

The ship and that awful room melt away. I'm confused. I know I heard him speak, but I can't see him anymore. I can barely move. My own limbs pin me to the bed.

Where'd he go?

"Just a small dose of Ativan. This will help keep her calm," the woman says to Alfred. She leans back over the bed. Her dark brown skin is smooth under the light and her expression is kind.

"Hey, Miriam. You're in Gotham General, you've been here for two days. There's a police officer outside the door—you're completely safe, OK?" Her amber eyes track mine, she won't let me look away. Everything slows down. The panic ebbs, but it doesn't leave completely.

"I need you to understand that you are safe, Miriam. Alfred has been here the whole time with you. No one else is here." She doesn't look like a liar. I start to doubt my own senses. I heard him speak as if he were right next to me. I saw him no more than two feet away. But he couldn't have left without the doctor running into him. What's real and part of the nightmare muddies together the more I try to focus on it, slipping through my fingers and dispersing like grains of sand.

The doctor's eyes keep mine still. She's tethering me back to the room. My head stops throbbing, and logic works its way back in my mind. I centre myself on her face. I stare at her until my breathing evens. Her long faux locs have small bands of gold and threads of silver woven in. A hospital badge hangs from her coat pocket. She has a warm smile.

"I'm Doctor Rosetta Williams, but you can call me Doctor Rose. You've received a lot of injuries this past week: you've suffered extensive bruising, some tissue damage in your hands and feet, and
you have a serious head injury."

My fingers twitch and the discomfort flares up with her words, as if my body needed to remind me that what she's saying is true.

"When you were in the river, you took on a lot of water and hit your head again. We saved your hands from most of the damage, but we're keeping you for another night before we release you," she says as she leans toward me and adjusts the mask around my face. "I know this has been a lot to deal with, and I know you're scared, but I'm here to help."

I can't say anything. I'm struggling to remember. Everything's all jumbled up inside. I close my eyes and try to think.

_We were on the edge of the ship. Parker was there and so was—_

The memories hit me at once. The ship was burning, and Batman pushed us off the edge into the water.

New images flash in my brain, they're unfamiliar. _He's_ in them. I can hear his voice behind me, around the edges of my senses. I can't make out the words.

Dr. Rose moves the hair away from my eyes. The feeling of warm hands on my skin, ones that won't hurt me, is enough for my body to ease into the mattress. My breathing steadies again and I don't try to fight the medicine.

_You're losing it, Miriam. Didn't she say I hit my head?_

A wrinkled, shaking hand reaches for my arm.

"Miri," Alfred begins.

I look over at him and my head feels heavy again. Most of the pain has dulled, but it rises anew in my heart when I search his features. The lines in his face are deeper, his hair disheveled, skin a deathly shade of white, and I think this is the first time he's been in public without a tie. I haven't seen him like this since Bruce went missing.

"I am _never_ letting you out of my sight again. Master Bruce thought—_I thought_—" Alfred can't finish. Instead, he brings my hand to his face and cries.

Damp warmth flows down my cheeks. Alfred rises from his chair next to the bed and wraps me in his arms. He still has the familiar sandalwood smell, mixed with the scent of sleep, clinging to his sweater.

Doctor Rose says something I don't catch and leaves the room. The forced calm running through my blood makes me realize who's missing.

_Bruce should be waiting to see me, and Parker must be in another room with his family._

I let go of Alfred and look towards the door.

"Where's Bruce? Is he here, too?" My voice is croaky from disuse, and it's a struggle to get to words out of my mouth, like my tongue forgot how to work.

Alfred doesn't say anything. My confusion spirals into doubt.

"Where is he? Doesn't he know where I am?"
Alfred looks at me and conflict rages in his eyes.

"Master Bruce is—" I can tell Alfred is thinking hard about something. "Master Bruce will—he will be here soon." Alfred, even with the medication pumping into me, doesn't sound convincing.

"He didn't come? Isn't he worried about me?"

"Yes, Miri. Of course. Very much. But he… he will…" Alfred trails off.

Another memory triggers in my mind. I push it down quickly. I close my heavy eyes and reach up and swipe the mask from my face with my padded hands. Alfred reaches up as if to put the mask back in place and I push his hand away. I don't want to hear more of Bruce's excuses. The strong smell of antiseptic and industrial cleaners fill my nostrils. I can't help but think of Mom.

She's here, in my mind's eye, laying where I am. She's screaming at me, unable to even recognize her own daughter. Mom was so angry—the tumor-fueled psychosis left the doctors little choice but to strap her to the bed to keep her from ripping out the tubes and attacking the nurses.

Bruce was there for me then. He sat with me while the drugs rendered Mom comatose. He stayed, holding my hand, as we waited for her suffering to end. That was something we shared. We both watched our mothers die; mine just took a lot longer. I thought he would remember. Bruce knows how afraid I am of hospitals, of being alone.

*What have I done? Why is he leaving me here?*

I can't think of Bruce anymore. The pain wrenches my chest and my throat fills with emotion.

"Where… where's Parker? I want to see him." It feels like Zsasz has his hands wrapped around my throat again. The drugs are barely keeping me stable. I need to know Parker's OK, that I didn't fail him, too.

Alfred doesn't answer me. Somehow, he pales even further. His shoulders start to shake.

"Tell me the truth." The words burn my throat like fire.

I want Alfred to tell me I'm crazy, that Parker is just down the hall. I want him to lie. Alfred's mouth sets in a firm line.

"He… Mr. Kwan—they—" After a minute, Alfred silences himself and forces his blue eyes to meet mine.

*This is all my fault. It all comes back to me. It's all my fault.*

"They don't know where he is. You—you were pulled from the river, but they couldn't find him. The police were attacked that morning, during a memorial parade. They didn't respond in time. Gotham River is being searched." Alfred reaches out as if to hold me. My vision goes black.

Everything conflates together.

*The Joker's knife plunges into Lewis' neck, again and again, the sounds of Lewis trying to breathe deafen me. Zsasz takes the knife and sticks it inside me, laughing while I scream. I'm in front of the school, my limbs contorted in some sick alignment. My hand grips Parker's as I make a promise I wouldn't break this time. Parker's face transitions from the sad kid I left behind that night to a man beaten bloody. It's me. I'm hitting him until the skin splits like an overripe peach. Parker's on his back, a knife sticking out of his chest, the Joker pouring the blood into a cup and taking a long swallow, his lips dripping red.*
I can't register anything beyond my own screams.

The next fourteen hours are a blur.

True to his word, Alfred hasn't left my side once. Dr. Rose ordered an MRI for my head before she'd sign the discharge papers, and so we're trapped within the hospital walls as we wait. Alfred doesn't want me watching TV. Instead, he's found some classical music radio station, the kind that doesn't have news segments. Alfred's kept his post by the bed, reading magazines and occasionally giving me sidelong glances.

Alfred gave up trying to get me to speak after the first three hours of silence. Dr. Rose is regularly dosing me with Ativan, and all I do is stare at the wall—trying not to think about anything. My fingers grasp for a ring that isn't there anymore. I try not to think about who has it. Every time I hear a laugh down the hall I break into a sweat and inch towards the edge of the bed, ready to drop to the floor and lock myself in the bathroom.

"Miri."

It's just Alfred. Don't think. Nothing exists beyond the fleck of paint on the wall.

A spasm erupts along my neck when I snap my head at the unexpected contact against my arm. Alfred is nudging me. The world falls back in around me. Somehow, I missed the three visitors who came into the room. Rachel, Detective Stephens, and an unmistakable Harvey Dent, with his styled blond hair and pressed suit, shuffle their feet at the end of my bed.

Rachel's holding a small bundle of flowers. Daisies. I break out in a cold sweat.

"Hey, Miriam. How are you feeling?" Rachel asks, as if she was inquiring about a cold I'm getting over. We never did get over the awkwardness between us, but her concern seems genuine. I inch away from the flowers she places on the bedside table.

It's been a few months since I last saw her. Her long brown hair is curled into long waves that sit atop her navy blazer. She looks thinner than before. Elongated, like a rubber band about to snap. I notice the exhausted look in her eye and how she leans towards Harvey. I'd never met the man before, but I still voted for him on election day. Mostly because I liked his cheesy smile in those awful ad campaigns. Standing here now, he doesn't have the same suave easiness about him that he exudes on TV. I'm surprised that Lieutenant Gordon isn't among them. If I was going to talk with anyone, he's who I wanted it to be.

"Where's Gordon?" My voice has gone all craggy again. The image of the deep purple hand-shaped bruises come, unbidden, to mind. I don't want to talk about how I feel. Especially with them. I'm afraid that, if I do, everything will come pouring out and I won't be able to stop.

Detective Stephens looks upset. He's in all black except for his crisp white shirt and blaring red tie. His back bows and his shoulders slump. He rubs a palm across his face before answering.

"Jim's—Lieutenant Gordon died in the line of duty three days ago."

I didn't think anything else could make me feel worse. I was wrong.

"What do you mean?" My heart steadily climbs up my throat. I pull at the collar of my hospital gown. It feels too tight against my neck. My throat constricts painfully, like it's being squeezed. It's Harvey who speaks this time.
"The Joker hid a bomb under the platform where Commissioner Loeb's memorial was taking place. It blew before it was full, and Joker used the diversion to start shooting at the crowd." Without that lopsided grin, Harvey's handsome face takes on a darker look, one that's stern, hard, and unforgiving. It makes his words ring true, but they can't be. Gotham may have its problems, but no one could do that here. Not even a man like the Joker.

I look at Alfred. There's no way it can be true. It can't be. But he won't look at me, his hands are folded together and he's staring at the point I was fixated on moments before. My stomach drops.

"Gordon… he died bravely protecting the Mayor. We—we suffered significant casualties." Harvey's solemn expression spears me in place.

A deep ringing pierces my ears. It doesn't take long to make the connection. If Batman hadn't been on the ship with Parker and me, he would have been there. He could have saved those people. I don't know how many people died, but the weight of their souls, and Parker's, crushes me.

_Batman saved me for nothing. All those people died. It should've been me. Parker should be the one who's here. This is all my fault._

Air leaves my lungs in shallow gasps.

"Is there something specific you require? Or are you just here to retraumatize Miriam?" Alfred demands. The hostility in his voice makes my head snap up to look at him. Never in my life have I seen him so angry. Not even when Bruce came home last year.

Harvey throws his hands up and backpedals quickly.

"No, I'm sorry. This has been a difficult time for everyone and—" Rachel cuts Harvey off before he can finish.

"What Harvey's trying to say is that we need any information you can give us, Miriam," she says as she comes around to sit next to Alfred. I don't miss the sideways glare she gives Harvey. Her eyes are shards of ice in the white room. She hesitates for a moment before gingerly holding my hand.

"I can't imagine how difficult these last few days have been for you, and I'm sorry about Parker. We're doing everything we can to find him."

I'd heard those words before when Bruce went missing. It took seven years for him to come back from his voluntary absence. Parker probably wasn't coming back at all. I don't want to look at Rachel, how she's pleading without saying a word. I feel close to cracking again.

"Are you blind? Can you not see that this is _not_ the bloody time for you to be pressing for information? She has been through enough without all this bollocks!" Alfred spits as he rises out of his chair, pointing his finger at Harvey. The two start exchanging terse words, Alfred's Cockney accent gets thicker the angrier he becomes. The tension escalates until I can barely stand it. Rachel rubs her brow and turns around to join the argument.

I just want this all to stop. I want them to get out.

"Alfred—it's OK." Alfred pauses mid verbal assault. His mouth opens in protest and I press on. I want this to be done. "I don't know how much I can tell you. Don't know if the doctor mentioned it, but I have a few head injuries. My memory's a bit rough." It's hard to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

Rachel takes point, probably hoping to keep Alfred from smacking Harvey with his tightly clutched magazine. Harvey leans against the wall and Stephens takes the other available chair, near the
door. He pulls out a pad of paper from his jacket pocket and flips through the sheets.

"We know you were on the old freighter that blew at Gotham's south harbor. Do you know why you were there?" she asks.

I thought I cried all the tears my body could produce when Alfred told me about Parker, but I can feel the burn of fresh tears filling my eyes.

I will not cry in front of them. I won't.

"I don't know what happened after being at Parker's apartment. The first thing I remember is the... the video he made. I thought that was it, that he was going to—" I can't even bear to say his name aloud.

Do not cry, Miri.

"After that they—they..." I don't want Alfred to hear. I don't want him to be upset.

Breathe, Miriam. Breathe. You're OK.

I'm lying to myself, I'll never be OK again, but it's the only way to stem the panic.

"Who's 'they,' Miri? Was anyone else there that you can remember?" Rachel asks.

The dark shaggy beard, my ruined clothes, the rows of scars, his hands around my throat—all of it flashes across my eyes. I try to suppress an involuntary groan.

"Zsasz. He was there. He—he was acting as some sort of second, or something." Saying his name is enough for me to shake. At least with Zsasz, I know he will be caught, just like he was before. The Joker seems more elusive, like a specter haunting me and the city, always staying out of reach, waiting for a sign of weakness.


"They wanted me to breach a popular app. Parker told me—he told me..." I take a shaky breath, "We were able to talk, once, before the ship went down. They were getting him to access hospital files. He—Zsasz—wanted me to do something similar, I guess."

Rachel stares at me intently. I'm sure we're both remembering the same conversation we had four years ago.

"Do you remember the name of the app?" Stephens asks.

"Gotham Mingles." Stephens looks incredulous, but he makes a notation in his pocketbook anyway.

"Why would they want access to a thing like that? Isn't that where teenagers yell into the void nowadays?" Harvey asks. I think he's trying to be cheeky, but it sounds callous. I direct my answers at Stephens and Rachel.

"A lot of people use it. They didn't say why they wanted access, but they were willing to beat me and Parker to get it." I know I sound bitter, and I definitely am. The more he talks, the more reason I have to dislike him.

"You're saying we should be on the watch for cyberterrorism, too? I know you're doing some new things at Wayne Enterprises, but this doesn't fit in with anything the Joker's done. How would he
even know you would be capable of gaining access? You know what, nevermind," Harvey says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

That's the problem with people like him. They only see the physical threats. He hasn't been paying attention to the news: computers hold the near entirety of human knowledge and much of it is largely unprotected. Despite everything, I can't help but scoff.

"Think of everything you've ever seen, sent, or put out on the Internet. All of that information is up for grabs if you know where to look. Are you telling me that there wouldn't be a sizable amount of people who'd be willing to do anything to make sure things they wanted buried stayed that way? Or the kind of panic that would happen if that amount of information became public? Entire governments have been crippled with less."

It hurts to talk that much, but it needed to be said. No one says anything. Rachel, Harvey, and Stephens are looking away from me, hopefully considering my point. Alfred's staring at me with an expression I don't understand, like I told him the answer to a puzzle he'd been working at for hours.

It's impossible to ignore that the Joker is a man without limits, and, if they aren't already, they should be much more afraid of what he can do.
"Alprazolam, Santyl, T3s, read the labels of the medication in my palm. I don't know how long I've been staring at the white and orange bottles with the little pills inside. Doctor Rose has been talking for five minutes. I'm only half-listening.

"Miriam. Honey, I need you to look at me. Do you understand what I've just told you?" she asks. She's wearing a set of bright pink scrubs this morning. It feels like it's assaulting my retinas.

"Yes. Even though my MRI was clear, I'll likely experience headaches, dizziness, insomnia, and nausea for a few days. The Santyl needs to be applied twice a day and the dressings need to be changed every morning. I need to keep a journal and I need to tell Alfred if the symptoms don't go away in a couple of weeks." I sound robotic. My throat feels better, but I haven't been able to bear looking in a mirror. I don't want to know how bad I look.

"Exactly. Take this," she says, handing me a white business card, "Doctor Sanford is a good friend of mine. You've been through a lot, and she can help you process what's happened."

Pity, that's what her expression says. I look away from her, nodding my head so she'll leave. Doctor Rose extends a hand, I look at it apprehensively before giving it a tentative shake.

"You're a strong young woman, Miriam. I know you'll be alright, just don't be afraid to ask for help. And you stay out of trouble. No offense, but I hope I don't see you here again."

Something bubbles in my chest, and, for the first time in what feels like years, I laugh along with her. It dies quickly, feeling like a betrayal to Parker. I can't feel anything until they find him. Until he's safe, one way or another.

Dr. Rose takes it as a good sign. She smirks playfully gives me a wink.

"You get home safe, now. Your GP can fill up the alprazolam if you need more," she says over her shoulder just as Alfred walks back in the room carrying two steaming cups of something smelling faintly of chocolate.

"Take this now," Alfred says as he passes me one of the cups. He doesn't let go until my padded mitts for hands have a secure grip. He settles down on the edge of the bed next to me, giving small cooling breaths on his coffee. "It's your favourite. I just hope they didn't bugger it down in that awful excuse for a café."

I give another small chuckle before taking a hesitant sip of the hot chocolate, being careful not to burn my tongue. His assumption was right, they did screw it up. Bruce's money might have bought me my own room, but it would never be enough to fix bad hospital food. The drink is still one of the best things I've tasted in my life. I match Alfred's little huffs over the styrofoam, trying to cool it enough to drink.

Alfred's been studiously acting like nothing's wrong ever since Harvey, Rachel, and Stephens left last night. I don't know if it's because he thinks it's helpful or if he doesn't want to have a nurse come in to tranquilize me again. He knows that he'll have to take me down to the station in a few days, and I'll have to go through everything all over again. I'm content to play along for now.
"Are we supposed to go back to the penthouse when I'm wearing this?" I ask, motioning to the mint green gown. Alfred raises an eyebrow. He was so hellbent on staying within 200 meters of me that he forgot that this would be strange to wear outside the hospital.

"Right. Well, erm. Yes," Alfred begins to shrug off his knit sweater when we hear a voice at the door.

"I can help with that."

I whip my head around so quick a spattering of stars eclipses my vision. Bruce is standing in the doorway holding up a green duffel bag. He's wearing jeans and a dark gray sweater. His eyes look concave and hollow, and his smile looks more like a grimace. Alfred rises from the bed and I turn to stare at the wall ahead, taking an interest in the cables plugged into the outlet.

Where was he? Is it worth even asking?

This is just like when he came back last year, acting like nothing happened. Like he didn't miss a near-decade of my life—as if things would be totally normal when he decided to show up again. A sudden headache pounds behind my eye sockets.

When a hand brushes against my shoulder, I drop off the bed and back myself towards the bathroom door. Loud clangs echo through the room as the bedside tray falls to the ground. My throat hurts, my skin is on fire.

No, not again. No no no no no—

He's standing over me. He's coming closer. Too close. I cover my eyes with my arms and whimper.

You're a fucking coward. Always have been. And you're going to die like one.

The pain my body expects never comes, but someone's hands are trying to pry my arms away. I can't control my breathing.

"No, no, leave me alone. Leave me alone—"

"Miri, listen to me. It's just Bruce and I. No one here's going to hurt you. You're alright, I promise."

I flinch away from the hand that touches my back, but it doesn't move away. It just keeps a steady rhythm, moving back and forth in slow patterns like Mom used to do when I had a fever. My arms move away slowly. Where he was a moment before Bruce is standing now, looking shattered. His eyes linger on my neck and the bright bruising that only gets worse with time. The warm brown liquid of my hot chocolate is all over the floor. Alfred's kneeling in it next to me.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean… I—"

"You do not apologize. For anything. It's alright now. Let's get you cleaned up before we head back, eh?"

Alfred helps me stand and leads me to the bathroom. He sits me on the toilet and starts running the water, it isn't long before the room fills with steam. Alfred has the green bag in his hands that he sets it on the floor, next to my feet. The nurses already helped me wash my hair, so Alfred takes the long strands and attempts to secure it in a messy bun on the top of my head. His hands are clumsy and inexperienced. The knot on the top of my head is precarious, but he manages to keep the hair away from my face. Alfred takes the clear plastic bags the doctor gave me and slides them over my bandaged hands.
"Take your time, my dear. We will be waiting right here." Alfred's trying to smile, but I can see the worry. I hang my head as the door shuts with a faint click. It only takes a few seconds before I hear raised voices. Bruce and Alfred are arguing.

I get up from the toilet seat and remove the stained gown. I should have checked where the mirror was. I'm staring at a girl I don't recognize. This stranger looks like a shell, with cuts all over her face and bruises that make her brown skin black and blue. Her collarbones stick out obtrusively, the angles of her jaw are too sharp. She looks tired and worn-down. Her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy from crying.

She looks defeated.

I walk into the shower and let the heat burn away the visions of his face in front of mine. I try not to notice the new divets in my hips or the outlines of hands along my stomach.

I don't know how long I've been standing under the jettison of water, but the heavy knocks on the door wake me up from the black nothing my mind wandered to.

"Miri, are you quite alright?" Alfred's voice carries over the sound of water echoing in my ears.

"I'll be right out." I don't have the energy to shout, I just hope he hears me and doesn't get some nurse to wrestle the door open.

Toweling off as best I can without the use of my fingers, I give a haphazard look inside the bag Bruce brought. I can tell he just grabbed whatever was on the floor and threw it inside.

Classic Bruce.

I search for anything that won't require any finger dexterity, but all he packed were jeans and button-up blouses. I struggle with the clothing until knuckles wrap against the door.

"Do you need me or a nurse, Miri?" Alfred asks.

Hot tears of shame prick at my eyes. I don't want to say anything. I don't want to be here.

Why did this happen? Why me?

I sit on the floor, staring at the peeling grout along a chipped beige tile. A loud ringing deafens me to every knock on the door.

We've been sitting in the car in silence for a long time. Traffic is heavy with the early morning rush hour. Even with everything that's happened, people are keeping on with their lives like nothing's wrong, as if the city wasn't on the edge of imploding. Alfred may have kept the TV off, but he couldn't stop me from overhearing conversations as we walked out of the hospital.

Twenty-six people are dead. Those people wouldn't have died if it wasn't for me. Parker would still be here, he'd be safe. It's all my fault.

I'm pushed against the door of Alfred's Rolls Royce, trying to stay as far from Bruce as possible. I can't look at his face, can't even stand to have him near me. He sucks in a breath like he's going to say something, but the words never come. He hasn't tried to touch me again.

The morning sun fills the street with resplendent light, bouncing off the backs of cars and walls of glass to temporarily blind me. I welcome it, I want it to burn out my eyes so I never have to see
again. It doesn't stop his voice in my head.

'Miri, Miri, Miri. Don't you want to play? It's fun, we'll turn that frown upside down.'

The blinding abyss holds my attention, the more it hurts the more I will my eyes to focus on it, staring so hard I lose all sense of the white leather interior.

"Miriam."

The voice jolts me awake. I blink and the light is gone. We're sitting in a dark parking garage. Bruce and Alfred are staring at me.

"We're home now, Miri," Alfred says. From the look on his face, this isn't the first time he's said it.

"Right." I stare out the window again. My eyes haven't adjusted and there are still too many shadows. Too many things hiding in the dark. I don't move.

My body jars hard to the left. Alfred's popped the door open a little, just holding it enough that I won't fall over. I exit the car reluctantly. Bruce and Alfred flank either side of me on the way to the elevator. Moisture creeps along my spine and I release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

You aren't safe here. He's already been inside once. What's to stop it from happening again?

The air leaves my lungs in short pants. I back away from the steel doors that will trap me inside that narrow box.

"Miriam. Look at me."

I snap my eyes to Bruce. He doesn't look broken anymore. A strange calm has settled over his features, it makes him look apathetic and detached. He walks towards me slowly, like I'm a horse that scares easy. His hand twitches like he wants to reach out, but it falls back down to his side.

"You're safe here. I've made sure." He's talking as if I'm a child.

"You said that last time, Bruce. What did you change that made such an improvement? What could possibly make any of this better?"

"Miri—" Alfred starts, but Bruce quiets him with a wave of his hand.

"We can talk about this upstairs. You'll feel better once you're home and—"

"This isn't home, Bruce. The closest thing I had to that is gone. Because, oh, right, you burned it to the ground." Everything I haven't said, everything I thought I buried, is bubbling up like poison being drawn from a wound. Bruce's calm demeanor cracks. I see a flash of anger that fans my own. "That's what you do best, isn't it? You destroy everything and then you come back and wonder why it's never put back together again."

Bruce loses his hesitation. He grabs me by the arm in a vise I can't escape. He hauls me towards the elevator, twists his key in the terminal, and drags me inside the elevator. He lets go of my arm and presses the button for the top floor. Alfred follows, looking like he wants to intervene and simultaneously be very far away. Bruce isn't even saying anything, his nostrils just flare. I want him to break, I want him to tear into me.

"What—were you out partying again? Is that where you were?" My voice is shrill and reverberates painfully in the confined space. It only climbs higher. "You couldn't be bothered to—to even see
me! What's so important, Bruce?" The doors open to the cold penthouse entryway. No one moves.

"Answer the question." Bruce says nothing. His face is a mask that blurs in front of me. "Answer me!"

I've lost Parker and Bruce is gone, too.

"Please."

His mouth stays in a grim line.

I step out of the elevator and slam the big oak door open into the kitchen. My surroundings feel foreign, and the tears blind me. I don't see the kitchen bar stool until I've tripped on the leg and fall to my knees. All I can do is sit here on the floor and sob loudly and wish I was the one who drowned.

A pair of warm arms wrap around me and this time I don't flinch away. Bruce's large palms are on my spine, soothing my convulsing sobs. He presses his head against mine, and I reflexively do the same. After my sobs turn to small shudders, Bruce pulls away and makes our foreheads rest against one another. We haven't done this since I was small when he would read stories to me when I was too scared to sleep at night. Bruce holds the side of my head, trying to make me meet his eyes. I stare at his five o'clock shadow instead. He takes several breaths, each sound like he's getting ready to speak. He holds me tighter for a moment, I can feel the apprehension before the words leave his mouth.

"Miri, I need you to trust me." My eyes jolt to his. There's that same pair of eyes, the colour of darkened pennies—the ones I've stared at, relied on for answers, looked up to for as long as I can remember. The same ones from the ship.

Part of me figured it out before we jumped off the sinking vessel. Maybe I wanted to hear it from him. Or maybe this explanation was more complicated and frightening than I wanted to acknowledge. How many more truths have been dangling in front of me, but I was too blind to see?

I pull away from Bruce. Leaning on the counter to hold my weight, I stand and back away from his crouched form. Alfred is next to me, trying to hold me by the shoulders.

"You're a liar," I spit. My body's vibrating. "Where were you for all those years? Off gallivanting somewhere, nurturing your god-complex? That's what you left us for?" I sound hysterical. I look to Alfred, expecting his expression to mirror my own. He's still holding me, but he's looking down and his mouth trembles. My stomach drops.

"You knew." Alfred looks down at me and his hands shake. "You knew and you said nothing. You're just as bad as he is." I step away from them both. I've never felt so alone. My chest constricts, air doesn't reach my lungs, and my skin ripples with hurt. It's like when Mom died all over again.

"Miri, that isn't fair. Alfred didn't know until—"

"I don't want to hear it! You can't even say the words out loud. Can't admit it to my face." My voice is a hoarse groaning through the new wave of sobs. "You let all those people—you should have just let me die." I push my padded hands into my eyes, pushing so hard I see bursts of white pop along my eyelids. The image of Batman the hero shatters, and each blade of glass sinks into my heart.

"It's not that simple," Bruce says. I almost laugh at that, nothing with him ever is.
"I've been trying to save this city—to bring her up from the depravity that's been killing Gotham for years. It's what killed my parents and it's what has been destroying the people of Gotham, piece by piece. This city is poisoned, but I can save her." Bruce sounds mad, delusional. "I do it for the good people of this city, like you, Miri. Batman is the symbol that's shocked Gotham into action. He is something more than I can ever be—than I could ever do alone. Things will get better, I promise—."

"I don't want to hear your promises, Bruce. I thought you were dead for seven years. When you came back I—I didn't care how you were home, I just wanted things to be the way they were. I needed you, Bruce. I needed…" My shoulders shake, and I cry into the thick bandages. I feel tired, drained. I want to hurt him. Just as bad as he hurt me. "Do not tell me this is somehow about protecting people like me. As far as I can tell, you're doing a really shit job."

Bruce appears soundlessly, holding his arms out as if to embrace me. I move away until my back faces the long hall behind me, but he follows my steps. Bruce looks tired, too. We all do.

"I need you to understand, Miri."

"Understand what? This is all your fault. All of it. Parker would still be here if you hadn't—" A wave of pain in my skull and thick tears make it hard to think. "The—-the Joker wants you! He's doing all of this to get to Batman, to you. None of this would have happened if you had stayed, if you had just—"

"You're looking for someone to blame, Miri. You're upset. I was trying to protect you."

"You failed on that count, too, didn't you?"

I want them to explain this away, to give a reason—anything—for why this happened. Why Parker's missing and I'm alive with a monster trapped inside my head. Why the only family I have left betrayed me.

Bruce and Alfred say nothing.

I turn and head for the only space that's familiar, slamming my bedroom door shut behind me.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I just wanted to give another thank you to those who have taken the time to read, comment, and leave kudos. I very much appreciate it and I love hearing from all of you!

This chapter is definitely more tense between Miri and Bruce, but it's a conflict that was inevitable (in my mind). I'm going to have to make you all wait for future chapters to see how it gets resolved, but I hope you keep checking back in for more!
Batman scanned the crowd inside The Palace from the skylight above, looking for Salvatore Maroni. The packed bodies dancing to the throbbing EDM that resounded through the glass and brick made it difficult to spot the man in the chaos of light and movement. There were several VIP tables Batman could see between the layers of metal catwalks that crisscrossed along the different levels of the nightclub. He saw drunk men in business suits pulling out small tubes and lining up neat rows of cocaine, women in bright metallic dresses leading men by the tie to cordoned off areas of the club, men's hands inching up the skirts of their drunken female companions as they giggled in one another's ears, and couples that danced so close together that Batman was surprised they hadn't transformed into one giant mass of collective depravity.

The Palace was a favourite, and relatively new, haunt of Maroni's. After Batman shut down the Stacked Deck, Maroni didn't wait long to invest in a new establishment to spend his weekends. It was good business for him: where Batman had created a void, Maroni was eager to make a profit. The building had an updated façade, shiny materials and glossy fabrics, but it still housed the same types Batman was trying so hard to combat: prostitutes Maroni paid to 'entertain' his men and guests, low-level politicians looking for a cheap fix, and underage girls who drank for free and were prey to the more predatory scum that tainted Gotham. Maroni enjoyed it all—he liked being at the centre, watching the world of his own making unfold around him.

Batman was being patient. He didn't expect the rising conflict between police and the criminals of Gotham would get in the way of Maroni's scheduled fun. It was early in the evening yet, but Maroni and the other scourge of Gotham had reason to celebrate—they were winning. They had struck a blow to be remembered against the people of Gotham and all those that wanted to reclaim the city from the criminals that held her in their grip for decades. Without Gordon, it was up to Batman to make things right.

Bruce tried not to think of Miriam as he waited, of the bruises on her neck and arms, the cuts on her face, the look of desperation and wild terror as she threw herself in a corner just to get away from his touch, or her betrayed expression as she yelled at him. He tried not to think about how he deserved it. To add to his grief, Barbara Gordon's broken voice as she screamed at him felt all the more warranted now. Gordon's children would grow up without a father because of him. The public was ready to offer the Batman upon a burning altar to stop the madness.

And he couldn't blame any of them.

No, Batman could only focus on the task at hand now. There was nothing holding him back anymore. Nothing to divert his attention away from what needed to be done. His closest allies were either gone or out of reach from men like the Joker. Miriam was where she belonged, and Rachel would be at the penthouse soon, safe and sound. Alfred was upset with Bruce, he wanted him to stay behind and fix things.

"You can't leave it like this. Get in there and make things right. If I had let a few ill-meant words get the better of me, I would have thumped you over the head more than once years ago," Alfred said. Bruce had left the penthouse before Alfred could tell him about what Miriam had said at the hospital. Batman's comms were silenced, leaving him unable to make the connections Alfred had.

But that wasn't a luxury Batman could afford. Miriam could stay angry at him, he had time to fix things between them later. She was safe. Everything else would come later.

A head of silver reflecting the dancing hues of blue and red caught Batman's attention. Salvatore
Maroni was wearing a white suit and had a tall blonde woman, who was most certainly not his wife, on his arm. Batman narrowed his eyes as Maroni settled in his plush seat and a waitress handed him a drink. The club was almost packed to the brim with more pouring in from the long line that wound along the edge of the building. He could see security along the exits and a few in the crowd.

Batman felt like making a point.

With a loud crack, Batman broke through the skylight and dropped between the catwalks to a table on the edge of the dance floor, his cape billowing out to slow his fall. He landed with a loud and heavy thud on the stained wood, a figure of fear and menace. The DJ on the stage above the dancing horde stood agape, one hand on his headset and another on the table in front of him. The crowd stared in a static moment of astonishment.

One of the men in front of Batman reached for his gun, pulling it out with his finger on the trigger. Batman jerked the man's wrist as the shot went off, making it fire into a large spotlight above. Screams of panic drowned out the music as the crowd covered their heads with their arms against the shards of glass falling like rain from the sky. Twisting the gun from the man's hand and cracking him across the face, Batman rose to his full height as the shouts rose and people mobbed to the exits. Batman locked eyes with a panic-stricken Maroni.

Sensing movement in his peripherals, Batman threw a bola at one of the security guards running towards him, making him drop like a bag of bricks as the wire wrapped around his legs. Leaping off the table, Batman connected his fist against the jaw of another one of Maroni's men hard enough to break bone. He pirouetted away from the running figure coming up behind his back, catching the man's outstretched limb and breaking his arm just above the elbow. A glass bottle shattered across the back of Batman's neck. He twisted, unfazed, and landed a sideways kick against the man's knee, making it snap like a twig, before crushing three of his ribs. He felt the air rush out of the thug's lungs as Batman's fist drove into the hard flesh.

Batman looked up and saw Maroni making a run for the club entrance along with the other terrified party-goers. A group of six men stayed behind and reached inside their jackets for the semi-automatics holstered to their chests. Lunging behind an overturned table, Batman launched a quick series of batarangs, all striking home in various positions along the men's arms and torsos. The men cried out as blood gushed from the surface wounds. Taking advantage of the moment, Batman activated his newly minted batons and advanced on the group before they could blink. The electric current glowed blue in the dark space as Batman connected them with the obstacles in front of him, jabbing them in their ribs, cracking the sticks across their jaws, and fracturing their forearms as they tried to hit back. The high voltage pulse was enough to land the men on their backs with a direct hit.

The men were on the ground moaning in pain in the time it took Batman to grab Maroni by the collar of his shirt and smack him against the door he was trying so hard to escape through.

"Damnit, this is a new suit you're wrinkling, pal." Maroni was trying to play the situation with practiced casualness, but the sweat along his brow betrayed him. Batman's face was a carving of wrath. His eyes looked like pools of black that bored, unflinching, into Maroni.

"It's been a while, Sal." Batman increased the pressure against the man's chest, pulling Maroni up by the shirt until his toes barely touched the floor. Batman was in no mood for quips.

"Do your worst. We ain't afraid of you—we're wise to your act."

Rich words coming from a man who always had someone else to fight his battles for him.
Salvatore Maroni was a shrewd man and good at his chosen vocation, but he ruled through words and blackmail. His brand of violence came out of the barrel of a gun. He didn't know how to take a beating.

"Funny. That's what Jahan Shaddid said before I shattered his kneecap." Maroni looked unsure of how serious a threat that was supposed to be, but he felt his bones ache and joints seize at the thought. Everyone was tough until things started to break. "You know why I'm here."

"No one's going to tell you nothin'. In case you haven't noticed, the odds are in our favour." Maroni changed his tactic of playing at being smug, and Batman loosened his grip on his shirt. "Wait, wha —"

With a renewed ferocity, Batman grabbed Maroni's tie and flipped him down against the stained tile. Walking with purpose to the middle of the dance floor, Batman knocked the teeth out of any man stupid enough get up and attempt to take another swing. Maroni dragged behind, trying to ease the cinched knot cutting off his air supply. Aiming up past the metal beams supporting the metal walkways high above, Batman shot his cable-gun at the opening he created moments before. Batman pulled Maroni to his feet and shot them both up through the upper levels of The Palace. He didn't expect the police to come right away, but Batman would not be interrupted. Not tonight.

Batman dragged Maroni along the asphalt, with Maroni's legs digging in to find anything that would slow their progress, until they reached the edge of the roof. Batman thrust Maroni over the edge, only keeping him from falling by his hold on the silk tie.

"Talk," Batman said as he loosened his grip by a fraction, just enough for Maroni to wave his arms in the air and try to scramble back over to the safety of the roof.

"Y-You're not goin' to do a thing. You're bluffing." Batman stood stoic for a split-second, and for that small window of time, Maroni thought he was right.

"Watch me."

Batman let the tie slip through his fingers, and Maroni screamed as he dropped twenty feet in an instant. Maroni had failed to notice the cable, anchored to a metal vent, that Batman strapped around his ankle, but the shortstop and the wrenching of the joints from their sockets and tearing apart the muscles alerted him to its presence quickly. Batman tried not to feel a pang of vindication at the sound of Maroni's shrieking pleas for relief. Taking his time, Batman reeled Maroni back up to the edge, letting him dangle like a fish fresh out of water.

"Don't make me ask twice." Batman's voice was deep and cold, a rough rasp against his vocal cords. He crouched down until he was at eye-level with Maroni and grabbed the silk tie again. Tears and strings of saliva dripped down Maroni's face.

"Look—look, no one knows where he is. That freighter blowin' in the harbour was the… the first thing we'd heard about his setup here. We don't even know… know what the hell he's doin'." Maroni was barely conscious from the intense pain. Batman jerked the cable to keep Maroni awake, eliciting fresh cries from him.

*Have to be more careful. Don't want him passing out. Yet.*

"Someone knows where he is."

"Even… even if they did, who do you think… is goin' to give him up to you?"

It was a fair question. One that Batman didn't appreciate.
"How much longer are you going to play at being terrorists before the military comes in and crushes you like the garbage you are, Sal?" Maroni looked offended at that. Blood was rushing to his face, making his rounded cheekbones plump and, in any other context, would aptly be described as rosy.

"Terrorists? We didn't sign up for any of that. He's... he's..."

Words seemed to fail Maroni. Insane, freak, and homicidal maniac were the descriptors that came to mind, but anyone with a kernel of sense would have said the same. His vocabulary was limited in describing a man like the Joker, and the unknowable enigma at his core.

"You have the solution—solution right in front of ya. Just take off that mask and he'll come find you." The snide comments were Maroni's last efforts at staving off the pain searing through his leg.

Batman was reminded of what Alfred said less than a week before.

"You hammered these men to the point of desperation, and they've turned to a man they aren't capable of understanding. They've summoned a demon beyond their reckoning."

Not for the first time, Alfred was right.

Batman dragged Maroni back over the edge and cut the cable, giving him a sudden drop against the sticky tar of the roof. Batman stepped over Maroni's prone body, making sure to give a good nudge to the man's twisted leg, as he walked off the edge of the building to the waiting Tumbler below.

Batman had learned several integral points that were forming a larger pattern, but he still couldn't see the bigger picture. His mind raced as he patrolled the dampened alleyways around abandoned warehouses and storage sheds on Gotham's waterfronts. Batman kept the lights off and minimized the roaring rev of the engine as he searched for any possible place the Joker might have been hiding.

The Mob hired the Joker to kill the Batman, that much was clear. They wanted unencumbered control and unequivocal might, and Batman was the only thing stopping Gotham's backslide into the state that was killing her. It was also clear that whatever they had intended in hiring the Joker spiraled out of control quickly. This is where things became murky in Batman's mind.

The Joker, out of some sick desire to make a point or because he gleaned some potential of her skills at the bank, went after Miriam for a reason. If what Ivan Dimitrov said was true, then Miriam had what he had never thought possible. She possessed a dangerous skill set and exposed herself to a lifetime of danger, and he hadn't been there to stop it. After killing Commissioner Loeb, Judge Surillo, and sending in a bomb that nearly leveled the top floor of the Wayne Holdings skyscraper to kill Harvey at the fundraiser, the Joker knew where exactly where Miriam would be. There was no coincidence in that.

Three days on that freighter had taken a toll on Miriam. The frost damage to her fingers and feet were reversible, and the state of her head injuries and the prolonged period of time before the Joker released the video suggested that Miriam was incapacitated until that point. The Joker kept her alive for more than a video, but he wasn't concerned enough about her health to keep frostbite at bay or mitigate her injuries. It also didn't explain why he would have broken into the penthouse in the first place.
The Joker also didn't seem concerned with expending resources or have any sense or care for the potential sabotaging of his own operations. The explosion on the freighter and the attack on the memorial were disasters on levels previously unseen in Gotham. Batman was in the heart of the ship, where the men from the meeting with White's gang were unloading the explosives. They were storing them in a room directly adjacent to the engine room, and they were not careful to keep the vials of nitroglycerin properly stored. It only took Batman placing the vials outside their cooling containers and placing them by the hot engines for the rapid heating to cause a chain reaction that sunk the ship in less than ten minutes. He had made sure no one was in the blast radius on the deck, and his quick sweep of the ship on his way to Miriam had ensured no one died. He had hoped his intervention would halt any plan the Joker had in motion, but he was wrong.

Sixteen people died of gunshot wounds as a direct consequence of Batman's choices. He was so focused on Miriam, on getting her home, and the chance of stopping the threat the Joker posed before things escalated beyond his control. There was no way for Batman to find a discernible pattern of behaviour in the Joker. Batman thought of the conversation he had with Alfred after the Joker's fourth bank robbery, the one where he'd met Miriam.

"Criminals aren't difficult to understand, Alfred," he'd said.

"With respect, Master Bruce, perhaps this isn't a man you fully understand." At the time, he was only half-listening to what Alfred said, thinking it was just another one of Alfred's preambles or war stories. He foolishly thought he had more important things to worry about.

"A long time ago, I was in Burma. My friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders by bribing them with precious stones, but their caravans were being raided just north of Rangoon by a bandit." Bruce's attention was still divided then, but he began to focus when he realized he hadn't heard this story before. Alfred was walking toward him, trying to impart the wisdom in his words. "So, we went looking for the stones. But in six months, we never found anyone who'd traded with him." Bruce was paying attention then, trying to figure out the end of Alfred's story.

"One day, I saw a child playing with a ruby the size of a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away."

"So why steal them?" His stomach had felt knotted up. He thought of the security footage at the time, and the way the Joker loomed over Miriam.

"Well, because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with."

There were no answers that satisfied Batman's mind. No way to tackle the problem head-on. No way to stop the madness that unspooled all his efforts. There was only one solution he could think of as Alfred's voice rang in his mind.

"Some men just want to watch the world burn."

The lights were dimmed down when Bruce walked into the penthouse. It was the early hours of the morning and Bruce didn't expect anyone to be up. He didn't pay attention to anything as he walked down the hall. He needed to see if Miriam was awake, just in case. He needed to see if she was willing to hear him out.

Coming up to her bedroom, Bruce opened the door as quietly as he could. The light was still on in her room and the mess hadn't changed since Bruce packed a bag full of her clothes hours before.
Miriam was a small huddled shape under a thick mound of blankets. He walked over to her bed and saw her resting form. Her black hair was wild and covered most of her face and pillow. Pushing back the tangled strands, he saw that she looked more at peace than she did when she was awake. She didn't look afraid anymore, but the bruises and cuts along her cheeks dispelled any illusion she was alright. Bruce noticed the ring he gave her the Christmas before he left on her finger. A pang of guilt twisted his stomach.

Bruce dropped down and whispered into Miriam's ear in short, quiet breaths before placing a gentle kiss on her head. He didn't know how he was going to undo what was already done, how to take away the pain he knew would plague her for the rest of her life—just like it had for him. An unfamiliar feeling of uncertainty swept through him as he shut the door behind him in silence.

Shirking off his long-sleeved sweater, Bruce walked shirtless across the hall to the living room. He had too much to think about before he could sleep. Touching his bruised abdomen and tender ribs, he pretended not to see Rachel sitting in a far chair. The bright lights of Gotham illuminated her outline in the dark.

"You're late," Rachel said as she turned on the table-side lamp. A sprawled open book lay next to her bare, curled-up legs. Bruce tried hard not to stare at how smooth her skin looked under the warm light, or at the half-bun sitting low on her neck that draped her face with loose ringlets. He wasn't succeeding.

"A bit early for reading, isn't it?" Bruce asked, changing course and walking within the glowing rings of the lamp. She kept her gaze on his face, but he could see her struggle to keep her eyes from wandering down his chest. Bruce smirked, which only made Rachel angry. She let out a long breath through her nose.

"Did you find anything, at least?" Rachel asked as she raised up from the white cloth chair. Her red nightshirt stopped just at her mid-thigh. Now it was Bruce's turn to keep his gaze averted from her bared skin. It was hard for him to be around Rachel, he could never find the version of himself that was compatible with being with her entirely. There was always some block—some obstacle—that kept them apart. Every time he looked at her face, at her lips, he was reminded of how she was with someone else.

"Nothing useful. He's like an eel, or a rat that's too smart for traps. I just have to find the right approach, find the right person to break."

"Why do you sound so flippant? Thinking of him like he's an animal—or even a normal person—is a mistake. We both know he's more than that, Bruce. He's not going to stop." Bruce took a step towards Rachel, leaving only a small space between them. Being around her, the faint smell of vanilla and of home when his parents were still alive almost made him lose himself. It also made his decision easier to bear.

"That day we talked about, Rachel? The day where Gotham wouldn't need men like Batman—I thought it was coming. Maybe... maybe Batman isn't what Gotham needs right now."

Bruce thought of Miriam; she certainly didn't seem to benefit from Bruce being gone. Now he was letting Rachel slip through his grasp. If he wasn't Batman, if he had never been Batman, he could have his arms wrapped around Rachel. Miriam would never have gotten hurt. He didn't know if he could sacrifice them, he didn't think he could forgo them for the greater good. Doubt permeated his mind, clouding it.

Rachel cocked her head to the side, raising her eyebrows in that disapproving way, imploring him to be honest.
"It's like he's disappeared off the map. I can't find him, Rachel. Maybe it's time for the Batman to turn himself in. To stop this once and for all."

Her blue eyes widened and Rachel looked up at Bruce through her long lashes. It was almost like she was trying to drive him crazy on purpose. She shook her head.

"Bruce—"

"Did you mean it, when you said we could be together?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

Bruce didn't let Rachel finish. He closed the distance between them and kissed her hard. His hands wrapped in her hair, moving along her neck to keep her close. Her warm hands on his chest gently pushed him back, but he didn't move his hands from her. He didn't care that she was with Harvey. He wanted them to be together before everything fell apart.

"Bruce, you know we shouldn't."

But, to Bruce, her eyes were pleading with him not to stop. They stared at one another for a long minute, the tension raising their body temperature to a fever pitch. Closing her eyes, it was Rachel who kissed him first. Her chest pressed against the curve of his stomach as her arms wandered along his biceps, up his shoulders, and rested on his neck and worked through his hair. Bruce's hand dropped down to her waist and hips, pushing her closer to him as his hands slipped past the thin fabric of her nightgown. His tongue traced along hers, his teeth pulling at her bottom lip. Rachel kissed him back with a fierce desire that Bruce only experienced last year in the ruins of his childhood home. His fear and doubt slipped away as they folded into one another.

He pulled away for a moment, to make sure she wanted this as much as he did. Rachel's lips were bright red and swollen, just as his were surely the same. Bruce could barely hold himself back. Rachel's fingers traced his collarbone and the muscles that defined his broad chest. Wordlessly, she took him by the hand and led him to his bedroom. Her eyes signalled the same desires his did: they had found a shelter from the storm in one another. As they collapsed against the bed and her thighs curled around his hips, he hoped that morning would never come.
"Listen, habibti, I'll be back around. You'll see, just keep your eye on the horizon."

Those were the last words my father said to me before he rode off. It wasn't like he went very far, he stayed in Gotham. Jahan Shaddid is not a noble man, he just likes to talk like one. No, he was being dramatic. He had a flair for that. He even had the stones to do it with a wink and a smile, like he wasn't leaving his six-year-old kid behind while he went to make a living ripping people off and leaving them bloody.

My father is an easy man to like, but difficult to love. Mom told me what he was like when they first met after she found out she was sick. From what she told me, he was handsome and charming, a smooth talker with a lot of potential of being an artist. That's where they first met—in a painting class. I'm just glad it wasn't pottery. I would never have been able to get that stupid scene from Ghost out of my head otherwise. He moved from Algeria when he was young with his parents and was eager to make a lasting impression on the world. Mom said the thing she always liked most about him was his ability to make her laugh.

My father is also a talented liar.

Mom was in her last year of university out of state studying history and political science. Her parents wanted her to fit in with the higher social circles in Gotham, marry well, and take over the family pharmaceutical company. Mom didn't talk about my grandparents often, but I knew they were shrewd people with an eye always trained on public appearances and making good connections.

"Bunch of stuck-up toadies," Mom would say when she'd had too much wine and she felt like reminiscing. This was usually after I had dragged her up to her room. She was always bitter right before she went to bed, like a little kid who stayed up past their bedtime.

My parents weren't together for long, only a few months. I have a few memories of them being in the same room and laughing together when they were feeling civil enough during my first birthday parties and recitals. Those moments were rare and often punctuated with vague memories of screamed insults and the tossing of various potted plants when my father would visit. One of the few lingering and solid memories that stayed with me were when my father gave me lessons in Arabic. I was small and soaked up the language like water. I was six when Mom stopped letting him come around when he got in deep with the gangs in Gotham's inner-city. She gave him an ultimatum: it was either me or the path into crime that he was following. Obviously, he didn't choose me.

The language slipped away as I grew older, and I only remembered numbers and names for animals. I lost everything else when he decided to walk away. When I was a little older, Mom offered for me to take more language lessons to "keep part of my heritage alive." Much like I dropped learning how to play the piano, I also didn't want to learn anything to do with him. Mom never lied to me about him, but you had to wait until she dipped into the gin before she got really vocal about it. Apart from the small things Mom would tell me, the only other way I learned about my father was through the small glimmers on TV, until one day all I saw when I looked at him was an outlandish character that bore a resemblance to me.
Mom told me that some part of her legitimately loved him, but she could also be vindictive. It was in her last days, during her more lucid moments, that she admitted she went out with him to make my grandparents angry and to field away the questions surrounding her sexuality that followed her since she was a teenager. My mom was gay, but she was too stubborn to admit it to anyone until after I was born. She told my grandparents it was more important for her to be happy than live a complete lie for the rest of her life. They fell out after that. It was a couple of years later that they died in a car crash. My grandparents never reconciled with Mom in person, but they left her and Aunt Martha the bulk of their estate.

It was when Mom was dying that she left me her wedding ring. She never married: she was a serial dater that never settled with anyone longer than a couple of years. But the ring was her mother’s, and Aunt Martha was already married when my grandmother died, so it went to Mom instead.

"The first person you should marry is yourself," she said to me when I was twelve. She told me a lot of things that wouldn't make sense until I was older. My personal favourite was "I don't expect anything from you, that's not my job." I'm still trying to work that one out, but I think it was meant to be a statement of acceptance —there wasn’t anything I could do that would disappoint her.

It wasn’t until she was almost gone that I appreciated the weird pieces of advice she’d given me or conversations we’d had. For all her flaws, Mom was the type of woman you couldn't help but agree with. Even when she was dying, she had a forcefulness that almost tricked me into believing she would get better, that she'd pull through after all.

"Find your reason to live beyond me, Miriam," Mom said.

She was in the hospital bed that had been her home for the past three months, her arms tied to the sides in padded cuffs. This was one of her rare moments of sanity. She had whittled away to bone, her skin stretched taut over her frail skeleton beneath. Her bright auburn hair had disappeared after the first round of chemo. Bruce and I kept the room filled with daisies—Mom and I's favourite—but even they couldn't mask the smell of rot and antiseptic.

"This isn't fair, Mom. You can't leave me here. You can't leave me alone."

"You'll never be alone, Miri. You have a good heart, follow your gut and never lose your spirit. Or your nerve. They'll keep you going through anything, if you feed them the right things." She even managed one of her trademark winks, which was more of a poorly-timed asymmetrical spasm than anything. It was almost like she was well again. I shook my head and held her hand as hard as I thought she could bear. I could feel every tendon, every bone in her small, pale hand.

I thought she was reiterating some of New Age or Eastern philosophy she was reading about up until that year. Mom had a lot of eccentricities, but she didn't much care what anyone thought about them, including me. Part of me thought it was the cancer, that she was spouting something she didn't really believe to gloss over the ugly truth smothering the room.

"You are my light, Miri. You always have been." I couldn't look at her anymore then, I just held her close. "Endure, Miriam. When you have nothing left to fight back with, endure."

Her last words reflected the engraving on the small gold band of her wedding ring. I read the words for the first time after she balled it in my hand.

Mon Amour Dure.

My Love Endures.
I want to burn everything in what used to be my room. It still looks like it did before I left that day, before I had that one last shot at a normal life.

As the sun travels across the sky and gives way to the late autumn moon, the once comforting objects take on an upsetting glare. The shadow of my closet hides shapes that sit in wait, watching me. The necklaces, accessories, and textbooks on my shelves have been contaminated by him. The smells alone are enough to make me feel ill. I'll never touch my perfume again. I don't want to keep anything he might have touched. Nothing in my room can make me feel safe again. I'm too tired to get off the bed and turn on the light, to dispel the haunting silhouettes. My mind seems eager to dwell on the black of the room, to stew in the hate I thought I put behind me years ago.

Sitting in the middle of the bed with blankets piled all around me, I use my teeth to pull back the bandages on my hands. I try to keep about a sense of detachment that I used during dissection days in biology as I see the red blisters that pock all along my fingers and knuckles. They're healing well if Doctor Rose is to be believed. The dark helps hide the damage. I try flexing my fingers back and forth and find myself pleased at the dexterity I still somehow employ.

A faint tap against the wood door startles me. I pull my comforter further up my body and over my head, ignoring the sound.

*I'm never talking to them again. I'm buying a ticket to Hawaii and getting the hell out of here. Nothing bad happens there, right?*

"Miriam? It's me, Rachel. Can I come in?" Hers is a voice I didn't expect to hear for another few months.

I mutter something non-committal and she enters. Rachel looks more exhausted than she did last night, even in the dark, but she's still dressed in a spotless white blouse and a flattering gray skirt. Her long brown hair fans around her face in loose curls. Her spotless appearance makes me self-conscious and all too aware of how awful I look in comparison.

Rachel turns on the light, causing me to squint and hide my face behind my hand, and looks around the room for a place to sit. Finding nothing but heaps of clothes on the floor, she settles down on the edge of the mattress. I curl my legs away from her. This is the first time she's ever set out to initiate a conversation when it was just me and Bruce or Alfred weren't around. Her red painted lips curl up in a half-smile.

"How are your hands doing?" Rachel asks, pointing to the fingers sticking out past the blanket.

*Any longer in the cold and I would have had permanent nerve damage. I'm lucky I didn't lose fingers, and I look like I'm in the early stages of leprosy. How do you think they're doing?*

"Why are you here, Rachel?" I ask instead. Her smile grows.

"Fair enough. Bruce asked me to stay until things... settle down a bit. He's worried. The Joker's been posting his targets in the papers."

"He-he's coming after you, too?" As awkward as our relationship is, I would never wish any interaction with him on her.

"He's named Harvey, and by extension that includes me. With Jim gone, this is one of the few safe havens left in Gotham." I realize that Rachel must know about Bruce, how could she not? She's known him longer than I have.

"It's... it's not that safe. Th-The Joker was already in here once." Saying his name feels like an
invocation, an invitation for further pain. I swallow hard and stare at the bubbling blisters on my hands.

"Bruce told me. It'll be OK, I think. If anything, the Joker's shown he's a bit like lightning—he never strikes the same spot twice," she says with a conspiratorial wink. I can see the faint tremor in her hand. She's scared too.

"When did you find out?" Rachel glances at me and raises her brow in question. "About Batman. How long have you known?"

"Ah. Well, since last year. During the riots when Crane released the gas in the Narrows. I was there, you know. Trying to help as best I could." I sit up further in bed and stare at her, my anger with Bruce temporarily set aside.

Bruce sent me on a two week trip to Europe for a technical training session a week before it happened. It was painful leaving when he'd only been back for a few months, and it was even worse when I came back and everything I owned was ash. I guess it made more sense now.

"Why would you do that? Weren't you scared?"

News channels everywhere ran countless segments highlighting the extreme violence that happened at the first outbreak, how it rippled out as the gas spread. I remembered watching it happen and trying to call Bruce from my hotel room in Prague. I thought he didn't answer because he was too busy getting drunk and setting fires, but somehow the truth seems worse. It took police weeks to contain most of it back in the Narrows. Rachel moves closer toward me, shifting across the bed. Her voice stays at a low and soothing pitch.

"Of course I was. I was scared out of my mind. Crane had... he dosed me with his fear gas the day before the attack happened. I still have nightmares about what I saw." Rachel stares off into space for a moment. Her smile falters before it returns, lighting up the room. I can understand now, at least a little bit, why Bruce loves her. "Batman—Bruce saved me. He made sure I was alright. If there's anything I've learned in my life, it's that being scared is OK. It just means you get a chance to be brave, to make a different choice—to be better."

"But, all those people died—you almost died. Doesn't that bother you?" It surprises me how good it feels to talk to her. Rachel is the last person I ever thought I would feel comfortable confiding in. She takes a deep breath, considering her words before she speaks. This is the most we've spoken since I came to see her four years ago.

"When Bruce first came back, I thought he had become the type of man I abhorred. I didn't see the smart, sweet boy I knew growing up."

That's something I know too well.

"But when I found out he was Batman, everything made sense. That aligned with who I knew Bruce to be. Batman is Bruce's true self, and he wants to protect what, and who, he cares about. Sometimes those things come into conflict. Bad things happen no matter where you are, it's not specific to Gotham, even if it feels like it."

I can tell she's talking about more than what happened to her. I look away and stare at the blue patterned throw-rug on the floor, trying to ignore her points. The peace-maker in me wants to latch on to what she's saying, but the deep pain of Alfred and Bruce's duplicity is enough for rage to burn in me.
"They're out of anyone's control, even Batman's. I think if he had made any other choice, had done anything differently, there still would have been casualties. Batman can't stop men like the Joker and Jonathan Crane from existing. I trust Bruce. I trust him to do what's right. And I'm proud of him, even if it makes it almost impossible for me to be around him."

I let her words sink in long after she gave me a brief, and unreciprocated, hug and left the room, shutting me in to wait out the night.

Bruce and Alfred don't try to see me. Whether it's because Rachel told them not to or because they're afraid of what I'll say, I'm not sure. Maybe they don't know what to do with me just as much as I don't know what to do with them. Rachel doesn't see their lies as a betrayal, but as something to be admired, even from a distance. I don't know if I'll ever get to that place. Loneliness wraps itself around me in a blanket of familiarity.

The silence and solitude give me time to think back on my life. My mind lingers back to the mistakes I've made, the mental monument of my failures. I've never stopped being scared, even before all of this. I can grasp at bravery and pretend for a while, but never attain it permanently. Mom would have known what to do right now, what to say. She would have held me, ran her fingers through my hair, and stayed with me until I fell asleep. Mom was always there to hold my hand, to brush me off and pick me up when I fell—always had the right words and did the right thing. She would've set the world on fire if it meant making sure I was OK.

But that's part of the problem, isn't it?

I can't even say if my anger is truly directed at Bruce or at myself. Too many people get hurt because of me. Mom's bravery wasn't the only thing I didn't learn: I missed all her independence, her ingenuity, her selfless heart. I can't even say I'm like my father, I haven't seen him in so long that I barely remember his face unaided. Bruce may be a liar, but he at least has the guts to take action in what he believes in. I'm stuck in a No Man's Land, waiting for someone to tell me what to do while everyone drops around me.

A thought bubbles in my brain, slow at first, but it quickly gains momentum.

Maybe it's not too late. I can still help Parker. If they haven't found his body, that means he could still be alive. I can still do something good.

I throw the blankets from my shoulders and drop to the floor, crawling underneath my bed for my old computer. I see the hard-shell blue case protecting the heavy mass of circuit boards and internal processors and pull it toward me. The CPU is much older and slower than my newer, and much more expensive, laptop. Something tells me that I'm not going to see it again, not unless I wanted to go knocking on the Joker's door.

Just thinking about it is enough for me to nearly throw up on the bedroom carpet. My back becomes a mess of jangled knots and spasms, as if my body remembers a pain my mind doesn't want to.

"Be brave," I tell myself aloud, like somehow hearing the words will make it real.

It has to.

I power up the old computer, plugging in the charging cable into the wall and wait for the login screen. This was the terminal I used when I did my work for Ivan. It was the first computer I custom built back in high school, and I'm glad the sentimental part of me didn't let it go. It hurts to move my fingers with any of the speed I was used to before, but I make it work.
It doesn't take me long to access the Kwan's FutureGen medical company servers. I helped write the code Parker used to develop the bulk of the security software for the company when it first started. FutureGen expanded to be the main software and database provider for over three-quarters of the medical centres in Gotham and the greater metropolitan area. If Parker was accessing hospital files, then this would have been his way in. I try not to think of the implications a data breach that large would do, of the enormous amount of information anyone—no, not just anyone—the Joker could have access to. It would be a one-stop list of potential targets. I can only hope that Parker did something, anything, to alter or corrupt the files.

Using the admin privileges I wrote for myself, I search for Parker's signature tag: harvestmooner. Borne from Parker's favourite song and video game, Parker likes exploring the prankster side of hacking, and he thought his tag should reflect his juvenile sense of humor. I remember his big accomplishment senior year was changing the digital construction signs around school from "Caution: Construction Ahead" to the lyrics of Aqua's "Barbie Girl" on a loop. That's the kind of guy he is, always looking to make someone laugh, even if it was just me. He made me listen, quite unwillingly at first, to classic rock and folk music when we first became friends.

"How many things am I gonna have to teach you? You won't read and you won't listen to anything other than K-Pop and heavy metal. You need to open your mind to the possibilities, my friend," he said to me one night when, after a particularly bad day at school, I stole the Gotham Academy's football team mascot costume and lit it on fire in the backwoods of the Manor. We had a bottle of wine that I took from the cellar, with plans to get tipsy on fancy alcohol, and we were roasting marshmallows well into the night. I would try to pretend that I didn't like any of the stuff he'd make me listen to or read. It took months for him to catch me blaring Bon Iver and Amos Lee of my own volition, and he would lord it over me every chance he got.

Snapping out of my state of reverie, I focus on the task at hand, and it doesn't take me long to find what I'm looking for. Someone using Parker's tag accessed the servers and the nests of information less than twelve hours ago. I look through dozens of code files, looking for any message embedded in its intricate depths that would act as a clue.

After over an hour, I find it. It's a simple line, but it's enough to make my heart soar.

3889 155 Stickney and Main, it reads.

Parker's alive, and he needs my help. I refuse to let him down, not again.

Indecision, doubt, and, above all else, fear, invade my mind. With it, a new barrage of images crashes into me.

"That's what dear ol' Brucie's like, eh? Sounds like a real prima donna, that one," the Joker said.

"He... he's a jerk. Not a good friend." I remember saying it, but I don't remember what I told him or the context. It's all jumbled up, an incongruent mass of pain and flashing images of purple, green, and red. I was laying on my back, staring at the swirls of rusted water stains and tracings of decay that ate away little patterns in the ceiling of the room. He was right next to me, his side glued to mine in some vague parody of stargazing, his fingers pointing out constellations that did not exist.

"Well, turns out Parker's not so hot, either. What do ya say we become friends instead? People are always dying for one of those." Remembering his laughter is enough for me to shove the rest deep down, somewhere it won't flicker back up in my mind. I focus on Rachel's words.

It's a chance to be brave. Like Parker was for me. I need to help him, no matter what.
The analogue clock at the bottom of my screen alerts me to the late hour as I try to think of a plan. Something takes shape, forming out of the cloud of guilt and pain that obscures my mind, formulating into some idiotic plan that just might work. But I have work to do if I want it to come to fruition. There's only one way I can see any of this working, and that means seeing him. My father.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, Everyone! I want to again thank each and every one of you who have read, commented, gave kudos, and bookmarked this story. Your support means so, so much to me, and I probably won't ever stop thanking you and expressing my deepest gratitude. Truly.

A note on the timeline: this is happening simultaneously to Bruce's encounter with Maroni in "Reckoning."

I'd love to keep hearing from all of you! Until next weekend!
“Do you know what our name means, habibti?” my father asked me once.

It was summer and my father took me on a rare outing to the beach. We played in the sand mostly. It was too cold to play in the ocean for long and, even back then, I preferred laying out in the sun. I liked the feeling of the warmth on my skin, the tingling heat that enlivened my body and drifted my mind to places of adventure.

My father seemed so big in my mind. His hair was longer then, wrapping around his ears in lazy half-curls. He liked the sun, too. His skin had grown darker in the July heat and it stuck out sharply against the large, bright yellow towel we reclined on. I mimicked his posture, keeping my chest out and chin tilted up in defiance against the sun's rays. He had a beard that he would rub against my face every time he went to give me a hug. I remember hating the feeling of it against my skin, how it tickled and scratched, but he would laugh when he did it and so would I.

Mom told me my last name was Kane, and I knew he didn't share the name—Mom said it just belonged to her and me. My five-year-old mind didn't understand his question, but I remember wondering why it mattered. Kane meant 'family' in my brain then. I didn't understand that Kane wasn't the name he was referring to. I shook my head in response, thinking this was the set up for a joke or fun game.

“Shaddid means 'strong.' Strong like a lion. And do you know what that means?” he asked.

I shook my head again, enjoying the serious nature of the attention he was giving me. It made me feel special, wanted. I didn't often feel that way around my father.


He was asking if I understood, and I thought I did. If he was anything to go by, then I understood strength as a guise, deception, remorselessness, control, physical presence, emotional stagnation, and behaviour ruled by self-interest. The association with strength and violence became so pronounced as to permanently link the two together in my mind.

His words stuck with me for years. Hell, they're one of the few vivid things about him I remember with absolute clarity. But, despite that, they never seemed to fit; it was mercurial and intangible—something I could think about but fall short of replicating. I couldn't live up to any of the examples my parents set before me. I tried to be the brand of strength my father talked about, and all I accomplished was hurting those closest to me. His definition of strength was a curtain to hide behind. Mom told me to endure, and I thought of it then as its own brand of cowardice.

Suffering is a good teacher. It would be a long time before I understood—before I knew that sometimes to change who you are, you have to be stripped down to the bone and remade anew.

"Never cower. Never run. We are lions—say it, habibti."

His fierceness scared me. I didn't want to say the words.

"Babba—"
"You need to say it, Maryam. We are lions."

I know now it was a sacred bond to him, some code that I couldn't decipher the significance of. Some link to an understanding I didn't think existed.

"We are lions."

You'd think a man like my father, who's been in the game almost as long as I've been alive, would make his passwords more difficult to crack: mosalah2791—the name of one of the world's most popular soccer players and Jahan's birth year backwards. Complete child's play if you narrow down your target's interests enough, and his privacy settings on Facebook are sorely lacking. It made it easy to see where his current interests lay. That, coupled with brute-force password cracking software and a RAT, got me access to his emails, desktop, browsing history, calendar, Facebook, Dropbox, and last known location in a matter of minutes.

I have a pretty good understanding of where his life is at right now, and it gives me a grim sense of satisfaction that it's just as pathetic as I imagined. The ever-flowing amount of information about his personal tastes, sex life, hit list, everything he ever planned for his gang, and shopping habits are more than any one person should know about another—more than a child should ever know about their parent. All his secrets are mine to find.

The temptation is strong, but I try not to look at everything, just skim for the information I need. The drive to delve deeper, to see what can't be unseen, is a keen pang. I suppress the urge with a cursory search through the various articles and news clips posted online in the last week. There are floods of tweets about how scared people are to leave their homes and the small but growing groups of citizens who are looking to abandon the city altogether. Even more are dedicated to vilifying the Batman and his inability to catch the Joker. Mayor Garcia hasn't even declared a state of emergency after the attack on the memorial. Instead, he's calling in specialized task forces and FBI teams to maintain order as public outcry rises with each dead police officer and civilian. None of them have any news about Parker, either. Most only graze over him in passing, like his entire existence ceased to matter.

My heartbeat accelerates painfully as I see the Joker's face plastered everywhere. Articles hail him as Gotham's most prominent criminal to ever exist, a madman converted by some foreign philosophy or a leftover from the insanity of last year's attack. Every article runs with rampant speculation on the Joker's mental state and attempts to understand his motives.

**TERROR IN GOTHAM: MASS-MURDERING CLOWN KILLS 16**

**THE JOKER: MADMAN OR AL QAEDA HITMAN?**

**CHAOS IN THE STREETS: WHERE IS BATMAN?**

**MORE COPS MURDERED: IS ANYONE SAFE?**

Just reading the headlines and seeing his face is enough to make me feel ill and for the rusted-out walls of the ship to come back, closing in around me. None of the articles are completely right; they only skim the facts in exchange for sensationalism. They know even less than I thought they would and seem to be stoking the fires of panic and fear.

*So much for investigative journalism.*

It's ironic how much the media glorified Batman incessantly only six weeks ago just to turn on him
with a savage ferocity—all made possible by the immediacy of the internet. A small part of me feels sorry for Bruce and the pressure he's under, trying to juggle superhuman amounts of responsibility for nothing in return. I temper the urge for empathy quickly.

_He brought it on himself. No one made him dress up like a Cirque du Solei performer in high-tech tights and beat the shit out of people at night. He's the reason this is happening in the first place._

Deep down, I know what Rachel said is closer to the truth than what I'm feeling, but rationality doesn't play a part in my feelings towards Bruce. My rage runs too deep, and I let it fester for far too long. Pretending everything was OK for a year was a mistake. If we both live long enough, then we'll need to work it out, but I'm not in any mood to think objectively on why Bruce and Alfred lied to me. My pain fuels me into action. I can't let Parker down the way they did to me. I can't go to the police, the Joker's been targetting them for a bloodbath, and I know they won't take me seriously. They've already all but forgotten him.

I go to close the tabs I've been reading through, but not before I see the other news stories dedicated to Jim Gordon and memorial sites for the victims of the attack. A profound sense of guilt wracks through me. I wipe at my eyes but I don't look over those, I don't want to read what they say. I quickly write down the address of Jahan's club, the Amaseena, and move to change.

As the month comes close to ending, the weather has only gotten colder, and I don't feel like testing my luck and lose my fingers this time. Changing into a dense pair of leggings, knit sweater, and winter jacket makes me feel like I overdid it with the layers. I only need to think of the numbing cold of the ship and the burning blisters on my hands to chase the thought away and stuff an extra sweater and pair of mitts in my backpack, just in case.

After wrapping my hands carefully in gauze, going around each finger with care not to pull the material too tight, I stuff my CPU inside my backpack and pull out my old Swiss Army knife and shove it in my pocket. I keep it close to the rolls of twenty-dollar bills that I'd kept from my hacking days in high school. I have no idea how to use a knife, but I figure that it's better to have something than nothing at all.

The pattern of crisscrossing scars and the sinister look in Zsasz's eyes as he tried to squeeze the life out of me over-impose what I'm seeing. All the layers of clothing suddenly feel like too much and I'm sweating.

_This may be the stupidest thing you've ever done in your life, but you don't get to be a coward. Not this time._

I take several rattled breaths and rise to leave the room. My hand rests on the cold metal of the handle when the sound of shoes hitting the floor outside in gentle taps makes me stop dead. My first instinct is to hide in my closet, but I drop myself back on the bed and pile all the blankets around me in a mounted heap, hoping that my clothes and bag are covered completely. I close my eyes just as the door opens. A growing flicker of panic makes me want to open them, to make sure the Joker didn't come back. I force out a gentle breath.

_You're OK. You're alright—just stay calm. You can't help Parker if you're locked in your room. Don't let them see your bag, just stay still. Breathe, just breathe._

All my years pretending to sleep when someone needed something from me pays off. I sense someone standing over me, the warmth of their body as they come close. The tension leaves me when I catch the faint smell of Bruce's earthy cologne—the scent of freshly mown grass and cedar. He releases a breath and drops down next to me; his warm hand brushes away strands of my hair from my face. My eyes almost pry open when I hear his voice, quiet against my ear.
"I meant what I said, I always have. You are my family, Miri. That'll never change—that's a promise I'll never break."

I don't have time to think about his words when he presses a quick kiss against my head, and I lay stunned in the warm folds of the blankets. It takes me more than a minute to compose myself long after he's left the room and closed the door behind him.

Two taxis, a trip to Wal-Mart, and three full-fledged panic attacks are what it took to stand outside the Amaseena.

It had to be two taxis because I nearly threw up in the first one less than a block away from the penthouse. The cabbie thought I was high and kicked me out, and the terror of staying in the open for long was mitigated by the certainty of the fight I would get into with Bruce and Alfred if I went back. I also knew that the longer I left Parker, the closer he was to death. The note I left on the counter that would hopefully convince them that I went to the Kwan's to check on Parker's family. It was doubtful but still worth a try. I found another cab with surprising speed for it being just past four in the morning.

The stop at a 24-hour Wal-Mart was to get a burner phone, a hand-held radio, firecrackers, and several road flares. The close proximity of Halloween meant that government-approved explosives and the economy's debilitating reliance on consumerist expenditure ensured they had what I needed.

My other two panic attacks were triggered by nothing more than a quick look from the driver and the lingering smell of smoke and gasoline in the backseat. They were enough to shake me to my core and have me in near hysterics. I couldn't stop the Joker's voice from resounding in my head, bouncing around and sneaking up from behind. The driver looked glad to be rid of me when he dropped me off and I made sure to tip him well for his trouble.

I stare at the building in front of me. The first floor of the brown brick has been painted over with a glaring shade of white. Neon lights advertising "GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS" and a large sign written in an Arabic-style reads "The Amaseena." The three floors above it seem more like the layout of an apartment complex to me, but I know from my father's emails that this is all that's left of the little empire he tried so hard to build. Even remembering his gang name, the Djinn, is enough to make me chuckle—I guess he thought employing the name would inspire fear that they were demons incarnate. Too bad it took less than six months for everything they had to be crushed under Batman's boot. My father also assumed people cared enough to look up what it actually meant.

*Looks like the name didn't do much at all.*

I take out my new brick of a phone and check the time.

*5:05 am. If I don't move fast, then Bruce will wake up and do... whatever it is he does as Batman.*

Most of the city will still be asleep, just like Alfred and Bruce were when I left them. It took me extra time to disable the new alarms Bruce set up. They were good, maybe even good enough to keep men like the Joker out, but they weren't enough to keep me in. If I can get this done quickly, then no one even needs to know I'm gone and Parker will be home safe.

Tucking my scarf closer to my chin to shield me against the wind and hide the bruises, I cross the street. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I knock loudly on the club entrance. No reply. No sound of approaching footsteps. I knock again, harder this time.
A small glare catches my eye and I look up to see a surveillance camera to my right. I pull the hood of my jacket down and stare at the small opaque screen. Nothing happens. The street and the building remain quiet, and I turn away to look for a back entrance when the door pops open.

"Who the fuck're you?" a large man with a head full of long black hair asks. He has a nasty scar running from his left eye, which is a cloudy white, down to his throat. Judging from his severely wrinkled dress shirt and puffy-eyed glare, I woke him from whatever dreams he was having.

He isn't the Joker and he isn't Zsasz. Jahan may be scum, but he won't turn me down and he won't hurt me. Not after all this time.

My rationalizing doesn't mitigate the waves of nausea and burning nerves that scream at me to leave. I keep my head as high as I can and force myself to look him in the eye.

"Miriam Kane, Jahan's daughter. I need to speak with him." I try to say it with authority. Even with the cuts on my face and bruises along my cheekbones, I know anyone familiar with my father will recognize me. It's both advantageous and dangerous that my name has been in the news so much recently, and I'm not sure which it will be here.

The man's face arches in surprise. His one good eye takes in my appearance before speaking.

"Shit, right. Uh, come in, I guess." He's looking at me strangely now, like I'm an old acquaintance he's trying to place. After a long moment, the man steps back from the entrance and ushers me inside.

The inside of the club is dirty and littered with trash. Liquor stains the floor and edges of the carpet, and the walls are a shade of green that reminds me of spring pine. Silver strip poles and aging wood seats line the periphery of the dance floor. They obviously haven't cleaned from the night's festivities: more than one used condom sits on the floor near the tables, broken glasses lay glistening in the faint light, and empty bottles of beer stand guard at varying vantage points along the club's tables and counters. The smell of smoke hits me again, and I'm transported away from the club.

I can't see his face, but his hands are on me, crawling up my shirt and tracing the lining of my bra. I'm paralyzed, my arms are heavy and weak. My head hurts, everything hurts. The dark shadow hangs over me, choking the life from me. He's leaning on my stomach. I can't breathe, he's crushing me. My legs are pinned. I can't move. I need to get him off, I need to fight—

"Now, now. What did I say about touching my things, hmm?"

"You deaf, or what?"

My eyes snap back to the man in front of me, leaving me dazed with an overwhelming sense of vertigo. He's looking at me with an offended brand of concern, with the type of discomfort only men unfamiliar with emotion are capable of. I wipe at the steady line of sweat trickling across my brow and shake my head.

"Lead the way," I say, trying to jar the memory from my mind. Forgetting would be much more helpful than remembering right now. Fear licks at my consciousness. I still don't remember the context of what I'm seeing—or if they're even real or some nightmare-fueled hallucination brought on by my head injuries. I try not to let my trembling show and swallow the acid climbing up my throat.

He takes me up several flights of stairs, occasionally glancing back at me and giving me the same
strange look from when he let me in. We pass several doors with writing in Arabic I can't fully decipher, and each new floor is totally silent. Our echoing footsteps seem to be the only sound in the entire building, giving it a haunted feel. Just going up a few flights has me winded. We reach the top floor and I brace myself against the chipped wood railing as I try to catch my breath.

You're fine. Don't show any weakness and you'll be fine. He's scum, but he won't hurt you. Breathe.

The man raps his knuckles against the door, his hand rests on the handle, waiting for a reply.

"Dakhal," a voice says from the other side of the metal frame.

The door opens to reveal a room filled with black leather couches and light blue walls. Intricate floral-based tiles, mahogany floors, and a half-dozen different ceramic vases give the room a refined air, even as it's tempered by the smell of alcohol and cologne that reminds me of Axe body spray. A man with short black hair and complexion mirroring my own greets me. His leg's propped up on an orange-cloth stool and, somehow, he manages to look worse than I do. His face is so swollen that most of his features are unrecognizable. His knee's been forced straight by a brace and his left arm is pinned to his chest in a sling. The gauze wrapped around his neck reminds me too much of Lewis.

"Babba?"

I didn't want to refer to him that way, with a term of endearment. I wanted our first interaction in so long to start with me having the sure footing, not reducing myself back to when I was a kid. But some part of me recognizes him, even as my eyes look at him in disbelief. My mind, even after everything it saw in the last week, struggles to comprehend how so much violence could be inflicted on one person.

"Habibi? What're you doing here?" My father uses his one good arm to prop himself up on the couch and motions to the man behind me. "Get me a drink, sadiq—and my cigarettes." I see the man give me one last lingering look before complying, shutting the door behind him as he goes to descend the stairs.

I look back at my father. From what I can tell, he looks as uncertain as I feel.

"It's been a long time, habibi. Why visit? I thought you were still in the hospital." I try my best not to scoff. Old feelings of resentment crawl up my back and twist my stomach.

'Visit'? Really? He's the one who didn't come see me in fifteen years, and he thinks he can act all casual. This son of a bitch.

What hits the hardest are the questions he doesn't ask. No comment on my appearance, no care at all about what happened to me. Even hearing 'habibi,' beloved, is enough to raise my blood pressure. I wasn't 'beloved' enough for him to stick around, it wasn't enough for him to help me. He knew I was gone and he knew who I was with, I saw as much in his emails. He knew the type of violence men like the Joker could exact, and he did nothing.

"I need a gun." I keep my face straight and attempt to leave the contempt out of my voice. I don't think I'm succeeding. A glimmer of question passes through his swollen eyes. He forces a laugh and a half-grin that stretches tight over the engorged skin, revealing rows of white teeth.

"Takalimuni biallyuqhat alearabia," he says, jerking his chin at me. I can't hide my confusion. Annoyance passes over his face, erasing any expression of pleasant reunions. He keeps the smile in place, but I can see it's false. "What, you're too good for your own mother tongue?"
"That's not my first language, I forgot most of it years ago. Not exactly a lot of people to practice Arabic with in this country, in case you missed the memo."

He won't help you if you insult his ego. Take a deep breath and calm down. Don't give him anything.

My father's face hardens in front of my eyes and the smile disappears completely. Whatever shock my presence inspired in him fades quickly and is replaced with a business-like demeanor that's only betrayed by his crippled body.

"Fifteen years and that's what you come here for, eh? If you need protection, you can stay here a while. The Djinn don't do business with fucking nut-cases like that clown." He says it so casually, like the time that's passed doesn't mean anything at all. As if it could remedy what's already happened. "I thought that arrogant wakhiza Wayne would have enough money for a safe house somewhere. Or has he finally spent everything?"

Seeing him in person, even with the obvious beating he took, emphasizes the similarities in our features. I see the same set of my jaw in him, the same pair of brows, the thick black hair. But I can also see the emptiness in his eyes, the void of emotion, that don't exist in mine. He looks smaller than I remember. More fragile. Maybe that's another thing we share.

"Will you sell me one or not?" I ask, my frustration mounting. He only stares, his gaze flicking past me at the sound of the door opening. The scarred man from before enters the room with a glass of bourbon and a package of cigarettes in hand. My father takes one and lights it with a casual spark of a lighter while trying to balance the glass on his lap. I fight to keep the memories down. Don't think about it. You need to stay strong, Parker needs you. Take a deep breath, move closer to the window. Don't think about it. No one here will hurt you. Breathe, just keep breathing—

"Why do you need one? There are better places to get one than from me, habibti," he says, interrupting my thoughts. The scarred man moves away from us and sits in a large leather chair in a far corner. I see him attempting to text discreetly in the corner of my eye.

"Why does it matter? It's a simple request." My father doesn't say anything in reply, he only narrows his eyes and raises his chin. For some reason, he wants to draw this out, and I'm struggling to hold my tongue.

I used to dream of this moment—of a time when I could tear him down and tell him how much he hurt Mom and me, about him being trash and how I wished he was the parent who died. Now that he's here in front of me, and he's almost entirely helpless, I don't feel any of the spite I thought I would.

The life of his I saw online, with all the emails and messages to almost a dozen women, his blatant addiction to gambling, veiled threats and his attempts at being some old-school gangster, the frantic efforts to fill a void he probably didn't even know existed—all of it amounted to this: a broken man on the cusp of losing everything he thought he wanted. No urge to lay him low, to spew out the dozens of insults I thought of over the years, surges within me. Something like disappointment sits in my heart. No, maybe what I feel is a tired resignation. Nothing I can say will change the past, it won't bring Mom back, and it won't make him care.

There is one thing I know he cares about, and I didn't need to read his emails to figure it out. I stuff my hand in my pocket and pull out a large wad of cash. His eyes lock on the faded green ball of bills.
"I'll give you five hundred for it—no serials, and a pack of bullets." He stays silent for a while. I can see the conflicted thoughts racing in his eyes. I know the Djinn are strapped for cash. I know that it won't be long before the police and the Batman will crush whatever's left of his operation. I'm hoping my blatant appeals to his greed win out over his innate desire to be spiteful.

"Al'ama, you're just like your fucking mother. Always putting her head out where it didn't belong," he says, pointing at the cuts on my face, "you should go back to your nice place in Midtown. Girls like you don't belong down here, habibti."

Anger colours my cheeks. The checks I put on my emotions fall to the side at the mention of her.

"Fuck you. You don't get to talk about Mom—you didn't even come to her funeral. Don't you dare—"

"Like hell I don't! She humiliated me. She poisoned you against me, she ruined the family we could have been. Her... shameful antics cost me everything!" It's with an effort that he raises himself from his seat on the couch and points his finger at me, spilling his bourbon on the carpet in the process. He turns his head away and takes a deep drag on his cigarette and my stomach turns at the smell of billowing smoke. "The bitch obviously failed to teach you respect," he scoffs. The urge to close the distance between us and add my own mark to his face is overwhelming.

It isn't worth it, he doesn't care anyway. Let it go, Miriam. This isn't a fight you can ever win.

He doesn't know the arsenal of information I have, how I could break him with a few leaked emails to the right person. A few keystrokes are all it would take. Maybe the only things he understands are threats and leveraged positions.

"Unless you want the police to know what businesses you're laundering what's left of your money through, and your little accountant's name that's helping you fake the numbers, you'll get me a fucking gun. Then I'll be on my way and we can both go back to pretending the other doesn't exist."

My father stares at me in stunned silence. The man in the corner looks up from his phone, his jaw slack.

"Maryam Adeana Shaddid—"

"That's not my name. It's Miriam Adina Kane. If you had stuck around you might have got a say, but you didn't. Answer my question—what's it going to be: yes or no?" If he hadn't undergone such a rabid beating of his own, I'm certain he would've hit me now. He crushes the cigarette in his hand and drops the ashes on the red carpet. I don't break eye contact, I don't move my head even when I hear the other man clear his throat uncomfortably.

My father's laugh surprises me.

"Maybe you learned something from me after all, habibti." He turns and awkwardly hobbles off to a door across the room. It's ajar, and I can see the splintered wood around the door handle. I breathe deep and follow.

The room is a mess. Garbage bags duct-taped to the window do little to keep out the cold wind and there are deep grooves in the floor, like chunks of it were gouged out. Wood frames sitting on top the desk hold pictures of various landscapes in Gotham, their glass shattered.

"This your idea of redecorating or something?" I can't help the question coming out of my mouth. My curiosity trumps the feelings of frustration and indignation.
Jahan doesn't say anything, but he sends a glance at me over his shoulder. He leans heavily against a wall and moves one of the large hanging frames, revealing a small black safe. I hear the faint clicking of the turn-dial as he enters in the combination.

"I have midrab to thank for all of this. Fucking alfiran altaayiruh," he says as the safe door swings open. He reaches inside and hands me a small silver revolver. The barrel is shorter than I thought it would be, and it's not as heavy as I expected. My father holds a small cardboard box in his hand and hobbles around the desk to stand next to me.

"It's a Taurus 85 .38 caliber revolver, easier to shoot than a semi-automatic. Have you ever shot a gun before?" His expression's changed, he's gone from vitriolic antagonist to the man I remember teaching me how to ride a bike. The change leaves me feeling whiplashed, and all I can do is shake my head.

"Use the sights here to line up your target. You only get five shots before you have to reload— make sure you keep track of how many you shoot." The reality of what he's saying doesn't set in; I just take it in passively and think of the last time I saw a gun on the ship. "Push out the chamber and load the bullets, then just slap the chamber back and you're ready to go."

He's smiling again. He's in his element, explaining how to use a weapon that will wreak only death.

"Just 'cause it's a revolver doesn't mean it doesn't have a safety. If you drop this it won't fire, you have to pull the hammer back and keep your finger on the trigger." My father has a strange look in his eye, a sort of allure I can't explain. "Take your time before shooting, pull the trigger back a little before going all the way—it makes your shots more accurate." I don't want to be near him, so close to his world—the one Mom tried so hard to keep me out of. The hard-line I always thought existed between right and wrong is blurring.

It's for Parker. You have to help him, no matter what.

I pull out a wad of bills from my pocket. I don't bother counting it, I just slap a large chunk of the cash on the desk and grab the package of bullets he set down. I turn and go to leave the room.

"I tried to help, Maryam. I tried to find you when you went missing."

I stop and look back at him. His brown eyes are wide and open, sincere and genuine. He's leaning heavily on the desk for support, and his posture makes it easy to pity him.

"We both know you didn't, babba."

I cross the room quickly and ignore his calls after me. The scarred man is by the exit to the stairs, trying to look impassive and coming across as nervous instead. I barely give him a second glance on my way down, and it takes everything I have not to sit in the stairwell and cry.

You can get Parker now. Just a couple more hours and he'll be safe. Be brave. Breathe, and be brave.

The word 'midrab' tugs on my memory as I exit the Amaseena, taking in the crisp morning air in greedy gulps. I recognize it from the little Arabic vocabulary I have left. It means 'bat.' Batman—no, Bruce—did that to Jahan. Two weeks ago I wouldn't have cared, but now I'm left wondering if Batman isn't cut from the same cloth men like my father are—men like the Joker.

I looked up the address before arriving at 3889 155 Stickney and Main, and I paid the taxi driver
who drove me here two hundred dollars up front with the promise of another four if he stayed until I came back. A lot of my plan depends on him staying where he said he would. It's a shame that when I first tried learning to drive that I crashed one of Alfred's favourite cars. He gave up teaching me after that, leaving me reliant on others to drive me or the public transportation system, and there's no way I was taking the Skytrain after everything.

The address was one I wasn't expecting. It's an abandoned arcade in Amusement Mile, a one-story sprawling complex that used to house everything from paintball courses, fun houses, go-kart tracks, mini golf, and, of course, arcade rooms filled with dozens of machines. The recession that hit Gotham over twenty years ago and a massive flood destroyed most of the businesses and left the rest as carrion for opportunistic predators. What used to be a fun and relatively safe place for the families of Gotham to enjoy during the summer and weekends became a rotting husk used as an occasional drug den or refuge for the homeless when winter came. The file on record at the permit's department had all the details for the building. I couldn't help but shake my head at how lax local government databases were to access. It seemed everyone was still running on Windows '98 and were either too incompetent or cheap to make a security update.

From the outside, it looks more like a warehouse with its great gray walls and sheet metal roof. I know from the blueprints that the series of squares and rectangles are deceptive, they don't show the complex maze of playrooms, storage areas, offices, and security access halls that loop through the building for an easy exit in an emergency. Only the faded-out sign with missing chunks of letters, burnt out bulbs, and the dirty afterimage of the sign's previous name give any indication of what it was. What used to read "VINCENT'S HOUSE OF FUN" has undergone a transformation glowing in red: "VI CI OUS FUN" is what the sign reads now. It's impossible not to understand the purposeful connotations of violence that's so specific to the Joker. The sign, coupled with a familiar white van parked down an otherwise empty street, makes me certain that if Parker could be anywhere, it was here.

You have a plan. Just breathe. Parker is waiting for you. You can't let him down.

Blinding panic and the cold sweat that makes my shirt stick to my back tells me otherwise. Every instinct, every method of alarm is ringing in my body. My breaths are painful, shallow pants. I sit on the filthy sidewalk by the van and drop my head between my knees. Confusing visions spiral through my mind.

I'm on that bed in the rusted room. It's cold, I can't feel my hands and feet. My chest hurts, everything hurts. My head feels cracked open, unspooling onto the dirty mattress. Someone's next to me. Their bare hands rub against my arms, tracing along my waist and chest before crawling up to my neck. His hot breath is in my ear. It hurts, I won't let him—I won't I won't I won't—

"What's the matter, love? Just lie back, you'll enjoy it soon enough."

I throw up in the gutter. The memory is painful, as if it was breaking bone. My skin's rippling, rolling in revulsion and something twisted I can't place. I don't know who my fear is centred around; it's all mixing together to form a tangled mass where I can't extricate one memory from the other. I force myself to think about my underwear on the ship; it wasn't ripped up—they were the only things not destroyed like my blouse and skirt. My mind is confused—I was OK. I must have been. I would have known if something happened.

I retch again. The small strings of bile burn my mouth.

Don't think about it, Miri. You'll break if you do. Focus on Parker. Focus on the plan. You can come undone after, but you will help Parker first.
"This is a chance to be brave. You can be brave. You are a lion." Saying it will make it true. It has to. "You are a lion, Miri."

I rip my bag off my pack and pull out my CPU. I have the code written already, it didn't take long. I just need to connect to the right server and execute it. Using my phone as a hot-spot, I access the local emergency broadcast stations. The government made this easy, too. It shouldn't be a surprise that no one thinks of these things, they're too busy focusing on foreign terrorists to consider the ones inhabiting the country already. I turn on my newly acquired hand-radio and switch it to the right frequency.

Move on to stage two.

I shut the lid of my laptop and grab the heavy metal pipe from my bag and the road flares. I look through the passenger window of the van, scouting for anyone coming out of the abandoned arcade. Seeing no one, I pull my arm back to break the window open when I see it—a large splatter of blood caked on the front seats and through the back of the van. The memory of all the blood when Lewis was stabbed, how it poured from Parker's head, and the rivers of it that flowed down my body in the shower on the ship freeze me in place.

That's too much blood for one person to lose and still be alive.

I immediately think of Parker. That could be his blood sprayed all over. I could be too late.

No—no, calm down. Think. He accessed the FutureGen servers just yesterday, no one else could have known his tag and accessed those files. He's alive, he has to be.

I crush the hesitation in me, clinging to the mad hope that Parker isn't dead, and smash the van window open. I drop the pipe and activate the flare quickly, letting the flame spew out for a moment before throwing it inside.

You need to move. You only have two minutes before they check on the sounds.

I run to the side entrance I know leads to the interconnected halls that link the buildings. My shaking hands grab the firecrackers from my bag and lay them just behind where I know the door will open. A large whoosh signals the van's transformation into an engulfed fireball.

Stage three. Focus, Miri.

I grab my laptop and radio, executing the commands I know will send every soul within five miles on high alert. Within seconds, the sound of a whooping siren—the one used to warn people about nuclear war and natural disasters—blares through the air in high-pitched screams. I count to ten before lighting the fuse on the firecrackers.

I scramble behind a nearby dumpster, shove my hand in my pocket and grip the revolver, waiting for the men who are certainly coming my way. No sooner than I pull my legs to my chest does the metal door burst open. I can hear men yelling over the siren.

"What the fuck is this?!

The plan hinges on most of the people inside funnelling out of the building in a panic. I risk a glance around the edge of the dumpster. There's four of them, all have their guns drawn and they're looking down the alley and towards the street. I snap my head back and pull out the revolver. My finger shakes against the trigger.

"Oh fuck!" I hear someone yell, it's followed by hurried steps. I sneak another look—they're
sprinting towards the van.

*It's now or never.*

I don't need to worry about the noise, the emergency broadcast will take care of my cover for me. All I can manage is a quick burst of speed across the gravel to the entrance. Wrenching the door open, I make my way cautiously down the long hall. The wailing of the siren outside is a persistent but muted squeal from inside. It won't cover the noise I make in here. The walls bear the marks of severe water damage, mould and rot eating their way through the walls. Soggy cardboard boxes line the side of the hall in haphazard piles. Whatever was inside of them is giving off a faint smell of algae and salt. I pull out my phone and stare at the blueprints on the screen, looking for the different areas he could be. I know this hallway will take me directly down the middle of the complex, giving me access to the adjoining rooms if they're unlocked. I just need to find the right door before I run into a wrong one.

Doors flank me on all sides, each one holding the possibility of some nasty surprise. Emergency lights are the only source of light in the dingy hallway, bathing the space in red. Every sound makes me jump and aim the gun wildly in its general direction. The near-dark makes it all too easy for the Joker's voice to come creeping back, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"*Y'know, I didn't think you had it in you. I like a girl with a little, uh, zip. You're just full of little surprises, hmm?*"

I whip around, waving the gun in wide arcs. His voice sounds real, like it's right next to me, whispering in my ear.

*Move, you have to move faster. The voice isn't real, and those men won't stay outside forever, and the police and fire department will get calls about the siren soon. You have to find Parker before then.*

But the building is massive at 20,000 square feet. I can avoid the go-kart track, mini golf, and paintball arenas. It's the playrooms, offices, and storage rooms where I need to look. The first door is up ahead. The doors are inordinate obstacles that seem to hold my nightmares at bay. The possibility of opening them is akin to letting the images and memories I've been holding back come crashing into me. I'm breathing too loud; my footing is clumsy. My fear makes my hands jangle the doorknobs, and a paranoid certainty almost convinces me that the Joker can hear it from wherever he is. I suck in a breath and wait for some unseen presence to hurt me, to drag me back into the hell I need to save Parker from.

*Breathe. It's locked, keep trying the other doors. You'll find him — you have to.*

The process continues on for what feels like eons, but I know it's only been a few minutes. The fire, the firecrackers imitating the sound of guns, and the emergency siren will keep the men outside preoccupied for a while, but it will all be for nothing if I can't move fast enough. I come along a bend in the hall when I see a door that's slightly ajar, and I can see the sterile white light emanating from within. I sneak up to the edge of the door, trying hard not to let my footsteps fall too heavily.

"*Those fucking numbnuts haven't shut that racket off yet? The boss'll be pissed.*" None of their voices seem familiar, and they don't sound like they're moving. I try to hold my breath, restricting my breathing and staying as quiet as possible.

"*What's he even doin' anyways?*"

"*Said something about wrapping Christmas presents or some shit. Fuck if I know what the hell*"
that's supposed to mean."

"Don't wanna know, better that way. I don't wanna end up like Gerry. Christ, what I wouldn't give for a job with the Maroni's again. At least there was a good pair of tits in your face after a long day and a warm cunt to send ya home."

"Yeah, tell me about it. All the boss brings back is that fucking darkie and we don't get to do anything, even after all that shit he made us do. Fucker." I hear the man scoff and the rustling of fabric, like jeans rubbing together.

"Careful how loud you say that, man. I'm not gettin' skinned 'cause of your fat mouth."

My face burns in shame and terror. The threat of another barrage of memories makes me pull away from the door and continue moving down the hall.

*Just keep moving. Find Parker and get the hell out of here.*

The constant whooping of the siren stops. A door at the far end of the hall opens and slams closed. Raised voices, high with anger, lilt down to me. I'm running out of time.

The noises behind me are growing louder—and the siren didn't last nearly as long as I thought it would. There's no time for me to start it again on my computer, it would take too long. An intense feeling of nausea and scalding pain searing my skin almost makes me throw myself to the ground and cower. It's a severe effort of will that keeps me moving closer to the heart of the arcade. With each step my dread grows, culminating to a pitch of fear that nearly surpasses anything I felt on the ship.

*Keep going. You can make it. Just — just be brave. They don't know you're here yet. You can still help Parker.*

I risk lighting the screen of my phone, trying to calibrate where I am. I lost count of how many doors I've passed. Panic starts setting in, quickening my steps and creating more noise than I mean to. I come to another door—this one is closed, but I can see a light blazing through the crack underneath. Hope and relief make me careless. I open the door to a scene of horror.

Noah's on a table shirtless, his large body spills over the edges. He looks half drunk and delirious. His head lolls to the side and his eyes are struggling to stay open. The Joker's in there with him, holding a scalpel aloft and wearing latex gloves. A small mass of wires, small wrapped packages in brown and green paper, and a cellphone lay next to Noah. A preliminary incision's already been made, and blood seeps over the opening of the cut in large, dewy drops. Noah isn't fully asleep. He's still talking, rambling in small sad sobs that fill the room.

"B-boss... I don't feel so good. Make it... make it stop." I can see Noah's arms twitching to move, but they never move past being small spasms.

The Joker hasn't noticed me yet. He keeps his back to the door, focusing on the task in front him in a near perfect mimicry of a surgeon. His green hair is pulled back into a low ponytail at the base of his skull, and his gray shirt sleeves are rolled up to reveal muscular forearms. The scalpel rests in his hand like a pen. Hearing him speak, seeing him lower the blade for another cut, drops me in a descent I can't pull up from.

"Now, now, big guy. This is how we make the voices go away. But, don't you worry," even now, the Joker can't help the giggle that escapes his lips, "we're going to light you up. Christmas is comin' early for you this year."
I slap a padded hand over my mouth as the knife drops back down to continue the Joker's infernal work. Noah's brown eyes are looking my way, but as the Joker starts again, his eyes glaze over in a haze of agony. The blueish purple of Noah's viscera is visible, even from here. I'm suddenly grateful that I threw up everything in my stomach outside.

*Jesus fucking Christ! Is he—what are the wires for? Jesus, fucking Jesus.*

My mind's obviating the truth in front of me, and I welcome it.

Unlike when I witnessed what happened to Lewis, this time my body has the ability to move. I force a detached sense of calm to come over me, to shut the door almost all the way but avoid the clicking of the lock. It's with that same detachment that I force myself to move down the hallway, to grip my revolver tightly, even as shock numbs me to the sensory information that was so heightened before. The primal urge for self-preservation kicks in, and I try to fight it down.

I'm trying the doors at random now, abandoning any logical approach to finding Parker. My fear makes me look over my shoulder constantly. It's convinced that the Joker, stained in red, will be standing behind me—blocking my escape. My silent tears escalate to full-on sobs when each door I try stays shut. Tapping footsteps resound from down the hall.

"Shit, fuck!" It's a panicked whisper, but it's still too much noise. My breath hitches in my chest, I feel my throat closing.

I'm near the end of the building, at the end of the complex's main hall. There are only two doors left to try. They're both dark and there's no clue if Parker's in either of them. The fear that I could have done all this for nothing is clouding my brain. Closing my eyes, I go for the one on the left. The door handle twists, but it doesn't budge from its frame.

"Uh, hey boss—I think you should see this—" It's one of the men from outside. I throw my weight against the door, trying to centre my weight against the handle. It moves, but only an inch at a time. I cringe at the sound it makes and screw my eyes shut. Each pound against the door is bringing me closer to dying.

"You've come too far. C'mon, Miriam. Just a little more."

I throw my weight against it one more time and the door swings wide open, but my momentum throws me to the ground. Through my wheezing, the first thing that hits me is a putrid smell. I try to cough quietly and shut the door, trapping me inside with whatever's causing the smell in the dark. Pulling my scarf over my nose, my trembling fingers struggle to turn on the light on my cell phone, illuminating the dank room.

The prone form of a man is laying under a wool blanket, and a swollen foot covered in purple and green infected tissue sticks out from underneath. Frightened alarm freezes me against the door. The body doesn't move, and I'm afraid to look at their face. The air is filled with the smell of a sickness that I recognize all too well.

*This is what it smelled like when Mom couldn't leave her bed for those last three months.*

On hands and knees, I crawl up to the still form. I need to know—I need to know if this was all for nothing, if I came too late. I shine the light on the man's face.

Parker is nearly unrecognizable. His skin is swollen and tight, a sickly colour that reveals the dark network of veins underneath. Sticky sweat coats his head, and his black hair is matted against his face. The rapid flickering of his eyes behind their closed lids and the shallow breathing are the only
indicators that he's alive. I start crying again and gently shake his shoulder.

"Parker—Parker, it's me," I whisper. In the jerky movements, the blanket moves away from his face and neck, revealing angry brand marks along his skin.

*What did they do to you?*

My sense of urgency is renewed. We need to get out of here.

"You need to wake up. I'm going to take you home, *come on,*" I'm shaking him harder, trying to wake him up without having to raise my voice. He makes a pained groan. "Parker, it's me. I need you to wake up. Come on, *please.*"

His eyes open slightly, almost in slow motion. He looks fevered.

"Y-You shouldn't.. shouldn't be here," he manages. A small feeling of joy breaks through everything else.

*I can do it, I can still save him.*

"I made a promise, remember?" I smile at him, hoping my optimism will be enough to get us out of here alive. "I'm going to help you sit up, and then we have to move quickly—"

"No, Miri. You—you shouldn't have come back. Leave me."

I don't understand what he's saying. I won't leave him here. Not with him.

I move back down to Parker's leg and rip off my scarf, wrapping it around his foot as best I can. Parker lets out a loud yelp in pain.

"Listen, we won't need to walk far. This place has wide ventilation ducts, that's how we're getting out, OK? C'mon, *please,* Parker." I'm trying to lift him up, but it's like his body's nothing but dead weight.

"Well, it seems like you've got everything, ah, all *figured out.*"

In all my efforts with Parker, I didn't even hear the door open. The Joker's standing there, his shadow taking up the entire doorway. He flicks on the light switch and I'm temporarily blinded. I swing my arm up, still holding the revolver, and point it in his direction. I force my eyes to stay open even as they tear up.

"You'll stay right where you are," my voice shakes.

As my eyes adjust I can see the bloody smears going up his arms, almost all the way to his elbows. His eyebrow's quirked up, like I just told him an interesting fact rather than a threat. One side of his mouth pulls back in a smile.

"What are you going to do with a thing like that? *Shoot me?*" he asks in a mocking tone. He doesn't think I'm serious. He doesn't think I'd actually do it. I pull back the hammer until it locks in place. He snorts out a derisive laugh.

"*Heh,* I'll tell you one thing, *toots,*" he walks closer to me and Parker on the floor, my hands shake uncontrollably but I keep the muzzle aimed at his chest, "you'd better kill me in the first shot, 'cause if you *don't...*"

He stuffs his arms in his pockets and rolls his eyes up to the ceiling before they land back on me,
as if he was addressing a larger audience that's all in on the same joke.

"You're not going to like what happens next."

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I just wanted to say thank you so much again to all of you who have been reading. Writing chapters for this story every week has been a real joy for me and reading all of the comments gives me a surging happiness that is impossible for me to describe. I love hearing from all of you, and I love having the ability to have so much reader interaction and awesome discussions with people who love Batman as much as I do.

One of the points of focus in this story is identity. We, as flawed, intricate, and yet (paradoxically) inherently simple creatures, have many 'selves' that we sort through and use in various situations. Navigating our incongruous natures is something that can be easier or more difficult, natural or forced depending on the individual. Miriam, being a young woman with very few stabilizing influences, is struggling to navigate the options of identity within herself. I think the struggle with identity is a very human plight, and a journey that doesn't end for many of us.

When it comes to a man like the Joker, whose identity is a near absolute that defies human logic and understanding, he provides another opportunity for exploration. Because of his mercurial nature and his nihilism, the Joker subverts our notions of identity and that is perhaps why he is so good at corrupting and changing it in others. It's also part of what makes him so alluring and compelling.

We saw in TDK how he could corrupt a man like Harvey Dent because of how he, a flawed but well-meaning man, tried to find his identity in law and justice and believed those things to be tangible and never-changing. The Joker proved that those things are intangible and often inabsolute—open to change and interpretation. Harvey couldn't take the damage to his sense of identity and the loss of Rachel (another part of the identity he wanted to have for himself). Even Batman's sense of identity was pushed to the near breaking point, and though he stayed immovable in his fight with the Joker, he did not come out of the conflict unscathed, and his certainty in who he was as Batman was almost obliterated (which we see in TDKR).

Part of the reason why I wrote an OC and have been reworking the canon is to see what would happen when someone who sits more in the middle, who doesn't have a place on either end of a binary (absolute good or evil), behaves when confronted with these issues. Would it be easier for such a person to crack under the pressure, to be brought down to a level of depravity that the Joker fights so hard for Gotham to be steeped in? Or are they able to navigate that same middle ground, to rise (even a little bit) above the line into a stronger position within themselves?

Sorry if I'm getting too philosophical, but it's questions and lines of thoughts like these that lure me into characters like Batman and the (rightly) iconic villains and obstacles he faces. And it's another thing I love so much about the Batman fandom, there are so many interpretations and angles you can take to these stories, and I think that's why Batman's been an enduring icon for almost 80 years. Please feel free to tell me your
thoughts and if you think I'm right or wrong, these types of conversations literally* give me life!

*By literally I mean figuratively

Some of the Arabic words I use will be difficult to translate back into English, so here they are!:

Dahkal: Enter

Habibti: Beloved (feminine)

Takalimuni biallughat alearabia: Speak to me in Arabic

Wakhiza: Prick (reference to the phallus, meant as an insult)

Al'ama: it literally means "blindness" but is used as "damnit" is in English

Alfaran altaayiruh: Flying rat (in relation to Batman, another insult)
The week had been much more interesting than the Joker thought it would be. Well, the entire month had really been one big joy ride he almost didn't anticipate.

Almost.

He'd found his calling, his raison d'etre. He'd have to be a fool to want this to end, and the Joker was no fool.

Nope nope nope.

It was the fireballs, the sweet singing of Gotham's screams, bullets as they ripped through bone, the gentle whittling of the blade of his knife against soft skin, the blood and the fear—terror, speculation, all the ants of Gotham waiting in one big jumbling bunch of exposed nerves. It was ambrosia to him, the sweet nectar that gave him a high and imbued him with feelings he thought he was no longer capable of.

Granted, if any normal person—what does that even mean anyway?—were witness to them, they'd say calling what he was experiencing 'feelings' a bit of a stretch.

He was worried things were going to go too smoothly in his little operations, but the blips in the grand design only worked to make the tapestry he wove all the more compelling. He didn't particularly like losing his boat—that took some time to find and effort to order the right idiots around to get it working the way he needed—but the ensuing fireworks as it went up in flames made up for the loss. The Joker could hear it ten kilometers away, could see the billowing smoke, could taste the ash in the air.

Despite his deep appreciation for a blast that big, he still almost shot Davie in the head over the absolute incompetency of his handling of the precious materials. Didn't he see that YouTube video the Joker sent him? Did the moron fail freshman chemistry or something? Literally everyone knew you don't leave your incredibly unstable materials out where anything could happen—well, not by accident, anyway. Nope, not this special moron, apparently.

Amateurs.

The Joker was right behind the idiot, gun pulled out and finger on the trigger. Davie was glued to the television, legs crossed and propped up on the coffee table. He and Thresh had their backs to the Joker, and they weren't listening very well to their survival instincts. Rule Number One: never show your back to a predator.

He was just one hair's breadth away from executing the kid when the news clip that saved poor Davie's little blonde head from becoming the new modern art installation all over the walls of Gerry's sorry excuse for a living room popped up. Recycled, shadowy glimpses caught by those lucky few citizens who saw the Batman in action were plastered right next to the images of the girl the media had been fixated on since the ill-fated day of the robbery.

He liked that picture. The girl's—not Batman's. There weren't enough details for it to be appreciated in the same way—it was just one blurry blob with a hint of yellow. He had a clipping of her's from the paper. Big smile, full lips. Bright eyes, shoulders leaned in and hands clasped
together in an unconscious moment of happiness. Just the right amount of cleavage and exposed collarbones.

The Joker liked it even more so now that he knew what she looked like when she was sniveling and crying, desperate and pleading. He got that on camera, too—an along with the incoherent ramblings of a girl whose head got just a bit too scrambled. There were other things he wished he got on camera, like filming his adventure in Rich Boy's apartment. But there were plenty of opportunities to make up for the loss later.

The picture was a good frame of reference. A starting point for the total unraveling of someone so lovely's psyche, something he liked returning to again and again.

His appreciation grew when he heard through that blessed television's mouthpiece about who was at the explosion site—the TV didn't need to tell him explicitly for Joker to know for certain who had a hand in it, but it certainly helped. The prattling of that ghost-faced reporter told the Joker all he needed to hear.

*The Batman.*

It was the Batman who dragged the Joker's little dame out of the water but was kind enough to leave one house guest behind. It was the Batman who caused such honied music to grace the air with the rumblings of destruction.

It was all almost too good to be true. A divine act of providence, even—as if the Batman was leaving messages just for the Joker to find, pointing to what made him weak. The Joker could help with that. Imaginings, each better than the last, of what he could do solidified the idea in his mind, birthing an unholy plan that brought a smile to his face.

Batman had prioritized one, insignificant rich girl over the entirety of Gotham's police force. Over Gotham's fearless elected leader, over the justice system hanging on to its newly acquired grip on Gotham by a thread—the one tired strand that Joker was waiting to cut. That was entertainment you just couldn't make up. It was almost as good as the articles he'd read about the Batman's proclivity for helping out certain lawyers in the DA's office—especially when they looked as good as Rachel Dawes did.

The Joker needed to recalibrate. Why gut Gotham right away when you could drag out the proceedings and enjoy watching her bleed on the muddied ground?

Humming "Let the Good Times Roll," the Joker decided to be generous. He only shot Davie in the shin on his way out of the living area. The shrieks of surprise were almost as good as those of Davie in pain.

*Let the stories be told*
*They can say what they want*
*Let the photos be old*
*Let them show what they want*

Let the good times roll, indeed.

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The Joker had a Plan B, he always did. A series of contingencies put in place for those *Just In Case* moments, like where he found himself in the early hours of the night after the memorial.

He had picked the arcade more so because it was funny rather than for any strategic purpose. Victor's House of Fun was a rotting pit of garbage, but the setting seemed poetic to the Joker. A
kind of place that seemed to be fashioned after him, in its own way. A symbol of fun until the veneer came off and you had to get a tetanus shot. Or, in his case, a knife in your chest cavity or a bullet in the head.

Joker and the men who didn't get shot were leaving their temporary hideout, which in this case took the form of Gerry's old house: a half-shuttered two-story with grass that had grown too wild just outside the Narrows. Gerry was dead, so he had no objections of their appropriation of his house as a halfway point between bigger machinations.

Gerry was sloppy, and an ignoramus.

That wasn't why the Joker killed him, though. Well, that was part of it.

*Whoa, spoiler alert.*

The surviving members of Joker's motley crew used it as a visceral example of why you didn't piss him off, but they had a few new recruits that night who'd joined after the boat sank in the harbour. The Joker was in need of some replacements, and the new guys didn't know the gory details. They didn't know how to walk the line between dog-like obedience and survival. It was a message the Joker would have grown tired of teaching if perhaps he wasn't so inventive with the lesson plans.

It was during their move from Gerry's house to the arcade that the Joker decided he wanted to drive.

The Joker wanting to take the wheel was a new turn of events for the cronies with him. They'd assumed, and rightly so based on Joker's previous tendencies, that he liked to be chauffeured around, getting one of the guys he was with to do the driving while he yelled out, sometimes incoherent, instructions on where to go.

That night was different, and it wasn't going to work out for one of them.

*Got that right.*

He sat in the driver's seat, keys in the ignition and adjusting the seat to accommodate his slouched posture. As he turned the keys, the radio came on. It was set to some asinine pop station, and the sound of the auto-tuned vocals was enough to set him on edge, grate his nerves and make him grind his teeth. The Joker flipped idly through the stations, cracks of half-sung lyrics interspersed with uncomfortable silence.

There were ten men crammed in the van meant to seat eight, some almost sitting on the laps of the companions beside them. Six others were supposed to meet them at the arcade. Everyone wished they were able to ride with them, not be stuck in the van with the Joker.

*Ouch.*

No one sat up front with the Joker, not when he was in a mood like this one. Parker, who had barely survived drowning in the Gotham River, was out cold in the back of the van. Arguably, he had the most room compared to the other passengers, but no one wanted to bunk up with him. Parker looked close to death, and smelled like it, too, and the men knew the Joker wasn't done with him yet. They kept their distance—the Joker's brutality towards Parker was more than even some of the more seasoned thugs had seen in a while. It was almost nothing when compared to Gerry, but even they thought branding the kid with a fire poker was excessive.

*Define 'excessive.'*
The close proximity and tension-filled high from their successful outing from the memorial were mingled with the Joker's erratic mood swings and tightly wound strain that choked the air. The Joker seemed elated after he saw the news, but as night fell and the gears started turning in his mind, he'd grown quiet. He was thinking—there were pawns to put in place and opposing pieces to capture.

And most of them knew better than to be the first to speak. Most knew you don't interrupt the Joker, not even his silences.

_Most of them._

"We leavin' today or what?"

Nobody said anything in reply, only glaring at the kid who spoke, urging him to be quiet with their eyes. He was younger, in his early twenties, with shaggy blonde waves. He'd heard the new rumors about the type of anarchy the Joker wanted to let loose on the city, he wanted in on the action without really knowing what it all meant. He had an eagerness that came with the uninitiated, trying to chisel out a spot where he could fit in Joker's burgeoning empire. He had missed the point the Joker made with Gerry, he didn't get it. Not yet, anyway. Maybe he thought he was being funny, trying to lighten the Joker's mood.

_Fools, all of them._

"What, you searchin' for the Disney channel or somethin'?" he laughed and elbowed Thresh, the man to his right, trying to rope him in on the joke. Thresh had just seen Davie get shot thirteen hours before and helped him clean out the through-and-through the bullet left behind in his leg. He edged away as far as the metal door would allow. The kid was trapped in the middle. He wouldn't be able to escape even if he wanted to.

The Joker's hand froze mid-motion, his finger hovering over the radio. The signal had latched on to a station that was just out of range. Choppy static crackled through the speakers, upping the new and sudden fear the rest of the men—the ones who knew better—felt.

The kid still didn't understand.

"Ha ha _hah_. That's _funny._ _Hilarious,_" the Joker said, dragging out the _s_ until he sounded like a snake.

The dark of the night and the shadows in the van obscured his expression. They all almost missed what he said, he was talking so quietly. He turned in his seat and stared at the kid, freezing him in place. The Joker's face was mostly hidden, but the whites of his eyes and edges of make-up—newly applied after the events at the memorial—were visible. The silver of his Smith & Wesson revolver caught glimmers of the moonlight, reflecting his dark grin. He aimed it right at the kid's head, finger caressing the trigger.

"We've got a resident _comedian_, everyone. C'mon, shorty. Tell me another one." The Joker was met with silence. He bared his teeth in a false show of a smile.

The kid flinched, his eyes were wide and desperate. Understanding was dawning on him like a cement truck. The sharp scent of fear filled the back of the van, and it seemed only to egg the Joker on. Davie, who was in the furthest row in the back, slid down the seat until his head disappeared entirely. His leg still hurt like a son of a bitch, even after several hits of his pipe to numb the pain. He wasn't about to keep his head out and get shot again. He'd learned his lesson.
"Didn't me-mean nothin' by it, I swear. I-I was just kidding, boss. Just a joke, is all. Honest—" He had his hands in the air, like the Joker was sticking him up for his lunch money.

The Joker was trying to remember the kid's name. Was it Marty? Sam?

_Doesn't matter much._

He was going to be an empty meat-sack with a bullet soon.

The Joker's eyes were still hidden in the darkness. He kept his smile and started pulling back the trigger, making the kid crumble in on himself with a squealing plea as he braced for the pain—the other men ducked their heads and hoped the bullet wouldn't miss its target.

The hammer of the revolver clicked against an empty chamber round.

"So was I." The Joker tipped the barrel of the gun to the ceiling, waving it around like a truce flag and laughing lowly.

The men moved their arms from their faces and breathed out in relief. After a beat, they thought it was safe to chuckle along with Joker, trying to make themselves buy into his latest sick joke. The kid looked at Thresh and laughed a little louder than the rest, attempting to hide the fact that he almost pissed himself. But they all forgot Rule Number Two of survival: don't take your eyes off the enemy.

The Joker lowered the barrel of the gun at the moment of their inattention and shot the kid in the head. The muzzle fire from the barrel lit up the Joker's face in a quick flash of malice. Blood, bone, and brains shot out from the back of the kid's skull, coating everyone in the back in a thick mist of red.

"_Fucking Christ!_"

"Oops. I wasn't, apparent-ly." The Joker stuck the gun on the empty seat beside him and pressed the search button one more time on the van radio. Hank William's "I Saw the Light" floated through the vehicle, he turned up the volume until it was one mix of soulful country and shouted expletives and whimpers.

_I saw the light, I saw the light_
_No more darkness, no more night_
_Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight_
_Praise the Lord, I saw the light_

He could hear some of the men sputtering like children, trying to hold back the tears as they tried in vain to get the blood out of their mouths and off their skin. The Joker didn't unlock the van or allow them to dump the body. As Thresh went to open the van door, the Joker put his foot on the gas, trapping the men in the back with the dead man on an extended trip to the arcade.

_They never learn._

The Joker was smiling now, breaking his own silence as he sang along to the tune.

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Things were working out exactly how the Joker wanted. All he had to do was wait. If his assumption was right, it wouldn't be long before he had his long-awaited face-to-face with the Batman and the Joker had the home-field advantage.
His preparations had all led to this. Miriam was on the ground in front of him, quivering like a doe, gun pointed right at his chest. That part was unexpected. He didn't think guns were her style. He liked that, though. Another surprise in an endless list of *mea culpas* he had accumulated, with a little help from Parker.

The firecrackers and emergency siren were surprises, too. So was setting his van on fire. He didn't think she'd be so *creative*.

But it didn't matter much. She still didn't see what made all of this so goddamn funny.

The arcade, with its new moniker, was primed for the main event. Select doors were locked all along the hallway, creating a funnel that kept his expected guest from going where she shouldn't. That was it, really. She'd taken the bait hook, line, and sinker. So naive, so willing to believe in her friend when it should have been obvious from the start that things weren't so rosy in the Kane-Kwan household.

The message he got from Farid, one of Jahan Shaddid's lackeys, was a helpful warning, too. It gave him time to craft a few extra surprises for her arrival, but dear Farid didn't mention the part about her getting a gun. The Joker would have to visit him about that. Still, her visit with daddy dearest was another area he could explore, and if he had his way, he'd have all the time in the world.

He wasn't worried. Not at all. Her little rescue mission was doomed from the start. There wasn't any way she could drag Parker out with her, even if she did manage to get by the Joker. Parker's untreated broken ankle was causing him to go septic, but the Joker had been using EpiPen's—stolen from a quaint local pharmacy off Solomon Bouvelvard—to wake him up and keep him working on getting the files Joker wanted. That was after the little experiment with him using fire as a motivator. Turns out that it's harder to type when someone's carving smiley faces with a hot poker on your back.

*Who knew?*

The Joker needed someone with more expertise, and he was willing to drive Parker into the ground until he broke or he poached a replacement.

And there she was. Depending on how things went with bat-brain, he wouldn't need to keep Parker around for much longer.

He had time to kill, so why not add a little bit of fun?

"You'll stay right where you are," she said, her pretty green eyes all wild and her hands shook with the snub-nosed revolver. It was cute. He saw that she was wearing the ring he'd so kindly given her.

"What are you going to do with a thing like that? *Shoot me?*" he asked, enjoying the game of chicken. He tried not to laugh at her expression. She wouldn't shoot him, she didn't have that killer gene.

*Not yet, anyway."

"Heh, I'll tell you one thing, *toots,*" he said, closing in on her—adding in another reason to pull the trigger. It would make it all the better when she couldn't do it. "*You'd better kill me in the first shot, 'cause if you don't...*"

It was too late for him to keep it at bay, the irony of it all made short bursts of laughter echo through the room.
"You're not going to like what happens next."

She really wouldn't. The Joker stared at her to emphasize the point, letting her imagination fill in the blanks. He was preoccupied with thoughts about her eyes, savouring all the flickers of fear that danced in them, thinking he might just want to preserve them forever in a jar on his shelf. It took him a second to notice the bruises that adorned her neck. He didn't leave those there.

The Joker sucked on his cheek, pulling in the scars and mulling on the jagged edges with his tongue. He was mad. More than that, he was livid. His anger reignited. He still couldn't believe Zsasz didn't know that it was rude to play with other people's toys without permission. Especially when he specifically told Zsasz the rules of the game.

He won't like the marks I'm gonna leave. He's going to wear his skin like a suit jacket by the time I'm finished.

He was angry, but he saw a tender spot to sink his teeth into. Playtime with Zsasz would come later, but he still had a slightly used and abused toy right in front of him that required attention.

"If you'd told me you were into breathplay, we could have been doin' a lot more than visiting, girlie." The Joker made sure to lick his lips and smack them together when he said it, enjoying the bright red of the blood rushing to her face, the virginal look of horror as the meaning of what he said sunk in. Her expression of embarrassed shame made him feel ravenous.

Well, if all the secrets Parker spilled were true, then she wasn't a virgin. She just looked and smelled like one. He felt his face morph into a mask of insidious anticipation.

"Miri, Miri, Miri. I was right, hmm? You're just a bundle of, uh, trouble. So much effort and planning... and all for nothing." He could see the traces of defiance peeking back up, her trying to be an arduous knight fighting for her down-trodden companion. He wondered how much she could take before she broke. "Tell me, Miri—who do you think it was that told me where you were on our, ah, first date?"

The bright red that coloured her cheeks just seconds before leeched from her face. He giggled.

"Think about it. Do you really think Parker, uh, just left such a specific address for you? Hmm?"

Comprehension finally bloomed on her face, making her black brows furrow in disbelief. She started crying, and the Joker wanted to lick the tears as they fell. He didn't laugh now; instead, he took on a tone meant to connote friendliness and familiarity.

She makes it too easy.

"Friends are fickle things, aren't they? But's not like you've been a very good one either. Hmm?" Oh yes, he knew all about what she did. The Joker knew what she'd done to Parker. Or, more specifically, what she didn't do for Parker. "No, no. Y'see—all it took was an offer. A little bit of money here, promises to help with family trouble there, a reminder about some past mistakes and oh! then he's raring to drop you like a dime." He leaned down towards her, making insistent eye-contact.

"Sh-Shut up! You're lying. You're a fucking liar." Her face contorted into a lovely blend of rage and hurt. The Joker felt a small, insistent pang of irritation. She was still in denial, even if her body was betraying the truth.

Gonna have to work on her choice of words.
"I'm a man of my word, Miri. I haven't lied to you yet," that in itself was a lie, "you, on the other hand, struggle with *veritas*, hmm? What would big brother Brucie say about that, I wonder."

She waved the gun at him with renewed vigour.

"Don't talk about my family. M-Move out of the way unless you want to get shot." So much bravado. Such a valiant attempt at bravery. She didn't even have the language to make herself sound like a threat.

"Oh, but you were so *eager* to tell me *all* about him and Mr. P."

She looked confused, blanching at the mention of Alfred's nickname she and Parker had given him. The Joker would only know it if someone told him or heard them say it. His mouth tugged up in a grin.

"Don't you remember? We had so many nice little… *interactions.*" He laced his words with double entendres. It was clear there wasn't much she remembered, or they'd be having a different conversation.

"You're lying." She could barely manage a whisper now. The Joker had struck a nerve. Whatever she did remember, it was obviously open to manipulation.

He took another step towards her. Parker had that familiar dazed look in his eye signaling the need for another shot of adrenaline in the thigh.

*Or a hospital. But we can't always get what we want, can we?*

"St-Stay back! I mean it." She'd already pulled back the hammer, but she wouldn't do it.

"Let me prove it to you." She tried protesting, tried cutting him off, but he kept going, creeping in on her all the while. "Your tattoo. It's a little sun with exactly ah, five rays and little *squiggles* on your right side—right above that small birthmark, by that *soft* part of your ribs, and just below the *lacey* bit of your bra—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. He was almost in reach to tear the gun away from her when she did it. Miriam jerked the barrel to the side and shot the wall next to the Joker, only six inches away from his head, freezing him in place for a brief moment. The shock at how loud it was surprised her, but she recovered quickly. She pointed the gun back at him, steadying her aim.

"Move. Or the next one's going in your head." She put an arm under Parker's armpit and hoisted him up with a strength the Joker didn't think she had in her lithe frame. Parker's pain left him in a state almost beyond words. He clung to Miriam in a way that pissed the Joker off, making him regret not going with the amputation route instead of branding. The Joker was disappointed to see determination emerging in her.

*Still so much work to do.*

She kept the gun raised and backed him out of the storage closet that had been Parker's personal hell for the last couple of days. Joker wanted to see where this would go, see how long she'd last before her shaking legs gave out. The Joker raised his hands in mock surrender. She realized too late that she had just backed him up into the only clear route of escape. The corner of Joker's mouth tugged up in a sly grin.

"Where are you going to go now, *Miri*?"
He'd left the door opposite Parker's open for an added dose of entertainment. The Joker didn't originally anticipate things working out this way, but that was part of the fun. She couldn't keep the gun pointed at the Joker and open the door at the same time, not without dropping Parker. Her eyes darted from the handle to the Joker; indecision and doubt were evident in the line of her mouth.

"D-Don't move," she said as she started lowering the barrel of the gun.

The Joker was right, she didn't want to shoot him. Even after everything. She also hadn't learned Rule Number Two. As she turned to the door, the Joker's hand reached down for the knife in his vest pocket. He was ready to leap when a loud series of bangs and shouts caused them both to look down the hall, weapons momentarily forgotten.

It was happening. He had come.

_The Batman's come to play._

Chapter End Notes

So I have a few things going on in this chapter that I want to clarify.

I have the Joker interacting differently with the narrator here. When it's Miri's perspective, the reader is very much grounded in her experiences and feelings. When we see into Batman's mind, the reader is a little more detached - much like Batman is from himself and his allies sometimes. Narrating the Joker is an entirely different phenomenon. I think the Joker, almost like Deadpool but not to the same extent, has more knowledge about what is happening around him, even on a more metaphysical plane. His ability to reaffirm notions from the narrator and almost gleam past the barrier that narrator's pose between readers and characters is an idea that intrigues me. Grant Morrison suggested once that the Joker (in the comics) has such a high IQ that his perception of reality is close to breaking the fourth wall. I want Joker's POV to be fun while still remaining dark with an edge, like there isn't much keeping him from addressing you all directly.

This whole story is an experiment with different styles of writing when it comes to identity and perspective, and I hope it isn't too jarring or hard to follow. To be honest, I'm not as confident with this chapter. Heath's version of Joker is amazing, and I really want to do justice to it. I hope that comes across here... You'll have to let me know what you think of the chapter! I may or may not do another POV for him, but as hard as this chapter was for me to write I had a lot of fun with it.

I'll be back again next weekend with another chapter, thank you again for reading!
Every knock on the door made the lump in my throat grow larger.

I stared at the red paint and gold handle, willing it to open. The Kwan’s lived in a beautiful old brownstone building. Potted flowers hung on either side of the entrance and a bright yellow welcome mat smiled up at me from the landing. I was holding Parker's favourite candy, pink Pop-Rocks, and a small bundle of flowers. In hindsight, it was probably a weird gift to give a guy, but I panicked and grabbed the first thing that popped into my head. My face had been burning since I left the convenience store.

The door opening startled me from my thoughts, and I almost fell down the small set of front stairs. Soo-ah Kwan stood in the entryway. She was a petite woman. Her short, graying bob was tucked neatly behind her ears. Even on a Sunday afternoon, she was dressed up in a bright pink dress. Much like Alfred, I had never seen her wear anything that might be considered casual. She could be incredibly warm and kind if she liked you, but she could also be severe and cold. I was unsure of how she would greet me, but the firm line of her mouth wasn't a good sign.

I cleared my throat and tried my best to smile. "Hi, Mrs. Kwan. Is Parker around?"

She looked at me with suspicion and didn’t return my smile. My expression fell. I could only stare at her white shoes as the heat in my face intensified. She was always kind to me when I’d visit before, offering me snacks and trying to get me to stay for dinner. She didn’t have any daughters, only two sons. Parker told me once that she liked having me around to fuss over in a way she couldn't for them. Her cold attitude compounded my guilt. I knew I’d earned it.

"You haven't been here in a while. What do you want?" she asked. Mrs. Kwan wasn't a woman to mince words. I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked her in the eye.

"To apologize. I've been a jerk—especially to Parker. Do you... do you think I could talk to him?"

She stared at me for a long minute and I thought she was going to tell me to leave. After glancing down at the items in my hand she sighed and her face softened. She stepped back from the door and motioned for me to come inside. I followed her into the large living room. They had changed the design since I had been there. When Parker and I would hang out, there was more to do there, more space to spread out—an ability to connect again over the same events that brought us together in the first place. I think it was also because Parker would always be the one to come to me, to search me out. It was rare that it was ever the other way around.

The walls of the Kwan residence were a rich gold with red throw pillows set against long white couches, a stark contrast against the sea of grays that I recognized from before. Red frames hugged the Kwan family's vacation photos, their bright smiles beaming from across the mantelpiece of the white marble fireplace. A picture of Jun, his wife, and their new baby caught my eye. I'd missed Parker becoming an uncle. My heart hurt anew, and it was difficult to convince myself to stay and see my apology through.

I made myself focus on the rest of the house, how it smelled like ginger and honey. I caught myself feeling melancholic, I couldn't remember the last time Alfred and I baked something together. It...
had been years before Bruce disappeared, back when we nearly set the kitchen on fire in a vain attempt at gingersnap cookies and Alfred had to rush in with a fire extinguisher. Thinking of Alfred made me feel worse. I knew I needed to apologize to him, too.

Mrs. Kwan motioned to the large, plush couch before she left to go up the large wooden staircase. Sitting still was an effort. My knee kept bouncing up and down as I waited until I moved from sitting on the edge of the cushion to pacing around the room. My hands were sweating; I kept rubbing them on my jeans and tried to not ruin the wrapping on the flowers.

"You into crop circles now or something?" I whipped my head around so fast I gave myself a crick in the neck.

Parker was halfway down the staircase. Unlike his mother, Parker was dressed casually in a baggy pair of sweatpants and wore a familiar light gray shirt. It was from the first concert we ever saw together—Angus and Julia Stone, one of the groups he got me to love after making me listen to their albums on repeat when we did our homework. He pulled his hair into a messy bun and popped up an eyebrow. This was the first time I let myself look at him fully since we spoke outside the café after my meeting with Beeker. Before, I would pretend not to notice him when he passed me in the halls at school. My face would always burn with embarrassment and left me feeling off-balance.

"What?" I sounded like an idiot, even to me. Parker made a circling motion with his finger.

"It seems you like leaving weird patterns in people's carpets, so I could only assume."

Looking down, I saw that my shoes had indeed left an obvious pattern in the white shag. I jumped off the rug and onto the hardwood floor. Parker descended the remaining stairs and leaned against the living room doorway.

"What do you want?" Parker was careful to keep his expression neutral, but I could see the hurt in his eyes. I bent my head down and extended my gifts toward him, but as I looked at the flowers and candy again, they looked so pathetic.

A perfect reflection of me, I thought.

Parker let out a small chortle.

"Who are you supposed to be, Lloyd Dobler?" I shot Parker a confused look. "Lloyd Dobler? Say Anything? Ring any bells?" He sighed and muttered something that sounded like 'hopeless' under his breath.

"No. No, umm... I..." All the apologies I rehearsed beforehand were gone. I couldn't think of a single thing that would make things right. Parker crossed his arms over his chest. I wasn't used to floundering, especially in front of Parker. Looking him in the eye was difficult, but I tried anyway and started again.

"I fucked up, Parker. I treated you like shit when you and Alfred have been the only ones looking out for me these past few years. I don't have any excuses. I—I just..." I told myself before I knocked on the door that I wouldn't cry. My resolve hasn't improved much since then. A small hiccup escaped me as I shut my eyes tight.

"I know I hurt you. I know I should have been here weeks ago doing this. But I didn't. I let it stew—just like I do with everything else—and I am a giant ass. But I'm so alone, and I'm scared, and I need my friend. I need you, Parker. I'm so sorry."
I wiped at my eyes long enough to see Parker staring at the floor, his brows knitting together in that way they do when he's thinking hard and his nose was twitching. I thought it was too late, that I had finally done enough to drive Parker away, too. I would have been surprised if he hadn't given up on me.

I would have given up on me a long time ago.

"I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry for bothering you guys—just pretend I was never here."

I placed the flowers and Pop-Rocks on the glass coffee table before edging around Parker and all but running to the front door. I jumped down the short set of stone steps and started walking at a brisk pace. I kept my head as low as I could, so no one could see me crying. I reached into my pockets to pull out my headphones when a voice stopped me.

"Miri! Wait!"

I stopped and nearly collided with a man in a suit. He shot daggers at me as he passed by, but I didn't care. Parker trotted up next to me. He didn't even put on shoes.

"Look, sometimes you are a complete ass. And a jerk. And a hotheaded, impulsive, selfish, thrill-seeking moron."

I could only nod my head. I was all of those things and more. Part of me wanted him to tear me down. To crush me to the level he had been at this whole time. To make up for what I couldn't take back.

"But you're my best friend. Even though you are all those things 98 percent of the time, there's another two percent that's kind, brave, nerdy, and whip-smart. I like the other two percent a lot better, I don't know about you." I let out a laugh and looked up at Parker.

He was taller than I was, finally surpassing me in height since the days in freshman year when I was the tall one of our duo. He had shot up another few inches in the few weeks we had been apart and began to tower over me. My chest constricted in a way I didn't want to understand.

"Parker, I—you're right. I promise you, I swear on my very being, that I will be better. I don't deserve to have a friend like you. I—I guess I need a little help staying in line."

The last sentence was especially difficult to say. And even more painful when I would break that promise. Parker would lord my admission over me for years afterward, but he didn't know what I did. He thought I was making progress, that my hard shell was being left behind.

Parker burst out laughing, and my wounded ego took another blow.

"Hey, I'm being sincere here—"

"I missed you, Miri." He pulled me into a hug that pushed the air out of me, and when he drew away, I felt another tug at my heart—but at the time, it wasn't a feeling I recognized. One I wouldn't acknowledge. "Don't say stuff like that again. I forgive you, but that doesn't mean I will the next time you decide to use me as a punching bag."

Parker was never one to lie, I knew he was telling me the truth. That's why I never told him. Why I kept lying all this time. I didn't think he would forgive me. I wouldn't have.

Parker gripped my arms and bent down to look me in the eye.
“It won’t. Ever.”

That promise is what fills me with the most loathing. I didn’t break my gaze away from his, I remember thinking that this was the moment Mom told me about. The moment where I could be different from my father. One of her greatest fears was me being like him. I know looking so much like him made it hard for her to separate out her memories of him from me; it made her fight harder that my personality would be nothing like his.

She fought for nothing. She only raised a coward.

I didn’t know that then. I still suffered under the illusion that there was a line I would never cross. Lows I would never stoop to.

I stood there for a moment, lost in his brown eyes. The relief I felt when he smiled melted away the anger and borders I had been building. As much as I wanted to believe I was self-sufficient, I couldn't stand being alone.

And yet I abandoned him when he needed me.

"Good. Now, Umma’s cooked up some yakgwa. Is it a safe bet to assume you want some?"

“What the actual hell, Miri!? I told you—I literally told you—"

"I know you did! But I didn't listen because I'm a legitimate idiot. A colossal moron."

"Yeah, you're not wrong. Jesus. Fuck, Miriam. How the hell are you going to do any of that? The Russian Mob? I feel like I'm trapped in a bad episode of the Days of Our Lives or something. Am I being Punk'd? Because that would make a whole lot more sense than this." Parker was rambling. He did that a lot when he was flustered.

The flowers I brought sat in an ornate green vase between us, a symbol of our renewed bond. I picked at a small leaf that had fallen, twirling it in my fingers. I felt bad for springing what happened on him, but I was out of options and Parker was the only person I knew who was smart enough to help think of a way out of what I got myself into. He picked up another yakgwa cookie from the plate on the table and shoved it in his mouth. That was another thing he did when he was flustered—he ate everything in sight.

"I know, OK? I know. If it makes you feel any better, I broke Beeker’s nose. It made me feel better, anyway," I said, mumbling the last part. Parker scowled. He never approved of me getting into fights.

"No, that certainly does not make me feel any better." He rubbed his face and sighed, before looking out the window and nodding. "Well, yeah, I guess maybe a bit. But don't distract me. I am furious right now."

"It's hard to take that seriously when you have pink Pop-goo all over your chin."

"Don't change the subject! Why does the name Dimitrov sound so familiar?" Despite the serious topic, I couldn't help but chuckle at Parker as he worked to scrape off the residual pink Pop-Rock that seemed to have merged with his skin.

"Maybe because the Dimitrov family is constantly on the news for suspected drug trafficking and gang wars with the Maroni's? That sound familiar?"
“Jesus fuck,” he whispered under his breath. He pushed himself away from the table and stared at me. “You were hoping I would have a plan to deal with this?”

I didn't realize that I was signing a warrant for years of pain for Parker. That I was dooming him to a life ruled by my inaction, my cowardice.

"Well, yeah. Kinda."

I realized at the time that I was asking a lot of Parker, I just didn't understand the full weight of it yet. That wouldn't happen until later, but I had four days to have the information Ivan wanted or... I didn't want to think about what would happen otherwise. It would be bad. Having my legs broken was the best outcome I could have expected, and my naïve mind couldn't even imagine the worst of it outside the cliché and distant happenings of old gangster movies.

Parker rubbed his eyes and let out a loud sigh.

"There's three ways I see this going down. One: you give him the information he wants—or at least how much you can get on short notice." I glared at Parker.  "Just checking. Option two: you rake up all the money you can get your hands on, pay off what Beeker owes and then just tell him you're peacing out—no harm no foul." I shot Parker another look.

"I don't think a freaking Mob boss is going to just let me 'peace out' on this, Parker."

He sighed again.

"Then that just leaves option three."

"Which is?" I asked.

Parker flashed his lazy grin and started talking.

A bead of sweat drips along my hairline, the hairs on the back of my neck stand painfully at attention. I know to move, to break eye contact, is as good as turning the gun on myself.

The Joker's blocking the only way out down the hall, and he still has that smug look on his face. A gloating grin that shows he's humouring me, feeding me drops of hope along with the certainty that death will follow close behind. I feel so stupid, so incredibly blind. Memories, ones I can't tell if they're true or false, are bombarding me. A dozen voices are whispering just out of earshot, growing more incoherent the closer they become.

Later. Think about it later. You need to get out. Breathe.

"Where are you gonna go now, Miri?" the Joker asks. It's a playful taunt, one that reminds me too much of how Mom would sound when I'd break some expensive vase or plate when I was small and I'd hide the broken pieces under my bed.

The ventilation shaft I planned on using is further up, now out of reach. My legs are shaking badly; I can barely keep Parker's weight balanced against me as my mind struggles to work. The shaking reaches my hands, making it difficult to grip the gun as my palms sweat. There's only one more door I didn't try.

"D-Don't move," I say. I don't know what to do with the gun. It's the only thing keeping the Joker from knocking me to the ground. His strength is something that is not in doubt. I won't last more than a minute if he gets too close. Parker won't either.
I try not to think about what will happen if he does.

Fresh feelings of hands whispering up my stomach, ghosting along my sides with a gentle touch leaves my muscles spasming. I can't get Joker's words out of my head, their sick meanings and my mind's inability to discern the truth.

The Joker has a playful look on his face, the grin of a cat waiting for its next meal. His face blurs as tears threaten to overwhelm me. I see his hands twitching, slowly descending from their raised position. He's leering at me with the same expression as before, totally unconcerned about the weapon in my hand. It doesn't have any of the power I need it to.

*I'm running out of time.*

I don't have any real choice. My mind blanks on what's behind the door—I can't remember what the plans showed, but it has to be better than the option in front of me. Like furious beating wings, my heart feels as if it's about to rip out of my chest. My arm is heavy, desperation and Parker's weight is crushing me.

*I can't give up. I owe Parker that much.*

There's no real choice at all. I turn and reach for the handle, hoping to open and slam it shut when I hear it. The sound of screams and something heavy smacking into a wall. Time seems to slow down when the shouts fill the hallway. The Joker and I look down the curved slant of the hall in unison, drawn by the noise. It's then that I notice the black butterfly knife in his hand.

*Move. Now.*

Stuffing the revolver back in my jacket pocket, I fumble with the handle before the door swings open, revealing a dark expanse ahead. I don't have the luxury of hesitating, of waiting to see what the disturbance is. Even as the pitch-dark levels a new layer of distress upon me, I shove Parker and I inside and slam the door closed, momentarily leaving Parker slouched against the wall as I lean against the heavy wood. I whisper fervent prayers to a God I've never believed in that the Joker doesn't open the door. That he can't reach me here.

A sob of panic escapes me in the dark. I can't even see the shape of my hands; the absence of light is total. I jump and press myself harder against the door when I hear a voice, somehow clear against the growing rumbles of the heavy thuds resounding through the building.

"*Tsk, tsk. Impatient as ever, I see. If you, ah, wanted me to take you to the fair, all you had to do was say 'please.'*

A sudden burst of light blinds me. Adjusting from the darkness to the light again in such a short period of time leaves my eyes watering—leaves me vulnerable. I dig my hand back in my pocket and whip the revolver out—pointing it wildly at threats I cannot see.

But a gun won't help me here.

I've trapped myself in one of the largest playrooms, and this one's modelled after some sort of carnival.

The bright reds and yellows of thick canvas cloth descend from the ceiling, creating the illusion of being on the inside of a tent—all of it marred by mould and grime. Smiling cartoon cut-outs of clowns, jesters, and ringmasters peek out among the rows of carnival games. A banner hangs from above, with singe marks and moth-eaten holes, the words obliterated by time and decay. Thick ropes of cobwebs coat the platform Parker and I are resting on, the one that leads down to this
strange recreation of a defunct circus. There's no way out in sight. Only a darkened maze lit ahead with flashing Christmas lights. My blood freezes when I read the sign below the festive blinking colours, illuminating the words written in red.

'Tunnel of Love.'

My heart hammers in my ears. I can't think, can't breathe. Something's gripping my throat, circling around my ribs and squeezing tight.

*Think, Miri. You can still get out. C'mon, get up.*

Sweat coats my spine and my knees knock together in terror. I try to shove it all down, shutting my eyes and trying to focus. My legs won't move.

*Think—you need to think.*

None of the plans I looked at showed that there were still props set up, just the shape of the rooms and the exits. None of my efforts help me recall the information, I have no way of knowing how to find the exit in this potential labyrinth. I reach inside my pocket, looking for the phone that has the map to our salvation. All I feel is the leftover money, box of bullets, and my pocket knife.

*No, no, no—*

Three small taps against the door make me press harder into it, bracing for it to be forced open.

"Uh, looking for something?" the Joker says in a sing-song voice. The mocking sneer isn't something I need to see to know it's on his face.

A quiet whimper rises, strangled by the tightness in my chest.

*He has my phone. He has my fucking phone and he trapped us in here on purpose.*

"You're sick..."

True despair has me in its grip and I can't shake it loose. It's only a matter of time, there's nothing I can do before he kills me. And I did it to myself. I did this, I doomed Parker and me to this nightmare.

Parker groans next to me. His face is slick with sweat and the dark veins I saw before seem almost black under the light, through all the layers of swelling and bruises.

*Parker's already half-dead. I'm too late, and now we're both going to die.*

The Joker's just dragging this out, getting off on our suffering. I can't even raise my voice or yell out. Hopelessness is plunging down on me. My words only come out in strained whispers.

"Why—why are you doing this?!"

Tears blind me when all he does is laugh. I ball my hands into fists and try to stem the escalating hysteria.

"We're running out of time, I'm afraid. So... let's play a, ah, game. Hmm?"

My mind blanks. There's no way he's being serious. He can't be.

"Game?! Just leave us alone—"
"I'm gonna count from ten. Then we'll see how good you are at uh, hide and seek, Mi-ri."

My vision darkens. I look over at Parker, how he slumps against the wall. He can barely keep his eyes open. There's no way I can carry him again. It took almost everything I had just to get us here.

"Oh, your chances increase dramatically if you drop all that, ah, dead weight. Just a thought."

Anger rises in me, but it isn't enough to make the shaking stop. It isn't enough for me to get up and run.

"Fuck you."

It's all I can manage, a curse that I fill with every fibre of hate I'm able to muster. The brief sense of gratification almost makes up for the fear throbbing behind my eyes, twisting my stomach into a painful block of brick.

"Ten," the Joker says, his voice a high, nasally pitch.

I'm vibrating, my hands tremble so badly that I shove the gun back in my pocket. There's no way I could shoot it now. The sign past the carnival games winks at me with menace, inviting me down the rabbit hole to a darkness that I have no chance of leaving.

_I can't I can't I can't—_

"Nine." His voice is low and throaty now, like he's about to sing a lullaby. The ghosting sensation of hands on me intensifies, turning them into crawling grasps that peel back my skin, exposing the muscle beneath.

"Eight." It's there again, that snapping of the consonants. Like when he stabbed Lewis.

_Get up get up GET UP—_

"Seven."

I slide my way back up the door, my knees trembling with a force that almost knocks me back down.

"Six."

I don't know how I do it, but I pick Parker back up and throw his arm over my shoulders. His head falls to the side and he leans heavily against me.

"Leave me here, Miri. I-I'm tired... so tired," Parker mutters. I ignore him and hoist him up, trying to get his feet under him.

"Five."

"Just a little longer, Parker. I'll get you home. I promise."

_This promise I will not break. Not this time._

We nearly fall down the stairs as I drag us along. He grunts in pain until he's suddenly silent. I keep going. My feet are just one misstep away from both of us landing on the ground in a heap. Parker's legs nearly tangle with my own, his broken ankle trailing behind us. It's difficult to navigate the path while straining every muscle in my body with the effort to keep us upright. I can't hear the Joker's voice anymore. No noise permeates the tunnel as we enter. I have no way of knowing if
he's behind me, I can only keep forging ahead into the cold folds of fabric that brush against my
face and bandaged hands.

Damp mould and rot fills my nose and causes Parker to cough. It's a rasping wheeze that makes me
cringe. The path twists and turns up ahead, narrowing until the thick canvas swallows my limbs
almost entirely. It's like we're wading in water.

Faster, Miriam. Move.

The trail of Christmas lights ends, trapping us in suffocating darkness. Apart from Parker's ragged
breathing and my winded gasps, I can't hear anything else. The lack of sensory information is
disorienting. I drop to one knee and nearly collapse—my grip on the wet canvas the only thing
keeping me from being flattened by Parker. A sudden draft of air touches along my face, gently
swaying the loose strands of my hair.

Breeze. That means there's an exit close by. C'mon, you can make it.

The pain in my arms and legs brings tears to my eyes, but I keep going, forcing myself to walk into
a mass of what feels like tar. The feeling of the canvas suddenly drops off, leaving Parker and I
naked in the dark. It's like we're falling, trapped in a dizzying spiral of confusion and empty space.
I'm so tired I can barely think.

There's a rustle of fabric. A whisper of shoes brushing along the concrete. I can hear it all in the
silence, every movement and every pathetic whimper coming from my mouth. Every laboured
breath exhaled in unison. It's coming closer and moving further away in equal measure.

A sudden blast of sound makes me scream.

Oh, oh, oh
For the longest time

The resonating vocals almost make me drop Parker, lay on the ground, and wait for Death to find
me. It's not until the hot tears run down to my neck and wet the collar of my shirt that I realize I'm
still crying. My hands and spine feel like they're on fire. The bruises that cover my body ache with
a renewed fervor.

Oh, oh, oh
For the longest
If you said goodbye to me tonight

I can't tell where the music is coming from, only that it's above our heads. It sounds like it's
echoing in a padded garbage can.

There would still be music left to write
What else could I do

Yellowed lights turn on with each snap of the fingers in the song, one bulb at a time—illuminating
a straight walkway with long rows of large costumed mannequins. The transition is easier on my
eyes, I can see they're mostly dressed up as animals. The half-light gives them an unsettling air.
Laughter, real or imagined, comes from behind me. I look wildly over my shoulder and force
Parker and me to move forward.

I'm so inspired by you
That hasn't happened for the longest time
Something in here smells rotten. Like meat left out in the sun for too long. The whole space feels wrong, like a perversion of something I can't articulate.

_Once I thought my innocence was gone_  
_Now I know that happiness goes on_

I scream again when the mannequins start to move.

_That's where you found me_  
_When you put your arms around me_  
_I haven't been there for the longest time_

As I near them, I see what they are. Creepy plastic smiles swathed in a coat of red paint, half-lidded and bulbous eyes. What I mistook for costumes are really the skins of malfunctioning animatronic animals—swinging back and forth from their pedestals, dancing to an off-tune, jittery beat. A brown dancing bear in a pair of striped overalls nearly blocks the entire path ahead.

Approaching it fills me with dread, but there's no other way forward. I try to navigate past the foul-smelling fur, pulling along Parker and praying his limp leg won't catch against those of the bear.

_Oh, oh, oh_  
_For the longest time_

I move as fast as my cramping limbs will allow. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. The gaze of the animatronics seems to be watching us, following our movements with dead eyes. My entire body is a mass of shudders, each one more violent than the last. A voice, creeping out from the mouths of the animals, echoes around me.

"You're, uh, not very good at this, are you, Miri?"

_Oh, oh, oh_  
_For the longest_  

I'm limping with Parker now in my efforts to get out, still trying to get away from the sound of his voice. From how it crawls under my skin, caressing along the softest parts of me before ripping them open.

_I'm that voice you're hearing in the hall_  
_And the greatest miracle of all_  
_Is how I need you_

It's hard to breathe, air won't stay in my lungs. There's a darkened doorway ahead and a faint light glows from around the bend. Buzzing, growing louder and more incessant, fills my ears.

_And how you needed me too_  
_That hasn't happened for the longest time_

I don't know how I'm moving anymore. I don't know how I've managed to hang on to Parker's sliding form as his nearly-unconscious body begs for relief. My back bows under the weight, feeling like it's on the verge of snapping. The door leads to a bright hallway, one covered entirely in mirrors.

I'm hyperventilating, starving my brain and making black spots spin across my vision.

_Maybe this won't last very long_
But you feel so right

Every movement is agony. The smell is worse in here, working in tandem with my exhaustion to steal the air from me. Little groups of flies sprawl out from the corners of the mirrors, making black rolling seas of movement.

And I could be wrong
Maybe I've been hoping too hard

Whatever shock of Parker's and my appearance would have normally brought is now a passive one. I don't focus on that, how we look like wild animals on the run. I keep looking for the next bend—trying to find where the mirrors divide to form a path. But I can't see anything, I only brush the cold walls and lean against them for relief.

I only notice in passing that my hands leave smears of blood on the glass.

But I've gone this far
And it's more than I hoped for

"Do you think this will make things better, Miri? That it'll make up for your little, ah, mistake?" He's giggling again, making it bounce off the walls and pierce my mind.

The mirrors seem to twist, melding into one another—creating a mesmerizing pool of light and colour. I don't know where we are, how many turns we've made or what direction we came from.

Who knows how much further we'll go on
Maybe I'll be sorry when you're gone

My eyes open and close in heavy blinks.

It takes a moment to discern if what I'm seeing is real. Zsasz is in front of me, down the lighted hall. No, he's standing next to me, grinning. I sink to the ground with Parker, choking back sobs. I can't keep moving, my arms are too tired to stay up and protect me. Everything's drained, leaving an empty vessel behind. The pain fades along with my vision. All I can do is hold Parker's hand.

"I'm sorry, Parker."

I'll take my chances
I forgot how nice romance is
I haven't been there for the longest time

The smell forms its own miasma, burning my eyes and keeping my stomach in my throat. I feel sick. My heavy eyelids close, blocking out the light and Parker and Zsasz and everything else.

"What, is that all you got? C'mon now, Miri." He's laughing. Always laughing. "Some things might just start looking up for you." The Joker's voice makes his words sound like an order. A command.

I force my eyes to open again. Zsasz is gone and the pain ebbs back into my bones, crushing them to the breaking point.

I had second thoughts at the start
I said to myself
Hold on to your heart
"Show me some of that, ah, zany zip I. Like. So. Much."

Everything darkens. I tilt my head back, at the ceiling, and try opening my eyes again. My mind can't comprehend what it's seeing. It's the image of a man, one I must have mistaken for Zsasz. But I don't know how I did. This man's in a red and blue jumpsuit with a thick black beard, he doesn't have the scars.

No, that isn't right. His beard is moving.

Now I know the woman that you are
You're wonderful so far
And it's more than I hoped for

My vision clears. I see the bloated husk of a man with exposed muscles. Some parts are red and others have gone a navy-black with rot. His skin's been peeled off, revealing the musculature beneath. The job wasn't perfect, small islands of deteriorating skin cover his body in green polka-dots. His eyes are sunken pits that crawl with something I can't see. The black of his beard is a writhing horde of flies that are scurrying in and out of his open mouth.

"O-Oh my god!" It's a desperate shriek that tears my raw throat apart.

I was wrong. There's still enough in my stomach for me to throw up.

I don't care what consequence it brings
I have been a fool for lesser things

I can't take anymore. My eyes stay shut this time. Flashing hemorrhages of memories fill my mind, invading every part that tries to keep them at bay.

Someone's hands are on me, violating me. Underneath my jacket and tracing along my abdomen, reaching ever higher. My hands are shaking too badly, quaking with paralyzing electricity that prevents me from moving, from getting away—from making it stop. Parker's hand is still in mine, I try my best to hold it tight.

"I was hoping for more of a, ah, challenge. Gotta say, I'm a little... disappointed. I thought you'd hold out a bit longer. Oh well, we'll try harder next time, won't we?"

Nothing comes out of my mouth. Just strangled sounds.

I want you so bad
I think you ought to know that
I intend to hold you for the longest time

The hand stops around my waist, circling and squeezing the air from me, making my lungs take in more of that festering, putrid air. A finger rubs against my ribs, where my tattoo is. I try to flinch away, but the hands just grip me harder and move along my torso, propping up my slack body. A hand cups my face, leaning it to the side.

My body won't listen to me, I can't make it move.

"Look at me."

I don't remember opening my eyes. But I'm staring at him, at his obsidian eyes, and how they seem to burrow into me. I can't make my mouth work, can't even beg him to stop.
"C'mon now. It's funny. I'll help you put a smile on that face." His hand leaves my cheek, reaching down for something.

It hurts to sob, but my chest wracks with them anyway. I can still see the body reflected above me, the black knife in the Joker's hand.

"What's wrong, hmm? You and your little buddy are reunited now. So where's that beautiful smile, huh?"

My eyes are locked on the edge of the blade, how close it is to my eyes.

"It's right here."

A large figure in black drops like a crack of lightning from the ceiling, raining down shards of glass in his wake. The living shadow leaps at the Joker, knocking him to the ground. Instead of a grunt of pain, the Joker lets out a cackle of amusement. His laughter fills the halls as he picks himself up off the floor. He cracks his neck and stares down Batman and smiles. Something like joy lights up his eyes.

"Finally."

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, thank you all for sticking with me and reading this! I know this fic goes to some dark places, but I really hope you keep reading along and let me know what you think.

Remember that scene in The Dark Knight, when that police officer is pulling out all the Joker's knives and the last one (where the tremor of his hand shows his disbelief and horror) is a vegetable peeler? That's where I got the inspiration for what happened to our mystery man, and I'll leave the rest to be filled in later. Also, my deepest apologies if I ruined Billy Joel's "The Longest Time" for any of you ☹️.

P.S. If you feel like being extra traumatized, look up the ShowBiz Pizza Band from the 1980's, they were also a source of inspiration (or nightmare fuel, depending on your view).
It was 5:58 am and something was wrong.

"Come back to bed, Bruce," Rachel said, her eyes closed and grabbing Bruce's arm in an attempt to drag him back under the covers. Her brown hair was a mess against the pillow and the duvet lay haphazardly across the bed, almost unnecessary in the warmth of the room.

Bruce looked away from Rachel, the outline of her bare hips and her pale skin in the glow of the rising dawn. Exhaustion, creeping feelings of guilt, and the sensation of Rachel against him dragged his thoughts away from the danger he felt, hindering his mind from reading the signs his instincts perceived.

Bruce ignored Rachel's gentle tugs and he didn't move from his position on the edge of the bed. As much as he wanted to lay back down and be pulled back into a slumber he hadn't known in decades, he could sense that something was wrong. There was a sharp pull on his stomach that wouldn't go away. He'd learned a long time ago in his years of wandering to trust these feelings, that they were pointing to something that needed his attention. Quickly.

Bruce pulled on a loose pair of sports pants and made his way out of his room, leaving Rachel looking after him, groggy in the early morning light after only three hours sleep. He hoped he was wrong, that there wasn't anything to be worried about, that he had done enough to keep his world from crumbling.

He tore out into the hallway, his steps landing heavy against the floor. He needed to check, needed to be sure.

Bruce nearly collided with Alfred when he reached the portion of the hallway that forked between Alfred and Miriam's rooms. Bruce dodged him deftly before continuing his march to Miriam's door.

"Bloody Christ—when did you begin making a habit of waking this early in the morning?" Alfred called after Bruce, still in his violet plaid pyjamas. Bruce ignored him and knocked on Miriam's door, straining to hear any noise from within. He heard nothing.

"Miriam, open the door."

Bruce pounded on the door more insistently when he heard no reply, no sign of movement. Alfred came up beside Bruce, trying to pry his hammering fist from the door.

"Let the poor girl sleep, Master Bruce—"

Bruce ignored that, too. He gave up on knocking. If there was one thing he knew about Miriam, it was that she prized her sleep and it wouldn't matter how angry she was, she would lay into him if he disturbed it. That was something they had in common. He went to open the door, firmly blocking Alfred's attempts to bar his passage inside.

"Master Bruce, she's a grown woman, you can't go knocking down—" The words died in Alfred's throat when they saw the room was empty. Her bed was tousled and unmade, clothes were still strewn all over the floor, but Bruce noticed several new items added to the existing piles. He also
saw that her backpack was gone. Panic and a blind rage almost overcame Bruce completely.

"No, she didn't... she wouldn't..." Alfred couldn't finish the words. He looked stricken, his skin paling and eyes watering.

Bruce turned on his heel quickly and moved to the new security panel he had installed in the kitchen, the one that would shutter off the building and enable the security protocols Lucius designed if it was activated. He felt his body grow cold when he saw it was disarmed. He'd had no notification that it had been turned off this entire time. He knew he had remotely set it when he got back earlier that morning.

_How did she—?

The realization hit him before the thought fully formed. Miriam had been working with Lucius for a year, it made sense that she knew how he wrote his codes, and how to dismantle them. He was furious that he hadn't thought of it sooner. He'd underestimated Miriam's abilities again. That, and her penchant for such blatant foolishness. A piece of paper on the kitchen island caught his eye.

With a forced calm, Bruce picked up the note written in a hasty cursive.

_Hey. I went to see the Kwans, I owe them that. I'll be back by lunch. –Miriam

Bruce was fuming. He balled the paper in his fist and focused on not letting out an ear-piercing yell of anger. He spun when he felt a small hand on his back. Rachel was standing there in his robe and the red nightgown she had worn hours before. She looked from the ruined note in his hand to his eyes, trying to hold them steady.

"Bruce, what's happening? Why—"

"She's gone, Rachel. She left." His mind was searching for an answer that made sense, that would justify the motive that would make her act this brash. He saw Alfred head up the stairs in of the corner of his eye, going to search the extra lounge area and the platform leading to the helipad.

"What do you mean she 'left'?

"Did she say anything to you? Anything about what the _hell_ she was thinking?"

"No, not when I was talking with her last night. Why would she leave? She was hardly in any condition to go anywhere."

Bruce looked at the balled paper in his hand, saw again the name on the note.

_The Kwan's. Parker._

That was the only reason that made sense.

"Let me make a few calls down to the MCU, they might know something we don't," Rachel said.

Bruce doubted they would have anything at all. Without Gordon to steer the department, the unit was inept in dealing with anything of the magnitude the Joker was capable of unleashing, nevermind finding a missing person.

He moved away from Rachel and jogged back to Miriam's room to see if his hunch was right. He stepped over the piles of fabric that threatened to tangle his feet and searched her room. Amongst the mess, he saw no hints of her bag or her heavy down feather jacket—the one he'd placed a
tracking device inside yesterday morning before he picked Miriam up from the hospital. He'd done so to most of her jackets, a fallback plan that would let him monitor her whereabouts for the foreseeable months ahead. He didn't expect that he would need to use them so soon.

Bruce left the room quickly. If she had her coat, then he could find her. He'd lock her in her room until sense penetrated that thick skull of hers, until he caught the Joker and ended the madness. She was angry with him, sure, but he couldn't comprehend how she didn't see the risks—the obvious consequences—even after everything she endured. Or, if she did, she was too blinded by a vain sense of hope that would only lead to ruin.

*Why didn't she talk to me?*

The thought wracked through him, elevating his frustration and mounting panic. He honestly thought Miriam could rely on him for anything. Bruce had believed that she would understand, with the man her father was. He honestly believed that she would take solace in the man he'd become. The feeling of a dagger sliding into his heart made it stutter, hitching in a painful reminder of the horror he thought he could help keep anyone from experiencing again.

*If the Joker finds her before I do—*

He couldn't finish the thought. Bruce didn't think that would fit with anything else the Joker had done, but none of his previous actions was something Bruce could predict in the first place. The Joker had remained under the radar again after the attack on the memorial, but that didn't mean he wasn't waiting for Batman's next move. For another opportunity to level a blow against the people of Gotham. Bruce's stubbornness and inability to reconcile the hand he played in Miriam's current state kept him from speaking to her, from gleaning the vital information he needed.

Bruce fought his overwhelming dread as he moved back down the hall towards his room. Alfred caught up with Bruce, pulling him by the shoulder with surprising strength, spinning Bruce around to look at him. Bruce tightened every muscle as an act of control to keep him from acting rashly. His expression was eerily empty, neutral. But Alfred knew Bruce long enough to see the rage barely contained in a façade of calm.

"Master Bruce, think rationally. She can't have been gone for long and you cannot just leave here—in broad daylight—as bloody Bat—"

"She's going back for Parker, Alfred. She still thinks he's alive."

Alfred shot Bruce a look. "With good reason. Not that anyone's had much opportunity to search for the lad." Bruce went to move past Alfred, but he put himself back in Bruce's way, blocking the path to his safe room where his suit and tactical gear awaited him. "Do you have a plan in that head of yours? Or are you going to keep repeating the same nonsense as before and expect a different outcome?"

Bruce glared at Alfred. He didn't give a damn about why Miriam left, he just knew that he needed to bring her back—to keep her safe. She should have trusted him to find Parker, to take the weight from her shoulders. Didn't she know him at all?

Kate's words resounded in his mind, her spirit reminding Bruce of his failures.

'You'll keep my baby safe, won't you?' she had asked him, her hard-won sanity lit up her eyes—giving them a life that hadn't been there for months.

'Of course I will, she'll always be safe with me, Kate.'
'No. It needs to be more than that. Swear to me—swear that you'll keep her safe. That she won't... that she won't—' Kate was crying then, trying to hang on to her lucidity, to that sharp focus that defined her for as long as Bruce could remember.

'Show her your good heart, Bruce. You get it from your mother, you're more like Martha than you'll ever know.' Bruce felt his eyes burning at the memory. At the crippling helplessness threatening to consume him. 'Make her understand, catch her when she falls. I'm leaving that up to you. Can I trust you with that?'

He didn't want his voice to betray the emotions he was feeling, they would not help. They only served to obscure the path ahead. So he said nothing, only glaring at Alfred to move. It wasn't working.

"You are not the only one feeling angry and afraid, Master Bruce. I helped raise this girl, and I'll be damned if anything happened and we failed in taking the best approach possible." Bruce went to go around Alfred again, pushing past him and walking towards the false marble panel embedded in the bedroom wall. Alfred kept speaking, hoping his words would reach Bruce. "An approach that relies not on you tearing out of here like a madman and expecting things to end well."

Bruce forced himself to stop his progress. He was itching, spasming to do something and to do it now. He forced calm and rationality back into his mind.

Remember your training. Remember why you fight.

Bruce forced himself to go back to the Monastery where he spent all those years. He remembered the rigorous exercises his body endured and mastered. The trials and horrors his mind overcame before and could do so again. He focused on those recollections now, forcing his body to ease into the muscle memory he worked so hard to hone. His thinking needed to be clear, to make him sharp as the edge of a blade even in the midst of total darkness and chaos. He needed to draw on that again, to centre his focus and dispel the cloud of doubt and anger. Bruce needed to put himself and his feelings aside, he needed to separate out the vulnerable and weak from the strong and unyielding.

Batman could see the wisdom of Alfred's words. With a deep breath, he forced his breath to be calm and even.

Self-control above all else.

"If you have a suggestion, I'm all ears, Alfred." Batman's eye twitched and he didn't mean for his words have that lingering edge of venom. The mounting awareness that they didn't have much time pricked his consciousness, making his hands shake and his mouth pull back into a hard line.

"I assume you put all your bats to good use, sir?" Alfred was referring to the small tracking devices he developed with Lucius, who had been cheeky in designing them to look like smaller versions of his symbol. Batman nodded, trying to quell his impatience. "Then we know where she is and we have the means to retrieve her. Now, are you willing to listen to my proposal?"

Rachel walked in the room, pulling Bruce Wayne's robe tighter around her body and grasping her cellphone tight in her hand. Alfred couldn't help the small knowing grin that tugged at his lips. In any other circumstances, Bruce Wayne would have said something smart, started some snarky tit-for-tat with Alfred. Instead, Batman nodded at her approaching form, noting the look of uncertainty on her face.

"I just spoke with Stephens. They haven't had any reports about the Joker or Miriam."
That gave Batman pause, a small moment to consider how much time they had until that state of uncertainty would be rectified. Perhaps the Joker was still staying hidden and he wasn't paying attention to Miriam's movements. He still hadn't spoken with Alfred, and Rachel's words would crush that hope, fulfilling his instinctual awareness of the danger that grew in each passing minute.

"But they said an emergency broadcast siren is going crazy down by Amusement Mile. The Fire Department's waiting for back-up before they move in."

Batman's thoughts dragged up what he knew about the area.

Amusement Mile. One of the few existing portions of Old Gotham, mostly stagnated in the 80s. A site of potential economic development that Lucius meant to procure for Wayne Enterprises. Flooded in the early 90s, extensive structural damage and known drug dens. Largely uninhabited.

Batman didn't believe in coincidences. He tore his eyes away from Rachel and met Alfred's gaze.

"I'm listening, Alfred."

Indignation was a new feeling for Batman.

Alfred's idea of ‘subtlety’ involved taking his black Rolls Royce Wraith and speeding to Amusement Mile at a reckless speed Batman didn't expect to see out of the usually demure and composed man. Batman was forced to carry his gear in a bag and lay low in the back of the car, hoping to avoid the looks of recognition by the citizens mobilizing in the early hour.

As they approached the outskirts of the derelict neighbourhood, Batman began pulling on the different elements of his suit. The task was a difficult one, however. Alfred's jostling movements as he threaded through traffic at a break-neck speed tussled Batman around, making his gear slip from his grasp and forcing out grunts of frustration.

Batman liked it a lot better when he was the one driving.

When they arrived at Amusement Mile, Batman was ready to leap out of the car. Small snaking currents of smoke rose in the air in a sheen of gray against the pale blues and pinks of the cold morning sky. Batman took it all in, interpreting each sign as an indicator of the menace lying ahead. The comms unit built into Batman's cowl was tuned to the police scanner's signal, alerting him of the alarm's silence and the series of patrol vehicles working to set up a perimeter. With public servants and police being murdered, they would no longer respond to any call without going together in force. They believed staying in a pack would mitigate the rising risks, and it served to give Batman time to move in before his presence would bring more problems than solutions.

Alfred took out the tablet from the seat next to him and pulled up the screen showing a map of Gotham. Three small red dots marked it: one for Rachel back at the Wayne Holdings skyscraper, another for Batman, and the last for Miriam in the building ahead. In 3889 155 Stickney and Main.

"How accurate is this hunk of metal meant to be, sir?" Alfred asked, pressing on the screen and expanding the area ahead of them.

"Up to ten feet."

"Excellent. Then she should be in the far end of the building here," Alfred said, pointing down the sprawling mess of the structure next to them.

The area was mostly abandoned, and Alfred parked in the alleyway directly beside the building,
with the shade from the towering walls acting as a welcome cover. Batman moved to get out of the car when Alfred called after him.

"Remember now, sir, what we discussed—"

Batman shut the door, cutting Alfred off mid-sentence. It wasn't often that he felt annoyed with Alfred, but the culmination of events irritated him in a way that he hadn't experienced in years. It made him feel almost sullen, and the urgency of the situation compounded his need to get through this quickly. He was facing an enemy that was becoming too familiar for his liking—uncertainty and doubt, agony and crippling frustration.

Batman didn't have enough time to do reconnaissance, he only had a vague inkling of what used to be housed in the sodden shell he stared at. He remembered it being a funhouse of sorts, but the kind that his parents would have never taken him to as a child. Alfred drove away, keeping the rumblings of his engine quiet as he moved to an agreed-upon position further ahead, where he could avoid the roadblocks the police would inevitably establish and Batman could drag Miriam to afterward. Batman didn't know what he'd do when he saw her. It was a debate between shaking and yelling sense into her that she clearly lacked, or being the version of a father he'd never experienced and locking her in the penthouse with an enforced set of security parameters that she couldn't break. As he moved towards the building, he was seriously considering employing both.

He edged around the south side of the building, noting the side exits and the high windows. Mounds of accumulated garbage clung to the alcoves and divets in the walls where they expanded and contracted inwards, accommodating the interconnected sections that made up a sprawling complex that was uncommon in the centralized areas of Gotham. He looked up and saw a vent covered by precarious slats. It looked big enough for him to be able to move comfortably.

There was a reason Batman did his work at night. The night held terrors that worked in his favour when used against those with minds weak enough to be influenced by the shroud of the unknown and the fear of punishing retribution Batman unleashed. Batman thrived in the darkness, but it was different during the day. In the early hours of the rising sun, and its accompanying light, part of Batman's power was taken away. It cast an unflinching glimpse of what Batman really was: a single man underneath a mask. He needed to play to his strengths, no matter how much he wanted to storm the building and search for Miriam, one room at a time if required.

Jumping from a nearby dumpster, Batman grabbed the ledge just below the vent. Batman pulled himself up, grabbing where the vent's cover precariously connected to the wall. Peeling it back and holding it away from the entry point, he raised himself inside, glad for the ample space the vents offered. Batman dragged the vent's cover in with him, gently setting it down and minimizing all noise from the potential conspicuous sounds of metal grinding against one another.

Batman followed the trail down the vents, having just enough room to crouch down and move swiftly. Batman's training in ninjutsu was especially helpful here: his footfalls were quiet, his breathing even and controlled, and only the slightest form of perceptible sound came from him. His thighs burned in a way that he'd grown unused to. He made a small note in his mind to alter his training exercises. The cramped space smelled of salty dust. Thick linings of grime and black mould coated the inside of the metal walls. Batman crept along in the dark, activating his night vision and taking the bends in the vent that would lead him to the end of the building Alfred pointed to. Alfred's voice crackled to life through the comms unit, loud in Batman's ear.

"Just a bit further ahead, sir. You're closing in on the signal."

Batman said nothing in reply. He continued moving along until he came upon an opening in the vent, revealing a large window into what looked like a large children's playroom. The opening was
close to the top of the ceiling with a twelve-foot drop. He switched off his night vision and saw ten men sitting inside. The door was cracked open on the adjacent wall, and the carpets were badly stained with water and what appeared to be blood. Batman's body froze momentarily when he saw the clown masks propped against the semi-automatic rifles that lay next to small playhouses and toy cars. Bruce Wayne's worst fear was realized.

_The Joker is here, that means…_

"Sir, why have you stopped moving?" Alfred asked with a note of concern.

Batman switched off the comms unit. He locked eyes on the men. Batman may have less power in the daylight, but there were plenty of opportunities to work in the darkness there. The group was huddled around a small pop-up table playing cards beneath the small glow of the light above. He tried to rationalize with himself; Miriam couldn't have been there for long.

"So that Pakie bitch came back, eh? The cunt could've been quiet about it."

Batman worked on prying the cover from the vent, the small noises from the moving metal were covered from the men's boisterous conversation.

"Somethin' like that. Now we're down a van. Fucking bitch."

"The fuck is Joker doing over there then?"

He pulled the cover inside, setting it down before moving to the opening.

"Somethin' to do with that maze we set up. The sick freak."

"Shut your _fucking_ mouth, Thresh."

Batman readied a batarang, keeping his eyes glued on the men. He felt his knuckles ache, muscles tense, and an awaiting rabid sense of gratification that would accompany what came next.

"Wonder if he don't need some, uh, 'assistance.'" The licentious laugh made Batman's blood boil.

_He won't like the type of assisted living arrangements he'll need when I'm finished._

"I thought he was wrapping presents?"

"They weren't _actual_ presents, you moron."

"I don't wanna know, but my bet's on him having a lot more fun than we are. God, can't we for once stay in a place that doesn't smell like piss?"

Batman threw the batarang at the light, shattering the bulb and engulfing the room in darkness.

"What the hell—"

The man didn't have time to finish his sentence. Batman was on him, shoving him to the ground and cracking his head against the carpet. The other men didn't have the advantage of being able to see in the dark. They fumbled for the exits, but Batman was too quick. Batman swept his leg out, knocking one man to the ground. Ducking to the right, closer to the door, Batman swung out his arm and clotheslined another—catching him off guard and punching down onto his stomach as he fell. Batman moved through the room at a dizzying speed, breaking arms and shattering elbows as they swung at him blindly in the dark. His fist drove into their ribs, his elbow against their jaws. He wanted to put them down hard enough that they wouldn't be able to get back up on their own. Some
still made it out into the hall, ripping the door open and letting in the weak rays of the emergency lights. The five men remaining in the room were groaning on the ground; they wouldn't be going anywhere.

The men in the hall were limping and shouting. The sound attracted three others to join them, their fists and guns raised. Batman stood still for a moment, glowering. Their hands shook, and their hesitation was all Batman needed. He threw a batarang—it found its target in the soft tissue between the thumb and index finger of the man closest to him. The man dropped the gun with a shout and Batman lunged.

The hallway filled with the sound of skulls and bodies cracking against the exposed drywall, Batman's fists connecting with kidneys, teeth, ribs, and shattering femurs. Blood sprayed out from their mouths and dotted the walls. A shot went off just as he jerked one man's arm upward, but not before the bullet grazed past Batman's ribs. He moved through the pain and the screaming of his winded lungs. Some of the men behind him still had the strength to fight, landing blows against Batman's back and kicking out at his legs.

This was taking too much time. If what the men said was true, then he only had minutes to get to Miriam. And if by some miracle Parker was still alive, his time was running out.

Batman blocked an oncoming blow with one arm while reaching for an explosive pellet with the other. He threw it at the ground—causing the men to shield their eyes from the flashbang and the smoke that confused their senses.

Batman was brutal.

Targetting their skulls, Batman hit hard enough to temporarily blind them, to force them to their knees in a complete daze. His fist drove in uppercuts that caused them to bend over heaving, the air and contents of their stomachs leaving them. Batman kicked out at them, his powerful legs crushing theirs and leaving them in a tangled heap. He targeted every weak point with precision, with an exactness that would leave them in excruciating pain but alive.

Batman stood over his bloody work as the smoke dissipated. Red coated his knuckles and he could see several small, yellowed teeth at his feet. Every one of the men was out cold in one groaning mass. Stepping over their unconscious bodies, Batman turned his comms back on.

"How far?" Batman asked, lowering the pitch his voice to a deep rumble.

"She's moving further away, approximately 100 meters ahead." Alfred sounded tired.

Batman sprinted down the hallway, his cape billowing out behind him. He approached the end of the hall that led towards the back of the complex. On the left, he saw a storage room with mouldy cardboard boxes and outdated cleaning supplies. There were small pools of blood on the floor and a stench that smelled like rot and decay. The door to his right was closed, but he could see a glowing yellow beneath it. He found the door was locked.

"You're in the right direction, sir," Alfred said.

Batman kicked the door open, splintering the warped wood and revealing a twisted parody of a carnival ahead. He could hear the faint tricklings of music, muffled and distorted. He couldn't recognize the tune yet. He saw no immediate signs that Miriam was still in the room. Small smudges of blood and wet footprints marked the platform, leading to an entrance with a sign that made Batman forget himself for a split second.
Batman had underestimated the Joker's sick sense of depravity.

As he moved further in, he recognized the lyrics echoing from afar. It was that Billy Joel song, the one Bruce Wayne hated since he was a kid. An increasing sense of urgency made Batman move faster. He wouldn't go in the tunnel, there was no telling what the Joker had set up, but the Batman was certain that the Joker was in here, he was counting on it.

Old canvas cloth hung from the rafters, that would mean that there would be a metal framework above where it would be suspended from. Batman backed up closer to the wall where there was a gap in the fabric. His presumption was correct, there was enough space for him to move along the top. Grappling himself up, Batman tested his weight on the rusted metal, making sure it would hold. It creaked and groaned, but it held. The expanded space above the rotting canvas was filled with choking dust and a wet dank that choked Batman's lungs. He pushed past the burning feeling, balancing himself and keeping his sure footing, Batman raced along the long stretch of interconnecting beams, moving swiftly above the tunnel's path below.

The music was getting louder, obscuring the happenings below, but it wasn't enough to cover the sound of the Joker's voice, the one Batman had been replaying over and over again in his mind. The one that tormented him, taunted him with his inability to keep back the tide of chaos.

"Do you think this will make things better, Miri? That it'll make up for your little, ah, mis-take?"

The song was close to ending, and Batman couldn't hear any noise coming from Miriam. No clue of what state she was in. Batman forced himself to stay calm, to push down the violent imagery of what every barbarous part of him wanted to do. Dust and shards of rusted metal fell down from the bowing beams as Batman moved faster, he willed them to hold his weight for a while longer. Batman was close to the end of the room, fast approaching the enclosing wall.

"Show me some of that, ah, zany zip I. Like. So. Much." The clown was laughing in a way that Batman hadn't heard before. It made his blood run cold. He didn't focus on the words, only on the end result he would make into a reality.

Rage and panic flooded his ears when he heard a loud scream of terror.

Miriam.

The canvas that covered the path below ended, and Batman was hit with a rank stench that turned his stomach. It was a scent he was all too familiar with, one he encountered often in the last year but never grew accustomed to.

The smell of decomposing flesh.

And by the intensity of it, the body was over a week old.

"She's directly below you, sir." Alfred's voice was still calm. It was a steadying force that kept Batman from tipping over the edge. "I suggest you move quickly, the specialized task force has arrived. They're preparing to breach."

There was a long rectangular wooden structure ahead. Batman dropped from the beam and landed softly on the sodden wood.

"What's wrong, hmm? You and your little buddy are reunited now. So where's that beautiful smile, huh?"
Batman found a weak spot in the wood. Even with all the hate, disgust, and blind anger filling him, Batman couldn't help the smart reply that came out of his mouth as he jumped in the air, landing on the weak point and shattering through flimsy layers of glass.

"It's right here."

Batman could see the Joker crouched over Miriam's limp body and his mind kicked into an instinctual savagery Bruce Wayne spent so long learning to control.

He leaped at the Joker, knocking him to the ground and making his head smack against the mirrors with a satisfying *crunch*. Putting himself between the clown and Miriam, Batman stood firm and glared him down, his mind wrestling for control. He could see Parker next to Miriam, and if it wasn't for the faint rising and falling of his chest, Batman would have thought him dead. Instead of the grunts of pain Batman expected, he only heard the unsettling laughter from the Joker.

The Joker straightened, totally unfazed by the hit to the head. The smell was worse down here, but the Joker seemed unaffected by it. His messy green hair was half-pulled back, and blood coated his arms up to his elbows. He was taller than Batman thought he would be, wiry and moving with a fluidity that belied his slouched posture. Batman scowled as the Joker made a show of cracking his neck and his scarred smile expanded, splitting his white face in a wide line of red.

"*Finally,*" the Joker said in an exhalation of something akin to happiness.

The Batman made himself stand still, to rein in the control he was quickly losing. Miriam's small whimpers behind him made the task a difficult one. He saw the knife in the Joker's hand and played out the different strategies in his mind, thinking of the best way to put him down while inflicting the most damage, but he didn't act. He knew if he hit the Joker now he wouldn't stop until the man was dead.

"You're much more impressive in person, y'know." The Joker was pacing in the small space, the refracting images from the mirrors creating a dance of green, purple, and red. "The media doesn't give you much credit at all. They never catch all of your... what do you even call all that? *Muscley*-ness?" Batman's fists shook at the clown's words and his psychotic giggle, but he forced himself to extend the mercy of surrender, no matter how undeserving.

"It's over. Special forces will be here in two minutes. You're finished."

Batman was disturbed by the Joker's unhinged laughter, at the total lack of concern displayed in his features.

"Oh, but the *real* fun is just beginning."

Batman didn't see the lighter in the Joker's other hand until he raised up at eye-level. Batman readied himself to pounce again, to flatten him to the ground and crush every bone in his demented body. Something in the clown's words rooted him to the spot, keeping him from acting on his impulses.

"I imagined us meeting under some, uh, different circumstances. Bu-t I'm, ah, *adaptable.*"

Batman took a step closer to the Joker. He had the advantage of years of training and developed muscle, the Joker didn't look like he could put up much of a fight. The Joker smiled and stayed rooted where he was, inviting Batman closer. He kept talking, and Batman had an insistent urge to break his jaw.

"The nice thing about rotting corpses is that they cover up all the other, uh, problematic gasses in
the air. Y'know, like propane." Batman stopped mid-motion, his nose only then picking up the faint traces of the gas beyond the overpowering scent of death. His eyes widened with dawning understanding. "Well, buster-bats—I'm just going to light your day up."

That's when Batman realized what the Joker was holding wasn't a lighter at all. It was a detonator.

Batman had just enough time to dodge backward, pulling his cape to cover Miriam and Parker as an intense wave of heat shattered the glass mirrors. The burning intensity of the fire almost convinced him that his suit was melting onto his back. He could only keep his head down and wait for relief or death to find them.

As quick as the burst of heat was there, the flames receded back, smouldering on the wood frames of what used to be a house of mirrors and burning the canvas above them. Batman looked up and saw that the Joker was gone. All that remained was the devastation of the room, Miriam's broken cries, the struggling breaths coming from Parker, and Batman's silence.

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Batman watched from above as the ambulance took Parker away, speeding him to the medical care he so desperately needed. He saw Alfred pull up the street, a comfortable thirty minutes after the police stormed the building—enough time for it to be believable that he had just sped there from Midtown. Batman watched it all with a faint detachment that underlined his despair.

'No, you don't... don't understand. You don't. It's all my fault. I did this—it-it's all my fault.'

Miriam kept saying it over and over again, repeating the words as her eyes stared at Parker. She had only come back to life when he dragged them both out. The shards of glass cut into their bodies and left trails of blood behind.

Miriam was blaming herself, but the culpability lay with Batman.

His mind lingered on how her hands pushed him away, resisting the embrace of erasing comfort he didn't know how to give. He heard the shouts of the police storming in, clearing the room, and the ring of the fire truck's siren as they worked to put out the remaining flames. The tenuous relationship Batman had with the police was inextricably tied with Gordon. With him gone, Batman knew it would not be good if they saw him here, if they made any further connections between him and Miriam. Batman had no choice but to leave her there clutching at Parker's hands as the pain on her face shattered something he already thought was beyond further harm. A deep sense of self-hatred he hadn't felt since the night he left Gotham all those years ago pierced through him.

His failure was nearly complete. He didn't have it in him to become what was necessary to stop a man like the Joker. He couldn't even protect those that mattered the most.

Whatever uncertainty had existed before was gone now. It was time for all this to end.

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Batman didn't have to wait long for Harvey Dent to wake up. He'd slept longer than Batman had noted before from his previous hours of surveillance when Rachel first started dating him seven months ago. It was something Batman spent his spare time on, looking for any reason to hate Harvey—to find a sense of vindication and superiority over the man Rachel had chosen over him. In all his time watching Harvey, he had never given Batman any reason to doubt his good intentions. Harvey used to wake with a genial look of sleepiness that bordered on endearing, with his blonde hair dishevelled and a smile ready to greet the day. It frustrated Batman at first, seeing someone be so effortlessly content. A sense of normality Bruce Wayne had never known as an
adult.

Maybe it was because it was a Saturday, or maybe it was the understandable strain marking his features that made Harvey sleep longer. Batman recognized this look, it was the same one that had plagued him from the beginning: grim defiance and moralistic idealism along with the knowledge that those same qualities chipped away at a man's very being, piece by piece.

He'd already seen the cracks showing when Harvey was under extreme stress. Harvey's reaction at having Rachel stay with Bruce Wayne was enough to show Batman he truly cared about Rachel, but his devotion to her was an uncomfortable reflection of his own. The guilt he felt before about his night with Rachel grew in his chest, marking his cheeks with anger mixed with shame.

Harvey's reputation in the IAD, his seemingly incongruous nature of extremes, was something Batman rationalized as being the result of Harvey's abusive father. Batman could see those same cracks again as he stared at Harvey's unknowing face, the side of him that Batman hoped Harvey could keep at bay for a while longer.

Batman was waiting on the balcony ledge, where he knew Harvey had his coffee every morning.

Harvey came out in his usual suit and tie, his hair was back in place, but a thick stubble lined his jaw and neck. Batman's unexpected presence caused him to drop his cup of coffee, shattering it against the wood, and pull out a revolver from his side holster. The wild, hardened look in his eyes disappeared when he realized who it was.

"Jesus—I almost shot you!" Harvey was surprised and temporarily angry. Lowering the gun, Harvey tried to smile. The line of sweat on his forehead betrayed Harvey's trademark easy-going grin, making it ring false.

Batman ignored Harvey's surprise and the gun that was just pointed at his chest. He felt weary, tired in body and mind. He couldn't help but wonder what his life would have been like if he followed the same path Harvey did. Would Rachel have stayed with him? Would they have married, started a family of their own? Miriam's mind would still be intact, unmarred by the vicious savagery Batman couldn't help but feel he brought upon her.

He made his decision. Bruce Wayne couldn't take the crushing burden. The Joker had found his cracks and broke them open, widening them to a place Bruce Wayne never wanted to descend to. A total darkness that had no path of return.

"I need you to call a press conference for tomorrow morning."

"Wait—what do you mean? You can't be serious."

To Harvey, Batman was an incorruptible absolute, a trustworthy source that rooted out the moral bankruptcy that had allowed for the murder of his mother and the police's blind eye to his father's violence. Batman was a force of justice that enacted the brand of righteousness that had been missing from Gotham for too long, something Harvey had worked towards his entire life. Hearing the implications of Batman's words deepened the crack in Harvey a little further.

"It has to end. No one else will die because of me," Batman said.

Being Batman wouldn't save any of the people he loved. It wasn't saving Gotham, only tearing her apart. The people of Gotham had spoken: he was not the saviour they needed. He was ready to accept the consequences of his failures.

"No—no, wait! You can't give in, you can't." It was too late, Batman jumped from the balcony,
disappearing from Harvey's sight. He screamed after him, hoping his words would sink in, that his faith in Batman would be rewarded. "YOU CAN'T GIVE IN!"

But it was too late, Batman was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I want to thank all of you again for reading this and leaving such thoughtful and wonderful comments. As much as I write for me, your kind words inspire me to keep going and unfurling this dark mess of mine.

In my descriptions of Harvey and references to his own backstory, I mention an abusive father and death of his mother. I'm pulling this information from the novelization of TDK which details how Batman really did stalk Harvey for months as a way of vetting him as a DA and as Rachel's boyfriend, and Batman finds out about Harvey's very troubled upbringing. This is something I may or may not go more into later, but just in case you were curious if I was making up that detail or not!
Hey everyone, please be aware when reading: this chapter contains descriptions of self-harm.

The heart monitor is beeping in an arrhythmic cadence that almost lulls me to sleep, but the sight of Parker's bloodied bandages and exposed burns keep me awake. He came out of surgery six hours ago and we still don't know if he'll be OK. His kidneys, liver, and heart are failing. Even with everything else, the doctor's said that was what they had to wait for—to see if he'd pull through.

I haven't been able to bring myself to look down the hospital bed. Soo-ah and Jin-sung Kwan are sitting across from me. I can't look at Soo-ah, or the vacant agony on Jin-sung's face, either. I've seen her cry too many times, and every time it's been because of me. They just didn't know it. I don't know what I'll do when Jun and his wife get here from New York.

Soo-ah's clutching Parker's hand tight. I hesitate at first, but I take his free hand in my own, squeezing gently. The triangle tattoo stands out against his pale skin and the too-bright lights. The tip faces upwards, pointing to the thick IV in his arm. A small outline of a wave sits inside, a series of smooth arcing lines that intersect with one another but stay within the bounds of the black border. My finger traces along the pattern and I think of my own. I can still remember the day we got them together three years ago, a happier time that I hope will keep back the bad. I feel my mind slipping away, in and out of a waking state of dreaming.

"That's going to hurt way more than mine did," Parker said when I lay down on the parlour's leather chair and pulled up my t-shirt to expose my ribcage, being careful to not show too much of my stomach. Parker always wanted to get one, but he told me he was too afraid of needles to do it on his own. It seemed fitting that we should get one together, and I was excited that we'd have something to bond us permanently, even if the patterns didn't match.

"Why a triangle, Parker? I swear, if it's just a reference to Zelda, I'm never speaking to you again." I was teasing him, and I gave myself away too quickly by letting out a small burst of laughter. I remember his big grin and the white flash of his teeth.

"Shoot, you got me. Hey—I'm kidding," he said when I grimaced at him. I played at being annoyed, motioning my hand in small circles for him to give me the real reason. "The Greeks thought that triangles symbolized the doorway to higher wisdom. Maybe it'll help my grades at GU, you know? Doesn't hurt to have some good luck."

"What about the wave, then?" I lightly traced the pattern, just like I am now, barely skimming the surface of the tender skin.

"My parents had to cross the ocean to get here, and all great journeys start with a crossing over of sorts. So, here's mine—may it lead to nothing but adventure." His smile grew until his face was one big show of happiness.
I remember how my heart swelled, and how much I hated myself for it. My efforts in killing my affections for him weren't successful, they only fed into the self-loathing that already ate its way into my heart. My smile dimmed when I saw his.

"Why'd you pick a sun, Miri?" Parker finally asked me, pointing to the drawing sitting on the counter next to the little wells of ink. The titular Adam of Adam's Body Shop was getting ready to start. It wouldn't be very big, just a small sunburst. I hadn't planned on telling anyone the meaning, but it was Parker who was asking, and I had a hard time saying no to him—especially after everything I put him through.

"Nothing can live without the sun, right? It shines light where it would otherwise be dark forever. It's a good reminder—an aspirational symbol, I guess." Parker looked at me funny then, like he had guessed what I was trying to hide all along. Like he might have felt the same, too.

"It's fitting, I think. You always shine so bright, wherever you are." Just like it did then, the memory of Mom's last conversation with me rings through my bones in a searing flash of agony. His smile was nearly blinding. "Yeah. You're like the sun, Miri."

Parker was wrong. I wasn't anything like the sun. It was him that acted like the centre of my universe from the first day we met. He was the force that kept me together, the person who kept me looking for the light and never back at the dark. I found myself wondering then, just like I am now, what I would do without him.

The cold of Parker's hand seeps through my bandages and snaps me back to the hospital room. Soo-ah and Jin-sung are holding each other now, looking at Parker's face with a desperate longing for him to open his eyes. Soo-ah tried talking to me when she came into the room, but I couldn't make myself speak. The look on my face must have told her enough. She gave me a hug and a whispered "thank you" in my ear before sitting opposite of me. I couldn't even open my mouth to tell her the truth, that all of this was my fault. Parker's…

No. Don't you even think about it. He'll be fine. He'll be OK, just like he said.

I focus on the pain I feel, how I ache in places I didn't know was possible—and how much I deserve it. I've refused treatment that would keep me from Parker's bedside. Alfred was mad about that, but I kept pushing him away until he agreed to sit in the waiting area. I don't think about how Batman—no, Bruce—left me again to withstand all of this alone. But that's not important right now. My pain can come later. As long as Parker's laying here it can't touch me—it can't drag me away from him. Alfred and Bruce don't realize staying with him is all that matters.

Everything I feel is nothing in comparison to what I've done to Parker, the pain he's in. I don't mean to, but some part of my mind won't let me look away. My eyes go down Parker's unconscious form to the leg that's missing, the part of him that he'll never get back. Removing the necrotic limb wasn't enough, they had to try and repair his heart and flush out the sepsis that's killing him. And it's all my fault, it always was.

My head is throbbing, both from an oncoming migraine and the pulsing memories that I can't hold back anymore. The violation I feel goes beyond the physical, it slithers into my mind—in the deep recesses I thought I shut away a long time ago. The floodgate that kept everything I tried to forget at bay crumbles completely, damaged beyond repair at the arcade by the Joker's taunting voice, creating an onslaught that overwhelms me entirely. A new kind of pain crushes my lungs.

I don't want to remember. I don't want the pain it will bring.
"But I do. I always do."

"Miss Dawes will see you now," the woman behind the front desk said.

The DA’s waiting area was spacious and bright with worn furniture that needed replacing. Cedar paneling covered the walls in a colour of brown that reminded me of 90s cabinetry trends. I tore my eyes from the various portraits of previous DA’s, rising from the uncomfortable fake-leather chair and picking up my backpack as I headed for the hall the woman motioned to.

"It’s the second-last door on the left," she said. I nodded my head and fidgeted with the straps of my bag. The apprehension of meeting with Rachel made me nervous and my hands were starting to sweat.

I’d only been in the courthouse twice before, and both times were with Alfred when he was signing forms to be my legal guardian. It was intimidating being there on my own, walking through the large marble halls and passing important looking people in suits. It was nice that most people didn’t know my face. Outside my connection with Bruce, there wasn’t a lot to draw attention to myself. Mom sold her parents’ pharmaceutical company when Aunt Martha died, investing her money in Wayne Enterprises and leaving the rest in a trust fund for me when I was older. After the initial uproar of Bruce disappearing, I was allowed to fade into the background—not entirely anonymous, but vague enough that no one really cared to know my face. That changed when Bruce came back.

Deep breaths were all I had to centre myself as I walked to Rachel’s office. I knew what I needed to do, but I didn’t know how well I could sell it. Parker’s plan was still in the forefront of my mind, I just needed to keep my nerve.

Glancing at the names on the frosted glass doors as I headed towards Rachel’s office, one name caught my eye.

Carl Finch: Gotham City District Attorney.

That was one of the names on Ivan’s list, the one that kept popping up in all the emails I sifted through. The anxiety and tension the name brought made my shoulders curl up, like I was pulling into myself, making my body smaller until I’d disappear entirely. Ivan wanted dirt on Gotham’s DA—one of the most important people in the judicial system. That reminder was all I needed to square my shoulders and approach Rachel’s door with an affable confidence that I didn’t truly feel.

I winced when I knocked on the glass of Rachel’s door louder than I meant to. Rachel’s wide smile was unexpected when she swung the door open. She was wearing a dark gray pencil skirt and matching jacket; her hair pulled back into a bun on the top of her head.

"Miriam, it’s so good to see you. Have a seat," she said, motioning to a more comfortable looking chair than the one I was just sitting on in the waiting room.

She seemed much happier to see me than I anticipated. She’d come to the Manor once since Bruce disappeared to visit Alfred and I’d purposely made myself scarce. Rachel had no reason to see me anyways, we weren’t friends. I was just the annoying kid that would stick to Bruce like a shadow.

Rachel had been working in the DA’s office right out of law school, and she’d worked hard to be an assistant DA. The amount of case files showed just how much she was doing. Rachel’s desk was covered in stacks of files, paper, used coffee mugs, and a large assortment of pens. She shoved them aside until she created a window wide enough for her to see me through when she sat down. I
tried my best to smile while glancing at the precarious stacks that looked like they'd topple at any moment. My nervousness was at risk of showing, and I was glad that she didn't seem to notice. Something settled in the air and the uncomfortable look on her face certainly mirrored my own. I was relieved when she spoke first.

"What can I do for you, Miriam? I won't lie, I was surprised you called."

I tried to stretch my smile wider and fall into the act I'd rehearsed in the bathroom mirror two hours before.

"I was hoping you could help me out with a school project. If you wouldn't mind, that is." Hope grew in me when her expression lit up. I almost felt bad for lying to her. "It's for my law class. We're doing projects on what kind of legal avenues the prosecutor's office is following to lower Gotham's crime rates."

"Sounds like a big project," Rachel said, her smile dimming as her interest piqued. I could see the lawyer side of her coming out. I just needed her to be convinced and not ask too many questions that I couldn't answer.

"I know, right? It sounds like a lot, but I'm keeping my focus on one area." Rachel was nodding her head with her eyes fixed on the desk.

"I can try to answer some of your questions, but there's a lot that's tied up in red tape and, as I'm sure you realize, in strict confidentiality regulations," Rachel said, this time meeting my eyes. I nodded my head emphatically and urged her on with an encouraging smile. "But there are some topics I can be a little more specific on, depending on your area of interest."

Jackpot, I foolishly thought.

If I was smart, I would have told Rachel everything then. She would have helped me; I knew that then just as I know it now. As much as Rachel may have avoided or disliked me, she was never cruel or unkind. Rachel would have done anything in her power to help anyone she could. That's what made her a good lawyer and friend to Bruce. It seems, in hindsight, that I was incapable of making the right decisions, a trait that's followed me my whole life. I continued with the lie.

"I'm really hoping to do it on the Dimitrov and Maroni's feud. It's on the news a lot." Rachel's eyebrows shot up in what I took as surprise.

She seemed a lot more comfortable talking with me when it was rooted in the impartial facts of a case and not the personal minefield that we left unspoken between us. Bruce's absence, and our vastly different relationships to him, contributed to that. We knew the same struggles but had no way of communicating those to one another then. We were both eager to have something safe to talk about, to find a tentative common ground, even if it was based on a lie.

"They're all complete scum, but the Maroni's are a different breed. I have a lot of hearsay on both, but little in the way of hard evidence. I'm not sure how much I can help."

"Generalities will be fine. OK, so how long has it been going on for? Like three years or—?"

"More like thirty. It started when an arms deal went bad. Two of Luigi Maroni's nephews died. As you can imagine, things devolved fairly quickly."

Rachel looked exhausted just talking about it all. The frustration was clear in her distant gaze and set of her mouth. I could understand why; thirty years was a long time to hold a grudge and exact a penance that had no way of being satisfied. I tried not to think about how much my father
contributed to that bloodshed.

"Luigi Maroni, the previous head of the family, declared war on Yuri Dimitrov and his family's burgeoning influence as heroin smugglers. They've been at it ever since, and it's only gotten worse with the Falcone's throwing themselves in the mix. It would take a goddamn miracle for them to stop."

The topic of retribution and long-held anger should have been a clue for me, an indicator to stop while I still could. I didn't see it then, I thought if I was clever enough Ivan couldn't touch me, that I could out-think senseless brutality. I was wrong.

"Why haven't any of them been prosecuted, then? We all know who's doing this."

Rachel shot a quick look to the doorway, ensuring no shadow lingered in the hall. I would've dismissed it as paranoia had I not seen what was on many of the cops' computers in the GCPD. Ivan wanted me to mine for information and hand it all over to him. I did the mining, but I had no intention of sharing what I found. The amount of repulsive rot and corruption that had infiltrated nearly every level of law enforcement, all the way up to the goddamn Commissioner, was massive betrayal from a system that I'd been taught to trust in my entire life.

I was bluffing to Ivan. I cracked the police's network and firewalls in less than two hours. Their security was good, but they had a few backdoors that they didn't conceal very well. I was blown away by the incriminating evidence just laying bare on their computers. No encryption, no codes to break. Just bold-faced dishonesty, bribes, selective police brutality against those who asked questions, double roles as drug dealers and enforcers—all of it just sitting there for anyone to find. They were so cozy, so certain in their positions, that they had no reason to care about getting caught. Some of them even conducted their dirty side businesses right from their work emails.

Somehow, I thought I was above them. That what I had done wasn’t as bad, it was forgivable. In reality, there wasn’t much that separated them from me. I was on the same slope that led to the same place. I just didn't understand that yet.

After a second when she didn't see anyone or hear movement in the hall, Rachel nodded her head in agreement. I could see hints of defeat climbing up her shoulders.

"We do know who's doing this, you're right." I saw anger in her eyes, but it wasn't directed at me. "They've paid off the right people and they know how to organize, I'll give them that. They have lower level men carry out most of the dirty work, career criminals that don't necessarily mind jail time. The ones at the top, they stay further back and reap all the rewards."

Rachel made a sound of disgust in the back of her throat, pushing stray strands of hair behind her ears as she stared out the window. Lost in her own limitations, I felt more empathy for Rachel. I was glad that I looked at her computer, too. Rachel's pure idealism wasn't just for show. She was really trying to make a difference, to change Gotham from within the system. But I had glimpsed into the other side and saw that she and very few others were the lone stones that tried to withstand the raging current that was trying so hard to erode them to nothing.

"What would it take for syndicates like the Dimitrov's to implode? Like informants, internal conflicts—"

"It could be a combination of things. The way things are now, it would take years for the law to catch up to people like Carmine Falcone, Salvatore Maroni, and Yuri Dimitrov. Informants are a feared certainty in any organization, but the Mob isn't afraid of people ratting them out to the police here. The FBI would be different if they gave a damn in the first place." Rachel said the last
part as an aside to herself, and I didn't miss the bitterness in her voice.

"Now people ratting out to other families, that would be different. 'Family above all else' is a blood oath to them. Betraying that is equal to signing your own death warrant. It wouldn't benefit anything we're trying to do—they're usually murdered before we can get to them. The families rely on informants to get an edge on the competition, but no one wants a traitor in their ranks."

"Has this happened a lot between the Maroni's and Dimitrov's, from what you know?"

I was writing down everything Rachel said, making notations where I would need to find the right information to spin the story I was going to sell Ivan. Rachel stopped herself short of answering and looked at me hard. The lawyer side of her was drawing back and was replaced with the Rachel I knew—the one that was uncertain of what to make of me and felt an awkward and extended affection out of my relationship to Bruce.

"This is just for your paper—strictly academic, right?" She looked skeptical then, her keen eye trying to glean past any façade for a lie. I forced myself to smile and hoped my attempts at deception weren't so transparent. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

I almost caved then. I was invested in Parker's plan, and I truly believed it would work. Rachel's inquiries prodded at the scared, vulnerable part of me. Another mistake: I ignored what my instincts were telling me to do—foregoing the right path Mom tried so hard to teach me to follow.

"Oh, no, of course not. Just strictly academic."

What I wouldn't give to change what I said.

Rachel seemed to buy it.

"To answer your question—yes, this has happened at least a dozen times, that we know of, over the years. I shouldn't tell you this," I leaned forward then, so eager to hear the key that would destroy a part of me I'd never be able to rectify, "but there are rumors that someone on the Dimitrov side is leaking information, trying to leverage a position where he can set up his own branch. No word on who it is, not that we'd be able to do anything anyway, with the GCPD the way it is."

I knew too well what she meant.

"Greed makes fools of everyone. It's what makes people like the Maroni's, Dimitrov's, and the Falcone's so liable to mistakes. It's what will bring them down, in the end," Rachel said with a small smile.

What I saw when I looked through the GCPD's computers was a broken system in desperate need of cleansing. Rachel's certainty made me think that maybe it wasn't completely beyond repair after all.

"All we can do on our end is build a case big enough that no one can ignore. Our moment of grace is coming, we just have to be ready when it arrives."

It's too bad that neither of us knew then that the moment of grace Rachel spoke of would come in the form of Batman. Maybe it was just that Gotham's fate would start to change and we were both lucky enough to know the man who'd make it happen. Or perhaps it was a twist of irony, a good joke God was playing—one that men like the Joker would certainly be capable of understanding.

Parker and I were ready to face Ivan. Or, at least, we thought we were.
My time was up, and Ivan wanted to meet in person for the drop-off. He could sense my hesitation and unwillingness before, and I think he wanted to see the results of my research for himself and root out if I'd lied. I felt confident going into the meeting. Parker and I had everything planned out, every detail we could think of was accounted for. Nowhere in our calculations did we foresee what would happen, the consequences of my foolishness. The results of my brazen disregard for everything I should have been fighting to keep safe.

"Are you sure you want to go in alone, Miri? There's too much that can go sideways, I don't like this at all," Parker said as we stood a block away from The Red Square.

It was the anniversary of Mom's death that day. At the time, it felt fitting—I was doing right by her memory, standing up against everything she hated. I didn't acknowledge how what I had done before likely ruined several people's lives, or put them on a route that led there. I thought this one decision would fix all that, it would make up for my mistakes in a way that absolved them.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

"It'll be alright, Parker. Just wait in the café over there and I'll meet you when we're finished." Parker looked like he was having second thoughts. I knew having him come into the restaurant was a guarantee for things to end badly. I touched his arm and pulled his gaze away from the direction of The Red Square back to me. "We did our work. You'll have to trust me with the rest."

"It's them I don't trust."

His nose was twitching more than usual, and I felt my cheeks grow warm. He looked down before locking eyes with me. I stared at the deep shades of brown—the colour of earth and home. I looked up at him and gave his hand a quick squeeze of reassurance. Even through the thick mitts, I could feel the jolt his touch elicited in me.

"Alright," he said after a moment, chewing on the corner of his mouth, "I'll wait. Try not to take long, though. I don't think Little Russia is accustomed to having a Korean hanging around."

I made myself laugh and show a confident smile I didn't really feel. Hugging the thick manila envelope to my chest, I walked around the corner to the restaurant. Just like the last time I was there, two men stood out front with noses bright red from the cold. They had knitted hats and scarves obscuring most of their features, along with plush jackets and thick mittens. Through all the extra layers, they still looked like they were freezing. The gave a barely perceptible nod at my approach, and it was with a frozen stiffness that they opened the door and gave me a slight bow in greeting. Despite the knowledge of what these men were truly like, I couldn't help the trained smile I gave in return for their courtesy.

Ivan was alone this time, his hair more tousled than the last time we met, and wearing this awful khaki suit jacket that clashed, almost offensively, with a neon orange dress shirt. Beeker and the blonde woman from before were absent. The same amount of men still stood guard at the exits, blocking any path of escape with their bulk and the stopping force of the guns visible from their jackets. I took a deep breath and willed my shaking hands to be still. It didn't work.

"Ditya! I am pleased to see you were successful." Ivan was in a good mood and I could tell from the red in his cheeks and his thickened accent that he'd been drinking. That alone made what I was about to do more dangerous. No one likes having their day ruined, least of all in the way I was going to do it.

I waved Sergei away as he tried to take my coat. My clothing needed to act as a layer of armour, as if it would stop any pain that might come my way. It was a childish notion, my coat wouldn't stop a
bullet from ripping through my chest. It was hard not to let my breathing shake. I walked over to Ivan at a slow pace, trying to keep an air of calm.

"Da, da. Sit, little one, sit. Come, I will get Sergei to bring you some solyanka, it is fresh," Ivan said as he rubbed his hands together. I sat across from him in the red leather booth, adjusting uncomfortably. His empty grin grew when he saw the folder clutched tightly in my hands.

Keeping calm was the most important thing, I reminded myself. If Ivan saw any uncertainty, any hint of doubt, then the consequences of failure would certainly mean the end of me. My research in the last week had solidified that feeling and gave new meaning to the constant viciousness that was necessary in a world like Ivan's.

Just like with Rachel, the words I'd rehearsed failed me. I tried anyway.

"No, thank you, Mr. Dimitrov. Um, actually I—"

"Give me report. What have you found for me, eh?" Ivan said, interrupting me. I closed my eyes for a moment and took another deep breath. I had to try asking to leave our arrangement first, and that would be the hardest part.

"That's what I need to talk with you about, I—"

Ivan cut me off again. "What, do not tell me you need more time, ditya." His expression grew dark, but so did my temper.

"No, that's not—"

"I will not be happy man if you not have what I ask for—"

"Mr. Dimitrov." My tone was hard, and my expression certainly wasn't respectful, but my words needed to be. The men in the room were already looking my way, and the weight of their gazes made sweat drip down my back. Ivan looked at me sharply. He didn't like it when the tables were turned and he didn't get to finish his sentences. "I don't have the information you want, and I'm not going to give it to you."

I forced myself to maintain eye contact. The steely glint in his eye raised the hair on the back of my neck. I'd come too far, the words had already left my mouth. I needed to see this through, to end it once and for all. My body temperature dropped when he didn't say anything. I couldn't stand the silence anymore—the tension was too much for me to bear.

"Look, I want out, OK? I want this to end." I pulled out the envelope from my lap and dumped out several stacks of cash, this had come from my own account. I'd already come to terms that I would need to tell Alfred about what I had done. The withdrawal of such a large amount of money would raise attention when he saw my monthly bank statements. "This is everything you ever paid me. I just—"

"Zakróy svoy rot, súka." The forcefulness of his words struck me like a blow. The bitter rage in his voice terrified me. "Your next words should be chosen carefully, little ditya. You do not want to make me angry." He was speaking carefully now, trying to erase the slips in English his normally heavy accent caused.

Blood drained from my face and leached away from my limbs. I felt like crying, apologizing and agreeing to keep doing the vile things he asked of me. But I didn't. I closed my eyes and tried to be braver than I actually was.
"I'm not trying to make you angry, Mr. Dimitrov. You have a lot of valuable information now, and you have the money you paid me. I know Beeker still owes you—I'll pay that and you'll leave us alone. No harm no foul."

"Ty blyad', pizda." I didn't have to speak Russian to understand the pure vitriol coming through his words. His anger transcended language. The men in the room shifted uncomfortably. In hindsight, it probably wasn't a common sight to see their boss yell at a teenage girl with such hatred. Or maybe it was, and they just knew what usually came after. "You are making very big mistake. No one goes back on deals with Ivan yeblya Dimitrov. I will fucking end you, pizda—"

He was reaching down to where his gun rested against his chest in its holster. I saw the other men instinctually reach for their own. As bad as I knew this would make things, Ivan gave me little choice. No, that isn't really right. I had eliminated all others when I chose to meet with Ivan; when my stupidity ruled over reason.

"No, you won't, Ivan." It was time to stop being polite. I'm certain now that fed into what would come later. I dropped the rest of the envelope's contents on the table, revealing dozens of emails, Facebook messages, banking transactions, and forged calendar details. Ivan stopped reaching for his gun and stared at the mess of paper.

"The fuck is this?"

He didn't see the obvious truth that was right in front of him. If you're going to hire a hacker, always know that they're capable of ruining your life in the same way you paid them to do against someone else. It took three nights with barely any sleep, but the damage I had wrought was total.

"These are your emails, Ivan. When I went digging, I didn't expect you to be so sloppy with your paper trails." I pulled out one particularly large stack of paper and flopped it in front of him. He was gobsmacked when I pointed out the names at the top of the addressee lines. Ivan Dimitrov and Petra Onyshko—the blonde woman from the week before. "I don't think your grandfather would appreciate you sharing so many of his business plans with a woman from outside the family. Oversharing is an obvious sign of desperation, didn't anyone tell you that?"

Ivan's eyes widened. He still couldn't say anything. The men in the room took their hands away from their guns and unconsciously drew closer, their curiosity outweighed their show of strength. I grabbed another stack of emails, this one was forged by Parker and I. We used the dates from newspapers online that detailed when different altercations with the Maroni's went bad — when members of the Dimitrov family were murdered or major deals were interrupted. It wasn't hard, a few Google searches were all it took. Each date and time matched with lines of information that I framed Ivan for sending to a Joe Bandano—one of Salvatore Maroni’s top lieutenants. His fake calendar coincided with him going to known meeting points used by the Maroni’s—something anyone in the Dimitrov family would have known.

The bank statements showed false money transfers from Joe to Ivan, as if he was being paid for information. Any tech-head worth their salt would have been able to show it was fake, but I went in and altered months worth of banking statements. I didn't change the actual code, I just modified the function that took data and translated it to text. Every time Ivan got paid from one of his smaller laundering businesses, it looked like it came straight from Joe. It was damning, and Ivan started to visibly sweat.

"I did not send these—they know I did not send these—"

"That doesn’t matter, and you know it. There's a rat among you, and we all know what happens to them."
"You fucking —"

"All I have to do is press one goddamn button and everyone you know gets this same amount of information I have right here in front of you."

It was Ivan's turn to coil back in terror as the gravity of my words sunk in. I felt a surge of power, vindication and an enlivening sense of satisfaction. I liked that he was scared of what I had to say, of what I was capable of. For a moment, I felt the intoxicating sensation of having absolute power over someone else.

"This is what's going to happen, Ivan. I'm going to leave, and you're not going to do anything. You're going to leave me, my family, my friends, even my fucking mailman alone. You're going to cut your losses with Beeker and never speak to him again." Ivan still said nothing. I don't think he ever anticipated this side of me. No one ever did. "I'll be watching, Ivan. I have everything I need to bury you. If anything happens to me, or anyone else, then all of this is going right into Yuri Dimitrov's mailbox."

Just like when I would hit someone, or after a particularly hard training session, I felt suddenly tired. All the feelings of superiority drained out of me, leaving behind an emptiness that hurt deep in my bones.

"Do we have an understanding, Ivan?" I asked. I felt as defeated as he looked.

He couldn't meet my eyes, he could only stare at the papers that would have him killed. His muscles tensed and released in violent spasms, but the small nod was all I needed. I got up from the booth and walked away. The other men shrunk away like I could ruin them with just a glance. Their fear twisted something inside of me.

I felt a deep and reverberating hatred for myself then. My father's face flashed in my mind. How was I any different from them? The importance of Mom's memory came to mind and all of the lessons she'd taken the time to make sure I'd learned.

"You could have ended things before this, Ivan. I gave you a choice —"

Ivan's look of unequivocal hatred made me stop. Fury blazed in his eyes at his humiliation, this position of impotence that I forced him into. That was something I hadn't learned yet — how dangerous it was to take a shot at a man's ego and pride.

"Someday, little ditya, you will feel the pain I do. That is a promise."

I chalked up his words to posturing. He was angry but he couldn't do anything now, I thought.

"Goodbye, Ivan." I thought that would be the last time I would ever speak or think of him again, that I could finally be free to forget what I'd done. If only things were so simple.

I walked away and Ivan let me. As soon as I was out of the restaurant, I ran all the way to the café where Parker was waiting. He saw me coming and met me halfway. The feeling of his arms around me, his face pressing into my hair, was all I needed to break down and cry. It was a feeling of mourning, grief, shame, and relief. Parker held me tight and I thought it was over, that from that moment on I could be a better person. I made a silent vow that I'd never hurt anyone again, that I'd be better than I'd already proven myself to be. The feelings of my face pressed against his chest, smelling the traces of cologne and ginger, made me believe it could all be true.

As much as I lie to everyone else, I lie to myself the most.
It took three months for Ivan's punishment to come to fruition.

Spring was in the air, flowers were blooming and the river had washed away the last remnants of ice. Fresh green sprouts flourished on tree branches and the constant chirping of birds followed me everywhere. Gotham's Botanical Gardens were always best visited in spring, and that's where I asked Parker to meet me that day.

I decided to tell Parker the truth, to open myself up to everything I was afraid of having ripped away. My feelings were growing harder to hide, and I convinced myself that Parker felt the same way, too.

March 18th was going to be the day I told Parker I loved him.

I put on one of my favourite dresses—this one was a dark purple with bright flowers of pink, yellow, blue, and orange. My hair was in a series of small elaborate braids that made it look like I had more hair than I did. It took me hours and a repetitive viewing of several YouTube videos to get it right, and a lot of cursing about my decision to cut off my long hair. Alfred was taken aback by how much time I put into my appearance. Putting in so much effort wasn't something I did often.

"Don't you look absolutely beautiful, Miri. Is there a special occasion I should be made aware of?" Alfred asked when I came down to the kitchen that morning.

I remember how furiously I blushed and the profuse stutterings that I just wanted to spend a nice day out with friends. A teary-eyed look came over his face when he smiled. It wasn't an expression I'd ever seen before, but it created a feeling that made my smile grow.

It's painful now to think about how Alfred's face lit up with the hope that maybe things were starting to turn around for me. I'd started talking with Alfred more over those three months, taking the time to open up again and try in school. His happiness was infectious, and my girl-like nervousness descended into a wordless bashfulness. I gave him a hug and my heart felt full for the first time in years. I felt happy. Alfred couldn't wipe the large grin from his face for the entire ride into Gotham, and his excitement only heightened my own—so much so that I forgot my purse in the car. He took me to the main gate and waved to me as I walked away, heading towards the path that would doom Parker forever.

The Botanical Gardens are huge, a sprawling mass of over four hundred acres of trees, ponds, playgrounds, jogging paths, and picnic areas. Much of it wasn't maintained well, and there were areas that belonged entirely to local street gangs. But that was on the other side, far away from where Parker and I were to meet. There was one spot that Parker and I found, about a kilometer in. It was a secluded pagoda that sat on the edge of one of the man-made ponds. It was shabby and in desperate need of a new coat of paint, but there was a dual-seated swing hanging from a tree that gave a spectacular view of the park.

Gotham could be a dingy city, drab and rainy in the fall and a sweltering pot of heat in the summer. Spring was the ideal season here, and I knew it would be beautiful with the bright pinks of the cherry trees and the vibrant greens of the full birch trees and blooming flowers. I wanted this to be a special moment for Parker and I. A show of how much he meant to me.

The sky was clear and the sun was bright that day. I took it all as a good omen, an auspicious sign. As I walked along the worn path, insecurity plagued my mind. How certain was I that Parker would feel the same? How would it affect our friendship? What if he said no?

I wasn't asking the questions that really mattered: where was the line when Parker wouldn't
forgive me anymore? How much could I take before I broke entirely?

I was so distracted that I took the wrong footpath, I’d inadvertently taken the longer route. It was one that would take me through an overgrown outcropping of trees that were in need of a trim. It was only then that I realized I didn’t have my bag or cellphone. The unfamiliar territory made me nervous, and I rushed ahead, not wanting Parker to think I stood him up. I pushed through branches, overgrown grass, and the underbrush that scratched at my bare legs. Familiarity marked the features around me after a while and I knew I was close to the pagoda.

I was about to leave the trees when I heard a voice.

"Did you see which way she went?"

The voice was an unfamiliar one. In all of our times in the gardens, Parker and I only ran into another person once at the pagoda. Something was wrong. I stopped and looked around from the trunk of a large tree. Four men were standing in a small clearing, all wearing baseball caps that hung low over their eyes and the same non-descript brown jackets with matching blue jeans. Two of them were holding baseball bats. Dread found its way into my stomach. My gut was screaming at me to be quiet, to wait for them to leave and go back the way I came.

"Let me see the picture again," said one of the other men. They held up a photo and stared at it for a while before glancing around, as if who they were looking for would suddenly appear from the cluster of trees.

"Shit, she went this way for sure. Where was she supposed to end up again?"

"Ivan said around here. Apparently, there’s a spot she and her boyfriend frequent."

The mention of Ivan’s name stopped me cold. Fear and panic found their familiar grips in my mind, and the instinctual urge to be safe dictated everything else. There was no mistaking now who they were talking about and looking for. It was me, and they were heading right for where Parker was waiting. Ivan had grown tired of waiting out the threat I posed, he decided to exact the penance he felt I owed him. As quietly as I could, I slid back to the other side of the trunk and sunk down into a crouch. My breathing was too loud, and I had to clap a hand over my own mouth to keep them from hearing me.

"Fuck, she’s hot. What did that Ruski say we were allowed to do, Sikes?"

"He said to use our imaginations."

"The bitch is seventeen, you idiot. Or are you into kids now? Sick fucker."

"Shit, that never stopped me any. Once they hit fourteen it's all the same anyway."

"God, man. Do you even hear yourself sometimes?"

"Just shut your fucking mouths, both of you. C’mon, she’s probably further ahead."

I heard them leave and I sat there paralyzed. I knew I needed to move, to get ahead of them and warn Parker. But I couldn't. My knees were knocking together and I was shaking so bad that I could barely control my muscles. It took longer than it should have for me to rise up and move down the path where the men went. My feet dragged along the path, it was a fight to move forward and not run away.

But it was too late. I didn't make it in time.
They were at the pagoda and talking to Parker, circling around him in a predator's formation. I
couldn't make out the words, but Parker raised his shaking hands, mouthing the words that asked
for mercy.

The first crack of the bat hit Parker in the knee. He fell down hard and the men laughed. They
laughed. The next one hit him in the ribs. It kept on like that, one hit after another. Parker was
screaming in pain, crying for them to stop. From the distance, I saw his skin split open and the
blood coat his shirt. Parker passed out when one of them hit his thigh hard enough for it to snap.
But they weren't finished. One crouched over Parker and kept hitting his face over and over again
until it was one swollen mess of blood and bruises.

The worst part of it all was how I just stood there. I didn't cry out, no tears left my eyes. Air didn't
fill my lungs and I felt faint. I stood that way for a long time, immobile with a sense of helplessness
that shut down my body entirely. All of that fight training I did meant absolutely nothing. Every
defensive stance, every punch I was ever taught to throw left my mind completely. All of my rage
from before amounted to nothing.

Self-preservation kicked in when the men stopped their assault and pulled out a camera. They were
taking pictures of Parker as he was bleeding out. I didn't have it in me to help him, but my
cowardice forced me to hide in the trees.

"Shouldn't we finish him off? Y'know, mercy kill and all that?" One of the men said as the group
casually walked up the path, their voices carrying to me in my spot in the bush.

"Nah. I don't kill minors."

"But you'll fuck 'em? You're a fucked-up motherfucker."

"Shut up, you two. Let's get paid so I can shower all this shit off."

I sat there long after they were gone. A fear so profound left me immobile. When I was able to
move, after my brain was convinced they weren't coming back, all I could do was crawl to where
Parker was. I was crying then. Sobbing as I held his face in my hands and thought he was dead. It
took time for me to realize his chest was still moving. I wanted to take his pain away, but I couldn't
take any of this back.

My panic grew when it was punctuated with the knowledge that Parker would have helped if the
men had found me first. He would have done anything for me, and I hid. I left him alone to suffer.
All I could do then was try to stop the bleeding as I called for help —screaming into Parker's
phone as helplessness consumed me.

Parker was an excellent soccer player. His parents had him on teams since he could walk. They
wanted him to be the best and encouraged him to be great. So Parker stuck with it and fostered his
talent with the sport. He was good enough that he was being scouted to play for several college
teams. Parker told me that it wasn't really what he wanted, but the pressure of his parents'
expectations overrode his own desires more often than he admitted.

What those men did took away any choice Parker might have had in the matter. They shattered his
femur, six of his ribs, ruptured his spleen, fractured two vertebrae, and caused so much internal
hemorrhaging that it took the doctor's over fourteen hours of surgery to repair. Parker spent six
weeks in the hospital. I only worked up the nerve to see him twice.

Each time I saw Soo-ah, or the bruising that covered him, or breathed in that familiar smell of
death and dying, I'd break down and drag myself out of there. Parker thought it was because of how much time I spent in hospitals when Mom died. He didn't know that I just couldn't stomach the knowledge that I'd done that to him. It should have been me in that bed healing from the wounds I deserved. Every time I looked at him was a reminder of how unworthy I was of him and his friendship, how his knowing me only dragged him down into a mire that nearly killed him.

I knew I was better off alone, to not have anyone around that I could ever hurt again. But Parker was right, I'm selfish. I couldn't let him go, even after everything I did. So I resolved to bring myself down to a position where the feelings I had would die. I'd go to a level no one else around me would sink to. No one else would ever get hurt because of me, not if I could take the pain and make it mine. But first I needed to forget, I needed to take that first step to distance myself again from the people around me.

I did a lot of things to make me forget how I felt about Parker.

The first thing I did was drugs, both the prescriptions I found in Alfred's medicine cabinet and those that I'd buy from people at school. Vicodin, Xanax, Oxycontin, anything that would numb the raging feelings of guilt in me. My dependency grew to the point that Alfred started to notice, and I couldn't have him ask me why I wasn't sleeping at night, why I barely spoke anymore and walked around like a hollow shell. I couldn't have Parker find out the truth about how badly I let him down. No one could know the extent of my betrayal—my ultimate show of cowardice.

Where drugs couldn't obliterate my feelings, I tried to replace them with meaningless relationships. That's a tactful way of putting it. I'd go to parties on the weekends under the guise that I was spending that time with Parker as he recovered. Most of them were held by my classmates, others were from college boys that didn't mind the rich preppy kids tagging along and sharing their bountiful wealth. It wasn't hard to find boys that were interested in me. I'd pretend to be drunk, but most times I never touched a drop. I wanted the feelings to match how much I hated myself already. Most of the time it didn't even matter who they were. I just needed to erase all feelings of happiness that I didn't deserve, every hint of hope that maybe one day Parker and I could be together.

The first boy I slept with was Jeremy Harris. He wasn't a bad person, he was my age and had only ever been nice to me. Physical affection was difficult for me, even with family. It was another matter entirely with the physical intimacy that came with sex. It was awkward and he stumbled around a lot. He pinched my breasts too hard and his fumbling between my legs was cringe-inducing. I didn't know what I was doing, and the feeling of hands on my body, ones that I didn't really want, brought waves of revulsion that made it difficult for me to participate in the way I saw in movies.

The entire experience was the opposite of how I imagined it would be. But, then again, I thought my first time would be with Parker. The ordeal was over quickly. It wasn't any longer than ten minutes, and Jeremy was embarrassed. I locked myself in the bathroom afterward and waited for him to leave. We never spoke to one another again after that.

This process would repeat for almost three months. Every weekend it was someone else, a new reason to shut myself away in the mental fortress I was building. Most of the boys were nice, they tried their best to make me feel good when it was clear I wasn't engaged. They were largely unsuccessful. Others were rough, hitting me and using my body in a way that hurt long after they were finished. In a twisted way, I thought this was more deserving of me. Each time I was less present, more withdrawn into the broken shell that irreparably cracked when Mom died and Bruce disappeared.
Everything I did came to a culmination of me not being able to get out of bed one morning. It's like my limbs wouldn't work. I couldn't think beyond the scene that replayed in my mind on a permanent loop. How Parker's skin split like overripe fruit. The sound of his bones being broken. His cries for them to stop. Their laughter at it all. The comments that made me hide further in the darkened trees. How I couldn't think beyond my own realm of safety.

I didn't even realize that Alfred was shaking me, I was so lost that I couldn't pull myself out of the prison of my own making.

"Miriam. For God's sake answer me," Alfred demanded. Something in my expression must have worried him, his fierce look of concern almost roused me from my depression-induced stupor. I still didn't speak, only rolled my eyes away and went back to an existence where no one really mattered at all.

"Miriam, I swear to Christ almighty, if you do not tell me what's wrong right now, I am taking you to hospital. This has gone on long enough."

The threat of going to a hospital caught my attention. My eyes snapped to his. They were pleading with me, imploring me to be honest. His familiar blue eyes broke a levee in me and I cried for the first time in weeks. He wrapped me in a blanket and held me tight. The feeling of arms on me was difficult to deal with, I'd started to associate physical affection with pain and misery.

He didn't let me go, he just let me cry and told me everything was going to be alright. I decided to tell him everything. Well, almost everything. No one needed to know what I had done in the last two months. That was my own private hell I only hinted at to Parker years later.

"Miriam, that wasn't your fault. Don't you understand? This wasn't your fault."

Alfred just said that over and over again. He didn't get it, he'd missed the point of what I told him. He didn't understand.

Of course it was my fault. It always was.

Something breaks inside of me when the heart monitor goes erratic. I sit and watch as the doctors rush in, trying to figure out what's wrong, how to save a life that's already leaving. Soo-ah's yelling, but I can't hear her words. I just stare at Parker's face, at the man I've always loved but could never do right by. The man I never deserved. Nothing I did mattered. Nothing.

It's all my fault. I did this to him—I killed him.

The doctors are trying to stabilize him. It's not working. I just sit here and feel a crushing nothingness as they try to get Parker breathing again. Soo-ah's screaming now, as if she could bring her son back to life through sheer force of will alone. Someone's tugging on my arm, trying to get me to move. I'm rooted to the chair, more dead than alive, unable to move past my worst nightmare come to life.

"I'll be Ok, Miri. It's OK, it'll be alright."

Parker was lying to me as much as I'd ever lied to him. Why did his last words to me have to be that? Why couldn't mine be "I love you, I always have," instead of the useless, incoherent sobs that couldn't tell Parker what he needed to hear—what he'd now never know?

Parker was wrong. Why did he have to be wrong?
I shatter completely when the monitor flatlines. I stare back at Parker's face, his closed eyes, and the marks that I might as well have made myself. The man Parker was disappears until all I see is the boy I knew. The one I owe everything to. The one I failed. The one I let die.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was one of the most emotionally painful things I've ever written, and the decision about Parker definitely wasn't an easy one. I wish I could say that this story was heading in a brighter direction, but that would be dishonest.

I hope you all had a wonderful holiday this last week, and I wish you all a Happy New Year. I'm sorry that a chapter like this lined up with the holiday, but I'll be back again next week with a tentative schedule to keep my weekly postings (I have a full course load and three jobs for my last semester of my undergrad, it'll definitely keep me busy).

Be safe with your celebrations and travels and I'll be back again with more in the New Year.
Blood On My Hands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ladies and gentlemen, tonight's engagement is dedicated to the man brought back from the dead —our very own Prince of Gotham: Bruce Wayne!"

Thunderous applause erupted from the dozens of party guests at the gala thrown in Bruce's honour. He'd been home for little over a month and the lavish parties were nearly never-ending. This was the first one Bruce attended and he brought me along for the occasion. He said he wanted to do something fun together, but I don't know if he really felt that way; things were unbearable between us for the first three months he was back.

It took over three hours of convincing, but Bruce relented and I brought Parker along for company. I would never have been able to handle being there without him. This was Bruce and my first foray in public together, and the amount of attention I was getting from everyone was almost excruciating. Having Parker there, another manifestation of my selfishness, made things easier to bear. Bruce stood near the podium, looking like the definition of dapper with a champagne glass lifted in acknowledgment and a smug grin on his face. It was infuriating.

"Well, thank you, everyone. If I knew I had this many friends, I would have disappeared a hell of a lot sooner," Bruce said with a half-assed smirk.

People laughed, eating up Bruce's words like they were dropped nuggets of gold. Bruce wasn't being funny; it was snark laced with sarcasm, and it rode the line between rude and charmingly aloof. He was dressed to the nines in a smooth tuxedo, his hair slicked back, shoes shined to a brightened gleam, and a cocky air that made me want to punch it out of him. This was a version of Bruce I'd never seen before. I avoided my feelings for Parker and crippling guilt in an on-and-off relationship with self-abuse. For Bruce, I was dodging the deep and long-held anger by not spending any more time with him than necessary. I think he felt the same way on some level. Bruce kept trying on different personalities to see which one worked best with me. He never found the version of himself that existed before he left, the one I loved but let me down in a way that never recovered.

"You were always the funny one, Bruce," the host of the party said. I don't even remember his name, just the ingratiating look on his face. It also provided plenty of fodder for Parker and me to do mocking impressions of later. "To many happy returns!"

We were in the main ballroom of some five-star hotel Bruce just bought, high above the regular people of Gotham on the top floor. I never knew Bruce to spend so wildly before he disappeared, and the flashing of opulent wealth was counter to everything Mom taught me. White marble floors, thirty-foot ceilings with faux Italian murals, and ionic columns gave the room a gaudy, try-hard feel. A string quartet with bored-looking musicians were playing Brahms, ruining the song for me and adding to the idea of elitism that everyone exuded. There was a lot of food, nothing filling, of course, just fancy little hors d'oeuvres that looked nice but left you craving a cheeseburger afterward. Alcohol was ever-flowing, with waiters handing out fresh flutes just as the last drops of champagne graced the bottom of the glass.

I felt very out of place amongst it all. My dress was too tight and a flashy shade of purple. I was the only brown girl there, and I already felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I didn't like how the dress hugged every inch of me, defining the parts I wanted to keep hidden. Bruce picked it out,
showing up one day with a car full of expensive garbage we didn't need. He paid to have someone style my hair in a bunch of elaborate curls I would never have been able to do on my own. He didn't know me well enough to understand I never wore anything revealing, preferring instead to hide in my clothes and fade into the background. I was wearing heels—I never wear those—that made my feet ache, and my skin felt like it was on fire from the paranoid certainty that people were staring at me.

"Miri, did you try that stuff with the crab?" Parker whispered to me as he and I pretended to listen to the rest of the speeches supposedly honoring the Wayne legacy.

"I'm eighty-nine percent sure that's lobster," I whispered back. One lady in red glared at us for our daring failure to fake rapt attention at the asinine words spilling out of some guy's mouth.

Parker looked at the small piece of bread topped with avocado, coarse-looking pepper, tomatoes, and the mystery seafood with exaggerated incredulity.

"Would it kill them to label this stuff? It's not like they have a shortage of minions lingering around the kitchen," he said while simultaneously stuffing the food in his mouth. He chewed slowly before he decided it was good enough to eat more, grabbing another four from the passing tray. He'd been eating non-stop since we arrived, and the way his cheeks puffed out when he was eating was adorable.

"Parker, don't pretend that would've stopped you."

His side glare caused a small fit of laughter I could barely hold back. My giggle was too loud, and I had to clamp a hand over my own mouth to keep the noise low. A snappy glare from an elderly man next to us shut me up quickly. I turned my giggles into a small cough but almost started right up again by the look on Parker's face.

"Sure, laugh it up. Hilarious," he muttered with a mouth full of food.

I may have come from money, but Mom was largely anti-social. She didn't like crowds or the sycophantic ass-hats that plagued these events. Mom was more cynical that way—she never trusted anyone when money was involved. We never went to parties, and her lack of social upkeep kept her and me below the radar until she died. People suddenly cared who I was when I went to live with Bruce. After he disappeared and showed no signs of returning, most people went back to ignoring my existence. I liked it a lot better that way. It was too bad the pendulum swung in the other direction when he returned. Now Bruce, and me by extension, were hounded by reporters and internet bloggers looking for a quick story everywhere we went.

The flashing cameras and new sounds of applause signaled that I could stop pretending to listen. Parker went to go snag one of the open chairs at the rows of tables sitting along the edges of the room. Parker underwent grueling physical therapy in the years since... since the beating he took that should have been mine to bear.

Alfred made me join a few AA meetings when he found out about the drugs, hiding the medicine in the house and enforcing a strict curfew. Alfred didn't understand that I wasn't hooked on the pills themselves. Most days I didn't feel any urge at all to take them. That is, until I saw Parker struggle to regain full function of his body or any sort of kind look from Soo-ah. Or late at night, when sleep wouldn't come and I was plagued with visions I couldn't escape from.

I hadn't touched anything in three years, but that didn't matter to Alfred. Anytime he saw a dip in my mood, patterns of reclusive behaviour, or if I took anything stronger than Advil, he threatened me with rehab, counseling, and the possibility of medication to level me out. Alfred didn't realize
I'd grown adept at repressing what I didn’t want to remember all on my own. That was before. When there were fewer reminders about how badly I fucked up—how I was poison to everyone around me. Though Parker could walk without a limp then, he tired easily after standing for too long. I went to follow him when I felt a hand on my arm.

"Miriam Kane, right?" the man said in a tone that connoted he knew who I was.

From the way he was dressed, I knew he wasn't one of the rich ilks that surrounded me. He was wearing a suit that looked too big in the shoulders and had a small stain on the lapel where he tried unsuccessfully to scrub it out. He wore glasses, had a mousy shade of brown hair, and a five o'clock shadow he needed to shave. Thick-framed glasses created a border around his eyes that made him look cartoonish. He wasn't bad looking, objectively. Something about him was off-putting, like he was looking at my smallest flaws to laugh about later.

"Yeah, do I know you?"

Vague hostility with strangers wasn't a trait I left behind in high school, but I tried to cut back the bite in my tone. I didn't like how his gaze flicked to my chest and I crossed my arms over my torso, trying to angle myself away from him. I felt way too exposed in the dress and I silently cursed Bruce not for the first time that night.

"No, no, I guess you wouldn't. Sorry, I'm Jack Ryder," he said, extending his hand out for me to shake. I took it apprehensively and didn't like how he tried to crush my fingers in his grip. "Quite the party, huh? These guys sure know how to have a good time."

I didn't like his smile either. It was trying too hard. Shooting a glance over my shoulder, Parker started waving me over.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it." I tried turning away, signaling with my body language that I wasn't interested in conversation, but he side-stepped around me and kept talking.

"So, what's is like having Bruce back home? Must have been quite the shock. Did he ever let you know he was coming back or reach out at all when he was gone?" He was asking way too many questions, more than was appropriate. Especially given that most people there knew to hide their ripened curiosity with leading questions and inquiries about current events without caring what the actual answers were.

"Um, excuse me—" I shouldn't have been polite. I blamed Mom for ingraining so many rules of social engagement in me.

"Sorry, am I keeping you from your boyfriend? How long have you two been together?" His rapid-fire questions made my cheeks burn and I didn't like how personal they were.

Social etiquette be damned, I thought.

My temper got away from me; the impulsive insults were only partially involuntary. "OK, look—Jack, right? Do me a favour and piss off." Instead of looking taken aback, Jack smiled. It's then that I noticed the pad of ruled paper in his hand. He was taking notes, sizing me up like he was my psychiatrist.

Of course, this asshole's a reporter, I thought.

I didn't have time to insult him further. Bruce snuck up behind me and threw a, what I thought was at the time, drunken arm around my shoulders. His speech was slightly slurred, and he felt heavy against me.
"Look at you, Miri, making friends everywhere," Bruce said, still with that half-smile that offended me more than it should. His voice steadied, but it had a lilt meant to hide the biting derision. It didn't work very well. "I didn't think I invited anyone from the Gotham Times. Funny who managed to scurry in."

Jack stiffened for a moment, not missing the implications in Bruce's words, before going on the attack again.

"Bruce Wayne—the man of the hour. How does it feel to be back? Care to share where you were —"

Jack was interrupted by a movement that was too quick for me to see. When I looked back at Bruce, he was holding Jack's notepad.

"Usually when you conduct an interview, you tell the interviewee about it first. Or did I miss something new in journalism ethics while I was away?"

Jack didn't look amused. The grin he maintained before disappeared and was replaced by a grimace.

"I know this might be a new concept for you, Mr. Wayne, but it's generally frowned upon to take things that don't belong to you." Jack was bringing out his own snarkiness in an attempt to rival Bruce's. It would have been a funny exchange if I wasn't so angry.

"Huh. You don't say? I wonder what you'd call this, then." Bruce flung the notepad nonchalantly over his shoulder. His aim was true, and it landed right in the middle of one of the giant punch bowls, tainting the mix of juice and fancy alcohol with Jack's musings that he passed as being newsworthy.

"You son of a bitch," Jack muttered. His face flamed red and his balled hands shook.

Bruce didn't pay any attention to Jack's anger. He laughed lowly and took his arm from my shoulders, splaying them wide in a show of theatrics for the small crowd that watched with poorly-hidden amusement. The keen sting of embarrassment pricked my cheeks.

"You should learn to relax a little more, Jack. You're at a party after all—who knows when you'll be invited to another." Bruce had that smile again—one that showed his arrogance and a frustrating amount of charm. It set my blood on fire.

A few people laughed, but I wasn't interested in watching Jack be humiliated further. He was the walking definition of a douche-bag, no doubt about that. Bruce stooped to the same level as Jack, something I'd never seen him do in all the years I'd known him. The chasm time opened between us felt insurmountable at that moment, like I would never be able to see the man I knew—the one who used to be the model of perfection in my eyes. Bruce looked at me with an expression I saw as him urging me to join in the fun; to laugh along with the show he was putting on. I turned away and went to where Parker was still sitting, rubbing his thigh to ease the ache I knew he was feeling.

"What was that all about?" Parker asked when I sat next to him.

"Oh, you know. Just another day in the life of being related to Bruce Wayne." I sounded bitter, petulant, even. I didn't know how to handle my feelings towards Bruce. A small part of me itched for the drugs I had found peace in before—it would save me from destroying what little I had left to hold onto with Bruce. It was fleeting, but its presence—and the intensity of it to have passed the mental blocks I put in place—was enough to make me feel weary.
Alfred was so happy that Bruce was back, eager to have him home without questioning why he was gone. Even if it wasn’t the same man at all. No explanation was given, no line of inquiries opened. Just a “hey, how’ve you been?” and an abrupt attempt at normalcy that hurt just as much as his absence did. I didn’t want to be the one to ruin the precarious balance we had found, one that was ripe with the possibility of spilling over at any moment—collapsing my world completely. That’s why it hurts so bad that they lied about where Bruce really was, what he had become. They played me for a fool, hiding the truth that would have eased everything I felt in those seven years.

Parker understood. He always did.

"Hey, take a walk with me," Parker said. He got up in a fluid motion, but I saw the wince that touched his eyes.

"Parker, no. Rest your leg for a bit, please—" Parker waved away my words and he smiled, temporarily erasing my frustrations and itch to fall into old habits.

"Relaxing for a few minutes won’t kill you, you know."

Parker was wrong about that. As well as Parker knew me, he didn’t know the little things I did to continuously punish myself. I may have been bound to the Manor and school, had my drugs taken away from me, and denied the opportunity to have others inflict the pain they didn’t know they were dealing out—but I was inventive in the ways I hurt myself. Punishment isn’t always about the physical. Having too much fun, the pleasures that should have come with physical intimacy, even enjoying the foods I liked, letting go and relaxing—all of it was akin to admitting I deserved those things. Self-denial became an art form for me. Parker just hadn’t realized it yet.

He took me by the hand and led me to one of the balconies that overlooked the Gotham skyline. The city looked beautiful from up there, a place where only good things happened, and nothing was marred with the toxicity I knew was festering just below the surface. The first inklings of who would be known as 'the Batman' started to be whispered about by then. A man spotted jumping from rooftops and leaving street criminals and thugs scared. In a few more weeks, Batman would make his debut as a force to be reckoned with.

The wind wasn’t too strong that spring night, but it was still cold enough that I shivered. We could hear the music trickling in beyond the glass and white sheer curtains. Somber tones from the cello, and the high, soothing harmony of the violins, all working together to encapsulate the moment. I worked hard against the feelings they inspired, resisting the urge for the tension and anger to leave me.

"I always liked seeing Gotham from up high," Parker said after a minute. I stared at his profile before glancing back down at the streams of faint yellow and red of the cars stuck in traffic for miles ahead.

"Yeah?" It was becoming painful to speak, and I think Parker knew. He kept talking, easing my discomfort with his words and the sound of his voice.

"Yeah. You can’t smell the garbage from up here, for one thing." That earned a laugh I didn’t mean to make. "I don’t know. I guess it makes me feel hopeful in a way. Like everything isn’t all bad."

Parker struggled not just with the physical aspects of what happened to him, but the mental repercussions as well. The attack compounded his struggles with depression, providing me with another reason never to tell him the truth. Bravery came so effortlessly to him, I thought. He was so much stronger than me, but I didn’t want to be the one to break him. Just thinking about it all—about everything I wanted to say but couldn’t—made my eyes heavy with unshed tears.
Parker touched my arm. His expression was soft, and his goofy grin was back.

"C'mon, let's dance." He looked downright mischievous. My blush of embarrassment came back full force at the thought. I'd never danced outside of the weird jerky motions I did alone in my room, and the prospect of doing so there tipped too much into the pool of self-indulgence. I shook my head and backed away. "What's the point of being at a fancy party if you're not going to dance? C'mon, Miri."

He was swaying in large, exaggerated circles, dancing with an invisible partner with a grace I envied.

"No, Parker. I don't dance. You know I have the poise of a platypus." I was trying to be funny, to brush off the serious tone underneath the jocularity.

Parker didn't give me much choice at all. He grabbed my hands in his and pulled me into step with his movements. He more than made up for my awkward stumbling, and there was a tension in the air that made my skin tingle. He kept us angled away from the main windows, in the corner of the balcony where it would be harder for others to see us.

"Where'd you learn to dance like this?" I was trying to hide the hope in my chest with distracting questions. I didn't want him to look too closely at me.

"Umma taught me. She said every good Korean boy needs to have all the makings of a proper gentleman." His voice took on a false air of a posh Englishman, both to lightly make fun of yet another one of Soo-ah's extracurricular activities she signed him up for and to lighten my mood.

"Does Jun know how to dance then?"

"God, are you kidding? Of course not."

We both laughed, the sound mingling with the music as it rose to a crescendo. There was that feeling again—one where a part of me was beginning to bloom with the possibility that maybe I had earned some small moment of happiness. The proximity of his body to mine was something I used to think about all the time, but I warped it—intermingling the feeling of physicality with shame and humiliation; the feelings that every part of me wasn't worthy of the affection Parker was showing me.

"You're not as bad as you make yourself out to be, Miri," Parker said, his breath moving through my hair. For a moment, I froze, thinking he discovered what I'd been trying so hard to hide. "We should do this more often. Umma will be happy I found a dance partner that isn't Mrs. Kim."

He was referring to his elderly neighbour who lived two doors down from his parents' house. She was barely half his height and had a fiery temper. The image of the two of them trying to dance created an image in my head that I couldn't help laughing at.

"Do you see it now, Miri?" he asked. The question caught me off guard. I didn't understand what he meant.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you see how everything you need is here now? You don't have to feel bad about trying to be happy." I could only stare, stopping the movement of our bodies and take in his face—how the lights of Gotham and the party inside warmed his features. Echoes from the first summer we spent together came to my mind.
“You don’t have to fade away anymore, no one’s leaving. Everything will be OK. You just gotta believe in that sometimes.”

Parker and his eternal optimism were wrong. I thought what Ivan and I had done was the worst thing that could have happened to either of us. My mind couldn’t conjure any evils beyond what I saw as a sixteen-year-old girl. Another cruel joke from God—he wanted to prove me wrong. To prove all of us wrong.

Something pulls me out of the stupor my mind wandered to, where things were bad, but they were better than what’s happening right in front of me. What I can’t accept. It’s like I’m back in freshman year again, dwelling in a fantasy world that's better than reality.

"What’s wrong with her?"

I hear the words, but I don't register their meaning. They don't matter, they won't change anything. There’s nothing that can make up for Parker.

I can't handle a reality without him. He got me through the worst time in my life. I abandoned him once already, and now I can never make up for it. Now I’m trapped in a waking nightmare I can't imagine myself out of. Even my memories—the ones I want to dwell on—are tainted with the knowledge of the present. Every time I lapse back into a state of mind that's safe, I'm drawn back out and away from any refuge.

*Things were better when it was just me and Alfred. Fewer people to irreparably disappoint and lose. You knew better than to make friends, Miri. It's all your fault. You kill everything that's good.*

There it is again. That tug on me, trying to draw my attention away from my thoughts; the words that have lost their meaning and what my body feels doesn't register fully.

*Don't look at them. If you can't see them, they don't exist.*

Something in the space is too bright. It feels like I'm both floating and incredibly heavy at the same time, being dragged ever downwards. There's a lamp shining in some distant corner that's blinding me, keeping my eyes from adjusting to the dark.

*Maybe it's better this way. Nothing can hide in the light.*

The nice thing about the light is it makes me focus on how much my eyes hurt. How my skin burns from the fire in the arcade and the blisters on my hands that weep blood. My mind aches with a pulsing behind my eyes and a throbbing beat banging at the back of my head. I've reassembled the mental prison I tried so hard to dismantle. I don't even know how I got back here.

*Where is 'here' anyway?*

*Does any of it matter anymore?*

"Miri," a voice says. It doesn't matter.

*Nothing matters anymore.*

My mind won't recall what's important. Just fragments of the past I wanted to forget forever but now can't bear the thought of losing. Memories are all I have left of the before—when Parker was alright and I could just be mad at Bruce for being an irresponsible whoremonger. This is worse.
Worse than anything my mind could have invented on its own.

*It's your fault. All of it.*

Nothing seems real. The edges of what I'm seeing are too crisp; the colours oversaturated and scratching at the backs of my eyelids.

*That's right. None of this is real.*

"Miriam, please."

Some distant part of me knows I'm in pain. A lot of it. I can't seem to focus on it—a wisp that's just out of reach. I can feel the edges of it around my periphery, dancing—just like Parker and me that night—out of sight when it gets too close, but a constant reminder to alert me of its presence. My soul left with Parker's and now some small piece of me is trapped inside what remains of my battered body, trying to jump-start a corpse back to life.

*Parker's dead because of you.*

"Miriam."

A missing piece snaps back in my brain. It's enough for me to look around for the source of the noise, to see what's impeding me from disappearing entirely.

"Miriam, I need you to say something."

It's Bruce. He's here, somehow. He looks tired. Maybe he wants to disappear, too.

*No, Bruce is gone. He's not coming back. You're all alone.*

I go back to staring at the light when I'm shaken so violently I'm forced to look up. Bruce's face takes up most of my vision. Every pore, whisker, and blue and yellow traces of bruising are so clear. His eyes, the ones that just look brown from a distance, have flecks of gold and green. There are hints of purple under them, and little lines mark his skin. Beyond all that, he looks like he did before he left. Like he never disappeared at all.

*He can't be real. I would have noticed all of this before. Right? I would have noticed.*

His mouth's moving, forming words I don't hear. I stare at how the pink contrasts with the pale white of his skin. It's all just little details. Marks made on a painting.

I'm shaken again, jarring my aching head back and forth. My eyes blink a few times and sound hits me in waves. It's an eerie quiet, a reverberation of sound that hammers in my ears more than the talking in the background. It's the familiar Cockney accent of Alfred's voice, the low hum of Rachel's. Distantly, I register the panic coming from Bruce.

"Talk to me." He's pleading with me, and I don't know why.

*Doesn't he know I'm empty now? Why does it look like he's about to cry?*

He lets out a long exhale of frustration. My eyes track his movements: the hand that goes through his hair before pinching the bridge of his nose; the moisture that brims around his eyes; his broad shoulders coming forward in a motion of internal pain; the hands that reach out and hold my own. It's a familiar gesture, one that pulls me back out from where I've receded, grounding me back in the room. I realize suddenly that 'here' is the penthouse.
"Why am I not with Parker? I should be there with him. He can't be alone.

"If you won't talk, can you at least hear me? Can you understand what I'm saying?" Another plea. Some part of me doesn't want to answer.

*It's not real if you don't want it to be.*

My anger with Bruce is gone. Deep loneliness fills my chest, pushing my ribs apart and pressing against my spine. I don't know if I should open myself to his words.

*What will it hurt? Nothing matters anyway. It won't change anything.*

Not speaking, I nod my head ever so slightly. Just enough for him to know I'm listening now.

The next breath is one of tentative relief.

"Miriam, I—" Bruce starts before stopping himself. More sensations come back to me and, with them, the visions of violence and blood and death. The more aware I become the worse they are. Soft fabric rubs against the jacket I realize I'm still wearing. I wonder if the gun is still there.

*If it was, would you use it on yourself? The perfect solution for a permanent problem.*

You are the problem.

Hands are on my stomach again, going up my sides and touching my ribs. I don't know if what I'm feeling was ever real or not, and I'm not sure I care anymore. I'm sitting on Bruce's bed and both Rachel and Alfred are gone. I have no idea how much time has passed since I heard them speak. It's dark outside, well into the night. Bruce's room feels cold and empty.

*Just like me.*

"Alfred told me what happened." My eyes snap to his in alarm.

*No, he didn't. Alfred said he wouldn't.*

"Miriam, what happened to Parker wasn't your fault."

Now I'm shaking violently all on my own. I rip my hands away like he burned me, burying my face in them. I can't look at Bruce anymore. His face is too real; it's lost the dream-like quality.

*Go back to where you were. He doesn't understand. He doesn't get it. He knows now—he knows what kind of person I am. He hates me.*

I hate me.

"No. It's my fault. My fault." I'm surprised that it's my own voice I hear. It's so small, almost child-like. A pitch I thought I outgrew.

I'm in danger of snapping back to the present. To a full body realization of my own failings and the agony rippling through every part of me. To how broken I am. I can't even find it in me to blame the Joker. None of this would have happened if it wasn't for me. It all started because of the choices I made. Me alone. If I talk anymore, it'll pitch me over a ledge I'm not capable of saving myself from.

"Can I tell you something, Miriam?" Bruce's voice is gentle and quiet. It appeals to the small, vulnerable part of me, the one that would run to Bruce to chase the monsters away—even the ones
I invented.

He's pulling at my hands, trying to look me in the eyes again. The feeling is accompanied by sensations I don't remember experiencing. A creeping touch tracing along my clavicle.

"I never told you why I left, and I should have." Bruce has my full attention now, or at least, the full amount I'm capable of summoning. "I have a lot of anger, Miri. Anger at Joe Chill, and the vengeance I couldn't get for my parents. At Gotham, for being the place that drained away almost everything I loved."

Bruce is looking away now, staring at the gauze wrapped around my hands. He traces the edges of them gently.

"Why did you leave me all alone?" There's that voice again. The one I don't recognize. I don't feel very grown up at all—I feel weak, helpless.

_That's because you are helpless. You couldn't save Parker and you can't even save yourself._

There it is. A truth sitting in front of my eyes. Another reality I don't want to acknowledge.

_You know how this is going to end, Miri. You never could open your eyes. They can't see what's right in front of you._

Bruce looks close to crying. I know he must be remembering the promise he made to me after Mom died, but the emotion strikes me as odd. I don't ever remember a time when Bruce cried—not even at Mom's funeral—only the rage that formed him into a taut fist. I've never seen him so vulnerable before.

"Most of all, Miri, I'm angry with myself."

I look at Bruce then. _Really_ look at him. I don't see the boy who watched out for me when I was young, the man who let me down, or the man he was when he came back. I don't recognize this person either, but maybe this is a truer version of who he is. The one I always wanted to know but he always kept hidden.

_Maybe we're alike that way._

"I felt responsible for what happened to my parents. I still do, sometimes. It was me that asked to leave the theatre." Bruce takes a deep breath before he continues and the pain in his eyes matches what I feel. "There was a time where I nearly crossed the line; when I thought killing the man responsible for my pain would take it away. It took a long time and a few slaps in the face to see where that line of thinking would lead me." He has a wistful smile on his face, pondering some memory he keeps to himself.

"I used to be a very fearful person, but I hid it in rage. Leaving Gotham behind, finding a way to fight the injustice that killed my parents and take back the control I craved, seemed like the only way to overcome those fears. I wanted to help, to make a difference. I needed to see how the world worked in order to combat the evils that ruled it, and I couldn't do that by staying in Gotham."

Bruce rises from his position from the floor and sits on the bed next to me, the mattress sinking under his weight. "Someone—a man who used to be very important to me—told me later that what I was really afraid of was my own capacity to do harm. He said I had a drive fueled by hate and anger that made me powerful—that I could do great and terrible things."

The pain's coming back, seeping into my tendons and muscles—twisting under the strain of grief and the extent my body was pushed past its limits. What happened at the arcade hits me like a blow
to the stomach. The smell from the hospital fills my nose. The Joker's face is in front of mine, whispering poison in my ears. Zsasz has his hands around my throat, pinning me to the ground and I can't escape. I can hear Soo-ah crying, see Parker's stump for a leg—his face as the monitor flatlined. It's all one rotating mass my mind tries to repair the shattered pieces of. I'm not sure if it's an exercise in futility yet or not.

I'm shaking again, vibrating with the pain that's starting to define my existence.

"Did it?" I can't help the question coming out of my mouth. I need to think about something else. Anything else. I need Bruce's words to ease what I'm feeling.

"Yes, it did. I spent five years training how to harness the damage I could unleash. They wanted to use me as a weapon, but they also made me realize that the power I was afraid of didn't have to be destructive; it could do good." Bruce gives a rueful smile. I have no idea who 'they' are, but I keep listening. "But that was a form of its own naïveté. I missed something important in all the years I was gone. All of this—everything—"

He sucks in a breath. I know what he means. Our suffering has reached the same wavelength. We're thinking about the same people—the twenty-six who died. And the death toll that will only keep rising. The escalations that won't stop.

"I've learned something important. Deep down, I'm not a good person." I snap up at the admission. Maybe—just maybe he understands. Because, deep down, I don't think I'm a good person either. "I used to think there was a divide between me and the people I fought against, but there isn't much of a difference between us at all. What separated me from them was self-control and a hard line I told myself I would never cross. One rule I would never break."

The air hitches in my chest and my lip quivers. I'm closer to the edge, and I need someone to keep me from falling. I realize now Bruce isn't that person. He's struggling, teetering on his own edge while trying to hold up the world around him.

Parker is gone. Bruce can't help. Where does that leave me?

Selfishness. All I can think about is myself right now.

'You'll never change.'

Parker was right about that.

"It was Alfred who told me Batman couldn't dive into the personal life of Bruce Wayne. If Batman acts out of vengeance, then everything he's done is rendered meaningless. Batman is incorruptible, an absolute that needs to be more than what I am." Bruce doesn't sound crazy anymore, not like he did yesterday—god, was it only yesterday that I was screaming at him? He doesn't look at me when he says it, but I feel my blood stop in my veins. "Batman has no limits, but I've found mine. I can't stop the Joker, Miri. Even after everything he did—"

I look over at Bruce. He's crying. For the first time in my life, I'm seeing Bruce cry. Even on my own island of pain, the sight of it gives me a sense of permission; it's safe to be upset here. I can break down completely, and I won't be alone. The motion hurts, I can feel every muscle grinding against the other as I lift my arms, but I hug Bruce. Seeing his pain worsens my own, and all I can do is cry. Cry for Parker and my role in killing him, for the people who died and those who haven't yet but will, for the loss and pain that's been consuming me for years. I cry in relief that Mom isn't alive to see any of this, that her suffering didn't have to be entangled with mine. I'm crying because she isn't here and that loneliness is killing me.
Bruce returns my hug after a minute, and for the first time, I don't feel that subconscious pullback from the contact. I'm sobbing, but Bruce's pain is silent—even as I feel the warm dampness grow along my neck. Bruce speaks into my hair.

"Harvey Dent is holding a press conference tomorrow." The meaning doesn't click in.

*Why should that matter?*

"I have too much blood on my hands, Miri. I can't add any more." Another thing we have in common. "It's time for Batman to be put aside."

I pull back from him. He still won't look me in the eye. The knife's edge of betrayal skirts along my heart.

"You're going to leave me again?" As quickly as he'd drawn me out, I feel myself retreating again.

*Of course, Miri. You're always going to be alone. Always.*

"What else can I do? How else will all of this stop? This will keep you safe. I won't go anywhere you can't reach me."

*You being in prison won't make this stop. None of this stops until one of us is dead.*

It's a dangerous game my mind has tapped into—a deadly triage that only ends one way. Bruce—no, Batman—and the Joker, they can't both exist. Not for long. And me, I won't last, either. I'm going to die, and I'm certain the Joker will be there, sending me into the netherworld with a smile on his face.

'I own you.'

That's what the Joker said to me on the ship. I thought it was an intimidation tactic, a strategy to keep me scared. I'm convinced now that he was telling the truth. He's put a mark on my soul and he's going to be the one to drag it out of me completely.

Numbness finds me again, bleeding through my skin and wrapping me in a smothering blanket of familiarity. The tears stop and my hands fall to my sides.

"I'll come with you." I know I'm saying the words, but the voice doesn't sound like mine. "You can't... you can't leave me behind again."

I faintly see him nod his head, and that's enough for me. My dead hands unzip my jacket, vaguely taking in the detail that my pockets are light—there's no gun weighing it down—before lying down across the bed. I don't want to be awake anymore. Oblivion is calling back to me, beckoning me home to a place where I can watch my ruin from a distance.

"Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?" It's a childish request, one that I can't help but make. I'm being selfish again, hoarding the small time he has left.

I'm relieved that he doesn't say anything, that he doesn't direct his reddened eyes at me. When I close my eyes, I feel a blanket being put around me. Bruce's hand is on my back, rubbing in small circles. A motion of comfort that brings none of what it intends. I don't move, I don't acknowledge any of it.

*None of this is real.*
But the nightmare of images that comes back, playing on a reel across my eyelids is real. I don't try to hide from it. I lay there in darkness as everything that matters dies around me.

Leaving the penthouse with Bruce has instilled a sense of calm in me I didn't think I was capable of feeling anymore. Perhaps it's the pervading cold that's sapped the life from me, or maybe mental anguish can actually translate to the death of your body.

I woke up alone in Bruce's room. Alfred was the first to come in, holding a mug of hot chocolate. I drank it but didn't taste anything on my palate. He tried talking with me, to tell me about Soo-ah's arrangements for Parker. As soon as his name left Alfred's mouth, my ears stopped working. I just laid my head against his shoulder and waited for him to stop talking. Soon, it'll just be him and me again.

*Always has been, always will be.*

I feel guilty that he'll be stuck with a girl that's more dead than alive.

Rachel helped me get ready for the conference. She wrapped my hands in plastic to keep the water from burning the aggravated blisters, not that I would feel it anyway, and got the temperature of the water just right. It was hot enough to burn away the cold gripping me and sear the first-degree burns on my forearms from the arcade. She picked clothes I could get into on my own. A warm cotton sweater, in a muted gray, and a dressier pair of pants that I could slip on.

Rachel even braided my hair, taking the long damp strands and tucking them away from my face. It reminded me so much of Mom then; it was nice. I retreated to that place for a while, dwelling in another memory. I caught myself appreciating her in a way that surprised me. It made me regret that I didn't get to know her better. The resignation in her eyes was something I almost missed, but I caught it in the reflections of the mirror as I pretended I couldn't see myself at all. I gave her a hug that I almost entirely meant before Bruce and I went into the elevator. She was staying behind with Alfred.

Bruce is driving now. It's some fancy car I could never learn how to drive. It's a standard—that's the kind Alfred's Rolls Royce Phantom was before I hit that oak tree. Another regret; I wish I'd learned how to drive after all.

We're silent the whole way to City Hall. I had my fill of everything he had to say last night, and I don't need to hear any more now. Walking inside the large building of ugly glass and metal is an exercise in living in an alternate reality. I don't feel my legs going through the motions, the strains of my body struggling to function with so little energy. But I don't feel afraid anymore; I've found a welcome reprieve from the terror that's held me for so long. It's like what I saw in Rachel's eyes: a tired resignation that will accept whatever outcome.

There are more people here than I thought there'd be. Large groups of reporters with their phones set to record and people vying to have their microphone closest to the podium. The rows of chairs are taken up quickly by other eager journalists, leaving Bruce to wedge his way in to find a spot against the far wall. There's a large group of cops in uniform, standing together with looks of determination. I stand next to Bruce, ignoring the stares that are trained on me and the flashing of cameras. Bruce has been adept at fielding the media's unrelenting frenzy at our doorstep when he pulled me from the river, but no one missed what happened yesterday. I could see the questions, almost comedically like text bubbles over their heads, they were dying to ask. Jack Ryder's face was a familiar one among the crowd. The room is filling to full capacity—the close quarters of all the people, their loud voices and tinges of panic create a thick cloud of uncertainty I can almost feel against my skin.
That's right. I'll need to talk to the police today.

The thought brings back an inkling of dread. I don't want to talk about what I saw, what happened, with anybody. I'd rather take it all with me to the grave, an event of punishment that out-did everything I've ever done to myself.

Soon, no one's looking at me anymore. Harvey Dent walks in, commanding everyone's attention through the power of his personality alone. He stands in front of the podium, the American flag stoically beside him in a parody of his campaign commercials. I still see the severity in his features, the unyielding, fervent passion that makes him so likable. It's also what unnerves me the most about him. The room quiets when his voice resounds from the microphone.

"Ladies and gentleman, thank you for coming. I've called this press conference for two reasons. Firstly, to assure the citizens of Gotham that everything that can be done over the Joker killings is being done." Mutinous voices rise from the sea of people in the room. People shake their heads in disbelief and expressions of anger mark many of their faces. I don't blame any of them. "Secondly is that the Batman has offered to turn himself in. But first, let's consider the situation."

Spoken like a true politician.

"Should we give in to this terrorist's demands? Do we really think that he's going to—"

"You'd rather protect an outlaw vigilante than the lives of citizens?" a woman's voice from behind me calls out. There's no denying the logic in her words, even as the sting registers almost imperceptibly in Bruce's expression. The voices that rush to agree with her give the woman a look of vindication.

"The Batman is an outlaw," Harvey says, cutting through the voices of the masses, "but that's not why we're demanding he turn himself in. We're doing it because we're scared. We were happy to let the Batman clean up our streets until now."

"Things are worse than ever!" a man's voice yells out followed by more shouted cries of agreement.

"Yes, they are." Harvey's voice forces another wave of quiet in the room. He's pulling people in with his words, with a tone and image meant to inspire hope. But they haven't seen what I have. There's no hope to be found in any of this. "The night is darkest just before the dawn. And I promise you, the dawn is coming. One day, the Batman will have to answer for the law's he's broken. But to us, not this madman."

"No more dead cops!" This time, it's clapping and a unified yell of solidarity from the other officers present. Harvey's losing control of the crowd quickly.

"He should turn himself in."

I grab Bruce's hand, just like I did with Parker, and hold on tightly.

"Yeah, give us the Batman!"

Harvey's voice is almost too quiet to hear over the shouting, but I hear him clearly.

"So be it. Take the Batman into custody."

The sounds now are varying levels of vocalized incredulity. They seem to be forming into a mob, taking advantage of the opportunity to vent their frustrations and fear at a target that can't hurt
them back. Soon, all of that will be focused on Bruce.

Bruce lets go of my hand and walks forward. He never looks back at me. Not once. I stare at my bandaged hands and my mind crawls backward, away from any conscious parts of me that will register the pain of what comes next.

"I am the Batman."

The voice isn't right at all. Bruce isn't the one speaking. It's Harvey.

The mob that was about to boil over simmers down to a dozen different conversations when two officers, both eager to make the arrest, come up to Harvey and cuff his outstretched hands. Shock manages to reach the distant place where my consciousness resides. I look from Harvey to Bruce, expecting him to speak up—to clarify their mistake.

That's when I see it. A steely glint of calculation in Bruce's eye, visible even in his profile. One that's strategizing how to capitalize on Harvey's false omission. It took near-total detachment for me to see it, but I understand now. Bruce needs Batman; they're two halves of a whole. Bruce was willing to go down in self-sacrifice, but the opportunity to maintain the identity that gives him so much power is naked in his eyes. The vulnerability I saw last night is gone. I don't know if I envy him or if it's disappointment that I feel. All I know is nothing good will come any of it. My vision comes to life in front of me.

One of us isn't going to make it out of this, Bruce. It's too late. If I'd known, if you had told me before, would the outcome have been different? Nothing we do will stop any of it. Nothing matters at all.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank you all again for reading this story and those of you who have been so kind to leave reviews. The last few months have been pretty tough for me personally with stress from school and health problems, but coming back to write and share these chapters every week - and reading all of your comments and seeing how invested people are becoming in this story- even after all the awful things I put these characters through - means the world to me.

There's one bit I want to clarify in this chapter: I have Bruce being incredibly vulnerable with Miriam. Some of you may see that as him being out of character. But I do this very specifically: it is very rare in any depiction of Batman for him to have emotions beyond stoicism, anger, righteous fury, and, occasionally, sass. Batman is the pinnacle of what has been traditionally valued in masculinity. Part of Batman's innate appeal is how rigidly he stays within the moral high ground - taking an untold number of beatings, emotional and psychological torture, loss, and pain while remaining steadfast in his goals. Some writers of Batman have shown the negative sides that come with that rigidity - the loneliness, alienation, and deep, deep pain that Batman will never allow himself to be rid of.

But in order for a hero to rise above something, there has to be a stumbling block to begin with - an emotional trap door that leads to the things that are capable of breaking any one of us. As much as I love Nolan's movies and the fantastic, brilliant job
Christian Bale did as Bruce Wayne/Batman - that emotional vulnerability was rarely acknowledged or addressed. When Rachel dies, we see Bruce's choked grief in the form of a 100-yard stare. We don't see him cry over the woman that he's loved since childhood. His grief for his parents' is relatively understated in Batman Begins. Something could be said about the possibility that he's emotionally stunted - but I don't believe that's true. I just think people are uncomfortable with seeing a man being emotional, especially one who is supposed to be as bad-ass as Batman. One of the reasons Batman is so amazing as a hero is because he is human. Unlike Superman, or any other enhanced superhero, Bruce has known true suffering and has managed to do what almost no other hero has been able to do - rise above almost every single challenge thrown his way while never compromising. It's what makes him admirable, despite his flaws. But we need to see those flaws, the parts that connect him to others. Yes, it makes it all the more painful when those vulnerabilities are ripped away, hurt, or destroyed, but it's also what drives us to cheer him on. Because no matter what happens to him, we want to see him get back up and rush into the fold again, even better or more scarred than when he arrived.

That's another reason why I wrote an OC that's related to Bruce. We rarely see Bruce have a familial connection to anyone outside of the small glimpses with Alfred and flashbacks of his parents. I've introduced elements in the story that adds more emotional power to what happens - grounding it in a reality that we all on some level will contend with at some point: being afraid that those we care about will be hurt, failing (in whichever way we interpret that), being helpless, and living with loss and trauma. Killing off Rachel in the movies provided a reason for Batman to be angry and a hurdle for Batman to overcome when it came to his final showdown with the Joker - but it wasn't explored as fully as it could have been (and the novelization of the film was straight up terrible). Miriam parallels a lot of the qualities and struggles Bruce/Batman has, and it's because of those shared traits (and other factors I'll explore later) that the Joker can't leave her alone. We see the Joker obsessed with Batman, but I don't see their relationship as totally homoerotic (4ofCups in her amazing epic Not Playing With A Full Deck on FFN explores a lot of this beautifully) but the same things that draw the Joker to Batman feeds into his pull to Miriam.

I'm sorry for this terribly long and rambly Author's Note, and I would like to say there will be fewer of them - but that's probably not going to happen (I'm incorrigible, sorry about that). The Dark Knight is a story that's impacted me tremendously since I first saw it in theatres when I was 14. I have a lot of thoughts about it, and a lot of time and consideration went into how I was going to present the characters and where I'm going to take this story. Hopefully my vision is coming across, and maybe adding a plausible - possibly more gut-wrenching - alternative/addition to what was unfortunately limited to two hours and thirty-two minutes.

I'll shut up now, but I'll be back next weekend with another Joker POV chapter and more agony to unleash on everyone... Things will only get darker, so I guess you have that to look forward to?❤
Like A Dog Chasing Cars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pain was by no means a new sensation for the Joker. It wasn't that he didn't feel anything at all—quite the opposite. The Joker always felt everything. It was a familiar, and welcome, sting that proved he was alive. He liked to think of it as a simple matter of chemistry.

Cause and effect.

Action and reaction.

His body has nociceptor-tipped nerves. Nerves unfortunately send messages to their respective axons, and those axons were always waiting for an excuse to light up your goddamn spinal cord straight to your brain and blink all those subtle alerts when things aren't ideal on the self-preservation scale.

If we're being technical, that's biology.

The kicker was that pain had no hold on him, and, as a consequence, he looked at death as a trifling inconvenience on the way to untold planes of existence. He wasn't unwilling to plunge into the cosmic ocean and see what kind of possibilities were waiting, but the Joker has ideas he wants to play out in this world first, starting with good ol' Gotham: ones that are too delicious to pass up and required him being around for a while longer. The Joker was a hedonist at heart, and pain's part of the carnal—no getting around that. Granted, he's a different breed of hedonist from your average shmuck, but—

"Sometimes, to make an omelet you gotta bash a few skulls together," Joker mused to himself as he stuffed another seafood sauce-laden shrimp into his mouth. He wasn't as much into meals as satisfying certain cravings until his stomach stopped screaming at him. He was feeling irritated. Perturbed.

There were a few things that were making him itch. And it wasn't just the second-degree burns.

Focus on the pain. It makes things more... simple.

Pain came with his chosen vocation—a perk that connected his frenzied brain back into the needs his body demanded. It's what reminded him to eat, to sleep—as rare as that was—and to occasionally blow off the steam that wound him up into a maligned fist of uncontrollable fury.

The Joker didn't like losing control.

Nope.

The Joker liked to see the physical result of the pain inflicted upon him. Bruises, long and jagged cuts, gouges, little holes left behind by a quick jab of a corkscrew or a bullet, swollen flesh, the puncture wounds of a knife penetrating his skin, picking out shrapnel, the few places where the flesh was missing entirely and scar tissue covered missing pieces, the sweet throb of broken bones—all of it was pain manifest. He could control what happened with those. A half-assed stitch here, pouring whiskey in the gaping wound before slapping a rag on it, setting the bone of a clean break or shoving the unwelcome contusion back through the skin, or sometimes just letting it bleed. But the choice was always his.
Always.

If you could control the pain, you controlled the power others held over you. And no one had that power over the Joker.

No one.

So he listened to those markers and met them when required. No more, no less—part from the rare occasion where boredom and free time intersected and he felt like being indulgent. He was facing plenty of opportunities for that, and they were getting harder to resist. It was a **niggling** feeling he'd ascertained after that morning of bliss at the arcade. It made him shake with a feeling he no longer recognized, one he thought he'd forgotten a long time ago.

The feeling of soft skin, fingers wrapped around her ribcage. Absolute terror in that pair of green eyes. The willingness to kill in his. A fixed scowl on his black mask and shaking fists. The commanding force of a worthy adversary. The great show of determination he was so close to crushing. Futile resistance in a scheme they couldn't see the scope of.

All the feelings intermingled, creating a pull in the Joker's gut he didn't understand. He didn't like that there was something just beyond his reach of analyzing. Or, perhaps, not beyond his reach, but beyond his willingness to engage with its full meaning.

*Hey, what happened to the whole pain thing?*

Despite all his masochistic tendencies, there *were* some sensations the Joker didn't like. Burns was one of them. He'd learned to like the initial flare-up of alarm bells screaming at him, but there was little he could control them with afterward. He couldn't stop the uncomfortable boiling trapped under the skin, an itch he couldn't scratch. With everything else, the Joker revelled in physical suffering. Sometimes, in just the right settings, it even made his cock twitch.

With severe burns, the Joker couldn't control the intensity of them or how long the sensations lasted, how the tissue bubbled and chafed against the fabric of his jacket. He liked seeing the effects of them on others but didn't enjoy the reverse. He couldn't get rid of them, not without scraping the offending tissue off and starting anew. And he had several burns from the *meet-and-greet* at the arcade.

Taking a knife to his arms, neck, and parts of his shins wasn't an option. It wasn't even that the burns hurt—*which they did*—it was just that they were *there* and the only remedy he could enact was leaving them alone. If there was one thing the Joker wasn't particularly good at, it was leaving things—*or pretty girls and batty-men in expensive morphsuits*—alone. He had too many things on the docket to distract himself with blood loss. The men in his employ needed a firm hand, an enforcer to keep their minds on the prize. Spending alone time with his chosen remedies wasn't an option around certain upstarts, the little volatile—*but idiotic*—sadists who played at being psychopaths.

No, no. The Joker wanted to *savour* what happened at the arcade for later. Preferably when he had more *desirable* company. So, he focused back on the pain. On the burns that prickled. He sat in his makeshift office in an abandoned warehouse at 250 52nd Street, not literally licking his wounds—but considering them with a trace of a frown.

A knock was heard at the dilapidated slab of wood that passed as a door. The Joker stayed still for a moment, letting the sound hang in the air, before propping his legs in a criss-cross atop the large stacks of newspapers, hospital files, insurance papers, and dozens of small notes sitting out of order written in a scrawl so messy that only he could understand them. He pulled the sleeves back down
of his replacement shirt—had to look his best for his future guest and his oncoming close-up with Bats—and glanced at the TV in the corner. His mouth tugged back up into a small grin as he stared at Golden Boy's face and his impassioned plea for a beating.

Only after the Joker made whoever was on the other side of the door wait for an uncomfortable amount of time, letting them stew in the uncertainty of his mood, did he grunt his approval for the intruder to enter. His mood went from contemplative to sour quickly when he saw who it was.

Vicky, Vicky. Tricky little Vicky's gonna get sticky when I fucking peel back his skin and play myself a game of marionettes.

"Slater's back with the truck. When are we—" Zsasz began, but he stopped mid-sentence when he saw the look of pure venom on the Joker's face.

He wasn't afraid—he should be—but Zsasz could be careful when necessity drove him to it. Probably the only reason he was still alive, but he was also arrogant, thinking he was valuable enough in the Joker's mind that he wouldn't face the same punishments that had been dealt with impunity to others. Victor was useful at keeping the others in line, and the Joker needed that usefulness for just a while longer, but he was falling into a dangerous position of lingering wrath when he heard the words coming from the puppet on TV.

"I am the Batman," Harvey Dent said, making the Joker do a spit-take. He would have laughed, but what was happening on GCN was so bat-shit—pun intended—crazy he was rendered mute.

Trust me, kiddo, that's a rare occasion.

The Joker had been sitting there, watching the televised press conference touting to have some 'big news,' and damn did they ever deliver. This was undoubtedly a bombshell for the city's residents. Harvey-Boy just killed the climax the Joker had been building toward this whole time in Gotham. The Joker could hear their cries of astonishment in the background. He could practically see the Twitter feeds just going stark raving mad with the news. If the Joker ever needed confirmation of the success of all his efforts, that's where he went when he wanted to see how stupid fear made people.

He paused the TV and considered the man's face as it sat on the screen, ignoring the presence of Victor. Harvey's chin was up, defiant. The cleft of his chin made the Joker irrationally angry, and he was instinctually disdainful against deceptively handsome men like Harvey. Most beautiful women were like that, too. Using their looks to hide the vapid thoughtlessness that was excused because of the appeal of symmetry and a good pair of tits. They had more to hide, more ugliness inside than people wanted to believe existed.

But the Joker knew it was in there, and he was only too willing to show that hideous interior to the world. Miriam was beautiful, but the pain and twisted knot of conflict and barely contained rage eclipsed any pleasure the Joker got from just looking at her. Her outbursts tempered by a good dose of fear were amusing, her on-camera reveals appealed to him.

Since Rich-Boy's return, she'd been held up by those around her in an image based on the surface alone. Money, good looks and important relatives were all it took to become a feature in the American zeitgeist—another lie the Joker enjoyed shattering. It was an illusion she didn't embrace with the gusto of Bruce Wayne. Miriam was intelligent,crippingly self-aware, and wracked with a loneliness that spoke to him. But the real beauty of her being, stuck in a place of denial, was floating just below the placid surface—it just needed some encouragement to come into the fore. She was perceptive, observant of the facts in front of her even if she wouldn't name them. Miriam was a liar, but she also knew the truth, even if she wouldn't admit it aloud willingly.
That'll change by the time I'm done.

The Joker was a firm believer that anyone could see the light; even if he had to lead them there with a knife at their throats and a hand shoved in their insides—gripping their beating hearts in his hand before crushing it completely.

Harvey was a different kind of liar. He was blind, replacing reason with falsehoods to assuage his own crippling despair as he searched for meaning. Harvey's eyes hadn't lost their idealism. His hair was too well-manicured, his suit too unwrinkled. This wasn't the man the Joker saw the day before, one on the brink of rage-fueled madness. He didn't see the glimmers of despair he'd anticipated, nor the shaking fury.

Obviously, Denta-bone here isn't being very honest.

Dent being Batman made sense only regarding his connections—generous choice of words—with Rachel Dawes. It didn't take much to unearth that she got extra special treatment in the DA's office and that Bat-Brain had given her extra extra special attention when he made his appearance last year. She was good looking, too. The Joker could see the appeal—where were the hotties clamoring to wrack my bones?—and Miss Dawes just couldn't seem to stop banging the guys she worked with. She'd pay for all those favours she got in a way that would make Batman hesitant in displaying anything to anyone ever again.

If Harvey was that golden boy-scout moonlighting as the Batman, a Dark Pretender, then the Joker had over-estimated him. No, there's no way Harvey could be Batman. For one thing, he had no connection to Miriam. The Joker had crossed his i's and dotted his little i's with tiny hearts when it came to checking her out—in more ways than one—and that wasn't something he missed. And the Joker never missed anything. If you had to describe the Joker definitively, then you could say with certainty he was a guy for details, and he'd have to be obtuse not to see that Batman was losing his mind over the itty Miriam. That was part of the fun. The arcade proved that all too well. Either Harvey was a two-timing git with a diverging taste in women, or it was a different man altogether that the Joker was so desperate to play with.

Harvey's hard stance against organized crime and iron will were reminiscent of Batman, but it was an imitation. There was no way Harvey was the real thing—he was too obstinate, too rigid. He still had too much faith in the institutions he served. Batman had none. He saw the system was broken—why else would he work outside the law? Why do ninety-seven percent of the police's work for them? Why act as a human equivalent of a sledgehammer if he didn't take pleasure from the pain he so generously distributed? It wasn't because the system of due process was working, because the People were capable of functioning on their own. Batman could see the fractures, he knew the system was a joke, even as he fought so hard to defend it. He was like the Joker's doll in that regard. He wanted to perpetuate the lie to keep the established order from crumbling like a house of fucking toothpicks. That's another difference—Batman wasn't a liar, he was just unwilling to let the truth get in the way of the falsehoods that constituted the material world.

Harvey's rigidity and blind romanticism would make him easy to break, and the Joker knew the Batman wouldn't break easily. It would take effort and more than a little bit of the Joker's time. It would require tearing down everything, and everyone, the Batman ever put his mark on—anything he ever glanced at with any feeling of fondness. To have someone like Harvey be Batman would be for the Joker to admit he'd won already, and that just spoiled things for later—all the delectable surprises he had in store. Even though the Joker had the game planned right till the end, there was no fun in any of it if he didn't have an opponent worthy enough to put up a good fight. He needed Batman to be that opponent. Harvey's lie incensed him.
No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

It was an insult of grand proportions he wouldn't let stand. It set a blaze in the Joker's mind. Harvey's inordinate arrogance was going to be his downfall. The Joker had already cased his life, too. He saw the pathways that lead to unequivocal dominance over the minds of his opponents, and there was no way Harvey had what it took to be the Batman. None.

Not in this fucking lifetime.

The Joker was getting close to losing it, to finding the nearest head—in this case, Zsasz's—and bashing it into the LED screen that illuminated his retinas. He was just about to do it, too. He could already see the blood decorating Harvey's face in a prophetic vision of what was coming for him, how the skin would be pierced by the edges of the screen and his soft skull crushed between the Joker's hands and the mass of wires and plastic. Taking his rage out on the two pillocks was so tempting it nearly blinded him. The Joker moved to get up from the chair when a different vision hit him. A better one.

The only reason Harvey would lie is if he and the Caped Crusader were gearing themselves up for a classic set-up. The Joker could see through it now that the anger passed—the bald-faced lie he wouldn't leave unanswered. How dare Harvey just insert himself into such a grandiose position—think he had what it took to step toe-to-toe with the Joker. What kind of gall did he have to think he'd be anywhere near the Joker's—even the Batman's—level? That pompous fucktrumpet needed to be knocked down a peg. And the Joker knew just how to do it.

He'd planned on just killing Dent just like he was going to kill Zsasz, but that would be too easy.

The cogs in his mind were whirring at a dangerous speed. Springing out of his ratty chair, making it shoot out and bang into a wall, the Joker left his office—ignoring Zsasz and making him trail behind—and burst out on to the metal walkway overlooking the warehouse.

There wasn't much space to hide out there. The elements had gutted the building, leaving some walls open to exposure on the upper floors but providing enough cover for their purposes for the day. The Joker overlooked the dozens of barrels filled to the brim with ammonium nitrate—one of my personal favourites—and gasoline with the nineteen men huddled around the single space heater that struggled to keep them warm. All it took was for there to be noise on the second floor for them to be alerted to the Joker's presence, and they all hopped right up like any good group of soldiers. When the Joker smiled, the men looked at him with varying degrees of excitement.

Some looked wary—they'd gotten a taste for how things were going to be that night and harboured inklings of uncertainty about their future success. Lewis was among them. He used to be an eager beaver, but the broken wrist and malfunctioning voice box dampened his spirits. Not enough to be disobedient, but just enough to piss the Joker off. Marky-Mark, Stan, and Joel were the others. He made a mental note of it, of their unconscious betrayals. You couldn't be half-in on a crusade as important as this one. They'd have to be dealt with later. For now, the Joker would have them rig the necessary charges for the parties happening that night, he wouldn't cry over some spilled doubting Thomas' if they managed to fuck that task up.

The others looked excited, eager to unleash a night of true hell on the citizens of Gotham. Davie, Thresh, Lee, Slater, and Noah were decidedly in this camp. Noah's excitement surprised the Joker. Noah was doped up on painkillers that distracted him from the poorly stitched incision covering the length of his torso. The giant moron genuinely thought the voices were going away, that the packages of C4 Joker stuffed into his fat guts acted as a cure for the incurable. Thinking of that brightened the Joker's mood. He'd let them come in the ride-along and if he was feeling particularly overjoyed, he might even let a few take a crack at the RPG. It didn't even matter if they could aim
—Gotham was going to get a taste of anarchic bliss and there was no going back now. She was going to get the sweet taste of blood, bile, and absolute freedom and never look back. Not ever.

*Let the games begin.*

"Who wants to go shopping?"

"*Why are you calling me?"* Salvatore asked in an irritated tone.

It's too bad he couldn't see the Joker's grin and the promise of menace in his eyes at the sound of Maroni's impudence. With one of Joker's burner phones gripped in his hand, he ironed out the specifics for the night. Things had to be planned down to the minute. No room for error.

"You'd think you hadn't watched the *news*, Sally." The Joker was playing with him, being purposely irritating—*daring* Maroni to make a comment about it. The Joker had him by the balls and they both knew it.

Salvatore Maroni was smart. Smarter than the fools around him who were ruled by their dicks and an avaricious need to amass stacks of useless currency in order to wield a power that wasn't even theirs. Maroni had mastered the family trade of keeping a tight hierarchy, adhering to some arbitrary code of honour, dishing out orders from on high and reaping the rewards from a position of unquestioned authority. His *incestuous* little bunch was so successful because they operated under the illusion that nothing in Gotham was beyond their control. Their delusion mandated that everything was in reach and they were tasting what true freedom was: the ability to murder without consequence, extort and exploit with impunity, take what wasn't offered, hold total dominion over the land without concerning themselves with the citizens within.

"Yeah, I saw it. We wanted Batman dead, not in prison. Lau's still in custody. You haven't *delivered* anything on your end of the deal."

Now Maroni was just being *insolent*. The Joker resisted the urge to pace. He was out on the warehouse floor, examining the wood crates that held the fireworks for the evening's show. Joker couldn't help but laugh.

Above all, the Joker knew, criminals in Gotham operated under the certainty that they were untouchable by all manner of influence and order outside the rules of the game they dictated for themselves. Men like Maroni ruled like kings over a mob of the ignorant. Maroni added finesse to the process, masking the ugliness in the grand order of gratuitous violence and savage brutality in Gucci suits, Maserati's, nice haircuts and a slick grin, affable charm, and Machiavellian tactics that were fucking *uninspired*.

"I need you to call your, uh, little *piggies* in the gee-see-pee-dee for me." The Joker was met with silence on the other end. Sally was thinking, searching for a hidden meaning in Joker's words.

There was a lot about people like Maroni that the Joker could—*distantly*—admire. Like the Mob fools, the Joker enjoyed taking what he wanted, spitting in the face of those too weak to break through the self-perpetuating delusions of idiocy, dabbling in the carnal pleasures of the world, the supremacy that came with undisputed acts of control, making people *squirm* just for the satisfaction that he *could*. But the Joker possessed a mind that—applied correctly—could bring a city of *ten million* to its knees.

"*What do you need to know?*” Maroni asked finally, deciding to play into the Joker's game without asking *why.*
Smart man.

As much as the Joker could point out what men like Sally did right, they were overshadowed by all they were doing wrong. They didn't go far enough—too wrapped up in the veil of delusion without going beyond it, discarding those who didn't fit into their mold of king-maker for the same old fucking thing on an endless loop. The Chechnyan, Maronis', Dimitrovs', and the Falcons' were missing the bigger picture. They shirked the blame of their actions onto those who didn't hold the same material markers the world put so much value in, never moving past what had been established before.

Money.

That's where their brains ceased all operations. They didn't see that all of it was inconsequential, a non sequitur, a useless output the world was obsessed with obtaining. They didn't understand that's not where power comes from. Not at all.

"I need to make a, ah, special delivery to one Harvey Den-t. Unfortunately, he's in between addresses, and I'd really like to, hahaha, surprise him in person." The Joker's smile grew when he heard the sigh Maroni probably didn't mean to make on the other end.

"Give me twenty minutes," Maroni said after a pregnant pause.

"Make it ten," the Joker replied before promptly ending the call.

He turned his attention back to the crates and the paper in his hands covered in the doodles he'd drawn in green crayon. Things were shaping up the way Joker expected, and he was pleasantly surprised at the imagination of some of his men.

Give 'em enough room to spread their wings and the possibilities are endless, kid.

He'd given Davie Cripple-Field and Thresh some vague instructions and was eager to see what they'd do. The others were already back from their deliveries and errands, and now he just needed to add the finishing touches.

"When are we moving out?" Vicky asked. He'd gotten back an hour ago and was wisely keeping out of the Joker's view. He still looked nervous, unsure if the Joker was angry with him or on a downswing.

The sight of Victor Zsasz opening his blasphemous mouth gave the Joker ideas about pulling his lips back far enough that he could see the bare bone white of Vicky's mandibles. He was so furious he didn't bother asking how it went with the whole business of stealing a firetruck.

The Joker fought back the urges he felt. Control was an important part of the game. Lashing out at the right moments, saving the pay-off for a moment of greater returns, those were important things to keep in mind. The Cookie Monster wasn't just good for a laugh and his insatiable gluttony—the blue son of a bitch had a point about the whole delayed gratification thing. It was hard to keep in mind when there were so many opportunities just standing right in front of him—an infuriating little reminder that brought him back to baser urges that made his blood sing.

And most of them tied back to his little gal pal. It gave him a shot of adrenaline to the balls and set his—speaking of chemical reactions—nerves on fire. It left him just itching—fucking itching—to do something with his hands, or other choice extremities, depending on the hour. He always pictured his playdates with a knife involved, somewhere. Or in someone. His mood changed on that one frequently, too.
The Joker giggled when he thought back to all those *valuable* lessons imparted by a bunch of obnoxious puppets with fists shoved up their asses. Victor was having a hard time hiding his impatience.

*Just give me another reason, Zsaszy-boy.*

"The best parties happen from *dusk* 'til *dawn.* And I plan on arriving right on the *dot.*" That was a cryptic answer at best. Victor didn't appreciate it, but he didn't say anything—only frowning and waiting for an actual order and a timeline.

The Joker made Victor wait. His favourite distraction revolved around the best way to punish Victor for his transgressions. He'd meant what he said about making Zsasz wear his skin like a suit jacket. He just needed to wait for the time when it would pack the most *punch,* and he was tempted to do it right there on the concrete floor. The golden part was Victor didn't *know* that the Joker knew what he'd done. Paranoia was good for a lot of things—it meant having the inside scoop on what the morons around him were up to when they thought he wasn't looking. It's why he installed cameras, tiny ones—and they do make 'em tiny nowadays—in every room of use on the ship. Why he bugged the rooms in every safe house.

*You don't trust anyone. No. One. Can't be disappointed if you know how the joke's gonna end and you get to decide the punchline.*

Joker's lack of faith was rewarded. He had ample ammunition to slaughter three birds with one stone by the time things reached their allotted climax, starting with a special surprise for Miriam and ending in a show of fireworks with Bat-Boy. He'd really outdone himself on those ones, but the Joker had plans for *Vicky,* and it involved getting creative. See, Victor was another kind of man that pain didn't have a hold on.

*The guy literally carves kill notches in his own skin. If that's not admirable on some level, I don't know what is.*

Once again, the Joker had to re-evaluate the class plan to teach some *naughty* students a lesson.

The Joker heard the energetic *ping!* of the cellphone he'd just been speaking to Maroni on. Reaching deep into his overcoat pocket, the Joker held the phone aloft, dangling it by the corner of the screen, reading the glowing message, and then throwing it haphazardly over his shoulder.

"*Goddamnit!*"

Judging by the sound of the voice, he'd just nailed Lee in the head. The Joker cackled before speaking. "Mr. Pepper-Maroni's rats say the convoy leaves at five o'clock *sharp.* Wouldn't want the little *piggies* to miss their dinner."

"Do you have the map ready? We set up the roadblocks in two hours then, yeah?" Victor asked.

Victor was one of the only people in the Joker's employ that could maintain eye contact with him for any length of time. The rest usually met his gaze and darted away quickly, showing their deference in a way that pleased the Joker. That was the thing with people who weren't afraid of pain. You had to *carve* your own path when dishing out some much-deserved retribution. If making 'em bleed wouldn't do it, then you had to find their weak points. Flip them on their stomachs and find the soft parts before sinking the teeth in.

And the Joker had found *Vicky's.* Oh yes, he did.

"Bring in the rest of the, ah, *cadets.* I don't want to repeat myself."
Vicky didn't like that order. He didn't like being an errand boy. The Joker was pushing his buttons, slowly aggravating him to accentuate to build-up of what he had planned. Victor said nothing in reply and obeyed, turning to gather the others. Most of the men had their orders already, but getting the particulars down was important. His rats were scurrying to the tune of his pipe, and he just had to lay down the finishing touches. Soon, Gotham would be doing the same.

The Joker, keen to fixate on something else than what had been pulling at his mind, focused back on an immediate source of the rippling his skin was feeling. Victor came by sadism honestly. The Joker even admired his resume in many ways—the clean work he did with a blade, his savage appetite, and just balls-out audacity of the guy. Vicky was an animal at heart—are we all?—but a dumb one. When the Joker was out on the playground picking teammates, Victor was an obvious choice. There was no troublesome conscience to worry about, the guy was a risk-taker, and he had a thirst for violence that appealed to the Joker.

He was also overly impulsive and had delusions of grandeur that were too lofty for Joker's liking, especially if it meant that Vicky thought he was better than him. Sure, what Vicky did leading up his kills was something the Joker turned his nose up at, but that didn't preclude Victor from the terror the Joker wanted to unleash. You couldn't be picky when you were starting a revolution.

The Joker's own la Terreur was just getting started, but it wouldn't do to be too eager yet. Patience is a virtue and understanding its importance was an absolute requirement in the Joker's line of work. Batman understood that; the Joker could tell. Which is what made it all the more delicious when he was worked up in a nearly uncontrollable tempest of pure rage.

He was getting distracted again. Joker was thinking about Batman being a figure of heaven's wrath incarnate. A vengeful angel sent down to battle for the souls of millions. Batman hadn't fought with this much brutally before, shown so many signs of slipping from the archangel Michael to Lucifer, one of the fallen. All because of one pretty dame. One that the Joker was having a hard time ignoring.

Back to Victor being an insipid, insubordinate, degenerate.

Yes, Victor was a rapist. A vile one at that, with a taste for teenage girls, dragging out their final moments to an hours-long ordeal—excessive if you ask me—and making his own version of an art exhibit all over Gotham. It was all so…unnecessary. A call for attention, and a show of Vicky's poor planning. Victor churned out kills at an admirable rate, but it's also what got him caught.

Sloppy. Like Mr. Gerry-Man.

And Victor had the temerity to ignore the direct order of 'don't touch my toys without permission.' Had the balls to try his hand at rape right under his nose and lie about it, like Joker was an idiot. The Joker had temporarily let it slide, taking in a large dose of entertainment in the rabid beating Miriam dished out on Victor's face. He honestly hadn't expected that at all, what with the debilitating concussion and all. But then Vicky went as far as to try and kill her like she was some common bitch on the street. He'd seen as much on the camera's feed—technology is a wonderful thing—before she'd done any of the necessary work required for the Joker's vision to come to life. It wasn't Victor's violence that bothered him, it was that Vicky had dared touch what the Joker had already claimed as his. The Joker didn't believe in God, but he sure as hell liked playing as one. The Joker wasn't lying when he said he wouldn't tolerate fools and insubordination.

I never do more than plant a little white lie here and there. The key's to mix it in with the truth, that's Rule Number Three.
The Joker didn't give a fuck about what the sick bastards who worked for him did on their own
time, but he was the type of dog owner that didn't believe in letting the pooches shit in the house. If
they worked for him, there was a set of house rules they abided—even if they change by the hour
—and Victor had been a very bad dog indeed. When the Joker gave instructions, when he spoke a
word—you followed what came out of his mouth to the letter like your life depended on it.

Their lives do depend on it. How many times do I have to say that?

Any man was still at risk of ending up dead, 'cause sometimes it doesn't matter if you follow the
instruction manual—life's all about kicking you in the balls when you least expected it.

Like what's his face. The empty meat-sack rotting in the river.

Listening. An underrated skill. One Victor lacked. The Joker had said—very specifically—not to
touch his toys. The Joker wasn't one for sharing. Not for anything.

Disappointed Mommy on that one.

And what did tricky Vicky do? He didn't listen. One could argue that the Joker was overreacting.
Getting a little too possessive of the merchandise. Especially when that merchandise had a very
specific role to play, and was being so bothersome about the whole programme he had going on.
He had told Miri that she couldn't die until they ticked off all the items on his agenda—and he
meant it. Now he just couldn't decide how long that was going to be, and whether he'd ever push
her off the ride after all.

He didn't like having puzzles in front of him that were beyond the powerful thought processes that
defined his mind. There were a few puzzles in front of him now. He could see the solutions, but
every one he thought of made him angrier. It was something he'd focus on later, during the
upcoming moment of exploration he was so looking forward to.

The Joker didn't need to turn around to know the men had gathered. The silent tension of
anticipation and uncertainty was palpable, a refresher on the Joker's palate that made the corner of
his lips turn up. He spun on his heel to face the men. His gleeful smile confused and excited them.

Maroni had called the Joker a 'nobody,' a clown in a 'cheap purple suit and makeup.' Technically,
he wasn't wrong. That was part of the Joker's allure. He was a spirit summoned from the depths of
hell to level the playing field. He was the voice inside every person's ear whispering their darkest
heart's desire. He was the advocate for a new brand of existence—one ruled by impulse and the
traditional dominions of power meant nothing at all. Maroni thought he was a king, but he still
owed fealty to a God—he was plagued by the rules of existence laid out by a higher power. The
Joker had no such ties. He was a godless warlord, a voice for the mob that rioted—one waiting to
be let off the leash. Pandemonium was the God they should have been worshipping all along, and
chaos was the path to the world's rebirth in fire. And the People were going to be the ones to make
it happen. He'd bring them to the edge of the precipice and they'd jump off, smiles on their faces
and a 'tally-ho' as they fell into a pit of no return.

"It's time that equality bore its scythe above all heads. It is time to horrify all the conspirators.
So legislators, place terror on the order of the day! Let us be in revolution..."

They didn't get the reference. The meaning was lost on them, but that was alright. Gotham would
know the meaning intimately by the time Joker was finished.

The Joker and old man Slater were waiting in the cab of their repurposed semi. They were waiting
for dusk, for the sun to set a little further on the horizon. It was 5:15. The coppers and their
doomed caravan were already on their way. It's like Gotham could sense what was coming. The
city was quiet, the citizens in a cluster of confusion and turmoil, and the pigs were kind enough to
clear the roads ahead. All he had to do now was drop on by.

"Hey, you'll have to wait like everybody else, pal," the young patrolman said. He'd probably said
the same phrase, with its necessary variations, to dozens of others already. It's too bad he had to say
it to the Joker.

The bespectacled boy in blue didn't even have time to blink when the Joker cocked his twelve-
gauge and unloaded a round in the patrolman's face. Slater was expecting the shot to be loud, but
even the hardened geezer in his Crocodile Dundee hat couldn't help but flinch away from the shot
that left his ears ringing. The Joker didn't care.

"Excuse me, operator. We've got an officer down who requires some, uh, immediate assistance,"
the Joker said as he unloaded another round into the downed man.

He was laughing as Slater pulled away. The Joker felt amped up—jubilant beyond words. Like a
thousand volts were coursing through him, imbuing him with a strength and resolve that was
unwavering—and he was excited to share in the pain he was going to be subjecting a few dozen
people to that night.

See, most people didn't see pain the way the Joker did. As another tool that could help or hinder.
Avoiding it was like trying to deny the need to breathe—and people spent their whole lives in a
permanent state of denial—choking and wondering why their airways were closing. Hopping
themselves on drugs that dulled their minds and playing it safe when, really, they were just signing
up to live a life ruled by boredom, idiocy, and a vacant hell the Joker wanted no part of. They, the People,
put their faith into an array of institutions and blindly trusted it would take them by the
hand like a watchful father to an ideal place of peace and order that just. Didn't. Exist. Like that cop
back there. He was supposed to be a symbol of law and order. Now he was just a corpse on the
street adding another stain to the blood-soaked earth.

It was a fine balance to strike—the illusion of randomness and unpredictability and the stabilizing
force of keeping an even grip on himself and the peons around him. He was consistent at
being inconsistent. You break one rule, one toothpick of thousands upholding societal order, and
people quite literally lost their minds. They can't fathom why someone would try to knock down
the pillars they thought were holding up the sky. They saw it as an irrevocable act of self-
destruction. Suicide in the face of reason. But they were wrong. And the Joker was going to show
them how deep it all goes.

It all comes down to fear.

The People are ruled by it. How else did humanity grow beyond a slippery bundle of molecules
freshly formed from the void? Cavemen became regular men because they were afraid. Afraid of
going hungry, dying out, isolation, and—this is a good one—being forgotten. Becoming another
speck in the wind, blown away to a place where you become one grain amongst a sea of others—
indiscernible and disposable. Why did the great civilizations of old create monuments that lasted
millennia, the first scribe put ink to animal hide, man's longest-lasting creation was art in caves, or
literary meisters wrote books that were as much about expression as recognition? One of the most
enduring legends of all time was dedicated to the point! Achilles was terrified of being forgotten—
it's what killed him and everything he cherished.

Why else did people bury themselves in their phones and create their own personal temples at
which their followers could throw themselves at the feet in reverent worship? The fear of identity-
less oblivion was so terrifying that the People created the means by which they could be forgotten. The struggle with everyone trying to be remembered is that it creates such a backlog of useless, irrelevant garbage that overwhelms reason. They didn't realize they were just adding to the stinking heap, selling out their lives for the fleeting gratification of temporary acknowledgement—only to be forgotten as soon as their picture, their life, their fucking words leave the screen. That was no existence worth living. Not at all. And these people weren't living. No. They were sleeping, down so deep in an ocean of everyone jacking each other off in one big cumming circle where they bond over the mutual struggle for comradery but only solidifying their own isolation and adding another layer to the lies that define every single part of them.

Now, the Joker isn't immune from the particular facet of the terror of being forgotten. He could understand it, even. He isn't perfect after all—nothing is.

And that's the point.

But it goes beyond all that—the People are afraid of themselves. Of the natural, primal, urge to literally exist for existence's sake and to revel in fulfilling every impulse, every drive that comes to mind and body. The People are afraid of the amount of pain they can take. How much they can dish out. Of enduring the silence of their own company. Of looking into the face of reality and seeing the world as it is and stop trying to create a grand artifice of what could be. The small horrors every person in every lifetime on every continent has ever had. Where do laws come from? From the outright terror in the possibility that someone may enact upon them the imaginings of death and pain they've already conjured for themselves. For how much they love finding order and reason, the chaotic nature inherent in every system, every bleeding heart, in every atom of every thing in existence—no one wants to see the truth, the one that really matters, sitting in front of their dumbstruck eyes.

The Joker could see the truth. Yes, yes he could. Even Jonathan Crane had an inkling of it—he was just a poor actor in a scheme larger than himself—an impotent executioner when he had all the tools he needed at his disposal.

Much of the world might not see the cosmic joke sitting at the heart of humanity, but the Joker sure fucking could.

Chalk it up as part of that whole 'overactive imagination' bit the Joker has going on—just mix in napalm, for good measure—but he has a point. Nobody likes to admit that. Not willingly, anyway. No one wants to admit that every endeavour they've ever undertaken, every bill they ever paid, every dollar spent, their meaningless aspirations, every fucking vote they ever cast, the brownie points they try to earn in the name of The Good, every single little rule or law they put so much stalk in was for nothing. It all literally amounted to nothing. Just a mausoleum, worldwide in its scope, that prevented the People from seeing the truth and suffocating them as they burned up the pittance of oxygen they've allowed for themselves while the source stayed beyond their unwilling reach.

As much as the Joker understood it all, he didn't understand why. Why they bought into it, why they castrated themselves straight from the womb, how they perpetuated their own suffering without realizing the cause.

Well, no, that's not entirely true—he could understand why. There was a time when his life was ruled by that same avoidance: the fear of a blow or pinched skin or the hurt that accompanied experiencing someone's rage or the thought of a knife cutting too close. He couldn't even pinpoint exactly when that started to change, just that they had.

But that's not the point.
Maybe his frustration was directed at the willful ignorance people lived in, ignoring the reality of the world through layers upon layers of meaningless constructs and efforts—that's what he didn't fully grasp. How could the People not realize that to exist was to equate that existence with suffering—with letting go and realizing that nothing really mattered at all in those delusions made in their own mind that they convinced themselves was reality?

That big bastard Buddha got one thing right.

Willful blindness was a conundrum he pondered often. The Joker thought of himself as a teacher, in many regards, and an artist at heart. He had the answers that mattered and was determined to impart the lessons of the world in the malleable minds of the students in front of him. They just wouldn't like the process of learning those lessons. Sometimes, to teach a kid a lesson, you have to drag them by the hair and show them that touching the stove was bad by branding their hands with it. Whether or not the People understood the lessons didn't matter much. It was still a victory if he left the masses disillusioned and angry enough to ruin things for the next generation—maybe they'd grow up to be smarter. He'd even be content with convincing one special Bat in black and a permanent frown.

Being a revolutionary is hard work, y'know. And no one ever says thank you. Now that's just rude.

Certainly, no one would be thanking him by the time the night was over, but that didn't matter. He may not receive his accolades in this lifetime, but they'd remember him alright. He'd leave a legacy too large to ignore as he ushered in a new age the People truly deserved.

Chapter End Notes

While, undoubtedly, the Joker is my favourite part of TDK, we don't really see much of his interior thoughts, philosophies, and motivations beyond what he says to the other characters he is antagonizing. This chapter isn't meant to be as action-heavy, but more of a deeper introspective look into who the Joker is as a character. Though the Joker is absolutely an agent of chaos, nihilism taken to an extreme, and a 'man of simple tastes' - he is also, without a doubt, much more than that. Nihilism doesn't just come from nowhere, and neither does disenfranchisement to such a degree that you want to burn the known world to the ground. I see the Joker as a revolutionary in TDK, but not as a liberator for democracy like the American Revolution is characterized. His brand of revolution is bloodier, more terrifying, and unrepentantly dependent on the willingness for others to be just as brutal as he is - and that's much more in line with the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror (hence why I included several references/allusions to it). He wants to instead create a mobocracy - where the illusion of choice is present but is tempered by the incredibly violent and mindless tendencies that define mob mentality. But the Joker is a persuasive character, and his views have a certain amount of appeal - especially when the world we invest so much in continuously lets us down.

The Joker, though given the appearance of being unpredictable, is incredibly intelligent and manipulative. He would not be able to do what he does so successfully without planning for several different outcomes and dozens of moves ahead for each. We don't see that (unfortunately) in TDK. Harvey lying that he's Batman would be something, I think, the Joker wouldn't have anticipated. I think he's cunning and incredibly perceptive with an ability to intuitively understand the psychology in others.
I think it's a natural assumption to make that there would have been no doubt in his mind that Harvey wasn't Batman, and I think it would have made him really angry to think that someone could pretend to be on his level. I think that fed into him corrupting Harvey - it was a way to strike a blow against Batman and Gotham, but also as a way to crush a man who slighted him (despite his assertions that what he did to Harvey and Rachel wasn't 'personal' - but there were several points in the movie where we know he lied, thus throwing his words into doubt). The Joker is vindictive, but not usually without a cause. Similarly, I see him having a grudge against the Mob for their dismissal of him and their potential to be more but their insistence in remaining stagnant.

A few elements I have manipulated in this fic include the timeline and the nature of Joker's obsessive/controlling/human qualities. TDK, of course, was filmed through 2007-2008, before the insanity of social media became such a force as to totally define the last decade. We had inklings of the absorbing quality of the internet, but we didn't have the technology that made it possible for people (on average) to spend over four hours a day on their phones (my youngest sister, who's 18, spends an average of seven hours a day - I know this because my parents made her average it out, it's frightening). I think if the TDK had been set even a few years ahead, his disdain would have taken on an entirely new level of meaning. The cult of the celebrity, the evolving way we interact with one another, and the (arguably) more pervasive movements of doing take-downs of those we deem reprehensible online are ongoing developments that I think would have really interested the Joker. As much as the Joker is all that I have outlined, he is still a human being with human weaknesses and vulnerabilities. As much as he understands others, I think there are elements within himself that he doesn't really know how to deal with, even as a sociopath. I have the Joker here showing a growing obsession with both Batman and Miriam. His obsession with Batman has been explored by many creators and authors more skilled than me, but we don't often see the Joker acknowledging that the life he leads is a lonely one and is incredibly alienating (hence his soulmate-esque relationship with Batman). As controlling as he is, the Joker - even on an incredibly twisted level - wants someone who is capable of understanding him. What is more human than the urge to be known and seen? I don't think the Joker is immune from those pulls, and we don't usually see that desire involving a woman outside of Harley Quinn, who is almost always characterized as the obsessed one. The Joker isn't a death machine, and his desires for connection comes out in ways that are antithetical to convention (please feel free to disagree with me!).
Bruce hissed when he pulled back the gauze from the sticky wound on the side of his ribs. The bullet from the arcade had found its way between the plating of his armour and tore a path through the first inch of skin. It wasn't deep enough to require stitches and Bruce glued it shut. The ugly gash, spanning almost three inches long, was weeping blood. The glue came undone in his movements to and from the press conference, causing the cut to reopen. Patching himself up was nothing new, but his mind was still distracted. He had too many things to focus on, matters that necessitated all his rational discernment.

'You're going to leave me again?'

Miriam's words weren't an accusation, but they were a broken lance that shattered in Bruce's chest. Her pained expression made it difficult to keep his mind where it needed to be.

No. Miriam is here now, and Rachel is safe. You have one clear shot of getting at the Joker in the open.

He winced slightly when he reapplied the medical glue. Bruises, dark purple and green, covered his stomach, ribs, and arms. Raised scars, from the mauling he'd suffered over two weeks ago, were bright pink and red on his left bicep. The stretching of his limbs, elongating the tender muscles, felt good. Bruce felt lighter than he had in weeks. For once, there was a clear plan now. One he could keep from failing.

Through all his renewed determination, guilt gnawed at him. Alfred told Bruce that Rachel went to be with Harvey at the MCU, a development that bothered him, and Bruce was upset to see Miriam return to a wordless vacancy after the press conference—staring out at nothing and only giving the smallest replies when addressed. He knew what kind of grief and self-blame gripped her, but he thought reaching out to her would have made a difference. Now her mind had drifted to a place he couldn't access.

Bruce truly felt like he could change that. He had an opening sense of freedom after being honest with Miriam. She was another person he didn't have to hide in front of anymore. He knew now what she had been struggling with alone for so long and Bruce thought that it was something he could shoulder with her. After the night ended and the Joker was dealt with, once and for all, Bruce could help Miriam. It would take time, but he would make it happen. He resolved to be around more, to find a better balance between the life of Bruce Wayne and Batman. He'd save Gotham and he'd keep Miriam safe. He even convinced himself that he could win Rachel over. They were certainties he didn't question.

After squeezing the torn flesh together as the glue dried, Bruce pulled his shirt back down and went to leave the bathroom. Rounding the corner, he found Alfred standing in the hall, his hands clasped together and head bent. Alfred's suit was crisp and hair in place, but his face was barely composed. Wrecked with worry and a burden that weighed heavily on his shoulders, everything about Alfred drooped downward like a wilted plant. He raised his eyes at the sound of Bruce approaching, but he wasn't smiling. His mouth was pulled back in a firm line. Alfred's steps fell in line with Bruce's as they walked towards the living area.

"I'm assuming you have a plan of action for this evening, sir," Alfred said. His tone was low, as if
he was afraid Miriam would overhear him from Bruce's room on the other side of the penthouse. Even if she was in the room with them, there wouldn't be much of anything that could reach her then.

"Yes. Wait for the Joker to take the bait and move in," Bruce replied. It was a simple matter in his mind. He didn't know how the Joker would do it, but he would certainly attack the trucks that would send Harvey to Central Holding. The MCU was too vulnerable to hold out against the Joker if he was determined to get at who he thought the Batman was. "They're leaving in a couple of hours. I need to get ready."

"You believe it will be so simple?" Alfred asked. He looked doubtful. Alfred didn't believe that the matter could be as unassuming as it appeared on the surface.

"He doesn't have much choice." Bruce turned his back to Alfred and headed for the kitchen. He needed energy for what lay ahead, and eating was a necessity he couldn't ignore anymore.

"What about this whole business with breaching websites, databases, and mobile applications? How has that factored into all of this?"

It was a valid inquiry, and one Bruce didn't have much time to delve into deeply. Alfred had only told Bruce about what Miriam had imparted to Detective Stephens the day before when he met Alfred at the hospital. Miriam was like a walking corpse and Alfred was unsure of what to do. His years as a medic and officer in the SAS didn't prepare him for the personal shock to his system at seeing that level of devastation in someone he cared for so deeply. Alfred's knowledge of what had happened, limited as it was, was necessary to give to Bruce. He'd known only what Ivan told him before, and he'd hoped much of it was exaggerated. Now he knew better.

Bruce was shocked at her behaviour, at the rash and foolish decisions she'd made. Her lack of foresight had come with its own punishing consequences. Bruce didn't see any need to compound those feelings, even if the revelations he'd learned shook him. Alfred's detailing of Miriam's digital-takedown of Ivan Dimitrov was one that impressed and worried Bruce.

Bruce's own hacking abilities were limited, and even more so was his skills in rooting through systems to see what had been accessed. He usually relied on Lucius for that, but even he couldn't figure out the entire scope of what the Joker might have done. Lucius mentioned in the previous weeks that he was relying on Miriam more and more for Wayne Enterprises' military contracts left over from the year previously. Bruce had asked Lucius to keep her projects simple, something to keep her busy but enough so she could learn. He had a feeling her skills grew beyond even what he had an inkling of then. The connections between hospital, public records, and insurance databases with the servers of a popular app was an enigma he couldn't connect the Joker with at all. Miriam might have been able to, had she been in the right state of mind to do anything other than silently implode.

Bruce reasoned that this must have been another facet of the Joker's targeting Miriam that he'd missed before. If Ivan had told anyone what had been done, and who was responsible, it added into the list of reasons that made Miriam, and Parker, understandable targets. But it still didn't explain the Joker's fixation on her, or his willingness to go through the efforts to torment her on this level. The Joker's brutal torture of Parker, and the bloody aftermath, was an act that seemed personal. The burn patterns in his skin, deep cuts made with a knife, the beatings, the repeated abuses of his adrenal system and heart with the reviving stabs of adrenaline—it was more prolonged and savage than anything the Joker did before, and Bruce didn't know why. As far as he could tell, the Joker had no previous contact with Parker before the night his apartment was set on fire.

Bruce shook his head, trying to clear it with the motion. It wouldn't matter in a few hours. He'd
make sure the Joker wouldn't be able to hurt anyone ever again. He'd get the answers that eluded him and the Joker would rot in prison, and Batman would be the one to throw him in there.

"I don't know, but it won't matter soon. He's going to make himself vulnerable, and the Batman will be there when he does." Bruce drank straight from the bottle of orange juice in his hand, finishing it in a few gulps. "All of this ends tonight, Alfred," he said after taking a moment to swallow.

Alfred still didn't look convinced. He turned his head to the side, deep in thought.

"I hope, sir, for all our sakes, you are right," Alfred said, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He'd read Rachel's goodbye letter and was deciding when the best time would be to show it to Bruce. His returned confidence and certainty gave Alfred some comfort, but the damage to his family had been done. Broken pain would be what defined all of them for the foreseeable future and Alfred didn't want to add to that suffering. "Detective Stephens has requested that I bring Miriam down to the station this afternoon. He's quite concerned about what she'd informed him of previously."

"Why today? Don't they have enough going on?" The idea of that didn't sit well with Bruce. He wanted to be there for that, but he couldn't be in two places at once.

"On the contrary, I believe they're trying to gain a full understanding of what they're up against before matters descend further," Alfred said, straightening his jacket. "We're leaving in an hour."

Alfred walked away from Bruce, his eyes heavy. Looking after Miriam was an upsetting task, and Alfred didn't like leaving her for any great length of time. Seeing the devastation on her face was enough to crush him. He knew nothing he did would make any of it better.

Bruce sighed and re-oriented himself, finding a space in his mind to meditate. He had a clear goal in mind, an achievable one. The Joker wanted a showdown with the Batman, to challenge him and to continue his progress uncontested. Batman would meet that challenge, and make the Joker wish he had never instigated it in the first place.

Peter Blume was nervous. Nervous and afraid.

He was assigned the front cab in the armoured truck that would be at the back of the convoy, on what should have been a simple task but was destined to end badly. He was sweating, and his tactical gear and the Benelli, gripped tight in his hands, weighed heavily against him. He wanted to drive, but Gordon's replacement—Sergeant Benning—overruled him on that one. Peter was stuck riding shotgun with an actual shotgun. In any other situation, he would have cracked a dumb joke and had a good laugh. But not that night. Too much shit was stacking up to go sideways.

"The route will be cleared along the way. This convoy stops for no reason—" Peter heard Benning's instructions clearly, and he was hoping to make this a fast trip to the prison.

"I hope you've got some moves, pal," Peter said to the driver as he climbed in the armoured truck.

His companion said nothing, only turning his head towards Peter and giving the smallest of nods. Peter tried not to scoff at his bad luck. Of all nights, he was sitting next to some guy in head-to-toe gear. It was some idiot he didn't recognize, a temporary transfer from the Special Operations Bureau. Peter couldn't even see the guy's face. He didn't like that either. And from his lack of a response, Peter thought the guy was a stuck-up jackass to boot.

Peter's nervousness usually translated to unhelpful comments to uphold his shaky grasp on indifferent masculinity. He couldn't help it. Peter needed to create a distraction to focus on to take
away the uncertainty building up to intense dread. It was better than showing he was afraid. You
couldn't do that, not as a cop in Gotham City. Show any fear, to anyone, and you're giving some
bastard an excuse to lord it over you. He gripped the stock of his shotgun harder when the truck
pulled forward, leaving the shelter of the MCU.

Peter had been with the unit since Gordon took the helm of the operation to beat back the Mob the
year before. Peter had been eager for it; he wanted to be part of the movement that changed
Gotham for the better. But now Gordon was dead, and their ship was rudderless and heading for
sharp rocks that would sink them. Peter thought Batman would show up after it happened, that he'd
be there to explain why he wasn't at the memorial and was blowing up boats instead. Why he
wasn't there when they needed him most. Peter had felt a reinvigorated sense of hope when Batman
came to Gotham the year before. Batman was a catalyst for change, but Peter's faith was tested.
Now he was unsure if the Batman had been what Gotham needed at all.

It was just shortly after five o'clock, and the stretch of road ahead of them was clear of obstructing
traffic. Peter took comfort in the notion that at least they'd see any attacks coming. They had a
SWAT vehicle ahead of them, two other cruisers, and a goddamn helicopter for Christ's sake. They
had enough bullets between them to deal with whatever the Joker would throw their way. That's
what Peter liked to keep reminding himself.

They were crossing Mercy Bridge and the sun started to dip below the horizon, painting the small
gaps between the skyscrapers blue and pink. Peter almost forgot what he was doing long enough to
enjoy it. His mind snapped back to the cab of the vehicle quickly, taking in deep breaths of the
familiar lingering scent of greasy fast food, sweat, and nervous energy.

They moved from the open view of the bridge to the towering shadows of downtown. A bright
beam, sweeping out from the helicopter above, illuminated small patches of the side roads as they
marched ever forward. The warm shades of pink were gone, leaving a deep filtered blue that
transformed the tall blocks of gray around them. Peter felt a drop of sweat drip down his temple
when he saw the glowing ball of orange directly ahead. He forced himself to enter the mindset they
had trained him to develop in the academy and he'd honed after ten years on the job.

"Ah, hell," Peter said. The flames were too bright in the dark to see what was burning, but he knew
it wasn't looking good already.

The radio crackled to life. Officer Steinem, a patrolman from a precinct in Midtown who'd
volunteered to lead the escort, yelled into the mouthpiece.

"Obstruction ahead—obstruction ahead! Damnit—all units divert down onto Lower Fifth. I repeat,
extit down!"

"Lower Fifth? We'll be like turkeys on Thanksgiving down there," Peter remarked. The less noise
his companion made, the more Peter was itching to fill the tense silence with sound.

Peter could see now what was burning as they moved closer. It was a firetruck, and the entire
length of it was blazing orange, blocking the path ahead, and spewing black smoke. The irony of
the scene in front of Peter wasn't lost on him. He wiped at his brows and the sweat beading there as
it passed the passenger window. It was eerie—a shock to his system. This was the type of thing
you saw on the news in the Ukraine or Afghanistan—not right in the middle of Gotham, even with
how bad things had become.

His stomach dropped with the vehicle as they descended onto the Lower Fifth roadway. Peter had
the irrational, and unwelcome, thought that this might be his last look at the setting sun. He really
couldn't keep himself quiet now.
"Shit, man. Can't we go any faster?" Peter asked, hoping to elicit some response from the man next to him. He still said nothing, and Peter's unease grew. He kept gripping his shotgun, but it almost seemed comical that he had one now. There were no targets to aim at, just uncertainty and anticipation ratcheting up to a fever pitch.

Scraping metal, sirens, and the rev of a large engine made Peter twist in his seat. Because of the inflexibility of his full suit of tactical gear, and the long back of the vehicle, he could see nothing behind him. The resulting crash of something ramming one of the cruisers into the concrete divider in the middle of the road wasn't something Peter needed to see to hear. Sounds of metal hitting metal, brakes being pumped, tires burning against the pavement, and the resounding familiarity of cars crashing into one another pierced through the vehicle. Peter jumped in his seat and took the dispatch radio from his left shoulder in his hand. The driver gripped the steering wheel harder, but he couldn't move any faster—they were trapped by the SWAT vehicle ahead of them. Peter knew the cops in those cruisers: Constable David Mulligan and Officer Martin Pedd. They were good cops, ones Peter had known for years.

_It'll be a goddamn miracle if they aren't dead_, Peter thought. His body began to shake. His mother had raised him to be a good Catholic, but he hadn't been an avid practitioner since he left home. He made a point of crossing himself now as he looked in the side mirror. He saw the high headlights of what looked like a garbage truck behind them, moving in closer.

"Sweet fucking Christmas—"

His body flew forward when the garbage truck rammed into the back of the vehicle.

"Jesus! Come on, get us out of here, let's go!" Peter was yelling now, he couldn't help it. He was trying not to panic. They managed to get a little further ahead, but the garbage truck followed close behind. Peter pushed down the transmission button and spoke quickly.

"Listen, we need back up—we've got company!" Peter yelled into the radio. He tried to calm himself down, to keep his mind focused on thinking clearly. SWAT could handle this idiot no problem—they'd been trained for this shit. It would be harder for the truck to batter them off the road than the cruisers.

_What good's all that government funding if SWAT can't handle a goddamn garbage truck?_ Peter thought. The notion was a comforting one.

"We've got trouble guys," SWAT team leader Leonard Smith said to the nine men in the back of the vehicle. He could hear them cocking their weapons and getting ready for the fight. If this is all the Joker had to throw at them, then they'd be able to get a handle on the situation quickly. "Let's lock and load!"

Leonard's enthusiasm was cut short.

Peter flinched and covered his face with his arms as an eighteen-wheeler semi blindsided them, coming up on their flank and battering into the side of the SWAT vehicle like a landslide. Peter, through all the noise and terror that they were about to be crushed to death, was horrified to see the SWAT vehicle be blown clear off the road into the Gotham River.

"Fuck! Jesus—Fuck, fuck! Drive man!" Peter was still shouting. He wanted to crawl across the cab and push the guy's leg down harder on the gas. They needed to move—quickly. Peter could see their deaths playing out in front of his eyes. "What the hell was that?!"

The semi righted itself and took a position in the opposite lane of traffic, crashing into cars and
plowing others right off the road. More crunching metal and the roar of the heavy engines was
deafening in the cab of the truck. Somehow, the cruiser in front of the convoy remained untouched,
but they were a useless chaperone in a conflict they couldn’t mitigate. Peter watched them with rapt
and helpless attention. A Benelli couldn’t do shit against a semi, but as long as they stayed in the
other lane, Peter knew that the jack-ass next to him would get them topside. He had to.

But Peter couldn’t see the look of malicious amusement on Slater's face. If he had, he may not have
felt so certain.

Peter leaned forward, trying to keep his sights on the semi and attempted to predict what they
would do. The garbage truck was still on their tail, smacking into the rear bumper, ensuring they
couldn’t slam on the brakes without risking the deaths of those in the back. His sense of terror grew
when he looked at the side of the semi. It was an HYAMS eighteen-wheeler—and there was a
picture of a carnival with the pop-house tent of a circus and wooden rollercoaster. Peter recognized
it from his days as a kid—it was from Amusement Mile. Instead of the slogan he remembered, it
had been altered—an extra letter added.

'SLAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE.'

Peter slid back towards the door when the side of the semi opened, revealing the Joker leaning
from a handrail nonchalantly, his long purple coat billowing in the breeze and a Glock 17 with a
modified bump stock is in his hand. Peter's jaw went slack; he ducked for cover when he saw the
Joker take aim at the truck and fire.

"Oh god, oh god—"

The rapid hail of bullets biting into the metal was something straight out of a war zone—this didn’t
happen here. Not in America. The driver ducked down, keeping his head almost level with the
dashboard. Peter didn't even know how the bastard could see through the tinted goggles. He nearly
pissed himself. He couldn't decide what was worse—getting shot and bleeding out or having the
man next to him ram into some obstacle ahead and being crushed between two slabs of metal.

Even as the hail of bullets came down, none of them hit the front cab or the cruiser ahead of them.
They were all being aimed at the fortified side of the truck, where Harvey Dent and two SWAT
officers were sitting inside. They'd have no way to fire back if the Joker pierced the side of it. Peter
tried to take comfort in that as well, if they weren’t going to shoot them, then they’d be waiting a
while before they'd break through the thick layers of metal.

The bullets stopped abruptly. The driver peeked back up and straightened, pushing on the gas until
they were going over seventy miles an hour. It still wasn't fast enough. The semi kept pace with
them, unrelenting in its pursuit. Peter saw the Joker discard the Glock and was handed, from what
he could tell, a shotgun. He couldn't help himself when he ducked again as the buckshot hit the
side of the truck. He flinched inwards when the other three shots hit home in loud metal clangs, but
even those stop quickly. Peter looked back again, and the Joker's hands were empty, but he was
motioning for something and dropped down on a knee. He was bracing himself, grounding his
frame to the floor of the semi as they barrelled ahead.

"Please tell me he's giving up, please for the love of Christ—"

Peter cut himself off when he saw something big being passed to the Joker. Something Peter had
never seen outside of the news and Die Hard movies.

"What is that?" Peter was unbelieving. How the hell could anyone get one of those in Gotham?
Peter didn't think it was possible—of all the arms deals they’d broken up, they’d never recovered
one of those before. The Joker braced the weapon on his shoulder, balancing its weight and looking in the sights. To Peter, it looked like he'd handled them before.

"What, is that a bazooka?!

No, it's wasn't a bazooka. It was a Norinco 69 RPG. The projectile sprung forward in a flash of sparks and fire.

"SHIT—" Peter was surprised that the noise wasn't coming from him that time, it came from the driver.

The back end of the cruiser in front of them caught fire. The projectile hit the back carriage, enough to damage it but not enough to stop it completely. Peter flung forward again when the garbage truck behind them assaulted the back again, pressing the armoured truck closer to the dying squad car. Peter sat in dumb panic as he imagined the driver burning alive as the flames jumped through the back seat.

"I didn't sign up for this!" Peter yelled. He wanted to be anywhere but there. He wanted to be with his wife and his young daughter. No, he wasn't going to see them again. He was going to be like the doomed officer in front of him.

Peter didn't see the Joker reload the RPG, how he took careful aim and fired the next projectile right at the driver's side of the cruiser. The front of the car was engulfed in flames, and the force of the blast flipped the car over on its back. Peter felt like he was going to be sick when the driver slammed into its burnt-out husk, forced forward as death encroached around them.

He's dead—Steinem's definitely dead. Fuck, fuck! Peter thought, adjusting his helmet and choking as words failed him. They were about to be consumed in fire.

The Tumbler roared as Batman sped down the crowded street, weaving in and out between the lines of cars that obstructed his path to retribution. He didn't have a large window of time—he needed to wait for the Joker to attack the convoy and make his appearance, but that window was closing. Quickly.

The sky had darkened topside, and the yellow hues of the streetlights lining the Lower Fifth gave the space a surreal glow to Batman's surroundings. He had followed the convoy from afar when they took the exit down to what could only be a death trap. He didn't really know what to expect from the Joker, but it definitely wasn't setting a firetruck ablaze. The maneuverability of the Tumbler and the added boost of the after-burner gave Batman a considerable advantage, and he needed every one he could get that night.

Batman sped faster when he heard the voice of an officer when it crackled through the Tumbler's radio.

"We need back up!" The voice was distressed. Batman needed to hurry, get there before things got out of hand.

Cars thinned ahead. Some noticed the trucks barrelling behind them and moved off to the side as best they could, while others stuck to one lane and hoped to avoid getting crushed in the onslaught of raging metal. The path was mostly cleared. He was coming up head-on with the sole remaining armoured truck; where the SWAT vehicle went, Batman had no way of knowing definitively. He could see the hulk of a garbage truck behind them, pressing them onward like a cattle driver, and the speeding semi in the wrong lane of traffic. The cars on the other side weren't as quick to get off
the roads. Batman felt his fury ignite.

The driver's seat of the Tumbler dropped Batman closer to the vehicle floor as he accelerated the throttle. The roar of the engine added to those of the three large vehicles in front of him, creating war cries of angry machines rather than of men. He braced for an incoming hit that would jar his bones. He closed the distance between them and needed the driver of the truck to dodge at just the right moment.

What good was having an armoured tank if it couldn't be used as a battering ram?

Peter was distracted by the RPG in the Joker's capable hands when he noticed the roaring around him amplify, creating a cacophony that was impossible to ignore. Tearing his eyes from the semi, he saw a new possibility coming at them like a freight train.

"Oh shit, shit, shit!"

"Look out—look out!" Peter yelled, throwing his arms against the dashboard the side of the door as he braced for impact.

The driver swerved away from the Batman's tank at the last second, dodging right and continuing ahead. Peter's hands flew to his ears when the smashing of metal and the grinding steel screeched through the air.

"Oh fuck. Batman's dead and we're next. I'm going to die in this fucking truck—"

Peter didn't see the Tumbler crash into the front of the garbage truck, crushing the front end of the cab against the top of the underpass in a flash of flying metal—and irreparably damaging the engine block. Batman slammed on the brakes and watched the garbage truck bounce off the hood of the Tumbler before pulling it into a quick U-turn, revving his engine and making the tires spin as the vehicle went from zero to over sixty-five miles an hour in seconds. He needed to catch the semi and take it down.

The Joker heard the Tumbler racing towards them and watched with amused interest as it slammed into the garbage truck with impressive stopping power. He was certain Marky-Mark's head was probably caved in, but that added to his own sense of entertainment.

"Hmmm," was the only sound he made. Couldn't let the grunts know he was impressed, but Batman would have to do better than that to get this party to end.

The armoured truck wove through the cars ahead, dodging around them or going down the centre of the lane and side-swiping the civilian vehicles. They tried their best to flee, but they weren't willing to ram the cars off the road to do it. Slater had no such hesitations. He charged ahead, closing the distance between them.

Batman engaged the Tumbler's battle-mode, dropping the driver's seat down completely as he went forward into the front of the vehicle and primed the ramp-less jump initiator. He was running out of time. Batman could see the Joker and the RPG balanced on his shoulder. He needed to time the jump perfectly or Dent would be dead along with Gotham's hope for a lasting change.

"C'mon! Let's go!" Peter yelled as he saw the semi speed up alongside them again. There were no uncertainties this time—the Joker was aiming for them and he wasn't going to miss.

The Joker pulled back from his outstretched position from the side of the truck, taking the RPG—armed with a fresh projectile—from Noah and getting ready to aim again. Slater's reckless driving,
and the inconsiderate drivers in the lanes, caused the semi to jerk upon impact with the smaller cars. The Joker was knocked down, giving Peter a fleeting beat of hope, but the semi kept up with them at an alarming speed despite the moving roadblocks. Peter saw the Joker right himself and aim again, his sights lining up with the cab of the vehicle.

Peter muttered urgent prayers as the Joker took his time, waiting for a break in the concrete pillars for a clear shot at the engine. He wanted fireworks, and he didn't want to be disappointed.

Batman timed the jump just right—firing the afterburner and leaping over a small sedan just as the RPG fired forward—and took the hit in the back of the Tumbler's undercarriage, setting it on fire and knocking it off the main road as it spun on its side.

The aftershock of the blast nearly made the armoured truck tip over, causing them to fishtail across the road as the driver wrestled for control of the vehicle. He managed to right it just in time, stopping after the truck after it spun sideways. The back end smacked hard against the concrete divider.

Debris and the flash of blinding heat knocked the Joker and his men down in the back of the semi and rendered Slater unconscious, finally stopping their unrelenting progress.

Batman's sensors' blared in alarm as he tumbled through several support columns and wooden construction frameworks, nearly flipping over entirely before stopping a few feet away from a group of construction workers on their supper break. The Tumbler landed right-side-up, but the burning smoke and residual flames were not a good sign. He flipped switches, primed the engine, and tried getting the vehicle to start again. Nothing he did stopped the flashing 'WARNING' on his screens.

Well, good thing Lucius made spares, Batman thought.

Peter was wracked with adrenaline. It made him shake, his gear stick to his sweating body, and his senses heightened and clear. His breaths were coming out in pants and he was desperate to get out of there. The closed space was suffocating. He wanted to hold his wife and never let her go.

"Can you drive?" Peter asked his companion without looking at him. The driver nodded his head and started the engine again. They drove off, picking up speed slowly. Peter thanked God their engine was undamaged.

The Joker watched from several dozen feet back as the truck sped off. Tossing the empty RPG to the ground, he hopped out from the back of the semi and made his way up to the front. He had rabbits to catch, and he wasn't about to let his dinner slip through his fingers.

"Harvey, Harvey, Harvey Dent," the Joker said as he entered the cab of the vehicle. Slater was out cold. He mused that this is what happens when you hired old people. The Joker pushed against Slater and shoved him towards the door. "Oh, excuse me—I wanna drive."

He popped open the door, unceremoniously pushed Slater to the ground, and started the engine. Lee hopped into the passenger seat. He was excited to get a front-row seat for the show, buzzing with a different kind of rush. The Joker pulled forward and the wheels of the semi drove over Slater's prone body—rupturing his internal organs and killing him almost instantly. The Joker didn't need him now; he had served his purpose. He hummed a lively tune as the chase started again, the manic grin stretching his face as his gaze narrowed at the retreating target ahead.

The Joker drove erratically. He had more pep than Slater did, popping the clutch and shifting
quickly, revving up the RPMs and speeding down the road like he was on an expressway. There was no need to dodge oncoming cars.

"Da da da dum, da dum—" the Joker hummed as he plowed into the side of a soccer mom's minivan and swept the semi from one lane to the other, crashing through the divider. He righted the semi, pulling in directly behind the armoured truck. It was comical how much smaller they were in comparison. The Joker was going to crush them like the pissants they were.

It was impossible for Peter and the driver not to notice the semi's approach and its renewed energy as it looked to run them off the road. The jittered energy and panic returned to Peter. They were out of options—Batman was quite literally blown out of the sky and that semi could crush them against the underpass walls in a heartbeat.

"We gotta get topside—we need air support, now!" Peter yelled.

The first exit from the Lower Fifth was ahead. The driver took it, shooting out in a hard jerk to the right. He hoped to throw off the semi, to make them think they'd keep heading straight. It might have worked if the Joker cared about making nice turns and smooth transitions.

The Joker followed their movements, twisting the wheel and almost jack-knifing the trailer of the semi. A loud slapping sound of sheet metal hitting a concrete pillar shook all the passengers and vibrated their bones. It invigorated the Joker, driving him forward and upping his excitement to a point of elation. He'd planned for this outcome in case the truck made it this far. He had the contingencies laid out ahead and he was eager to see them done.

"I like this job, I like it!" The Joker sounded like a mad dog. He shook his jowls and his mouth almost frothed with excitement.

The truck headed down smaller side streets, trying to maintain a distance. Joker smiled. They were heading right for the Financial District. A smarmy grin was on his face as he pulled at the semi's dispatch radio and started directing orders to the men on the other end.

"Scanning all systems; scanning all systems." The ignition wouldn't catch. 'DAMAGE CATASTROPHIC' was the message that flared after the diagnostics scan. That was it, the Tumbler was dead. Batman let out a sigh and pressed several buttons and thrust a lever forward.

The men outside the Tumbler lowered their meals slowly. They'd seen the tank on the evening news several times in the last year and were unsure if they were finally witnessing Batman stumble or were the unfortunate souls to discover his body inside. No one was ready to move forward to take a closer look.

"Ejecting sequence initiated," the computer program reported. The Tumbler's front tire realigned and spun. The men jumped back at the sudden movement. Components on the Tumbler shifted, readjusting for some newfound purpose. Small canons popped out on either side of the driver's side tire. Batman pulled several levers above his head, finalizing the last phase of the Tumbler's transformation. "Goodbye," and with those words, the Batpod was birthed out of the dying Tumbler and bid its farewell in a send-off of flame.

The Batpod raced past the line of construction workers, leaving them dumbfounded as to whether what they'd just witnessed was a collective hallucination. The heat of the fiery wreckage of the self-destructing Tumbler told them they weren't. They were unsure if they were experiencing a lasting piece of Gotham history or not, but many of them couldn't help but be impressed, even with how unpopular Batman had become in recent weeks.
Batman was happy with Lucius' ingenuity. What he'd ask for, Lucius delivered. The Tumbler landed in a large parking area and he had time and miles to recover if he wanted to catch the Joker. He accelerated, leaning into the subtle turns and twists of the bike as he rounded corners and navigated through the dozens of parked cars. He'd transitioned from a parking area to long lines of cars waiting to get through the blocked roads ahead. Most seemed oblivious to the wreckage that transpired in that small stretch of road behind them. The gap was smaller than he first estimated—the handlebars of the bike knocking off the side mirrors of the cars he passed in rapid succession. Batman almost felt bad about it.

*Paying for property damage will have to be Bruce Wayne's next charity fundraiser,* he thought wryly.

Batman only needed to listen to the police dispatch being picked up by his cowl to find out what direction the trucks were going. He knew a quicker route. Speeding off the main road, he drove through the glass doors of a ground-floor mall that was attached to one of the Skytrain platforms. He slowed his speed and dodged around several lethargic pedestrians, commandeering the walkway with a near reckless abandon. Batman burst out the other end in a shower of glass and burned rubber before he wove through the evening traffic. He dodged cars by a hair, picking up speed and letting his instincts and muscle memory take over. He drove through intersections, totally disregarding the traffic lights and oncoming vehicles.

He was close, but he hoped—no, willed—that he wasn't too late.

Peter's sense of confidence came back by degrees. The driver had been able to maintain a solid lead, taking turns meant to throw off the semi and bring them closer to back-up. A glaring spotlight from above signalled the arrival of the police helicopter. Relief flooded through Peter.

"*We're on point and ready to give them some of their own medicine,*" Sergeant Nathaniel Brown said over the radio. They dipped down, dropping between the skyscrapers and taking the semi in their sights. He aimed his turret gun and prepared to fire on the eighteen-wheeler.

"That's what I'm talking about! Air cav," Peter said, pointing to the chopper like the driver was incapable of noticing it. He felt relieved and he let an edge of cockiness come back in his voice. The Joker was going to pay and get his own shower of lead rained down on him.

Once again, he would have felt differently if he could see the lopsided grin of the Joker.

*They make this too damn easy,* the Joker thought.

He spoke into his radio quickly to Thresh and Davie up on the roof of one of the above buildings.

"O-K! Aim *real* careful, kids. Ya only get one *crack* at the big prize this time," he said. His voice was quick and filled both with the expectation of joy and the promise of a painful death if they did miss.

Thresh steadied himself on his knees and took careful aim. He was sweating and it was making the clown mask stick to his face and block his vision. He ripped it off his head and aimed again. The helicopter was almost level with the rooftop. The Joker was right, they'd only get one shot at it. Once it dropped low enough, just as it was about to go in for the kill, Thresh fired the RPG straight at the tail-end. It struck his target even as the kickback of the shot knocked him against the dirty asphalt of the roof.

Davie watched in fascinated glee as the hit made the helicopter spin out of control, creating a
dizzying spiral that made it smack into the side of the buildings opposite him and crash down to the earth like a swatted fly. The battered husk of the helicopter smacked into the front of the armoured truck in a ball of fire.

"Oh, no, no, no—" Peter started.

What's with these people?! This is insane—fucking bananas—fuck!

Peter's thoughts were a chaotic jumble of crushed bravado and fear. He was trapped in some living nightmare. This wasn't anything like the movies he'd seen; this was something straight out of his father's stories about Vietnam. He cringed and covered his face with his arm as the driver kept going, never slowing down and pushing through the ruined fuselage and the four burning bodies of the men inside the downed helicopter.

The takedown of the chopper was more than the Joker could have hoped for. His boys didn't let him down. He laughed hysterically and slapped his hand against the steering wheel. It wouldn't be long. The truck was all alone now. No Batman was there to save Dent from the Joker's wrath. He felt playful; maybe he wouldn't gut Dent right away. He was still deciding.

A flash of fire and dirt burst out from an alleyway ahead. Rolling lights and a motorcycle travelling sideways came to a stop just as the armoured truck passed. The Joker's joy only grew. His smile disappeared and he became a physical manifestation of unparalleled focus.

"Now there's a Batman," he said. The Joker felt vindicated. He'd been right all along and it was time to watch the puppets jerk around for a little while. The Joker dropped his chin down towards his chest and glared as the Batman sped towards him. "Ooh, c'mon—you wanna play, huh?"

He stepped on the gas. There's nothing he liked better than a game of chicken—to see whose will was stronger than the other.

"C'mon, c'mon," he said, egging the Batman on even if he couldn't hear him. He didn't want Batman to disappoint him. He wanted to see how far he went before his resolve caved.

Batman's grappling hooks were initialized with a press of a button by the throttle. He fired the mini-cannons and sunk them into the front chassis of the semi. He took a sharp and sudden right just before he would have been obliterated by the oncoming truck. Ducking below the undercarriage, he confused the Joker as he looked around for his missing target. The Joker didn't expect that.

Batman wrapped the cables around the frame as he passed straight through to the other side of the massive truck. He wove the trailing cable around three lamp posts before firing the grappling guns again, making them dig heavily in the pavement.

The Joker couldn't believe it; the joke just kept on getting sweeter.

"He missed!" the Joker cried.

As the semi kept driving forward it sealed its own doom. Two light poles snapped under the forward propulsion of the truck, but the third one held true. The Joker was going too fast, and the momentum and the taut force of the cable made it stop dead—holding the heavy engine in place as the back end kept going forward until it tipped over, ass over head. The semi flipped completely on its back, creating a deafening echo as the empty metal slammed into the asphalt.

Batman put the brakes out on the bike, sticking his leg out to guide the bike in a quick turn-around. He took a moment to breathe before speeding back towards the Joker.
The armoured car stopped at the unexpected take-down of the semi, the brakes squealing in protest at the sudden and heavy application of the brakes.

"You can't stop here—we're like sitting ducks!" Peter shouted. The driver ignored him and took the Benelli out of his hands and exited the cab.

The Joker rolled out of the cab of the semi, groaning in pain, but he never let a slight concussion get him down. He stood up, leaning on his Smith & Wesson M76—taken from his unconscious companion beside him. He was disoriented, and as he started to stumble he pulled the trigger as he fell over, making the gunfire a rapid burst of bullets into the ground. He rolled back on his feet quickly. The Joker stood up underneath the cable that had so gloriously upended his semi. He hadn't expected that and he liked it. He snapped the cable off his shoulder and shrugged off the disoriented feeling and pain like it was nothing.

He was excited. Here came the showdown for the ages with the Batman. He was speeding towards the Joker, and he wanted to give Batman more of a reason to run him down. He shot at the oncoming cars, killing the drivers and causing them to crash into others and the sidewalk. He could see the bursts of blood as the bullets found a home in the assorted chests.

"C'mon, c'mon," the Joker muttered, quiet at first.

Another car appeared alongside him foolishly. He raised the gun again and fired—barely missing Batman but hitting another man in an old cruiser. That was five that the Joker murdered in the last two minutes alone. He'd do it. Batman had to.

"C'mon, c'mon. I want ya to do it, I want ya to do it. C'mon!" The Joker's voice rose to a yell as he kept firing, spraying bullets on anyone he could—anyone but the Batman. He marched forward, looking to meet Batman in battle.

"C'mon," he said again. It was a dare. A summoning. An invitation for ruin and mutually-assured destruction. "C'mon—I want ya to do it. I want ya to do it. C'mon!" He grew frustrated. Batman was closing in, but it wasn't enough. There wasn't that same fury from the arcade. That same bloodlust that awoke a life in the Joker he hadn't felt in years.

"C'mon. Hit me. Come on, hit me!" He stood in the middle of the road, his body blocking the path ahead. Batman only had one choice. One way to end the madness. The Joker felt the ecstasy that came with heightened danger, the expectation of pain followed by a sweet release. He stared right in Batman's eyes and yelled again. "Hit me!"

The Batman returned with his own yell and the Joker felt hope for a moment—an itching sense of victory—until Batman dodged at the last minute, breezing by the Joker with less than a foot to spare. The Joker watched as Batman crashed into the front of the downed semi and flopped onto the ground. His feet stayed planted, and he couldn't help but feel a crushing sense of disappointment. He expected more. He wanted more. Where was that same man from the arcade?

The Joker smacked his lips together. He was mad. This put a damper on the whole night. It was a build-up that led to nothing. Didn't Batman appreciate all the effort he went to for him? He ran his tongue over his lips and reached down into his coat and pulled out a switchblade. He opened it with a metallic click.

Smacking his lips together again, he skipped over to where the Batman lay. His genial humming and child-like hopping should have connoted he was happy, but his expression betrayed his body's motions. Sweat dripped down his face and from his hair. Makeup ran into his eyes and it annoyed him. He'd make up for his disappointment somehow, and maybe giving good ol' Batman a
matching smile would do the trick. Some of his goons crawled out from the truck and stood guard over Batman's unconscious form.

Noah reached down and touched Batman's mask and was promptly electrocuted, his body seizing up and joining Batman's on the dirty pavement. It was like Batman was punishing Noah for an act that wasn't done by the Joker. With a surge of unexpected energy, the Joker jumped over Batman's body and mocked the downed man, kicking him with his feet and shaking his head and cheeks in a mockery of his pain. The Joker would have done worse if his stomach wasn't already packed with C4. He spat at Noah for his insolence before straddling Batman.

"C'mon, c'mon…" The Joker had his hands on Batman's neck and was getting ready to really give him something to smile about when he felt the cold metal of a gun barrel bury itself in his neck. He froze, knife in hand, at the sound of the shotgun cocking. "Gaahh! Could you please just give me a minute—"

The Joker didn't get to finish; he was pushed off Batman and thrown to the ground on his back. He was vaguely surprised to be looking at the mustachioed face of Lieutenant James Gordon.

_Didn't I shoot this guy once already?_ the Joker thought.

"We got you, you son of a bitch," Gordon said. The Joker dropped the knife in a comedic show of surrender. His eyebrows arched in surprise as he decided to roll with the revelation. He could do something with that later, he was sure. The night had been filled with some twists and turns, but the end result would be the same. The Joker suppressed his smile outwardly, but inside—he was laughing.

_I always get the last joke._

Jim Gordon walked to the battered truck and threw open the rear door. Batman, after making sure the Joker was in cuffs, righted his motorcycle and sped off before the media and the flood of police officers arrived. Everyone wanted to be there for the take-down of the Joker, and all were shocked at the sight of Jim's face. Harvey Dent looked like he was staring at a ghost.

_Gordon—you do like to play things pretty close to the chest,"_ Harvey said. His shock was quickly replaced with triumph. His faith _had_ been rewarded. The Batman had come through and Gordon was alive. What had felt like crushing failure three days ago now felt like a resounding victory.

"We got him, Harvey," Gordon said with his hand outstretched, both in congratulations and to assist Harvey outside the back of the vehicle that he was almost convinced would be his coffin.

The flood of reporters and cameras trained on Harvey as soon as he was in spitting distance of the press line. He shielded his eyes from the flashing cameras, but his shining charisma was never one to shy away from the limelight.

"Mr. Dent, Mr. Dent—how does it feel to be the biggest hero in Gotham?" someone yelled out at him.

"Oh, no. I'm no hero. Gotham's finest, they're the real heroes," Harvey said. And for the first time in his life, he meant the words.

"But you and your office have been working with the Batman all along," another voice threw out.

"No, but I trusted him to do the right thing."
"Which was?"

"Saving my ass." Harvey got a good laugh at that one. The press loved his cheeky comments, his self-assurance.

"Alright people, that's enough—let him be, let him be," Detective Anna Ramirez called out as she shouldered the more invasive cameras away and led Harvey to his escort vehicle where Detective Weurtz was waiting.

"Thank you, detective. I've got a date with a pretty upset girlfriend," Harvey said before he ducked in the back of the car. He had his big easy grin back, and he was looking forward to his evening—he and Rachel could finally spend the night together and feel safe. They could both breathe easy and know that they had put an end to the wave of terror in Gotham.

"I'm sure you do, counsellor," Ramirez said. She tried smiling, but it faltered quickly. Harvey was too caught up in his own thoughts to notice. She shut the door behind him and tapped on the top of the metal roof of the car. She watched the car pull away and felt riddled with guilt and shame. The only way she was going to sleep that night was if she found the bottom of several glasses of bourbon first.

Batman watched everyone from a distance until he made sure that the Joker arrived at the MCU. An intense amount of relief flooded through him. His muscles relaxed and the grip on his stomach disappeared. He felt lighter, already like this could all be a distant memory soon. He followed the new convoy, this one unimpeded on its route, until it reached its intended destination. Some concern crept back in his mind when he saw Alfred's car still parked in the lot behind the MCU. They should have left by then. Batman remained in his shrouded position, both to wait for them to leave, and to also make sure the Joker remained exactly where he was meant to.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Hey everyone! It's strange coming back with an update after two weeks instead of one. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to keep the longer breaks between updates for now just until I get ahead on some school work, so I'll be back again on February 9.

As always, I extend my incredible gratitude to everyone who's bookmarked, given kudos, and commented on this story. I love reading your comments and it'd be wonderful to keep hearing from you!
As much as I liked the heat, Mom preferred the cold. She said that it was always easier to warm up than cool down. When winter would come, she'd throw on these big sweaters that swallowed her. They made her look thinner, her shoulders broad, and her frame long. Knowing I didn't like the cold, she'd come up with reasons for us to spend time together in the house—staying close to me in case I needed warming up. I don't know how much she spent on heating the house every winter just to keep me from complaining, but she'd laugh at how much I'd shiver and pine for a warmer climate.

In our old house, in one of the older residential districts in Gotham, we had this room on the third floor. It was small, but it had large windows that overlooked the street. All the houses were squished together with barely any room between the brick exterior walls—just enough to be classified as 'detached' but not enough for anything wider than a child or small animal to pass through. The walls inside were exposed brick, this muted and dirty gold, and it wasn't insulated properly. In winter, especially when it snowed, you felt transported back to a different place entirely where time seemed to slow and the world took on a glow in large, white swaths.

Mom liked that room. She put this ugly loveseat that looked like something straight out of Downtown Abbey up there. I remember it had this orange and yellow floral pattern that hurt my eyes to look at for long, but even that was almost too big for the space. Mom didn't care about that much; she would drag in a plush blanket and a space heater and read in there for hours at a time. She would take me up with her, burying me in the blankets and the sea of her sweater. Mom would wrap an arm around me, and we'd lean into one another and watch the snow fall. Most times we didn't say anything, comfortable with just the silence. I'd fall asleep sometimes with her, despite how much I'd be shaking with cold and my butt would fall asleep on the stiff cushions. Other times Mom would play with my hair and she'd just start talking.

"Miriam," she began one night.

It was close to the end of February and it had only gotten colder since January. She felt warmer than usual and I'd fallen into a sort of trance as we watched the cars go by.

"Yeah, Mom?" I answered, not really paying attention and my eyes getting heavy. It was dark in the room, the street lamps and passing headlights filtered through the thick, paned glass in red and yellow streaks.

"People are going to try and change you—make you into who they want you to be," she said.

It was a strange way to start a conversation. I tried raising my head to look at her, but she tightened her grip around my shoulders, keeping me sidled next to her. Mom's voice sounded thick and heavy, like she was trying not to cry.

"Mom—"

"It'll be tempting, Miri. Sometimes it might even be preferable to who you are. But you can't let them, not ever."

Her voice had more forcefulness than usual, each syllable punctuated with meaning that I didn't
fully understand. She paused for a moment and she swallowed. I looked up at her out of the corner of my eye, but Mom was staring straight ahead, not out on the street but somewhere beyond.

I was thirteen then, and I didn't have many friends at school. I had a hard time relating to the other kids—I was brash and prone to indulging my temper. I didn't understand how people couldn't see the world as I did, why they didn't seem to want the same connections. Most people turned out to be a disappointment, I learned early. After a while, I gave up. My aloof hostility and quiet skepticism pushed people away. Most kids avoided me. Others would talk to me at school and that would be the end of it. My family became the people I relied on the most, and I believed they'd never disappoint me, that they would be a constant refuge that wouldn't drop away. I was embarrassed to admit it out loud at the time, but I loved spending time with Mom. I thought of her as my closest friend.

"Once you give an inch, then the slide downward doesn't stop until you don't recognize yourself in the mirror anymore. I did it—I wanted to be a good daughter to my parents, have the life they set up for me. But the cost isn't worth the sacrifice."

My own throat constricted painfully when she started to cry. She leaned her head on mine, her red hair tickling my nose and grip holding me tight. She twisted the wedding band on her finger, a habit I picked up when she gave it to me.

"Never change unless you want to. Never give in just because it's easy. If you screw up—own it. No one can use your mistakes against you if they're yours. Do you understand what I mean when I say that, Miriam?" she asked.

Mom pulled away, twisting in her seat to look me in the face. She swiped at her cheeks and her eyes were glassy with tears. It made her eyes look almost cat-like in the dark. Her lashes, dark and thick, clumped together. Mom could be so intense; her eyes could stare right to the core of you and almost burn you with her thoughts. Usually, she only looked like this when she was upset about something or mad when I'd get in trouble at school. It was the face of her trying to impart something important to me.

"Yeah—yeah, I think so," I said.

Mom reached out her hand and brushed the hair away from my face. She smiled a little, but it was sad and I didn't understand why. I felt much younger then, like I was missing something. Both her hands held on to the sides of my head, making sure I wouldn't look away.

"I may not have planned to have you, but I'll punch the teeth out of any bastard who calls you a mistake. You are my light. You are mine and I am yours. No one can take that away. No one."

If Mom had been in any other mood, I would've bugged her about implying that I was an accident. That fact didn't bother me, but sometimes I liked to pick up on small things and try to probe a reaction out of her. What I didn't realize, what Mom would take another three weeks to tell me, was that she had been diagnosed with glioblastoma. The doctors gave her five months and she managed to hold on for ten. Sometimes I wished she died sooner, so that her suffering didn't have to last so long. But I felt selfish for thinking that way, that I was prioritizing my pain over hers. I used to think she was invincible, that her willpower and sheer stubbornness would keep her from ever falling down. That, together, we could get through just about anything. Mom had her problems, but she never stopped loving me.

"Remember that, Miri. Always remember."
"Miriam—Miri, can you hear me?"

I turn away from the voice and stare back out the window. My eyes are open, but they don't really see anything; they just take in the gentle gradations of the sky and the shadows that come with the passing clouds. I don't want to think about anything, but my mind only wants to dwell on what I've lost.

A face appears in front of mine. I try to blink it away, but that only makes it come into sharper focus.

"Miriam, we have to go now. Detective Stephens is waiting," Alfred says.

I knew this would be happening, but I still passively resist, not wanting to think or move. I want Alfred just to leave me here until the world goes dark and I won't have to register anything again. But I feel resigned above everything else, and resisting Alfred will take more energy than coming along. Something shifts in me, despair replaced by acceptance. Acceptance of what I've done, of what I didn't do, of what my life will be defined by. There's no more denial, but it doesn't erase my pain.

My mind lingers on the memory of Mom's words. Letting out a pent-up breath and giving a small nod, Alfred smiles at me briefly and holds out a hand. I lean against Alfred's arm, feeling too light to walk in a straight line. He's been trying to get me to eat, but I couldn't force anything down. Acceptance doesn't take away the physical pain, how it twists inside.

The journey from Bruce's room to the elevator is one I don't remember. I'm still stuck somewhere far away. It's hard fighting back to a more present state of mind, a task I'm not ready to meet. I'm wearing a coat I don't recall putting on and staring at the ordered list of numbers that look foreign even though I know they're not. Alfred acts as my guide, nudging me where I need to go and keeping a tight hold on my arm.

It happens again. I'm in a car but I don't remember the door opening or the act of entering it. We're moving and it takes longer than necessary to think about where the destination is.

Alfred's talking, but I can't really tell what he's saying; whether his words are for his benefit or mine. Dusk isn't very far away, and my head goes back until I see the pink of the lowering sun beyond the tall towers that surround us like pillars of rigid teeth. I stay that way, even as the nerves in my neck prickle and pull at the strain of the uncomfortable position. It isn't anything worse than what I'm feeling already.

*It doesn't matter, does it?*

There isn't much of anything that does.

Eventually, my eyes stop seeing anything at all and I'm lost for a while. It's a place of welcome reprieve, somewhere deep inside where peace and effaced existence is all that greets me. I like it there, in the blackened space. Nothing here can reach me. I can be safe and, most importantly, I can't hurt anyone else.

At least, I thought nothing could reach me. My body falls hard to the right, and someone shakes my shoulder. It takes a moment for me to realize it's Alfred.

"Miriam, come now, it's alright."

I don't know how long he's been talking or I've been sitting here, and I can't care about that either. Time doesn't mean much anymore; it's a fleeting shadow, like those clouds—only creating passing
moments of interest but ultimately meaning nothing at all.

"We won't be here long, I'm sure," he says.

My eyes hurt—they've gone from registering only the dark to taking in everything around me in a flash of hyperawareness. Alfred's face has wrinkles that weren't there before, small lines of white hair brushed into a uniform swoop, eyes that are red-rimmed and bright, bright blue and puffed skin that makes him look tired. Small blossoms of pink line his cheekbones, but he still smells like sandalwood, and it relaxes a distant part of me.

*When's the last time I told Alfred I loved him? That I told him I appreciate everything he's done? Have I ever told him how sorry I am?*

I know I haven't done any of those things in a long time, but the words don't leave my throat now, even though I wish they would. The air outside is cold, it saps away the heat from my hands that are too numb to feel it fully. The creases in the leather seat garner a sudden interest from me and I look away from Alfred and touch the material with my fingers.

He sighs. "Miriam, I can't carry you in there. You'll have to help this aging man, I'm afraid. I'm not as spry as I used to be, contrary to all outward appearances."

Dragging my eyes away from the seat, he smirks. The words are achingly familiar, born from a different place in time than where we are now. My mind is far enough away that it doesn't hold me back as it did before, and my mouth moves into a small smile. It's enough to make Alfred's grow, just a little bit.

"Come along, then. Help this withering old man up all those stairs, eh?"

I know he's doing this for my benefit—he doesn't really need help, but it gives me something to do. Someone else to focus on. I take his arm but he doesn't lean on me, only patting my hand and staying close.

This time, my mind doesn't obscure the path ahead. I count each step it takes to go from the car to the raised cement; the distance from the sidewalk to the double set of doors made of metal and wood that leads into the foyer. Warm air flushes across our faces, banishing the cold, and I look back at the words 'Major Crimes Unit' as the door swings closed.

A man in a blue uniform sits behind a large wooden desk that spans almost the entirety of the far wall. The desk is flanked by two doors that lead beyond to a series of cubicles of frosted glass and aging wood, and a large staircase is on our right, leading up to somewhere I can't see. Several people sit in the rows of chairs lined up along the wall. Some look nervous, with their knees bouncing and eyes wandering wildly, and others have practiced looks of boredom. The world goes quiet as I look at them, the tears in their clothes and smudges on their shoes—almost forgetting my own existence entirely for a moment—until Alfred tugs me forward to the front desk. The officer gives a smile he doesn't mean in greeting.

"Good evening, sir. I believe Detective Stephens is expecting us," Alfred says.

Staring at the officer with the same detached interest I've been looking at everything else, I examine him, too. His skin is a light shade of brown, black hair peeks out from underneath his officer's cap, and high cheekbones frame his dark eyes. He's a little over-weight, but not by much. From his unlined skin, I wouldn't think he's much older than I am. From the tag on his chest, his name is Rodriguez. My staring's made him uncomfortable, and he shifts in his seat.
"I am Alfred Pennyworth, and this is Mir—"

"I know who she is," Rodriguez interrupts.

He mentally checks himself and chews on the side of his cheek. He didn't mean to sound that way—like I'm a bad omen. His expression says that he wasn't trying to sound rude, but I can see he's nervous and afraid. It's not hard to understand why; the Joker's probably killed several of his friends and colleagues, and I'm one of the few he's encountered and hasn't murdered. That wouldn't sit well with a lot of people. Rodriguez is right, a bad omen is exactly what I've turned out to be. Alfred straightens and his expression changes.

"Wonderful. We're properly acquainted. Would you terribly mind giving Detective Stephens a ring, then?" he asks with forced formality.

Rodriguez's face flushes red. He's flustered and embarrassed, but he nods.

"Let's have a seat then, Miri. The kind officer will let Stephens know we've arrived." Alfred's words are pointed, and I try to smile a little at Rodriguez so he knows I understand, before following Alfred to the hard, plastic chairs to wait.

There's no clock in this room. Or, at least, none that I can see. But that's alright, it wouldn't matter much anyway. Alfred's knee bounces in agitation. He doesn't want to be here either. I lean my head against his shoulder, resting on the padded crook of his neck. Alfred turns in surprise, but he makes no motion to move me. Instead, he leans a little closer and rests his hand on my arm.

We stay that way for a while, and I let my eyes lose focus and blur. Even without keeping track of the time, I know Stephens is late meeting with us. He should've been here by now. I feel, rather than see, Alfred check his watch. A familiar voice causes both of us to look up.

"How long have you two been waiting here?" Rachel asks.

She's dressed differently than when I saw her this morning. She's in a black suit with a fitted blazer, not the fitted pair of jeans and soft pink sweater from before. A small part of me feels distant concern: she doesn't have any jacket to keep out the growing cold.

"Not very long. Though, I'd expected we'd have seen Detective Stephens by now," Alfred says. Making sure I'm not liable to fall over, he stands and turns to speak with Rachel, as if I can't hear what they're saying in the relative quiet of the room. "What's keeping you so late, my dear? I thought Mr. Dent would have been transferred by now."

"Yeah—yeah, he just left almost half an hour ago. I—Detective Ramirez is going to give me a ride back to my apartment," Rachel says.

She sounds tired and stressed; her eyes are red. A small Hispanic woman stands near the door, her eyes shifting around the room and her expression seeming to fix into one of constant worry. Her hands keep sliding in and out of her pockets.

"You're here to see Stephens? Come with me, I was just speaking with him. He's a good cop, but he can be absent-minded," she says, distracting me from the other woman.

The name Ramirez strikes a chord in my memory, but my mind is too deeply buried—I'm too tired to investigate it further, so I let it sink back below the surface, creating a calm that's drowning me. Alfred turns back to help me stand, but I wave him away even as my legs shake, making me regret my starved appetite.
"I'll be back in a minute," Rachel calls over her shoulder. The woman by the door nods and wipes at her forehead. We walk past the front desk and Rodriguez's eyes follow us as we go to the stairs. Rachel walks next to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "How are you feeling? Did you manage to get some rest this afternoon?"

Her concern, coupled with the attentive care she gave me this morning, brings the threat of tears to my eyes. Looking at her, I can see she's being genuine, and I regret again that I never gave her much of a chance before. I wonder what would have changed if I knew I could have relied on her more. Leaning into her, I shake my head and force myself to speak.

"I'm... I'm doing—" I don't know how to finish the sentence, so I don't. "I did sleep. This afternoon, I mean." It's the most I've spoken in hours, and my voice is raspy and quiet. Rachel nods in understanding.

"That's good, really good. Rest makes a lot of things easier to deal with, and you certainly need it," she says. There's a forced playfulness to her voice, and I feel bad about it, but I start to smile again.

"You're starting to sound like Alfred," I say. Alfred shoots a false glare and a knowing smile over his shoulder as we ascend the last set of stairs. Rachel laughs in response, but there's still a hint of strain. She's worried about Harvey, and I'm glad that we can share a sense of guilt and uncertainty about that.

"After all these years, you're finally starting to rub off on me," she says to Alfred.

"You say that as though it's a bad thing," he replies with a snorted chuckle as we get to the top of the landing.

The upstairs is sectioned off with more wood and glass as it was downstairs, with bulletin boards filled with mugshots, listed names, and details I can't make sense of in a quick glance. Men and women, some in uniform and others in plainclothes, work away—rifling through paperwork, staring intently at their computers, or talking with one another. The stress is high enough that it chokes me. Down the hall, a concrete expanse opens to a large open area with bars designating it as the holding cells.

"This way, now," Alfred says, pulling my attention away.

Rachel stands by an open office door, talking with Detective Stephens. My stomach drops and sweat builds along my neck, but I let Alfred lead me along. Stephens looks up as we approach.

"Sorry—it's a bit of a shit—I mean, it's been hectic up here," Stephens says. He looks more stressed than the last time I saw him, and I can almost swear that more white hair has sprouted from his temples. "C'mon in. I appreciate you agreeing to come by."

His office is small, only large enough for his desk and two chairs to fit with little room to move around them. Two frames sit on his desk, but they're all angled away so the glass holding the pictures inside isn't visible. Several awards and certificates line the walls, but it's otherwise bare.

Rachel doesn't move to enter. "I'm heading out." Putting her hand on my back, Rachel's touch is a welcome one, and I try to give her as much of my attention as I can muster. "I'll see you soon, alright? Take care of yourselves," she says with a smile.

I hang my head for a minute. Almost unconsciously, I walk up to Rachel and give her a hug, something I never imagined myself doing. Her hair smells like vanilla, and her bones stick out almost as much as mine do now.
I guess the same strains have been pulling at both of us, I was just too blind to look past my own.

"Thank you," I say. It's quiet, just for her to hear. One tear escapes, but I brush it away quickly after holding her tight for a moment. It's a motion she returns. If I start crying in earnest now, I won't be able to stop. Suddenly, I feel embarrassed, and heat colours my cheeks. But I look up to see her smile grow, and she wraps me in a hug of her own, talking low in my ear.

"Things are hard now, but they do get better. Try to remember what I told you before—it's OK to be scared, Miri. It's what you do with that fear that matters." She lets go, smoothing my braid back over my shoulder, smiling and waving to Alfred and Stephens before leaving.

My heart hurts suddenly, and it pierces through the cloud surrounding me, bringing back a dose of reality. I'm staring after her, struggling with the selfish impulse to have another stabilizing force even when she has her own problems. Forcing myself to look away, I take one of the chairs Stephens offers me, and when Alfred takes the adjacent seat we're swallowed by an uncomfortable silence. Keeping my eyes down at my bandaged hands, I brace for the accusations to come my way. The words that will point to my glaringly apparent stupidity. I'm ready to accept responsibility for all of it.

Someone sighs. "I'm sorry about Parker, Miss Kane," Stephens says.

Those weren't the words I was expecting to hear. I can't look up, not without crying. Nodding, I want to move on from the topic—even as distant as my mind is, I can't come crashing back to all of this. Not all at once. I won't survive the process.

"What do you want to know?" I ask.

Stephens rubs a thumb along his eyebrow and leans heavily against the desk. He breathes through his nose in a sharp inhale. "I hate to do this, but I have to dive right in. That alright?" Stephens asks. At least he's being kind enough to give the illusion of asking for permission. I nod. "How did you know to go to the arcade? Has the Joker been in contact with you in the last thirty-six hours?"

I push hair away from my face that isn't there. It's a motion of habit, one I do when I'm nervous, and my fingers twist the ring on my finger and I ache to see Mom's again. "P-Parker told me… told me before—" I have to stop and blink hard, but Stephens waits for me to continue. "He told me they were getting him to look at hospital files. His parents own a medical software company, FutureGen."

Stephens is following along, but I know he has all this already. He doesn't know where it'll lead, but I do.

"I helped Parker write the code and build most of the software. I had root access, so I checked to see when he accessed it last. It hadn't been long, and he embedded an address in the data nests." I'm starting to lose Stephens, but he's still writing, concentrating on my words. I didn't tell anyone I saw my father, but the truth seems like the best option now. I don't know what happened to the gun, and I don't want to be caught in a lie—I don't want to lie ever again, not even to myself. "The address was for—for the arcade. I saw my father first and got a gun—"

"You did what?" Alfred starts.

Stephens quiets him with a look and a raised hand, still writing. I quickly explain who my father is and try to ignore the change in Stephens' expression. He knew my father, knew the sides of him that wouldn't have been made public. I know what that side is already, and my face colours with shame. My arms shake, but I keep going, and my voice stays steady.
"He didn't contact me directly, didn't need to. He knew I'd look for Parker, and he made him put the address in there on purpose. The—the Joker wanted me to show up."

Thinking about the arcade, the Joker's words pulling at things in me my mind wants to keep buried, and that maze of horrors is too much. Parker's face, the dark veins—the pain in his eyes. Zsasz's hands on me. The Joker's face right in front of mine. Memories are flaring up and I don't try to hold them back anymore.

Someone brought water to my lips and I coughed in between swallows. My throat burned, but the cool water soothed it. Someone held my head up, but I couldn't see their face. Everything spun around and I couldn't focus. Something warm was on my shoulder; it felt like a hand.

"What? What's so bad, hmm?" the Joker asked.

"I want... I want to go home," I said. I heard laughter, but it was different. It wasn't malicious, but something else I hadn't heard from him.

"Who do you even have to go home to, Miri?" His voice was different, too. Softer. Didn't have the same edge. "What, you're dying to go home to Rich-Boy? Must be a nice life." Sarcasm crept back in his voice, always ready to mock.

"I—I have Alfred. But... no, no—it's... it's lonely."

I felt him shift down, his arm pressed against mine. He made a small sound for me to continue.

"Bruce... he leaves me alone... all the time. He—he's sad, but he won't... won't tell me why." I said a lot of things, some I didn't mean and others that had been sitting on my heart for years. All of it came back to Bruce abandoning me. Whenever I was close to falling back asleep, the Joker shook me gently awake. "He's cold. I-Irresponsible. He—he can be mean," I finished. I felt so tired, the throbbing in my head was painful. My body didn't ache like it did when I woke up later. Zsasz hadn't attacked me yet.

"That's what dear ol' Brucie's like, eh? Sounds like a real prima donna that one," he said.

Déjà vu hits me back to the present. I don't focus on what Alfred and Stephens are saying—the blaring headache throbbing behind my eyes. I force myself to keep going, even as the horror of the information dawns on me.

"He... he's a jerk. Not a good friend," I said.

The Joker was on his back next to me. I could see overlapping ripples of rusted brown focusing in and out, white pops dotting my vision, like a shimmering series of stars in a galaxy across dying steel. My hand couldn't move much, but my fingers traced out a pattern, one that wasn't really there. The Joker joined me in the gesture, playing into the game made up by a concussed girl—a state of his own making.

"Well, it turns out Parker's not so hot, either. What do ya say we become friends instead? People are always dying for one of those." The meanness was back when he laughed, and my hand dropped down.

It was hard to stay awake. He said something else, but I couldn't make out the words—

I snap back to the room when Alfred shakes my shoulder.

"S-Sorry," I say, wiping at the traces of sweat along my forehead. Alfred looks concerned, likely
on the verge of dragging me home. He's about to speak when I talk over him, "What else do you want to ask me?" I ask, addressing Stephens.

Stephens shifts his eyes from Alfred to me, deciding if he wants to continue. He doesn't think I'm entirely stable, and he isn't wrong.

"I have to be honest, I'm not sure how you fit into all of this, Miss Kane. We still don't even know what he had Parker doing—hell, there isn't much we know at all." Stephens' candour surprises me. "You mentioned *Gotham Mingles*, but I have to agree with Dent—God help his goddamn soul—that I'm not sure what the significance of that is."

I can think of plenty of reasons. Blackmail, extortion, inciting a panic. The Ashley Madison hack ruined thousands of lives and caused a rash of suicides. *Gotham Mingles* has more than people orchestrating affairs. It was open to a larger, darker part of humanity that's expressed openly under the guise of anonymity. I could see why the Joker would think it worthwhile to expose it, but that can't be the only thing he wants. No part of me blames Parker, but I think he told the Joker—or somebody—things he shouldn't have. I didn't want to accept that reality before, so I didn't acknowledge it, but now it's all I can do.

When I don't answer immediately, Alfred begins talking with Stephens in hushed tones. He's talking about bringing me back another day, when my head's more clear. I rub at my forehead and breathe deep.

"I—I think it's because of what I've been doing with Lucius," I say, interrupting them.

Part of my mind guessed at the Joker's reasons for kidnapping me before, and I just didn't want to think about the full implications of it. I was too wrapped up in my own problems, my small world and the pain wracking through it to acknowledge just how badly this was all connected to me. But the more I think about it—the more my conscious mind recedes back and clarity crawls through—the more certain I become. He doesn't just need me to breach an app. The Joker found out what I was doing with Lucius. It's the only reason, the only explanation that makes sense, for why he won't leave me alone. I don't know exactly how he knows, the full extent of it, or what he'll do to get me to access it for him—but that's still something my mind can't handle thinking about.

Stephens gives me a strange look. He nods, turning towards me as I swallow hard.

"It was a conservation and exploratory project before a private military group took it over," I say. I try not to notice Alfred's own look of growing confusion. "It became a classified operation after Titan Industries bought it when the old CEO of Wayne Enterprises put it up for bid. I—I wasn't supposed to have access to it. Lucius was still working on it—trying to sort out the bugs."

"What do you mean? What kind of project?" he asks.

Alfred doesn't say anything. His silence makes all of this worse.

I didn't lie when I vowed never to hurt anyone again like I did with Parker and Ivan, but it didn't stop me from hacking into Wayne Enterprises. From plundering through the immense databases of the R&D Department since I was sixteen. The security measures to keep people like me out was a challenge I couldn't help but foolishly meet. The systems grew more complicated but I got in every time. I didn't think it was wrong—I wasn't doing anything with the information—it was just an indirect way to get back at Bruce. It was the reason why Lucius was so eager to hire me when Bruce offered to give me a position. It's funny now that I didn't see the connections to Batman until
everything had to be destroyed. I was able to do things Lucius couldn't, even being as blind as I was, and he wanted to help me use my talents for good.

*What a twisted, fucking joke.*

"It was called WE-286: PRESERVE before, but they're calling it TL-56: HAVOC now." They don't know what I'm talking about, their expressions connote confusion. It's understandable. Lucius wasn't supposed to give me clearance on a project that size with the instructions Bruce gave him, but I didn't give Lucius much choice. Another thing I can regret. Sighing before continuing, I can't help but feel exhausted. "They're dr—"

A group of raised voices down the hall cuts me off. Rapid shadows pass by the glass of Stephens' office, and I can't help but turn around and look after their fleeing forms. Alfred straightens and his eyes grow sharp.

"What the hell—" Stephens says, coming out from around the edge of his desk. He peeks his head out around the doorway and a young man in a leather jacket and hoody nearly runs into him. He looks elated, but it sparks a pit of dread in my stomach.

"Stephens—they've got him! They got the son of a bitch!" the man says.

"Murphy, calm down and talk sense."

"Gordon and Batman—they got the Joker. They're bringing him in now."

*Gordon? What is he—*

"Lieutenant Gordon?" Alfred asks, incredulous. He looks just as shocked as I feel. Stephens darts an apologetic look our way before moving out further into the hall.

*Batman and Gordon. Their own dynamic duo.*

I wonder if Bruce knew Gordon was still alive. It's not something I can totally be mad at him for, even distantly. It's nothing I asked about directly.

The man, Murphy, is humming. But it's not just elation; it's anger, violence, fear, and excitement. It's not hard to see the visions of retribution in his eyes, and I understand why. They'll finally have justice for their friends, but I don't know if I'll ever find mine. They go down the hall. Alfred and I are alone in Stephens' office now, and I'm on the verge of making a decision when Alfred speaks first.

"You'll stay right here, Miriam," he says with a gentle forcefulness, his face stern. "We're waiting here a moment and then we're going home. He doesn't need to see you're here."

But I have to see. I have to make sure.

"Alfred, I just—I want to—" Words become difficult to form. Reality threatens to swallow me, but I can't let it—not quite yet. "Please, I need to make sure."

Alfred says nothing and drops his head down, his hand smooths over his hair. He nods after a moment and I head back to the main hall where we came from, where I know it leads to the holding cells. Officers line up around the doorway. I'm taller than some of them, so I edge around the shorter officers and find a clear view of the large room.

It isn't long before I see a familiar flash of purple that reignites feelings of hate. Where my grief sits
heavy on my heart, rage finds a home. I move forward, being quiet, and no one seems to notice. Alfred hasn't followed, and I need to look. I need to see if it's true, as if seeing him in a cage will free my mind from the one I'm trapped in.

Standing in the shadow of the doorway, I watch two officers grabbing at the Joker in a forced, clinical manner. He's by a long metal table where they've emptied out the contents of several bags and line up guns and clown masks. The Joker's arms are outstretched and rigid. One gun's trained on him by an officer while two others roughly take off his long purple coat, not trusting the Joker to have full use of his arms. He's wearing the full outfit tonight, and the harsh green hue of the overhead lights makes his suit seem nearly phosphorescent. His hair is greasy with sweat and the makeup's almost completely rubbed off his face. The officers peel off the Joker's last jacket until he's just in his vest and octagon-patterned shirt. He's silent the whole time until they start patting down his legs.

"What? See something you like, officer?" he asks in derision. His face doesn't match the sound, he has a large lopsided grin on his face, and his eyebrows pump up in down in a suggestive manner. The officer stands and shakes with barely contained fury.

"One more fucking word, you piece of shit—"

"Officer Rollins!" a man shouts from the other end of the holding area.

With effort, the man backs up and walks away, his fists spasming. Joker lets out a bark of a laugh and the man next to him can't control the scowl on his face. It seems cruel to have them handle their would-be murderer with such restraint.

Once they make sure he doesn't have any weapons, the officer pushes the Joker by the shoulders, forcing him forward to an open cell door. It's then that I see who's already in the cells. Six men, all in thrift-store styled fatigues, stand at angry attention. Some of them are smaller, others thick-muscled and burly. I recognize three of them from the ship; some of them dragged me from the top deck to that bathroom with Zsasz. As much as their appearance strikes me, my mind doesn't fail to register who isn't present.

Zsasz. Lewis. The blond boy from the mess hall. There are people missing. Where are they? What about Noah—could he even still be alive?

One of my questions is answered early. Noah is the next perp they throw in a cell, the one with Joker, and slam the cage door closed. Noah's slumping against the bars as the Joker takes a seat on the bench, his knees spread wide and hands clasped together. The Joker's staring ahead; he might not see me right away. Seeing Noah brings back all the horror of what I witnessed yesterday morning.

"I—I don't feel good," Noah says.

The officers all look at him with an open expression of disgust. Noah looks like he's hurting, and the police are ignoring what he's saying. I don't think Noah is a genuinely bad person, I think he's very ill, and he doesn't deserve to be in that cell with him. I can't help Parker anymore, but maybe I can help Noah. Fear renews its grip on my lungs, fighting through the barriers of numb dulling my existence.

He can't hurt you from there. He's going to rot in a cell like that for the rest of his miserable life. He can't hurt anyone anymore.

I walk past the doorway. The officers notice too late what I'm doing, and I move with a slow
purpose further in the room. The Joker's eyes immediately find mine, and he looks genuinely surprised.

_Not that it means anything. He's a liar. You have to remember that, Miri._

I steel myself for what he's going to say, but he finds a way to throw me off guard again.

"Oh, well isn't this just a, ah, lovely surprise, Mir-cat," the Joker says.

The new moniker stops me dead. He just keeps bastardizing my name, perverting it. Seeing him, hearing his voice directed at me, snaps me out of my untethered haven of safety. It's like my soul's been slammed back in my body, back into a reality that I so desperately want to escape. The nickname succeeds in making my blood run cold. He seems to know the effects it has because his fiendish grin grows.

"I didn't think you'd come to, ah, visit so soon!" His voice is a higher-pitched nasal tone, and he smooths the stray strands of hair from his face and stares openly at my body.

No officer's made a move to hold me back, given no word of warning. Just like Rodriguez, they think I'm a bad omen, too. A curse. They're all right, but I'm grateful and resentful at their lack of intervention. There isn't much they can do to control the Joker, I know. Letting his words have their full effect is on me; I can't let them tear me down any more than I already have. I glare at him as fury bubbles in my chest, filling the emptiness in me with something I can hang on to—even if it burns me entirely.

The Joker’s chin nearly touches his chest, and he's looking up at me from underneath his eyebrows. He smirks, at total ease despite being in a cell that's only a precursor for what the rest of his life will look like. Despite the three inches of steel bars between us, he feels just as dangerous as he does when he's too close to me. His eyes are filled with need, but I don't know for what.

_Don't focus on him. Noah doesn't look good—he needs a doctor. Prove Parker and Rachel right. Be brave._

I raise my chin a little higher and look away from the Joker, walking towards the cell and trying to put him out of my mind. He doesn't like that.

"What, too good to talk with your ol' friend, hmm? That's not very nice, sweet peach," he says.

I try not to openly cringe at the new false term of endearment. How he's talking now, and how it contrasts with what I remembered from the ship, makes my legs shake. He wants a reaction out of me, and I won't give him one. I keep my focus on Noah. The Joker cutting open his stomach wasn't a dream, and I don't know how he's still standing. The officers stare and I ignore the pressure of their gaze, but they don't stop talking with one another and I don't either until I'm standing next to Noah. Joker doesn't move from his position, but his head follows me, expression darkening all the while. I stop looking at him; defiance blocks out all else, and I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry anymore.

"You're in a mood today, aren't you? Didn't Mr. P., there, teach you better manners?" Joker asks.

I ignore the taunt and speak only to Noah. "Are you OK? You're not in pain or anything?" I ask quietly.

He grips his stomach and shakes his head, unable or unwilling to say more. Only when I turn to ask for a doctor does Noah speak.
"Are—are you warm now?" Noah asks.

He still won't look at me directly, keeping his gaze at my shoes. The Joker scoffs.

"What do you mean?" I don't know what he's referencing and my concern grows, pushing past my anger.

"You... you were cold. The lady was cold so I—I got her a blanket..." he says, trailing off into a whisper.

He gave me the blanket that night on the ship. He's the only reason I didn't get full-blown frostbite or die from exposure.

The act of kindness and the unfairness of all of this hits me hard. Parker isn't the only victim here. Everyone in this room is wrestling with their own hell of suffering because of the Joker. Hate is replaced with deep sorrow, and I reach out to touch Noah's hand. My bandaged fingers briefly touch his and he doesn't pull away.

"Thank you, Noah. And yes, I am warm now," I say, making sure to smile a little—even if it's sad. He nods and almost bends over entirely at the middle. "I'll get them to bring in a doctor, OK? Just hang on for a few minutes."

My eyes leave Noah's shape and find the Joker staring with an open look of wrath. It makes my resolve harden and I meet his furious expression with my own.

You're going to rot. You can't hurt me anymore.

It's a thought that gives me back a sense of power, a command over my own limbs again.

I turn away to talk with an officer when I nearly run into Stephens and James Gordon. Seeing him after internalizing those memorial pictures harkens back to the feeling of Lewis' fist connecting with my face. He looks thinner since the last time I saw him, but he's still wearing that familiar pair of glasses and sporting the mustache. Gordon has the grace to look embarrassed.

"Evening, Miss Kane. I'm glad to see you're alright," Gordon says softly.

It's a poor choice of words. There's nothing about me that's alright. My grip on reality is tenuous at best, and I'm on the edge of snapping entirely.

My best friend is dead because of me. Several people are dead because of me. I'll never be alright again.

I only jerk my head in acknowledgment, not bothering to ask about his Houdini act. It seems needlessly cruel to me in hindsight, but I'm in no position to judge.

"Listen, that man over there? His name's Noah and he's sick. He needs a doctor," I say. I don't mean to, but exhaustion creeps back in my voice.

Gordon's eyes flick over to him and back at me, nodding. "I'm going to need you to follow me. We'll have to finish your interview tomorrow, when things are a little less, er, volatile," Gordon says.

I don't reply, but I'm frustrated and fighting back the feeling of fire coming up my neck. The Joker's staring daggers at me and I won't look back at him. A sudden thought hits me.
"Wait—did you find my mother's ring? It's a simple gold band with an engraving on the inside," I ask Gordon as he's about to guide me back out of the room.

He gives me a sympathetic look. "No—I'm sorry, we haven't recovered anything like that yet," he says.

I can't help it—it's involuntary, but my eyes dart back to the Joker in a wordless accusation. He's smiling, but it's mean now. No trace of mockery; just a vicious bite. He shrugs his shoulders and waves his fingers at me, mouth moving without making a sound. I don't need to hear the words, I know what he's saying.

'I'll see you soon.'

No, no you won't.

We're driving at a slow speed, Alfred's in no rush. The evening's traffic has reduced down to only a few cars on the road. Gordon was quick to usher us out of the precinct with urgings for me to come back later in the morning. They've caught their big fish now and suddenly what I had to offer goes to the backburner.

Like what happened to Parker.

No, playing a game of blame isn't the answer here. If I go down that road, all I'd find was that it was still my fault. All of this rests with me.

My mind still wants to escape, but it doesn't have the same urgency it did before. I feel lighter now, buoyant because I don't have anything of meaning to hold me down. My chest moves easier and it frees something inside; a release of a hold that I didn't know had me in its grip.

He's going to go to prison. That'll have to be enough for Parker for now. You'll make up the rest, you don't get a free pass in any of this.

Relief and a burgeoning sense of safety make my muscles unknot. I don't deserve that relief, but I welcome it anyway. Everything that seemed impossible before now has the possibility of hope; its weight won't crush me. It doesn't make it easier, but it sure as hell doesn't make it harder. The Joker is somewhere he can't reach me, surrounded by dozens of others who will keep him there. Nothing will ever make up for Parker, but now I have the opportunity to try.

Alfred seems to feel that same relief. His shoulders have dropped down, limbs not as taut. It's totally dark out now, only the occasional streetlamp lights the interior of the car. Our pain and grief aren't overshadowed by the fear of the future. I need to make things right, with everyone.

You need to tell him. You can't stay bottled up forever. Be the person Parker always thought you were.

"Alfred?" I say in the quiet of the vehicle. We're not far from the penthouse now, and I want to say it before I have to look him full in the face.

"Yes, Miri?" he asks, turning his head and peering at me from the front seat.

"There's something—"

Flashing headlights flood the interior of the car. A force with the power of a freight train broadsides the driver's side of the vehicle. I feel the spinning inertia of the car stopping dead in its
tracks pulling on my stomach—throwing me, weightless, mid-air for a brief moment before my head smacks against the window.

The world goes black for a minute, but the sounds never leave me, and I groan, trying to move. The car's tipped over on its side, and I can only tell because of how my body has fallen, how the weight pushes against my arms. Pain hasn't hit me yet, not entirely, but disorientation has. I can't see straight, closing my eyes and trying to focus—trying to recentre my battered head. Smoke and the smell of burnt rubber fill my nose.

A door opens on creaking hinges before slamming home. Glass crunches under heavy footfalls. Cursed expletives and metal hitting metal. The voices grow closer.

I open my eyes and see darkened silhouettes against a bright spotlight. Someone grabs my arm and hauls me upwards. A knife cuts through my seatbelt. They wrench my shoulder so hard it feels like it's on the verge of dislocating, and I find my voice again to cry out. My vision clears as I gain control of my muscles and they pull me out of the opposite end of the backseat, grunting under the strain of lifting my dead weight. It's a man grabbing me. A man in a clown mask.

No, no, no, no—

I thrash wildly and my elbow connects with his jaw. He grunts in pain and lets go of his grip on me. Clambering down from the ruined side of Alfred's car and fall to the glass-filled pavement, I shriek as the glass pierces my arms, but I force myself to get up. A hand grabs the back of my neck and throws me down to the ground, pushing until my chin almost connects with the asphalt.

"Long time no see, love. I hope you missed me."

It's Zsasz—Jesus, no—this isn't happening, no, no—

It's with a stab to the gut that I realize I'm more afraid of Zsasz than I ever was of Joker. Trying to move out from under him, Zsasz pushes all of his weight down on my spine. His hand moves from my neck to my back, keeping me down as he kneels. His fingers find the back of my bra and grip it in his curled fist. My hands reach out, trying to find anything to us to fight. With a savage twist, he flips me over on my back, making the air leave my lungs. He's wearing a clown mask, too. But I can tell he's fucking smiling. My hands keep reaching, and I'm surprised that I have any fight left, but I desperately cling to it.

"Just when you thought the fun was ending, eh?" His hand is on my shoulder, touching my neck. In the high contrast of light and dark, I can't see his scars. But it doesn't matter; I need to get away. He's going to rape and murder me, and there's no one to stop him. That's when my fingers find something. It's jagged and long, and it slices through the bandages on my hand and digs into the skin. I grip it hard as Zsasz leans over me. "C'mon, love. Don't look so surprised—"

Zsasz's hand goes from my neck to my jaw and that's when I do it. I raise my arm up and bring the chunk of glass down across Zsasz's face, cutting through the rubber of his mask and into the flesh beneath. He howls and blood coats his hand and drops down onto my sweater and face in wet bursts. The warmth of it cools quickly in the cold night air.

I—I just hit his eye—

No, don't think about that.

Tearing my eyes from his screaming form, I crawl out from under him. I'm almost clear when a hand wraps in my hair, dragging me back over the debris of the crash. I kick out and it lands
against Zsasz's knee.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you cunt—"

I can see through the slash I made in the rubber mask; I cut right across his face, splitting the skin open and making it hang in small flaps. And I did hit his eye, the opposite one I had marked before. A thick, bleeding line runs straight through it, a couple of inches deep where his eyeball would be. The thought gives my body more power than it should. My knee comes up and I hit him in the balls.

If I'm going to die, I'm making you hurt first.

Zsasz yells and pulls on my hair painfully, reaching behind him and pulling out a bowie knife. He raises it, ready to plunge it into me when he stops. A smaller man stands behind him with a gun to Zsasz's head. He cocks the hammer back.

"Move it, Zsasz. You know what the boss said." He sounds young. Zsasz doesn't move. "I will shoot you, and you'd have it coming. The boss might even thank me," he says. He's leaning off to one side, favouring one leg over the other.

Zsasz lowers the knife slowly, the blood still flowing down his face in thick rivulets.

I inch backward until I can sit up. The younger man still has the gun to Zsasz's head.

This is your chance—get up, Miri—get up—

I'm about to run when two hands grab me by the shoulders. I scream and try to hit them, but their arms wrap under mine, putting me in a headlock. Kicking at his legs and trying to bite his arms, I didn't think I was capable of this with how I've reacted to danger with helplessness before, with how profoundly tired I am.

Why didn't I fight like this for Parker?

I can't let the energy and rage leave me; I need it or I'm going to die.

Self-preservation above all else, huh, Miri?

"Fuck—just stay still—" the man says, struggling to maintain his grip. I recognize his voice. It makes me fight harder.

"Fuck you! Get off—"

Someone familiar steps in front of me. A black man with thick bandages around his throat.

Lewis—oh, no, no—

He's not wearing a mask and he's holding a syringe. He looks sorry, but it doesn't stop him from coming closer. I grow desperate.

"Stay the fuck away from me—"

"C'mon around the side or she'll hit you. Hurry the fuck up already, we've been here too long," the man holding me says.

I try kicking out at Lewis, but my energy fades quickly. Lewis gives me a wide berth and grips my bicep.
"No—no, don't—"

But it's too late. With a sharp jab, the needle is in me and I feel its contents biting into my muscles. As suddenly as I had found my fight, it leaves me, and I go limp, struggling to keep my brain focused. It's not working. My vision blurs again, and I can't make my mouth work. The man's dragging me and I can't even dig in my heels.

"You didn't give her too much, did you? Fuck, the boss will kill us if she's fucked up too bad."

I try making a sound, but the drug's taken any ability to move on my own. My lolling head takes in the van they're pulling me toward. This one's a dark gray with bright decals.

"Just tell him she hit her head again in the crash. It ain't a lie, Christ."

The man hoists me up and throws me against the back seat. The small strength I have left only allows me to turn my head as everything blurs into an incomprehensible haze. All I see is the white of the rubber mask as the door drags closed and familiar darkness greets me.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I'm still going to have to keep the longer breaks between updates for now. Some of the upcoming chapters are more intricate and require a bit more planning for their execution, in addition to finding time with all my homework and ~real life~ responsibilities. But I will be back again on the 23rd!

As always, I extend my incredible gratitude to everyone who's bookmarked, given kudos, and commented on this story. Your encouragement means the absolute world to me, and each one brings a huge smile to my face. I appreciate all of you so much, and thank you for continuing to read!
Batman's fists curled as he kept watch over the Major Crimes Unit. The barely restrained anger wound him up until his body mirrored a bowstring ready to be released.

He was torn between storming the building, taking Miriam home himself, and staying in position—watching for any developments from above and trusting that the police would do their jobs: keep the Joker caged. Batman didn't have a lot of faith in the police, not entirely—but Gordon's miraculous return eased his mind.

Surveillance and waiting were skills Batman honed, but they were difficult to employ then. He could see the movements of the officers through the large windows, had seen the Joker in the police squad car before he was shoved into the building, his hands cuffed behind his back. He could see glimpses of the Joker sitting behind bars, but he also saw Miriam go into the holding cells.

Why is she in there? Where's Alfred?

Bruce Wayne, whom Batman had to keep suppressed under the surface in all of this, was fighting his way back up. Bruce wanted vengeance, to exact a bloody payment for all the Joker had done. Miriam in the same room as the Joker, even with bars between them, was enough to send him close to the edge of losing it entirely. Batman had to use reason, to employ the logic that Bruce often set aside. Going in there would only cause problems, reinforce the connection he had to Miriam—and he couldn't do that, not with anyone there who might use it against them. Batman's identity staying ambiguous was paramount—even as every part of Bruce, every feeling of attachment, obligation, responsibility, and love were pulling him to act without thought and with unrepentant violence.

He didn't have to struggle with himself for long. Gordon came into the room, put his arm around Miriam's shoulder and directed her out. It was good Batman couldn't see the Joker's expression, it would have made looking on difficult. He could only hear parts of their conversation, the rest obliterated by static and distance, but he knew he caught Alfred's words about heading home.

Batman let out a sigh of relief. He strained his eyes, watching Miriam until Alfred's car left the lot of the MCU—carrying them far from the Joker's reach.

Though that relief abated his tumultuous state of mind, Batman didn't leave his perch on the building opposite of the MCU. He kept up his vigil, watching for a while longer. The Joker wouldn't be able to hurt anyone—no one in Gotham, and especially not Miriam. But that didn't mean the Joker couldn't still cause trouble, and Batman would be ready for when he did.

He kept his post for two hours, watching and listening. Adjusting his position so the amplifier in his cowl could pick up more of the conversations happening in the building, Batman was uncertain what he was even listening for—but he wouldn't let it go. He stayed after Mayor Garcia appointed Gordon as the new commissioner and left for the night, getting in his black Escalade and driving away. He watched Jim Gordon leave with a sense of solace. One mistake in a sea of many that was undone—one life he wasn't responsible for ending.

Batman stood there, the cold seeping through his suit, and found himself rooted in place. This was a huge moment for him. Batman felt a surge of vindication—resounding victory. As much as that
feeling filled his chest, it was tempered by something else: A nagging on his mind. This was a victory, one that was not only desperately needed, but necessary for the sake of keeping Gotham together. The city was on the edge and Batman had saved it from tipping completely. He thought so, anyway.

Then why does this not feel right?

The Mob was still a problem he would need to tackle. They were desperate as well, clinging to something that was already lost to them. He convinced himself that was what was still concerning him. Even desperate, they had proven to be more of a problem than Batman had originally estimated. In all his wanderings and time among the different criminal elements in Asia, he had thought he understood the way the world worked. The Joker had challenged those assumptions, but Batman had still met it and won. The cost had been high—higher than he ever thought he would pay. But it was over now, he had to convince himself of that.

Batman was already fixating on what needed doing. Having Gordon back would make it easier to continue working with the police. His relationship with the GCPD was tenuous, one built on uncertainty. Batman had an expansive knowledge of who was dirty, and it only grew with each new informant and when branches of the crime syndicates he was working so tirelessly to dismantle folded. Gordon was a staunch and reliable ally; a man Batman could depend on to maintain the connection he needed in order to bring the city back under control.

But, for now, Batman had earned several nights off. There were still massive efforts needed to pick up the pieces from the Joker's failed coup against the city—dealing with that would come. Batman needed to be put away for the time being. Bruce Wayne had his own collateral damage he needed to contend with, and he needed to train harder to keep pushing past his boundaries, to reinforce who he was as Batman.

If there was only one thing he'd take out of this, it was that the life of Bruce Wayne had no place with the workings of Batman—it left too much at risk. But that, too, would come. Years of struggle were ahead, and Bruce had failings he needed to make up for. Batman's Tumbler was gone, but the Pod sat in the alley behind him. Batman moved to drop off the ledge of the building when he froze.

"—What about Dent?"

"A unit's there now—"

Batman couldn't recognize the voices and they came inconsistently. He angled his amplifier towards the building, jumping to the next rooftop, his heart rate increasing to a rapid throb.

"What did that fucking clown say?"

"Some joke about lawyers and woodchippers. Unsettled Stephens enough to ask about it—"

Batman's mind raced. Activating his scope, he peered through the windows of the buildings. He recognized Detective Murphy and Sergeant Benning.

"Did you call the Commissioner?"

"Yeah—he's on the way. He said to prep the Joker for interrogation."

Batman jumped down from the rooftop, activating his cape to slow his fall as his boots landed against the concrete. He pulled out his small tablet, activating the screen that showed the tracking devices he'd planted on Miriam and Rachel. Rachel's showed up at her apartment building and Miriam's was moving through Midtown. The tightness in his chest eased. He was glad that his
problems were limited to Harvey and the Joker. It made it easier for Bruce Wayne to sink back below and for the Batman to do his work—dealing with the Joker would be enough without adding the blind fury he felt whenever Miriam and Rachel were involved.

Sticking to the shadows, Batman waited by the back entrance of the MCU. The fall night air was damp, coating the pavement and brick building in cold dew. Batman perched himself by the door, keeping a view at the parking lot behind the building. He needed a plan with Gordon, and it was the most expedient way to get access to the Joker. Batman didn’t have to wait long. Gordon pulled up minutes later, his tires squealing against the pavement. Gordon didn’t bother to park straight as he leaped out of the vehicle, keys barely out of the ignition.

"Gordon," Batman said, detaching himself from the shadows of the door's alcove.

Gordon spun around, reaching for his sidearm. The tension left his frame as he dropped his hand from the gun's grip, his calm demeanour returning.

"You got here quick," Gordon said, still startled by Batman's sudden appearance. He should've been less jumpy after working with him for over a year, but fifteen years on the force had taught him to dread someone surprising him, even if it was Batman.

Gordon pinched the bridge of his nose before opening the back entrance to the precinct, motioning for Batman to follow. Gordon was beyond exhausted, having barely slept in days and living on adrenaline and caffeine alone. Barbara's tears of relief had quickly turned into anger at what he'd done, and he still needed to deal with the repercussions of his supposed-death on his children. Having him home for an hour only to have him torn away again was an added strain—one he was praying Barbara could understand. His years on the job had worn on them both, especially as Gotham's decline only seemed to accelerate. But he had never done this to her before, and he was hoping to God his marriage would survive it. Part of him was aching to be back at work, where things were familiar and his actions validated.

Gordon didn't know how to undo his mistakes, either.

"What do you know?" Batman's voice was less gravelly when he spoke with Gordon, but not by much; a gesture of familiarity and understanding between them.

He followed Gordon up the back set of stairs leading to the interrogation rooms and the holding cells, and he was glad Miriam and Alfred were long gone. It was strange for Batman to go through the door of a building in a more casual manner, not performing reconnaissance by going through windows or other means of entry. This was so close to mundane an action that it struck him as strange rather than comforting.

"Not much. Harvey Dent's missing and the Joker's having a good laugh—so nothing we shouldn't have expected but hit us in the balls anyway."

Gordon's words would have come across as glib in any other circumstance, but he was right. This was another layer of sophistication and difficulty that they should have expected but didn't. The Joker had proved to be anything but simple before, and they were underestimating him again—falling into a false sense of security anytime he fell into a pattern they had grown accustomed to with other criminals. When they had a suspect in custody—especially one as flagrant and wanton in their crimes as the Joker—the case always headed towards a form of conclusion, a sense of finality that would leave relief where relentless pursuit was before. Once again, the Joker had undermined them; pulled out another card to play.

Batman said nothing that would betray how he felt about all of this already. He was already
castigating himself, going over every detail of the night and finding himself confounded as to how to find reason in any of this. The Joker seemed to know what moves they would make before they did, and Batman did not like being in the position where he didn't have the upper hand.

"Congratulations," Batman said.

Gordon stopped before pulling the door open to the bullpen of the MCU, looking confused before replying, "Ah—right. Guess I'll need to get used to that, huh?" Gordon rubbed the back of his neck.

Batman didn't answer, but a man like Gordon understood his silences. Words weren't always needed between them, and that was a quality Batman valued in Gordon beyond his staunch loyalty and fierce and steady force of will. He was an ally Batman couldn't have done without, and his sense of equanimity that Gordon was alive went beyond the easing of his conscience.

Gordon threw the door open and the officers inside gaped at Batman. Some of them had seen glimmers of the man on TV, others in flashes on the streets, but most had only heard about him in name alone. Most were wary of Batman, of what his influence brought before hell had broken loose two weeks ago, and now many looked outright hostile. Only a small minority still hero-worshipped Batman, and they skewed younger—marked by naïveté and not enough time on the force to feel jaded.

Batman ignored all of them, staying clear of the holding cells and following Gordon to a darkened hall. The Joker had been playing them for fools and Batman was eager to extract some much-needed retribution from the clown. Not just for Miriam—but for those who had died and the lives left in ruins by the madness of one man. He tried to suppress the thoughts about all the different ways the League of Shadows had taught him to kill an opponent—some more painful than others. Batman had to fight back the call for vengeance in Bruce's mind. Cool impartiality and calculated dispersion of pain were all that needed to be done. Indulging anything more than that and Batman would be skirting a line that was hard to pull back from.

"I need ten minutes alone with him," Batman said just as Gordon opened his mouth to speak.

Gordon gave him an appraising look. Weighing what he could read of Batman's mood and intentions. His eyebrows raised as he deliberated. "You have a plan in mind you'd like to share?" Gordon asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

"I'll get him to talk. Is there anything else that matters at this point?"

Gordon hesitated. Letting Batman interrogate the Joker would break nearly every protocol in the book, but they didn't know what they were dealing with and the sense of uncertainty was mounting.

"Let me try first," Gordon said, holding up a hand as Batman quirked his head to the side. "I'll keep the lights off. You're good at hiding in the dark—stay in the back and if I can't get anywhere..." Gordon trailed off. He didn't really know what he was asking—didn't know the full extent of which he could ask Batman to do something so blatantly against the codes he vowed to uphold.

_Serve and protect. That's your first concern_, Gordon thought.

He sighed and shrugged up his shoulders. "If I can't get him to talk, then he's all yours," Gordon said, looking Batman in the eye as they made a silent agreement. Batman would hold himself back, wouldn't do anything that couldn't be fixed or explained.

"You'll take care of the others?" Batman asked, shooting his eyes where the other detectives and
officers stood shaking with curiosity and apprehension.

"They'll listen to me. They don't have much of a choice now," Gordon said.

Gordon tried to ignore the familiarity of those words, how they were spoken to him often when his previous superiors had made him turn a blind eye to bribes and the corruption that permeated every aspect of his job. He rationalized it away: This wasn't the same, this was important and lives were on the line. It wasn't for his own personal gain. This was for the greater good. He had to believe that.

Gordon shook his head and opened the door of the interrogation room with the swipe of a keycard. Going to the table and turning on the lamp resting there, he turning off the other lights.

"Wait here. I'll get some detectives to bring him and come in after."

Batman nodded as the door shut and he took a familiar stance in the darkness.

When Gordon entered the room, he could feel the physical reaction of his skin crawling at the sight of the Joker's white face floating in the darkness. His smirk and the air of self-assured certainty was one that delved the room into an aura of hostility from the moment the door closed. The Joker was cuffed to the metal table and that gave Gordon some comfort. He wasn't familiar with the Joker in a one-on-one environment, how he could wield words just as well as he did knives.

"Evening, Commissioner," the Joker's voice rang out in the empty room. It was as much a taunt as a greeting.

Gordon took a long and silent breath before sitting opposite of the shackled man. Brushing off non-existent specks of dust from the table in a sweep of his arm, he looked at the face of the man who had murdered nearly a dozen of his men and colleagues—had tried, and damn near succeeded, to murder him only a few days before. Some of the officers were gutted, others their throats slit, more still with repetitive stab wounds in areas that would make them bleed but didn't pierce any vital organs. All of them had the Joker's smile replicated post-mortem, making the skin split and peel back like burned pages of a book. None of them were granted the mercy of a quick death; every one of them was a direct attack against the law enforcement of Gotham City. Gordon was granted the small clemency of being shot in the back.

He had interrogated child molesters, rapists, murderers, junkies, gangsters, deranged assailants—every manner of criminal and degenerate a city like Gotham could produce. All had posed their own challenge and required Gordon to develop a tough skin. He was difficult to disturb, distant but never detached, and cool where others had snapped. The Joker felt different. Sweat beaded along his hairline, but he wouldn't wipe it away, wouldn't draw any attention to it. He steeled himself before speaking. This was just another perp, no different from the other monsters who passed through the precinct's doors.

"Harvey Dent never made it home," Gordon said, his voice even and measured. He stared at the Joker's face, at the makeup that was almost completely gone, the way the shadows nearly hid his Glasgow smile, and Gordon's gut sent a pang he couldn't interpret.

"Of course not," the Joker said, as if this was a simple matter and Gordon had been too slow to catch on quick. He was at ease in his chair, his pallid face bobbing in the dark as he slithered in his seat.

"What have you done with him?"
Interrogations are a form of negotiation—each party having something the other wants. The Joker knew where Harvey Dent was, how to cause serious damage. And Gordon had the keys to his freedom. It should have been a clear line who had the advantage.

But nothing was clear with the Joker, and Gordon had been unable to see the clarity in the fact.

"Me?" The Joker asked with faked incredulity, raising one manacled hand to point at his chest. He looked around the room and shook his head in disbelief. "I was right here." As if to remind Gordon, the Joker thrust his wrists up at him, the metal clanging together.

*He's lying, not even attempting to be convincing.* Gordon thought.

He continued to stare at the Joker, hoping he would fill the silence with potential answers as to why this insanity wasn't allowed to end. The Joker's eyes went wide but never left Gordon's face.

"Who did you leave him with, *hmm*? *Your people?*" The mocking sneer slid into his voice, gliding under Gordon's skin and peeling it back.

The Joker squinted and looked at him from the side, critical of Gordon's judgement. With a small peeking of his tongue, his eyes travelled to a distant corner, as if he was speaking to more people than Gordon, his head adjusting in the dark of the room like it wasn't attached to a pair of shoulders.

"Assuming, of course, that they *are* still *your* people and not… Maroni's." The Joker's eyes stopped wandering, finding a home in Gordon's at the mention of the crime boss—another card played to nullify Gordon's efforts, every plan executed and put in place; a reversal of every good thing he'd sacrificed nearly everything for in service of the people of Gotham. Gordon went pale.

The insinuation wasn't lost on him. He took an involuntary swallow as he maintained his composure. Gordon had faith in his squad, but he couldn't kid himself. He knew the type of people he was working with. His mind ran through everything he knew about the men under his command, but he didn't think any of them would be willing to betray the GCPD to the man who was lining them up for slaughter. That defied logic, no matter how much money they were being paid.

"Does it *depress* you, *Commissioner*, to know just how *alone* you really are?"

Gordon's heart rate rose with every word coming out of the Joker's mouth. Anger and impotence were burgeoning into a physical manifestation of a tightening knot in his chest, especially because Gordon knew the Joker was striking at something true—even if he didn't want it to be.

"Does it make you feel *responsible* for Harvey Dent's, ah… current *predicament*? For all the, ah, *good* officers who died so *valiantly* in the line of duty?"

The key with interrogations is that you want to gain as much as possible while giving next to nothing in return. But Gordon didn't know what the Joker wanted. Not really. Even from the beginning with the demands for Batman to turn himself in, Gordon had not been able to make sense of the Joker. Targeting civil servants and law enforcement, data breaches, antagonizing the Batman, kidnapping a socialite and then terrorizing her, and murder—all of it didn't connect in Gordon's mind. He had none of the answers and the Joker smiled like he had all of them.

"All those people you let down, and for what, *hmm*? How many, ah, grieving widows will you have to visit before that all *sinks* in?" The Joker didn't break eye contact, leaning in an inch at a time, his words snaking into Gordon's ears with each uttered syllable and swipe of his tongue. "I'd
just be *riddled* with guilt if I were you." The Joker smacked his lips as if the thought was one he savoured.

Gordon couldn't bite into the bait the Joker was dangling in front of him, even as anger made his ears sing. He pushed his thoughts down. There was a clear goal in mind; he had to maintain control and get answers.

"Where is he?" Gordon asked, not acknowledging the poison spewing from the Joker's mouth.

"What's the time?" the Joker asked, jerking his head back, unsatisfied that he couldn't get an overt rise out of Gordon. His mind was already thinking of another angle, another way to slide under Gordon's armour—a place to stick the knife between his ribs.

"What difference does that make?" Gordon thought this was an odd ploy and strange change in tone. He didn't like it—thinking of it as a way for the Joker to throw him off.

"Well, depending on the *time*, he may be in *one* spot or *several,*" the Joker said, giving a pump of his eyebrows as he shifted forward in his seat—his hands mimicking the actions he described. His ghostly face weaved through the darkness of the room, giving him the appearance of a cobra.

Gordon's patience waned. He thought of Batman, waiting only a few feet away. If Gordon hadn't been the one to shut him in the room, he wouldn't have known at all that Batman was in there. He reached down to his pocket and pulled out the key that would unlock the Joker's handcuffs, twisting it in his fingers as he hoped he wasn't making another mistake.

"If we're going to play games..." Gordon reached across the table and uncuffed the Joker from the table, taking the silver cuffs and swinging them in his practiced hand.

"Mmm-hmm?" The Joker pulled his mouth up in a half-grin, an eyebrow rising. He'd dealt with dirty cops before, knew their routines and strategies. It would only make him laugh, but they didn't know that yet.

"Then I'm going to need a cup of coffee," Gordon said, his exhaustion creeping back in. He had no reason to regret his decision yet, but the night was long and held plenty of opportunities for that later.

Gordon continued to not give the Joker any discernable reaction. It was difficult to keep his expression neutral. He reached the other end of the long interrogation room, hand on the metal bar serving as a handle.

"Ah, the ol' 'good cop,' 'bad cop' routine?" the Joker asked, clicking his tongue and pointing his finger at Gordon. His smile grew as if he and Gordon were longtime friends playing the same ruse.

A buzzer sounded and Gordon pulled open the door. He even managed a tired smile.

"Not exactly."

For a moment the Joker was left in the dark by himself. His mind was calculating, thinking about which route Jimmy was gonna take, and keeping track of the running clock.

*Seventeen minutes and counting*, he thought, his smirk growing. *Certainly know how to waste time, these fellas.*

Never once did uncertainty cross the Joker's mind. This was already a match he had won—no one else knew it yet. He marvelled, not for the first time, about the power of words and prodding the
right buttons. His grin turned into an insidious mask of knowing as he accepted the darkness surrounding him.

Harvey Dent's head was pounding, throbbing with a force that was at once reminiscent of his days in high school playing football and more recent incidents of drinking too much late into the night. But this feeling was different. It made his tongue thick and stick to the roof of his mouth. He shook his head, staving off the exhausting cloud around his mind.

The next thing that hit him was the smell. It was chemical, pungent, and burned his nostrils. He could recognize it—it was gasoline and ammonia.

He opened his eyes, blinking at the glaring lights in the room. When his vision cleared, his stomach clenched at the sight of dozens of oil drums surrounding him. He tried to move his arms, but soon realized they were tied behind him. Harvey's muscles ached, pulsating at the strain to keep his blood flowing through the tightened constraints. He tensed and pulled, testing how much give the rope had.

It had none.

Crying out for help would do him no good. There wouldn't be anyone close who would care to help him. He looked up and saw the timer they had placed for his convenience. If it was accurate, he had less than twenty minutes to think of a way out of there. And thinking was what Harvey did best.

Harvey's first thoughts were ones of anger. At Michael Wuertz—the bastard who had driven him to the butcher. Jim Gordon—the man who wouldn't listen. The Batman—the hero who had every tool at his disposal and yet never did all that was necessary, had failed to live up to every promised expectation. Harvey had told them—warned them both about the scum in Gordon's unit. He had fought so hard against the corruption in Gotham, and now—in a sick twist of irony—his undoing would be at the hands of those who championed the fight against the rot.

The Joker had won another battle, and with Harvey's death, he would damn near win the war. Harvey willed himself to focus his rage on him—at the clown who was tearing his world down.

It was hard not to see how he had fooled himself. With his father having been the same type of filth he worked so hard to prosecute—and his mother having been a victim of the systems' failures—Harvey knew the damage that corruption and perversion of justice could unleash. He had seen how the GCPD had worked with his father on the force, how he had gotten away with beating his wife while the other officers had laughed and turned a blind eye. Had allowed it to escalate until he had finally succeeded in murdering her.

Harvey had thought if he studied enough, worked harder than anyone else, was ruthless but fair—a staunch advocate of every letter of the law—it would see him through. He could prevent the deaths of the innocent like his mother and ensure the just prosecution of those who dealt out the pain. That belief had given him order, a way of making sense of his own life and the world around him. The structure the law had provided and the ethics binding it together was one that Harvey had trusted to remedy the ails of the world, it just needed the right people to execute its will. It had made sense. But now that certainty was vanishing.

Harvey's time was running out. He couldn't rely on anyone to find him—they'd all proven how useful they could be when it came to undoing the Joker's designs. Harvey began pulling at the ropes binding him to the chair when a voice made him stop. One intimately familiar—the one he wanted to wake up to and hear for the rest of his life.
"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

It was Rachel.

"Hello?!"

Harvey's struggles morphed into desperate panic. He looked at the timer again, noticing now the old phone that was off the receiver. Harvey fought to get his mouth to work, to answer her so she knew she wasn't alone. His mind seemed to stop working when he focused on the time and how it was slipping so quickly.

*Fourteen minutes and thirty-eight seconds.*

Batman had stood in the dark during Gordon's failed attempts at getting the Joker to talk. He'd heard the same words, felt the same effects of the Joker acting like a needle going under the nailbed before tearing through completely. Batman had the beginnings of war in his mind, his sense of control slipping, but his breathing stayed silent and calm. Gordon getting out of his chair was signal enough—the time had come for Batman to come through again. He readied his mind, trying to quell the doubt.

*The Joker is just a man. Open to the same fears and vulnerabilities. People aren't complicated—not when there's pain involved.*

As quickly as Gordon had gone, the lights flashed on—the bright fluorescents blinding the Joker. He reached up an arm to shield his eyes as they adjusted to the rapid change in aperture. Batman took his opportunity to strike, coming up behind the Joker and slamming his head down on the table. The forced sense of restraint acted as the only barrier for the Joker not being knocked unconscious. He raised himself quickly, letting out an exaggerated groan of pain. Batman moved around to the other side, staring down the Joker.

"Never start with the head. That's torture one-oh-one. The victim gets all fuzzy." The Joker was talking like he meant to convey a helpful tip for Batman's lacking technique. The dismissal of such a blow wasn't one Batman would leave unanswered. "He can't feel the next—"

He interrupted him with his fist slamming down onto the Joker's hand, fracturing several bones but not breaking it completely. Where Batman expected grunts of pain, the Joker blinked and looked up at the ceiling, as if he just thought the pain away.

"See?" he said, turning to Batman and popping forward in his chair.

Pain was something universally avoided, it was a lesson Bruce Wayne had learned early and a drive that had been trained out of Batman. The Joker had no such training. Batman clearly wasn't hitting hard enough. Joker's lack of a reaction bothered him.

*He's been eager this whole time to talk. Let him, Batman thought.*

The thoughts were sound. A large part of him wanted to beat the Joker bloody, but that wasn't what he agreed to with Gordon. He sat in the chair Gordon had just occupied and looked in the face of the man who had caused so much pain and devastation. He didn't just think of Gotham, he thought of Miriam's terrified face and everything she had endured. The anger and blind rage that coursed through Bruce was buoying to the surface.

"You wanted me. Here I am." The Batman kept his words simple, vying for control to wrestle this situation back into territory he could manage.
The Joker's grin, the look of amusement in his eyes gave Batman pause—but it was the Joker's words that managed to unnerve him.

"'Let me not to the marriage of true minds
admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when alterations finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.'"

The Joker smacked his lips after his recitation, voice taking on an eerie lilt that was simultaneously mocking and antagonizing.

Did he—did he just quote Shakespeare at me? Batman thought.

Batman didn't deign the quote with a reaction. Of all the things he imagined the Joker saying when he finally had the chance to stare him down, he did not imagine it would be that. The Joker was at once menacing and disarming—villain and enthraller.

The Joker sighed, rolling his eyes up. "What? Not a fan of the classics, are ya? I know more recent stuff, too, I'll have you know—"

"What do you want?" Batman asked, interrupting him. Poetry, and its unwanted connotations he couldn't decipher, was not a subject he wanted the Joker to continue.

He rolled his eyes back to Batman, his marred smile growing wider. "I wanted to see what you'd do." The Joker's tongue darted along his mouth, skirting the edge of his bottom lip as he swiped against the other side of his scars. "And you didn't disappoint."

The Joker leaned forward on his elbows. Bringing himself closer and closer to Batman, who refused to back away. Batman stayed immovable—obstinate and stone-like. He waited for the Joker to continue—for him to answer his question.

The Joker only continued to undermine what Batman needed. The Joker's face turned mock-serious, his tone low in the spirit of camaraderie.

"You let—wait, what are we up to now? Twenty-nine people?" His lips made a gentle pop as he made a show of cringing.

Batman grimaced. The comments were meant to get a rise out of him, carefully constructed to make him upset. He couldn't let that happen.

"Thirty-three." It was impossible to not acknowledge the extent of the damage the Joker had wrought. It was a question that had no right answers, only ammunition for the Joker's expanding arsenal.

"Hah, that's right. You let thirty-three people die," the Joker said. He was constantly readjusting, shifting in his seat, filled with an energy that needed release. "Oh, and we can't forget—then you let Dent take your place. Even to a guy like me, that's cold."

Even the illusion that the Joker was somehow taking the high road bothered Batman. He saw it for what it was, another bear-baiting tactic to make him lose control.

Discipline above all else. You have nothing if you do not have self-control, Batman thought. He held his position, unwavering.

"Where's Dent?" Batman asked. Even with the Joker's diversion tactics, he wouldn't lose sight of
what was important.

The Joker had no use for getting straight to the punchline. He wanted to draw this out, bring it down to the wire.

*What good's a party without a sense of urgency?* the Joker thought.

He shifted again, darting his eyes away and his chin jerking in sudden movements with each emphasized consonant. "Those Mob fools want you gone so they can go back to the way things were," the Joker said, his hand peppering through the air in a fluttering gesture, his eyes fixed on some faraway point. He adjusted back on his elbows, leaning further into Batman's personal space. "But I know the truth. There's no going back. You've changed things. Forever."

The Joker's words weren't a lie. Batman's existence—and his successes, had all but guaranteed a revolution to begin. It wouldn't just be limited to Gotham, it would ripple out in ways yet untold. With every Batman there would be a Joker—with every extreme, an opposite reaction was created; every move on the board met with a response until only one was left standing. The Batman had changed the name of the game, gave it a desperately needed sprucing up. Because he stood for more—was a pillar of change—he had everything to lose. And the Joker had everything to gain.

"Then why do you want to kill me?" Batman was still caught in a dichotic mode of thought—either there were friends or enemies, no relationships in between.

The Joker burst out laughing. He cackled like it was the greatest joke he'd ever heard. "I don't—I don't wanna kill you!" the Joker said in between fits of laughter, his voice rising at the ridiculousness of Batman's question. "What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No, no."

The Joker corrected his twisted suspenders, pulling at his collar and adjusting further. His eyes looked away before boring the full intensity of his gaze back on Batman. His tongue darted out of his mouth as his grin turned into a knowing smirk.

"Y'see, people are wrong when they say, ah, soulmates are limited to the confines of love, Bats." His tongue darted out of his mouth again, eyes full of a dark intensity Batman had not encountered before. His red smile split in two as it only grew wider, revealing the yellowed teeth beneath. "What they don't realize is that it can happen anywhere and just… pop-up in the strangest ways."

Batman didn't know what to say—how to counter the Joker without delving into pools of philosophy he didn't have time for. The Joker quirked an eyebrow, his tone still serious—but always with the edge of derision.

"Like you and me—who would have thought, hmm? Or, ah—" The Joker broke off in a laugh, pushing his chin back to his chest even as his torso stayed pressed forward. He looked up at Batman from under his brows. "Or me and my little sweet peach. No one saw that one coming either, did they?"

Batman forced himself to stay seated, to keep his arms resting on the tabletop, even as the rising bloodlust called for appeasement in the Joker's annihilation. His body acted beyond his control: He could feel his nostrils flare, the tensing of his muscles, the deepening of his frown. He wanted to crush the Joker's face until he was incapable of making any sound ever again. Calm was forced upon him, cooling his veins even as everything in him screamed.

"No, no, no—it's, ah, it's all because of you. You've completed me," the Joker breathed out in a forceful exhale, his hands pulling in to touch where his black heart lay.
Batman could keep himself from beating the Joker, but he couldn't resist the opportunity for biting back with words.

"You're garbage who kills for money. A lowlife terrorist who gets off on hurting others. A murdering psychopath who's going to rot," Batman said with his own level of low force.

Just like with everything else, the Joker didn't give Batman the reaction he expected. He flicked his wrist in the air, dismissing the Batman's insults.

"Don't talk like one of them. You're not. Even if you'd like to be," the Joker said, motioning towards the two-way glass where the near entirety of the MCU stood watching. The Joker pulled back for a moment, brushing the greasy strands of his hair back before slithering closer, meeting Batman's unflinching gaze with his own. "To them, you're just a freak—like me. They need you right now, but when they don't…"

The Joker smacked his lips together, his eyes darting off to the glass again—a pointed look of meaning. His eyebrows rose, head cocked to the side, as he looked Batman in the eye again. He spoke conspiratorially to Batman, and, despite himself, Batman felt drawn in.

"They'll cast you out—like a leper," the Joker said, biting his bottom lip in a show of concern.

Batman felt pinned in place at that moment. Just like he had for Gordon, the Joker named an uncertainty that kept Bruce in doubt—and his uncertainties prevented Batman from seeing clearly. Batman, by his very nature, was an outcast—an outlier on the edge of the systems that couldn't see their own flaws. It's what allowed him to be so effective, but it's also what would always leave him to act alone.

"Y'see, their morals, their code—it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble." The Joker's hands mimicked the motion as he kept staring, pulling in Batman closer to the truth of his words.

The Joker's fluid movements, the lulling effect of his words, and his sinister ability to undermine Batman's faith in his resolve kept him in a place where he was forced to consider the Joker's argument. He couldn't bring himself to continue the urgent line of questioning, and he found himself wanting to see what else the Joker would show—what reveals Batman had been foolish enough to leave exposed.

"They're only as good as the world allows them to be. Examples aren't exactly hard to find, are they? Only have to look beyond your, ah, doorstep and see it play out in front of your eyes."

It was a dark thought, but one Bruce had caught himself thinking during his travels—when he had encountered the desperate and avaricious, the warmongers and opportunists. Batman always refuted the idea, just as he had then. He truly believed, even after everything he had witnessed and fought against, that the world was ultimately good. Bruce Wayne had fears and doubts—flaws and dangerous impulses—and the Joker was appealing to all of them. Batman gave himself a firm check. He did not have the same limitations as Bruce—only those inherent in the man that held Batman back.

"I'll show you. When the chips are down, these civilized people will eat each other."

Batman scrutinized the Joker, with his worn and running makeup and the smell of death cloaked around him. The Joker was mercurial liquid in the form of a man and interacting with him was akin to speaking with madness incarnate. Not madness in the sense of mental illness—Batman was familiar with that. No, this was the madness of rejecting all that was rational, refuting everything that made sense in the world. This was something Batman had not encountered before. Being in his
presence, having the Joker's eyes on him, was an erosion of every protective barrier Bruce had ever
developed, getting closer to hitting a mark deep in his being—leaving him vulnerable and
paralyzed.

"See, I'm not a monster," the Joker said, leaning back in his chair. His wiry body moved with
smooth agility, winding back and getting in close. "I'm just ahead of the curve."

Batman didn't know what it was in those words that snapped him out of the trance-like state the
Joker had him in. Maybe it was the denial of his nature, or the assertion that he was somehow
above those he was terrorizing—punishing them for not seeing the world as he did. Whatever it
was, it drove him into action. Pain, and Batman's control over it—both in himself and others—was
the necessary route to take.

Batman grabbed the Joker by the vest, dragging him out of his seat and clearing the Joker's body
over the length of the metal table. The Joker made no move to resist, at first surprised and then
amused. He grew giddy.

"Where's Dent?" Batman growled. He was mad at himself for listening for so long, he needed to
make up for lost time, to exact what he should have in the beginning. He ignored his silent promise
to Gordon.

The Joker's hands landed on Batman's, giving him room to adjust himself and speak. The look of
anger on Batman's face was good, but not good enough. The Joker needed to push him farther. His
smile turned into one of mean condescension.

"You have all these rules and you think they'll save you—these attachments you think make
you better," the Joker said. He tried to keep his laughter contained, suppressing it in his chest.

Batman slammed the Joker into a white-tiled support column of the interrogation room wall. The
force of it made the Joker's teeth shake and a small grunt of discomfort escaped him, but nothing
else. Batman was still holding back.

"I have one rule," Batman growled, his gauntlet pressing into the Joker's throat as he fought down
the urge to push harder.

The Joker's hand pushed at Batman's grip, the hilarity of all of this made his voice high with a
special kind of happiness he was growing addicted to.

"Oh. Well, that's the rule you'll have to break if you want to know the truth."

Batman paused. His grip easing.

"Which is?" he asked, his voice still low—trying to invoke menace upon a man who was immune
to it.

"The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules." The Joker licked his lips and brought
his eyes down from the ceiling. He really couldn't help himself, he popped up an eyebrow and
smirked, even as his airway constricted. "And tonight, you're gonna break your one rule."

Batman didn't hesitate. Intimidation and the threat of death, and making those believable even if he
never planned on acting on them, were pulls no man could ignore. He pushed harder, the blades of
his gauntlet digging into the Joker's skin.

"I'm considering it."
His expression matched the threat. Batman was shaking with restraint—with the brutality he wanted to unleash. In any other man, Batman's tactics might have worked. But the Joker was right. If you controlled the pain, you controlled the hold others had on you. And the Joker was immune to the punishments Batman was willing to dish out. It was those he wasn't willing to do that interested the Joker. He pushed the knife further into the flank Batman had exposed on the ship—when he made such an obvious point of what was important to him beyond a rigid sense of the moral high ground.

"Oh, hah, there's only minutes left, Bats. This has been all sorts of…entertaining. Almost as much as Miriam—she really knows how to show a guy a good time."

The jab was a necessary one for the Joker because the effect was immediate. The tight control of Batman was gone. The rage of Bruce was present and eager to ravage. He jabbed a knee upward, cracking one of the Joker's ribs. Releasing his hold on Joker's neck, he freed his fist to strike a blow across his jaw—making a spray of red spit out from Joker's mouth and dot the walls.

The Joker allowed himself to really laugh then, to belt out his own cries of victory. Batman had given him what he desired—and he wanted more.

"Hahaha! So much fire, hmm? And you didn't even hear the terms of the game to save one of them." The Joker jerked his eyebrows at Batman as he raised his fist to strike again.

That caught him off guard. It gave Batman enough time to reassert a necessary level of thought and control beyond violence.

"'Them'?" Batman asked, voice quiet and fist lowering. His gut screamed at him, dawning dread creeping up his back. Self-reprobation wrecked him as the Joker's words washed over him.

"'Y'know, for a while there, I thought you really were Dent. Do you always get frisky with your coworkers or is that, ah, something special you reserve for the pretty lawyers?" The Joker broke out in a knowing chuckle. Batman's jaw went slack. "You have an interesting choice of company there, Batsy. You really had me going—thinking you were into my sweet peach. Just when we were getting into the courtship phase! But no—no. A guy like you, you've got a taste for the finer things in life—especially when they're attached to someone else. Hmm?"

The anger and fury of Bruce shattered the safeguards of control he had created in his years of training, pushing Batman and his restraint to the side and unleashing his wrath. He grabbed Joker like he was a paperweight, flipping him over and slamming his body hard against the metal table. Visions of death, blood, and pain—levels he knew no one could ignore—flooded him. Batman was trying to regain command, to reassert the limits that would keep him whole. It was too late—Bruce had warped the Batman, forged his power into a weapon he could barely control. It took away his ability to discern, to think rationally.

The Joker was laughing, enjoying the effect he had on Batman. He laid on the table as Batman picked up the chair he had sat in minutes before and walked to the entrance of the room. He jammed the chair under the handle, blocking any intervention. He vaguely heard the pulls on the metal, the shouts and banging on the other side. They didn't matter. It was just him and the Joker.

"Look at you go!" the Joker forced out between the laughs that erupted from deep in his belly.

He was getting high off the anger, the savagery peeking through a man so self-contained—at the knowledge that what he had observed was right. He knew exactly where to hit Batman the hardest. It still wasn't enough. Batman was weak now, but the Joker would help make him strong. He knew he could get Batman over the edge, he just had to push a little harder. The Joker sat up and cracked
his neck in an exaggerated motion.

"Though, Miri is a cutie, isn't she? I like her almost as much as you like Harvey's little bunny—"

Batman didn't let the demented fiend finish. The sound of Miriam's name coming out of his vile mouth, the mentions of Rachel—incited something deep in him, rooted in protectiveness as much as feelings of resounding impotence. As quick as he had been at the door, Batman was in front of the Joker again. In a blinding motion, he picked up the Joker and slammed him, face first, into the two-way mirror—shattering it and splitting the Joker's forehead open in a jagged gash along his hairline.

The Joker was still laughing—like he hadn't felt any of it—as the blood flowed down the side of his face and he reclined on the floor. The sound and sight of red blood only made Batman want to hit him harder. He towered over the infernal clown, his fists shaking—his body wrapped up in a tempest on the brink of going berserk.

"What have you done?!" Batman yelled, his voice hoarse and booming.

The Joker's own visions of vengeful angels were coming to fruition. His brilliance had reached new levels. Everything he could have ever wanted was being realized—and he had been the orchestrator of it all. Their blindness would leave him to be the only one left standing to bask in the rewards. It was too good a joke not to laugh, and so that's what he did. The Joker kept laughing.

Batman's blood was on fire, napalm in his veins. He gripped the Joker by the lapel and hit his face until his blood coated his fist. The Joker wasn't fighting back. He was letting Batman hit him—encouraging the escalation of blows through his voice alone. Batman wouldn't have the satisfaction of ending this in a mutual fist-fight—the Joker was giving the Batman a painful lesson of his own: It wasn't the physical that acted as the pathway to victory; this was a tactical match Batman had failed to prepare for.

"Where are they?!" Batman yelled, his desperation growing.

The Joker rolled from his position on the floor, bringing his face back in the range of Batman's fury. He blinked away the blood pooling around his eye and tried to contain the shuddering howls that kept his smile stretching ever larger.

"I really thought you were the type of guy to, ah, play all this close to the chest. Who knew you had so many friends! You made it almost too easy—" Batman's fist connected with the Joker's face again. He still laughed, encouraging Batman to hit him—egging him on—fanning the flames of his rage. "Don't know if you figured this out yet—but killing is about making a choice."

Batman backed the Joker up into a corner between the wall and one of the support columns. He kept hitting the Joker, widening the gash on his head and spraying blood with each drawback of his arm. Batman's rational line of thinking was gone. He could only keep up his own form of howling in the form of a question—one that had no easy answers.

"Where are they?!"

"You have to choose between one life or the other." The Joker still grinned, even as the blood seeped between his teeth. "Your friend the district attorney, or his blushing bride-to-be!" His laughter ascended to a higher crescendo of madness as Batman hit him again. The Joker could feel the skin swelling, the blood leaving him in streams, and he revelled in every second of it.

Eight minutes left, Batsy.
"You have nothing! Nothing to threaten me with—nothing to do with all your strength—"

Batman's hands wrapped around the Joker's throat, filled with every intention of squeezing the life out of the man. Joker's expression showed his elation at the prospect—his entrancement with the gifts Batman had given him.

Batman didn't know what to do. He began to realize how futile his efforts were, how the power that had carried him through every other situation was rendered useless, but the Joker had voiced it and made it real. The Joker wasn't reacting to the threats and pain that broke Jahan Shaddid and Salvatore Maroni. Batman had nothing on him. Nothing to leverage his position, no pain to throw in the Joker's face because he welcomed it with open arms.

And he was still laughing, still had more venom to spew.

"I think I'll pay Miri a check-up later. Someone's gotta keep an eye on her—goodness knows no one else is!" The Joker just laughed. He was delighted at Batman's reaction, at the disbelieving expression of horror. He kept pushing the blade in until he found the edges of Batman's heart. "But—that's a surprise, between you and me." The Joker even managed to give his eyebrows another pump as he muttered the words—as if it was a secret between two friends.

Batman slammed him against the wall again, his fist driving into the corded muscle of the Joker's torso and breaking two of his ribs. The sharp stab caused a grunt to escape the Joker, but nothing more—and it was quickly replaced with giggles.

_Time to let him off the hook—he's got six minutes and counting_, the Joker thought.

"Don't worry—I'm going to tell you where they are. Both of them—and that's the point. You'll have to choose."

Every word out of the Joker's mouth was a point of unravelling for Batman—for Bruce as his anger twisted the symbol he created. Batman was in no condition to ask questions, his grip only tightened as every piece of willpower he could summon kept him from snapping the Joker's neck.

"He's at 250 52nd street, and she's on Avenue X... at Cicero."

The information was the only thing he wanted to hear coming out of the Joker's mouth. Batman dropped the bleeding clown to the ground and tore out of the room, throwing the chair to the side and blowing past Gordon. From the way the Joker had spoken, Batman thought he only had Rachel and Harvey to save—Miriam may have been a future target, but he thought her safe for the time being. His mind latched onto Rachel. The choice the Joker posed was an easy one. Too easy. He didn't allow himself to think of their implications.

"Which one are you going after?" Gordon yelled as he sprinted to his squad car.

"Rachel," Batman answered, trying to master his own voice again

_She doesn't deserve to die. Harvey knew what he was signing up for—he isn't Batman's priority._

"We're getting Dent!" Gordon called out, but Batman barely heard him.

Batman raced off into the night on the Pod. He'd already lost too much, and he wouldn't lose anyone else. His fury at himself matched what he felt for the Joker, but his fear outmatched it all and he hoped the price demanded for his mistakes was one he alone could pay.
Hey, everyone!

You'll notice that I used quite a few lines and elements from the movie again (full credits go to Jonathan and Christopher Nolan for those!), but I have reworked/altered a great deal of them. I wanted to up the Joker's ability to get under Batman's skin and how the Joker's most powerful weapons are his intellect and speechcraft. The Joker does have physical power as well, not on the same levels as Batman, of course, but it's not what he relies on.

Batman, despite having been at this for a year at this point, still has a lot to learn. In the Nolanverse, the Joker was his first real prolonged test of how much he could endure and it was an ordeal that shook him to his core and stunted who he was as Batman. The League of Shadows and Scarecrow were formidable in their own right, but they posed a more simplistic threat in a lot of ways. The Joker is so compelling as a villain because of his relationship to Batman - they are opposites but part of the same whole, which just doesn't exist with Batman's other villains. This is why I end the first scene of Batman feeling very at home in the dark and the Joker embracing that same darkness in the second. I wanted to emphasize how they contrast and compare, so you'll see that I've added other elements of this throughout.

Bruce Wayne and Batman are very clearly split in this fic, almost acting as two characters sharing a body in a lot of ways. Eventually, in canon, Bruce Wayne disappears entirely until his entire identity is subsumed into that of Batman. I believe that it's in Batman Beyond where Bruce confides to Terry McGinnis that in his own thoughts he refers to himself as Batman, not by his own name. That's a pretty huge shift in identity and not one that is easily achieved. In TDK trilogy, Bruce comes back in Batman Begins already embracing his old life as a lie and an act, but we see him get lost in a state of 'in-betweens' when personal relationships, like with Rachel, become involved. I want to heighten those moments, make them more intense, with Miriam's involvement in this AU. Just like Miriam is building up to a choice of how her world and self will be, Bruce/Batman is facing a similar decision. I want my intentions with that split to be clear, but I hope you'll let me know what you think and see how it plays out in future chapters.

Scott Synder suggested that the Joker embodies not only Batman's worst fears - which, in this fic, is having his family and loved ones targetted and being helpless to stop it because of his own sense of (unwitting) arrogance and unwillingness to ultimately rely on others - but also our own worst fears. It's been argued that The Dark Knight and the Joker's brand of anarchism that Heath Ledger and Christopher Nolan created purposely harkened back to 9/11 imagery and the very real fears and uncertainties that gripped America during that decade (the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, terrorism, ideas of surveillance, Bush-era administration and the divides in opinions about his policies, etc). This notion is an interesting one, especially considering how the Joker has evolved in every decade - and how he has only grown darker as our tolerance for violence and depravity increases with our desensitization to it. Though how I'm representing the Joker is very much rooted in the masterful portrayal done by Heath, I'm changing his targets and how he terrorizes Gotham and Batman. How I'm doing this will be revealed in the coming chapters, but I hope you all will stick around for the ride there.
And, of course, I extend my never-ending gratitude and sincerest thanks to everyone who's bookmarked, left kudos, and commented on this story. Hearing from you and having you continue to support this story has honestly been a huge bright spot in my life and it's given me an energy I haven't felt in years. It's been a massive encouragement for not only writing this fic, but my life outside of this, too. Thank you again - I'll be back again next Saturday!
"Hello? Can anyone hear me?" Rachel Dawes shouted, her voice growing hoarse from the repeated screams for help.

She had been awake when the men wearing clown masks had pulled her from Anna Ramirez's car. They were much stronger than her, but that hadn't stopped Rachel from kicking one of them in the kneecap and getting a heel into the stomach of another. But that hadn't stopped them from hitting her face and tying her to the chair so tightly she'd lost the feeling of her hands ten minutes ago.

Rachel was in pain. The fear and uncertainty, watching as the clock literally ran out on her life, the men's ringing taunts in her ears, and the straining effort it took to stay composed in the near-darkness of the warehouse siphoned her composure. Only the distant light of the moon and residual halos from nearby floodlights in the surrounding buildings illuminated patches of the place.

All of the strain drained her, sapping the strength she needed away, but what hurt the most was how Anna had sat back and done nothing—staring ahead and cringing with every scream Rachel made as they dragged her out of the car. Rachel had trusted her—worked with her closely for the last year. She was Gordon's up-and-coming detective. Astute and tenacious with a passion for justice; that's how Rachel had always thought of her. The betrayal cut deep. Rachel had hoped—trusted—that Gordon kept his unit clean, that he had his officers working towards the same goals she'd been working at tirelessly for years.

She had been wrong; hoped for too much too soon.

You will not cry. Keep trying—there's a chance someone could hear you.

"Hello?!!" Rachel tried again.

The warehouse they had dragged her into was large and freezing. She regretted not having her jacket, leaving it behind at her apartment when she went to change and drop off her things from Bruce's place. Oil drums, numbering in the dozens, filled the dark space around her. The fumes they gave off were stifling, even with the air movement coming through the decaying walls.

Rachel pulled at the ropes again, the pain of the fibres cutting through the stinging numbness that crept up her arms. The words of the clowns were in her mind and she tried not to think about the worst-case scenario: That she was going to die alone here—in the dark and without anyone to find her. She thought of her mother and hoped enough of her body would be left to bury.

Don't think like that. Keep trying. Someone will come. They will.

"Rachel?"

She snapped her head up, looking to the telephone receiver she had originally assumed was part of the structure of the detonation device. The voice was so quiet, Rachel almost believed she was hearing things—her desperation manifesting into an inkling of salvation that wasn't real. But she allowed herself to hope, to reach and hold on to it—no matter how distant the chance.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"
"Rachel—it's me."

Rachel nearly wept with relief. The voice was quiet, but it belonged to Harvey. Her heart constricted, pinching tight in her chest and seizing her ribs.

"Harvey! Oh, thank god—"

"Where are you? I—I'm tied to a chair in some kind of warehouse, I think."

Strength was coming back into Harvey's voice, giving it more volume and reassuring Rachel despite the reality sitting in the fifty-five-gallon oil drums rigged to incinerate her in less than twelve minutes.

"I—I am, too," Rachel said.

She didn't mean to, but tears fought their way up, choking her voice. But she wouldn't cry. Even if no one was there to see it, she wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"Did they say anything to you?" she asked, thinking of what the Joker's men told her as they left.

"No, no I was knocked out. Why? They—they didn't do anything, did they? Please, please tell me they didn't—"

"No, Harvey. I'm OK, honestly. Nothing permanent, and I got in a few digs of my own," she said, smiling despite the dread—or maybe because of it. It disappeared quickly when she thought about what was coming, the time slipping by. "They told me—they told me that they were letting our friends choose. That only… only one of us is making it out of here. But, Harvey—"

"That means they're coming for you. Don't worry, Rachel. You'll be alright, they won't let anything happen to you," he said.

Rachel knew Harvey was right. As angry as she was with Bruce, for his selfishness and for the extreme form of altruism subsuming his very being, she knew that he would do anything for her. She had to accept that no matter how hard he might try, the man she could be with was disappearing—he wouldn't stay for her or anyone else, not even Miriam. He'd shown that all too well. Bruce couldn't give up Batman any more than he could stop breathing. Despite knowing that, she was also certain that he would find her. If nothing else, she had to trust that he would overcome the impossible—just like he did before. She ignored what her gut told her, choosing to focus on Harvey.

"I know they are, but talk me through what's going on over there—what's happening with you?"

Rachel couldn't help it, a tear escaped as she tried to not think about how Harvey was not the person they'd save—how she'd lose two of the people she loved most in one day. It was too much to endure without telling him what she decided, without laying her soul bare.

"Harvey," she said, her voice quiet enough to hear his sharp intake of breath, "If we don't make it out, I want you to know—"

"Don't talk like that—there's still time. We still have time, Rachel."

That wasn't true. Somehow, the clock told her that they had just over nine minutes left. Rachel didn't want to say it, it was too soon; they were words she wasn't ready to articulate.

Harvey could talk himself out of anything. He'd talked Rachel into their first date—a meeting at a
coffee bar that had lasted late into the night. It was how he was so successful as a lawyer, able to find the exact words to convince a jury and sway a judge. Rachel loved hearing him talk, listening with a critical ear to find the weak points in his arguments and debate with him for hours. It was one of the things she loved and appreciated about him, but she didn't want him to use that charm that simultaneously incensed and left her smitten. There was no way to fix any of this, and he would unknowingly make it harder.

*How do I tell him everything I ever loved about him? How much he means to me?*

But guilt mixed with her feelings; an ugly truth she didn't know how to deal with. She'd slept with Bruce, and she still loved him, too, despite everything keeping them apart. He wasn't someone she could be with, but Harvey wasn't either. She wanted the opportunity to tell him in person, to tell him the truth and find a way out of the spiral she'd let herself fall into. Rachel didn't regret sleeping with Bruce—it was something she had ached for since she was young, but her willingness to do that to Harvey, and the realization that she couldn't be with either of them, was one Harvey wouldn't have accepted even in better circumstances. Perhaps it would be a kindness if she didn't say anything about it—but how could she find the right words, not leave him in silence and comfort him when they had so little time left?

"*It'll be OK, Rachel. They're coming—they'll come for you,*" Harvey said. His voice seemed steady, but something about the pitch told Rachel he was close to panic.

Rachel's heart constricted again. Even then, with the certainty of death pressing down on him, Harvey was thinking of her. Rachel felt wretched. She wanted to speak, but her resolve disappeared and she cried instead. They both didn't know how to say what they needed to, how to properly use the time that was evaporating.

*Be brave, Rachel. Stay with him—put your own feelings aside.*

"I love you, Harvey," she said.

She truly meant it. Rachel may not have deserved Harvey's affections, and she would never live her life with him, but her heart loved him all the same. The sounds Harvey made through the crackling line compounded Rachel's suffering.

"*I love you more than anything,*" he said.

Rachel closed her eyes and forced herself to keep going, to hold on to her resolve and be there for Harvey. Bruce would come, but she couldn't leave Harvey alone.

"Do—do you see any doors or anything sharp?" Rachel asked, trying to fight through the despair and pulling at her bindings. She'd long given up trying to move her bolted-down chair anywhere, but she was still attempting to work her wrists out of the knots. "Is there a way for you to get out? Signal someone, anything—"

"*I'm trying.*" Harvey said. She could hear scraping and indistinguishable sounds on the other end of the line. "*I think... I think I've got something—*"

Harvey cut off mid-sentence. Rachel couldn't hear intelligible words, only a crashing sound, and something heavy falling.

"Harvey?" Rachel asked after a moment. Her blood went cold when she heard nothing.

*Did—did the bomb go off?*
Her own clock quickly approached the seven-minute mark.

*Oh no, oh god—*

"Harvey?!"

Rachel couldn't help the heaving of her chest. She was more afraid than she'd ever been in her entire life, alone and a liar, terrified and desperate for someone to stay with her. She'd been able to give Miriam advice before, to comfort her in the pain she felt—and Rachel thought she understood it. What happened when Jonathan Crane had made his debut as Scarecrow was something that haunted her dreams when she slept alone. She felt foolish now. Rachel thought she understood what it was like to go through hell, but she felt like she was on the edge of plunging into it entirely.

"Please—*please*, can you hear me?" Rachel's voice broke, her breathing going shallow. "*Harvey, please—I* need you to be alright. *Please.*"

Her pleas went unanswered and, in the silence, doubt was born. She wanted to be brave, but her hope was dying. She regretted the choices she made that led her there and her own inadequacies that accumulated to a place of so much pain. Through the tears she stared at the countdown, at the bright red numbers taunting her, and inhaled the burning chemicals that would eat through her skin and burn her bones.

_Five minutes and forty-six seconds._

The Joker smacked his lips together, tongue darting out and touching the scarred corners of his mouth.

A bloody cut split his bottom lip, right along the scar that severed it years ago. His tongue traced across it as he cleaned off the residual taste of copper and felt the thickening scab as it formed. His face throbbed where Batman's fist had connected with the tissue and bone. It should have hurt; his head was still bleeding, but it didn't—the pulsing of his veins and his blood was a high for him. The night had gone better than he thought it would, and it was only going to get better.

He thought of Miriam and his lip split again when it stretched up into a giddy smile.

The countdown in his head was running out, and he was certain it was accurate. Batman and Jimbo were long gone. The boys would have had Miriam by then if they knew what was good for them, and the explosive conclusion he'd so meticulously planned approached.

It was time to light the fireworks.

Rolling his head to the side, the Joker appraised the man standing guard at the interrogation room door. He wasn't tall—maybe 172 centimeters.

*And, clearly, he's been having one too many doughnuts.*

He wanted to laugh at his own joke, but he didn't. This was serious business; had to be careful about how he poked the bear.

Joker was sitting like a naughty kid kept after class on the concrete floor. Shards of broken glass surrounded him in a reflective mosaic of dirty white, green, and purple. His legs were stretched out in front of him, arms reaching for his toes, looking like he was getting ready to sing a tune.

_I still might._
"I want my phone call," the Joker said, catching the attention of Detective Stephens.

The energy he had was translating in ways he couldn't fully control, but he played up the childish motions; rubbing his legs, bobbing his still bleeding head like he was concussed.

*To be fair, I probably am—just a little.*

He had plenty of experience watching someone who was, anyway. He tried not to smile about that, too. It was hard when there was just so much to be excited about.

"I want it—I want my phone call."

Stephens looked over at the Joker, trying to keep his composure. "That's nice," he said.

The Joker bit the inside on his scars, working his sore jaw back and forth. "It's a *constitutional right*, y'know."

Stephens couldn't help himself. He wasn't supposed to engage, but every word that came out the Joker's mouth grated his nerves—and the Joker knew it, too.

"No, it isn't," Stephens said, exasperation creeping into his voice. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

*Well, I did ask nicely.*

"So, tell me," the Joker said, rolling his head around his shoulders full circle before meeting Stephens' eyes, "how many of your *friends* have I killed?"

Stephens stiffened and looked the Joker dead in the eye. He thought of his friends—people he'd known for over ten years—with the split cheeks and the stab wounds and exposed viscera and the pools of blood and piss they had been left to die in. Stephens *knew* he shouldn't answer, shouldn't dignify the Joker's obvious taunt with a reaction. But his face still got hot, and his rage grew when one side of the Joker's bloody face curled up in a smirk.

"I'm a twenty-year man. I can tell the difference between punks who need a lesson in manners, and the *freaks* like you who would just enjoy it," Stephens said. He wanted to leave it with the insult, but the Joker's smile grew even as his eyes darkened. Joker didn't like being insulted, and Stephens felt compelled to answer him. "And you killed six of my friends."

The Joker smacked his lips in a quiet *pop* and cringed in a mock-show of sympathy, clicking his bared teeth together. Stephens felt his blood pressure rise and forced himself to look away before he did something he'd regret. But the Joker knew an opportunity when he saw one, and he relished in the ample opportunities people gave him to rile them up.

"Y'know why I use a knife, Detective?" The Joker's voice was quiet in the room, slithering into Stephens' ear. "Guns are too *quick*—*messy*, and all that. But I don't need to tell you that, do I?"

Stephens' kept staring ahead, his breathing even and attempting not to show any outward sign of the effect Joker's words had on him. His heart hammered in his ears.

"You don't get to *savour* all of the little... *emotions*. You wouldn't know *that*, though, *hmm*? Maybe be a *cliché*, but staring into someone's, ah, *eyes* when they die is a *powerful* thing."

Stephens' hands began to shake. He wasn't a dirty cop. He'd been proud of the fact that he managed to stay relatively clean during his time on the force. Stephens was well-liked and had spent many
years in the esteem of his colleagues, even the dirty ones. He didn't make a habit of beating prisoners, but he wasn't opposed to it. Some people truly did need a lesson that came at the end of a nightstick or a taut fist. The Joker would enjoy a beating, but goddamnit he would deserve it. Stephens tried to resist the temptation and focus on Gordon's orders to stand and wait.

But the Joker had a way of getting what he wanted, one way or another. He'd make Stephens break, and it wouldn't be hard at all. The right words with the right tone were all it would take. Most people were simple like that.

"See, in their last moments, people show you who they really are."

The Joker smacked his lips together again, a giggle building. That was the best way to see someone's true colours, but other ways existed, too. Like Miriam. He knew exactly who she was—the doll only needed a debilitating concussion to suss out the details. He liked that and he wanted to know more, and he would soon. The Joker felt eager, feeding off Stephens' growing anger and grief. Seeing his Miri earlier in the evening and having a heart-to-heart with Bats combined with what was coming next to become an event that nearly made him salivate. But this would be good, too.

Appreciate the little things, buddy. 'Live in the moment,' as they say.

Stephens couldn't look away now. He was watching the Joker, his fury building.

"So, in a way, I knew your friends better than you ever did," the Joker said, straightening his neck and looking away. With a little tilt to the side and a roll of his eyes, he met Stephens' gaze again. "Would you like to know which of them were cowards? I'm good with names, y'see. Who do you wanna hear about first? Officer Ryan Petty or Detective Billy Nelson?"

Stephens' resolve snapped. He may have been older, but he knew how to throw a punch and make a man hurt. Batman had already had his fill, who would be able to tell if Stephens added a few more injuries to the Joker's deserving face? He shirked off his jacket, a mirthless laugh building in his throat, and rolled up his sleeves. "I know you're going to enjoy this," Stephens said, walking towards the Joker, whose only reply came in cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders back. "I'm just going to have to enjoy it even more."

"Let's see what ya got. You look like you have more, ah, fight than the others did."

The Joker was still smiling, but his tone belied his true intentions. The consonants were snapped tics of menace that Stephens didn't notice. They'd all underestimated him again; didn't bother to take away the small shower of weapons so ornamentally arrayed around him. The sharp edge of the glass cut into his palm, but it would be cutting into something else very soon.

Batman was panicking. He didn't recognize that feeling—how it stung so acutely. It hooked under his sternum, pulling his ribs apart and tearing him in two.

He made the Pod go faster, weaving in and out of the cars puttering along the Lower Fifth and speeding as fast he could just short of losing control. The distance was closing quickly, but it wasn't enough. He would deal with the Joker later. Miriam was safe with Alfred, and all that mattered was Rachel. He had to save her.

You will not fail tonight. You can't.
Batman didn't have time to think about his anger and frustration—but Bruce Wayne did. His personal feelings were what led to this; the feelings he had taken years to suppress were what crushed him now. His jaw clenched so tight he thought his teeth would snap into splinters in his mouth.

The turn-off leading to the rundown section of office depots lay ahead. Batman took the turn at a break-neck pace, barely slowing down and pulling back on the throttle. The streets blurred together, but Batman never lost his focus on the destination. He would save Rachel. He had to.

Batman knew Gotham intimately and it served him well: He cut through back alleyways, through pedestrian passages, and tore through the streets—narrowly avoiding colliding with oncoming traffic in his wake.

He found the building—ten stories high and dirty—quickly. Batman almost sprung off the Pod until he saw the door. It was bolted shut with loops of heavy chains. Activating the small canons on the front of the Pod, Batman blew the doors from their hinges.

Nothing would stop him from saving Rachel. He'd die trying if that's what the toll demanded of him. His mind shoved everything else to the side—incapable of focusing beyond the agony of crushing helplessness that consumed him, just like it did when he was a boy.

Flashes of his mother's blood on his hands, the light leaving his father's eyes, feeling their bodies growing cold—it was overwhelming. Miriam's face, terror-stricken and broken. Kate—withered away to bone and pleading for a vow he knew now he had no hope of keeping. Bruce Wayne had failed them all, and now Batman was on the verge of repeating the same mistakes—making them real and irreversible.

He wouldn't admit it, he couldn't, but it wasn't him who would pay the price for all of this. It never was. The blood running down the altar was from the millions in Gotham who would suffer, the people he cared about the most but could never reach.

And he was the one holding the knife.

Patrol Officer Jeremiah Elliot was bored.

He'd been sitting in the same spot for hours watching for people speeding on the expressway leading to the Westside exit of Gotham. It was a fairly unpopulated stretch, with only a large district of warehouses that acted as a buffer between the boroughs leading to Midtown and the outskirts that eventually bled into the suburbs. It was also a popular place for idiots to go so fast they obliterated themselves when they didn't pay attention to the sharp right merging lane. The spot claimed nearly twenty people a year on average. Jeremiah's presence was somehow supposed to help mitigate those numbers.

Most of the time, he saw nothing at all. He drank his coffee, listened to some podcasts with the volume low and his police scanner. He'd been on the force for two years and he had been eager to rise through the ranks, but he was still considered a rookie. That was before the Joker started killing cops. Now he wasn't so sure what the future held or if he even wanted to continue. The assignment that usually caused Jeremiah to roll his eyes and prepare for a night of intense boredom was very welcome then.

It had been a still night, only three or four cars passed in the two hours he'd been sitting there. It was so quiet he nearly jumped out of his skin when the radio crackled to life.
"Attention—all available units get down to 250 52nd Street! This is a code three, I repeat—a code three!"

The voice wasn't one Jeremiah recognized, but he noted the concern and deep sense of urgency. A code three was a bad sign.

"Oh, shit," Jeremiah said, scrambling to sit up in his seat. He turned on his patrol car. That address was only a couple blocks away.

"We have a 207—rescue and recover at all costs!"

207? A kidnapping out here? What about SWAT?

Jeremiah didn't think beyond that. He was likely the closest; he'd be able to make it before they would.

"10-4, this is Patrol Officer Elliot. 10-17 with a three minute ETA," he said into his microphone, already pulling away. He flicked the switch for the lights and sirens and floored it.

More details came in as he did a 180-degree turn and sped in the direction of the address. "10-0 Elliot. Potential 10-7—proceed with extreme caution. Secure the scene and get them out. More units inbound."

Bomb threat, too? Jesus—what the fuck is going on down here?

Jeremiah was familiar with the area after the weeks he had spent patrolling and watching the deadly intersection. He knew exactly where to go, and he had a general idea of what state the building was likely in. Used to be a shipping warehouse, if memory served him correctly.

It wasn't until he was amongst the mostly empty stretches of dying brick and cement that the nerves pressed down on him. He'd never dealt with anything like this before without back-up. The car blitzed through the narrow spaces separating the buildings, looking for the 250 lot. He found it quickly. It was a hulking building, one that loomed with grim foreboding. Jeremiah swallowed hard and talked into his radio.

"10-23, please advise," Jeremiah said.

He waited but heard nothing. Indecision wracked him. Protocol said he should wait for their arrival, but if there was someone in there with a bomb, he couldn't just leave them. He took a deep breath and picked up his radio again.

"I'm going in. Requesting a 10-33."

Jeremiah didn't wait for a response. He drew his sidearm and hopped out of the car, leaving his keys in the ignition. Assistance wouldn't get there in time. He sprinted for the small door ahead and prayed he wasn't brazenly walking into something that would make the situation worse.

Noah couldn't remember hurting that badly before.

He remembered what it was like when the doctors weren't nice; they'd stuck him with needles, strapped him down to cold tables and zapped his brain until he couldn't see straight for weeks. Or when the guards would get frustrated when he was slow—and he was always too slow—and they'd gang up on him and laugh as they rained blows down. He didn't like thinking about those days.
Things with the Boss had been better. He didn't hit Noah and he didn't give him medicine that made him sick and slow. The Boss was generous and obliging: He'd told Noah that, if he was helpful enough, that he'd make the voices that taunted and tormented him since childhood go away. Not even the doctors had promised Noah that.

Noah just had to do what the Boss asked—even if he didn't like the tasks assigned to him. He tried to be gentle when he could be; he didn't like hurting people—but sometimes they made him so angry he couldn't help it. He had always been big and never mastered his own strength. Every time he broke a bone or made someone bleed, he tried to make it better in the best ways he knew how—but it was hard when people were afraid of him. A lot of people were afraid of him.

But she wasn't, the nice lady from the ship. She was pretty and Noah liked her eyes. They seemed to almost glow, and the voices liked her, too. They went quiet when she talked. She wasn't even afraid to touch him, and that was something he hadn't encountered in a long time—especially from women. She wasn't short, but she was small—lean like a willow. Usually, the smaller ones were the most afraid. But she had thanked him, and she wasn't cruel. He wished she could have stayed.

The Boss wasn't always nice to her, though. He always had something mean to say, talking in a way that had made Noah's stomach hurt. But he wasn't like Zsasz—and Noah didn't like him, and he was glad that the Boss didn't want him to hurt the lady. He was afraid the Boss wanted to hurt her. He didn't keep women around, something that comforted Noah and left him distantly uneasy.

Searing agony tore through his stomach. He clutched his torso, thinking if he pressed hard enough it would keep the pain from spilling out onto the floor. His skin felt tight along the jagged line of stitches going the middle of his sternum, and something hard pushed against it.

It hurt. It hurt so bad that Noah almost couldn't stand anymore.

The lady had said she'd get a doctor. Noah was afraid of those, but he wanted one now. He looked at the mean-faced officers pacing along the cages he and the rest of his friends were trapped in. He leaned against the bars and tried to get their attention. "Pl-Please—my insides hurt," Noah said. He didn't know how to ask for help properly. It was getting hard for him to think.

"Step away from the bars, freak," one of the men said.

Noah's face grew hot when the others sniggered. It hurt when people laughed at him. The voices grew louder, insistent and deafening. The lights had strange flares in a range of technicolour. Noah would have liked looking at it if it wasn't for the cold pain working its way up his throat. He held on to the bars for dear life—his grip the only thing keeping him falling to the ground.

"They hurt… please—"

"You're lucky to be feeling anything below the neck. Back away, now."

Maybe if Noah told them, they'd understand. Just like the Boss did.

"The Boss said he'd make the voices go away," Noah said. He had to laugh, mostly out of fear and the realization that maybe the Boss hadn't been honest after all. The voices hadn't gone away. They were still whispering, prophesizing his doom with unnerving clarity. "He—he said he'd go inside and replace them with bright lights. Like Christmas."

Noah was never good at making eye contact. It made him nervous and gave the voices something to fixate on; it became too much for him to translate into a rational understanding. He stared at a white-haired officer, begging with his eyes for help.
But the man only looked at Noah with disgust. "You're out of your mind, pal. Back off."

That was the last straw for Noah. His legs gave out and he sunk to the floor. The medicine the Boss gave him to take away the pain wasn't working anymore. His body seized and he hoped this was all a dream. The Boss said that all the time. He wouldn't lie—Noah was sure of it now.

The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became. He'd wake up and he'd be just fine.

Rachel wanted to scream.

When the clock hit the four-minute mark and Harvey still didn't answer, she grew beyond desperate. She pulled so hard on the ropes binding her hands that she could vaguely feel the warmth of her own blood running down her fingertips. She strained and moved her wrists any way she could, but her thumb caught on the knot and it was agony to tug any harder than she already was.

*Push through it, Rachel. They can fix your hand if you're alive. It won't matter otherwise.*

Rachel breathed deeply and pushed aside her mind's natural response to pain. Steeling herself, she pulled again—leaning all her weight forward as she finally screamed. An animalistic sense of self-preservation hit her in the chest, made her capable of self-inflicted injuries she wouldn't have thought possible before. Something in her hand tore and gave way, loosening and sending shooting stabs of pain up her arm.

But she didn't stop. The muscles holding her thumb to her palm almost completely tore through; the thick edges of the rope caught the edges of her cut skin, peeling it back with every tug.

Agony was a reality no matter which way she moved, but looking at the clock made her feel strong. She had less than three minutes left. Willpower and psyching herself up would be the only way to do the final bend.

*Just fucking do it, c'mon—*

Rachel bared her teeth and screamed again when she forced her arm up, twisting it into an unnatural position in one last tug that would leave her right hand permanently damaged. Her skin furled back from her wrist to mid-palm, coating her hand in blood. The pain was extraordinary, but her hand was free. Enough slack was there for her other hand to leave the knots with considerably less strain.

Rachel sobbed in relief and shocked horror when she stared at the bloody limb. It looked like her skin was a red glove that was falling off her hand. Too much blood was pouring out of it to see anything else clearly. She suppressed the overwhelming urge to vomit. Cradling her wrist to her chest, Rachel worked quickly at the knots tying her feet together. She was right-handed naturally, and pulling at the tight material was difficult with her diminished dexterity and shaking, clumsy fingertips.

She had a minute and a half.

Terror-filled sobs gripped her, but she made herself keep going—pulling on the strength that had seen her through everything else in her life. She had survived her father dying when she was sixteen, seven years without a word from her best friend and the man she loved, the crazed plot of a lunatic, an attempt on her life—she had lived through them all and was stronger for it. She refused to die there.
Clenching her teeth and ignoring the light-headed distortion from blood loss, Rachel finally loosened the rope enough to slip her bare feet through. They'd given her no drugs, but she couldn't feel her toes. The lack of blood circulation and bitter cold of the night rendered them numb. She ignored that, too, and pushed forward. Having no choice but to lean on the barrels for support as she limped, she saw that the timer was past the sixty-second mark. She willed herself to go faster.

"C'mon—you can make it. C'mon," Rachel said through her teeth.

She knew where the exit was, could see it ahead. She literally only had seconds when she reached the door handle. Twisting and shoving her weight against it, she cried out when it wouldn't move. They'd locked it—trapping her in there before she'd be able to find another way out. Rachel couldn't accept that, she couldn't die when she was so close.

"Help! Somebody!" she screamed.

Rachel was beyond caring about the pain—survival was the only thing that mattered. She hammered her fists against the door; alternating between beating the rusted metal and trying the handle. Rachel was stuck uselessly railing against an object that was unmovable. It didn't care that she had less than twenty seconds. It was only when she heard a voice that she stopped and listened before fire and death would be the last things to reach her.

"Stand back, Miss!"

Rachel didn't have time to think. A loud shot rang out mingled with the sounds of metal snapping. Heavy thuds smacked into the door and flooded Rachel with light. A man in an officer's uniform stood there, his gun drawn. Something hit Rachel hard and grasped her heart in a vise.

Bruce didn't come.

The officer paled when he took in Rachel's appearance. He said nothing and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her through the doorway and tearing through the small room that led to the exit. Rachel struggled to keep her feet under her.

"Just hang on, we'll get you help. We're almost—"

The officer didn't get to finish. A flashing wave of fire surrounded them with a deafening blast that knocked them over and plunged their worlds in a ring of heat and darkness.

Batman raced inside the derelict building. Another chained double set of doors was the last obstacle to getting Rachel out. It wouldn't hold him back any more than the bolted doors outside did. Kicking it open, he knew with everything in him that he'd see Rachel there, waiting for him.

But it wasn't Rachel at all. It was Harvey Dent.

Batman stood still. His momentum fled his body—left him weighted down in horror.

"No, no, no!"

Harvey was on the ground in a pool of diesel fuel and blood. His chair had tipped over and face bleeding badly, nose broken. He was choking, trying not to swallow the golden liquid that was flooding his mouth.

"Why did you come for me?! You shouldn't have come for me!"
Harvey's words, choked and quiet as they were—Harvey's, not Rachel's—hit Batman in the lungs, knocking the air and any certainty he felt in himself into dust.

_The Joker lied._

He should have expected it but didn't, just like Gordon said. Batman—no, Bruce Wayne didn't make the right decision. He never made the right decision.

Harvey was still trying to scream, the gas soaking more of him as he thrashed against his bindings. Batman forced himself to move forward. He couldn't leave the man to die and he couldn't stand there and burn himself. His mind clung to the vain and desperate hope that Gordon wouldn't let him down, that he would get to Rachel in time.

It was with numb determination that he freed Harvey's bloody hands, wrapped an arm around his chest, and dragged him with an excruciating effort from the building. Dent was struggling, attempting to scream out Rachel's name in the way Bruce was already longing to do, but Batman stayed silent. The strength of his mind was leaving, but his body remained hardened.

Bruce Wayne still hadn't learned his lesson. He didn't learn to pay attention to the things he was supposed to. It tainted what Batman was meant to be, limited his own capacity to exist on a plane of limitless potential.

When the building behind them burst into flames, overpowering the men and throwing them to the ground, Batman only had time to bring up his cape and cover his own face. He forgot about Harvey. How he was soaked in flammable liquid. Harvey's screams quickly alerted him to the fact. Batman looked up to see the man half-covered in fire—the flesh of his face alight and filling Batman's nose with the scent of burning, acrid tissue.

As Batman worked to put out the flames, to take back the damage that was literally burning a man in front of him, Batman's premonitions came true. He saw what he didn't want to see.

He'd done exactly what the Joker wanted. He'd cut out his own heart and watched it pump out the blood of Gotham as the life drained away. But Batman didn't die. His fate was to watch it happen and be helpless to stop the blade from ending him completely.

Detective Stephens may have had twenty years on the force, but he didn't have anything on a man more than twenty-five years his junior with the blinding agility no one expected.

_They should have._

But there was a lot of things they should have seen coming.

The Joker kicked a leg out and tripped Stephens as he approached to give what he thought would be a satisfying beating. He twisted up, maneuvering behind Stephens and placing the sharp edge of the impromptu knife to his throat—pressing hard enough to make him bleed but not quite deep enough to nick the carotid.

"Let's see how much you enjoy this then, _hmm_?" the Joker taunted.

Stephens dropped to one knee and froze. He'd had more than one son of a bitch try to kill him before, but none of them had managed to get a blade made of glass at his throat. He broke out into a sweat and berated himself internally with a violence that made his arms shake.

"_Up, up, up_ and at 'em, _officer_," the Joker said, digging the glass underneath the man's chin.
Stephens rushed to obey. He forced his legs to stay steady as he tried to move into a position where the edge wasn't biting into him, so painfully close to puncturing the skin completely. With every adjustment Stephens made, the Joker did his own. He wrapped an arm underneath Stephens, pinning him in place and keeping him from trying to wrestle away from the blade.

Shoving him towards the door, the Joker spoke close to Stephens’ ear—making him cringe and try to edge away from the psychotic clown. The Joker only moved in further. "Open it," the Joker said. His voice was low but eerily soothing. It made Stephens' skin crawl.

Usually, the Joker liked to play around a little more. He was on a tight deadline, and he had a surprise visit that still needed to happen in North Coventry in a certain house in the wealthier part of town. He marvelled, not for the first time, at how much useful information one could find with a simple tax form and a thoughtlessly written address imputed into a system with so little real security. Well, security that even a greenhorn like Parker couldn't crack. It would be much simpler with his freshly re-acquired recruit onboard. She had more talent and the know-how to make all his dreams a reality.

The thought of it brought a genuine smile to his face.

Joker forced Stephens to tear the door open and they moved quickly. Coming out from the hall, the Joker marched them forward with purpose into the main bullpen to meet his awaiting audience. His smile slipped into a mocking line of contempt with every pathetic squeal coming from Stephens' mouth.

Funny how they all act tough until they've got something sharp stuck somewhere.

At the sight of the Joker, and the streaming blood leaking from Stephens' throat, every gun in the MCU was pointed at them.

"Whoa! Take it easy, take it easy!" Detective Murphy shouted, his force-issued semiautomatic pointed at the Joker's head.

Drawing up Stephens higher and using his body as a human meat-shield, the Joker pushed the glass in further, making Stephens yelp loudly.

"Drop the weapon, now!" was shouted at the Joker by several of the officers. He ignored all of them. "Just put it down—don't make this worse for yourself—"

No one was eager to watch a live reenactment of what had already happened to so many others. Stephens tried twisting away, but the Joker's lean frame hid a strength that nearly dislocated Stephens' shoulder.

"It's my own damn fault, just shoot him!" Stephens yelled.

The officers surrounded the Joker in a half-circle, but no one knew what to do. They had no commanding officer, no one to tell them how to think.

"Let him go—drop the weapon!"

Like being stuck with a bunch of goddamn parakeets around here. But somehow less entertaining.

The Joker consoled himself. There would be plenty of entertainment coming his way shortly. He decided to play it up a little; he just couldn't help himself.

"What's that? I'm sorry?" the Joker asked, squinting and turning his ear towards them as if he'd
somehow missed the screamed orders. Stephens' blood was running down his fingers in warm streams. He resisted the urge to make it gush out faster.

For now.

"What do you want?!" Detective Murphy yelled. Stephens was his mentor, someone he aspired to be like. He had a gun but he felt powerless with it in his hands.

The Joker gave Stephens' arm another jerk as he moved the blade along his neck, slicing through the loose skin under his jaw. The Joker's eyes went wide and he waited for that sweet moment of quiet.

"I just want my phone call."

He tried not to laugh at the stupefied looks on the officers' faces. Their eyes darted amongst one another, trying to determine how serious of a request that really was. The Joker made another incision, this one deeper than the last and Stephens sucked in a painful breath.

Detective Murphy broke first. "Alright, OK?" he said, taking his fingers off the trigger and lowering one of his hands to his pocket.

"Might not wanna move, there," the Joker said to Stephens before pressing the glass further in. Outstretching an arm, he motioned Murphy to throw his cell phone. "Right, c'mon."

Murphy obeyed, tossing the device to the Joker. He caught it easily, and, with deft fingers, he dialed the ten-digit number that would end their night in a bang and start his evening in a send-off that would only make the days ahead an exciting prelude for the coming celebration. Stephens couldn't help but be loud as the Joker kept cutting deeper and deeper.

"Shh, shh, shh." It was a gesture of mock comfort, one that was in direct opposition to his hand bringing the blade down in a small arc to the jugular. Stephens wouldn't have long now.

The Joker counted back from ten. He was glad he picked Noah as the mule for his present. Both because he was an easy, gullible sap who lapped the Joker's words up like a puppy and because he wanted to punish Noah now for his strange little friendship with Miriam. He didn't like that she ignored him. It was maddening, really. But he would deal with her later. Noah clearly had some special feelings for his sweet peach, and he couldn't have that.

A cruel smile marked his face as he counted to zero.

The blast of six pounds of C-4 bursting out of Noah's stomach shook the entire building. Windows shattered, papers went flying, rancid burning flesh and gore vaporized into the air in thin sheets of bloody rain, fragments of bone shot out like bullets, and every man and woman in the MCU fell to the ground—either dead, on their way there, or so shocked from the blast that they didn't move from their positions on the floor.

The Joker stood alone in the mess, a fine coat of red misted through his hair and decorating his vest, unaffected. His hand and forearm were covered in thick streams of blood as Stephens bled out at his feet, his throat an open gash that poured out a never-ending river that soaked dropped police reports.

He was smiling again, a low hum coming from his throat as he licked his lips and tasted the carnage in the air. With slow purpose, he stepped over Stephens' body and made his way to the holding cells—the little cages he'd been in before.
The Major Crimes Unit was dark. Sparks of electricity from dangling wires and short-circuiting power systems arced in loud cracks. The Joker was in no rush now. He'd made his point, and now he had to get one more small cog that would make up the machine that brought Gotham's annihilation.

In the holding cells, the smell of Noah's burst intestines and charred remnants of his body were at its strongest. Some of the people on the floor were still alive, but even more of them were dead. The Joker had seen Lau in the very back holding cell, and Gordon had accidentally added some meat-shields of his own to ensure Lau made it through the blast.

The Joker looked like an ethereal creature of folk tales in the dark. His hair was dishevelled, back hunched, torso curved in a way that no normal man positioned himself naturally. He moved silently through the after-effects of the short-lived pandemonium he'd unleashed. The darkness belonged to him, and watching the Joker approach was enough to break Lau.

Grabbing the keys off the belt of an officer missing half his face, jangling them in a song only he understood, the Joker turned and looked at the sniveling man. Lau cowered and cried as the Joker, and his twisted, lanky frame, came to a stop at the door of his cell. The Joker raised up the key in continued drips of music that spelled out Lau's death.

"Hello, there," the Joker said simply.

Lau shrank back and Joker smiled. Out of the corner of his eye, the Joker saw that some of his lackey's had survived the explosion as well. He had his showdown and won. They'd all shown themselves as blind as he'd predicted they'd be. Only more rewards awaited, and the Joker couldn't help but share the good news.

"Well, boys, I've got a hot date tonight—the evening's not over just yet," he said as his remaining men picked themselves up, speaking like he had a larger audience than he truly did.

They curled their noses at the horror show surrounding them, but the Joker revelled in it. He spoke low, and no one knew him well enough to see the joy that made his eyes turn the colour of molten honey. "The stage's set and the results are in—Gotham's goin' to burn by the end of the week."

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, everyone! Thank you all again for tuning back in and reading!
"What do you think?" Bruce asked, pointing out to the green expanse in front of us.

There wasn't much to look at yet. It was a vast hill with a gentle slope where Wayne Manor used to stand for over 150 years. That was before Bruce burned it to the ground. Or, at least, I think he did. I'm not so sure anymore.

I'm not certain about much of anything anymore.

The long stone staircase leading to what used to be the Manor's front door was still intact, some places singed from where the black ash fell from the burning husk of melting mortar and brick. The new foundations of Wayne Manor had been laid down, apparently adhering to the same plans as those created by the first architects who modelled the place off British gentry estates. It had been a year since they started rebuilding. The bare bones of the first floor were already standing, but it looked like a new husk with an improved veneer.

Bruce had assured me that things would be almost the same with room to make any changes if we wanted. I had no interest in any of it—the Manor wouldn't be the same and the things that had made it home were destroyed.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" I said, crossing my arms and trying to sound indifferent.

Bruce laughed, his eyes surveying the horizon and taking in the work-in-progress. There was a lot to do—probably another two years worth of construction. He could visualize the Manor as complete, but I only saw ruin.

"Yeah—for now it doesn't. Just wait, it'll come along," he said. Bruce walked off, lost in his own head. I stood there, staring but not really seeing, and it wasn't until Alfred nudged my elbow that I started to follow him.

It was summer. The sun was warm but not hot enough—hiding behind the clouds and leaving me shivering in its absence. I wore an extra layer, a large cardigan that draped around my shoulders in a way I thought was flattering but still hid me, over my summer dress. It was white, with red flowers and light green leaves peeking out from the petals, and long—going down nearly to my ankles. It was the dress the Joker took from my room—when he played voyeur and turned my life into a hellscape and haunted my every waking moment.

But I didn't know that then, did I? Oh, how small my problems seem in comparison now.

"Come along, Miriam. I believe Master Bruce, in all his grand assertions of possessing an excellent memory, neglected to mention there's a surprise on the other side," Alfred said, pointing over the crest of the hill where Bruce disappeared from view.

Following Alfred, going slow, I wasn't eager to see what awaited. I remember trying to master my temper, keep back the unspoken frustration that made it hard not to start walking in the opposite direction until I was in another world entirely.

We talked about what happened the night the Manor burned down as much as we did about Bruce's disappearance. That is to say, we didn't talk about it at all. It was another thing left unspoken to fester under the skin.

When I came back from Prague, scared and worried with the riots ripping apart the Narrows and
downtown Gotham, Bruce made the fire sound like an inconvenient accident. The papers, going off the disbelieving accounts of his guests, labelled it as the work of an affluent drunk disgracing his family's name in the party bash of the decade. I didn't care about that so much; I long stopped giving a damn what they published about Bruce. I could see it well enough for myself without having to read about it.

It was the other things lost that mattered. The albums of Mom and I were in the Manor—all the things she left for me when she died—everything that was important and I didn't take with me to Europe. And it was gone. Two out of a dozen albums survived. The places where Parker and I forged our friendship incinerated. All I had left really was her wedding band resting on my finger.

Bruce never even said sorry. He made a joke about it once and I couldn't bring myself to speak to him for a week. That was the closest I had ever gotten to breaking his nose.

I think he didn't really know what to say—he was stuck in a place of limbo, just like I was years before. He couldn't be the Bruce Wayne that everyone else knew in the papers—that man was snarky and cold, rude and indifferent, the poster-boy for debauchery and suave charm. But he also couldn't be the young man I knew another lifetime ago—the one who was kind and understanding, protective and generous, involved and fiercely intelligent. Bruce didn't know how to reconcile the two, and I wish he had told me why sooner; it would have been easier to know that there was a third self he kept hidden rather than believing it was me who was responsible for the change, why he left in the first place.

I wasn't immune to change, either: I was just as foreign to him as he was to me. Quiet, muted, quick to find seething rage boiling below the surface, struggling to stay attached to the world and the people in it, and always looking to hide. Parker was someone who knew how to see me. He made me better, brought out the self in me I used to recognize when Mom was still alive. Alfred saw the change and knew the reason, even if he didn't understand the full repercussions, the ways I'd hurt myself. How I made the wounds deeper—never allowing them to heal completely.

Alfred had tried being the negotiator to help Bruce and I find familiar ground. Sometimes his efforts worked, but they often didn't. Certainly, I had blame in that—I couldn't let go of my anger, burying it deep instead and creating that fantasy world again. Instead of it just being Alfred and me, Bruce was allowed back in, but he didn't hold the same place he used to. He was a bystander I desperately wanted the attention of while simultaneously shoving him away to a place he couldn't hurt me anymore.

Alfred and I met Bruce at the top of the hill. My guard was up, already not willing to accept whatever it was he wanted to give me. After a moment, and Alfred clearing his throat, Bruce turned to look at us. I was surprised to see such a big smile on his face. It threw me off guard and hit me in the stomach.

"I think you'll like this—c'mon," Bruce said, heading for where the back garden used to be. He looked ready to start sprinting. There was a new building made of stone that looked like a large shed with sprawling windows and a glass dome ahead of us. He looked back at me, still grinning. "What, don't tell me you got slow?"

He was appealing to my competitive side, and it was working. "I'm in a dress, Bruce," I called after him.

Despite myself, the old parts of me—the one that played with Bruce out there for hours and he would careen around with me on his shoulders—was eager to return.

"When has that ever stopped you before?"
I set my jaw but couldn't help my own grin. He turned away, getting ready to start running in earnest. I kicked off my shoes, grabbing one in my hand, and threw it—hitting him right in the back of the head.

"What the—"

In the time it took him to turn around, I had already darted past him—sprinting ahead with my dress hiked up around my knees. Bruce was stronger, more muscular after he came back, but I was lighter and faster.

"Who's slow now?" I yelled over my shoulder.

It was a strange moment, like we really could forget that he left—skipping back to a time of ease and familiarity. I didn't keep up with my fight training after what happened to Parker, letting myself get out of shape, wasting away indoors as I imposed stricter controls on what I would allow myself to eat or enjoy. I hadn't exerted that much energy in a long time, but at that moment it didn't matter. My lungs were on fire and my muscles were tight with energy, but I felt more awake than I had in years. It was foolish, but I started to let hope grow.

I got to the stone structure first, out of breath and chest heaving. I smoothed out my dress and watched Bruce trail in behind.

"I won, old man."

It would have felt more like a victory if it didn't feel like I had just run up six sets of stairs, and if Bruce didn't look so unaffected. The bastard didn't even break a sweat.

He laughed through his nose, his smile still in place. "Hey, watch it. You're going to be this old one day, too," he said.

I knew he let me win the race, but we kept up our familiar game of pretend—feeding just another part of the illusion. "Yeah, but I'm not right now, am I?"

He raised an eyebrow and turned to the building. It was taller than it seemed from the top of the hill, sturdy with a smell of fresh, wet dirt.

"What's this surprise Alfred was talking about?" I asked, looking around for anything obvious.

Bruce's smile widened. "I'll show you," he said, motioning me to follow him through the ornate wood door leading inside.

Bruce never tried to placate my anger when he came back. He never tried to fill the gap between us with money, but he didn't try with anything else, either. This was a new notion, one I automatically mistrusted. I followed him anyway, passing through the door into something I had never expected.

It was a little greenhouse. There were bags of dirt and different pots of various shapes and sizes. Soft earth sporadically tickled the bottoms of my feet. Gardening tools were organized neatly along the wall, and the light bathing the room was ephemeral but brilliant. The place just needed someone to get started, but that wasn't what drew my attention the most.

There was a large telescope in the middle of the room, aiming up at the ceiling. I'd never really seen one before outside of science class—and even those we were never allowed to touch as students. A feeling I had almost forgotten stuck in my throat.

"Do you like it?" Bruce asked.
It took a minute for the question to register and I had to clear my throat more than once. "Is it for me? You know I don’t go outside very much—not sure how much of a green thumb I’m supposed to have," I joked.

My laugh was an uncomfortable one, and I didn’t know what to do with what was in front of me. The idea of taking care of living things was unsettling. I didn’t want to be responsible for them, no matter how small. I still found myself being pulled to the telescope where Bruce was standing.

"When did you get ideas about me gardening?"

I couldn’t look at him, afraid I would break if I did. Mom had loved gardening. The dirt had never bothered her and neither had the bugs. Both were unappealing to me, but I used to watch her from the back steps when she had been outside on sunny afternoons. I would watch the clouds or get lost in watching her work—I still didn’t like reading back then. Parker was the only one who showed me the joys in them, and so I entertained myself with daydreams. Even then I was practicing at deluding myself.

"That wasn’t much of an answer," he said, leaning down to look me in the eye. "I thought you were too cooped up—spending all your time at work or in front of your laptop." He was smirking, showing this wasn’t much of an admonishment. "I thought… I thought it would be nice to have something to look forward to. Make it your own."

He spoke quietly and I don’t know why, but something in the action of him looking away—completely uncertain without that façade of arrogance—made my chest feel tight for a different reason than I was used to. This was a view beyond the illusion, seeing through the front to find the depths beneath. Bruce was trying—just in the only way he knew how.

"Yeah, I like it," I said, taking my eyes from him and looking around the space again. The smile that came on my face was big, one that I hadn’t found in a long time. "I really do."

I didn’t want to see his smile. This had been enough, and though my sense of optimism rose, it was too much to accept it completely. Looking at his face would have broken my resolve.

"Alfred picked out the telescope, didn’t he?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood that made my throat constrict.

"You’re bloody right I did." Alfred stood in the doorway, looking pleased. "As far as I am aware, Master Bruce wouldn’t know one end from the other," he said with a laugh.

Bruce and Alfred descended into an exchange of jabs I didn’t really listen to. I was staring at them, my ears starting to ring. It was then that I realized what Parker said was right—I did have everything right in front of me. It wasn’t perfect—not at all, but I thought I could work at it and make it whole.

That required a sacrifice from me.

I couldn’t go back to who I was before when Mom was alive, couldn’t change what I did—the mistakes and damage I inflicted—any more than I could undo the ensuing pain that haunted everyone around me. But I could change who they thought I was. I could bury the past, just like Bruce had. I could forget, push it down until it was another thing that wasn’t real and the illusion I lived in became reality.

Parker was the only one who wanted to see what was hiding in me from the very beginning. He genuinely tried to see what was underneath, my own layers that I hated Bruce so much for having.
I thought I wanted to show Parker those things, to shirk off the self-destructive behaviours that kept everyone at a distance. That was before what I did. Even now, I have nobody who can see beyond what I've done, who I am, and still want to be around me. I didn't deserve what I had in front of me—but it was all there. I thought I had finally opened my eyes.

"Alfred, Bruce?" They both turned their heads in my direction. Alfred was thoroughly amused, and Bruce had that look that usually meant he was losing an argument and was too stubborn to admit it. "I think it'd be nice to get a picture. Need to start replacing those empty frames sometime."

I even sounded lighter. My resolution was fixed and immovable. Detachment in the areas that caused me pain was a well-practiced skill, and I employed everything I learned right then. The beaming smile on my face felt real if I didn't think about it.

"Well, I can take the photo—"

"Now, Master Bruce, you get in there. We do need some photos. Preferably a recent one just in case you go for an extended evening stroll," Alfred said motioning Bruce to stand next to me and taking my phone. Bruce rolled his eyes and Alfred laughed, and I forced myself to join in.

Bruce and I stood by the telescope, his arm around my shoulders. Even with how tall I'd gotten, Bruce still had three inches on me. Alfred took our pictures, struggling more than once with my phone, and the energy between us wasn't mired in anything discernable. We felt easy around each other again, found old grooves to follow. We laughed, took photos with goofy poses, lost track of time.

I felt jubilant through the exhaustion. Bruce and Alfred were smiling; I wasn't causing them strain or pain. This was the first step in maintaining the lie no one wanted to see beyond.

We moved to leave when Alfred stopped me. "We didn't get one of just you yet, my dear. Go on, stand by the window there," Alfred said as he pointed to the far window where the western sun peeked through the overcast clouds. "Need to mark the occasion of your surprise, don't we? We'll take another in a few months when things have livened up a bit." Alfred chuckled at his own stupid joke and squinted as he stared at the phone screen.

I moved where I was told, leaning against the glass. Pictures usually made me uncomfortable; they showed me things I didn't like to see in my eyes: They never really matched my expression. To me, they looked like the eyes of a liar.

The smile was forced before I caught Bruce making a face out of the corner of my eye. Bruce had become chronically serious when he came back, stoic to the point of cliché sometimes. When I was a kid and Bruce would help me fall back asleep after I woke up in the middle of the night, he used to pull funny faces to make me feel better. My favourite was when he did a wriggling wave with his eyebrows while keeping the rest of his expression neutral. I don't know what it was about it, but it always managed to make me smile.

He was doing the same thing then and I laughed the way I used to—with no self-consciousness and a little snort at the end. The old Bruce peeked through and that was because I had changed—put forth my own little lie that everyone didn't have to feel bad accepting. Alfred looked so happy, and I had faith that this was something I wouldn't let anyone down on.

But what I decided to do wasn't really a form of selfless altruism to make the lives of those around me better. Not really. I'm too selfish for that. I was afraid of being left behind, and that fear never disappeared. Just like my resolve, it was also immovable—never leaving me or something I could explain out loud. It was consuming and constant—another buried truth I didn't want to confront.
I'm afraid of being alone because I already am.

A familiar feeling of pain greets me when I open my eyes. It bleeds down into my limbs and up my spine, each muscle aching and tight. Waking into a fog, my mind's trapped in another place, nothing has the impact it's supposed to.

Something's wrong, but I can't get my brain to work. One thought does come through, one burning question that would make everything else irrelevant.

**Why am I not dead yet?**

Everything would be so much easier if I was dead.

My eyes are open, and my sight goes from black nothing to blinding white. I'm staring up at a silvery tin ceiling with crown moulding framing the expensive-looking tiles. It's not what I expected to see. It's like there are cotton balls stuffed into my ears; either there are no sounds to hear or they've stopped working entirely.

I feel the panic. It's there—deep in my chest, but it hasn't buoyed up past the layers of numbness. Of all the things I could have thought of, I never would have come up with this.

*There's nothing about any of this you could have predicted, Miri.*

Glancing off to the side, being careful not to jostle my head, I can see unfamiliar family portraits and a large wooden armoire. Things are still fuzzy; I can't make out the faces. Lit candles illuminate the room, giving a faint and inconsistent light. From what I can tell, I'm in a bedroom.

Vanilla, heavy and artificial, fills my nose. Drug-induced apathy shifts into a state of hypervigilance as I register the other smells. The vanilla's mingled with something else—cigarettes, lavender, and a familiar scent I can't place.

*Yes, you can, Miri. It's sweat, gas, and gunpowder.*

My stomach is stuck in my throat. Panic succeeds in working its way through the stifling numbness. The despair that's become an old friend since waking up on the ship rests on my chest. It's getting hard to breathe. An unwanted thought pops in my mind.

*You knew this was going to happen, Miri. You can't get away from this. You'll never be able to get away.*

Shoving the thoughts away is difficult, my mind at war between giving up completely and the vain hope that maybe I can fight my way out of here. Right now, apathy claws its way to a resounding victory.

It takes a minute to realize how cold I am, how difficult my arms are to move, how stiff my spine is, and how it emits flashes of pain all the way to the tips of my toes. My skin feels taut—like it's being stretched too far across my bones. When I sit up, I realize why.

I'm just in my underwear and a large button-up shirt. It's a bright yellow with faint lines of intersecting diamonds. It's garish—too bright and loud—and it's nearly neon next to the brown of my skin. Someone put me in this—took my clothes and set this up. Zsasz's face comes to mind in a new context I don't fully remember, but I remember blood pouring out of his destroyed face and blind rage. I forget how to breathe.
I can't finish the thought; I don't want to—but, even now, there are parts of me that are eager to hurt me with the truth.

You knew, Miri—you knew something was going to happen. They haven't bothered to hide it—Zsasz already tried. You're going to die, and your blindness will be what kills you.

I've been so stupid—stupid to think I could get away from any of this. That, if I fought hard enough, I could be safe.

All I can do is curl in on myself and sob. The fast movements bring fresh throbs in my head, but I don't care. Fighting has only brought me pain. If I had just done what the Joker had asked, if Parker was the one Batman had saved instead of me, none of this would have happened. Now, the only certainty I have is that more pain is coming. It's only a matter of when.

Of course, they won't let you die easy. Where would the fun be in that?

I stay this way for a long time: Sobbing intermixed with hyperventilating, shuddering spasms with agony. The waiting is worse than anything I feel. Death was a welcome certainty before, but some part of me can't help the instinctual fight or flight response.

Get out and find a way to contact Bruce.

But Bruce hasn't been able to stop this before—hasn't been able to keep me safe. I don't know if trying is worth the effort, or if I should find something to end things myself. One way or another.

Anything is better than waiting here for something to happen.

Untangling my limbs from one another slowly, I try my best to sit up. Nausea hits me in waves, burning my throat and blurring my vision. Whoever took my clothes also undid my hair from its braid, making the thick waves stick to my sweaty neck. Moving is taking a lot more effort than it should, but I keep going.

Blood soaked through parts of the shirt in small patches along my arms, but I'm still in the fog. The memory of crawling along glass comes back up and I remember the pain clearly—how it cut into my arms and slashed the skin. But the worst of the cuts have been wrapped carefully in gauze. The dressings around my hands have been reapplied, and I know glass sliced through the skin underneath. The bandages strike me as being stranger than my state of clothes—an act that's somehow more dread-inducing. My movements seem to unlock my mind from whatever drug-induced sleep I was just in. I focus on them, trying to remember what happened.

Zsasz was there before—when they hit Alfred's car—I know that. They hit it hard enough to flip it on its side. The clown masks. The hands on me. Zsasz's holding my waist—fingers crawling up to my throat again, reigniting the visions that haunt me. His voice—filled with excitement and the promise of a slow death—his screams when I hit him in the eye with the shard of glass. Lewis and the memories he brings. The needle going in my arm and them dragging me back into a dimension of agony I have no escape from. I think the blond boy from before was there, too—the one from the mess hall. A realization hits me and my stomach drops.

Wait, Alfred—he could be here. I don't know what happened to him. Wait, wait, wait. The Joker was in jail. You saw them throw him in a cell. That means—

Zsasz could be the one waiting. He could be the one who did this.
Somehow, the absolute terror inherent in the prospect is worse than anything I've ever felt around the Joker. Reason leaves, and I nearly crumble into a broken mess incapable of anything. Hands squeezing my throat choke the air out of me. Black spots, growing larger by the second, obscure my sight.

*Try to breathe—just keep breathing.*

It's not working. My breathing is shallow pants that worsen the dizziness, warping what I'm seeing. Fear makes the path ahead of me simple—I need to get out.

Ignoring the searing tension in my muscles, I push myself off the plush bed and stagger, grab the metal bedpost for support. The wood floor is colder than my feet, and it doesn't help me find my footing.

*Keep moving.*

Knees feeling like jelly, like they can barely hold my weight even after how small I've become in such a short period, I stumble and trip on a throw rug I didn't notice before, nearly falling over before catching the edge of a dresser on the opposite wall. The framed pictures are discernable now, and I recognize who's in them.

*That's Anthony Garcia. This is Mayor Garcia's house.*

He's standing on some beach with his wife and daughters, looking happy and tanned. He could be here, too. His family could be dead.

*Would that be your fault, too?*

It's impossible for me to work out the reason in any of this. Five lives that could be riding on me, who could be held here somewhere and I need to find them.

*No, you don't. You can't even help yourself.*

My mind is not being kind, it's not focusing on what it should. Or maybe it is. But I know I can only panic about so many things at once, and I need to keep moving.

*Look around for anything you can use. Anything.*

It's painful to turn my head, but there's a half-shut door to my left. The marble countertop means it's a bathroom. Leaning heavily against the wall, I make it to the small en suite. It's too pristine and white, hurting my eyes if I open them past a squint. My breathing's too heavy, and I'm already running out of energy. I wince when I catch a look of myself in the mirror. The bruises on my legs are luminescent, and the canary yellow shirt that barely covers my underwear nearly makes me vomit. The bruising on my face and neck have faded into an ugly pattern of yellow and green. Hair wild and curled, the look in my eyes is one I can't decipher.

*Move. Think about that later. Find something you can use.*

Moving from the wall to the counter, I will my legs to hold me and search the medicine cabinet and vanity drawers.

*Band-aids, dental floss, towels, tampons, Q-tips, soap, nail trimmers... None of this is useful. Who doesn't keep a pair of scissors in their bathroom?*

"Fuck." The curse comes out as a strangled whimper.
Whatever they gave me is making it difficult to function, and I don't know how much longer I can last before my legs give out, or whoever it was that left me in here comes back. Fatigue—the deep weariness I've been battling—is trying to lull me back to sleep. But fear gives life to my limbs; it's the only thing keeping me upright. If I drop now, there's no way I'm getting back up again. Fear leads my mind down a darker route.

_no one can hurt you if you're not cognizant enough to feel it._

There are rows of small prescription bottles in front of me. Twisting around the labels, there are only a few words I recognize. Taking something I'm unfamiliar with could do nothing. Or it could cause a reaction that would make me feel worse than I do already.

_or it could kill you if you took enough._

The thought of suicide is one I would have shoved away immediately a month ago. Now it's a tempting alternative to the hell I'm convinced I'll never be able to escape. I can't stop my mind from going there, but I think of Mom.

_endure, Miriam. When you have nothing to fight back with, endure._

Those were her parting words to me. Would she still feel the same if she knew where I was, had any inkling of what was going to happen to me?

_endure it. You can't make anything up to Parker now, but you can share his suffering. Take the pain that you should've had from the beginning._

My jaw tightens to the point where it feels like my teeth are going to snap under the pressure. The pounding in my head is worse, nearly unbearable, but I'm too tired to cry anymore. Faint feelings of resolve sit in my heart. I should have died that day four years ago. It should have been me that suffered. If I can endure this, maybe—

_it's a vain hope, Miri. There's no escape until one of you is dead._

The chances of me coming out of this are small, but I need to try.

But who am I trying for?

_if you're going to die, at least try to give them hell first._

Steeling myself, I tense and leave the bathroom with exhausting effort.

__try the kitchen. They'll have knives there._

It's the only plan I have. Part of me knows it'll be for nothing, but I keep going. If not for myself, then for Alfred and Mom. Maybe even for Bruce.

Inching along the bedroom wall, using the various pieces of furniture for support, I make it to the door. It's shut, and with care I pull at the handle, bracing for some noise to betray me. The door swings open in silence and more candles line the hallway. Bile rises in my throat and I slap a hand over my mouth to not throw up.

_try—to breathe. Just—just try._

With resolve I didn't know I was capable of, I move down the hallway, my sense of alarm growing with each pained step. More family photos of the Mayor with his family smile at me from behind
their glass prisons. The candles are a tribute in memoriam, a shadow of remembrance for a happy family that's likely—

*Stop it, Miriam. Focus. Focus.*

Wherever they are, I hope they're safe. It's a stupid thing to do, but if I'm going to lie to myself, I might as well make the delusion total.

The house is huge with several rooms lining the hall and two others that split and lead down to darkened destinations I can't make out. The candles create a path, marking the way to what's likely going to be the last thing I see. I still don't cry, but my muscles grow weary. More of my weight pushes against the wall and I lean my burning forehead against the cool surface.

My breathing is uneven, making my mind feel more precarious than before and close to slipping back into unconsciousness. I almost welcome the feeling when something startles me. The hair on my arms and neck rise to stand painfully at attention.

Voices carry through the house; I can hardly hear them over the chattering of my teeth. The words don't sound natural; they're too tinny. Coming to an open staircase overlooking the large living area, I search for the source of the noise, more than aware that whatever end waiting for me isn't far away.

It's not until I see the cold blue light framed by flickering orange and yellows coming from the living room that I realize the voices are from a TV. There are no candles here, only the inconsistent flashes from the screen ahead.

Staggering down the stairs, trying to be quiet and failing, I make my way down one step at a time. When I make it to the bottom, there's nothing in the open space for me to lean against. I nearly fall to the floor when my hands leave the railing and try to walk unaided.

*Whatever's going to happen is probably waiting over there, but you sure as hell won't crawl.*

Where I tried to keep my breathing quiet before, it's now ragged heaves as I force myself upright. Crossing the remaining distance, I lean heavily on the red canvas couch. The kitchen is off to my right, and I can see the butcher's block, but there's nothing to help get me there. The renewed flickers from the TV catch my attention, and I can't keep myself from staring.

*Why—why am I on the TV?*

The TV is playing a video of me.

The shot is jerky, unaided by a force to keep it straight. I'm in my old pinstripe blouse and there's a bloody halo around my head, coating my hair and the mattress beneath. My eyes are closed, and I barely recognize the sound of my own voice when I hear a groan—from both versions of me. This was shot on the ship. I don't remember anyone taking a video of me, but there are also three days that are totally eclipsed from my memory.

*Who was sick enough to film this?*

I already know the answer. The Joker did this, but he can't be here. *He can't.* Gordon had him, he's in *prison*. He can't get out. Bruce wouldn't let that happen. *He wouldn't.*

*How do you explain any of this, Miri? Then who the fuck is waiting here for you? It's either Zsasz or the Joker. Either way, you're going to die.*
Shock and dread make me freeze as I flinch at the sound of my voice—foreign but familiar.

"Wh-Who're you? Where's… where's Parker?"

The camera angle's set from above, and the sudden lurch downwards increases my vertigo. Parker's name coming from my mouth causes fresh pain to rip through my heart.

"Uh, is that supposed to be a joke? 'Cause if it is, depending on your delivery, this could be hilarious."

*It's the Joker. I'm trapped in a fucking nightmare.*

The video continues, and I watch myself open my eyes. It's an out of body experience, like I'm watching my past self as if I was there the whole time—a spirit caught in a time loop from hell. I seem dazed in the video, my eyes are unfocused and heavy. Moving forward enough to sit on the couch I was leaning on before I fall to the floor, my legs shake uncontrollably: They don't have much fight left. I pull my legs up and hug them close—as if that will protect me from what's happening.

"He's my... my friend. Best friend." The Joker gives a small laugh at the expression on my face: It's quizzical, and it's not filled with fear at all. "Why do you look like that? It... looks like it hurts. Are you OK?" My voice sounds casual and higher like I'm thirteen again. I was showing concern for the man who did *that* to me—nearly caved my head in and left me bloody.

*Why didn't I know who he was?*

The camera angle changes again; this time it's on the same level as my prone body—but off to the side, like he was laying next to me.

"Nothin' hurts me now, sweet peach," he says. There's that sick nickname again—the one with meanings I never want to learn. "It's for the party, remember?" His voice sounds different, too. It's more… friendly. If I didn't know any better, I would describe it as kind.

"Oh. OK. Makes... makes sense."

My eyes close in the video. A purple gloved hand creeps along the edge of the frame of the shot, grabbing my chin and giving my head a slow but deliberate shake. My teeth clicked together in the video, making them ache now in this fucked up replay of a memory that was literally beaten out of me. My eyes popped back open, but they still don't seem to see anything at all.

"Someone over here's a little loopy, hmm? Did I hit your head too hard?"

Those words are familiar. I heard them when I woke up in the hospital. I thought I was hallucinating, but no—some part of my mind was remembering.

*Wait, if that happened, then that means—*

The feeling of someone touching me, their body on top of mine, hands on my chest and in my bra—that might have been real, too. I'm trembling so bad my hands can't hold onto my legs anymore. I try to bring them to my face, to force myself to look away.

*You shouldn't watch this. You need to get out.*

"I don't... I don't feel good."
My double rolls over and vomits, and it feels like I'm about to mirror what's happening in front of me. The camera twists around to the Joker's face. The glaring proximity of his face to the screen, the sight of his black eyes, and the frightening uncertainty of what I'm about to watch make me convulse.

"Whoopsies. Don't you die on me now, we've got too many items on the agenda before you bite it."

The screen goes black and I drop my head in my hands as darkness surrounds me. Even now, the black of the room compounds the terror in me—elevating it to a position of unholy fear where the dread of knowing what's going to happen is mixed with deeply embedded childhood nightmares until they become one. I don't scream, but I want to. It's like all the air is trapped in my throat, choking me instead of imbuing me with the life I so desperately need. My cold cheeks feel warm as tears roll down.

No, Miri. Get up. Go to the kitchen. You're running out of time. Someone set this up—you need to move.

But I can't. I can't.

"Why... why?!" The sounds are coming from me now, not the TV, and I can't stop them. "Why... why didn't I die instead?" It's a whisper choked by absolute helplessness. The dark part of me, the one that knew how this was going to end all along, is right: I'm never going to get away from any of this.

A warm hand lands on my shoulder and I scream. He lets me, not even bothering to try and shut me up. He pulls me off the couch and I fall on my knees in the dark. Begging won't make this stop, but I try anyway.

"No, please don't—please, please just stop—"

I crawl backward as fast as I can, trying to put distance between him and me. My back slams into something solid and I can't get up, can't even properly see in the dark. Somehow the Joker got out. He's here with me now. And I'm going to die.

I expect to hear him laugh, to make some fucked up joke. But I don't hear anything beyond my own incoherent muttering mixed in with the sounds of his angry snarls. My pleas become high pitched whines that catch in my throat, like my body knows better than my mind that pleading won't help me.

Warmth pools from a lamp, giving a small circumference of light. My eyes cling to it, desperate to see the coming danger. What I see is enough to silence me completely.

The Joker's wearing something different than usual—a black long-sleeved shirt and a pair of purple pants in a different cut from the other ones. His sleeves are rolled up to his biceps and he's holding something I can't discern. His frame is lean, but it hides agile brutality that I've seen too many times before. I can see the wiry muscles of his arms, a small line of a tattoo, the thick scars and what looks like burns that mark them. Seeing him—here in front of me with the promise of hurt and pain and agony—isn't what has me so afraid. It's his face. If there was anything in my bladder, it would have gone now.

He's not wearing any of his makeup, and the Joker's all the more terrifying for it.

His puckered scars are a raised line of pink that seems more brutal, more violent without the red—ripping his skin and deforming a face I once might have found handsome. His face is covered in
freshly formed bruises and swelling along his jaw—his bottom lip split and a long gash that looks glued together runs along his hairline. But even that isn't what is so totally terrifying—it's his eyes. He has dark circles under them, I can't tell if it's from the makeup or lack of sleep, but it makes them look like black holes. And they're staring at me with an intensity that strikes me dumb.

If I thought he was a demon before, now he looks like the devil incarnate. I remember what my father told me about *djinn* as a girl.

'*Beings wreathed in smokeless flame.*'

That's what he had called them. He had picked that as his name because it was meant to invoke fear in others, but it was also to ward off evil from himself—a defensive measure. He believed that *djinn*, on some level, were real. I understand now. He was right. They're real and one's standing right here, staring into me in an act of immolation.

*He's going to kill me. He's finally going to do it.*

I find my voice again when he starts walking toward me, his hands clenched into tight fists, and I shake so bad I can barely see.

"*Please—please, don't—*"

I know it's useless. It's like I can't help being cowardly, right until the end. I cringe inwards and throw my hands up in front of my face, as if that will stop the damage he's going to inflict.

Burning heat hits my palms as the Joker threads his fingers through my own, gripping my hands in a vise while bringing them closer to his chest. He's warm—too warm—and the shock of it against my freezing hands burns through the bandages and hurts as if I'm pressing them against a live stove element. I don't want to feel this, the muscles in his chest and how they're coiled springs waiting to burst. A yelp leaves my lips when he leans in closer.

"*Y'know, I'm getting real tired of having the same conversation with you, Miri,*" he says. His voice is close, too close. His breath is on my neck, moving my hair. "*I'm only going to say this once. If I have to, ah, repeat myself, you're not going to like it. One. Bit.*" He's squeezing my hands too tight and I yelp again, twisting my arms in vain for relief. I know what he's going to say, and I don't want to have to listen. "*Look at me.*"

Opening my eyes, I stare at his chest. It's too close—he's too close. His muscles are tensed and pulsing under the taut fabric. He crushes my hands until the bones crack under the strain. My eyes drag up, past his reddened neck and the scars that seem more savage and crueler than before—punctuated by fresh shows of violence—and land on his coal-black eyes. The pupils are so dilated they almost take up the whole of them, making him look like an otherworldly monster come to destroy me completely.

The Joker lets out an exaggerated sigh and the corners of his mouth twitch. His fingers dig deeper into the small bones of my hands, smile widening at my whimpering.

"*Why're you so afraid of me, hmm? What have I really done to make you hurt?*" he asks as his face draws closer to mine.

I thrust my head back so fast it cracks against the wall. The pain barely registers—adrenaline masks everything but the fear. I'm certain the question's rhetorical, but the sudden twist of one of my wrists, bending backward until it nearly breaks, proves me wrong.

"*Y-You're—*" My vision blurs but I'm afraid to blink. "*You're h-hurting me n-now.* I don't know if
he wants me to be honest; if my answers will change anything.

His grip loosens until he's holding my hands in some fake gesture of a gentleman. My breathing turns to painful gasps. If he wants me to keep talking, then I need to answer. Anything to keep the end result at bay.

"Wh-Where… where are—are my c-clothes?" I whisper. For all the pain he's put me through, my mind fixates on the immediate danger in front of me.

He holds my hands differently, cupping them in his own. He brings one to his neck and leaves the other on his chest. The green waves of his hair, slightly damp and clean, touch my skin and I desperately want to tear my hand away.

"Is that it? Hahaha—"

The Joker's chest shakes for a moment before he regains control of himself. He lets go of my hands after giving them a squeeze—a reminder not to move—and reaches into his pocket. I don't even know what I'm staring at, but it's small and black.

"You came with so many little… surprises before. Couldn't have any tricks this time 'round. Unfortunate-ly for you, a good chunk of your wardrobe is at the bottom of the Gotham River, but I'm nothing if not… inventive," he says with a tilt of his head and a sidelong glance. I'm still confused, and it must be showing on my face because he rolls his eyes. "A certain Bat-Buddy of yours likes showing up where he hasn't been invited. Which—by the way—is just plain rude. He has to learn when to wait for an invitation, and this little fella here," he brings the object closer to my face, and I finally see that it's in the shape of a small bat. Paling, I shiver hard. "This is just a mood-killer."

Oh my god—when did Bruce leave that on me? When did the Joker get it?

A more immediate thought winds me.

Bruce won't be able to find you. You're stuck here with a psychotic lunatic who's going to murder you.

I don't know how well I can deny knowing who Batman is if he asks. Lying has never been my strong suit—not when I'm under so much strain. The Joker's eyes are too perceptive, they see too much of me. My knowing Batman has become a decided disadvantage. I wouldn't be able to resist Joker for long.

"Didn't need any of that. So, I may have set your clothes on fire. Sue me," he finishes, tossing the small tracking device over his shoulder as he chuckles. His hands return to mine, and I try my best not to recoil.

Why wouldn't he ask? Surely he'd know that Batman obviously knows me. Unless…

Unless he's going to torture it out of me later. Sweat soaks my back and I shake. There are too many questions—too many problems—and I don't know what to do with them.

I don't believe the tracking devices are the only reason he did this, put me in one of his shirts and—no, he's just toying with me. My lip shakes and it's difficult not to close my eyes. He looks so satisfied with himself, like he's bragging to a friend about an especially difficult problem he's solved and is looking for praise. His face is inherently more malevolent without the makeup. It was easier to think of him as being inhuman, a bad fictional character come to life before. Now an irrevocable man is the one doing this. A real human is capable of this level of malice. I have no
idea how to rationalize that level of barely-contained rage and hate sitting here, so close and ready to inflict that pain on me.

"That's all? You're mad about some clothes? They were drab anyway—really, I was doing you a favour—"

"You... you hit my head, a-and the b-bruises... and P-Parker—" I'm overcome with sobs but don't look away, even as my mind screams for relief.

What were you doing to me in the video? What about the ship and that time I can't remember? The arcade? Every second of every day since I met you has made me hurt. You know you're hurting me. And you're fucking going to do it again.

I can't say any of that, both because my mouth won't work and I'm afraid of what his reaction will be.

"So I gave you a, ah, bump on the head. Look at you—you turned out just fine after all. Little wear and tear never bothered me any."

His chin dips down towards his chest and his eyebrows do a small pump. I want to scream at him, punch him—do anything to make him hurt like he's hurt me. But he has all the power and I have none. I have nothing to make this stop. The realization hits me hard. I tremble with violence that shakes every inch of me so bad that not even his firm grip on my hands can make them still.

He scoffs, "It's not my fault you bruise like a pretty little peach. You were being so stubborn, too. Didn't leave me any choice on that one." The Joker takes his hands away from mine; he can't help himself from making grand, emphatic gestures in the air. I want to take them back, to use them to shield the rest of me, but I'm afraid to move any more than I already am. "And as for, uh, Parker—"

He lets out a low chuckle, eyes moving from me to some far-flung corner of the ceiling. The red of his tongue peeks out before disappearing in his mouth, his eyes dropping back down to mine. A condescending smile creeps the corners of his mouth up.

"That wasn't really me either, was it?"

Indignation and anger colour my cheeks. He can’t talk about Parker, not after what he did. His memory gives me a vanishing feeling of bravery and I'm vaguely proud of how my voice has steadied.

"Yes, it was. You branded him—he needed help—"

"Was it me who broke his ankle? Hmm?" His words and black eyes make me forget where I am. I'm brought back to the boat, to a place of confusion and uncertainty. "From, uh, my understanding—that one's on you, isn't it?"

He's right, and I can't even refute him on it. It's the sepsis that killed Parker. He broke his ankle trying to keep me from falling. He got hurt because of me. Parker always got hurt because of me. No—don't, Miri. Don't listen. He's fucking with you because he can. You're going to die, but that doesn't mean he can break you.

"Wasn't the first time either, was it? You've been a real heartbreaker, seems to me," he says with another derisive laugh, his eyes wandering down to my chest before slowly sliding upward. The mocking's still there—with him drawing his head back and raising his brows, eyes all wide in a
false show of innocence. But he's right again. It's getting hard to think. "And Parker, there, got more than that broken, didn't he? Femur, ribs, a spleen—those are tricky to pop, too—some vertebrae..." He trails off but he doesn't need to finish. I was responsible for all those things. "You really did a number on him, sweet peach. It's almost like... hmm."

He sucks in his bottom lip, still staring at me with an intensity that makes my bones vibrate. He laughs again, low and deep in his chest. One hand trails along my forearm, pushing back the sleeve of the shirt and tracing the bandages. I can feel the strength in his fingers, waiting for him to hurt me. His eyes follow the motions, seeming to get lost looking in the hints of my skin—at the fresh signs of injury. My hands shake harder, desperate to pull away. He's being too gentle—they don't match the mutilations his words cause.

"It's almost like... you ruin people. You're trouble—just like me. Surely you must have realized how much, ah—how much damage you do just from being around people." His hand goes from my forearm to my face. My tears are silent, but I can't make them stop. His thumb brushes across my cheeks, wiping them away. I don't understand the meaning behind it—how he can cut me open with words and hold me as I bleed out.

"Daddy leaves—now that one's a bit harder to pin on you, with him being a scoundrel and all. Mommy dies of cancer—biological, irrational to think you caused that one." He's talking like he knows the intimate details of my life, knows a history that I've only shared with three people on the planet. His tone doesn't match the words; he's saying it's not my fault, but we both know that's a lie. "Even Rich-Boy Brucie left you! Wasn't very nice of him, was it? Granted, he did come back—got that goin' for ya."

He's voicing every dark thought I've ever had about myself—every whispered evil I think I am—every fear that everyone I've ever known is worse off for knowing me. It's what keeps me awake at night and fuels my need for constant self-denial and total loathing. And it's because of a different fear that I keep hurting others—the fear of being alone.

I want to call him a liar, but I can't. Because it's true. It's all true.

"Now, Parker—well... we both know what happened to him," he says, voice low. It's a pitch that seduces the worst parts of me—the ones that call for my blood as payment for past sins, the hidden fragments that want to keep me from caring about anyone at all. I don't mean to, but my hands cling to him, desperately holding on to something—anything—to make the world stop spinning. "Even Alfred's in trouble because of you, sweet peach. It's like you can't even help yourself."

He's not laughing for once. His eyes are steady, not leaving mine. My heart feels close to stopping. "W-What have you done?" I whisper.

He smiles but there's no humour in it. I wish there was. His hand slides down from my cheek to my neck, his thumb grazing along the jugular and feeling the pulse of my heart.

The pain from before—from keeping so much shame on my shoulders alone, unable to talk about it entirely with anyone—comes right back up and it's like I'm back in those places again. I can smell the trees near the pagoda, the spring air—hear the baseball bats crashing into Parker's body. The day Bruce left—his back to me as he walked out the door and I didn't see him again for seven years; when I thought he was dead. The smell of Mom dying, her hands too weak to hold mine—her gaunt face that didn't even look like her anymore. Jahan riding off—lying to me with a smile on his face as he began the tradition of leaving me behind that so many others would replicate. I can't help but know, deep down, that something is so wrong with me for so many to have abandoned me—for me to be so willing to do it to others.
"Mr. P. is just fine. For now." The menace is back, his hand tightening around my neck, thumb pressing into the existing bruises. I barely feel any of it. There's a hand on my bicep, giving it a squeeze of reassurance. "Him staying that way entire-ly depends on you, sweetheart."

"What have you done with him?" My voice is barely audible—but the room is too quiet not to hear it. Another person who's going to be hurt because of me. Alfred's been the one constant in my life—the one person who's never disappointed me but I've let down every time the opportunity presented itself.

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to," he says. He can't help the ingratiating falsetto—the pitch he takes when he's imitating me in a show of ridicule. I've lost count of how many times I've thought those exact words. And he knows them, he's quoting them back at me. "Remember?"

Alfred—no, no, no—he doesn't deserve this. This is your fault. He's right. This is all your fault.

Visions of Parker dying flash in front of my eyes and I don't see anything else.

That could happen to—no, no, no—

I can barely breathe. My mouth won't work, can't even ask him how he knows so much about me—my failings, my life. I'm lifeless, just sitting here and letting him shatter the tenuous grasp I've had on the connections that made my world easier to bear. The Joker's reminding me of how much I never deserved them in the first place.

"I'll admit, things were a little… rough for Parker. But…" His eyes finally leave mine, allowing air to come in my lungs. The relief is short-lived: he runs his fingers through my hair, pulling me closer by the grip on my arm until my curled-up knees are the only things separating us. I let him keep touching me as the venom poisons my blood. "At worst, all you got on me is reckless endangerment—maybe some, ah, false imprisonment. You did all the rest, didn't you?"

Don't let him shirk the blame on that, Miri. You can't listen to him—you can't. Push that away—deal with it later. Don't just sit here and take it. C'mon, Miri—c'mon.

I'm trying to listen to the more rational side—the part of me that's still intact. Anger is still below the surface and I draw on it. Anger can make you brave, and I need it now. Resistance and defiance flare up, and I know it'll only lead to pain, but it's what's keeping me from breaking.

If the only thing you can do is slide in some insults, then make it worth your while.

"He's dead because of you. You get off on hurting people—you're a murderer, you sick, demented, psychopath—"

With alarming speed, the Joker rips me to my feet and slams me against the wall. My head creates a dent in the drywall, vision going black, air leaving my lungs. He's laughing now, each sound the sharpening of the knife that's going to kill me.

"Always the poor choice of words, hmm?" I'm slumping back to the floor, but he grips my biceps and keeps me upright. My vision doubles, unable to tell which floating face is real. "It was nothing personal with the kid, honest. He would've been just fine if you'd stayed."

He's lying.

He has to be.
The Joker would have killed us regardless if I stayed or not—and what choice did I even have? Parker's death—it's as much Joker's fault as mine. But his words are a poison that snakes into my battered mind. It's impossible not to listen to him. Every ugly part of me makes it impossible to keep up my resistance for long. My head lolls to the side and he shakes me, trying to redirect my focus back to him.

"You broke the rules of hospitality, and I have a job that needs doing."

No, you're a fucking sadist. You should have killed me back on the ship, saved us both the trouble.

The words don't leave my mouth, and the shaking panic returns when he presses himself against me. His chest is only an inch away from my own, my stomach touching him with every inhale, and his legs press into mine. The fabric of his pants is rough, grating against my skin and making me squirm. It only makes him move closer until he's almost completely crushing me with his weight. I can't push him away and his grip tightens on my arms, deepening the existing bruising.

"Get off me—"

He squeezes my arms so hard his fingers become talons that bite through the muscle. He shakes me, cutting off the words from my mouth. The heat of his hands burns me, making it spread up my shoulders and infect my brain. I can't think—I need to get away, but I can't. All of this is too much. The weight of my guilt crushes me just as much as he is. My body trembles against his and I desperately wish I could just sink into the wall. That anything could take me away from here.

He's laughing in a lower pitch and even through the blur, I can see his tongue dart out to run across his cut-up lips. His face is only a few inches from mine, the pink scars and the sharp angle of his jaw and cheekbones taking up my vision. His breath is bitter and wrung through with acid. When I pull back, he follows my movements, pushing me further against the wall.

"If you want to have a, ah, conversation about who's hurt who—you should take a good look in the mirror first," he says with a smack of his lips. His grip tightens again, eliciting another cry from me. His eyes flick down to my mouth and his smile grows. It's not a happy one. "We both know you haven't proven to be a very good, ah, influence. And don't think I've forgotten, Miriam. You almost shot me."

My burning blood goes cold. His eyes close for a moment and he inhales deeply against my hair and neck, pressing against me harder in the process. My body's crying out for relief and it's hard not to scream, but my jaw feels wired shut. His eyes open and he leans his forehead against mine. Sweat transfers to my skin, the prickling edges of the cut on his head tickle, and his eyes excoriate the depths of me.

"Shot. Me."

It's irrational; I had that gun to defend myself, to save Parker. I have nothing to apologize for; he's undoubtedly the one in the wrong. That doesn't stop me from reliving the violence he's only too willing to inflict, from apologizing like my life depends on it.

That's because it does, Miri.

"I-I'm sorry—I'm s-sorry! Please, I-I w-was scared. I just wanted—"

He cuts me off with the movement of his hands. They release my arms and trace the outline of my waist, slowly—not quite touching me but close enough that I can feel it—skirting the air around my breasts, before landing on my shoulders. I shut my mouth and try to breathe through my nose,
but it's difficult. My chest heaves and I'm painfully aware of how it brushes against his, how he
leans into it until he's taking the air from me.

"That wasn't very nice, was it? I'm a generous guy, Miri, but I've got my limits, y'know. Even
for you."

There's a dangerous glint in his eye not even my darkest state of mind wants to incur the wrath of.
The tears are flowing so bad I close my eyes. He doesn't like that. Hands bite into my shoulders,
climbing to the base of my neck and squeezing until my eyes fly open. I wedge my hands between
us and grab his wrists, trying to alleviate the pressure. Nothing I do can make them move, either
because I lack the strength or his will is one I can't overcome.

"Pl-Please! Please, d-don't. Please—"

His grip loosens and moves further up my neck. I try falling to the floor, finally letting my body go
limp, but his chest and position of his legs hold me up. He's not letting me go anywhere. He cups
my jaw in his hands and forces me to keep at looking him. His head tilts down until the tip of his
nose touches mine.

"So, what do you think we should do about that, hmm?"

I can't answer or look away. What does he want me to say? There's nothing I can do, nothing, that
will keep him from hurting me. My hands cling to his wrists, as much a technique to ground me as
to give the illusion that I can still fight, even though we both know I can't. His grip on my jaw
keeps me from opening my mouth.

"See, I had to think about that one for a while, Miri. I leave you alone for less than an hour and my
boat's just… gone. Poof!" The forcefulness of his words makes me recoil, but he stays where he is.
His mouth grazes against mine. The smell of cigarettes is on his breath and faint traces of booze
mix in with everything else. He doesn't look drunk, but the possibility of it makes my legs shake.
Black spots unfurl along the edges of his face. Air comes through my nose in fits and starts. "I
didn't like that, Miri-cat. Mm-mmm. Not at all."

The pressure lessens and I need to tell him—it wasn't me. I didn't do that. He can't be angry at me
for that.

"I-It wasn't m-my fault—"

"Then! Then you try to put a bullet in my head. After everything I did for you, too. That hurt. It
really did."

His nose drags across my face until his cheek presses against mine. The feeling of his scars against
my skin makes me shudder uncontrollably. They're thick and smooth, rippled and rough, skipping
along my skin as he rubs against me like a cat. His sweat marks more of my face and I try in vain
to pull away. His fingers tighten around my jaw, mouth close to my ear and I can't move. He forces
my chin upward again so I can't speak. More whimpers are all I can answer him with.

"Miri, Miri, Miri," he says in my ear. It's a quiet exhale, one filled with disappointment. He pulls
his head back and cocks it to the side, grip renewing on my face and my own clinging grasp with it.
"And, to top it all off, you just... ignore me."

For some reason, that's what seems to offend him the most.

"I said 'hi' and everything. I don't just say that to anyone, y'know. I'm not some kind of floozy." I
don't like where this is going. He keeps the pressure on his fingers, making my mouth stay closed.
"And yet... you talked to that crazed degenerate over me."

I try shaking my head, but he has it fixed in place.

"You—you even touched his hand! That wasn't considerate at all. No, no." I try to whimper some kind of wordless apology, to mitigate whatever he's building up to. His smile keeps growing. "I'm sitting in a cell and my, ah, sweetheart just ignores me. Worse! She's purposefully difficult for just no good reason." I keep trying to shake my head, but he won't let me move. His head comes closer again, and I'm running out of air. "You've been so... infuriating."

The whimpers turn into muffled shouts for mercy.

His touch turns gentle but the look in his eyes darken. My whole body shakes. From his grin, I can tell he's enjoying it. The Joker's thumbs reach out and fan across my chin.

*What's he doing? No, no, no—*

The pads of his fingers touch my lips and I press them tightly together. He traces their outline, following the small dips and curves. His eyes fixate on them, the calloused skin catching against the chapped surface.

With a force I'm not expecting, his hands move to my neck and take fistfuls of my hair, pulling my head back and making me scream. His mouth lands on top of mine. For a moment, I'm too stunned to move until his tongue snakes out and licks along my lips and into my open mouth, touching mine with his. His eyes jolt up and see that his are open. I can tell he's smiling from how his scars pull at my skin, his lids hooded and filled with something I won't name.

I squeeze my eyes shut and claw at anything I can: his arms and the burns that mark them, his hands and neck—trying anything—*anything*—to get him off me. I manage to close my mouth, but my legs can't move, keeping me from kicking out at him.

My efforts aren't working. *Nothing* is working. I'm trapped.

*No, no, no—how do I make him stop? I need to do something—anything—*

I can't. He won't stop unless he wants to.

The Joker's lips part and pull on mine. His teeth trace along my bottom lip, trying to open my mouth again. His nose presses against mine, blocking my airflow. His breath is too warm—a sickly sweetness mixed with battery acid. He's choking me and I can't breathe.

One hand stays wrapped in my hair, and the other moves along the side of my face, cupping it gently as his thumb grazes my ear. I sense the same restraint from the ship, the barely contained violence. My body rocks with the memory. Every part of him is burning me, scorching me from the outside in. His mouth parts again and the tip of his tongue probes along the line of my lips, trying to coax a response from me.

I try not to think about how this feels, how his hand slides down and caresses the side of my neck. Something's pulling in the bottom of my gut, making me lightheaded—whether from oxygen deprivation or the unwanted feelings building up in me, I don't want to know.

*He's a monster, Miri—he killed Parker and he's going to kill you. Fight—you need to fight.*

My hands keep their hold on his, but I'm horrified that they aren't trying to pry them away anymore. He's pulling something out of me, a part of my soul I can't take back. My mind isn't
working, can't do what I so desperately need it to. It's just the trembling of my body and his chest pressing into me with a fervour I've never experienced.

My lips slowly part and I can't help it. I try not to think about how I've never been kissed like this in my life. It's a dream my body can't help but respond to and a nightmare my mind can't escape. Bolts of electricity make my muscles tense and my brain foggy: I want it to stop but I don't know how.

I whimper into his mouth when his right leg moves between mine. The motion and its implications give me energy I didn't think I could summon. I tear my head away—or maybe he lets me—and suck in greedy gulps of air. I'm out of breath and burning up, but I try to speak.

"Stop—please, just—stop, I-I—" The words don't come anymore when I look at his face.

His eyes—they're so angry and mean. It doesn't line up with the tender form of force he just employed. He looks like he did when he hurt Lewis, when he fashioned himself as my teacher. Terror overrides the latent feelings of—of whatever that was. I try to force my legs closed, but he stays immovable and they wrap around the limb. No matter what I do, he'll take it as an advance—a form of reciprocation. I can't move them apart and have him think I'm welcoming this, that I want him to continue.

"Please," is all I can manage, hoping something in my expression will grant a feeling of mercy in him, tug at some part that might be good.

Nothing but pure, unadulterated viciousness is discernible in his face.

"What? C'mon now, Miri," he says, drawing his head closer. I cringe and a helpless whine builds in my throat. "You're lying again. Always, always lying."

I close my eyes, thinking he's going to kiss me again with his vile mouth—but he doesn't do that. Not at all. His mouth goes to my neck, his lips ghosting over the sensitive spots lining it. Feeling the cool inhale of air being pulled into his lungs makes me jerk back.

"Wait—"

Blinding pain interrupts me. His teeth bite into my neck. It only takes an instant to feel the enamel of his teeth break through the skin. I scream, but I can't make any words form. As quickly as his teeth bit into me, he pulls back, eying his handiwork. I can't tell if the warmth I feel is from my blood seeping out of the fresh wound or the residual effects of his mouth on me. I'm crying again, trying to twist away.

"There, there. That's another hurtful thing you said, now that I'm thinking about it. You called me a liar, too, didn't you?" He's laughing, but there's no trace of humour. His thumb brushes against the wound and sends a fresh searing pain up my spine. Whatever he did, it must be bad. "Bu-t, as you can see, I haven't lied at all, have I?"

I can't tell what's true and what's lies with him anymore. It's all mixing in my head. I can't interpret the data in front of me, I don't want to—but a small part of me is growing and it's becoming harder to deny.

No, Miri. No—he is a fucking liar. You can't forget—you can't.

"I own you. No gettin' around that, is there?" He laughs again and there's a bite to it. "Y'see, Miriam, I like an honest, wholesome kinda girl. Seems to me you just need a little help getting there."
He pushes his weight against me again, driving the air from my lungs, before stepping back completely, letting my body drop to the floor. No sounds come out of my mouth, just winded gasps as shocks of pain shoot up from my knees and elbows.

*Fight. You need to fight.*

The kitchen is to my left, but there are at least ten meters between the living area and where the butcher block's sitting on the marble countertop. Joker's back is to me, he's grabbing something out of a bag. Breathing shallowly, I can't think fast enough.

*Calm down—use your fucking head. You can barely stand, going for the kitchen would be stupid—he'd get you and make whatever he's about to do worse.*

That option isn't an easy one to swallow, but there are too many unknowns: I don't know where Alfred is—or what's happened to him; this is Anthony Garcia's house, the goddamn Mayor of Gotham, and who knows where he is; and I don't even know where I am—if I got out, I'd have no way of getting away if it's outside the city limits; and why the hell I'm here in the first place.

I close my eyes and force myself to think rationally. The Joker is faster and stronger than I am—there's no question about that. He has all the advantages. I still feel sick from whatever they gave me, I don't have the energy to fight back and run—not yet. The only smart option in front of me is one that twists my stomach.

*You'll only get one shot at getting out. Going too soon will make his reaction extreme and you'll have screwed yourself. Patience—just like before. Breathe, and keep using your fucking head. Don't listen to him, but don't make him mad either. Think. Breathe. Endure and wait for your chance.*

It's still hard to breathe and my arms shake, barely keeping me from collapsing on the floor. Hands grip my biceps and I swallow a scream, a stifled whine coming out instead. I didn't hear Joker come behind me again and I realize why: he's not wearing any shoes, just green argyle socks. He lifts me up easily—too easily—and snakes an arm around my waist, his hand resting on the small of my back. It's hard trying to get my feet to work, made worse by my screaming lungs and tightness cinching my chest, and I have no choice but to lean on him. It's disconcerting to feel the muscles in his arms, the straining tension and cruelty, with the added threat of whatever the fuck that kiss was supposed to mean.

*Just stay calm. Breathe.*

Turning me around to face him, a hand snatches my jaw. I'm forced to stare at him again—at the terrifying embodiment of malevolence in his eyes—and make myself not look away. His eyes search mine, but not peering through my core like they usually do. He drags me closer to the light, his eyes squint and the corners of his mouth turn down.

"Hmm. Seems they don't know how to follow *simple* instructions," he mumbles to himself, twisting my head and sending stabs of pain up my spine. "Go to prison for a few hours and they go back to being a *jumbling* bunch of *wild animals*." He's still murmuring, barely loud enough for me to hear. His eyes refocus, and a corner of his mouth pulls up.

"Sorry 'bout that, sweet peach. Looks like they gave you a *little* too much. Makes things *difficult* for starting our work tonight, but, ah, we'll *make do.*"

"G-Gave me too much of what?" It's probably not wise to speak, but I do anyway. I want to shove him away, go back to laying on the ground, but I need to keep back the vicious volatility ready to
burst in him.

His eyes squint and he turns his head, unsure about something. They wander up to some unseen point in a corner and he nods his head in some silent conversation with himself. His fingers flex against my arm and chin.

"Ketamine's a funny thing. There's a lot depending on the dosage—obvious things. Like size," he says. His hand goes from my arm to my ribs, pushing me into the hard line of his abdomen. I stiffen and desperately hope he won't move to take off the shirt or touch any of my bared skin. I'm too vulnerable and every move he makes reminds me of the fact. "You're tall, but you're also small. One of the stooges gave you too much—and ketamine's not exactly, ah, beneficial for what I had in mind."

His words turn my blood into ice.

*What the hell is he talking about? Oh, Jesus Christ—is that why I'm just in a shirt? Oh god, oh god—*

He tucks the hair falling around my face behind my ears, one side at a time, and the command I have over myself surprises me.

"Why am I here then?"

It's a dangerous question, one that doesn't have any good answers.

He looks at me for a moment, cocking his head to the side as his eyes droop. He lets go of my arms and shoves me on the couch. I land on my back and nearly slide off, too slow to right myself. He follows quickly after me and throws an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his chest. I strain against him and try to keep back the screams.

"Let me tell you somethin', Mir-cat," he says, giving my shoulder a hard shove and angling me to face him. What's left of my composure evaporates quickly—I'm seeing too many visions of a slow death playing out in front of me mingled with brutal acts of violence. "There aren't a whole lot of people I like, so this is… unusual for me. It's true!"

He's saying this like I've voiced a doubt, but I don't even know what the hell he's talking about. He didn't answer my question, validate what I've been suspecting. It makes the dread worse, a build-up for a nasty surprise. I can't think about it now, not with my hands pinned against his chest. Each of his breaths is even and measured as mine grow more erratic.

"I'm fairly certain that, ah, you've bewitched me."

My mouth drops open; my mind screams.

'Bewitched'? *What the fuck—oh Christ—he can't mean that.*

"W-What?" I must have heard him wrong. My voice is barely audible, but this isn't right. He can't possibly think that. "You... you can't be serious."

He laughs good-humouredly and presses me into him again, throwing me off balance and making me collapse against his torso. My mind can't take this—it's too much in this new, previously unimagined world of misery that's unfurling. Every part of me seizes when he rubs his hands up and down my arm in rough, jostling movements. He angles himself toward me, making me stare at him as he chips away at my sanity. And he looks so—so elated, eager, filled with that same want I saw at the MCU. Except, this time, I can name what that want is.
"No, no, no. I don't like many people—at all. But you—you're fun," he says with a sly grin and a drawl. I wanted to be able to draw back and watch myself implode from a distance, but his eyes won't let me. He's enacting my ruin, and I can feel every cut and stab. "You're nice to be with. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted you to talk to me. It's all very—" He looks off and his expression hardens, as if the feelings I inspire in him make him angry. "Like. I. Said—bewitching."

His eyes are lascivious, but they also hold barely-contained fury. I knew he was insane, but not like this.

"You—you can't mean that. You can't—"

The Joker rolls his eyes and laughs again, reaching down to his pants pocket. He leans into me to straighten out his leg and pulls out a silver knife. shrieking, I try to throw myself backward, but his grip on my arm transfers to my hair. Breaking his grip isn't working and my fingers dig into his wrist, trying to alleviate the pressure. He's still laughing, turning it into a high-pitched giggle.

"We'll have to postpone your very important work until later, sweet peach," he says with sickly sweetness. "It's too important for any, ah, mistakes. And, we never did come to a real understanding, did we?"

The Joker lets go of my hair and twists so that he's sitting cross-legged on the couch, facing me. He motions for me to do the same. I can barely see, but I obey—more than aware I won't be able to fight back in a meaningful way, not without the blade sinking into me. He grabs me by the calves and pulls me closer until our legs are almost on top of each other. Crying so hard I have to close my eyes, his hand cups my cheek I flinch back, but the hand moves to my neck and grips me hard.

"This is definitely going to hurt you more than it's going to hurt me, sweet peach," he says, leaning forward so he's closer to my face. My hands can't protect me from this. There's nothing to stop him from whatever he's about to do. I feel pathetic, but I can only sob. He stays unmoved, talking in a soft way that makes all of this so much worse. "But don't you worry, it'll all be for the best, hmm?"

He leans back and pulls up the knife, flicking it open. Keeping it gripped in his hand, he lays his palm on my thigh. Panic is the only thing I can process.

"W-Wait—no, please—"

He places a kiss on my lips and it's like I'm paralyzed. Eyes open and staring, I take in the cruel kindness that's seeping through his gaze and peeling away my skin.

"You didn't do so well last time we played a game," he says, smiling in a way that lights up his face. I tremble so badly my teeth shake. "Try to do a little better this time, Miri. I'll be cheering for you."

I want to scream, but I can't make my brain work—to take control of my body and do something—find the right words to save me.

"Let's begin, shall we?"
"Let's begin, shall we?" the Joker says.

My neck throbs; I'm close to throwing up, barely having any control over myself, from throwing my body on the floor and begging for my life. Taking my eyes away from his face is an invitation for the knife against my leg to plunge into me, but I can't help my eyes darting down when his free hand goes to my other thigh, squeezing as if he was trying to massage it.

"It's real important for things moving forward that we get all this..." He takes his hand away from my thigh and gestures at the air between us in some motion I'm meant to understand, "Situated. I can't have my sweetheart lying to me—that would make things very, ah, difficult for Mr. P. later. And you have lied, a lot, haven't you?"

He's staring at me expectantly; he wants an answer that's too dangerous for me to give. The fear's making it impossible to think. My mouth won't open, but I need it to.


He beams at me like I'm a dog that did an especially impressive trick. "That's more like it, Miri. Just takes practice—and that's what we're gonna do. Practice."

His tone makes me shake harder. He drags his fingers along my thigh, getting closer to my hips before drawing back towards my knee, going higher each time. Feelings of intense burning and electric shock make my muscles spasm where his bare skin meets mine. Unvoiced screams build in my chest. The cold edge of the blade is a constant reminder of what his real intentions are—how close he is from using it on me.

"Let's lay out the rules of the, uh, game. Make sure you listen good, Miri—"

I can't take it anymore—I can't. He's going to kill me and he's only dragging this out.

"I-I just want to go home," I force out. It's choked and quiet and he raises an eyebrow, clearly annoyed I'm interrupting him. It's useless—I know it is, but I have to try. "Please—please, I-I'm begging you. I just want to—"

He presses a finger against my lips, silencing me with a sideways glance. His glare hits me in the heart.

He won't let you get away from this. You can't make it stop. Nothing you do will work, and he's going to make it hurt.

My eyes close, and I cry harder when his hand works through my hair, cupping the back of my head and forcing me to lean forward.

"Now, now, be patient—your turn's next. That was your freebie, Miriam." He shakes my head with every syllable, punctuating his meaning with tugs at my hair. "Are you going to be a, uh, good girl and listen, hmm? Is that some-thing you know how to do?"

The condescension in his voice is thick and the meaning clear: He won't give me the mercy of
dying quickly. No matter how much I beg, he won't be moved. My lip quivers with the force of holding back a wail of despair. His hand pulls my hair harder, the edge of the knife pressing into my skin. He tilts his chin down, expecting an answer. He won't let me be silent, either.

"Y-Yes—yes, I—I understand. I-I'll listen." The words are glass in my mouth, painful to utter and impossible to get the shards out. He smiles and nods his head, leaning back and releasing the tight grip wrapped in my hair without removing it completely.

"This is how it's going to work. Every time you tell the truth…"

The hand in my hair brushes the length of it, touching the middle of my back. The Joker leans forward and kisses me gently, sending a confusing mix of signals that fill me with revulsion and self-loathing. The hand in my hair goes back to my cheek, wiping at the tears and rubbing them into my skin.

"That's not so bad, is it? You just tell the truth and nothing… irreversible happens. Real simple, hmm?"

He's looking at me again, but I don't know what to say. The alternative is coming, and I don't know how bad it will be. The prospect of him asking for information, and having no choice but to give it, is one that makes my heart seize.

If that's what he'll do when you tell the truth, then he's going to—he'll—

"I thought so, anyway. And you'll know that Mr. P. can keep breathing easy. That sounds like a reasonable incentive, doesn't it?" He's nodding his head slowly, staring until I return the motion in acquiescence.

Do it for Alfred. Just keep thinking about him. You can endure this for him. He won't get hurt because of your mistakes. Not like Parker. You have to keep him safe.

The Joker keeps talking, outlining the infernal game only one of us will enjoy. His hand is on my neck, thumb stroking the spasming tendons in my throat.

"Now, if you lie to me…" His eyes wander up to the ceiling and he takes his bottom lip between his teeth, breathing out a chuckle through his nose as his eyes land back on me. They're filled with deadly calm, a one-time warning I would be foolish to ignore. "And I mean ever, Miri, then un-fortune-ate-ly… it's gonna hurt."

Quicker than I thought possible, the hand on my thigh—the one holding the knife—comes up and digs into the upper part of my bicep. The fabric splits and the skin underneath gives way under the blade—cutting into me like the flesh was soft butter. The blade's already made the incision by the time I'm screaming.

He's going to kill me—I'm going to die here—

I reach up to stop the flow of blood soaking through the yellow fabric, jerking away from him as my eyes stop working—like they can't take it anymore either. Air can't get in my lungs and terror grips me in a way I didn't think was possible. Shrieks tear out of my constricting throat. I'm crying harder and he's laughing at me. I curl into myself, trying to protect my body from him, but he won't let me. His arm goes around my shoulder, hand going where mine is trying to stop the bleeding.

I can't breathe—I can't—

My chest is imploding, and I can't breathe. This is too much. I can't take this—can't sit here and let
him cut me one inch at a time. Joker twists me so that my torso’s facing him; sound barely reaches my ears—my heart's hammering, pumping adrenaline I can't use into my veins. The air hitches in my chest, stopping before it gets to my lungs. He's draining the life from me and I can't do anything to make him stop.

*You're having a panic attack—you need to calm down—breathe—*

But I can't. I can't breathe and he's going to kill me.

"Oh, don't *cry*, Miri. It's just a shallow one—nothing to get *upset* about."

He presses me into his chest, making my head rest against his shoulder. He's still laughing at me, his chest rumbling. I'm sobbing for air—the pain of the laceration only peeking through to deepen the fear—to punctuate my helplessness. His hand goes to my back, stroking up and down my spine.

"P-Please—please, don’t—"

I'm choking on my own tears and I feel sick. The ketamine they gave me, the adrenaline, the fear, and the warm blood seeping from between my fingers is making it impossible to sit up straight. He can hurt me with more than a knife and I won't be able to fight it. My chest heaves, but his hands never leave me, keeping up this fucked up embrace.

"Get it *all* out now, sweet peach. Makes it *hard* to play the game if ya pass out." His hands go up and down my back in a gesture meant to be soothing. "Need to work on your *pain tolerance*, seems," he mutters to himself. It makes me cry harder, but my mind can't focus—can't think. It's desperate for reassurance, for a reprieve from this—but my only means of preservation is coming from the one inflicting the suffering.

"*I did* tell you what all of your *resistance* would do, didn't I?" He's talking into my hair, pressing his face into the thickness of it.

I know what he's talking about—what he said on the ship before he left and Batman brought the whole thing down. I was stronger then—I didn't have the memories crushing me and the compounding of so much guilt. His hands go to my shoulders and pull me away from his chest.

"Tell me what I said, Miri." His voice is low and quiet, but it rings loud in the silence of the house. His eyes search mine and they don't fit with anything I know. They're soft and kind. It doesn't match my blood on his hand. "Surely you remember *that* much?"

My lips stay shut tight. I don't want to answer him, even if I do remember what his words were. His thumb digs into the cut, making me wince. *Just say it. Get it over with.*

"You—you said… i-it w-would leave a—a mark."

My voice is even quieter than his and it's painful to force out. His grip turns gentle, as if he was getting ready to hold instead of eviscerating me. Stroking my face, one side of his mouth tugs up in a lopsided grin. The hand goes from my tear-stained cheek to push through my hair, the pads of his fingers rubbing against my scalp until he finds the scabs and bumps on the back of my head—where he slammed it against the floor and the cuts deepened in the river.

"*Maybe* I addled your head a *little* more than, ah, *necessary,*" he murmurs, eyes wandering to my stare at my profile, as if he could see through the hair.
I don't know why he's talking like this and it's strange. It doesn't line up with who I know him to be. Whether it's the absence of his makeup or the quiet tenderness he's using now, I don't know. It doesn't abate the terror trying to burst out of my chest. The eyes return to mine, and they look lighter—more playful.

"You seemed to have forgotten a lot—and that hurts, Miri. We were bonding so well, too."

His hand is back on my neck, fingers working into the taut muscles. My hand grows sticky with blood, head going light and far away. I'm almost certain it's just him and me in the house. No one is here to help me. He sighs, smiling and splitting his face with the pink scars. It's so different without the red, the clear marker of the macabre and inhuman.

"Now that you understand the, ah, rules, we'll start easy, hmm? Simple. What were you hiding on the ship?" His lips pop when he says it, eyes widening and head tilting to the side. I don't understand what he's asking me.

"Hi-Hiding?" It comes out in a croak. Somehow, the tears have stopped—but they're waiting to start again, for the pain to overwhelm everything. My mind is slow to process this, what the hell he means.

"Yeah, sweet peach. Hiding."

The hand with the knife is back on my thigh, the tip running along the small hairs lining it. Skin crawling, I blink hard and try to understand.

Is he talking about what Parker gave me?

It's the only answer I can come up with. Telling him shouldn't lead to pain—I didn't use it on him. It all proved to be so fruitless anyway.

"It—it was a stun—stun gun," I say. He nods his head, eyes lighting up again like the last time I answered correctly. "L-Lucius gave... he gave it to me after I—I met Zsasz the first time on the—the train."

Thinking about Zsasz, if he's waiting somewhere—whether the Joker will leave me with him to finish what he started if I get too many answers wrong—has me shaking uncontrollably again.

"And how did you get it?"

The Joker won't let me have any break—time to dwell on uncertainties and future hurts. He wants me to focus on him and the hurt he's going to inflict now. I swallow hard and keep focusing on speaking, my voice shaking as his hand keeps sliding higher towards the edge of my underwear.

"P-Parker—he... he had it. He... he gave it to me."

The higher his hand climbs the further I curl into myself. He lets me, content with the affect he's having. It's when I look down that another kiss lands on my lips. I pull back and for once he doesn't follow me. He lets out an ecstatic giggle, like this is just entertaining for him.

"That's right, sweet peach. Off to a good start—that's promising." He looks away and nods repeatedly, eyes fixed just past my ear. I don't like where this is going, the tension building in the air and the pressure in his fingers. "Speaking of Parker... did you love him?"

No—you can't talk about that with him. No, no—he doesn't need to know. You can't tell him. You can't.
I know he won't let me not answer, that he'll keep pushing until he hears what he wants. The tears pour down again, and I have nowhere to hide my face. My head bows under the weight of this—how I have no recourse or refuge. Shoulders shaking and my hand gripping the wound on my arm, my heart feels like it's going so fast it'll stop entirely. He's asking because he already knows, and I've never been able to admit it out loud. I've never had the courage to say them when they mattered, and the only person who's going to hear it now is the man who helped kill him.

"Yes," I whisper.

I don't care if moving will make him angry, I need something to keep me together, to keep the pain from spilling out of my chest. My knees come up and I fold in on myself, dislodging his hand and jerking away from the heat of him and the cold of the blade. I'm inconsolable, crying because he's going to tear out everything that ever mattered in a lobotomy part of me is aching to welcome. An involuntary cringe makes my limbs jolt inward when he adjusts his own position, sitting closer to me and putting an arm around my back, his fingers touching the lines of my bra.

"Oh, Miriam."

He sounds disappointed somehow, like he's mad about the answer. He jostles me to him, attempting to get me to look up. The tears are blinding and I don't want to meet his eye, to see the mean mockery, how he enjoys my pain.

"Is that how you treat everyone you care about? Hmm? No wonder they all just... left."

"He's saying it to make you feel worse—you can't let him. Don't listen—you can't let him get to you."

It's too late. He's in my head because I'm already convinced of those things—I just buried it in years of denial and lies.

"Hey." The hand on my back grabs the nape of my neck and I cry out; the other grasps my chin, blade resting under my jaw. "Hey—eyes on me."

He's shaking me, squeezing harder and drawing loud whimpers of pain from me. I won't look at him; I can't. Even in the din of the room, the sensory information is too much. Looking at him, at the death that's coming, is beyond what anyone should be forced to see. I scrunch up my eyes and try to twist away. My arms still don't have the strength to push him back, to fight.

An angry growl comes out of his throat in a guttural mimicry of a wolf. I scream when his hand tries to crush my spine.

"I said, 'eyes on me'."

He brings the knife up to my eye and rests the tip against the delicate tissue just below the lash line. I'm seeing now, staring into the eyes that have gone from brown back to black pits sapping away the last of my resistance into near-complete capitulation. I force myself to be stone-like, to rein in the shudders to keep the knife from biting into me. He's not smiling. His lips curl and the softness that was there before is gone. Cruelty has taken its place. The tip of the knife finds a home in the corner of my orbital bone.

"Oh, no—no, no, no—"

"I warned you—I don't like to repeat myself, so I won't. If you don't learn to listen, sweet peach, I will pop out your goddamn eye before you can even blink."

The threat paralyzes me. I don't doubt for a second he's telling the truth. He would dig that in my
eye and laugh while he did it.

"Do you understand?"

Answer him. Don't be so weak, come on, Miri—

I nod slowly, careful not to let the blade dig in. He eases back on the pressure, eyes going to my lips as he keeps the knife in place. It's when he lets out a low growl in his throat that I realize how close he's pressed to me, how my chest is against his. I want to cower away, but I'm trapped in place.

"Do you?" he asks again. The knife comes away a little, not pressing as hard into the skin. Nodding as much as I can, unable to get my mouth to work right, I desperately hope this is enough. "Good."

The growl builds up to a snarl, and his lips press against mine. The heat of them burns me, but it's not as violent as the rest of him is—his teeth nibble at my bottom lip, tongue sliding against the creases of it. The skin of them is sensitive, and I want to draw away from the searing of my nerve endings that spreads down my throat. The kiss doesn't last long, and I can feel the effort it takes him to draw back. My breathing comes close to hyperventilating again as I see the visions of what he wants to do to me playing out on his face. He smacks his lips together and licks along them, as if I left a lingering trace he's eager to taste again.

"I don't want to be angry with you, Miri. We, ah, got along so well before. I liked that," he says, drawing back and pressing his shoulders against the couch. His hand stays on my neck, giving it a mock-massage that only brings my shoulders up higher to my ears. His eyes keep wandering from mine down to my lips and chest, going in a repeating arc that spreads the heat radiating from my mouth. "There were a, uh, few topics we didn't get to... examining. The rigours of courtship can be a bit... limiting sometimes, can't they?"

Courtship? He can't be referring to—what the hell is wrong with him? What he's done couldn't be considered that in any context. He's sick. He's like Zsasz—he won't just murder me, he's going to—

Bile rises and I force it down. Everything in me is burning hot—it's anger, confusion, fear, and overwhelming panic. The language he's using—implicating that he sees this as some form of romantic endeavour—it's insane. He's insane.

"Let's start with Parker," he says, nodding his head to himself as I desperately shake mine.

Every time I think about his face, all I'm aware of is my crushing failure, the visceral pain ripping through my heart as memories—of when we were in school and in the hospital as I held his hand as his soul left—flash in a constant reminder. It's like I'm there again, with Soo-ah crying and the burden of knowing that I do ruin people.

Stop it, Miri—you need to fight back. If you can't use your hands, you need to block him out. Breathe and think—he's doing this to hurt you and you can't let him.

"He told me so many... fascinating things about you." He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, eyebrows raised, and chin dipped down. It's an expression I know well—he's setting up an innocent remark that will cut through bone.

"Parker wouldn't have told you anything." The conviction I feel is one that gives me strength. Parker wouldn't hurt me in the way I do to others. Parker was kind and selfless—he wouldn't have given the Joker anything. He wouldn't.

"Oh, but he did, Miri. He told me everything."
The Joker's own certainty casts doubt on mine. I won't let him sway me, not on this.

"You're forgetting again, it seems," he says, pushing himself away from the couch and into my personal space again. I hold my ground and glare. "Parker sold you out. Pretty easily, too."

Fear mingles with fury. Right now, I don't care about the knife against me—I won't let him chip away at the man he did so much damage to already, at the one who never did anything to deserve it.

"It doesn't mean anything if you tortured him."

The Joker bursts out laughing, his breath hitting my face, causing me to pull away. He doubles over with the force of it, laughing as it turns into a fit of giggles. It's something disturbing—a mark of even greater madness without the makeup to hide behind.

"Oh, no, no, no, sweetheart. He told me things long before any of that." He's still laughing, brushing away tears in his eyes. He's trying to get control of himself, but the giggles don't stop.

*What does he mean 'before'? What the fuck is he talking about?*

"What do you mean?"

I shouldn't be asking. He's lying and I'm inviting the ugliness to come out of his mouth, to drive into me. The cut on my arm doesn't mean anything now. The tightness in my chest and the aura of malice coming off him is enough to shake me.

"It seems you aren't the, ah, only one who lies." He lets out one last giggle before mastering himself. Staring ahead, showing his profile, his tongue peeks out and touches the corner of his mouth. Tilting his head to the side, he gives me a meaningful glance. "Do you really wanna know the answer?"

It sounds like he's giving me a choice in the matter. He's giving me the option to court my own destruction, invite the pain he'll inflict in another way if I refuse. But I want to know. There's a tug in the back of my mind, an urge to acknowledge what I've always known since I was fourteen: People will always let me down. They care, but never for long. It's never enough, and I'm the reason why they leave in the first place.

Something's happening with my heart. It's agony and it's numbing emptiness. Blood seeps from the wounds on my neck and arm, but it's nothing compared to the feeling of having my own heart carved out while I watch its last few beats before it stills forever.

"Yes."

He moves too quickly for me to react.

I'm on my back and he's leaning over me. Joker's face—he has an expression of delighted thralldom. One hand by my head and the other on my shoulder, his thumb traces along my collarbone. I want to scream, but I don't. My eyes are wide and slow to register what's happening, what he's doing. I'm not pressing against the cut on my arm anymore, losing the strength to grip the split skin together. I can't move and he's smiling in a way that twists my stomach.

"I wasn't lying at the arcade, Miri. Parker told me where you'd be that night, that you were out together—heading for some gyros if memory serves correct-ly. Niko's, right? Nice little place. Quaint-like."
All warmth flees, even as the heat exuding from his chest stifles me. The blood drains from my face and I can't make a sound.

That's exactly what we were doing. Parker and I went there and that's when the Joker was on the news.

I want to say he's lying, that he's wrong, but he isn't.

It was Parker's idea to go to his place.

"He told me he'd take you to his apartment to wait for me. Thought I'd be... dropping by later. But I was just so... eager to see you again, I just. Couldn't. Wait."

I'm trying to take my memory back to that point, searching for some clue that Parker was acting strangely. Thinking of him is painful—my mind doesn't want to dwell on his face or the time when I thought I knew what fear was. I didn't know anything, didn't know how bad things could be—how much damage I was capable of unleashing.

My vision blurs and I'm glad I can't see the amusement in his eyes. "He wouldn't do that..." I choke, unable to even curl my hands into fists. "Parker would never do that to me—"

"Oh, but he did." His hand moves from my collarbone to the concave hollow at the base of my throat. My muscles spasm—desperate to get away or die and unable to do either. "His parents owed a bit of money to the Falcons. Well, a lot of money."

No, no, no—it's not true. It can't be true—

The Joker knew where to wait for me that night. He knew where Parker lived. Who else would have told him those things? How else would he have known?

"When ol' Carmine got himself committed, the debt transferred to Maroni." He's almost singing the words, rolling and tasting them in his tongue like they're sweets he's enjoying. "Y'see where I'm goin' with this?"

Parker never talked about that with me—he would have. He would have told me. I would have helped him, and he knew that. It can't be true—it can't.

I know the Kwan's had accumulated a lot of debt when they expanded their company, but they were doing well—I could see it whenever I accessed their servers. Parker told me everything—he was never the one who would lie, that was always me.

"How—how am I supposed to believe you?" The Joker looks surprised at that, and it's not until he draws his head back that I realize how close he was to my face. Everything's spinning out of control—my mind lost in a mist of lies and truth I can't separate, the blood in my veins thick and dying. "He wouldn't do that—he wouldn't..."

I don't even sound convincing to myself. I'm reminded of when I was a girl—when all I had was Mom, Bruce, and Alfred. For years I thought there were so few people in my life because I just didn't know how to reach them. That wasn't it at all: there was something wrong with me, even then. I'm starting to doubt, question everything I knew about Parker and my own ability to see the truth in others even if I wouldn't acknowledge it entirely in myself.

"To give the kid credit, he didn't know he was talking with me, specifically."

He shifts above my chest, and only now do I feel his knee by my waist, the pressure of him sitting on my hips. "Thought I was some, ah, lackey with a computer problem. He'd been telling Maroni..."
some… *interesting* intel for a while. Like how he was such *good friends* with the Almost-Wayne—little Miriam Adina Kane."

*He wouldn't do that. Parker was a good person—he didn't have a malicious bone in his body. He was good—I know he was.*

I keep resisting. Even if I don't have the strength in my body, I have to push back with my mind.

"No—no, he wouldn't. Parker wouldn't have done that—"

"He *sold you out.* The Judas." His eyes wander away again above me, head twisting from side to side, considering words yet unspoken. "And then, well…"

The Joker's hand, the one at the base of my throat, traces up the skin until it's touching my face. His eyes are back on me, burning and bright. Fingers trace my lips and I feel everything—even as I can't get my body to move, to recoil back or get away. He adjusts again, putting more pressure on my stomach and restricting how much hard-fought air can fill me.

"The *things* he told me… and I didn't even have to *ask!* He was, ah, *eager* to save his own skin. Didn't work out so well, did it? *You* made sure of that." The fingers go from my lips to my cheekbones. It's like I'm dead but aware, the shivering of my skin the only sign of life. Only distantly do I realize I don't know where the knife is. "I'm not *lying*, Miriam. I'll prove it to you."

He keeps talking like I'm giving him a reaction, but it's not one I'm cognizant of doing. I manage to shake my head, but all he does is smile.

*No—I don't want to tell him anything. Why won't he just let me die?*

"You had a *bit* of a drug problem, didn't you, Miri?" The tears start again. His thumb is on my bottom lip, index finger resting by my eye. I press my lips together tightly. His touch, once gentle, is adding pressure with each second I don't answer. He's leaning further down, trapping me against him. "*Remember:* only the truth, sweetheart."

A long blink and furrowing my eyebrows is the only way to show my pain, and he doesn't care about any of it.

*Why does he want to know? Why does any of this matter?*

I want this to end. Answering him is worse than death. I did use drugs to forget, as a crutch to deal with the immediacy of what I'd done. Only Parker and Alfred ever knew that I abused them, that I went to those AA meetings.

*The Joker isn't lying. He knows things only Parker would have been able to tell him. And he's enjoying this.*

"Y-Yes," I force out. His smile turns kind, but it's a lie. There's nothing kind in anything he's doing.

"That's *right.* You told Parker it was because of school."

It's not a question, it's a repetition of facts he already knows. Everything's slowing, coming to a point of static exhaustion.

"Yes."

I close my eyes when he comes near, his lips against mine again. I'm choking, starving for air. It
doesn't last long. He pulls back and keeps his hand on my face, the edges of his short, dirty nails lightly following the outline of my cheeks to my nose. His eyes focus on my mouth.

"What was it really for, hmm?"

I know what the Joker is trying to do—what he's already succeeding at.

He wants you to spit out what you did. He wants to rub it in your face—make you relive it all before he lets you die. Just get it over with, get to that foregone conclusion and end this.

"It was... it made it easier—easier to deal with... with what I did." The words come out in shallow breaths. He's not laughing. This would be easier if he was—I could hate him more than I already hate myself.

"Mmm-hmm. What did you do?" He's purring now, like a goddamn cat.

"Pl-Please, please don't make me say it." Like everything else, I know it's a desperate plea he won't grant.

"That's not how the game works, sweet peach." He's smacking his lips, as if how he's making me feel is something he can taste in the air. "No answer is as good as a lie."

Cold metal is against my stomach. The steel is biting, even against my body going numb. My chest seizes again. It would be easier if he was just cutting me, that these words were more clearly forced than a demonstration of how pitiful I am.

"I... I left Parker. He—he—"

The pain of it brings new wretched energy. I can finally move my arms, and I bury my face in them—trying to roll on my side. The knife starts making a line along my abdomen. Sobbing won't help, but I can't help it—and it makes the blade cut deep. Self-preservation I thought abandoned me makes me answer, to admit my greatest shame.

"I—I let Ivan's men beat him and I didn't help—I didn't do anything... anything to make them stop." Every muscle spasms under the weight of admitting this aloud. The only other person I uttered these words to was Alfred and I thought I knew then what it was like to be broken. "They were—they were there for me, and I just—I—"

I left him. I watched them beat him nearly to death. It was my fault. That happened because of me.

I can't finish the sentence, but that doesn't stop me from pouring over my culpability over and over again in my mind. The Joker coos, his hand on my neck and running down my hair in a soothing motion. I can't keep back the despair anymore—howling and barely feeling the knife leave me. The pressure of him is gone and he's finally going to do it. He's got his sick sense of fun and he's going to end this.

But he continues to disappoint me.

The Joker's arms go around my back and pull me into a sitting position, adjusting my limp body until I'm resting against him again. He makes my head lay on the crook of his shoulder, hushing me like I'm a kid with a scraped knee. Warm pressure rests against my temple as his arms tighten around me. I don't know what to do.

The suffering won't end, Miri. This is what the rest of your life will be—these next few short hours.
I don't want it to, but my mind keeps going into dark recesses previously unknown.

You deserve this, remember, Miri? You're getting what you deserve.

My head shakes back and forth; I'm clinging his biceps, embracing him when I don't mean to. Desperation and agony leave me willing to hold onto anything to stop my mind's descent down into depths I won't be able to recover from. I focus on the senses beyond pain—how his clothes have the lingering smell of gunpowder mixed with detergent and clean sweat.

The Joker buries his face in my hair, mouth close to my ear. "You did more than that, too. Isn't that right?"

His hands go to my jaw, pulling me back and keeping my face inches from his. I'm still holding onto him and I don't know why. Dehydration, blood loss, exhaustion, and the drug make every movement blur the edges of my focus—giving everything a dreamlike quality that's descending into never-ending torment.

"W-What do you mean?" I don't know what he's referring to. How could he guess at anything else? There's a limit to what I told Parker and Alfred—humiliations that were mine alone to bear.

His head cocks to the side. There's a dangerous glint in his eye, a warning. The pressure increases on my jaw.

"Playing dumb ain't cute here, Miri. C'mon, now."

That's an answer I won't give him. I can't. What I've done to myself these last four years—what I did in the first few months after what happened to Parker—they're all things I never want to admit out loud under any circumstances.

"There wasn't anything else—I... I don't know what you're talking about."

I've said the wrong thing; given myself away. His movements are fast, but I can see them coming—and I'm powerless to stop any of it.

He twists my arm so hard he nearly dislocates my shoulder. I scream as the sharp stabs of pain and the knife drags deep into the muscle just above my elbow. I'm shrieking but no intelligible words come out. I'm trying to tear away from him, twist out of his grasp as he rotates my arm in a position it was never meant to be in. I can only repeat the same two words and he just chuckles.

"Stop! Stop—please!"

"That's not very honest of you, Miri."

I don't have time to beg. He gives my arm another savage turn and I scream. I fall off the couch and would collapse entirely if it wasn't for him suspending me from his position above. My howls are deafening as my body aches for relief. He's going to break my arm—there's too much pressure on my elbow, the bones straining against one another, grinding at the joint. Just when I think it's going to snap, the pain eases and he allows me to breakdown completely.

"Oh, it's not that bad. Could always be worse, right?"

My screams go silent, but the feeling is the same—my throat constricts and the muscles won't let me bring in any air that could help me. The warmth of the blood coming out of the new wound
leaves the rest of me shivering violently with cold. I'm swallowed by a curtain of hair, but light breaks through when he moves it over my shoulder, giving him a view of my agony.

"I could always be worse."

I force myself to make all my breathing come through my nose to keep the hyperventilating at bay. Anger is there—anger and my dying sense of defiance.

*Hold on to it. Don't let him crush you—you can't.*

"You're a bastard," I growl through clenched teeth. He laughs and it sets my blood on fire; I sit up straighter. It'll only make this worse, but I don't care. "You get off on hurting people who can't fight back, like a fucking sadist. Does it make you feel big and strong?"

He looks surprised and stops laughing. He's on the edge of the couch, bloody knife in hand.

*Make him angry enough and he'll just kill you already. You're not getting away, but you can shorten the suffering.*

"You're sick—a coward. I might be pathetic, but so are you."

Malignant rage transforms his face. He doesn't need the makeup to look like a monster—his eyes are black and dilated beyond what I thought was possible, like the eyes of a shark. He rises from the couch, slow and deliberate, and looms over me. Shoulders hunched, neck craned in a way that hides his face in the darkness, and the pulsing restraint all spell out the coming pain. I almost welcome it, not moving or looking away.

Defiance has never helped me before, but I don't regret it. I only regret I never stuck by it sooner, that I couldn't be more like Mom.

He reaches down and grabs a fistful of my hair, close to my scalp, and drags me up. My hand reaches back and grabs at his, trying to break his grip. He's unmoving and growling. I keep my lips shut tight even as my body creates loud and uncontrollable whimpers. He pulls me to my feet with the strength of one arm alone. My legs are too shaky to stand on my own, and he doesn't give me any support beyond the grip pulling my hair from the roots. His eyes—black as they are—look like they're on fire with wrath. The lids of his eyes droop, mouth turned down in a grimace.

He is a devil—one I've made angry. One that's feeding off my misery.

"Y'know, Miri, you make me wonder if my, ah, lessons are sinking in at all." There's something about his words—the tone of his voice—it's like before, when he was getting ready to stab Lewis. My body quakes as my grip on his hand loses the strength I fought to muster. His eyes roll even as his grasp grows tighter, making the whimpers transform into muffled shrieks. "What am I going to do with you, hmm?" He seems to be genuinely asking me, like I'm a problem child he's having difficulty reaching.

I don't answer. There's nothing I can say that will lead to an outcome other than what he has planned. Despair replaces the defiance; pain the remnants of strength.

He brings me closer until my chest is up against his in a mock embrace, his free hand going around my waist and thumb pressing into the grooves between my ribs. Tears of strain and pain wet my eyes, but I try to hold them back.

"I wondered why you don't seem to have very many friends, Miri. I couldn't decide if it was because you're, ah, punishing yourself or if it's because you're just so... troublesome."
He's nodding, affirming truths about me I can't deny, no matter how much I want to. His lips pop when they smack together, and he comes so close his nose touches mine. The pain is temporarily forgotten when his tongue darts out and licks my lips before going back in his mouth. I want to turn away, hit him, but he presses me closer as his hand grips my ribs, inching higher toward my chest. The whispers build back up to screams.

"I think I've, ah, figured it out. They can see how ugly you are. On the inside." His hand wanders up, grazing the side of my breast and into the gap in the shirt to rest on my heart, palm resting just above the small swell of flesh and burning my bare skin. My chest heaves. There are ways he can make this worse. Much worse than cutting me open with a knife. "They can see it just as well as I can. It's what makes you disposable to them. They take one good look at you and oh! that's it. You. Mean. Nothing."

What he's saying hits me like a blow. I don't want to believe him, but it rings true. I've never had many friends, at any point, in my life. The constants have always been limited to Parker and Alfred. He's right. Bruce left like I didn't mean anything. Jahan never cared enough about me to stay—to love me at all. No one's wanted to be close to me.

No one wanted you.

It's not until I start crying again that he smiles, the sharpened edge of his gaze dulling to a blunt object he's using to bludgeon my sense of existence.

What you said is making this worse—he's trying to make this hurt, Miri. He's being cruel—you can't listen.

I'm fighting to keep my mind whole—fighting and losing.

"It's alright, though. We share that, you and me. So different, but the same in all the ways that matter."

I try to shake my head, but he renews his grip on my hair with ferocity, making me bite my lip hard enough to make it bleed as I swallow the shreiks. The blood from it flows into my mouth and it only seems to ignite something in him. Something guttural builds in his chest and his lip curls up in a snarl. Suddenly, his hand leaves my shirt and I'm on the couch again, breathless and dizzy. I can't take in everything—it's like my head's going to burst.

"You didn't answer my question."

He's back in front of me, leaning on my slack legs. The heat coming from him is the only life coming into my body, I'm draining away until there won't be anything left. Everything's in and out of focus, but I can still see well enough to notice his grave expression, how his mouth's pulled back in a straight line. Not even the curved tips of his scars give the false impression of jocularity. Every word out of his mouth is a command demanding obedience.

"It's not difficult. What did you do? Hmm?"

I don't want to answer—it's something I intended to never tell anyone, a humiliation that was mine to tear myself apart for. I never wanted anyone else to have the ammunition to do it to me, too.

"D-Don't make me say it—"

"It's not hard to see you're just full of so many… repressed feelings. What. Did. You. Do?"

It's not a request. None of this is voluntary. I have to listen to him. Only in a state like this can I see
that it's almost funny how he can make me go from righteous anger to a sobbing mess, but it's what he's done to me again. I'm covered in blood, living a reality where this will only end with the knife between my ribs and—I can't kid myself—rape.

*You just need to say it, to get it out of the way in as few words as possible. He has to be satisfied with that. He has to be.*

My entire body is a mass of throbbing pain, but it's nothing compared to this. "I... I stopped seeing people. Only went from—from school to home. Parker—" I convulse at the memory, blink hard and ignore his hands on my thighs, forcing myself to continue. To spit it out. I don't even see the Joker's face anymore; it makes it easier to pretend none of this is real. "P-Parker and Alfred were the only—only people in my life. I..."

His fingers drum against my leg impatiently. "Mmm-hmm.*

*You're a sick son of a bitch.*

Hate is the only thing keeping my heart beating, but even that is quickly evaporating. The tears make it hard to speak past the constricting of my throat. Even thinking of that brings back the memory of Lewis—what the Joker did to him.

"I—I stopped eating as much. Wouldn't have any—any of the things I liked..." The Joker's still making sounds, showing he's listening and urging me on, bringing more tears with it. "When... when it came to doing anything I loved, I—I quit everything except programming and—and tech development."

His face comes into sharper focus. I blink and realize it's because he's leaning over me. Air's getting stuck in my trachea, and I don't know why I haven't passed out yet—why my body won't give me that mercy.

"You're *holding back*, Miri."

I vaguely feel something warm on my chin, dribbling blood from my lip. He licks along the skin and I can't even find the energy to turn away. Whimpering is the only form of protest I can make.

"A-And I—I—" My eyes squeeze shut and mouth closes as a scream I can't control builds in my throat, but I won't let it out—making it muffled and weak. His hands are on my neck, thumbs pressing along the carotid arteries, reminding me that he could strangle the remaining life from me. "I... I let... I let boys—boys sleep—sleep with... with me."

The admission is something that's killing me. I thought my body was beyond being able to warm the deadened cold gripping me, but my cheeks are on fire and it floods my spine.

"That's not very... *specific*. Are you saying, ah, you played the *whore*? That you let," he gestures in the air at some invisible person to the side, a chuckle and a mocking smile slapping me in the face, "yourself be used like a *cheap* piece of *meat*? Is *that* what you're telling me, Miri? That—oh, that's a *good one*—you just—"

He's gesturing to me now, at my body. I am small, and it's only gotten worse over the last few weeks. My life in the last four years has been a sedentary one; I never kept up with anything that would keep me healthy and strong like I was before. I deteriorated in the dark, hiding behind large clothing and the assumption that I looked more like Jahan—tall and slender. Except I almost look boyish. The curves Mom had never came to me because I didn't let them. I'd lock myself in my room and wouldn't eat for extended periods at a time. That only started after those first few
months, when my body was just another instrument with which I could hurt myself without making it obvious. I didn't want to tell anyone what I'd done. Not entirely. My eyebrows knit close together, trying to hold back the agony forming behind my eyes.

Yes. Yes, I do feel cheap.

I sob because he's right. He's reminding me of how worthless I've felt for so long. It was pain that those interactions brought, never anything good—and it succeeded in giving me more reason to hate myself. I never wanted anyone to share in those feelings, to know how deep it all went. Especially not someone who uses words like he does.

"What were you trying to do? Trying to disappear, hmm? Not gonna lie here, Miri—it didn't seem to, uh, work out so well. You just—just let yourself waste away!" He's laughing hysterically, like my sorrow is the greatest joke he's ever heard—his breath hitching until it's a high-pitched giggle of joy. I close my eyes and try to block it out—how it's punctuating the absolute absurdity that is my existence. "We've got a real masochist over here, hoo boy."

He's still laughing, but he's getting himself under control. The couch shifts down and he's next to me. I feel like a rag doll—I have no control over my body—and he's twisting me around to face him; my weight leans heavily against the back cushions of the couch. It's like he cut through any ability I had to hold up my arms; they're just dead weights that drag me down. I'm too close to him again, almost sitting in his lap. His hands are on me and I'm glad I can barely feel them.

"That just wasn't—wasn't necessary. A waste, too. You're too, ah—too pretty to be so… miserable." His hand taps my cheeks, trying to keep me awake. I glare as best I can, but I don't have much control over my expression anymore. "You are beautiful. Mmm-mmm, you are that, Miriam."

I don't like how low his voice is, how his eyes fixate on my face—my lips. My eyes, heavy and tired from crying and everything I can't process, barely take in his movements. It's why I'm too late to react in time when he bends down, cups my jaw in his hands, and kisses me on the mouth. He takes advantage of my near-comatose state and his tongue slides between my lips, grazing against my teeth and touching the tip of mine. I try to pull back, but he follows the movements of my head. I sob and try to find the strength to push him away, but that only seems to renew his efforts. One hand goes on the nape of my neck and the other to my lower back, bringing my hips closer to his waist.

He's kissing me more furiously than before and my head gets fuzzy—I can't push him away; my arms won't listen to me. My mouth doesn't respond, but I'm horrified that my lips part, letting him deepen the kiss and awaken something in the pit of my stomach. He groans against my mouth and bites my bottom lip so hard it hurts, deepening the cut and lapping at the blood as he breaks the kiss. I turn away from him and try to catch my breath. The panic is still immediate, but the adrenaline is gone. The building horror of what all this means—what these fucked up displays of affection will lead to—isn't sinking in as it should. Every part of me is burning painfully and I want nothing more than to die.

His hands drop to my hips and pull me forward until I'm flush against him. I keep pulling away, tapping into a reserve of strength that doesn't exist, but all I can be is passive; I don't have any other option. My eyes stay down even as he breaks the kiss and presses his forehead against mine, and he lets out a quiet chuckle. Where he was angry before, now he sounds smug. He knows he's winning, that he's close to breaking me.

"Does that make it worse, having all these... ugly emotions trapped inside? Just straining to be let loose?" I'm an empty receptacle now, one that can only take in the vitriolic poison destroying my
veins. His tongue wets the corners of his mouth in a quick swipe. "But you did deserve it, didn't you? And it still wasn't enough… will there ever be enough, Miriam?"

There's no answer I can give him—because it will never be enough now. Parker's dead and I'll never be able to make it up to him. He'll never know how sorry I am, how badly I wanted him to be OK, to never hurt again.

You failed, Miri. You ruined his life when he was still alive to have one. You're the reason he's dead.

"Miri—it's a funny world we live in. But you—you can't even see it!" He sounds manic, deranged. It's because he has a point and he wants to drive it home until I prove how right he was all along. You're barely even present in your own life, are you? Do you think a, ah, good-looking, out-going, fun guy like Parker wanted to—to spend so much time with someone who's so detached?"

He's hitting my face again, getting me to refocus. His thumb reaches up and traces along my bottom lip, pulling at it and skirting along my closed teeth. I'm shuddering again and I can't tell if it's because of what he's doing or fear, or even both. I hate myself either way.

"A guy needs to know you're into him, Miri. You can't just… float around like he's barely even there to you." The high, mocking laugh is a punch to the stomach. The hand not touching my lips keeps gesticulating wildly as his eyes stay wide in a false show of innocence. "And you need to give them something. Some fun. Some laughs. Some pussy… I don't think you gave Parker any of that, did you?"

This is a question that demands an answer. His hand's not moving wildly through the air now. There is no existence beyond the pain of all this. My life seems far away, it's like all I've ever known is this and I'm slipping away entirely.

No, Miriam. Stay awake. Keep fighting. Enduring doesn't mean giving up.

I'm surprised that there's still part of me that wants to fight at all. Up and down, truth and lies, reality and fiction—it's all blurring together into one amalgamation of existence that no one should live through.

"No, no I didn't…"

Don't answer him. You can't give him any more.

He shifts and fingers rest on my clavicle, tracing the outline of the bones.

"You do realize, don't you, that you did all of that for… nothing. It all came back to nothing." My eyes find his, and it's a shock to my system to see that they're pleading with me, almost. It's cruelty mixed with desperation for me to see what he's talking about. "You, ah, suffered need-less-ly, I'm afraid. It was for the wrong person—he clearly didn't deserve such… such devotion from you."

All I can do is shake my head.

It's not true, it's not—it's not true—

"Parker sold you out without having to know anything about what you did," he says with a smack of his lips. His words are light and playful, but they cut deep. "I'm starting to get the feeling, sweet peach, that you've been doing all this for, ah, people who never gave a fuck to begin with."
"No—no… you're wrong." It's barely above a croak, but it's all that's left of my grip on what's happening, on my world and everyone in it.

He shakes his head, frustrated. "Didn't wanna do this, Miri. But it looks like you need a little more… solid evidence."

He holds up something and I have to shut my eyes tight when blinding white light comes through the TV screen. I'm trying to cringe away, but he forces my head to turn and I blanche when I read the title card for a homemade movie from the depths of hell.

'Memory Lane: Take One.'

I almost throw up, trying to lean away from him—to collapse in a way where I can't see. He won't let me. One arm stays firmly around me and makes me stare. A quiet wail leaves me when I see the face on the screen.

It's Parker.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone. First off, I want to thank you all again for continuing to read this story, even with how things are looking for the characters right now. Nonetheless, I deeply, deeply appreciate the comments, kudos, and bookmarks you all have been leaving. It genuinely means a lot that there are people who want to read this story, and I absolutely love hearing from all of you! I also want to throw out a specific shout-out to a few people: thank you so much LittleSnow for all your support and encouragement, it really means a lot coming from someone as talented as you are!

Thank you all so very much - you make writing this worthwhile!

The Joker is enacting a very cruel continuation of what he began in the arcade at the moment. I've been hinting/trying to make it clear that the Joker has some very misplaced and disturbing feelings turning over into obsession for Miriam. The Joker is not a good person in this fic, he has next to no redeeming qualities and is a pernicious, malignant, and brutal character. That being said, those things - no matter how sick and depraved it makes him and his actions - does not preclude him from wanting human bonds and experiencing emotions, even if they're not in a way we recognize and are unsettling. I don't think the Joker would brutalize a woman in that he would cross over into rape, but not because he has some code of honour or innate sense that he should treat women differently than men. The Joker is good at tailoring his particular brands of torture to the individual. He is absolutely more physically violent with men than women, but that doesn't stop him from terrorizing them - it simply looks different.
Hey everyone! It's been so strange not uploading every week, but my schedule's calmed down a bit and I'm going to try and return to my weekly posting schedule. I know reading what's happening to Miriam is a brutal ride right now, but hopefully you stick around to see what happens on the other side when this story gets close to the end. I hope you like the chapter, despite its harrowing grimness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No, no, no—I don't want to see this, I can't see this—
I don't have a choice in the matter. The Joker has a hand on my neck, keeping me facing the screen. What I see dispels any notion of moving from where I am.
The camera's focused on Parker, beaten bloody and covered in swelling bruises.
I'm paralyzed. I don't want to watch this. My heart—something's happening to it, almost beyond my ability to describe. All I know is it hurts, more than anything else in my life. The only thing that rivals it is when Mom died.

Everything is silent. No noise comes from the Joker or me, nothing from the TV. Parker's face—the marks are a blend of fresh and old wounds. His lip's split open; blood and saliva drip down onto his already bloody shirt. His head hangs like he's aslee, but his eyes are screwed up in pain. A thick rope is around his chest, and burns mark the entirety of his neck. Every part of me is frozen—I can't blink, can't move a muscle. The world falls away. It's just Parker and me retroactively experiencing his suffering. My lungs are about to burst, but I won't draw in air, not willingly.

"Tell us again, Mr. Kwan. Why are you here?"
The voice isn't one I expected. I thought it would be the Joker's, but it isn't. It belongs to Zsasz.
Parker doesn't answer, he looks beyond that. His face is a mess of cuts, and the black ichor I saw in his veins at the arcade is peeking up past the collar of his shirt. This must have been in the days after they pulled me from the river. I flinch like I'm the one being hit when Zsasz's fist connects with the swollen tissue of Parker's face. Pressing myself back away from the screen, I sob. I still can't move in any real capacity—I can't get away from any of this. It's only vaguely that I realize the Joker's arm is around me now, draping across my shoulders and holding me close.

"Don't be so shy. You were so eager to talk before, weren't you?"

Zsasz is taunting Parker. Inflicting all that pain and laughing. Just like Ivan's men. Flashes of overlapping incidents of violence—all of which I was a witness but never a force of help—nearly blind me. It's too much for my mind to handle and nothing's coherent. The screen's going black.

No—that's you. Stay awake—it's not safe to pass out. You need to fight. Fight.
It doesn't matter what my brain's telling me. There's almost nothing left to fight for. The Joker
shakes me. Hard. The screen comes back into focus.

"Why are you here, eh?"

Parker spits out a large clot of blood. His teeth are covered in it.

"S—Screw you." Another hit to Parker's face and the sound of crunching bone makes me scream—as if that could stop what already happened. I can't move my arms, I'm bleeding too much, and barely aware of what's happening beyond the screen. "B—Because... because..."

"Come on now, boy. You're here because of your friend, aren't you?"

"No—"

"Don't clam up because of the camera. You're here because you sold out our little girlie. Being friends with the wrong people can bite sometimes, can't it?"

The camera zooms out from Parker, showing a dark room with walls covered in graffiti and grime. From the windows in the background, it looks like a room in a house. It's dirty, as if it hasn't been cleaned in years. The further the camera pans out, the more of the floor is revealed. My stomach nearly climbs up my throat when I finally see that Parker's chair is in the middle of a large, dry pool of blood on the hardwood.

"So, tell us—what did you do? How did it all come to this?"

Parker didn't do anything to hurt me. He wouldn't. Never on purpose.

Everywhere I turn, someone's looking to turn me into a liar.

"I... I told Maroni I was friends with Miriam. What kind of projects she was working on. We—we made a deal. I'd get Miriam to—" Parker stops and cries, his head bowed and mouth in a tight grimace. Zsasz is patient, placing a hand on Parker's back and giving false motions of reassurance. Bile and disbelief choke me.

He wouldn't do that—Parker wasn't that kind of person—

"I'd... I'd get Miriam to do something big for him if it squared up my parents."

"That's right. I'm sure it feels good to get that off your chest, eh? So, you admit you sold her out," Zsasz laughs, leaning close to Parker as he flinches away, "that's cold, mate."

"I didn't mean—"

"Weren't very loyal, were you? Go on. Tell us the rest. What else did you give Maroni?"

Parker's mouth opens and closes, but he doesn't speak right away. Deep lines are engraved in his forehead, and I've never seen such a deep look of agony on another person's face.

"I... I told him where she'd be. Wh-What her schedule was like."

No. No—he—Parker—

I would give anything for Parker to be here right now, to hear his voice like I used to remember it. Not this pitch of pain that's burying itself in my brain, rewriting every memory we ever made together. I can't process what's happening, even when it's something so obvious.
The Joker was right. He was right. Parker is the reason this is happening. I'm here because he told the wrong people things I should never have talked about, things I never should have touched if my life depended on it.

*How did this happen? Why did you do this, Parker?*

No, no, no—that isn't true either. This all started because I failed to help him. It doesn't change the fact that I'm still alive and Parker's the one who paid with his life. I'm getting what I deserve. He might not have known it, but Parker finally got his recompense. I'm enduring the share of suffering that should have always been mine alone. I deserve this. All of it.

"That's good, Parker. Very good. Telling the truth is its own reward, eh? Too bad there's none of that here." Zsasz is laughing, circling Parker. There's something in his hand. A glint of silver.

It's a knife.

"W-Wait—I did what you wanted—stop—"

No, no, no!

I shriek as the Joker turns off the TV, taking away the last images I'll ever see of Parker alive. I double over and scream, wail with despair—knowing that I'll never be able to rectify any of this. I'll never be able to help him or take back the irreversible. Parker spent his last days in agony, and I can't find any anger in me for what he said—what he told Maroni. All I find is a resounding level of hate for myself that corrodes my being.

*It all comes back to you. It always does. The Joker was right—you ruin people.*

Parker did die because of me, because of my presence in his life—my fucking existence. My head spins—going back to every moment, every interaction I ever had with the people in my life and searching for how I poisoned them, too.

"You idealized him so much, and for what? He's no better than anybody else when you put a little pressure on their necks," the Joker whispers in my ear, rubbing my back in small circles. He's wrong about that. This wasn't Parker's fault. It was mine. "Do you believe me now, Miri?"

I shake my head and choke out a sob. Once I acknowledge the truth in what he's saying, that will be the end of me. The end of everything I ever was.

"I-It's my fault—it was always—" Air doesn't move past the thick knot of convulsions in my chest, and I can't talk anymore.

He sucks his teeth and grabs me by the back of the neck, pulling me upward. I'm thrown around like I don't even weigh anything to him—being spun around to stare him in the face. Instead of looking angry, he seems exasperated, as if I'm not catching onto something important. His eyes roll in an exaggerated arc, head shaking from side to side in tight gestures.

"You're, ah, missing the bigger picture here, sweetheart. Yeah, it is your fault, isn't it? Bu-t… can't you see that these—these people—" He smacks his lips and raises an eyebrow, gesturing to the TV in a gesticulation of accusation. "You keep thinking that, somehow, they're better than you are. They're not."

Nothing seems real anymore. The world is taking on a haze, blunting the edges of the knives embedding themselves in me. Every word out of his mouth is taking on a meaning my mind is desperate to cling to—anything to explain what I can't define.
"People like that—the, ah, 'good ones'—" The Joker takes his hands away from me to make large air quotes before returning to grip my neck, shaking me with each burst of emphasis. "They're the worst of 'em. You wanna know why?"

He jerks his chin down, looking up at me. The effect used to make his eyes look like dark pits when he wore the makeup, now it's a gesture that makes them seem concave and hollow—nearly skeletal. It's not until his fingers bite the muscles that I realize he wants an answer.

"Why?" I whisper.

"No—don't answer him. He's fucking with you—you need to fight—"

"It's because they're lying. All of 'em." I shake my head, but he's succeeding in what he always wanted—shattering every sentiment of comfort I placed in others—every feeling safety and craving to have someone close, every wish to never feel alone. He's making me realize I always was on my own, that I was lying on a level I didn't even realize—a delusion that outdid any fantasy I imagined to gloss over the ugliness that defines my life. "Miriam, I don't think anyone ever took the time to tell you these things, did they? You want honest people in your life. The ones who give you all the... hard truths. And, uh, they're rare-ly kind."

Any resistance my mind is capable of giving is eroding quickly. Warm streams of blood weep from my arms and my head feels light. The drug, the image of Parker, knowing—deep down—what the Joker's going to do to me—it's creating a counter-instinctual wave of apathy. What used to keep me tethered to everything I thought was important is coming undone.

"You don't see it now, but—y'know, I am a friend, Miri. Your friend. I haven't lied to you, have I?"

Shaking my head, I try to bring back the context, put meaning to the words I can barely translate.

What is he talking about? Think.

He's saying he's somehow not my tormentor—someone who's caused me nothing but pain. I shake my head, trying to signal as best I can that it isn't true—he has lied to me. I know he has. But... I can't bring up any examples of when he did.

Don't think like that—

"No, that's right. I haven't," he says, pulling me closer and pressing me into his chest. I still can't move my arms, can't make myself sit up and push him away. Even correcting him requires an effort that's beyond my ability to summon anymore. Another arm goes around me. I want to scream, but I don't. I let myself lean into him, eager for warmth as I shiver hard.

That's because you're losing too much blood—use your head—

"Haven't abandoned you either. And you know what?" he asks, voice getting gentler and quiet. It's soothing, lulling me to a place that's far from here. He isn't lying now. He won't leave me alone.
A twisted thought forms. One that leads down a rabbit trail to a dangerous realization. I shouldn't acknowledge it—it's sick. He's sick.

"You don't like what's in there." I jerk away when his hand goes to my chest, fingers pressing against the ribs that barely contain my erratic heart. I don't fail to realize how he almost fully touches my breast in his hand, and I force myself to push beyond what my body's telling me—I shove myself away and sit up. I'm still too weak and he pushes me back down, pinning me in place. "But I do. I see you, Miri. The real you."

How can that possibly be true? He doesn't know anything about me. Nothing. He's fucking delusional—don't listen.

I try to internalize reason, but his words… they're resonating somewhere deep in me—the parts that were never visible but always wanted to be acknowledged. I shake so bad my teeth chatter together, and it only makes him hold me tighter.

"I like what I see. I like you."

Everything about him is the personification of intensity—as if the grip on me could permanently impart his words on my skin. He says it with a gravity that almost makes it impossible to doubt. The words would infer some sort of confession of love or affection, but there's none to be found here. What he's seeing—whatever it is he likes—isn't anything in me that's valuable. There's nothing about us that's the same—nothing that would make any of this founded in logic.

He's a psychopath—psychopaths don't care about people. There's a lie right there—hang on to it. Don't believe him. He's going to use you for whatever fucked up plan he has and kill you. He's using you—

"They'll all leave you—they already have. I know everything about you. Everything."

I still completely. That's a claim that I should discount immediately as false, but I can't. Everything—from how he's holding me, putting pressure on one of the cuts as he warms my freezing limbs, the sound of his voice—gives him a demented sincerity that scatters any room for uncertainty.

Miri—he's the one who made those cuts. He just showed you a video of Parker being tortured—you're not thinking. Alfred's in danger—you're in danger. Use your head. Challenge him. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon—

"N-No, you d-don't. T-That's impossible. H-How would y-you know anything a-about me?"

I'm shivering so hard I can barely force the words out. Goosebumps rise painfully along my skin and drag my mind down to a sleep I hope I never wake up from. He laughs and rubs my arms, building up warmth through the friction of his touch. It feels like he's grating against my skin with a straight razor. His face splits into two, becoming afterimages that trail one another but don't come together. I still don't miss the roll of his eyes.

"Do I need to, ah, prove that to you, too? Maybe you want a movie night—shoulda just said so."

What the hell is he—

I shut my eyes tight when blinding white light comes through the TV screen again. He's starting up another video and I want to scream already. I can't handle whatever it is he wants to show me. He pulls my hair, keeping a firm grip at the base of my skull, and twists my neck to face the direction of the searing wall of white. When my eyes adjust, I catch the end of a scene card like the first that played before showing Parker. Except this one says, 'Memory Lane: Vista Cruise Edition,' and it's
not Parker's face that's shown after. It's mine—just like the first video when I came in here.

No, no, no—

The first video showed just how bad the damage the Joker did was, but there's something different about this one. I try turning, sliding away from the Joker, but he holds me like—like—

He's holding you as if you're a couple. Miri—you need to fight back. Don't just let this happen—
you know what comes next—

The shirt I'm wearing rides up, exposing my lower back. He takes advantage of it, placing his bare hand there and sliding further up my spine. I try shifting away, but the motion of the camera makes me forget about him. Something's tugging on my mind—shaking loose images that coincide with these, but from a different perspective. The ones I'm seeing are from the ground staring up, and this is staring down at my sleeping form on the bloody mattress. It's dizzying—confusing for my mind and impossible for me to work out what's real and what my head might have altered.

My vision centres back, the world stabilizing and easing nausea-inducing vertigo. The camera is focused on my face again until the shot pans out to show my entire torso at a speed that makes my head spin. Several of my shirt buttons are gone and the fabric gapes open, showing my chest and bra. Bruises, the ones that still mark me, are starting to take form in the shape of fingertips and hands. The camera stays steady, as if it's revelling in the image of me on the ground.

It's with a punch to the gut that things start coming back. I'm remembering how I got the bruises, how my blouse came to be ripped open and my skirt bunched up around my hips. I heave even when I know there's nothing to purge out of me—nothing to get rid of the memories burning through my skull and destroying my stomach in a bath of acid. A loud whimper comes out of my mouth when I hear the Joker speak through the TV—a louder resonance of a voice that will always haunt me.

"Miri, Miri, Miri. Don't you want to play? We'll turn that frown upside down."

My eyes flutter in the video and a sound of pain comes through the speakers when I start to wake up. That's another familiar line. I heard it in the car on the way home from the hospital. I was remembering then, too—my head was trying to tell me the truth even when I wouldn't listen.

They were always there—you knew parts of this the entire time. You know you did.

Another self-perpetuated lie I forced on myself. It was easier to keep them down; it kept me safe. There's nothing safe here. Nothing to keep me whole. I'm splitting apart and the Joker—the fucking Joker—is the one holding me together.

"No… my head…" My arms try to move in the video to cover my face and hands reach out and push them back down at my sides. The Joker makes a tsk sound when he zooms the camera in on my face as the one next to me chuckles at some private joke.

"C'mon, what'll it hurt, hmm? Up, up—"

The Joker pulls on my arms and tries to hoist me up with one hand, jostling the camera into a frenzy of jerked movements, renewing the nausea I'm experiencing from watching this hell unfold; one I already know all the answers for but can't bring myself to acknowledge. When the version of me on the screen cries out, he sets me back down and huffs in exasperation.

"Afraid of a little, uh, pain? It's not that bad—don't ya think you're being a bit dramatic?"
"You bastard. You nearly killed me and you're calling me dramatic?!

I squeeze my eyes shut and attempt to master my anger. It won't help me right now. I need to save it for when it will. Addressing the insult now isn't helpful. The Joker chuckles knowing full well he's getting a rise out of me.

*Keep your head, Miri. You can break later, but not here. You can't do it here.*

"No... not—not afraid of that. It—it just hurts. Please don't... don't make me get up." I sound so small and weak, so acquiescent. My eyes are barely open, eyebrows bunched up in pain. It barely even registers that I'm staring at a ghost of myself, not with the spike driving through my head and splitting me apart. "I... I'm so tired."

The angle of the camera drops down, and the bobbing of the Joker's knees tells me he sat down next to me, leaning over to get a good shot of my face. I want to be sick, but nothing comes up—it's just another thing building in me until I reach the breaking point. A gloved hand reaches out and smooths my hair back and it's like I can feel it happening now, even as the Joker's hands don't leave my back and arm.

"What are you so afraid of, Miri? Tell your new friend all about it."

'Friend'? This sick, fucking bastard.

Screw it—anger is good. I need to hold onto that. I need anything to replace what's trying to annihilate me. Even then, he was trying to spin the lie of him somehow caring about me. I haven't told anyone what I'm afraid of, not entirely. There's no way I told him—no matter how concussed I was. I watch the screen intently and almost forget where I am and who I'm with. The video's quiet for a moment and I'm appalled when my lips move to answer.

"I... I'm scared of the dark."

No, no, no—you didn't—how stupid are you? No, no, no—

I'm horrified. Another memory hits me square in the chest—a tidal wave of realization that nearly drowns me. Everything goes slack and I slump against the couch as understanding makes my nerves burn hot. I told this homicidal maniac my worst fears, the ones that plagued me since I was a child—the ones that still affect everything I do.

All this time, I was keeping the pain of remembering from buoying up and still couldn't stem it completely. Bursts of it slipped through and they were powerful enough to nearly knock me off my feet. There's nothing to stop that assault here. Even as I know for certain I can't, I still try to bury everything back down to a level of ambiguity that pardons me from examining what's causing my chest to rip open. The Joker doesn't give me time to compartmentalize, his voice comes out from the speakers and the version of him next to me has his mouth curled in a wicked smile.

"Mhmm." I don't like that sound, like a cat's purr, that's coming from the Joker in the video. "What else, hmm? If you can't tell me, who can you tell?"

*Why am I not moving, why am I answering his questions?*

I know why. I didn't have the power to do anything but lie there. He was the one who kept me alive—even if it was only the bare minimum. The thought tugs on a memory. He spent a lot of time with me after—after what Zsasz tried to do, but his care was limited. He gave me water, kept me awake to make sure I wasn't choking on my own tongue, and ensured I didn't lapse into seizures, but it still took an intense amount of effort to move past the pain when I regained the full
use of my body later. I was so tired then—just like I am now.

"Hospitals... don't like them," I rasped out. It's clear I wasn't in my right mind—my eyes are staring out at nothing and I'm limp like there isn't a soul trapped inside me. "They... remind me too much of Mom. I don't... I can't—"

My voice trails off, but I remember what I was going to say. Being in hospitals brings me right back to when she was dying—when her heart monitor flatlined after they sedated her so she could rest. I don't think she even knew I was there. She likely died thinking she was totally alone. I'm not breathing anymore, not on purpose. The air coming in my lungs is a happy accident in between aching sobs.

"Understandable."

How could he understand anything? *This—he's sick. He's a goddamn bastard and I'm going to kill him. I will.*

I try to wrangle the rage, but it's twisting even as it forms, transforming into a devastating hurt that erases everything else. Nothing has existed beyond the suffering I feel right now. I remember all of this—I know what I'm going to say next in the video, but I don't want the memories to be realized. They can't be made real. They can't.

"Turn it off—please, don't—"

It's too late. A new nightmare unfurls its bloody wings as it sinks its talons in my neck.

"I-I'm always... always alone. I don't... I don't like being alone."

The hot fire of fear turns into a cold slap of painful reality as I bear witness to what I would give anything to forget. My eyes are open in the video, but they're staring far away. I can see myself shaking from the cold just as I feel myself doing the same now. Tears come from both versions of me in this sick mirrored world. The Joker wipes at them in the video, adjusting my head to look up at him with dazed complacency as the camera zooms in.

"None of us do, sweetheart."

I wail at how his voice sounds: it's sweet and kind and a *fucking lie.* He's pretending to listen, to care—as if he understands it in a way that says he's human and not an unfeeling abomination in the guise of one.

"Everyone... everyone always leaves."

The Joker's thumb rubbed along my jaw and temple in smooth arcs. I'm sobbing in the video and it's not until the Joker pins my body to his in the present that I realize I still am, too. I want to be alone in my grief, but he won't let me. My knees come up and I press my eyes against them, trying to block out the sensory information that's obliterating me.

How did I let this happen? I gave him the toolkit to torment me, gave the devil the roadmap to torture me and everyone I care about. I did this. Oh, Christ, I did this.

Everything's falling into place in my mind, each memory a bloody cut that creates an interwoven pattern I could always feel but never see before. The Joker knows where to hit because I told him where it hurt the most. I exposed my flank and invited him to sink in his teeth, and now I'm here. I could have protected myself—could have saved so many more if I wasn't such a coward. This is what I do: I forget and keep everything that's hard deep down, thinking it'll save me pain when all I
do—every goddamn time—is create opportunities for new levels of suffering. Parker's dead, Alfred's going to die, and I'm still here, suspended in pain as I await the sentence my executioner will offer me and end this.

"I won't."

My head snaps up. The words were so quiet I almost missed them. His hand is still holding my face in the video, but his voice is so altered it doesn't sound like the same person anymore. This isn't the voice of the Joker, but it is at the same time—just in a form I don't recognize. I don't remember this. The tears stop as the tension exuding from the screen—from the pores of his body next to mine—enraptures me.

"You... you won't?"

Something's happening in my chest, a relived sense of—of hope, almost. I want this to end. I don't want to feel like this anymore.

"You can count on it, sweetheart."

Why—why does he sound like that?

It's—it's totally unlike everything I've grown familiar with him. There's no cruelty—no trace of mocking hate, no savage niceties wrapped in falsehoods. He sounds more real and genuine than almost anyone else I've ever known.

He sounds like Parker. That's the kind of thing he would say to me, especially when I'd cry. My face—watching the emotions play out on it as a third-party is strange. It's disbelief and mistrust that gives way to a desperate, longing wish for his words to be true. I shouldn't—I know that—but I feel echoes of the same feeling here now, even as my arms continue to bleed and I know who's really sitting next to me.

"OK... thank you..." Shock jolts me. I believed him so easily—so desperate to have someone that I clung to the man who put me in that state to begin with. It's unfair and confusing because my head's searching out that same reassurance. And, once again, the Joker's the only one I find.

No—don't think like that. You can't—

"What... what are you afraid of, J?"

'J'? Oh my god, no, no, no—

Another memory stirs. 'After all we shared, too'—that's what he said when he was making that fucking video—the one I remember. I thought he was messing with me, trying to get in my head. No, he was telling the truth. I just didn't remember it. I was more blatantly honest with him in ten minutes of video than I have been with anyone else.

"There's nothing I'm afraid of, Miriam."

His voice sounds foreign still—that same expression of care and affection. My name doesn't sound like an insult, a pulling down of my identity. It's the most violating and confusing thing I've ever experienced. Every muscle in my body spasms when I see his hand reach out again, not to mock me by twisting my head, but to stroke the side of my jaw. His hand isn't gloved, and his bare thumb runs over my lips in some tender motion I've never consciously experienced. The cold disappears completely, and my entire body erupts in waves of burning when his hand trails down to my collarbone. I don't even jerk away when I realize he's emulating the motion on me now.
“That must be... must be nice.” My voice is breathy; a sigh. Horror finds me again when I see my head lean into his hand, encouraging him to touch me more.

"You've got no idea."

The video cuts to black and I want to scream, but any noise I want to make dies. Just like I want to. Everything he's said is impossible not to acknowledge now. He was kind to me—he sat there and listened. I—I told him about Mom, how much I miss her and how her delusions at the end convinced me that I was the one who caused her suffering. And he was there to reassure me. I never told Parker that, though I think he knew. I talked about my frustrations with Bruce—how I felt like such a disappointment to Alfred. Parker—I almost choke on the thought—I'm the one who told the Joker all about what I did. A howl tears out of me and I push him away when the recollections of telling him my hopes and dreams—that I couldn't stop feeling sad—bores through my spine. The more I told the Joker, the kinder he would be each time I saw him.

"I—I haven't told... told anybody this." I said that after I eviscerated myself in front of him, spilling out every secret recess in me. My head was intact enough to tell him all about the past, but I couldn't understand what was happening in the present—who I was really talking to. "You're... you're a good friend. I—I like talking to you."

I invited this. I literally invited this.

The Joker holds me close as my skull's pried open with the visions that were buried. I think he's saying something, but I can't hear him. That moment is stuck in my head now—I don't see what's in front of me. Instead, I see how he was surprised by what I said, a red flash of embarrassment that went down his neck. He was wearing his makeup, but he was an entirely different person to me. I bared myself to him and, in exchange, he told me I would never be alone. He did keep his word—I just invited the monster in my house and was surprised when he began to tear it down.

"You won't be alone anymore."

How long had I dreamed about someone saying that to me? And it came from him—the man who's killed everything else in my life.

No. You drove him there.

There's no denying any of it—there's no way I can. I did this to myself.

"C'mon now, Miri. Do I have to keep showing you more, or do you finally remember?" he whispers in my ear. I jerk back but he doesn't go anywhere. He's waiting for an answer, and I feel compelled to give him one.

"I—I remember," I choke. I wish I didn't—that I could have kept living a lie. It would have made existing bearable. Now I can only hope he kills me quickly.

That's... that's what people like him do, right? They get what they want and then they—they—

And then they get rid of what was such a source of amusement and throw it down into a black crevasse, never to be found. I want him to do that to me. I want to disappear and never be found—to be erased: me and everything I've done.

The Joker takes my face out of the cloud of my thoughts and turns me to look at him. There isn't any malice there—even though he's ripped me down to nothing. His eyes are dark liquid gold, mouth relaxed, eyes dropped and heavy, and his touch gentle. Leaning in, he kisses me softly and I let him, not returning the act but not stopping him either. A bloody hand goes to the back of my
head and keeps me close, the other on my ribs. I close my eyes and try to be somewhere else when my lips part and his tongue probes along my teeth.

I'm not here anymore—I'm at the pagoda waiting for Parker to find me on a summer day. Everything's green and bright, warm with the sun beating down. Looking out across the water, I hang in a moment of perfect stasis. Nothing's there that can hurt me—no one to remind me how much I failed. I hear Parker's voice—he's calling out to me. When I turn to look, it's Zsasz I see instead.

The vision ends when the Joker's hand goes inside my shirt to cup my breast in earnest. It shocks me into movement—I don't know how, but I bring up a fist and punch him. It's hard enough for him to stop and I drop off the couch, tearing open the clotting wounds on my arms and stomach and trying to get my feet under me. I don't see the Joker anymore. I'm seeing Zsasz.

It's not real—wake up and fight, Miri—

I can't shake what I'm seeing. It's Zsasz getting up from the couch and coming toward me. I can see the tally marks just as well as I can feel his weight on me. Moving faster than I thought I could, I make it to the kitchen and try to stand, reaching for the butcher's block holding what might be my only salvation.

C'mon, c'mon—

Shaking and almost falling, a knife is almost in reach when a hand wraps itself in my hair, tearing me away from the counter.

"No! No—stop—" I shriek, tear at the hand holding me, trying to do anything I can to dislodge his grip, but—just like before—nothing I do is working.

I don't smell blood and detergent mixed with gunpowder anymore. It's cigarettes and sweat and a scent that's unmistakably Zsasz. Hands are on my throat, squeezing the air out of me. A hand's going in my underwear, bunching fabric around my hips.

"Please—please, don't!"

I'm folding my legs up, trying to protect myself, but I can't even see right. I'm not in a house anymore—I'm in that metal room. I'm trapped and I'm going to die. Zsasz is going to rape me and I'm going to die. I'm a wild animal caught in a trap. A crushing weight's flattening my lungs.

I'm dying—I'm going to die, I'm going to—

A sharp slap to the face creates a kaleidoscope of bursting colour. Air forces its way back in my lungs and nothing I was feeling before is happening now. The Joker is over top of me but not with any crushing weight—not like what I felt a moment before. The room isn't metal and the smells are gone. It takes a concerted effort to callback what the hell just happened.

You were hallucinating—blending the past and what's happening now. You need to wake up—you aren't safe if you can't—

"You gonna calm down now, sweet peach?" the Joker asks. An edge is back in his voice, and his eyes aren't open anymore. They're annoyed. He rolls them and gently taps my cheek, making me flinch. "You'd think the house was on fire, jeez. Cop a feel and suddenly the sky's falling!" he laughs.

Heat burns my face and neck. I was confused—remembering what Zsasz did and conflating it with
what's he's doing to me. It doesn't dampen the panic. Quite the opposite. I'm going to have to fight him off—like I did Zsasz. I remember that now, too. It's when his hand went in my underwear that I clawed his eye and hit him in the head. Just like now, I don't know where the strength came from, but it was enough to keep him away. When he let go of me, I just kept hitting him, screaming and taking him by surprise. I didn't stop even when Lewis—yes, it was Lewis and the blonde boy—pulled me away while another held Zsasz back.

Another flash pushes past despair and it makes me freeze. The Joker was standing in the doorway. He knew what Zsasz tried to do and he let it happen. He demonstrated all too well on Lewis that he isn't a forgiving person. There are no pardons when it comes to offending him.

*That proves it. Focus on that. He doesn't care—he was lying.*

I was starting to believe that what I saw on the videos was genuine, that what I remembered was a confounding glimpse into a man I'll never be able to understand—but he's showed himself again. Doubt's still raging in me, and he might be able to pretend he's not, but he's a monster. Just like Zsasz.

"Get *away* from me," I spit, trying to move until he pins my hands down. He shakes his head and licks his lips, staring over me and muttering before smacking his lips in an audible *pop*.

"*Really*, sweet peach? What do I have to keep doing to show you we're *beyond* all this, *hmm*?"

I'm in no place to challenge him, but I do anyway—straining at his grip and boring into him with a glare.

"*Beyond what?*! You—you are *always* hurting me. What—*what do you want from me?*!" He doesn't answer and the tears come again. I scream at my helplessness, at my inability to move him. "*What do you want?*!"

He quashes the resistance in me with silence and a hardened frown, holding me down until I've burned through what little energy I gained. I'm a crying mess underneath him, waiting for something I have no way of controlling.

"T-Tell me—*please*…"

I really don't want to know what the answer is, but I *need* to know. There must be something else to this. Why would anyone do this to another if there wasn't something beyond what I'm missing?

He chuckles and shakes his head again, readjusting his grip to latch onto my biceps. Pulling me up, he props me against a nearby wall, crouching close and keeping his hands on me. I whimper when they gently trail from my arms to my legs. I'm about to yell at him to leave me alone when he rubs his lips together, tasting the words before he speaks them.

"Miri, what do you think happens after all this? *Death*, I mean."

I stare blankly at him, the pain I'm feeling forgotten.

*What… what the fuck is that supposed to mean?*

"Think you're gonna see *mommy* when you die? You think *this* is, ah… *it*? The *here* and *now*." He twists his head to the side, glaring at the direction of the living room. If my body didn't feel dead, I'd bolt for the door. His fingers flex against my thighs and I jerk away only to hammer my back on the wall. "*Well…* if this is all there is, you don't have much of *anything*, do you?"
This is a new angle, one that elevates my distress. I want to shout him down and argue—tell him why he's wrong. But I don't; I'm exhausted. I had my opportunity to fight and get away and it's gone. His words are mollifying me, pulling my head down in a haze of despondent anguish.

"I mean, there's the *money* and the Almost-Wayne name and all, but that's not what, ah, makes you feel *warm* and *fuzzy* inside does it?" His voice takes on the tone of mocking I've come to know, the one he was hiding before. He's finding another way to strip away at me, and I don't want it to, but it's working. Shifting his feet, he looks at me with dark eyes that burn like they're live coals.

*You need to push back, Miri. Fight even if your arms won't work.*

"Y-You're *crazy*. *Insane.*" I want to mean the words, but my voice wavers. When he moves his hand, I think it's to hit me or drive in the knife to make a new laceration. I cringe but he's squeezing my jaw, making me focus on his eyes.

"You wanna know something, Miri? When people think of, ah, *madness*, they think of a *singular* event. One big *bang* of crazy and your mind comes apart at the *seams!* But that's not what it is at all. *No, no, no.*" There's madness in his eyes right now—something he'll never be able to rationalize away. I try to shake my head, but he holds me in place, gripping harder every time I try to move. "Y'see, *madness* is a… it's a *process*. Slow at first. Can't even *feel* it. Then one day…"

He looks away, growing quiet. I find myself straining to hear him finish. Realizing what I'm thinking, I try to force it out of my head—but he wants my attention only on him and he doesn't let me even blink before jerking my gaze back to him. The thought settles, burrowing in my mind. Nothing but the sound of his voice remains, his face floating in front of me.

"It's just… *there*. Like an old friend you haven't seen in a while. Except that voice is *quiet*… *whispering*. Telling you *all* the things you've thought but held back, getting a little *louder*." I've always known it was dangerous to look in his eyes for too long, and I'm past the threshold of resistance. Rather than terrifying pools of black, it's a mesmerizing lake that takes away everything that's killing me. "It points out all the *lies*, the *holes* in this *fucking hell* we call 'reality.' But that's not what's real at all, Miriam. No—*listen.*"

His voice turns feral when I adjust, giving the appearance of not listening to him. Stilling, I keep staring as his voice becomes white noise that blocks out all else.

*No, Miri—you're forgetting the important things. You have to remember*—

I'm not sure it matters much anymore. That welcome sense of apathy is coming back. There isn't anything here I can change, and what he's saying… the longer I listen, the more he makes sense.

*Miri—that's as dangerous as his knives are. Your eyes are open, but you're falling asleep. C'mon, c'mon*—

"*Fear*—that's another, uh, *old friend*. One that's *holding you back*. Limiting your… *potential.*" I slump and I'm sure if I could feel anything right now it would be freezing cold. It's creating a vortex of reality where he's the only thing that exists. His words ring true, even if I can't explain why. "You're so *afraid*, sweetheart, when you don't need to be. Some friends are better left behind."

*What is he saying?*

The words register but I can't analyze them. They snake into my mind as implicit truths, an echo of things I've caught myself thinking before.

"They're *wrong* when they attribute *madness* to matters of, ah, *brain chemistry.*" The changing
direction of the conversation has me paying close attention now, hanging on his words. "Sure, it helps. But madness… madness is rejecting lies. That's all it is. They—they can't even understand that!"

Taking away his hands, he throttles the air. I watch him make the motion, how the tendons jump in his arms. The cold's disappearing, but heat doesn't replace it. It's just... nothing. Blank nothing.

"You know why?"

I shake my head.

What don't they understand?

He hits my face when my blink turns into an attempt at passing out.

Maybe sleeping is the best option...

He shakes my head, making my eyes pop open even as they stay heavy.

He wants you to answer.

I don't remember why I shouldn't. There was a reason, wasn't there? Something I need to remember.

"Why?" I whisper.

"Because it's 'scary.' They don't like that, so they'll bury you—just like they tried to bury me. They're cowards."

He's comparing us again, but the meaning of that doesn't clue in. I do feel buried. Neck deep in sand.

"Some minds are, uh, weaker than others, but—but you and me, we're not weak. No, no—because you can see it."

I look at him with confusion. His words are slurring, time coming to a near stop.

It's the blood loss. You need to wake up—you can't sleep. Use your head.

He's trying to convince me we see the world the same way. He's trying to tell me I'm going mad, that I have been for a long time.

No, no you're not—

But aren't I? Wouldn't that make sense—explain why I'm on my own, why no one can be around me?

Don't go there, Miri. There's no coming back when you go that way—

"You can, can't you?"

Fight him. C'mon—fight.

It's my last ditch effort to dissuade him, to counter the immense pressures constricting me into a husk of nothing.
"Y-You've hurt me... you're always—always hurting me. How—how could you be saying the truth in anything?" A thick mist covers my eyes when hot tears spring up, unwanted and undermining everything coming out of my mouth. He has the upper hand. He's already winning and this is just a show before accepting defeat. "You don't—don't care, you're just—just like everyone else. I know you are."

Even in the state I'm in I can see how weak my argument is, but nothing comes out that isn't based on pure emotion. He huffs and slaps an open palm against his forehead. Muttering, he looks down at my arms, twisting them and eliciting small whimpers of pain out of me. He lets them drop and smack into the floor and I can't even stop it.

"And I'm almost sorry about that." He rolls his eyes and I close mine, trying to focus on breathing. "Really, I am. You can't see it yet, but I'm helping you."

That's a lie I can hang on to.

"Zsasz," I say the name like an accusation and he pulls back and gives me a sidelong glare. "You—you let... you let Zsasz nearly rape me. I—I almost died. How—how was that supposed to help me? You're lying. Y-You are." The last words are a desperate, whined plea I don't entirely believe. Things are just coming out of my mouth and it's like I'm going through a series of motions and can't get to any sense of real conviction. I don't want to accuse him; I want him to explain it to me. I want to know why all of this is happening. Why I'm being forced to suffer through all this.

Making another tsk sound, the Joker stands up, dusting off his pants in large motions. Relief and fear battle to see what's coming next, anticipating release and the worst. Just when I think he's going to leave me to bleed out on the floor, he threads an arm under my knees and behind my back, picking me up in a swift motion that almost makes me black out. My head lolls against his chest as he laughs mirthlessly.

"Oh, tricky Vicky. You won't have to worry about him soon, hmm?" He's walking, but I can't see where. Everything's finally become too much. Release is coming, I just have to wait and let it happen. The rage I feel coming from him is the only thing keeping me awake. "Now, there's a person who deserves to hurt. He's an... animal. An animal that needs to be put down."

I can't answer him, but thinking about what Zsasz did—what he let Zsasz do to me and Parker—makes me sob. The Joker coos at me and I'd be begging to die if I could summon the words. When the warm flickering light on the edge of my vision becomes more prominent, fear finds me again and reawakens my reverberating panic. I try to move out of his tight grip, but I can't. Just thinking about it drains me.

"You've already got a few good hits in, didn't you? Don't you worry about him, sweet peach. We'll save that for, ah, later."

My mind struggles to actively translate the horror into words I can understand—whether as an act of self-preservation or because I really am dying this time.

No—your head's still working. You're aren't dying yet. You know what he's saying. It means he's going to make you see Zsasz again.

"Pl-Please, please don't."

I don't even know what I'm begging him not to do. The smell of warm vanilla breaks through and almost sinks me.
"No, no, Miri. Pain's a good teacher—it helps you find the, ah... important things." No, it doesn't—can't he see? It's taking everything away, not giving anything back. "You're strong when you need to be, hmm? Just got too many, ah, blocks in place—limiters, you could say."

It's not until I'm laying on something cold and hard that my eyes snap open as I try to tremble warmth back into me. My eyes are wild, looking around and falling into a state of primal instinct; my conscious mind falls back until it's just a distant scream in the howling wind.

"You can only protect yourself when you just... let it all go. Like me. You get past all those pesky little limitations and go feral." He's a wolf, his smile wide and all teeth. It's distantly terrifying, but even that barely makes an impact. I'm stuck under thick ice, banging on an unyielding surface as I drown, the world becoming muffled and stifling as ice fills my lungs.

"I—I don't... I don't want this. I-I don't want to be here. Pl-Please, I want to go home."

That's it—don't let him win. C'mon, fight any way you can.

His face is in front of me and I can't tell where I am, just that I'm somewhere low. Begging isn't a win at all, but it's better than doing absolutely nothing. Confusion eclipses the immediate need to keep a hold on my pride.

How did I get here? What's happening?

That thought's interrupted. I've done something to trigger a malevolent onslaught. His eyes are angry, even as he's smiling so sweetly at me. I can't move on my own, only accept whatever he has to give.

"I'm no, ah, prize piece myself, but you could do worse, really. There's a lot to be said about... honesty. Maybe that's why everyone leaves you eventually, hmm?"

What... what is he talking about?

I didn't think he could drag me any lower, but he can and he will. His fingers play with my ear lobe, tickling the skin and unnerving me.

"Who do you think gave me the call at the arcade, hmm? It was dear ol' dad, looking to make a quick buck."

My father's a monster but that's—that's a low I never thought he would stoop to.

"N-No—he... he wouldn't—"

"Think about it. You've lied almost your whole life, hmm? Brucie just—just couldn't wait to get away from you. Took him nearly ten years to come back! Why do y'think Parker never loved you back and threw you to the fucking hyenas?"

There's no alternative my mind can conjure. He sounding back the things I've felt all along. Bruce didn't want me. Mom's life would have been better if she never had me. Jahan never cared—never even loved me. And Parker—Parker's another person who should have never met me. That smile he gave me in freshman year, he deserved to give that to someone else.


Any logic I could have relied on is gone. All that remains is pain and disappointment and the Joker pointing out all the things I never wanted to know but should have questioned all along. It doesn't
mitigate my suffering, only serving to heighten it. My heart is gone, only a pulsing vacancy is left behind.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I whisper.

He cups my face tenderly in his hands. The hard edge is banished and only unalloyed pleas for understanding is left behind.

"I'm not trying to do anything, Miriam." I shouldn't, but I believe him. "I want you to see the truth—accept it, like I have. It's only when we're, ah, honest that nothing holds us back. Nothing hurts anymore."

Is it really that simple? It takes it all away?

He leans down and his nose is against mine and his lips find me again. His teeth bite into my bottom lip, hands holding me up by the shoulders, and his tongue going in my mouth to feel the edges of my own. It takes away the air in my lungs, pulling on my stomach in a way that's painful with the rest of the agony in my chest. He breaks the kiss with a groan and his tongue peeks out to wipe along his lips and touch the corners of his marred mouth. I feel the force of his want in the air and it's...

Don't go there, don't even think about it.

I can't help it. I hate myself for feeling it—but I'm so desperate for anything other than this agony that I'm eager to feel his gentleness. I don't want to hurt anymore.

You're missing something—something important. Think.

"You're alone right now, aren't you?" he asks. We both know it's rhetorical, the answer is obvious.

"Yes," I say. He's against me and I'm finally starting to feel warm. Just like in the video, he shakes me enough to wake me up.

"Say it." I can't see his face anymore, but his voice is sharp and heavy.

"I'm... I'm alone."

I'm empty now. Utterly vacated. Everything recognizable is gone and I don't recognize what's been left behind. Crying is pointless, but my body can't seem to help itself. He's not holding me down, but I might as well be chained for all I can move.

"All alone," he repeats back to me, demanding another echo.

"I'm—I'm all alone."

"That's right, sweetheart. You are alone."

Why does he keep rubbing it in? What else could he want from me?

There's so much that's left my mind—some of it's waiting on the periphery, hoping for me to snap to my senses. But his voice has fought for a place of control and dominion over me and I don't know how to make it stop.

"You don't want to stay that way, do you?" I shake my head. The loneliness—the expansive chasm swallowing my being—is killing me as much as the physical suffering. "Do you think I'll ever leave you? Hmm?"
I would have denied it outright before, but now I'm not sure. He has become my own personal **djinn**, a demon who's binded to me until he finally decides to release his grip on my soul. There's nothing good about it, but it's nothing I didn't bring on myself.

"N-No," I whisper.

He maneuvers himself so he's straddling me, just hovering above so I'm not crushed by his weight. He's reaching back for something, and I can't bring myself to care what it is, even when he throws it in the air and catches it in a flash of glittering silver.

"Believe me now, Miriam?"

**You didn't give me a choice.**

I don't say anything, hoping whatever look on my face will be enough. The glaring look of menace, the straight line of his mouth, and twitch of the maligned scars tells me it isn't. The entirety of his eyes is dark, his brow catching the light and making his skin look like a mask. The sharp edges of his jaw and cheekbones are dulled by the blurring of my vision.

"Do. You?" His voice is nasally but quiet and something tightens along my stomach as he waits for an answer. Resistance has gotten me nowhere. There is no escape from this. None at all.

"Yes... y-yes, I believe you."

He doesn't have to have his hands on my throat to choke me.

"What do you believe, hmm?"

The more intense he gets the quieter I become until my voice is a hoarse rasp. He's not even shouting but I sob like he is, cringing away as he cocks his head to the side like a predatory bird.

"You—you won't leave me."

He smiles and it makes me break out in a cold sweat. It feels like my organs are shutting down, one by one, and like I don't have limbs anymore.

"Mmm-hmm," he purrs. He's leaning down, encroaching on the small space I have left. He doesn't have to ask, but I know he wants to keep hearing it—the repetitive summation of a desperate wish that's destroyed any chance of making it come true.

"I—I don't want to be alone anymore."

He doesn't stop until his forehead touches mine, his hands and something cold hold my head up. He's grinning like a lunatic, as if he has all the dark secrets of the universe and I've given him permission to share them with me.

"Of course, you don't. And you won't be. **Not anymore.**" He sits back and preens like an often-admired bird, chin tilted to his chest and a grin he can't help on his face. "**Lucky for you, I'm patient.** I can see… **potential.**"

'**Potential? What does that mean?**'

I should be screaming and clawing, fighting him. The flickering light in the room hypnotizes me, dulling everything until it all becomes part of the warm glow. Murmurs whisper by my ear but I don't pick up the meaning. Letting my head roll to the side, the tears fall and I feel so disconnected
from my body that my soul's connection to it must be severing completely.

"Right here, c'mon."

Wait... what's he saying?

Hand on my chin, the Joker tilts my head back to face him. His eyebrows pump up, expecting an answer out of me.

"Are you shy, Miri? Kiss me."

No, no—I don't want to do that. He... he can't make me do that.

I shake my head and close my eyes. That's a new transgression I won't invite. He can force himself on me, but I don't want to return any of what he wants to give. Trying to turn away, a sharp pain along my thigh makes me shriek pitifully and snaps me back to the immediate danger. He brings up the bleeding knife and rests it on my cheek, the damp warmth of my own blood coating the skin.

"Stop—no more, please—"

"What did I tell you, Miri? Did you, ah, think I was lying? That I wouldn't cut your eye out because I think you're pretty, hmm?" he spits. I try to squirm but he pins my arms under his legs, crushing them to the floor.

"No—no, don't—" I'm on the verge of squealing and already lightheaded. The tip of the knife breaks the skin just below my eye, pressing gently and growing harder by the second.

This isn't real if you don't want it to be. Just—just do what he wants.

I don't want to be in pain anymore. Not like that. Sobbing and shaking all over, I try to stay still as I bring on another new insult—a purposeful invitation for him to continue whatever he thinks this is.

You're a coward. Always have been.

"I—I'll—oh, god, please—" Choking on the words, I hope they're enough to make him stop long enough to listen. It is—he stops the progress of the blade and glowers. "O-OK, I'll—" I can't finish. Not blinking for fear of upsetting him, my eyes stay wide open even as the tears obscure everything. He takes the knife away and kisses where the tip of it just dug in, licking the trickling blood.

"Good. Then. Kiss. Me," he says after pulling back.

The Joker stays a small distance away from me, making me work to appease him. I feel completely sick to my stomach.

I don't want to do this—oh Jesus—

I want Mom so badly right now. I need Bruce to come through for me, to take me away from this. I need salvation and have no way of finding it.

No one's coming for you. You're all alone, remember?

That's right. I'm on my own. It's just me and him. Nothing else beyond that can exist in my head—not even in the waking dreams I relied on so much before to get me through the daily events that caused me so much pain.
"C'mon now, we know you _do_ deserve it, though, don't we?" he asks. It's an insidious thought; one I can't push away as unfounded.

_I do deserve this, don't I?_

My mind is no longer on my side. It's fallen for the call of complete sublimation to a force I have no way of overpowering. This is what the rest of my life will be—short as it is.

"Don't we?"

There's more aggression in the words, making it a command requiring an answer.

"Yes."

I want that to be enough. But it never is for him.

"Yes, _what?_"

_Why can't I die? Why wasn't it always me?_

Squeezing my eyes shut is the only way I'll get this out. The air required to make the words is a razor in my lungs, slicing along my throat and making me gag on the blood.

"Yes, I—I... I deserve it."

He laughs, and it's pernicious and cruel.

"That's _right_ , sweetheart. _You do._"

Just push your mind back. It _doesn't have to affect you if you don't let it._

Years-long defensive mechanisms that I've built are heightened to the point of breaking my conscious mind, but it's the only thing from shattering my psyche. He's staring at me, demanding more. Always more.

"Because all you do is hurt people, right?"

He's snapping the hard consonants, and it makes me feel distantly afraid—even as I know he's just reiterating painful truths I've always known.

"All I—all I do is hurt people..."

_"That's right."_ He comes back down to my level, his breath tickling my nose. He grips my face hard enough to hurt, but I barely feel it. "C'mon, sweet peach. _Kiss. Me._ You, ah, were so _willing_ with boys who didn't give a _fuck_ about you, but I do. Don't hold out on me _now._"

His words bring a dulled sense of disgust, but even that is fading into background noise.

_It doesn't have to mean anything. None of this is real. None of it._

Closing my eyes, I raise my head the rest of the way and place my lips on his. It's hesitant and weak, and his hands go to the back of my head to keep it propped up. His lips part immediately, eager to press against mine. He groans in my mouth when my tongue touches his. Hands work their way in my hair and cup my jaw, keeping me close and unable to pull away. His scars feel odd against me, soft but hard—corded tissue that rubs against my mouth and cheeks. The rippled skin tickles at certain angles, creating strange new sensations. I push my mind back, push away the
sensory information that's overwhelming me.

Even as I'm doing that, I can't fully ignore the zaps of electricity coursing through my mouth to somewhere deep in my stomach. I don't want to investigate why, how I could be feeling anything other than revulsion for any of this. But I can't deny that this feels nice—despite the horror and the pseudo negotiations of what level of assault he can lay against me. It's confusing and terrifying—just like he is.

*Think about someone else, think about anyone else.*

It's been almost five years since I kissed anyone, and it's an event straight from Satan's handbook for it to happen like this. My mouth moves automatically, unconsciously—becoming a bodily response I don't understand. His hands leave my head to trail down my neck, touching the opening of my shirt. I break away and try to find clarity in this as I struggle to breathe.

*Wh-What's happening to me?*

I don't understand this. Any of it.

*How did I get here?*

My head can't recall what transpired an hour ago—but there's something important. Things I'm forgetting.

"You're—you're starting to understand, sweetheart, and that's good." I look at him in confusion, seeking guidance. His face brings feelings and sensations that harken back the physical pain I'm holding back, and they pull on something inside my chest—something I don't remember feeling.

*Where am I?*

"Bu-t… you're so prone to forgetting the, ah, the import-ant things. I think you need a... reminder."

"W-What?"

I'm not sure that it matters anymore what he's said.

*Nothing matters at all.*

Some things are peeking through, prodding at my mind—trying to stir me to action. He's smiling differently. It looks like compassion, but something's telling me I'm supposed to know better.

*Why am I on the floor?*

It's a question I don't have an answer for, one I can't make my mouth move to ask. Cold air creeps along my chest, raising the skin and reawakening my numb nerve-endings.

"I'd like to say this isn't gonna hurt, but that would be… dishonest."

A moving line of dark silver floats in front of my eyes. The weight increases on my arms, pinching the skin to bone.

*You need to move, Miri.*

But where can I move to? Nothing's working. There's no point to anything anymore. It's meaningless. Just like I am.
"C'mon, Miri—get up, get up—"

Where is this coming from? Every moment passes through and I have to hold on tight to them before they disappear. Thoughts and sensations are sifting in my mind and turning to dust in my outstretched hands.

"Ask me to do it," he says, his voice low and clear.

His face isn't visible anymore, only passing shades of colour that meld into a mess of confusion. Something like a groan comes out of my throat, but it's hard to make the words come. His hand cups my face, making me focus on him.

"Ask… for what?"

_Is that my voice? Why am I answering him—what's he asking for?_

"You don't wanna be alone anymore, so you won't be. Ask me to never leave. Ask me to always be close."

It doesn't sound unreasonable, and it is something I want. I don't want to be alone anymore. There's… there's something off. Something I'm not getting.

_Miri, you need to get up—_

"I… don't want to be alone." The words aren't mine, but they leave my mouth. Tears come again, spilling down my cheeks and pooling in my ears. The shirt I'm wearing is unbuttoned, and I don't remember doing that.

_What's happening? You need to get up—_

That voice doesn't matter either. What has it brought? That's something that remains intact for reflection. Reason hasn't helped me, it never stopped any of this. I was so wound up grasping for control that I broke everything I tried so hard to hold. I have no control here, and maybe that's its own form of freedom.

"Don't… don't leave me."

I'm choking on the tears, on the deep ache that's constricting my chest. I'm saying the words, but not really at him. There hasn't been anyone, not a _single_ person who wouldn't leave me behind. I need someone to stay, someone who's just as broken as me.

_Miri don't think like that. You aren't safe—_

Self-preservation doesn't matter because there's nothing left to care about anymore. I'm all alone. Nothing matters anymore.

"I—I want you to do it."

_What are you agreeing to? Snap out of it—_

The Joker smiles, and it's filled with a kind benevolence that makes it feel like I did something right.

Something bitterly cold touches my chest, right between my breasts. I'm about to ask when it cuts through the muscle to nearly scrape the bone beneath. White bursts of anguish go beyond anything I've experienced. I'm trying to shout at him—beg him to stop—but the knife cuts down, lacerating
the skin in large arcs. Nothing coherent comes out and it's a savage sensory overload that makes me insensible to anything else. My entire chest is ablaze—he's cutting off my flesh, skinning me alive. I bite my tongue in the effort to get away from the knife and splutter as I shriek and try to get away.

As quickly as the pain started, it stops. The entirety of my vision is black. Instead of my mind becoming my prison, it's my body that's become the cell keeping me trapped with the Joker holding the key. I feel like I'm dead. I must be.

Lips land on mine, soft and tender but not demanding. They aren't there long. I still can't see, even as my body's pulled up and the heavy weight is taken off. Something warm is holding me, and I desperately want it to breathe life in me beyond what I'm experiencing.

"This is only the beginning, Miriam."

His words snap something back, but it's only temporary. It sinks below again and I retreat to a place where my body can't betray me.

I don't know how, but I'm on something soft. It hugs my limbs, shields my body. I'm drifting, floating somewhere far away from all this. I was right, none of this matters. I'm too tired for it to have any weight.

"Now you know I'm not going anywhere, hmm? No matter where you go or what you do, you'll always think of me." I whimper when a hand touches my chest, drawing back into the soft warmth surrounding me. I faintly register a laugh. "You're gonna help me now, aren't you?"

I don't know what he's asking, but I don't have any reason to say no. I'm the one who asked for this, didn't I?

_That's right. You should help._

Something feels wrong, but his face comes back into focus. Looking past the dark circles under his eyes, he doesn't look much older than me. I feel sorry for him, to have his face destroyed and maligned into something that looks so full of twisted pain.

"Y-Yes," I whisper. He nods and smiles, stroking my cheek.

_Yeah—it'll be OK, right? I'm not alone anymore... I won't be alone._

"Tell me about TL-56: HAVOC."

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Chapter End Notes

Hello again! Jeez, I missed posting, but I really hope I can get back in a groove and go back to posting weekly updates (and, as far as I can see), that shouldn't be too much of an issue! I want to thank you all again for keeping up with this story and for being so patient in waiting for the new update, I hope it lives up to the expectations of the other chapters!
Bruce Wayne had never felt more alone. Not when his parents died, not during the early mornings and late hours contemplating vengeance, not even during his travels across the globe where he could trust no one with the truths of his life. He was alone now, even as a battered Alfred stood next to him and he stared down at the photograph that often kept him going through everything else—but it wasn't enough to help him through the pain spearing through his heart.

It was an old picture, over thirteen years had passed since it was taken. Rachel Dawes and Bruce, fresh out of high school and ready to go off to college, a small Miriam in a green dress, and Kate and Alfred on the sides, arms around the group. It was for Bruce's birthday, the last time he went through the effort of socializing with his classmates before living a solitary life while completing his first degree. He wouldn't see Rachel for a year after that photo was taken, and Bruce remembered feeling so lost. It was the last time the five of them had been together, and he regretted not appreciating the moment more—only looking back retroactively and realizing exactly what he lost.

*I failed them. All of them.*

Rachel would never look like she did in that photo again, not even close. She was left with burns that covered over thirty-five percent of her body, causing her to nearly die from the intense shock and required keeping her under just to prevent her organs from failing, and a leg that was crushed under the resulting debris from the blast. Almost every part of Rachel would need reconstructive surgery if she survived the next thirty-six hours. She was still slated for procedures that would attempt to repair the intensive damage—and there was no guarantee she'd ever wake up at all. Jeremiah Elliot, the officer who saved her life, was still in the intensive care unit, his own burns leeching the life from him.

'*Don't be afraid.*'

It was a maxim he thought of often, but now it seemed to taunt him. A reminder of how he failed to uphold his family's legacy.

Harvey Dent was in the hospital too—comatose and appearing as if he was an extra from some macabre horror movie or an undead nightmare come to life. Bruce knew that because he saw it happen. The smell of Harvey's skin burning mixed with gasoline was still trapped in Bruce's nose, and no matter how many times he scrubbed at his skin he couldn't make it go away.

Bruce worked hard to deal with and compartmentalize all that gave him pain—turning it into fuel to feed his endless drive. His mind often returned to the Monastery, to another sort of madman that Bruce couldn't help but still look to for guidance.

'*Death is not considerate or fair.*'

Ra's al Ghul's voice resounded in his mind. It was a lesson in accepting that death was an impartial force, one without prejudice and did not consider who was deserving and who was not. He knew that, and yet Bruce couldn't help but resent the truth that was literally beaten into him.

Death had not been fair to Rachel or Harvey. It may have spared their souls, but it left them almost
nothing else. To Bruce, they might as well have been dead already. That's what he did to them. He literally left them to burn. Nothing he did stopped any of it and he'd lost everyone—everything he ever poured his hope into. Crushed under the boot of a madman. The Joker gave Bruce a choice, and he chose wrong. He didn't see at the time that there was a third option the Joker didn't speak of—Batman could have killed him. That would have ended his pain before it ever began.

"Master Bruce, can you hear me?" Alfred asked. He stood tall, but he sounded broken.

Bruce did hear him, but he could hardly stand to look at his oldest friend. When Alfred's car was rammed off the road, they took Miriam in a mess of fighting hysterics. Alfred had been awake to hear it all, but three broken and bruised ribs, a shattered clavicle, and a mild concussion kept him from moving and speaking until the paramedics arrived. The sounds of Miriam screaming haunted him, and it was evident on his face.

Voices of the past were besetting Bruce, showing that he hadn't really learned much at all.

'Tell us, Mr. Wayne. What do you fear?'

Why is it always his voice? Didn't I excise him when he died?

Bruce had lost everything in one night. Everything. The Joker won and Batman let him—his own hubris, his inability to see what should have been obvious, had led to where he stood.

'You have learned to bury your guilt with anger. I will teach you to confront it, and to face the truth.'

Another sage piece of wisdom Bruce thought he internalized in his years at the Monastery. He thought he could see everything in front of him with impartial eyes, but the Joker played him for a fool. It was careless impulse transformed into hardened resolve for justice when he left Gotham. The unwavering conviction that made him fight harder, faster—that drove him to push beyond the limits that defined mortal men. Bruce had kept his emotions aside precisely because they clouded objective reality and made him too human. He didn't realize that his emotions had always ruled him, never having succeeded at all in transcending them to become more.

Did I not realize, or did I just not care?

Nothing would come to Bruce—not tears, not overwhelming emotion, not even anger. He felt empty. Rachel was almost dead and Harvey not far from joining her. Nine others died in the Joker's escape from the MCU—dozens of others were injured. The Joker had succeeded in showing just how ineffective they all really were, taking their weaknesses and exploiting them until they broke from within.

And the Joker had Miriam.

'Why do we fall?'

The voices of the dead were haunting him, but it wasn't just Ra's al Ghul and his father he was hearing anymore.

It was the early hours of the morning. Dawn had broken past the horizon an hour ago, and the media was already busy feasting over the attack on the MCU, the incapacitation of the man who was their shining beacon of change, and the rising death toll eclipsed Miriam's second abduction to just a small note on the running banner along the screen that Bruce was watching out of the corner of his eye. The police were trying to keep it quiet—it raised too many questions they couldn't answer. One missing rich girl was less important than the total undermining of the city's police
The last two weeks were nearly enough to break Miriam, and now she wouldn't be far off from that fate. Like the police, Bruce couldn't even bring himself to rationalize why—why all of this happened, why it hadn't ended, why he couldn't have seen it coming, why he had so completely and utterly failed.

"Sir, we have work to do. You know we do."

Alfred's hand was on Bruce's shoulder, his weakened grip trying to stir Bruce into action. When Bruce didn't reply, Alfred let out a weary sigh. Alfred had fallen back on old, formal habits to keep himself sane, but inside the same hollow despair was dragging him down.

"Very well then," Alfred said, turning to leave, a small limp limiting his speed.

"Alfred, did I do this?" Bruce asked, still staring out at the city that took everything away from him—the one he was still willing to die for.

'Do you swear?' Kate begged for the assurance that he would never fail her, and all he did was just that at every turn.

Alfred stopped and looked at Bruce even as he wouldn't meet Alfred's eye.

"I… I was meant to inspire good," he breathed, his voice hesitant and uncertain, "not madness, not death. It wasn't—I never wanted—"

"You have inspired good, Master Bruce. But you spat in the faces of Gotham's criminals, and now —" Alfred fought to control himself. He was in pain, but he couldn't crumble when Bruce was on the edge of doing that himself. "Now we are paying the price for it. We all are. Do you remember what we always said—in the beginning?"

Alfred joined Bruce in staring out at the sun as it was eclipsed by Gotham's skyline, descending the penthouse in shadow. Bruce didn't say anything, but he knew the answer—he just couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Things were always going to get worse before they got better," Alfred finally said.

The rationalization didn't mean anything to Bruce, not after he'd underestimated so completely what that really meant.

"People are dying, Alfred. I… I don't know what to do."

Something broke in Bruce, something almost fatal. When his parents died, he knew he wanted vengeance. When Falcone pointed to how worthless his life really was, he knew he wanted to take action and make change a reality. When Ra's al Ghul burned his house, he could see clearly what he needed to do to take him down. But now the Joker had done something worse, and it invoked a feeling of helplessness that was total. Bruce Wayne was not capable of fighting through this.

"I failed. Miri's—"

"What would you like me to say?" Alfred interrupted, moving to stand in front of Bruce. "We can't know what might affect the future because we can't change the past. The only thing we know is how to make choices now that prevent what we most fear. If you failed, then we both did. We both made the same promises."
His lip trembled and Bruce finally looked at him. Alfred might not have disappeared to learn how to best deal with the evils of the world, but he still knew more about it than Bruce did. He was wizened, learning to kill as a young man in the army and how to dedicate his life to a cause bigger than himself. He also knew the toll that took; how it often left the idealists irrevocably disappointed when they saw that, no matter what they did, they never made much of an impact at all.

"Never in my life did I want to say these words," Alfred began, "I never wanted it to come to this." In Alfred's old age, he was not uncomfortable with emotion like he once was as a young man but crying felt wrong here—an early event of mourning that acted as a betrayal.

"Say it," Bruce said, breathing hard. He'd ignored so much of the truth for so long, he needed to hear it now.

"Endure, Master Bruce. Take it." Even as Alfred said the words, he was forced to sit down. It was so much easier to say than for Bruce to fulfill, and he knew that. He knew what he was instructing Bruce to do. "What else has worked? What else have you done that's been effective? Gotham needs you; your family needs you."

'Will we always be a family?' Miriam asked him that winter morning as a scared kid Bruce never wanted to let down.

Another promise broken. I let this happen to her.

"It's too late now. Gotham's dying—her future sunk the moment I let that murdering psychopath blow Harvey half to hell."

"They'll hate you for it, we both know that." There were other words Alfred wasn't saying but Bruce could hear—he'd hate himself for sacrificing the few to save the many. "When you told me about what Batman was meant to be, he was the one to take Gotham on his shoulders. I thought you could do it—you'd been gone so long and seemed to have succeeded in separating the personal from what needed to be done."

It was an observation that pained Alfred, but now he knew Bruce needed that separation. In some ways, he understood Batman better than he understood Bruce.

"What Batman is—he's meant to be the outcast. When Atlas was tasked with holding up the world, it was not a feat any human man could do. It required the insertion of the superhuman. Being able to do what no one else can. Batman… he can make the choices no one else can make. The hard ones, but the ones—" Alfred didn't want to finish, but he needed to. "The ones that need to be made."

Silence hung in the air, but Bruce didn't move.

"What are you asking of me, Alfred?"

"I'm telling you that to succeed, Bruce—" Alfred took a deep breath, "Bruce Wayne, not the billionaire, not the man behind the mask, but the one I knew nearly a decade before—he must be put aside. The personal cannot interfere with what needs to be done."

Alfred said something similar last year when Batman tore through Gotham to save Rachel from losing her mind after Scarecrow's attack. He warned Bruce about making a spectacle of himself, acting like a foolish teenager rather than Gotham's salvation. Bruce had justified his actions by valuing the importance of Rachel, and he had saved her. He'd been trying the same thing—but it
was a trick that hadn't worked a second time. Batman had torn apart Gotham looking for Miriam with a resulting mountain of bodies he had no way of justifying.

*He's right. Alfred's right.*

He knew what that meant, and he didn't know if he had that in him.

'*Some men just want to watch the world burn.'*

"That bandit, in the forest in Burma," Bruce said suddenly, his head finally rising to look Alfred in the eye, "did you catch him?" Alfred casts his eyes downward.

"Yes."

"How?"

Alfred sighed. He never thought the atrocities of his youth would be so applicable after he left all that behind.

"We burned the forest down."

Bruce was finally starting to have a clear picture of what needed to be done. He'd already stabbed his bleeding heart, now he was being asked to abandon it entirely.

'I know the rage that drives you. The impossible anger strangling the grief until the memory of your loved ones is just... poison in your veins. Then one day you catch yourself wishing the person you loved had never existed, so you'll be spared your pain.'

Bruce didn't want Ra's' voice in his head, calling back to what once made him feel so strong.

"But Miriam's in that forest."

That was it—the crux of what kept Bruce from rejecting all that was human in himself. If he let her go—left her to suffer and die, he could focus on what he needed to: save countless others from the same fate. A tear rolled down his cheek, falling onto the symbol that demanded everything.

'Like you, I was forced to learn that there are those without decency who must be fought without hesitation and without pity. Your anger gives you great power, but if you let it, it will destroy you.'

Bruce couldn't be angry anymore; he couldn't let his fear for his loved one's blind him into rage-fueled madness. It wasn't just destroying him—it was destroying everyone.

It was time for Bruce Wayne to die and only Batman be left in his place. Doing the impossible meant sacrificing everything that tied him down.

"I know," Alfred said. The words were simple, but Bruce wasn't the only one who was broken. By guiding Bruce to his ascension, he was also dooming someone he loved as his own to their downfall. Only one thought could assuage his guilt. "He's... he's kept Miriam alive this long, and I think I know why."

Batman looked at the man crumbling in front of him. Standing, he looked down at himself as his will solidified and he completed what he should have done when he came back to Gotham—homing in on the mind that was capable of anything by outthinking everyone else and doing what no one was capable of doing.

"What do you mean?" he asked. Batman didn't fail to realize that Bruce kept himself from asking
Alfred what he suspected before. Bruce had underestimated what Miriam had been doing, but
Batman would not.

"Did Lucius or Miriam ever mention a project under the name 'havoc' to you?"

Batman tilted his head to the side, thinking of every project Lucius ever mentioned—every plan he
ever approved Miriam to work on. Nowhere in his vast memory did the name ring as anything
familiar.

"No, what are you talking about?"

"Miriam mentioned it last night—" A new flashing banner running across the television caught
Batman's eye. Holding up his hand, he cut off Alfred. His mind was already working on what he
was seeing.

"Alfred, turn up the television."

Turning and seeing what caught his attention, Alfred complied immediately. Mike Engel's
reddened-face was on-screen from inside the GCN studio, and they were really laying on the
public's panic to promote a new kind of story that knocked Batman's mind back in the game.

**The Joker's Street Justice: Doing What Batman Won't or Inciting Mass Panic?**

What the hell are they playing at?

"Breaking news this hour. In the aftermath of the bombing on the MCU and the Joker's escape,
Police are attempting to restore order with little success. The number of reported robberies, break-
ins, and assaults continue to increase as the death toll in Gotham's wave of terror rises to 42,
prompting the GCN to issue another pressing warning this hour. We go to Jack Ryder at the scene
of the MCU precinct for more."

Jack Ryder's face appeared on the screen, his glasses flecked with drops of rain and a smirk he
couldn't quite hide that showed his undisguisable enjoyment of the horror spilling out of his mouth.

"Here in the early hours of the morning, police are scrambling to reassemble after an attack that
has left them shaken. In the wake of the explosions that rocked the east and west ends of the city, a
new video by the Joker has surfaced. Unlike the previous videos, this one is dated from a week ago
and pulled from a site where online users are encouraged to engage in a disturbing poll."

The face of an overweight white man appeared in the form of a mugshot, showing graying hair and
hollow, bloodshot eyes. Batman recognized him—he was one of the inmates on the list of patients
still missing from Arkham Asylum. A woman's voice narrates over the rotating images of the
Asylum, Gerry, and what looked like copies of the many police reports the city kept.

"Geralt 'Gerry' Nowak was a small-time criminal from the Narrows with a long history of mental
illness, serving time in Blackgate Prison for sexual assault, battery, and murder before being
moved to Arkham Asylum and escaping last year with dozens of others. His status was unknown
until his remains were found in the inferno that shook Amusement Mile earlier this week in a
reported showdown between the Joker and Batman."

Two opposing photos of the Joker—a headshot captured from the first video he released—and a
shadowy glimpse of Batman appeared. Batman's head was churning out what was in front of him,
processing the information until he realized what Alfred said the Joker had asked Miriam and
Parker to do—he talked about social media sites, accessing records on a mass scale. Batman paled
as the implications dawned on him.
How Gerry died was inconclusive until this video began trending on Gotham Mingles and Twitter. GCN is the first to break this story now and bring it to the citizens of Gotham City. Viewer discretion is advised, the following content is disturbing.

A grainy video took up the television screen, pointed at the floor until it was swung upward to show a large ring of men wearing clown masks. They were standing around someone bleeding from his legs on the ground. Batman's stomach tightened when he realized that the man was trying to crawl away.

"Where do you think you're going, Ger-Bear?" the Joker said, emerging from the group of men and waltzing slowly to the man on the ground. The man—Gerry—started begging incoherently. "The People have spoken, haven't they? No one wants you around."

The Joker was taunting him, quickly grabbing Gerry by a bloody leg and dragging him back to the centre of the circle as the man tried clinging to one of the stoic clowns for help.

Why are they showing this? Hasn't Gotham seen enough?

Whoever was holding the camera broke formation from their position within the group, walking up to the Joker to have a front seat to the carnage that was inevitable. The Joker laughed like a hyena.

"Let it, ah, never be said that I don't listen to what the People want, Gerry. And guess what?" The Joker waited for a reply he wouldn't get, holding his hand behind his ear as if to amplify the words Gerry was no longer capable of making. "No one wants a murderer on their block. No, no—we're gonna do this city a favour, hmm? Whaddya say?"

The Joker knelt down next to Gerry and flipped the sobbing man onto his back. Gerry tried holding his hands in front of his face, but they were shaking so bad the motion proved ineffectual. The Joker only had to punch him once in the face for them to drop.

"The People voted and the. Results. Are. In." The Joker reached back to his jacket pocket, pulling out a knife. When he held it up and the camera focused, Batman realized it wasn't a regular knife at all. His entire torso convulsed in an involuntary spasm. The Joker was holding a vegetable peeler. "This is just the beginning, and you're all invited in on the fun."

The Joker turned to the camera, making eye contact with an audience of millions. He smiled insidiously as his eyes lit up with savage glee.

"Every day, you all get to decide which scumbag who screwed you over gets to die, kids. Don't forget to vote—we, ah, all know how important that is in any good, democratic society, don't we?"

How did we miss this?

The Batman had never considered combing the depths of the internet for something like this show of demented depravity. He felt like he was choking, realizing that the Joker had been developing a new dimension of terror that was likely targeted at a bunch of teenagers.

"Gerry liked to rape and murder college students. The system put him in jail and a glorified rehab centre. He's been prowling Gotham for a year and no one caught him. How does that make you feel, hmm? Now you get a say. No one is off-limits and no one is safe. Let your voice be heard! Just like Gerry's here."

The Joker started laughing but no one else in the video joined in. He was nearly doubling over with it and Gerry found his voice. The video ended with him shrieking as the Joker placed the peeler against his skin. There was no doubt as to how Gerry died. Knowing the Joker, he didn't stop until
every piece of skin was flayed.

**GCN really has no qualms about what they'll sensationalize for a story.**

Batman was disgusted—both with the fools who would run the story and the Joker for finding a new level of malevolence that Batman didn't think could exist in a man. GCN still wasn't finished. Mike Engel's face reappeared, visibly restraining himself to speak calmly.

"**GCN has discovered that after the video was released on a website called IfYouCouldKill, similar polls were posted with links on popular social media websites where the hashtags went viral with estimates showing that nearly ten-thousand voted on the second day alone. The numbers continue to rise each day a new poll is posted.**"

"Oh, bloody Jesus," Alfred breathed, the TV remote dropping from his hand.

Batman wanted to second his sentiments. Over ten thousand people were accessories to murder. And now the media had given the Joker the means to enlist more. If people didn't know about it before, they surely did after the broadcast.

"**The police will not release any information on those killed, but five have died with victims ranging from infamous street gang leaders to businessmen charged with fraud and embezzlement. Subsequent videos released on the website range from mob-like violence to execution-style videos that were posted immediately online.**"

Batman was trying to rationalize what he was seeing, but more questions were raised than what he had answers for. Miriam didn't break into anything for the Joker—he didn't have her long enough.

**But he had Parker.**

Anyone with a few tech skills could set up a website, but this was another scenario altogether. More sophisticated. Surely the police would have tried shutting it down, but the Joker had someone who made it work with flying colours. But now that resource was dead, and the Joker found his replacement.

**Oh, no, no—**

"Alfred—go online. See if you can find this poll they're talking about. We need to find out everything we can. Now." Batman's voice dropped a register. He was still attempting to understand, to wrap his head around what this meant.

**Individuals were prone to participating in mass incidents of violence when together in a group—it was called mob-mentality for a reason—but on the internet, that entire dynamic changed. The guise of anonymity granted people a boldness that often translated into behaviours they would never exhibit in person. People were all too willing to spout out toxic lines at those they thought were deserving. The Joker had taken that vicious tendency and heightened it to a new level of brutality that translated into real-world consequences. He'd begun to mobilize the citizens of Gotham to participate in an episode of violence that removed them from any conscious barriers that would have stood in the way otherwise.**

"**The newly-appointed Commissioner James Gordon would only comment that the public should be aware of what the poll is and to not engage, reminding citizens that they are contributing to violent acts in a time of where compliance with police is a matter of public security.**"

Batman couldn't help but feel angry. The GCN had just given the Joker the mouthpiece to reach thousands—potentially millions—of others to buy into his insanity.
"Commissioner Gordon implored citizens for their cooperation and to let the GCPD investigate and not be tempted to take the law into their own hands. Mayor Garcia could not be reached for comment."

"Here, there was a new poll posted this morning," Alfred said, passing Batman a tablet.

Batman was looking at the Gotham Mingles app, where posts are shared by anonymous users and others could interact with one another without fear of having any personal identifiers.

jokezonu: #IfYouCouldKill anyone, who’d it be? The pedophile, or your local gangbanger? You choose! #IfICouldKill #AaronMurray #DukeFitz

The post had two accompanying links under each man's name—showing their real names, alleged crimes, and the city's failure to properly deal with them. The Joker was wielding public mistrust against the systems in place for the years of corruption and rot—and Batman's inability to fix it fast enough—as a motivator to descend into a mobocracy; letting the people decide how to dispense a brand of justice that was so open to manipulation. The pages were meant to spark outrage at everything that kept the people angry, playing on the emotions they would have had to keep buried.

When Batman read the replies, his suspicions were confirmed, with very few taking the time to deride what the Joker was trying to sell.

km892: #IfICouldKill itd be #AaronMurray.

cyrusly: lol is this real #IfICouldKill

seesawrampage: is both an option? #IfICouldKill #AaronMurray #DukeFitz

cosmicoverdrive: guys #IfICouldKill is sick. don't vote

brdnrd: I've heard of #DukeFitz – shot up a neighbourhood down the block #IfICouldKill

Batman couldn't just stand there and watch this unfold anymore. He turned to the man who could give him answers, pulling out his phone and dialing the only person who had a hope of giving Batman a place to start.

"Lucius, are you seeing what I am?" Batman asked when Lucius picked up the phone on the second ring.

"You'll have to be more specific."

Lucius, sarcastic as always.

"What's this about these kill videos? Why haven't the police shut it down if it's coming from a website?"

Lucius cursed under his breath, but Batman could already hear him typing. He was patient, waiting several minutes as Lucius did his work.

"It looks like, from what I can tell, there have been several versions based on the URL differences. Each time one's shut down, another popped up to redirect visitors."

Batman was no fool when it came to computers, but there were some things beyond his realm of experience. He'd come to rely too much on the skills Lucius offered.
"How is that possible?"

"This wasn't my area of expertise. Miriam was always much better at this than me. They're using bots—creating profiles that promote the tag to encourage others to use it. It—it's going wild online now. That broadcast really screwed the pooch."

Understatement of the year at this point.

"Can you stop it?" Batman thought it was a simple ask, but Lucius' mirthless laughter on the other end told him otherwise.

"You're kidding, right? There's no way to stop something like this without taking out who's feeding the content. This has been building for almost two weeks."

Batman pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to get his brain to work how he needed it to. He changed his line of inquiry, attempting to find anything he could use.

"Can you find out who's posting and where?"

"Unlikely. They're probably bouncing their VPN or using computers in the public domain."

"Can you try?"

It was Lucius' turn to sigh. "Yes, I can, but I can't give you any guarantees." He sounded ready to end the call, but there were other answers Batman needed. With everything he was piecing together now, what Alfred mentioned was too important to ignore.

"Lucius," Batman said, calling the man's attention.

"Yes?"

"What's this project Miriam was working on? 'Havoc'? I thought I was clear—Miriam wasn't supposed to—"

"She didn't give me any choice about that one," Lucius said interrupting him. He sighed again and his voice grew thick with regret, as if he was close to tears. "She knew what it was before she started working here. Miriam admitted to pilfering through a great deal of the databases of Wayne Enterprises."

Batman was struck dumb. He couldn't find any reason why she would have done that. Miriam gave no indication that she knew much of anything about the company when Bruce got her a job working with Lucius. She was genuinely hurt when she found out about Bruce Wayne's secrets—Lucius must have done enough to hide at least some of what would have given him away.

"And, to be honest, she was too talented not to use. Why are you asking about that? Did she mention something?" Lucius sounded hopeful, like Batman would have information he didn't. Batman's concern was mingling with what was left of Bruce Wayne's panic. He shoved it down.

"I need you to send everything you have to me, now." Batman waited for a sound of acquiescence from the man before continuing, "Start explaining, Lucius."

It was a long pause and a worn-out heave of air before Lucius could bring himself to speak. He wasn't sure how yet, but he knew—somewhere down the line—he screwed up badly. "Something tells me you're not going to like what I have to say."
Hey everyone! This chapter's had some crazy plot reveals, but since we are over 200k into this and it would be crazy for me to expect y'all to remember the details I littered throughout this story when it's been almost a year, I'm going to point some things out to show how all of this was foreshadowed.

First of all: yes, Alfred is alive and with Bruce. The Joker said Alfred was in trouble because of Miriam, that he hadn't been hurt yet but could be. He never said directly that he had him - only implied it. That's another way the Joker was manipulating her and using guilt, and her inability to question him, to his advantage.

In "Showtime," the Joker mentioned in his video that he was making that he wanted to show the people of Gotham their 'true face' and criticized them for lapping up stories and information they saw on the news without actually thinking about whether or not it was something they should have ever believed in the first place. He used Miri to punctuate his point, showing that although the media generally saw her as perhaps admirable, by her own admission she does not have an enviable life and made choices that had devastating consequences. The Joker, in "Like A Dog Chasing Cars," derides social media and those who use it. Here, he's using it as a weapon to expose how willing people are to condemn others, watch them receive their 'due' punishment from the safety of not having that same scrutiny levelled at themselves. Though taken to an extreme, this is something people do today - whenever a celebrity screws up or we hear about a reprehensible individual who's committed egregious crimes, we see a flood of people calling for their death (or other severe forms of punishment) without having all the objective facts, often going off a single source that's biasedly presented.

In this chapter, Bruce takes the final step of burying who he was and totally adopting the identity of Batman. What I have him doing is controversial, but Batman has continually (in canon) been forced to sacrifice his loved ones for the greater good. It's why he works alone and only truly relies on an aging Alfred. Even when he has wards, he sidelines them and keeps them in the dark as to not get in the way (and get hurt). He's realized that Batman and emotion cannot coexist. In a way, it's a form of character death. He can't be human and still succeed because pain and fear cloud what he needs to do - and those are the two basic drivers of humanity.

Thank you for reading and your support, I'll see you next weekend with another update!
"Lucius, this is Miriam Kane. Miriam, this is Lucius Fox," Bruce said in a voice of cool, practiced dramatism.

We were standing in a glass office overlooking the Research and Development floor of Wayne Enterprises, surrounded by terminal stations and employees in varied gradations of business attire, and I felt grossly underdressed. Bruce was wearing a suit like he always does, and Lucius wore a bowtie—a signature part of his wardrobe I would come to associate with his very being. I, on the other hand, was wearing ripped jeans and an oversized sweater with a cat paw motif.

"Pleasure, Miss Kane," Lucius said, nodding to me with a grin. I tried to smile back and swallow the feelings of inadequacy.

Various employees were working away at computers or crowding around boards as they worked to figure out the complicated equations and schematics in front of them. Despite myself, I was happy to be there—more animated than I'd been in a long time. The place was quiet, but it was humming with energy—and I wanted in on it. What I saw from my years of silently looking through Wayne Enterprises' servers nearly made my mouth salivate with the enormity of pure possibility that a company like Bruce's could provide. Wayne Tech—an offshoot housing the R&D Department, was a vast nest I was cracking away at from the outside. Imagining what I could do with any sort of clearance reignited dangerous curiosities I tried very hard to keep buried.

"Now, Miriam," Bruce began, calling my attention away from what I would eventually be working on back to him, "this is a training position until you work through your degree. Think of it like a practicum. Once you're done at Gotham University, then, if Lucius likes you enough, we'll find you something permanent."

I tried not to scowl as he spoke. Bruce didn't have a clue what I'd been doing in the years he was away. I was sixteen the first time I breached Wayne Enterprises' security firewalls. Most of what I found I didn't register as anything other than an anecdote to a larger scheme of pissing off someone who wasn't around to care. Bruce didn't know what I could do, and, for the moment, I was desperate to keep it that way. When he wasn't pretending that nothing changed, he treated me like fragile china—always keeping me in a place he had control over every potential outcome. He thought my affinity for computers was a passing hobby or something I could foster to enter a career in web development. I wonder now how things might have been if I told him everything instead of holding it back as a way to punish him.

"Yeah, I got it," I said. It was hard not to sound petulant, but I managed to keep the bite back.

Lucius kept smiling, but I could tell he was appraising me, seeing what exactly he was taking on. He had a sharp eye and a self-assuredness that made me feel at ease—and immediately suspicious of him. Bruce only told me he was a good man to learn from, but I thought Lucius would be just as condescending as Bruce could be.

"Lucius has already cleared things with me. He'll get you started with the new database we're launching," Bruce said as he walked away from us back toward the elevator. He was less smug whenever he was at Wayne Enterprises, but he always remained distant and distracted. I could tell he wasn't really paying attention anymore. "Alfred will be here at five," he yelled over his
"I can take the train, Bruce—"

"See you then!"

And with that, he rounded the corner and was gone. Part of that smugness he held onto in public required the need to have the last word in everything. I didn't want to be at Wayne Enterprises in the capacity Bruce had in mind, but it wasn't an option to just languish at the Manor and spend my ample time with Parker anymore.

Turning to face Lucius, I tried to keep the smile, but I'm certain it came across as awkward. He didn't seem to mind. His posture was relaxed, and I remember how he looked entertained. I thought it was because he thought it was hilarious that Bruce was pulling the nepotism card. Lucius' head cocked to the side, considering me.

"So, where do you want me to start?" I asked after it was clear he wouldn't speak first, swinging my arms and trying to find a use for them that would make the nerves disappear.

"I don't know, you tell me, Proxy."

I froze—finding something to do with my arms suddenly became far less important. My eyes dashed to the door behind me, considering taking a quick exit and pretending Bruce never had the bright idea of me working there in the first place. Lucius had just used the alias I operated under online. I was arrogant back then—I'd leave my tag embedded in the files I'd snoop through and code I'd alter. Like the irresistible urge to carve your name on a wooden desk or an aging tree, even though there's no logical reason for it, it's a way of incriminating yourself and demonstrating that you're a vandal. A wink that challenges somebody to do something about it. I was finally in a situation where somebody could—but with a company like Wayne Enterprises, that meant serious trouble.

Playing dumb was my first instinct, but something told me he was too wry for that. His eyes could see past any attempt at bullshit I'd muster.

"How'd you figure that one out? I thought—"

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Kane, you're good. Very good in fact," he said, shaking his head as if the admission was one he couldn't quite believe. "Took me a couple months to figure it out why the temperature in the building kept alternating or how doors that were supposed to stay locked were decidedly not so unless it was to surprise some poor sucker into smacking their face against some glass."

He smiled but I was sweating. I waited for the other shoe to drop, for the inevitable reprimand and banishment to some far-flung corner where I'd be using aerosol cans to clear out dust from keyboards. I did do those things he said — and more. Wayne Enterprises had most of their systems hardwired to the internet and their security measures were fairly rudimentary for a company with so much money. They were harder to penetrate when Bruce came back. Before then, I could control their electric doors, ventilation system, security cameras, PA system, and a whole lot else. Messing with the people there became an idle hobby, one I thought was harmless and wouldn't be noticed. I assumed wrong.

"Now, I didn't have much authority around here until recently. Used to be just me in the basement. Kinda like a crypt keeper," Lucius said with a laugh. He was calm talking about all this, no trace of anger or coming retribution. "Mr. Wayne cleared you for a few projects, but—"
"Which ones? The cybersecurity software? It's not that great, if I'm being honest with you—or is it the telecommunications initiative?" I was talking rapid-fire, unable to help myself from indulging in the one area of my life where I didn't limit myself—especially when it seemed like I wouldn't be reprimanded at all. I was eager for something to finally give me a challenge, and it kept me from watching my tongue. "Or WE-286—"

"How do you know about that?" Lucius interrupted me; his face serious. My mouth hung open like a fish and I shut it quickly.

You goddamn idiot, I thought.

Turns out the same adage still holds true.

Lucius stepped closer to me, holding my gaze as I felt embarrassed uncertainty. I realized too late that people's willingness to be impressed ended once you hit too close to the chest.

"That was in a file I encrypted myself after Titan Industries bought it," he said.

Lucius looked incredulous—disbelieving that someone who taught herself the skills he took years to hone had slipped past his notice. He stared and I tried to keep my nerve, not looking away and unwilling to feel small.

"Follow me, if you don't mind," he said, walking past me to the elevator where Bruce disappeared only minutes before. He sounded polite, but there was no request in his words. Swallowing thickly, I followed him and walked with my back straight to counteract the feeling that my figurative tail was between my legs.

The ride in the elevator to the top floor was silent. Lucius' head was bowed, eyebrows knitting together. My nervousness grew, stomach clawing up my throat and making explaining what I'd done impossible. What was I supposed to say to him? That my unfettered curiosity and inability to foresee the consequences of my actions would lead to something bad—just like it always did?

I didn't have the words mapped out in my head to line up my thoughts right, never mind speaking them aloud. We stood in silence as my face burned.

When the doors opened Lucius started forward, motioning me to follow close behind. Bypassing a secretary with a friendly wave, he ushered me into his office and closed the door behind him. Sitting in front of his desk felt eerily like the times I would sit in the principle's office for a chewing out in high school. I cringed when he put his elbows on the table to lean forward.

"I need you to explain just how much diving you did, Miss Kane. Finding mention of any of those things, I hope you realize, is cause for concern." He never looked away from my face, never raised his voice.

The realization that what I'd admitted to was illegal—very illegal—wasn't lost on me. If he didn't work for Bruce, I would have bolted right then. His brown eyes pinned me in place and made the aura of a principle's office that more immediate.

"I… I had access to all of it. That—I didn't look at everything," I rushed to say when his eyes widened and he drew back marginally. "There was way too much to sift through, and it was only a—a part-time hobby, of sorts."

Whatever I thought that would assuage made it worse. His dark skin paled and his mouth opened. I felt compelled to keep spewing out words in an attempt to make what I'd been doing sound more benign than it actually was. Had anyone else admitted to this—they'd be looking at prison time.
"I know what I'm doing—no one else has access, I promise—"

"Miss Kane," Lucius interrupted, his eyebrows rising, "how the hell did you manage to do any of that?"

"With my laptop?" I didn't mean for it to sound like a question, but the look on his face—at the gobsmacked disbelief—made my answer seem too simple. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. "I made sure the network was secure on both ends, and I even fixed some of the backdoors that were vulnerable. That meant giving myself root access—"

"You have root access? To—to the entirety of Wayne Enterprises' servers?" Lucius looked about ready to throw up.

"Y-Yeah," I said, finally able to look away and pull at my hair when he took off his glasses and rubbed his face. "But I—I never did anything with it, and I can help. Like WE-286—I can fix it."

Lucius stopped rubbing at his face and stared. After a minute of silence, Lucius managed to get through whatever mental distress my admissions caused and motioned for me to continue.

"The bug with the autonomous navigation—you haven't been able to fix it, right? Since it's being used for conservation, I figured out how to get it to adhere to the original design with the facial recognition and long-distance tracking—"

"It's not being used for conservation anymore," Lucius said with a sigh, leaning back in his chair. "Titan Industries isn't in the business of saving animals and deterring poachers, Miss Kane."

"That's what they bought it for, it's what was in the file. It's not meant for offensive purposes—"

"No, it wasn't originally. They're altering it for surveillance—gathering tactical information for defensive and offensive measures overseas." Lucius grew more serious, his head thinking of the possibilities I could bring and not of the dangers in the habits I formed. For the time being, anyway. "Titan Industries bought them, but we're still contractually obligated to make them operational."

I saw what he was building to, and I wanted in. I could see what was wrong with the software and how to make it better. WE-286, under the codename "PRESERVE," was meant to be a state-of-the-art drone, one that could differentiate between different species of wildlife and humans. They could stay in the air for nearly thirty hours and had cloaking sensors that made them difficult to track with anti-aircraft missiles on the ground and easier to outmaneuver larger aircraft in the sky like planes. They were meant to put an end to poaching and monitor endangered species with minimal human interference and track changes in wide areas of intersecting ecosystems. But, like many human inventions, man's first response to ingenuity is its potential use in war.

"They're calling it TL-56: HAVOC now—"

"And you have six months to get them working," I finished. I knew the deadline, but I didn't think to start looking at Titan Industry's servers. Not yet, anyway. Doubt crept onto Lucius' face, suddenly uncertain whether he should be talking about this with me. "I can help. Bruce doesn't get it—he doesn't think I can do much of, well... anything."

I had to stop when I realized I was twisting my ring finger so hard I was close to dislocating it. I was trying to tell Lucius that I was desperate to do something new, that made a difference in something—anything—and that mattered. Apathetic boredom was an escape from constantly monitoring myself, placing all those inhibitors that made me feel worthless, but working with
Lucius—making something—that went beyond me. This was never meant to be something I'd put my name to—only a way to keep my head from eating itself.

"Mr. Fox, I—I know that things could have gone badly with what I've done," I said when he was about to speak. I didn't want him to shut me down, to have to go back to wasting away in the dark. "But I can actually do things here. I've seen some of your designs, the things you're working on, and I can help."

What I didn't entirely appreciate—what I never learned—is that everything I touch distorts in ways I never intended.

Lucius stared for a long time—evaluating me critically. I don't know what it was, but something clicked and he sighed, leaning back in his chair with his glasses held loosely in his hand.

"Alrighty, then. If you can fix it, I would be foolish not to use you. Now, as impressed—and disturbed—as I am about your ability to do what you have, I want to make one thing clear." I listened eagerly, letting the excitement—real, jubilant excitement—pierce through the cloud of hurt I'd lived in for so long. "As long as you're working for me, you don't get to go off and have free reign of a system you're not responsible for. That's my job. I have a feeling about you—whether it's good or bad remains to be seen, but I need your trust. There's no place in any of this for you if we can't have that. Do you understand me?"

I answered too quickly—too enthused about what all of this could mean. "Yeah, of course—"

"I want you to seriously think about this. If you work on these projects, you can't share them with anyone. No one else can know what kind of access you have. These are potentially dangerous—military-grade projects that are not meant to be distributed, not to mention strictly confidential."

This was the only warning Lucius would give me, and I intended to uphold the trust I strong-armed him into giving. Like with everything else—in all my promises I always made an exception, and it was those exceptions that led to ruin.

"Do I have your word on that?"

I told all of this to the person I thought I could trust the most—I told Parker because I knew he'd never share it. In all aspects of my life except for one, I never wanted to keep anything from him. I would have been better off wasting away until I was nothing—never able to mar what couldn't be rectified.

Another possibility to screw up was likely sitting under my nose. Lucius hid files within folders most would never have thought to look under with great detail—one labelled 'family.' Funny how I respected that bit of privacy and pillaged the rest. I saw the massive amount of data content later, but I thought of what he asked of me. I didn't want to break that promise entirely. Now I'm certain that's where he kept the files related to the gear he made for Bruce. I can only wonder now if it would have helped me to have looked or if it's something I can pass over in relief.

"You have my word."

I cry out when the needle pierces my skin, but I still can't move. The Joker works quickly, pulling the thread through and pushing the needle past the bleeding flesh for another pass. He still doesn't stop when the pain becomes enough for me to hyperventilate, making coos of reassurance as if it'll somehow help.

At some point I black out, but now I'm propped up on the edge of the bathtub against the white
shining tile. The yellow shirt's completely gone—I'm just in my underwear, but the pain is so intense I can't focus on anything else. He's stitched one arm back together and he's working on the second, holding the limb steady and staring at his work with a focused eye.

"Shh, shh. Almost done—don't squirm now," he says when I whimper.

I think the tears finally stopped, but I can't be sure. I can't touch my face—can't even raise my arms. The muscles only spasm occasionally when he's too rough with the needle, pushing it through on a bad angle.

Why am I not dead yet?

I feel close to it—like it's waiting for me. Every time my eyes get too heavy the Joker shakes me awake, denying me any kind of rest. Everything aches and it's the only thing keeping me tied to the present. My head doesn't feel attached to my body, but the pain feels entirely mine, like I haven't known anything else.

"Hey, now. Staying awake is important for the time being, sweet peach," he says, tilting my head back toward him when I didn't even realize it moved to begin with.

I just want to sleep... haven't you gotten enough from me?

I told the Joker everything—all the details I left out when I told Parker about the project. It took a long time. I don't even know how he understood me—the blood loss made it nearly impossible to say anything until it was a just a trail of incoherent mumbling. He kept asking me one thing, digging his fingers into the cuts until I was lucid enough to grasp his words.

"Can you do it?"

He wants me to give him access to project HAVOC—needs me to see his vision through. I couldn't think of a reason to say no anymore, so I said "yes."

That doesn't matter.

That's the voice I listen to—it's the only one that keeps the pain away. It holds me gently, soothing my mind back from everything else trying to rip it apart. I gave him everything and there's nothing left to salvage, only the primal instinct to keep my heart beating—even if I'm not even worthy of that.

It doesn't matter.

That's right. It doesn't matter.

"Mi-ri," a voice says.

A floating pink arc comes into view, stopping just below my direct line of sight. Brown eyes come into focus next, flicking back and forth and making me dizzy. Something warm touches my stomach. It feels nice until it doesn't—pulling back the edge of the skin and causing new, small tears. I try to move away, but it's something that only happens in my head and doesn't translate into action. The eyes shoot downward.

"Hmm. Not deep enough for stitches. We'll, ah, slap a Band-Aid on that one." A noise comes out of my throat but I don't even know what it's supposed to mean, what it'll actually do. "Oh, you're fine, you're fine. It's shallow—it'll only leave a small mark. Probably."
The face pulls back and the warmth goes to my thigh, pulling at the skin.

*It doesn't matter.*

The needle pierces me again, pulling the gaping wound closed. I'm not staring straight ahead anymore—I'm looking down at the small rivers of red trailing down the length of my leg, meeting the white of the tub to create small deltas that signal an end to my pain.

*If I keep bleeding, I won't have to be here anymore.*

What's happening comes through a thick fog. My mind's on an endless loop of everything I wish I never experienced—every word relived in detail, every feeling of shame and anger excoriating my heart, every hour of loneliness compounded with insurmountable guilt. Focusing on that hurts more than the thread being pulled through and seeing how my skin looks like a thick, bloody piece of leather.

*None of it matters, Miri.*

A middle ground of nothing. That's where my escape lies.

*You don't matter. You never did.*

The whimper I make isn't just because the Joker's pulling the thread tight.

Warm, wet hands cup my cheeks. They're gentle. They won't hurt me.

"Gotta rinse off, sweetheart."

*What's he talking about?*

His face comes in and out of focus. The scars disappear—effaced under a softened lens that blurs everything together.

*Doesn't matter.*

"C'mon now," he says, tapping a finger on my jaw, "no need to be all boneless. Wake up a bit, it'll make things, ah… easier for you."

*You should listen.*

I don't know why what he's saying rouses me, but it does. Trying to lift my arms, the shaking and pain are so bad that they drop almost immediately. I can only arch my back, but any other movement is beyond me. He sighs and rolls his eyes. I'm pulled forward and resting on something warm. A hiss of pain forces its way between my teeth when the raw, bleeding skin on my chest rubs against the fabric of his clothes. It's only faintly that I recognize the feeling of fingers tracing my spine.

*What's he doing?*

When he undoes the clasp of my bra, I find no surge of resistance. I'm trembling, my chest getting tight, unable to even shake my head in dissent.

"Shh, shh," is the only thing he says, pushing me back but never letting go, until I'm almost entirely sitting up with his grip being the only thing keeping me from falling. "You *really* do worry too much. Just, ah—just take some deep breaths, hmm?" I distantly recognize the tone as patronizing.
Helpless panic finds me when he slides the straps from my shoulders. Awareness comes back with the flood of everything else happening in my head—but I can't do anything.

This is it—what you wanted. He's going to do what he's hinted at all along and then you can finally die.

He won't like it, but I need to close my eyes, to look away in burning shame as he takes it off completely. A sob breaks through but nothing else follows when the cold air hits my chest. Even knowing I won't have to endure much more doesn't mitigate the fear.

"Pl-Please." It's all I can say—all I have and it's not enough.

The Joker lowers me back down to return to my place against the freezing tile. I'm shivering, cold and unable to get warm. None of the old bandages are on my arms anymore and my blistered hands burn. A maze of red marks maps my skin to show the escalations of agony. His hands go to my hips and pull on my underwear, bringing them down past my knees until I have nothing left to hide behind. It's all too gentle—too close to a sort of kindness I never had with anyone else.

The Joker lets out a pent-up breath in a loud exhale, making my mind draw inward when my body can't. Fingers go through my hair, smoothing it back over my shoulder.

"Oh, Miriam," he says, his voice close to my ear, "you are beautiful."

Not even when I was with all those boys did anyone ever see me completely naked. None of them. And yet here I am, every part of me bared to the one who's laid claim to my soul, and it only serves to reaffirm everything he said to me—all the truths he pointed out that I can no longer ignore. My eyes screw shut—expecting him to touch me, to take away what so many others already have. It'll be just like before—something I always deserved even as the violation of it added another crack I could never fix. But, this time, I'm going to shatter entirely and there won't be anything left to put back together.

Just get it over with—end it and die.

It's an automatic reaction when I cry out at the feeling of his hands on my arms. I'm waiting for them to travel down, to repeat what Zsasz did, tried to do—but they don't.

He's silent—no noise other than soft breathing comes from him. Picking me up again, I'm set somewhere colder than I was, dropped lower. When I open my eyes, hot water rains down on me, making me splutter and move to get out from the burning heat. The silver taps creak as he adjusts the temperature, going from scalding to warm. Taking the showerhead in his hand, he moves it around, focusing on the cuts and washing away the blood. He never touches me with his hands. Other than a small, curled up corner of his mouth, he's neutral—no sign of anything I expected. My tired mind finds relief and the tension drains away—I don't have the ability to hold it in me anymore.

That's right—he said he wouldn't lie. He didn't. He won't hurt me like they did—he won't leave.

Something nudges my mind, but it's too quiet—going silent when I blink it away.

Shivering whenever the water moves to focus somewhere else, I openly stare at him, my pain forgotten. He catches me looking and smirks, cracking his neck and adjusting his position on the other side of the tub with a slithering jerk of his body. He reaches out but I'm not afraid of him anymore. Brushing the wet strands of hair from my face behind my ears, he gives a nod of his head and a laugh.
"What kind of monster do ya think I am, Miri?" he asks, twisting his chin to the side, tongue passing over his lips. "I prefer my women more, ah, awake and raring to go."

His smile turns dark, but my own face doesn't change in any way I can perceive. I'm just staring, taking in the lines of his eyes, the dips and fissures in his scars, the bruises and cuts. His thumb brushes over my lips.

"We'll get ya there. One step at a time, hmm?"

The comment is distantly disturbing—carrying implications that should terrify me, should make me lash out and keep him away. But I don't feel any of those things.

You don't feel anything at all.

I thought I was still staring at him, feeling that small spot of warmth on my mouth as my body grows fevered, but as soon as it was there it's gone.

Where am I?

The world grows confusing again—wrapped up in a haze that I can't interpret.

Does it matter anymore?

No. No, it doesn't.

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"Boss, everything's ready."

I've been staring at a wall for a long time. The Joker only let me sleep for an hour, shaking or slapping me awake when I'd slump over or anything close to oblivion would come. It wasn't enough—I want to sleep and never wake up. I don't even remember most of the things he's said over the last few hours; only the manic pacing, occasional tugging of my hair, and the laughing. Always the laughing.

It can't be long now. At least you know what he's waiting for now.

He might not have let me sleep, but I found a happy medium—a stupor that mimics life but without everything that hurts. I'm wearing clothes that aren't mine—the pants are too big and short, coming up to my calves, and the shirt dwarfs me. He reapplied the bandages on my arms and hands and added new ones to my thigh and stomach where his knife sliced into them hours before. He left the bite wound bare on my neck, the scabs pinching with my movements. Somehow, it all seems like a passing memory—acts of violence that happened to someone else.

"Hear that, sweet peach?"

My eyes fall to a family portrait sitting on a black marble mantelpiece. Four smiling faces greet me, but I look away quickly.

They're probably dead.

We're all going to be dead at the end of this.

"Miri, we've talked about this."

Something grips my chin in a vise and twists so hard it sends a jolt of pain down my entire left side. I'm forced to look at the Joker, with his newly applied makeup hiding the bruises, and I try to
shrink back. He frowns and clicks his tongue.

"Eyes on me, hmm?" I nod quickly. I don't want him to be angry with me. Enough of my mind wakes up to function when he's close, but I've otherwise turned into a soulless spectator.

"C'mon, perk up a bit. We're heading to a party. You wanna go to the party, don't you?" He nods his head slowly, arching an eyebrow as I struggle to process what it means. His grip eases as I pay attention, nodding along with him.

"I-I'm sorry," I manage to say. My voice is still small, but nothing I do can make it louder. He's still staring expectantly, waiting for me to continue. "Y-Yes, I want to… I want to go to the party." He grins, elated, and pats me on the head.

"That's the spirit."

His painted face disappears and I feel relief and fear. Relief because I can sink back below the surface, and fear because that means I don't know where he is—I don't want to—but the burning sensations tracing up and down my back and the throbbing on my chest means he's watching.

He said he wouldn't leave and he won't. He won't leave you.

I know he won't. He left a guarantee. My fingers thumb the edges of the blouse he threw at me a few hours ago—the one he had to button up because my hands wouldn't work—almost touching the knife wound he didn't bandage. The Joker carved his initial on my chest—spanning the near entirety of my sternum. I feel it every time I breathe—a constant reminder of everything he said.

You did it to yourself. It's all your fault. All of it.

He's not going anywhere because I asked him not to. There is no escape—no getting away from this. It's all gone—everything that mattered.

Is… is that true?

A hard tug on my arm dislodges me from my seat on the couch, killing the thought. My legs give out and I grip the arm holding me aloft. It shifts from my arm to my waist, propping me up against someone warm. The Joker's face shifts down in front of mine, tilting on an odd angle that should have knocked us both to the ground.

"Off we go! It'll be fun," he says.

I don't have time to reply. Like he forgets he's even holding me, he half-draggs me through the rest of the house. I shiver hard when the cold air from outside bites my skin, and I only realize I'm not wearing shoes when my feet touch the damp cement. We're almost out in the country—I can't see any obvious traces of other homes, just groups of yellowed trees bright in the sun and manicured bushes. I was right—running would have gotten me nowhere at all.

There's no escaping this, Miri. You know that.

The Joker jostles me, directing my attention back to him. "I've even got a few… surprises for you. Try to cheer up, sweet peach."

The dread I feel is distant. I don't have to be able to think to know it won't be anything good.

But that doesn't matter.

I'm half-thrown inside the gray van from—was that last night? It must have been, even if it feels
like another lifetime's passed. The Joker sits next to me, putting an arm around my shoulder and pulling at the tangled strands of my hair. A face that's vaguely familiar sits in the front passenger seat—a head of blonde hair and a young face. Memories come back up and close my throat.

*He's from the ship. The mess hall. He kept Zsasz from...*

The blonde boy was there to stop Zsasz's knife from killing me. I don't know whether I should thank him or level some of the hate I feel for myself onto him. It would have been so much simpler if I died. He just stares at me, oblivious to my thoughts, taking in my appearance with disinterested curiosity.

"Lay it on me, Davie-boy," the Joker says, leaning forward. I take the opportunity to rest, closing my eyes as the van begins to move. Anything to get away in the only avenue available to me.

"Got seventeen waiting and ten more comin', just in case." My eyes open against my will at his words. The blonde boy—Davie—looks at me and hesitates. The Joker motions for him to continue with a dramatic roll of his hand as I slide further down on my side, nearly laying flat and bent at the waist. "The charges are set up and we're waiting to move into Base Three. We've got everything covered." The Joker gives a hum of approval and I start to slip away.

"Nuh-uh, Mir-cat." The Joker pulls me up by the hair, temporarily dispelling the exhaustion with fresh pain and eliciting a faint yelp. He laughs, but there's no good humour in it. "You're not actually Sleeping Beauty. You've still got things to do for me, sweetheart. Sleep is for those who, uh, accomplish things, hmm?"

I know what he's talking about. What he wants me to do. It makes the urge to pass out more immediate.

*This isn't real.*

Tired, resigned, confused—that's all I feel. I don't look away, but staring at him hurts. He's dressed in his usual suit—the purple suit jacket and green vest. With the white makeup, the feelings of before mix with what's happened since. As afraid of him as I am, I know he isn't going anywhere. He won't leave and he wants me around. He's a permanent source of terror and comfort, and I don't want him to be angry with me.

"Y-You're right, I... I'm sorry," I say, cowering against the only place I can—against his chest and in the trap of his arms. "I'm just... I'm so tired—"

His glare makes me stop talking, and the need for sleep is so acute that my body cries in frustration. I'm hardly coherent, my thoughts jumbling to create a salad of words that I can barely pick out and string together to make a sentence. Davie's purposely looking away, fixing his stare out the front windshield with the driver. The Joker rolls his eyes and his smile never leaves.

"I know you are."

After a moment, he looks more benevolent and I silently plead, willingly leaning into him. He seems to like that because he reaches down into a bag and passes me a Gatorade. Motioning me to drink, I try twisting off the cap, but my hands shake so bad I can't even grip it. He tears it out of my hand, taking the off the top quickly, and thrusts it back at me so quick it almost spills over.

"Gotta replace those electrolytes," he says as I drink it eagerly after not having anything else in over a day. He laughs when I finish it, and his purple-gloved hand reaches up to pull on my head to rest on his shoulder, fingers massaging into the muscles in my arm. "We'll be there soon, hmm?"
Try your best now.”

It's not permission to disappear, but it's enough that I can relax into him. The movements of the van and the words I can't hear blend together to take me somewhere else—a place of stasis.

This isn't real.

I know it is, but thinking it isn't helps. My eyes stay open but the world is only floating orbs of colour, swaying from side to side and flying in and around my periphery. It doesn't matter how long I've been like this—how much I'm missing. When the movements that made my body bounce in the seat come to an end, overwhelming disappointment tilts me back into disequilibrium.

"Oh, goodie—we made it!"

The Joker leaves my side and opens the van door, jumping out with a burst of excitement. The two men up front get out and I'm the only one that's left inside. My hopes of them forgetting about me unravel when the Joker, who already started walking ahead, turns back with a look of surprise. He snaps his fingers and Davie steps forward, his face serious but holding an undercurrent of nervous excitement. The Joker clasps his shoulder and leans in.

"I'm putting a lot of faith in you, Davie. You make sure she behaves, hmm?" he says, giving Davie a knowing look.

What's that supposed to mean?

I'm still mustering the energy to care, but they keep talking like I'm not here to hear them.

"Of course, boss. We won't—"

"Now, we don't want a repeat of what happened last time, do we?" the Joker asks. Davie pales but he doesn't move away, his feet rooted to the concrete. "I'll do more than shoot you in the leg if anything... untoward happens. Ya get me?" The Joker glares, gripping Davie hard enough to scrunch up the fabric of his shirt and make him wince.

"No, no, of course, boss. You got it."

The Joker stares and gives Davie a small shove that would have appeared jocular if it wasn't for the expression on his face. I shrink further into the van when the Joker turns his glare to me.

"Can't hide in there, sweet peach. Got things to do, people to maim." He motions for me to get out of the van and I force my exhausted limbs to work, gasping in pain as the muscles protest and the stitches pull. When I get to the doorway of the van, someone grabs me and pulls me out the rest of the way, nearly making me do a faceplant on the ground. A low growl follows my yelp of pain.

"Part of that means minding that no one plays with my toys without... permission, kid."

He isn't addressing me anymore, he's talking to Davie—and he's the one holding me up. The Joker pulls out a handgun and cocks it before sliding it back into a holster by his ribs. My eyes wander as my knees turn to jelly. We're in a shipping yard, one marginally better maintained from the other that's implanted in my head, on a concrete pier with a hulking red ship ahead. This one doesn't look like it's rotting, but the memories of before make me whimper and pull away from Davie's grip.

"Don't forget, Miri, you said you'd help, hmm?" The Joker's face is suddenly in front of mine, making me jerk back. I'm scared and I want him to take the fear away. He touches the bite on my neck but doesn't do anything to make my pain grow. "You weren't lying, were you? You know what happens to liars." His gaze pulls my mind forward, making it focus singularly on him. The
eyes draw me back in and take away everything else.

"I'll... I'll help. I wasn't—I didn't lie," I say.

*I won't lie anymore.*

He smiles, but his face is still mean. It makes me nervous—eager to make it change so he doesn't do what he always does. I don't want him to hurt me because there's no getting away from it. I have no escape, no place of refuge—only a narrow path to walk to keep the worst away.

*It's not like it would matter, would it? You'd deserve it anyway.*

All the Joker does is nod, turning to walk ahead with a group of men I didn't see before. Davie adjusts his grip, trying to keep me upright.

"C'mon and help me with this, man."

The crunching gravel beside me isn't enough for me to turn and look. When another hand grabs my opposite arm, panic works its way back to the forefront. It's the rattled breathing—the familiar sound of air working through wet pipes, that makes me pay attention.

*Lewis. How long was he there for?*

He won't look at me, but his grip isn't the one of cruel indifference the last time he dragged me somewhere. His face is one of conflict, and he avoids touching me anywhere our skin might make contact. My thoughts amass together again, making it hard to differentiate between what I'm seeing and what I remember. They don't give me time to think, pulling me forward toward the lowered gangplank leading inside. The Joker and the group of men are gone, swallowed up by the belly of the ship.

"I—I can walk." When Davie turns his head, I realize I'm the one who spoke. I don't even remember thinking that or how I imagined I would have the strength for it.

*You don't, you're just going to fall.*

They ignore me. My feet drag behind me and their grip hurts, biting into the stitches. I don't know why it matters, but I still try to say it a little louder.

"Pl-Please, let me walk—"

Lewis lets go of my arm, motioning at Davie to do the same. Davie glares, but he listens, releasing my arm and waving his hand out to the ship in a grand motion of condescension. I sway on my feet but work to right myself. Hugging the thin blouse closer for warmth, I make myself walk forward and ignore the stones biting the soft undersides of my feet. I keep going, not caring about anything else other than putting one foot in front of the other.

When we get into the ship, the freezing metal makes me shiver so hard I almost fall, but the wind's gone and the sun is no longer there to blind me. One of them gives me guided shoves every so often, pushing me in the right direction until we come to the open expanse at the heart of the freighter. What I see quickly beats back the strangling apathy, unleashing a storm of chaos in my head that's so powerful in the force of it I nearly black out.

The room's full of money. More than I've ever seen in my entire life. It's a giant stack—a mountain of it—reaching well over ten meters. Money isn't the only thing in here. Men line the room, standing guard with M-16's, handguns, and enough gear to look like a guerilla group.
Hyperawareness slams into me. I feel every tug on my stitches as I move, each brush of the cotton against my throbbing chest, the panicked beating of my heart, the pulsing behind my eyes, how I'm starting to hyperventilate. Flashbacks from the past and premonitions of the future conflate into one, blinding me and robbing my lungs of air.

_You shouldn't be here. Nothing good's going to happen. This... this is part of what he wants you for. You're going to make it worse—just like you always do._

But where can I go? There's nowhere for me to run, nowhere to hide from this.

_Because you're all alone._

The thought makes me sink again, pulling me to the only safe place available and away from the gravity of what I'm seeing. The enormity of this—of what the Joker's asked me to do, is paralyzing.

"Move it," Davie says, pushing and then reaching to grab me again when my legs give out. "Oh, for Christ's sake—"

He yanks on my arm hard enough for me to cry out and the Joker whips his head around to scowl. Davie immediately adjusts his grip, muttering a panicked expletive, and eases off the angle he had my arm in. Trying to get me to use him as a support instead, he walks me to the edge of the perimeter the men with guns established. None of them look at me directly, but their eyes strain in my direction. There's no chair, so Davie presses down on my shoulder and guides me to the ground, making me sit and wait for whatever's going to happen next as he and Lewis flank me.

_Is this where he's going to make me do it?_

I'm not forced to wait and wonder for long. Muffled screams echo through the metal hull. The hair on my arms stand on end and I bring up my knees to my chest. Lewis and Davie don't move, but Davie's hand goes to the back of his pants to pull out a silver gun. Sweat collects on my back and trickles down.

"Ah, the man of the hour," the Joker says, his voice booming through the room.

A small Asian man—arms bound behind his back and several layers of duct tape wrapped around his head—is dragged in by the collar of his shirt. He's dropped at the outer edge of the mountain of money, trying to scramble away as the Joker closes in. I nearly vomit when I see who brought him—it's Zsasz.

_Oh, no, no, no—_

I inch back, trying to go anywhere he won't see me. Half his face is bandaged and dark spots of blood have leaked through where his eye should be. Zsasz catches sight of me with what's left of his good eye. The glare he levels is one that reawakens every feeling of primal terror.

_He's going to finish it, oh god—_

The Joker said he won't kill me. Even though I wanted to die, I know what Zsasz will do is beyond anything the Joker would. He had more opportunity to do what Zsasz didn't get the chance to finish, but he didn't. There are only two options, but I still believe what the Joker told me. I have to. Alarm makes my skin roil as Zsasz starts toward me with vengeful purpose.

_He said—he said he'd deal with Zsasz. Oh god —_

I'm looking to the Joker for help, but it's Davie who steps forward and brings his gun around to his
front. He doesn't point it at Zsasz, but he holds it tight and frowns. Zsasz stops in his tracks, the anger and rage palpable even from a distance. His fists curl and I can see him deliberating—deciding if it's worth having a go at me now or waiting until he gets another chance later.

"Ah-ta-ta-ta," a voice says. I tear my eyes away from Zsasz and find the Joker staring at him. He's grinning, but it gives him the look of a dead-eyed shark who's just found a particularly delicious meal. "You wanna take a step back, Victor? Or, ah, do I need to go for the other eye?" he asks.

Zsasz looks from me to the Joker, the lines in his face deepening with the darkening frown. For a moment, I'm sure the Joker's going to do exactly what he said—gouge out Zsasz's eye like he almost did mine. Zsasz seems to master his rage, backing up and putting his hands up in deference. I know it doesn't mean anything, that he has a lot of damage he's going to inflict as soon as the Joker's back is turned. My immediate thoughts focus on that, and I'm filled with a sudden urge to cling to the Joker's arm.

No, he won't let that happen... he said he's my friend, right?

It's the only thought that keeps me calm. The man is a maniac—without a doubt a psychopath, but he won't hurt me.

For now.

The Joker turns back to the bound man on the floor, his face arcing with newfound amusement. He seems almost giddy, his body pulsing with ebullience.

"Would ya lookee here, boys," he says to his men. The Joker has a skip in his step, a menacing violence hidden under the movements meant to invoke playfulness. "You should be proud—look at the monument to all your accomplishments." The Joker waves his hand to the money. The man shakes his head and keeps trying to talk through the tape.

Doesn't he know it's useless?

As much pity as I have for him, I feel overwhelming gratitude that the Joker's attentions aren't focused on me right now. Not like that. Although I can't differentiate between which I prefer—what he's always done to me before, like what he's doing to that man now, or the blatant interest he's shown that leads only to something beyond anything I can conjure from experience or nightmare. Even thinking like that is a useless train of thought.

It doesn't matter. He has all the power and you have none. None of us do.

"No sense worrying now. Y'know, there's a saying—an old one. Biblical," the Joker says, circling the man to stand behind him. Leaning down, he gives the man's neck a hard squeeze. "Wealth should be used to make friends, and when it's all gone you can find yourself in 'eternal dwellings.'"

The Joker nods his head, affirming that he remembered it right, every word laced with disdain. States of panic make it hard to use any form of reason, so I stop trying.

"Today's your lucky day. It's another old saying that we can't take our worldly possessions in the afterlife." The man stops trying to talk, going totally silent as the Joker keeps speaking. His screams start again when the Joker grabs him by the collar, yanking him to his feet and motioning to the top of the tower of cash. "We're gonna try it out—see how true it turns out to be. Move."

The tears on the man's face reflect the dim light of the room, showing just how much he's come undone. He struggles, but he does what the Joker says, climbing high and stumbling on the uneven foundation to the top. The Joker follows close behind with relative ease in comparison. He turns
and catches me staring, giving me a wink as he balances himself, and joins the bound man on the top of the heap. My eyes turn back to Zsasz. He hasn't stopped glowering at me.

"Boss—they're here," a man I don't recognize says from the entrance, taking my head in a new dizzying direction.

Who are they talking about—why are there more of them coming?

None of this makes sense with what he told me, what he wants me to do. I never asked questions, only kept agreeing even as more of my heart kept dying, but now I realize that maybe I should have.

You wouldn't have wanted to know the answers, Miri.

The Joker's kneeling behind the bound man, fiddling with something one of the men tossed to him from below. He looks up, his mouth forming a small 'o' as his concentration breaks.

"Don't just stand there then," he says, talking to the man like he's a child, "let 'em in. Can't start the party without 'em."

The man nods and hurries back down the hall we all came from, returning with a large group of men in suits and expensive-looking leather jackets. They saunter in the room, a few whistling when the money comes into view. Barking and growling—loud and then muffled, comes in the form of three large rottweilers. They pull at their leashes and sniff the air, saliva dripping from their mouths. The men's numbers are fewer than the Joker's and less heavily armed. One man breaks away from the group, his hair oily and greased back. He smiles widely, focusing on the cash like it's a site of holy pilgrimage.

"Not so crazy as you look," he says. There's a heavy accent—Russian. Something burgeons in my chest, expanding outward and pressing against my skin, calling back to the last time I heard someone speak with the same Slavic lilt.

The Joker stands, raising his arms out as he stands tall over all of us, the light giving him a white halo around his head.

"I told you, I'm a man of my word."

Shoving the bound man dismissively on the face, he hops off the top of the mound. Sliding down and creating a small landslide of bills, the Joker lands with a flourish, his arms going out like he stuck a perfect landing. He stands as if there was an audience showering him with applause and searches the room.

"Where's the Italian?" he questions.

The man shrugs his shoulders, looking around before lighting a cigar and taking a heavy drag. It's quick but, even with my mind as slow as it is, I don't miss the flash of pernicious annoyance on the Joker's face. Davie steps back, getting closer to me, and his finger never leaves the trigger of his gun. Lewis shakes violently.

When the Russian man doesn't say anything, the Joker returns the shrug but the tension remains. Bending down, the Joker picks up several of the fallen stacks of money and starts hurtling them upward, hitting the man on top in the face each time. The Joker's giggling lowly, happy to get some enjoyment out of tormenting a man who's already weeping. The cuts on my arms and leg hurt anew, the wound on my chest aching like the knife's there again.
"He could be doing that to you."

I hate myself for thinking it, but I'm glad it's not me anymore.

"Joker-man, what you do with all your money?" the Russian man asks, pointing his cigar at the cash and the Joker.

The Joker's voice snaps me out of it, bringing my attention to the present danger I can taste in the room.

"Y'see, I'm a guy of... simple tastes," he begins, backing away from the gathered group of men, "there are a, uh—a few things I enjoy in this life."

I'm only seeing it now, but he's holding his gun, waving it around as he speaks. He's getting closer to me. I try crawling backward but run into Davie's legs just as the Joker stops in front of me. The group of men see me as if for the first time—some stare with idle amusement and others with confusion.

"Dynamite, and gunpowder, for starters," the Joker says. Not even looking, he reaches back and grabs a fistful of my hair, jerking me to my feet. "And gasoline!"

Three men break away from the established perimeter, holding jerry cans, and start dousing the money. The sharp smell of it hits me in the stomach and my chest heaves with the effort of trying to stay conscious. The Russian man starts forward in a panic.

"What the—"

The Russian man's cut-off. Still not even looking at them, the Joker aims and fires. With a bright flash and a deafening burst of sound, a man drops to the ground and everyone moves to draw their weapons. The Joker's men are faster—circling the other group with their guns aimed and ready. I grab at the Joker's hand, but it shifts down to my ribcage, holding me up as I work through the terror to find my feet.

"Ah, ah, ah."

The Joker levels the muzzle of his gun at the Russian, keeping him in place. He turns to look at the progress of his men's work, breathing in the fumes, and leaves me to stand on my own when he sets me upright. I back away from the Russian, trying to put distance between me and the target of the Joker's wrath—but there's nowhere to go. I'm trapped in a place where only death will find me —with the people who scare me more than anything else ever has.

No, Joker said he wouldn't—

Retreating in on myself won't do anything here. Everyone looks ready to kill each other, and there's nothing easy about death now. I do the only thing I can do; I edge back towards the Joker, putting my faith in the belief that he meant it when he said he wouldn't hurt me. He smiles at me in approval, licking his lips as I try to shrink and disappear.

"And you know what those things have in common?" he asks, waltzing past me to stick his gun against the man's chest. He doesn't get an answer, but the Joker keeps talking as the man looks on in shock. "They're cheap."

"You... you said you were a man of your word," the man mumbles around his cigar. His face is covered in sweat, but he doesn't move or break eye contact with the Joker. Though the hold is large, it feels like it's closing in until it's on the verge of collapse.
"Oh, I am." The Joker plucks the cigar from the man's mouth, blowing on the end of it before throwing it at the pile of money. It lights up immediately and the muffled screams of the bound man shortly follow. I look up in horror as the fire rises.

Oh my god, oh my god—

The fire reaches the top quickly, and the man shrieks as he burns alive. Gas, stifling smoke, and the smell of cooking meat makes me double over and heave. There's nothing to come up, only bile that burns my throat. The man's still screaming like a dying animal.

"I'm only burning my half." The Joker says it so simply, almost chastising the Russian. I back away as the flames grow hotter, but a hand grabs the back of my neck and forces me upright. "Guys like you, they never see the, ah, bigger picture. You had everything to do it! But just... well, look at you now." He's laughing, howling at the joke only he seems to understand, his face red and orange as the fireball grows.

"I'm gonna help with that. You lot never had vision. The dawn of a new era is coming. Oh, yes it is," he says when the Russian shakes his head. The Joker looks down at me, smiling like the devil sitting from his throne, and adjusts my hair and rubs at the mark he left on my neck. "My little sweet peach here's gonna help tear it all down. Aren't you?" he asks me. I freeze and my lips tremble.

It doesn't matter, remember?

I don't believe my own thoughts anymore. Too much is fighting in me all at once, but I'm too tired to acknowledge any of it. His expectant stare is a powerful one, exerting a calm that allows only one thought to come up.

"Yes," I say. He beams and presses me against him as my face twists in agony.

Do you even know what you're saying anymore?

No. No, I don't.

"Tell your men they work for me now. This is my city." He points the gun from the man to the group, nodding his head. The Russian spits at the Joker and scowls. The howling of the dogs rises with the smoke.

"They won't work for a freak," the Russian says with venom. The Joker laughs and his grip tightens around me before releasing.

"You stay right there now," he says to me, striding forward to place the gun inches away from the underside of the Russian's chin. I do as I'm told, knowing he's the only way out of any of this.

I don't want to die here.

"Freak, huh?" the Joker repeats, imitating the heavy accent of the Russian and keeping his face only a few inches away. "You think you're king of the hill? The top dog watching from on high, passing judgement on all the willing peasants?" The Joker circles him, his expression exuding a level of viciousness he never used on me. I shake just from being in the presence of it.

"No, you're not. Were never even close. Y'know why?" He stops moving when he gets to the Russian's face again. "All you care about is money. Except," he laughs, rolling his eyes, "you never saw how useless you all really were. He's just found that out," the Joker says in a high ingratiating tone. He points to the top of the collapsing mountain of cash where the only remnants of the man
who was there are his charred corpse and the popping of his bones as they crack under the heat.

"And. So. Will. You." The Joker laughs again, high and demented. "You're gonna see that none of this really mattered at all." The Russian man's speechless, his mouth dropping lower until he's completely agape. The Joker's laughs is a song from Haawiyah—the abyss my father told me about where evildoers are thrown in to rot.

"Ty bezumets," the Russian growls. He doesn't have to speak English for it to be clear it's an insult.

The Joker pulls something from his vest pocket. It pops open so quickly I don't know what it is until the Russian flinches away and I see the sharp edge of a switchblade. I shake violently and back away, but Davie's moved forward. He puts a hand on my shoulder, keeping me from running in the opposite direction. Ash falls and the acrid smell of the smoke burns my airway.

"Net, ya ne sumasshedshiy, no ty umresh',"

I thought the Russian summoned the courage to speak again, but the voice isn't right. It was the Joker who spoke back in Russian, leaving the man stunned. The Joker tosses the knife over the man's shoulder to a group of thugs I didn't see surging in the shadows of the enlargening flame.

"Since you're being so... cooperative, why don't we cut you up into little pieces and feed you to your poos, hmm?" The Russian panics, trying to dodge right but unknowingly backs right into the men behind him. He shouts and struggles, trying in vain to get away. "Then we'll see how loyal a hungry dog really is," the Joker says in a vicious snarl.

The Russian's dragged to the other end of the room and he's swarmed. Those who came with him are divided into those who willingly join the Joker's ranks and those who won't. The Joker nods his head and his men raise their guns, creating an impromptu firing squad.

Miri, look away—

My eyes refuse to shut until the first bullet's fired, hitting one of the men and making his body drop like a bag of wet sand. My bandaged hands come up and cover anything I might see, but it doesn't keep me from hearing them die—their screams and pleas mixed with the bullets ripping through them that know no mercy. I burst out crying, dropping to the floor and trying to block it out. It doesn't work—one sound's replaced with another. The Russian's screaming, shrieking and wailing, and his dogs are growling—snarling and snaring and tearing at something as his voice pierces my ears rises to a crescendo before being silenced completely.

Oh, no, no, no—

Nothing can make it stop—keep the aching sobs from wracking my chest. Gunpowder, the sharp rusted scent of blood, smoke and burning fat—all of it is death manifest. I'm sitting in the middle of a slaughterhouse and bound to its master. I can still hear them screaming even though I know they're dead. No level of apathy can make this go away, no amount of will can make this not mean anything.

"Get up," the Joker says, nudging my foot with his shoe. I shake my head.

I can't—I can't—

He sighs and his fingers bury themselves in my hair again, pulling me up.

"What?" he asks, his mouth pulled down in a false show of sympathy. "You don't like the party?"
He giggles at the expression on my face, at the pure terror. He stifles himself and stares, tilting his head to try maintaining that same demonstration of something I know he can't feel. His thumb rubs along the side of my cheek, the material of his glove moving smoothly over the tears I can't stop. He moves his hands as if he were moving into position to embrace me, but he stops a few inches short and speaks quietly in my ear.

"I promised you a few surprises, didn't I?"

I shake my head as much as I dare, not taking away my eyes from his. I'm desperate—I don't want anything he wants to give. Hesitating, I put my hand on the bare skin of his arm, trying anything I can to make this stop, keep it from going any further and dragging me down with it.

"Y-You don't have to do that—"

"Oh, but I want to. Can't disappoint my sweetheart, can I? Not like you disappointed me."

His eyes are black and dilated, mouth a baleful line—scars tugged back and splitting his face. Despite the burning heat coming from the fire, my blood turns to ice. He's still angry with me. Hysteria makes me hyperventilate.

"N-No, I'm sorry—I am, I'm—"

He presses a finger against my lips and I cry, expecting him to do what he's just done to all of those others. My only hope is that it's quick. He twirls me around so I'm staring at the line of bodies, the pools of blood blooming under them. I whimper and involuntarily draw closer to him, gripping his arm and jacket in an effort to mitigate whatever's coming. He snaps his fingers and whistles.

"C'mere," he calls out.

I open my eyes long enough to see he's called Zsasz over. I shriek and try to pull away, but I'm not going anywhere. Zsasz is drinking in the carnage with a wide smile, a perverted bloodlust that makes his body vibrate. His look of eagerness grows when he glances from the Joker to me. Words won't come out, smothered by terror and intense betrayal.

"He lied—oh my god, he's going to let Zsasz do it. Oh, Christ—"

I try falling to the ground, to crawl away, but the Joker won't even let me do that. He wrangles a hold on me, pinning me in a way that tears at the stitches and pulls at the muscles holding my arm in its socket. I scream, but he doesn't even laugh.

"Oh, shh, shh, shh."

He's pressing me to him tightly, fingers threatening to work through the set of stitches sitting under them and threading their way through the muscle. He smooths back my hair and forces my head up, to be totally aware of the anguish he's going to allow to be lavished on me.

"Yeah, boss? I finally do enough to get a bonus?" Zsasz asks, grinning like Beelzebub and stepping closer. I cling to the Joker, my hand going to his as the other presses against his chest, doing my best to make this stop.

"Pl-Please, don't—I-I'll do anything, please—"

The Joker turns and looks at me, an eyebrow going up as if we're sharing the same joke. He smiles like he's just had a wicked idea. Head tilting to the side, he glances from Zsasz to me, his fingers starting to move along my arms in small circles.
"Did I ever tell you how I got these scars, Miri?" the Joker asks, motioning to his face.

The whole room goes silent. Bodies were being dragged to be thrown on the fire, but they're dropped as the remaining men stop to listen, inching closer despite themselves. Zsasz looks confused, opening his mouth to speak but unable to form the words.

"Oh, I know how you got yours, Vicky. But mine... now there's a story." He looks at me expectantly, prompting me with a raised eyebrow.

"N-No, y-you... you didn't tell me." The Joker gives me a full-toothed grin.

"Do you wanna know?"

There's only one right answer, even if it's the exact opposite of what I want. Staring at him makes it easier to ignore everything else. The pull of his words working to sedate all that would be overwhelming. I don't mean to, but I hold onto him harder.

"Yes," I whisper.

The corners of his mouth twitch and his tongue flicks out over his bottom lip. He talks in a low, conspiratorial voice—like Zsasz isn't there to hear, like it's just him and me.

"I thought you would," he says, nodding. The remnants of the fire burn hotter, making the black eye makeup run down in small lines and flickering dances of orange twirl along the slant of his cheekbones and ridge of his brow. "Y'see, mommy was sick. Real sick."

He tilts his chin down toward his chest, adjusting to hold my hands like we're about to dance. His eyes keep wandering around the room, making sure everyone's paying attention.

"We were poor—dirt poor. Daddy left a long time ago and mommy was, ah, working three jobs and pouring the rest into a bottle at the end of the day." He says it quickly, like he's rushing to remember it before he loses the thought. The low register of his voice obviates anything else until it's just the coloured blocks making up his face, the firm line of his stomach suddenly pressing into mine, and the sweltering heat that makes my eyes heavy.

"I was always crying, always upset at something. She couldn't take it anymore—just wanted me to smile for once. Just wanted a night of quiet."

Something in his voice changes. Taking on an insidious meaning. I don't feel tired anymore. He's wrapping me up in the world his words create until I'm in a dilapidated house with a foreign version of Mom that's angry and exhausted, scowling at me as I try to get her attention. His eyes dart away for a moment and I can breathe. When they find me again, the power they have only fixation to him.

"She begged me, shook me, slapped me—just wanted me to—to. Shut. Up." The picture becomes clearer. Mom's still there in my mind's eye, but so is a young boy. A crying one. Wearing pj's and asking for dinner. My breathing becomes laboured. "She couldn't stand to see me so—so sad all the time. 'I'll fix you, baby, don't worry,' she'd say."

His voice changes again, becoming soft and caressing, altering ever so slightly to mimic his mother. I'm staring into the eyes of a snake, one that has me hypnotized in place. I can hear Mom saying those words to me, her smile turning twisted as she holds my face in her hands.

"She takes a small paring knife from the kitchen and tells me to come close. She holds me so sweet and nice, and for once... I wasn't crying. I just wanted her to be happy again."
Dread weighs me down, ready to drown me. Part of me knows what's coming next, but I'm desperate to hear it, to catch his words even as they burn a mark on my mind. His hands leave mine and cup around my jaw, just like I can see Mom doing.

"'You won't be sad anymore, will you?" She takes the knife holds it up, smiling so I won't be scared." He's saying all this like it's a bedtime story, his words captivating and horrifying. A clear image is ingrained in my mind, a bloody one that will stay with me as much as the carving on my chest will. "'Now you'll be alright.' She puts it in my mouth, laughing until I start, too. And..."

He trails off, but he doesn't need to finish for me to know what happened. I can see Mom coming at me with the knife, slicing my cheeks open in a permanent grin. It's so visceral and real that it feels like it's happening now—I can feel my mouth splitting just like I felt the knife carving into me before. I don't look away, pinned down by the look of benevolence that only intensifies the horrible imaginings he's invoked. His grip on my face tightens.

"Well. Here. We. Are."

He kisses me briefly, and I can't move. My eyes stay open, afraid of how the visions will intensify in the dark, as his lips press against mine. A scream and a loud bang cause me to tear away from him, some of the escaped sense crashing back into me.

What... what just happened?

There's an opening in the floor, a panel flipped back to reveal a pit, and shouts coming from the bottom of it. Zsasz is nowhere to be found, and Davie's standing in his place.

The Joker's presence, one that felt like it was amalgamating to mine, disappears and I'm left winded, my head spinning in circles as fast as the flames the rise and fall in choreographed movements.

"Should have been paying more attention, Vicky."

The Joker's laughing, back to the malicious self that's comforting in its familiarity—not like the disturbing stranger laying down revelations as he stuck a knife in my heart. My eyes adjust to find all the men left in the room staring back from me to the Joker. Several are visibly sweating. The Joker paces in a circle around the opening, grinning maniacally.

"C'mere for a moment, Miriam."

His words aren't a request. He isn't looking, but he's holding his arm out expectantly. There's no choice at all; I put my head down and obey, forcing my body to go where it's screaming at me not to. I glance down the opening and see that it's more of a shaft. It's dark, but Zsasz is at the bottom of it.

"You crazy motherfucker! I'll kill you—"

Zsasz is still shouting even as his voice goes hoarse and sounds of intense pain break through.

"Like to see ya do it now, Vicky."

The Joker's still laughing, doubling over and wiping at tears that aren't in his eyes. He straightens and tries to suppress the giggles. When he snaps his fingers I realize I haven't moved any closer to him. Swallowing and trying to master the shaking in my legs so I don't join Zsasz, I make it to the Joker's side as he peers down into the pit.
"Surprise, Miri," he says, jerking me into him. Burying his nose in my hair, he breathes deep and sighs contentedly before moving his head up and shouting over me. "Get Vicky's surprise."

He snaps his fingers and points at Lewis, who rushes off immediately to another room. Two others come and set a large grate over the opening, securing it in place. Davie walks over, limping slightly, holding a video camera.

"W-What are you doing?"

Don't ask, Miri—this is an answer you don't ever what to hear.

He chuckles and his mouth goes close to my ear, his arm draping casually over me.

"I'm about to, ah, make a point."

None of this makes sense. There isn't any reason in this—none at all.

Lewis returns, holding a large pot that looks too heavy for him. His thin arms are straining, and as he gets closer I recognize the smell of fry oil.

Oh, no, no, no—

"W-Why are you—that doesn't… don't do that. You don't need to—" He cuts me off with a scoff, twisting me around to stare at him.

"Don't tell me you're defending your would-be-rapist, Miriam," he says, scolding me.

Lewis sets the pot with the steaming oil filled to the brim on the edge of the grate, getting it ready for it to be poured down.

"N-No, but—"

'You should be happy. I'm doing this one. Just. For. You." He smiles like I should be grateful, and a dark part of me is. I want Zsasz to suffer. I want him to die. I want to be the one to do it.

But you know that's wrong, Miri.

I'm not sure if I can tell the difference anymore.

The Joker drags my face away from the shaft and Zsasz's screaming curses. I don't finish seeing Davie setting up the tripod.

"Y'see, people just need, uh… permission to get in touch with their savage side. An invitation for brutality. And I'm about to give it to 'em."

He's taking on the role of being my teacher again, instructing me on the evil natures of man while he simultaneously embodies and contradicts them. What he asked of me makes more sense now. He wants Gotham to die, but he wants them to pull the lever for their own guillotine. I still can't help the question that forms in my mouth.

"Why?"

His fingers go in my hair and he speaks with the conviction of a prophet, pulling me back in so the blood spreading from the massacre doesn't exist—the burning smell of death doesn't choke me, and the searing pain of existing is just a dull throb.
"They're all... looking at the world wrong. It's not about any of this," he says, gesticulating to the smouldering remnants of the monetary inferno, "it's about... sending a message."

_Don't ask him, Miri._

I do anyway.

"W-What message?"

He smiles—but it's real. Not laced with anything else, not hiding a knife's edge. It's just one of simple joy. One of a man who has everything and he's willing to share. The look in his eye undermines all that brings, miring it nefarious ill-will.

_Everything burns._

**Chapter End Notes**

Hello once again! As always, a big thank you to everyone who's been sticking around to read and an extra big thank you to those of you who have taken the time to comment. I appreciate hearing from you all and love knowing your thoughts on the story. There are only a couple of things I want to clarify:

If it tickles your fancy, the biblical verse the Joker's referring to is as follows: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).

Who Miri is referring to as "the Russian" is actually known as "the Chechen" in TDK. Miriam would have no way of knowing that, she's never met the guy, but his accent was one that is Slavic. So that's who she's referring to in this chapter!

In Russian, "Ty bezumets" is "you're insane" and "net, ya ne sumasshedshiy, no ty umresh'" is supposed to translate to "no, I'm not crazy, and you're still going to die." The Joker's a guy of many talents, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if he knew several languages, even if it was just so no one could talk about him in any capacity he wouldn't understand.

Yes, I indulged in the "you wanna know how I got these scars?" story. The Joker is powerful in part because he is enveloped in mystery and his past is unknown. I want to stay in that thread, and all of his stories have the theme of being rooted in the domestic space and family. The first one was about a set of parents, specifically about the father's violent abuse, and the second about a marriage gone horribly wrong. Usually he says it to people he's about to kill, invoking an intimate moment that's inherently disturbing because it's coming from a man who doesn't seem human. Like all the other stories, this one isn't true, but he picked it specifically because he knew Miriam was close to her mom and it would hit the hardest. He might say he's her friend, but that doesn't make him any less of a bastard.

Miriam's hacker name, "Proxy," is a callout to Wendy Harris, a hacker in the DCU who worked with Barbara Gordon and Stephanie Brown in the Birds of Prey. Wendy will not be in this fic, but I thought it was fitting to incorporate that particular element from the comics. For project HAVOC itself, not all of this is based on fiction. Drones
are used for conservation purposes, especially more recently. There's been a lot of tech advances to make it a reality, but it's not as advanced as the one I've created for the purposes of this story.

**While I did do extensive research on the various elements I use in this fic, there are obviously things I will get wrong because I am by no means an expert. I'd be grateful if someone pointed out any glaring errors, but otherwise I will do the cliche magic eraser technique of Hollywood and say 'it's all part of the story and it's fiction, work with me here.' (I mean this in the cheekiest way possible.)**
Oh, Jesus. He's going to make me watch—I don't want this. Oh, Christ—

The black hole in the middle of the floor seems to pull me to it, sucking out the air in the room. Zsasz won't stop screaming—hurting threats of retribution and a slow death when he has no way of making them a reality. He sounds like an animal on its way to slaughter—an ironic juxtaposition, given his moniker of "the Bowery Butcher." It still doesn't take away what's about to happen, what I won't be able to stop.

Just—just stay back and be quiet. If you're quiet enough, maybe they won't notice you.

What a vain thought—a delusion that's in no way convincing. The Joker's smiling, watching as floodlights are positioned on opposite ends of the shaft, pointing down to illuminate its prisoner below. Davie's set up a camera on a tripod—the same one the Joker used when I woke up on the ship and he tied me to the chair. Another man, tall and broad-shouldered, has a cellphone, holding it out and pressing his thumbs against the screen furiously.

"Ready for your next, ah, close up, Miri?"

The Joker's suddenly behind me, whispering in my ear. I flinch and nearly lose my balance, falling forward to get away from the heat of his body. He clasps a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back toward his chest. I freeze and try to remember how to make my lungs take in air, closing my eyes and cringing.

"What, don't tell me you're not as, ah, excited as I am?" he asks, his hands sliding down my arms until it's like he's hugging me from behind.

Don't say it, Miri—you'll regret it.

I'm not far away enough to take this blindly, to not voice some form dissent. I will regret this, but I can't accept what's happening, even if it's only going to get worse.

"N-No, I'm not. This is…it's cruel," I say, drawing my arms in closer to my torso, bracing for more pain.

He wanted me to be honest, and I can't pretend this has the same effect on me as it does him. He stiffens and I have nowhere to draw into, trapped in his arms as I struggle with the bloodshed that's about to be dealt out.

"H-Hasn't there been e-enough, already? I—"

"Miri, I think you need to learn how to loosen up," he says, giving my arms a squeeze while he slithers out to stand in front of me. "You said you'd help, like a good girl, didn't you? I'd hate to think we didn't come to a complete understanding before, Miriam." His voice has a dangerous edge. He's advancing on me, making me back up toward the smouldering pile of burning money.

"W-Wait—"

He grabs me by the back of the neck and stops my progress, bringing me close to him again.
Tapping his fingers against my face, he sighs and rolls his eyes, darting out his tongue to touch the corners of his mouth. One hand trails down my throat to the top of my sternum, where his carving starts. My breathing goes ragged.

"You know I'm not going anywhere, hmm?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. My head going light, I nod as I'm transported back to when I was laying on the ground in the Mayor's house. It feels like more than his grip is crushing me. "And you know, of course, that you aren't going anywhere, hmm?" He nods his head in quick jerks, no smile to soften his building frustration.

You know it's true. There's no escape for you. No chance at all.

"Yes." I hope it's enough, but it isn't. He waits for me to elaborate, holding me in place as the noises behind us grow louder. "Y-Yes, you... you won't leave me and I—I can't leave you."

The words burn my throat, and the glee on his face brings me physical pain. I want to look down—away, anywhere other than at him—but I know to do that would to be to invite his anger. Barely composed, I try to master my body's impulses to find somewhere to curl up and die. He seems satisfied with what I said, but the hard glint doesn't leave his expression. Releasing his grip, he leans in close to my ear.

"We're gonna get rolling soon, and I need you to be... ready to do your part, Miri." He says the words with a heavy significance and sinister smile. It's like he just poured ice water in my arteries, cooling me until my brain almost doesn't register his words as English.

No, he doesn't mean... no, no—

"W-What are you talking about?"

I have a sick feeling that I already know what he means, but I want to be wrong. He gives me a meaningful look, like what he said was obvious, and stares from me to the bubbling pot of oil. Desperation, nausea, and panic make me back away from him, shaking my head as I try to grapple what I know he's going to make me do anyway. Because I'm going to have to listen to him.

Try—convince him. Don't let him make you do this—

"No, no, no—I can't do that. Please, please don't make me do that—"

I'm still staring at the pot, imagining what will happen if that was poured on someone. It's enough for my vertigo to nearly knock me over. The Joker grabs me by the wrists, putting himself in my line of sight until my eyes focus back on him. He's seething, containing the lingering violence he's been so generous in sharing with everyone else.

"You still wanna be friends, don't you, Miri?" he asks, his voice low. He's biting the inside of his cheeks, mulling on them. The remnants of the fire make his eyes seem like living entities separate from his body and I can't look away. "Because you haven't really been acting like a friend."

There's danger there, I know there is. What he said about me is true—I do hurt people, I ruin them. I don't want to hurt anyone ever again—just fade back into an existence where I can be forgotten. Not being a friend—or whatever he wants me to be—means he'll do what he just did to all those others, what he did to me last night. I choke back the alarm that's telling me to drop and beg.

Keep trying—try to think. Try to breathe.

"Fr-Friends don't hurt each other," I finally manage to say.
I'm so quiet that I'm not sure he can hear me over the background noise, but the look in his eyes says he's listening with rapt attention. I swallow hard and, though it pains me, I gently move my hands out of his grip and lay my fingers on his exposed forearms. He draws back and his eyebrows rise, cocking his head to analyze me—see where I'm going with this.

"I—I don't want to hurt you, so why… why are you hurting me?"

I can't help it, the tears come again and the panic with it. I can't hold onto the thoughts and words long enough to reason my way out of this. It's slipping away to surrender, but the parts of me he didn't maim are pushing me on.

"Please don't… please don't make me do that. I-I'm begging you."

It's my last attempt at persuading him and one look at his face is enough to see it didn't work. Helplessness and frustration make me sob because there's nothing else I can do. He clicks his tongue, pulling me into a hug, and his chin rests on the top of my head as he sways us. The smell of gunpowder, blood, and death fill my nose, but I hold onto him because I have nothing else.

"You're still clinging to all these… limiters. That just won't do. This isn't how friends help each other out, sweetheart. I've been helping you, haven't I?" He sounds serious, but he can't keep out the mocking edge. You'd think he was talking to a difficult child, not making someone into a murderer. His voice drops a register to a growl—a mean one. "If you don't wanna be my friend anymore, then… well. There are several boys here who would just love to get… better acquainted with you."

I stand completely still as the threat settles in place, levelling new fears on me.

No, no, no—he… he wouldn't do that—oh, no—

"I—I'm sorry! That's—that's not what I meant—" I draw away from him, trying to show that level of malice isn't necessary. His face is hard, eyes drooped, and mouth set in a grim line. I panic in earnest. "I'm trying to help, I am—please, believe me—"

My own sobs choke me, and he stands there, unmoved. I grip his jacket hard and bury my head against his shoulder, trying to call back whatever part of him that's spared me from Zsasz. The hard muscles of his shoulders and sharp lines of his collarbone are prominent even through the thick fabric of his coat, but I don't care—I press myself entirely against him and hope it'll somehow help me.

"Oh, I believe you, Miriam," he says into my hair. His hand rubs my shoulders, fingers tracing down my spine to my lower back before resting there. I feel sick—sick with desperation and terror and revulsion and the need for reassurance. "I just don't think you're trying very hard. If you won't do it to save your own skin, then there's always, ah… Alfred."

You—you didn't hear him right. No way.

I know I did.

He still has Alfred.

In all the pain my head's been unable to see past, I forgot about Alfred. How he's out there, somewhere, probably in agony because of me. I pull back from the Joker and look at the burning remnants of the men in the ashen pile of money—how the smell of their boiled blood and fat sticks to my skin—and see the large swaths of dark red where they died. The Russian's corpse hasn't been dealt with yet. His skin and muscles have been torn apart in chunks—blood painting everything red
except for his white staring eyes. It's like they're still alive with fear, like they're still looking for help.

_That could happen to Alfred. The Joker could think of something worse._

The Joker said he could always be worse, and I believe him. I believe him more than I've ever believed in anything.

"Do you _really_ want that to be your fault, too?" he asks, his hand caressing the side of my face.

_He can't die—you can't let that happen. You deserve this—Alfred doesn't. You can't get away, but he still could._

Every part of me is battling itself—with the truth of what I am and the ingrained standards Mom always tried to have me embody. The fate of someone else and never myself fall on me again. Another area I've touched and ruined. Another existence I've tainted.

_It's all your fault. This is your fault._

A spike drives through the back of my skull, splitting it and unspooling what's left of me.

_"Why is this happening?"_ 

The pain is too much—my voice hoarse and distraught. The Joker finally lets me fall to my knees. I hold my head, trying to keep everything in as my breathing turns to ragged gasps.

"Oh, Miri, life seems just so… _random_, doesn't it?" He's close to me, dropped on his haunches to utter his poison in my ears. The world falls away like before, taking away the sound of the dogs licking their maws, the men implementing whatever infernal plan the Joker's devised. "You wanna know _why_ this is happening— _why_ poor, little ol' you is stuck here with a guy _like me._"

His fingers go in my hair, brushing it from my shoulders onto my back. He hums and giggles like my pain is part of some twisted comedy.

_"You're smart, Miri, you really are. There's a lot you understand, and yet so many of the… simple things escape you, hmm?"_

_What is he talking about?_

I don't want to, but I stop rocking and look at him. He seems so understanding again, like he really is trying to help me.

"If you were _smarter_, you'd have never met me! You'd never have done all this… _stupidity_ that's led you here. But you did. And now… well, can't change the past, Mir-cat." His eyes are wide and neck straight, taking on a demeanour of an innocent observer. He smacks his lips together and leans down, hand rubbing along my neck. "Look how the— the _random_ affects us, Miri. Look how the universe _fucked us both._" The pitch of his voice goes from sweet to a snarl, making me flinch back.

"I—I never wanted—never meant—"

"Do you think this was _part of any plan_? Do you think _any_ of this was _planned for_, Miriam?" he asks, pointing to his face, to the scars. His hands leave me and he gestures to his clothes—the ensemble that will always be ingrained in my memory—in an accusation. "_No, no it wasn't—but, y'know what, here we are._ Mommy dying and everyone _leaving_ you behind… that wasn't _planned_
for, either. You had no control—none of us do! And yet... fate brought us together—you and me. You have a, ah, part to play, and so do I. Sometimes, you just gotta do things—work with what's in front of ya."

Is that true?

There's nothing else—no other point of reference in front of me. Nothing in my life has made sense. Mom dying felt like a cruel punishment for a crime I didn't commit. Bruce leaving was an indictment against my soul—a grand show that I'd done something cosmically reprehensible in scale. What happened to Parker was a demonstration that there was something wrong with me all along, it just took time to manifest.

Maybe... maybe he's right.

All my attempts to control what happened in my life amounted to nothing.

You amounted to nothing. Was... was this meant to happen?

Emptiness has found me again, wrapping its arms around me to smother what's happening. The sensations I feel are distant and painful. I'm holding the Joker's hands, needing them to keep me from sinking. The tears have stopped, but the stifled ability to feel what's destroying me makes it impossible to think.

"See? You're understanding now, aren't you?"

His voice is so far away, but it's still there—the only thing that's real. I don't realize I'm nodding until the world tilts out from under me. He stops the motion with his hands, one side of his mouth curled up in a cruel smile.

"Good. Now, do try hard for me. Wouldn't wanna disappoint, ah, Alfred now, would we?"

I think I shake my head and, for once, it's enough. He leans in and kisses me quickly before springing to his feet and barking at his men—issuing out orders I can't interpret.

Why do you bother? Nothing's going to change—he's right. You can't get away from this. You can never get away.

"Get up, lady," someone says behind me.

I hear him, but I make no move to obey. With the emptiness my energy is sapped away, draining out with the remaining life in me.

Just... fade back. It doesn't matter. You don't matter. This isn't real.

My arm's brought upward, but I don't even feel the stitches being pulled as I did before. Hands go under my arms, dragging me as I feel laboured breaths being sucked in behind my head.

"Drop her there."

It doesn't matter.

Blinding white light makes me squint, but not care enough to twist away. When I'm set down, I move to lie on the floor—to find the sleep that could take all this away. I'm propped up again, calloused hands holding my neck and trying to make me lucid. I'm too tired to care. My mind found its limit a long time ago, and now it's been stretched too far.
None of it matters anymore.

Gentle tapping on my cheek turns biting, breaking through the haze.

"Hey." I blink hard and the Joker's in front of me again, looking annoyed. "Need ya awake for the next… thirty-three minutes. Can ya do that for me, sweet peach, or do I need to find another motivator?" There's menace in his eyes—an eagerness to hear me scream again.

"I… I can do that. I-I'm sorry," I say quietly.

He smiles and nods, but that same vicious savagery he used with the Russian is back on his face. It makes me afraid, and that fear is becoming the only thing to define what's left of my existence. Standing and twirling in a circle, he looks over to Davie with the tripod and the other man with the phone, twisting his hand in a motion to start whatever new horror show he's conceived.

Doesn't matter. They're just… blocks of moving colour. That's all.

The world takes on a strange glint of beauty when I think like that. All shades of yellows and grays, tones of earth and a comforting vision of the sleep I can look forward to. Voices, which were muffled murmurs, come back into focus with the realization that something's begun. The Joker's talking in a measured but booming pitch in its cadence, pulling me in like it's a lullaby even as it makes me lose all feeling in my limbs.

"Gotham, you've gotta learn how to… immerse yourselves. You've been taking a back seat—sitting with your feet propped up and fingers in the candy bowl watching the fireworks," he says, mocking and masking his sneer with a high sycophantic tone. He leans in close to the cameras as he shares his revelations. "I want you to start lighting them."

He walks in a circle around the pit, the cameras following him, aimed at his face. Every time he passes me, his fingers find my neck, making a fevered shiver break out along my skin.

"I had a vision of a world without Batman. The Mob's been working hard to bleed you dry and the police were working so diligently to shut them down, one block at a time. And then Batman… well, what's he managed to do?"

He speaks like each word is a dropped pebble in an endless lake, each distinct with its own emphasis.

It's like he practiced before.

The thought is a random one, something that doesn't ultimately matter. It just strikes me through the encroaching dark. I'm barely sitting up, my legs splayed underneath me. All I can manage focusing on is Joker's radiating energy.

"Some of our worst rapscallions are still running free! All their efforts, all their talk… it didn't really amount to much, did it? It's all just been so… boring." He gently smacks his lips together, his head twisting down toward his chest as his body slithers, encroaching on the camera as his voice drops a register. "You wanna be free, but you keep looking to someone else to do it for you. You wanna reap the rewards? Then you've gotta get your hands dirty."

The Joker stops moving, his body frozen mid-step. His face is static until his webbed scars stretch further up his face, twitching with amusement. Moving them in an exaggerated arc, his eyes land on the prisoner in the shaft.

"Victor Zsasz. Serial killer. Rapist. A terror that's plagued Gotham for over five years. Wave to the
camera, pal," the Joker says, giving Zsasz a wave of his own in a mocking salute. He's only answered with strangled screams of fury and he giggles in response, turning his eyes back to the cameras. "What did the police do when he was dicing up teenagers and leaving them in playgrounds? Where was Batman when he was preying on junior high girls?"

I see Parker standing just behind the Joker, blood dripping down his fingers and marking the steel floor. The cuts and burns stand out prominently, and the black ichor in his veins creeps up until it swallows him. His eyes are open and he's trying to say something, but it only comes out in the muffled rasps I heard as he struggled to breathe around the tube keeping his airways open in the hospital.

"Why didn't you help me?" Parker can't say it aloud, but I can hear it as well as I can hear the Joker. Accusations and hurt—confusion and a call for justice. That's what he wants. He needs to know why I failed him—why I'm considering failing him again.

The Joker's giving you an opportunity for vengeance.

The frying oil in front of me isn't boiling anymore, but the simmering heat still makes me sweat. Zsasz's hands still have a place of remembrance on my body—a permanent reminder of what he almost succeeded in doing. It's at it's strongest on my thighs and stomach—tightening around my throat. Burning anger and hate—like what I felt for Ivan, sometimes for Bruce, but, above all, what I've always felt for myself—rises and makes my bones hum.

"Nowhere."

You can make Zsasz pay for what happened to Parker.

The Joker's shoes fall heavy against the floor until he's standing right next to me. I'm busy staring at the yellow liquid, imagining the pain that would cause and revelling in it.

"As a bonus for today, and a celebration for over twenty thousand votes in yesterday's poll, I'm giving you something special, kids. Once in a lifetime chance to see the scum of the earth get what they deserve."

A gloved hand drops on my neck again, pulling my head up and making me sit straight. When I look, I see that the cameras are focused on him and me.

"Miri, here, was almost one of those victims, weren't you?" he asks me, eyebrows up. The ferocity—the eagerness to see what's about to happen—in his eyes paralyzes me with fear. "And now you have the means to give him a, ah—a taste of his own medicine."

The Joker's right behind me, his presence draining away even my anger. When I look up, I still see Parker standing there, his gangrenous leg bare and rotting. I think of the video—how Zsasz laughed as he tortured him. It conflates with the laughter of the men who nearly killed Parker the first time when we were teenagers. Every time I blink, I see the bats falling on him like I've gone back in time to relive my biggest failure. Parker's staring at me—urging me to do right by him—until the tears don't let me see anything anymore.

'You are my light, Miri.'

Did Mom really believe that? Was she as blind as I've always been?

'You have a good heart.'

She was wrong about that, too.
"Whaddya say, Miri?" the Joker asks, nudging me with his shoe.

I look from the oil to the camera and down the shaft. Zsasz's face is twisted in helpless anger. Fear's there, too. He knows what's going to happen. He's snarling, yelling out words like a rabid animal.

My hands go to the handles of the pot and grip it tight, shaking so hard I can barely control my fingers. The seconds pass by like they're an eternity, every eye is fixed on me, waiting. I know what the Joker looks like—urging me on to lower myself further, to indulge in an act of brutality he'd commit with a disconcerting casualness. I look to the oil, thinking of how what Zsasz will feel is only a fraction of what I've felt, how this is what will keep Alfred safe—how I can finally do right by Parker.

I want Zsasz to pay for what he did—to take out the aggression I've never been able to unleash on anyone who's hurt me. I have permission—I have the fucking reason to do it. Zsasz tortured Parker. He tried to rape and murder me. He's hurt dozens of others. He does deserve this. It's like the Joker said—he is an animal. He deserves to die.

'When you have nothing left to fight back with, endure.'

And yet, I don't want to hurt Zsasz—not like this.

A stifled sob makes my lips quiver. He'll be angry, but I can't do this, no matter what Zsasz has done. The Joker does have dominion over me, and I'm surrounded by the abundant evidence of his cruelty, but I can't let him have this. There is no escape. We might be tied to one another, and I might be complicit in everything else, but I won't do this.

Drawing my hands back, I'm about to look at him and tell him "no." Something happens that beats me to it. A foot connects with my lower back, making me fall forward and scramble to keep from falling down—grabbing onto the only thing in front of me. The pot of oil.

I scream when the metal burns me and the pot tips forward, dumping the contents down the narrow shaft on its waiting prisoner below. Zsasz's screams quickly deafen my own. He's shrieking, his voice going so high that it's an ear-splitting screech.

No, no, no, no, no—

I'm staring down, my shaking arms barely holding me up. Zsasz's skin is a tapestry of angry, glistening red welts. His skin is simultaneously sagging and taught, swelling as it strips away from the muscle and bone. It's bubbling, obscuring any trace of his scars until he looks like the skinned man from the arcade—pink and raw. He's still wailing, and I am too. Holding my hands close to my chest and screaming and crying, I wait for a quick death Zsasz will never have. He's collapsed as his skin peels away and he won't die.

"Shh, shh—" someone says in my ear, clapping a hand over my mouth and dragging me from the pit. It isn't the Joker, he's standing over the edge of the shaft and looking down with savage happiness. The voice is only vaguely familiar. "Just be quiet—it'll make it easier later, yeah? Don't wanna ruin the shot, we're live-streaming."

It's Davie who's holding me, dragging me back to the larger ring of gathered men. They're too busy to focus on me, their eyes are drawn to the Joker as he basks in his den of misery.

"You've been voting, and we've been providing the means in which you can finally take matters in your own hands. Rise up and get what's yours." His hands splay out for the camera to get a wider
shot of the unfolding carnage, taking in with sick fascination the morbid agonies found in this corner of hell in abundance. "But change is hard, isn't it? Sometimes, you just need a little… push. A shove to get the dominos going. But… I'm here to help."

I fight against Davie, trying to break out as everything around me shatters into slivers of pain that serve only to show how weak I am. Davie is small, but he has more hidden muscle than I do, and I'm so tired I can't even put up much of a fight. He responds by holding me tighter, trying to wrangle me in a position where he can keep me still, forcing me to watch what happens next.

"I'm releasing the names and last known locations of fifteen of Gotham's Most Wanted. You're not getting any help with those ones, the fun's all on you, on one itty bitty condition."

Zsasz's screams only serve as the symphony for the Joker's sermon. The remnants of the fire and smoke rise to awash the Joker in a glow of orange and red. He is the maestro of destruction, the one who's going to bring everything I've ever known crashing to the ground.

And I'm going to be the one to help him do it. There's no denying that—no matter how much I want to.

I'm in hell—I'm trapped in hell with the devil.

"I've had a, ah—ah change of heart about the city's resident man in black. Coleman Reese is slated to go live at five with the identity of the Batman. If Coleman Reese isn't dead by four-thirty or, ah, sixty-three minutes from now, then I blow up a hospital." Even with a threat of that magnitude, the Joker says it with a bone-chilling level of blasé disregard.

When the Joker asked me to give him access to HAVOC, I didn't ask him what he was targeting. Now I know. He might take credit for it, but I'm the one who's going to help make it happen.

I double over as my stomach twists and heaves. My chest is a series of quick spasms, not letting me take in air and making black spots eclipse my vision.

"Mr. Reese, I do hope you're watching this. There's always the option that you could kill yourself, but that would be the noble thing to do. And you're a lawyer!"

He laughs hysterically, drowning out the fading shrieks of a man who will only know pain for the rest of his miserable existence. The cameras drop and the men start to disperse around the hold, working away at some unknown task. The Joker goes over to look at the footage and nods in approval. I know what's coming and it's going to hurt. He's going to make me hurt. Alternating between laughing and cackling, he smacks his lips and turns to me. Panic overrides everything else.

"You can, ah, drop her now, Davie-boy. Don't want you getting too familiar," he says with a quick swipe of his tongue across his lips. Davie obeys immediately, dropping me without caring if I land on my feet. Hitting my knees, I try to catch my breath as my lungs seem to shrink. "Got a lot of room for… improvement, don't we?"

His shoes stop right in front of my face and I whimper, curling in on myself and trying to disappear into the floor.

Was it worth it, Miri? Pretending to be better than you are?

I close my eyes when he moves, cringing—expecting his knife to find somewhere new to bury itself in me.
"That was hard, wasn't it?" he asks. His hand goes to my back, stroking along my spine and pulling the hair back from my face. "Hmm? You can be honest with me, Mir-cat. I'm a friend, remember?"

Exhaustion replaces fear. I want to sleep, to get away from the whimpering pain of Zsasz—the mound of half-burned corpses—the sea of red.

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry..." I choked out. He must be angry; I know he must be. My whimpers match Zsasz's. The Joker keeps waiting for me to answer him properly, his patience only serving to make him more terrifying. "I—yes... it—it was h-hard."

He says nothing for a moment, only his head twisting to the side. His lips curl back in a cruel grin.

"Mmm-hmm."

He grabs me by the biceps and pulls me to my feet like I'm weightless, hauling me back toward the shaft and forcing me to look down by gripping the nape of my neck in a vise. I cry out, trying to protest, but he makes me look at Zsasz—how he's sitting a pool of oil and his own blood and skin. I scream, but I don't have the energy to keep it up for long. He shakes me like he's about to drop me in there with him.

"I'm trying to be, ah, patient with you, Miri, I really am. Just when I think you're starting to understand—" He presses me down further, making me breathe in the perspiration, smoke, and the lingering smell of boiled fat. "What do you think is left for you? Huh?"

"Please—please, I'm sorry—"

"You were just on national television frying a guy like some battered calamari! You have nobody —no one! Who could ever want ya now, hmm?" Pulling me back, he throws me to the ground.

He's right—he's right he's right—

It doesn't matter if I intended it or not—Zsasz looks like that because of me. I did that. Me.

I curl on my side, trying to get up and failing. There's no strength left in me at all. Just like everything else, what I do is meaningless. It just drags out the suffering.

You don't matter—you're a curse. A blight.

The Joker leans down over me, his lips forming a quiet snarl. What's coming out of my mouth doesn't make sense—nothing in my head makes sense anymore—but I think I'm begging. It's a pressing weight that stops my thoughts from working. His fingers go to the blouse that's too big for me—an article of clothing that likely belongs to someone he's already killed—and he undoes the first three buttons. I know better than to scream, but I do anyway—unable to do anything else to stop whatever he's decided on.

Someone help me, please—

I can't say the words aloud because there's no one here who cares. He slaps a hand over my mouth and glares. I try twisting away, but all I see is the rest of his men watching in sick fascination—tuning in to see what godawful horror they're about to witness. The Joker's threat about leaving me to his men slams back in my head and I sob, trying to hold out my hands in clemency.

"What did I tell you, Miri? Hmm?" he demands. The buttons are only undone midway between my breasts, exposing the large gash he made to the cold air. He touches the edge of it, his fingers going deeper in my shirt to trace the curve of the 'j'. "What did I tell you?"
You're not going anywhere—you're trapped. You... you don't mean anything now. Nothing. All you do is hurt people—just like he does.

I'm still sobbing when he takes his hand away, but I know what he's asking. It feels truer now—more like my permanent reality. He's the only reason I'm not dead—he's the only thing keeping me alive now. I thought I wanted to die, but I know what that looks like now. I don't want that, even if that means my tie to him only grows stronger.

"Y-You... you o-own me," I choke.

He smiles and the anger evaporates. His hands going to my neck, he leans down further as something integral in me breaks.

"That's right, sweetheart. I own you."

His lips hover near mine, and it feels like I was the one doused in oil—my skin burns and ripples, shuddering as it feels like my body's shutting down. He lets out a loud sigh, his eyes going over my head to glare before returning to me with that false sweetness, and his finger plays with my shaking bottom lip.

"What do you deserve?" he asks.

"T-This... I—I deserve this." My answer is automatic and genuine.

You deserve this because you don't matter.

He squints and twists his head to the side, and his fingers trace down my neck to my chest, creating small patterns against the skin above my heart.

"You've got a good heart, don't you, Miri? But where's that gotten you, hmm?" he asks, imploring me with a sincerity that lulls me back, pressing the pain down until it's a dull ache. "They don't deserve it—none of them do. It's only brought you pain. Just let it go. Let it all go." He's gesturing around the room, at the world.

He's right.

"Let it... let it go...?"

He... he is right. Just... let it go.

He nods his head emphatically, his excitement growing. I nod along, pushing everything away until the only sensory information I really experience is what's coming through my heavy eyes.

"You're tired, aren't you?" The enervation compounds when he points it out, and I feel the rest of the life in me draining. "Just wanna sleep, I bet."

I somehow nod and he smiles so... so kindly at me. He leans in and kisses me, gentle and sweet, and it makes my eyes heavy. I want to disappear.

Nothing matters.

He pulls me to my feet and it almost seems like he's going to carry me. One last look down the shaft at Zsasz brings something back up—no matter how much I want to shove it down.

"Don't—please don't leave him... leave him like that," I force out. The Joker snaps his head around to look at me incredulously. The words hurt coming out of my throat, and I don't know why I keep
going. "He… no one should—not like that."

Emotion breaks my voice, and I don't know why I bothered saying it to begin with. Zsasz does deserve it—but... everyone deserves that small mercy—to not be left to suffer like that. It's a grace I'd want to be extended to me, and I don't know why it's the one thing that seems to matter right now.

"Like I said, sweetheart," the Joker says, pulling out his gun from his side holster, "*no one* deserves what you're tryin' to give. *No one.*"

The Joker aims and fires. I jerk and clutch my stomach, thinking he shot me—but a groan and pained whimper coming from below snap me out of it. He shot Zsasz in the stomach, a bright spigot of red budding from his chest to run down his legs. He looks up at me with what's left of his good eye—and the brown that brought so much fear and pain only invoke a deep feeling of pity. He's quiet now—leaving the hold of the ship silent except for the hollow shells disguised as people temporarily inhabiting it. His death won't be quick, but at least he'll bleed out. His life has an endpoint—not a continuous agony.

*That's more than what you'll get.*

When I slump over, I don't remember moving or the feeling of anyone touching me anymore. I'm just seeing Parker standing above me. His eyes are hard and angry. He's disappointed in me—furious that his vengeance came on accident, that it wasn't really done for him at all. No tears come this time because there's nothing left.

*Where... where am I? Why is Parker here?*

"C'mon, do this *right* and you'll get to sleep for a little while, hmm?"

I don't remember sitting, but I almost fall to the ground when I'm slapped hard enough to crack my head to the side. When my vision clears, I see my laptop sitting on a table in front of me—turned on and set to the login screen.

*No getting away. You said you'd do it, and you said you wouldn't lie anymore.*

My head hurts, pounding behind my eyes—but what's coming will be worse. A hand rubs my cheek where it still stings, and I look around and find the Joker crouched next to me, his eyes intent. He doesn't need to do anything else, I know what he wants. I've let everyone down. Everyone.

*But not Alfred. You can still try to help Alfred.*

It almost doesn't seem worth the effort anymore—nothing does—but Alfred's done too much for me to give up completely.

*I just want to sleep...*

The world just becomes those blocks of colours again—the beautiful spectrum of light and shadow that doesn't have any meaning. It makes it easier—makes the distance I force on myself as I think back to when I was a child—when Mom was there and so was Alfred. They're holding my hands, telling me I'll be alright.

*Just... just get it over with.*

With heavy hands, I pull the laptop closer to me and start typing. The Joker alternates from staring
at me to the screen, making sure I'm doing what I said I would. When I started working for Lucius, I didn't have access to Titan Industries' servers and networks. I promised him that I wouldn't mess with Wayne Enterprises' systems, that I would work strictly within his established purview. That was all true—I did do those things, but I didn't consider anyone we did business to be part of that. Titan Industries is a private military contracting group that works closely with the U.S. Army, but they're also guns for hire abroad, working with any government not directly opposed to ours. I was worried about the project—how they would use it, and so I did what I always do—created a backdoor for myself to watch and meddle.

Titan Industries took project PRESERVE, which was a UAV for conservation and research, and made it into a stealth drone. Made with signal-absorbing materials, it's barely perceptible on radar sensors—the angles of its design making it almost impossible to see in the air or on the ground. It was the perfect aircraft for surveillance on enemy combatants. It was also modified to have enough missile-fuelled firepower to level several large buildings.

They renamed it HAVOC because its purpose was to be the embodiment of its namesake—they're meant to spread as much destruction as possible with fire and fury.

I can't even find the energy to be angry with myself. The extent of my fuck-up is obvious—it doesn't require further explanation. If I'd been able to guess this is what the Joker wanted in the beginning—if I didn't trust Parker as much as I did—

No. If you weren't stupid enough to put yourself in these positions, to begin with. It's all your fault. All of this.

The Joker is correct. I deserve this—this is my fault—and more people will be hurt because I didn't have the power or foresight to stop any of it before it was too late.

It's on you because you're weak. Always have been, always will be.

With the tears returning, I pull up the screen I was looking for—the one that shows where the drones are. The Joker grows giddy, throwing an arm over me and leaning to peek at the screen. He whistles and gives me a hard jostle.

"Wow, would ya look at that."

He leans forward, counting how many are active. There's five of them still in the country at Titan Industries HQ, a four drive but less than an hour's flight—all sitting ready to be activated with a few commands. That was the benefit of the autonomous flight component, the one I fixed—you could plug in the coordinates and operate one with relatively limited equipment. Like a highly specialized laptop.

"It just… just need the coordinates." I sound defeated because I am. Resignation envelops me as the rest of my mind breaks apart—replaying scenes of violence with every bad memory until they're all that's left.

He starts typing and hits the command key, bringing the drones online. The Joker made me outline everything already. He has about thirty minutes before they realize something's wrong and then whatever else he has planned will be a moot point. He points to the screen, leaving small traces of blood.

"Need ya to get the other ones up and ready to fire, sweet peach," he says. When I almost fall over, he rights me, pressing his forehead against mine. I close my eyes and swallow, but he shakes me hard.
"They'll... they'll be in the air, but I... I need access to... Wayne Enterprises for the others. I-I'm sorry, I can't do anything else. I can't do... do what you want."

I really can't. One of them can be controlled through my computer, but to do more and to override any outside interference in any capacity, we'd need to be using the terminals found in the new Research and Development labs—a small offshoot attached to Wayne Enterprises. I close my eyes, trying to find rest from the unrelenting nightmare. Everything's taken on an unreal quality—like this isn't really my life, only a vivid dream that I still have a chance of waking up from.

The Joker twists his head to the side and laughs, but there's no trace of indiscriminate mocking. He genuinely thinks what I've said is funny. My brows furrow together as my sight blurs. He cups my jaw in his hands and kisses me hard, leaving a warm line of makeup on my face. I don't even have the energy to wipe it off.

"Where do you think you're going next?"

Chapter End Notes

Greetings! Thank you for everyone (again!) who's been so kind to leave a review and let me know what you think of the story. It means so much to me and it's a great feeling to know that I'm doing something right with this story. Thank you all for being so great and I sincerely hope you're enjoying this twisted mess of mine!

I'm gonna repeat what I said in the last chapter: While I did do extensive research on the various elements I use in this fic, there are obviously things I will get wrong because I am by no means an expert. I'd be grateful if someone pointed out any glaring errors, but otherwise I will do the cliche magic eraser technique of Hollywood and say 'it's all part of the story and it's fiction, work with me here.' (I mean this in the cheekiest way possible.)
"Da-da-dum, da-da-dum, ba-da-da—"

The Joker was beyond elated, and he just had to sing about it.

If we're being technical, it's more of a hum. Can't have them coming at me too early now, can I?

He was waiting in a large storage room with slatted blinds, peeking out and watching the doctors frantically evacuate their patients into the dozens of buses waiting outside. Nobody noticed one more soul—a generous term for a guy like me—flitting through the hall, working against the current like a salmon going upstream. Gotham General was in absolute chaos and it was the type of pandemonium he found glory in.

Almost wish I brought a camera. Kodak moment if I ever saw one.

But how do you capture chaos?

That's the beauty of it. It's all about the moment.

Police officers were there, too—scurrying about and trying to maintain order. It was laughable. They could feel the panic and were trying their best not to indulge, even as it coiled around their feet and worked its way up to their throats. The Joker bit the inside of his cheek, tongue caressing along the corded ridges, and tried not to let his hums escalate into a burst of hysterical laughter.

The Joker was wearing plain clothes, a nice average pair of jeans and your basic Joe's hoodie with the said hood pulled far over his head to hide the mess of green hair. He made Thresh strip when they arrived at the hospital. The guy was probably still sitting there in nothing but his briefs with an M16 perched on his lap. But the Joker didn't laugh at him, and that meant no one else could, either. Thresh took it with a surprising dignity, despite his pale chicken legs, and the Joker was all about rewarding good behaviour.

Killing morons en masse caused him to work up a sweat, and he had to keep pushing the now-greasy strands out of his eyes. He'd pre-emptively taken off his shoes in the ride over and his socked feet, which were decorated in a green series of interlocking patches, were doing a jittery dance as he waited.

Think a party was happening with all that stripping happening at the back of the bus. Woulda done a strip tease for Miri if she hadn't passed out. Real party pooper, that one.

He couldn't really blame her for that—well, not entirely, anyway—he'd done a bit of a doozy on her. Had to be careful now or her poor heart would give out. Couldn't have that happen. Pain is all about building up tolerance. Her's was already high—relatively—and the Joker was helping her toughen up.

Really, I am. Can't survive the madness of the world without a good dose of crazy yourself.

The Joker was sure she'd thank him later. He knew he was thankful—sometimes—for what ignited his transformation into what he became. At least, he'd never regretted anything that happened to him. He was thankful, and she would be, too. Grateful to him.
And I know just how I'd like her to thank me.

He didn't always think of himself as being singular, but he was always eager to enact certain conditions that would produce similar and intriguing results. Miriam's transformation was bound to be the latter—one's descent into madness always was—but he was waiting to see what the outcome would be.

Either way, it's a show worth watching. All the better when you're the ringmaster.

There was no remorse in his reflections, just the thoughtful consideration about whether she'd have the energy needed to see Phase Three through. It was the most important part of all this, really. The Joker was putting a lot of faith in Miriam and his own abilities to crush her sense of ego. She was coming along nicely, already becoming so compliant. He'd turned it around on her to push her mind a little further when she failed to willingly baste Zsasz like a Thanksgiving turkey, but he was actually excited that she'd resisted what he wanted. Yes, it also incensed him—but it meant she was stronger than he thought she was. Meant he had to try harder, but it also meant she was a challenge worth pursuing.

Rare find, that. She doesn't even need to dress up in a lycra suit to make it happen, unlike her apparent bestie in brooding black.

The thought of Miriam in a leather catsuit was one that confused him—it's fucking distracting, is what that is—and he gave himself a shake. He'd already seen her naked—mostly to make her incredibly vulnerable and show her she had nothing to hide that he couldn't find, but something else found him there and it made him feel murderous.

Thinking about how she looked at him in the bathtub tickled his skin. It was like when she was back on the ship—unafraid and eager to hang onto him. At first, he thought it was the enlivening sense of utter control he had over her that made him stir, but that wasn't it entirely. He'd be the first to admit that he was a being of contradictions—sometimes embodying juxtaposing qualities simultaneously—and it was never something he questioned before. But he was now, and he found himself in a place of indecision.

Stop thinkin' about it or you're gonna go on a rampage.

The Joker didn't like losing control—we've established this—and so what was happening underneath all his careful planning was grating to the point he felt like murdering the next sorry-sob he saw or sticking a knife in Miriam's heart and holding her until it stopped beating.

All good options. All of them piss me off.

Making his eyes focus on the happenings in the hall, he waited for an opportunity he wasn't even sure would present itself in the way he needed. As much as he tried to fight it, he couldn't help his line of thoughts. His mind slipped back to her.

He knew she was just as drawn to him as he was to her; she just had too much in her head to keep her from seeing it. A small shiver ran down his back and he let out a low growl when he kept thinking about her too much. It was infuriating, really. She had a clear purpose, a use like every other toy—and that's what she is, a toy—in his repertoire, but the way she was worming her way into his brain left him with a burgeoning sense of conflict. The Joker never took kindly to that—not even a little bit—

Not even at all.
Usually, that was a signal he had to excise the unnecessary tumors sticking to him, but even that didn't seem like a satisfying solution. It wasn't something he really wanted to do. Torment her in ways that blurred the lines between foreplay and torture—most definitely, I like seeing my puppets dance—permanently alter her sense of self until she didn't recognize herself in the mirror while he saw the truth of her goddamn soul—absolutely. He didn't carve his claim on her just for shit's and giggles—there was a clear purpose in that, a forced invitation to be tied to him forever.

*How long 'forever' lasts for her is an entirely different problem.*

Those were all things he wanted, but the twitches in his groin were *distracting* and he couldn't have distractions. Not when the stakes were this high.

*Then don't think about it, you schmuck.*

The Joker's mind turned back to his favourite play pal—the one he still needed to work on breaking entirely. And, to be fair with himself, he *desperately* wanted to leave a similar mark of remembrance on Batman that he'd carved onto Miriam.

*Preferably on his face. Like to see him be anything else after that.*

The Joker was counting on Batman putting up a good show of resistance, and he was excited to see what tricks Bat-Boy would pull out, but he knew there wasn't anything he could do to stop Gotham from tearing herself apart. The Joker was going to show Batman that he'd been fighting for the wrong things all along. Can't fix a problem that will only perpetuate itself until the cosmos snuffed out humanity from existence. The only real solution is to *indulge.* No sense in fighting in what you can't change.

*Who knows, maybe he'll thank me for that, too.*

Batman would give him the showdown of the ages that the Joker craved, and he knew Batman wouldn't go down quietly.

*That's what makes it fun.*

The Joker was almost disappointed he wouldn't be able to see Batman's face as Gotham burned and the citizens tore themselves asunder, but he'd make a point of finding him in the aftermath. The Joker had been saving his ultimate question for Miriam until he was about to kill her, but now he didn't think he ever wanted to know it at all.

*No one's ever accused me of being a killjoy. Wouldn't want to start now, would I?*

The Joker wasn't a big believer in the idea of *fate,* but he was starting to see a larger path ahead than he originally estimated. Destiny was showing him the way, and he'd be damned if he made any *hasty* decisions that would circumvent what lay at the end.

"Prep her with the other ICU patients—she needs to be in Dr. Helms' bus and sent to Trenton."

The Joker snapped his head up and blinked away the twirling thoughts getting away from him. He'd let himself get too distracted; didn't pay close enough attention. A *zing* of anger shot down his spine as a red-headed nurse put her hand on the door handle, shouting down to some unknown idiot down the hallway. When the Joker quickly looked, he saw that most of the people were gone, only a few left running back and forth with supplies. Twisting to the side, the Joker hid by the edge of the doorframe.
Was waiting for an opportunity, looks like it's coming a 'knocking. Well, almost.

When the nurse opened the door, the Joker sprang on her. Smacking a hand over her mouth and pulling out his silenced Glock 18, he held it to her head and spoke quietly in her ear as the door closed with a soft click.

"If ya don't want the walls to match the colour of your, ah, hair, then it would be smart if you said nothin' at all. Ya get me?" he asked, pressing the barrel of the gun harder against her head for emphasis.

She let out muffled exclamations of agreement, nodding as much as she dared. The Joker felt confident—with the whole bomb threat debacle—she'd be smart enough to not delay him more than necessary. Letting go and shoving her away from him, he stared at the white uniform—a dress and pink cardigan—she was wearing and cocked his head to the side.

*That would do nicely. Looks like just my size.*

The woman, terrified and ready to faint at the sight of the scars and full face of makeup, held her hands up and shook like a paper napkin in the wind. She was older, in her early fifties at least, and the Joker stared at the small details that made up the dress. The edges of pink on the dress complimented the cardigan she wore; everything was crisp and clean—probably freshly ironed; the white belt cinching her plump waist in an attempt to give the formless dress a shape; a little pin on her lapel showed a date to commemorate her years of service. The Joker smacked his lips together.

*Perfect.*

"I'm gonna need that," he said, motioning to her outfit with his raised gun. The woman looked just about ready to piss herself and the Joker tried not to laugh at her.

*That would just be rude. She's old enough to be my ma... I think.*

"W-Wha—"

"Now, preferably," he snapped, his impatience growing. He was still mad about what was preoccupying his mind earlier, and impatience certainly never made him *kind.*

*By golly, ya don't say?*

The nurse responded with a reaction he hadn't entirely thought about. She scurried to cover her chest with her arms and shook in terror. The Joker resisted the urge to facepalm himself and settled for sighing and rolling his eyes.

*Ask a lady to strip and you'd think the world was ending.*

He failed to keep back the giggle that bubbled up, but he checked himself when she looked close to tears.

*Always their first thought, isn't it? I mean, can't blame 'em, but still. It's almost insulting after a while. Christ.*

"I'm sure you'd have some interesting tricks up your sleeve, you dirty bird, but I am, ah, strictly—and decidedly—disinterested, lady." She was still petrified, didn't even laugh at his joke, and made no motion to move. The Joker sighed again and rolled his eyes so hard he was almost certain they'd pop out of his skull. "If it makes you, ah... *feel* better, I'm already spoken for. I've got a girlfriend. Kind of."
The Joker burst out laughing, tears springing to his eyes and making him double over, holding his gut as he tried to keep the volume down. He was imagining Miriam's face if he'd said that around her when she'd seen better days. The righteous indignation would have been hilarious. It wasn't technically true—always go for the technical, kid—but he knew more about her than most people did about their partners after fifty years of marriage. It seemed appropriate, but the nurse only looked increasingly horrified. He straightened and wiped at his eyes gingerly, letting out a scoff of frustration.

Can't she tell I'm on a tight deadline? People these days.

"Oh my—fine. Fine, fine, fine. I'll turn around, that make ya happy?" he asked. Of all the options he was presenting her, that one seemed the most preferable. She nodded and lowered her arms, casting her eyes down as she waited. He was about to turn around when a thought struck him. "Smack me with a bedpan and I'll have to do ya one better, nurse."

The glare he gave her would have melted hardened wax and she nodded faster, spluttering but not forming any words. The Joker was good at reading people, and he could tell she meant it without her having to spit it out.

Probably has little grandkids to think about. Good. Collateral damage is the best kind of incentive.

Mayor Anthony Garcia learned that the hard way, and he hoped—for her sake, of course—that he didn't need to teach her that lesson.

There was a shelf next to him stacked with hospital gowns. He grabbed one and threw it at her over his shoulder. He could be a gentleman. When he felt like it.

Turning to face the wall, the Joker heard the sounds of her undressing: the cardigan first, soft fabric rustling together; the clinking of the belt and the small, metallic taps of it hitting the tiled floor, the starched rubbing of the dress as it was unbuttoned and pulled over her head. He waited, rather patiently, for her to put on the gown.

"You decent now?" he asked after her movements were reduced to her shifting her weight.

"Y-Yes," she replied. Her voice was craggy, probably a long-time smoker—reminds me how much I want one—but the Joker was surprised at how calm she managed to be. He could respect that.

"Swell." The Joker did a twirl and started stripping off his clothes in a flurry. It wasn't until the hoodie was half pulled over his head, just his eyes peeking through the opening, that he remembered she was still in the room. "You can, ah, leave anytime, lady. Unless, of course, ya wanna watch the show." The words sounded teasing, but his face was deadpan. Wasn't much of an invitation at all, but—you never know—people could surprise you.

She started for a moment, opening her mouth as if to say something and making the Joker think he was about to have a good laugh, but she shut it quickly and hurried toward the exit, watching him all the while.

"Suit yourself," he said, his voice back to a playful singsong. He was about to go back to flinging his clothes on the ground when a thought hit him. "You can leave those."

"E-Excuse me?" she asked, stunned by the sudden question.

"Shoes. Leave 'em," he said, nodding to the white pair of crocs on her feet.

Too flabbergasted as to why anyone would want her shoes, she slipped them quickly off her feet
and edged toward the exit. The Joker could see no one was left in the hospital. The idea of killing her did cross his mind, but he decided against it. She was very helpful after all.

"Ta-ta for now, ma'am."

The Joker failed to keep the tone of snide niceties out of his voice, and he laughed to himself when she comically tried to keep the gown closed around herself. He was honestly surprised she didn't scream—probably would've shot her if she did—but she stayed silent and only occasionally glanced back to make sure he wouldn't follow. The Joker wasn't worried about her anymore.

Probably brightened her day right up.

He kept laughing as he quickly stripped, checking his watch for the time as he pulled the kindly given clothing on.

Got about twenty-eight minutes.

Could he break Harvey Dent by then—turn him to his purpose before Denta-bone got a little bit extra crispy?

Why is that even a question?

The Joker gave his lips a quick lick and cracked his neck. He lived for the challenge, and he was confident Harvey wouldn't be much of one at all. He reached down into the small bag at his feet and rifled through it. Several seemingly random items lay inside: a few different wigs, handcuffs, gag toys, the revolver Miriam inadvertently gifted him at the arcade, a granola bar—never know when you're feeling snacky—and a large bundle of campaign stickers he'd appropriated from an officer's home. That was when he—

Don't have time for that, kid.

The Joker pulled out a red wig and forced his greasy and matted hair away from his face to the back of his head. With a practiced hand, he pulled the wig on and adjusted it, getting the bangs to sit just so and ensure that none of his offending green locks were peeking through. He was about to walk out of the room when something he'd missed caught his eye. When he bent down to examine it, he almost let out a whoop of laughter.

It was Rachel Dawes' medical chart.

He picked it up to closely examine the list of injuries. Shattered left leg, extensive nerve damage to her right hand, burns covering over thirty percent of her body, blinded in one eye, and brain swelling from part of the building collapsing on her that required keeping her sedated until they could reduce it enough to wake her up. She'd need reconstructive surgeries, skin grafts, and would be permanently marked on nearly every part of her skin. The Joker was surprised she survived. Any lesser meat-sack would have died on the scene. He felt something near admiration for her. Her injuries were extensive enough that staying alive was a matter of choice. He didn't know if he should laugh, but he did anyway.

Batman could have saved everyone a little trouble. Maybe this'll teach him to stop bringing people into this little game of ours.

The Joker didn't seriously think that Batman would ever learn those lessons. Batman still had a soul, and that meant—at some point down the line—Batman would keep people in his life. And that meant the Joker had an extra reason to stay intertwined with him—help Batman sort through what made him strong and what only brought him down.
None of these people can see clearly. They're living in a fog, and I'll drag 'em out of it by the hair.

He smacked his lips together and recalibrated how he was going to handle Harvey. So many spontaneous opportunities were being dolled out at his feet, and he'd be foolish not to take advantage of them.

And, as we've also established, I'm no fool.

Holding the chart and doing a very prim and proper walk down the hall, the Joker donned the last bit he needed for his disguise—a simple medical mask to hide the red slash across his face. The only finishing detail—always gotta show off that sense of irony—he needed was added when he slapped on an "I Believe in Harvey Dent" campaign sticker on his right side, just above his wristwatch hanging from the dress pocket.

Straggling doctors whipped by the Joker, not caring to notice the black pits for eyes staring out past the red bob. It was funny how fear—literally and figuratively—blinded people. To him, it only served to make him see everything so much clearer.

He didn't know specifically what room Dent was in, but he knew he hadn't been brought out yet. That meant he just had to look—yeah, that's how peepers work, kid—for him and begin the first and final match with Harvey. By the time the Joker was done with him, Harvey would be down for the count in every way that mattered.

"Ba-da-da-dee, ba-da-da-dum—"

The Joker was humming again, getting louder as he tried not to skip.

Like this dress. So—so freeing. Wonder if I shouldn't wear these more often.

He was caught thinking about whether it'd be worth his time to get Miriam and himself matching dresses when he found what he was looking for. Harvey Dent lying peacefully in his hospital bed. Likely sedated. Definitely a ticking time bomb—kinda like this place will be if you don't hurry up—and certainly ready for a heart to heart.

The Joker stopped at the side of Harvey's bed and stared at the disfigured man in front of him. Half of Harvey's face was still intact: pristine and statuesque—like a marble carving of the Caesars of old. The Joker didn't trust what people looked like on the outside, and Harvey was by all appearances the model of trust—a handsome man with a chin you could rely on. It's what signalled to the Joker that Harvey had a lot to hide, and even more to lose. That's what made people dangerous—you take away everything they have, and when they're sitting in the vast space of emptiness, that's when the truth roams free.

The other half of Harvey's face was the truth. It's what interested the Joker the most. He stared, fascinated, at the burns. Harvey's skin was charred, blackened like crusted ash overtop layers of tender pink. Harvey's left eye was missing—the soft jelly melted down in the heat of the blaze that scorched a perfect dividing line down his face. A blackened hole remained, and the tendons in his cheeks and throat were exposed. It all made the Joker want to reach out and touch them, to see what skin felt like after going through that kind of trauma.

Wonder what Miri's skin would feel like if I burned it…

"Ma'am, we're going to have to move him now."

The Joker had just begun to read Harvey's chart, why he was tied to the bed, and he froze in surprise. He didn't turn around, but he raised his gun to his chest. It was one of the officers meant
to guard Harvey's room—*did a real bang-up job on that one*—and he would've done better to have stayed outside for a while.

*Oh well. Can't help everything.*

"Ma'am?"

The Joker turned around and shot the officer in the chest. The muffled shot and casing hitting the ground were the only sounds until the officer dropped. He didn't even bother looking at the man's face, how old he was—if he really was much of a threat. The Joker was done with distractions, and sparing a cop wasn't exactly on his *to-do* list. He'd done worse to so many others. This guy had the fortune of dying quickly.

*Cops know what they're signing up for when they take their oaths. They wanna carry a gun, they get the benefits and the hazards.*

Though, having a hazard like the Joker listed under any job description would dissuade just about anyone from taking it.

*That's what makes Batman so… special. He's basically asking for all this, really.*

Miriam wasn't technically part of the game, but she'd inserted herself in the sphere of *dangerous* possibilities the minute she picked up her laptop and started looking at things she should never have touched. She really *was* just asking for something to happen. If it wasn't the Joker, something else would have happened down the line.

*Curiosity kills the Mir-cat.*

But satisfaction could bring her back—markedly different than before, of course—but changed, nevertheless. She just doesn't know what that looks like.

*Not yet.*

"Showtime," the Joker muttered to himself, giving his head a roll.

Pressing a button on the side of Harvey's bed, the Joker started humming again as Harvey was sat up and began blinking his eyes lazily. When the sedatives faded, the Joker slowly peeled off his medical mask, revealing an innocent grin. Harvey said nothing, but he unleashed incoherent and frothy snarls, snapping his body forward—ready to tear apart the Joker in rage. His nostrils flared as a rush of air came out of his mouth in a venomous *hiss*. He was denied any chance of retribution. The doctors had done some of the Joker's work for him; Harvey was strapped to the bed with no way to undo his bindings.

Sitting down and adjusting himself, the Joker gave Harvey a toothy smile.

"*Hi.*"

The simplicity of the greeting enraged Harvey. He was grunting and growling, straining hard but ultimately going nowhere. He sat back and stared, rivalling any glare the Joker could make, with blind hatred and vitriolic malice. The Joker was calm where Harvey was anger personified. He looked ready to set the Joker on fire himself, more than willing to kill him and watch him die in agony.

*It's almost… delicious—his bloodlust. Let the game begin.*
Harvey was already primed and ready, he just needed to be aimed. And the Joker was only too glad to do it.

"I don't want there to be any hard feelings between us, Harvey." The Joker pulled off the red wig on his head, scratching at his scalp and pulling at the tangled strands to fall back in their usual mess around his head. He was being purposely blasé and overly casual. It would only heighten whatever it was Harvey was feeling. "When you and, uh—"

"RACHEL!" Harvey screamed at a pitch that sent a shiver of pleasure down the Joker's spine. He liked Harvey when he didn't hold back all the ugliness he was hiding all along. The Joker put his hands out as if to calm down the man, acting like a startled cat, and he kept his voice airy and light.

"—Rachel were being abducted, I was sitting in Gordon's cage." He made emphatic gestures with his hands, punctuating his words and amplifying the jittery nature people noticed in him. Made it easier to lull them into thinking he had no control over himself or his thoughts. He pressed his fingers to his chest, tilting forward. "Now, I didn't rig those charges."

"Your men. Your plan," Harvey snarled.

The guy's got fire, I'll give him that.

A fit of giggles almost exploded out of him, but he kept it in a tight check, the only giveaway being a twitch of his eyelid. Harvey's reactions only reaffirmed that the Joker made all the right choices that led them here. Chaos might be random, but that seraphim lady seemed to be on his side.

"Do I really look like a guy with a plan, Harvey?" It was a rhetorical question with a seemingly obvious answer. The Joker looked like a walking, talking, breathing definition of clinical insanity—I'm wearing a pair of crocs, don't get much crazier than that—but that was a surface judgement.

And we know how I feel about those.

People like Harvey lost because they couldn't see what was beyond them, couldn't peek past the veil. The Joker could, and he'd exploit all those who were too weak to get on his level.

"I don't have a plan… the Mob has plans, the cops have plans." That's the thing about aporia—it's about sowing the seeds of doubt. Make them question their assumptions and the house comes tumbling down. "Harvey, y'know what I am?"

The Joker wasn't really expecting an answer. Harvey was still glaring; a captive audience, of sorts. He could see Harvey fantasizing a thousand different—and increasingly imaginative—ways to murder the Joker, and he was almost tempted to let Harvey try some just to see what it'd be like.

No, no, no—focus.

"I'm just a—a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to—to do with one if I caught it! Y'know, I just… do things," the Joker said, sweeping his hands from him in large motions as if it illustrated how he went through life like he was a living version of a stream of consciousness novel—just add horrifying amounts of violence. "I'm the wrench in the gears. I hate plans. Yours, theirs—everybody's."

That's another thing about aporia, it works especially well if you're not interrupted. Harvey was being a good listener; the Joker liked that. Despite himself, Harvey stopped straining and was actually leaning toward the Joker, showing his interest. He might be able to gut a man like a rainbow trout, but the Joker's true power lay in being able to read others—and his ability to exploit what he saw. Harvey was an easy target—he put too many eggs in one basket. The Joker had
managed to capture Harvey's attention in just a few sentences.

*That's 'cause it's not really true. Not entirely, anyway.*

"*Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Bu-t, you knew that already, didn't you? You've seen it.*"

The Joker was building off assumptions and generalities, looking to Harvey's reactions before he took his words in any particular direction. Harvey knew that Wuertz dropped him off at the abduction site, which meant he knew Gordon's men were dirty. Harvey has a lot of rage, and the Joker could see he was willing to point it where it *needed* to be.

"*They're all just schemers trying to control their little worlds.*"

There was no lie in what he was saying, and Harvey knew it. Harvey's entire life was developed by the idea of control. Control over his grades, his relationships, friendships, jobs, money, himself, the courtroom, his cases—Harvey fought to create the outcome he envisioned. It took all he had some days and more than a small consideration for strategy. It was ultimately a risky legal strategy that led him to where he lay—how he lost everything. He'd bet it all on his arrogance and pride—on the notion that he could control forces that were beyond restraint.

*And he lost.*

*I'm not a schemer. I just show them all how—how pathetic* their attempts to *control* things really are. *So, ah, c'mere*—" The Joker stretched over and held Harvey's unwilling hand, clasping it in both of his and making insistent eye contact to the point of discomfort. Harvey never looked away, too drawn in by the allure of the Joker's assertions. *"When I tell you that you and your girlfriend was nothing personal, you know I'm telling the truth.*"

Harvey still wasn't saying anything—*and that's a good thing*—but the Joker needed more of a reaction beyond his hazel eye following his movements.

*Time to make a gamble.*

But the pay-off would be worth the risk of all this coming crashing down.

*Bigger the risk, the higher the reward, they say.*

*"It's the schemers who put you where you are. They're the reason Rachel's dead—"*

True panic gave new humanity to Harvey's face. He was angry about what happened to his body, and how the Joker was telling him all his efforts, everything he did—it was all for *nothing.*

*Absolutely nothing at all.*

But Harvey thought he still had something to live for. They'd tied him to his bed because his inability to control himself led him to peel at his skin, snapping at nurses and doctors, and a growing concern for his mental state. It's why they were also keeping him sedated.

*"No—no, she isn't dead, she isn't—"*

The Joker held up his trump card in the form of the clipboard left behind by the nurse. Rachel's name was big enough to see, but the Joker didn't leave the sheet in Harvey's full line of sight for long. Twisting it around, the Joker straightened and read off Rachel's catastrophic injuries. He used the complicated medical terminology—*everything sounds worse that way*—and spoke with a sympathetic authority. When he got to the potential brain damage, he took out the uncertainty there
and made them fatal.

"She died last night at three in the morning, Harvey," he said quietly, closing in and taking on a friendly voice that was completely unbefitting of any sort of relationship they might have. "Don't… don't tell me they didn't tell you?"

He was laying the faked-innocence act on thick, and he was surprised that Harvey just stayed motionless, in total shock. Tears were close to brimming in his eye, and the Joker's theory was proven correct. The police had kept Harvey in the dark more than once—they were corrupt, through and through—and that pain would inevitably be centred around Jim Gordon: the man who made all this possible. Upping the feelings of betrayal were essential, and the Joker needed Harvey to see who to pin that on. Who, by extension, worked with Gordon? Who else let Harvey down?

_Batman._

The Joker reflected, not for the first time, about just how badly the Batman kept screwing up.

*Amateur mistakes, really. He'll get there though. I'll help him along._

He couldn't expect much else. The Batman had only Scarecrow as a nemesis before—speaking of amateurs—and he didn't have anywhere near the sophistication that the Joker did. It really was a crazy game the Joker was playing, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

"They didn't want to tell you yet, huh? Guess they didn't want to upset you. Another thing they kept from you…" the Joker trailed off, looking away before snapping his eyes back to Harvey for his reaction. The level of devastation on his face was tantalizing. "She died almost fourteen hours ago, and they—they didn't even mention it to you? Now that's just… just heartless, isn't it?"

The Joker drew forward until he was nearly out of his chair, getting closer as his words destroyed what was left of Harvey's sanity. Looking like a human kabob was not conducive to a good state of mind—not after realizing that he'd never speak to the love of his life again—well, he definitely won't now—without really taking into account that the Joker is the one who ensured that's how it would go down. Harvey was searching the Joker's face for a lie, but he couldn't find any.

The Joker stood and undid the first clasp of the padded cuffs around Harvey's wrist. Harvey kept his eyes on the Joker, glaring in his agony like he could kill him with that alone.

"See, this happened because you were a schemer. You had plans, and, ah… look where that got you—"

When the Joker finished unclasping the last wrist, Harvey sprung at him like a wildcat—going for the Joker's throat and springing up from the hospital mattress. But he was still weak from what happened and the sedatives, and the Joker was faster. He grabbed Harvey's arms and firmly pressed him back down, careful not to use too much force and come across as the aggressor. It would be plain unproductive.

_Wouldn't want him to think I hurt him on purpose or something._

Holding back the urge to laugh in Harvey's face, the Joker leaned down until his nose almost touched Harvey's. His eyes, which usually liked to wander, were boring into Harvey.

"Easy now. You're not really angry at me, Harvey. I'm not the one who did this to you. They are."

That was only a half-lie.
It was more of a joint effort.

Harvey was still being quiet—he was pissed, looking to take out his rage immediately when he needed to save it—and his inability to argue with the Joker left him open to accepting what was being said without any lifesaving rationality. He was struggling, but his attempts were feeble. The Joker gave his arms a reassuring squeeze.

"I just did what I do best—I took your plan and I turned it on itself." The Joker couldn't help the hint of musicality that snuck into his words, and he shifted back and forth on his feet as he did a sort of dance in place. Harvey was starting to get the point, and the Joker was keeping the back of his mind on the clock.

Got sixteen minutes left.

"Look what I did to this city with a few drums of gas and some bullets, hmm?" the Joker said, picking up Harvey's arm and motioning together at the larger city of Gotham.

He was talking about how Gotham's citizens were killing each other. He gave them the means to start a mob, and if what was happening online was any indication, the bloodbath had already begun. The People were going rabid with fear and the police had let them down at every turn. The Joker was going to drive the last nail in the coffin within the next four hours. Gotham was going to burn and he'd be the only one left to stand in the ashes. He'd rise like a phoenix and his work would be complete. Others would do what he had, follow his example, and he'd know it could all be traced back to him. He'd be remembered forever.

"You know what I've noticed? When the expected people die, nobody panics. Cops—they put their lives on the line every day. More of them were killed in a three-month period just—just two years ago than this year alone." Harvey finally stopped struggling, allowing himself to be totally pulled in by the Joker's enticing logic—even if it led to a tumble off the cliffs of sanity. "But that was all 'part of a plan,' wasn't it? And as long as things go 'according to plan,' nobody panics—even if the plan is horrifying!" the Joker exclaimed in a high pitch of mania.

He wasn't wrong about that either. Even some freshman idiot taking an intro to sociology course could tell you the same. People like routine, adhering to the expected—order, structure—all of it is what allowed people to sleep at night. It's what the Joker had to tear down in order to set the world free. To point out every self-delusion until the world ran rampant in the madness of truth.

"If tomorrow I say, like, another gangbanger's gonna get shot, or—or a truckload of soldiers is going to be blown up—nobody panics. Because it's all part of a plan," the Joker said, doing air quotes with his fingers. Harvey's arms hung limp, and the Joker really did feel like he was controlling his own personal marionette. "Their lives—your life—is disposable. Meaningless to them. There's more where you all came from and they're just waiting for an opportunity to find a new enemy, put a new batch of souls on the line, find a new mouthpiece that won't disappoint them next time."

Harvey believed the Joker because—to varying degrees—he'd seen that very thing in action. How every system forced out the facets that sought to change it. Revolution was a bloody endeavor precisely because you couldn't overhaul a system without it. Drastic action is needed to shake the people into action. The Batman understood that, but he never went far enough.

"But when I say that one, little ol' Mayor will die—well then everyone loses their minds! They aren't so easily replaced. They hold all the power. They're the ones who make the world go 'round."
That's why the Joker kidnapped Mr. Anthony Garcia and his family. Parker had unveiled all of Mayor Garcia's assets—even the ones listed under his wife's name.

*Amazing what you can get from tax forms. Did I say that before? Feels worth mentioning again.*

Just like Harvey and Miriam had a part to play, so did the Mayor. Different, but just as vital. That's another thing people put stock in—figures of authority. The Joker was going to take all of those down.

*When the adults are away, the kids will play.*

The Joker grabbed the gun Miriam left in her jacket pocket, the one the Joker lifted when he was about to cut out her eyes at the arcade, and he tossed it in the air to change the grip around. Instead of holding the gun to Harvey's head—*wouldn't do something crazy like that*—he held it to his own. Taking Harvey's hand and forcing it to grip the revolver's handle, he pulled back the hammer.

"Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order and everything becomes… chaos." That was the goal. *That* was what the Joker wanted more than anything. The world needed to embrace nihilism so that they could be what they were all along. "I'm an agent of chaos."

And there lay the Joker's self-made identity—what rose to the surface when what he used to be was laid out to die. He saw the truth and he'd help spread Lady Chaos' message as the streets ran red with rivers of blood. The world was born into chaos—a mass of unintelligible forces that were beautiful beyond comparison—and the world needed to return to that again. It was the nature of things—every cycle had an end, and the Joker would be the one to help break the wheel.

*And I'll have a little fun while I'm at it.*

Because that was another thing. Life was one big joke. God kept the punchline to himself, and people like the Joker were the ones who could see it written in the stars.

"Oh, and you know the thing about chaos, Harvey?" The Joker looked in Harvey's eye as he pressed the barrel of the gun to the centre of his forehead. Harvey stared at the flood of earthy brown swallowing his soul and found meaning. He could see a way to navigate the world—one that took the control he never had out of his hands. "It's fair."

Harvey was breathing hard, chest rising and falling in deep heaves. Reaching into the pocket of his hospital gown, he picked up the coin that inexplicably found its way to him on his bedside table. It was his trick coin. The one he'd use to turn any situation to his favour. It didn't help Rachel, but he could follow the odds, no matter where that led. Because the Joker was right—probability was fair; free from outside manipulation if he followed it as closely as he did the letter of the law.

Raising it in the Joker's face, Harvey showed the side of the coin that remained pure and unscathed.

"*You live.*"

Turning the coin around, he showed the Joker the scarred remnants of what used to be whole. Harvey could have started laughing at the irony of it all. The Joker hummed his understanding and approval.

"*You die.*"

For the first time, the Joker was impressed by Harvey and how easily he was willing to embrace what he should have all along. His anger at Harvey impersonating Batman was forgiven. They'd
gotten to the heart of what lay in the darkness of the human soul. People were ugly. People were hiding monsters inside themselves that they were convinced inhabited the dark recesses in far flung corners of the world.

Harvey had embraced his inner monster, and now he was perfect.

"Now you're talkin'."

The Joker succeeded. He turned Harvey just like he was turning Miriam. Just like he was going to turn Batman and the city he laid his life down for. The Joker wasn't afraid of death—hadn't been for a near decade. He'd be disappointed that he couldn't take Miriam further down with him, but he'd meet her in the next life. He was certain about that. Even if the Joker died now, he'd have succeeded in making Harvey a murderer—taking away Gotham's White Knight and sinking the rest of the city into the mire that would suffocate them eventually. Harvey would prove the Joker's point either way.

Any man can fall.

Flipping the coin in the air, Harvey caught it and slapped it down on his arm. Taking his eyes from the Joker, they both looked down as Chance—Fate, whatever you want to call the unseen forces of the universe—made her judgement. The Joker's mouth curled up into a smile of anticipation, eager to see where this adventure would take him.

Harvey released the hammer of the revolver and lowered the gun.

Fate had judged that the Joker should stay alive.

Even if for just a little while longer.

It was official. The universe wanted him to see his work through, and nothing would stand in his way.

Harvey looked and saw that his vengeance would take another path. The Joker was judged and found innocent, but he'd find the ones that Chance found guilty. Every single one of them. And he'd make them pay.

Giving Harvey one final pat on the arm, the Joker drew away from him and went to the coat closet attached to the hospital room. Finding a forgotten jacket, the Joker took it off the hanger and threw it to Harvey, who'd risen out of the bed—ripping out his IV's and tearing at his skin—and started toward the hall, now a force of vengeance that had no room for anything else.

"Might wanna skedaddle. Things are about to get, ah... lively," the Joker said. He didn't want Harvey to die now, but that was about as much warning as he'd give him.

We do only have two minutes, after all.

Dent said nothing, only pulling on the jacket as the Joker strolled away. Their fate lines had met and intertwined, and now came the time to separate.

Who knows, maybe we'll meet again and do this party a second time.

Whatever the Joker felt before in terms of elation, it was heightened to a point of mania. He was giddy—positively jubilant. He felt like singing again and, this time, there was no one to diminish his victory.
"Maybe he's born with it, maybe it's gasoline!" he sang. His respect for Harvey didn't preclude him from the Joker's sick sense of humour.

The drone would be silent, the Joker knew that, but he felt like he could hear it singing through the air with him in a symphony of destruction. He skipped out the door just as the earth shook and rumbled as the missiles shot through the air. The drone was dropping its payload, and the Joker could see the fire and raining debris as he walked with calm purpose down the main road. He revelled in the heat at his back, the deafening roar of the brick and mortar as it crumbled, and the sweet crashing of all five buildings of the different hospital wings as havoc and calamity laid their claim on the land and made it theirs.

Splaying his arms out, the Joker felt the waves of heat move his hair and imbue him with a holy purpose. Screams from those left in the buses in the parking lot heightened the feelings of euphoria he experienced. He was in Nirvana; he had found his place of enlightenment. Nothing could take this away from him. Nothing was better than what was happening right then.

Despite all that, the Joker never turned around to watch it unfold—he knew it surpassed what he even imagined, but he felt no urge to attain confirmation. Even though he did feel those things, it was never enough for long, and it didn't encompass what was missing in the equation.

*What's all this worth when you've got no one to share it with?*

But he *did* have people to share his world with now. They'd make it all the sweeter.

The Joker wasn't surprised to see a camera crew and the infamous Jack Ryder standing near his bus. His men were watching the inferno behind him, and how he walked out of it like he was impervious to the flames, and saw him give a nod of his head to the crew. Davie—being smarter for the gunshot wound to the leg—understood the motion for what it was. He hopped out of the bus and pulled the reporter inside, using his gun to get the rest of them to follow.

Thresh—still in his *tidy-whities*—opened the back of the bus door and the Joker jumped in as the rest of the buildings fell. The drone would make another pass soon, ensuring everything was leveled, and then crash itself in the remaining blaze. The Joker didn't like sharing his toys, and he wasn't about to change that.

The Joker's ears rang from the blasts, but he could hear the whimpering as he stood tall and the bus lurched forward. Finally looking at what was in front of him, the Joker saw a group of people he didn't recognize. They were doctors and nurses—a handful of unlucky few who picked the wrong bus to evacuate in. The Joker grinned in welcome.

"*Ladies and gentlemen,*" he said with a sneer and a mock-curtsy.

They'd be useful later—*can never have too many hostages*—but the Joker wasn't thinking about them anymore. He was looking for where he left Miriam slumped over. He found her tangled head of long black hair, but he didn't know who was sitting beside her. Stopping and leaning toward the women in the seat, the Joker smacked his lips together in annoyance.

"*Sorry,* lady, this seat is, ah, *taken.*"

The woman next to his sweet peach was looking at Miriam's arms where the stitches tore and bled through her shirt. Bandages were on her face where the skin split and a cold compress was on the back of her neck. A surge of something the Joker didn't recognize made him want to strangle the woman in front of him, the one who was touching Miriam.
Turning around, the black woman glared at him with a fire that said she hadn't seen enough violence to know what real fear was like. Miriam looked at him like that once, and it was because of that he didn't drag her to the floor by the hair.

"She needs medical attention," the doctor spat at him, looking at the Joker up and down. "Did you do this? I'm surprised she hasn't gone into total shock."

Is she... reprimanding me?

The Joker had to admit; the lady had balls.

And I'm not talking about testicles.

Miriam, whose eyes were closed until that point, opened them slowly but didn't seem able to comprehend what was in front of her.

Maybe I should've let her nap longer.

"What was that?" he asked, leaning on his elbow so that he was closer to the woman's eye level. She had long black locs with bits of gold and silver woven in. She was pretty and her face exuded strength, but her hands shook. "Got somethin' you wanna say to me? I'm all, uh, ears."

Taking a big breath and drawing herself up, she rose until she was at an equal height with the Joker and didn't break eye contact.

"I don't know what you've been doing, and I don't much care. It's my job to help people, and she," the doctor—someone named Rosetta Williams, if her nametag was to be believed—pointed to Miriam, who was struggling to keep herself upright as she looked on in fear between the two, "needs my help."

Rosetta kept a stiff upper lip, but the shaking intensified. The Joker's men were looking on in stunned silence, unsure of how this was going to go.

"It's—it's OK," Miriam said, her voice small and croaky. She still looked dazed, but she was tugging on Rosetta's white coat. That pissed the Joker off almost as much as the way Parker talked about her did. There was a reason the Joker was so brutal to Parker, and it wasn't because he was uncooperative. He would never admit to himself what the real answer was. "I-I'll be fine, really."

Miriam was trying to catch the doctor's attention, pull her away from doing something stupid. He realized that Miriam must know the doctor from somewhere. She wasn't looking at the Joker and that made him angrier. What Miriam didn't seem to realize she was demonstrating that she still cared about the wrong things—the wrong people—too much. She wasn't admitting that she was as enamoured with him as he was with her. The Joker still had work to do.

"I'll say this, ah, once," the Joker inserted his face inches from the doctor's, making her jerk back, "move."

He poured the levels of malice building in him into the words, and the Joker closed in on her as she fell back in the seat. Miriam was shaking too, suddenly alert—her eyes wide and cute despite the dark bags and purple bruises—and she looked like she wanted to shrink into a corner. The Joker didn't necessarily like murdering people—depends on how stupid they are—unless there was a point—a specific punchline. Killing a pretty doctor sticking up for a beleaguered 'victim' wasn't a good look—not that I've ever cared about that—but that wasn't the kind of point he wanted to make.
"I'm not going to sit back and let you torture this girl anymore." The doctor didn't sound so sure of herself anymore. The Joker's will began to overpower her own, but he gave her some credit for trying.

When the bus hit a large pothole in the road, the whole vehicle shook and dislodged Rosetta from her post. The Joker was about to grab her by the hair and drop her off at the curb—via the back of the bus, doesn't matter much if it slows down—when something unexpected happened. Miriam surprised him—getting out of her seat and grabbing his hand with both of hers.

She stared at his chest, her shirt still slightly open from where he undid the buttons before—nicely showcasing his red initial on her brown skin—and then met his eye. She might look gaunt, her hair tangled and matted where the curls twisted together, eyes swollen from crying, small remnants of his greasepaint still evident around her mouth, her clothes mismatching and too big, exhausted and weak—but she still influenced him in a way that he intensely disliked as much as he craved. For the briefest of moments, he thought about killing her immediately for it—it's her fucking fault after all—and kissing her on the mouth.

"Wh-Where do you want to sit?" she asked.

Miriam looked more aware than before, but the exhaustion was readily apparent. It might take her longer, but she looked ready to do what she promised. There was still ample amounts of hesitation, but the gesture was something that made him feel equally smug and suspicious. He knew what she was doing it for, but he was content enough to let it slide.

For now. I'll get her to make it up to me later.

Keeping his face neutral, he took her hand and tugged, making her squeeze past the good doctor—and almost trip, whoops—and join him in the aisle. Rosetta sat and stared after Miriam with deep concern, but Miriam wouldn't look at her anymore. She leaned into the Joker for support as the bus shook and bounced around as they sped toward Wayne Enterprises.

"Have a good nap, sweet peach?" he asked, jostling her into him as he plopped down in a free seat and pulled her down with him. Her body stayed loose, the tension gone, and he was pleased to see that she was still looking at his face. He liked that.

A lot.

"Y-Yeah," she said quietly, not jerking away when he pushed the long hair over her shoulder, exposing the love bite on her neck. Her face went red—a blush violent enough to show through the dark skin and layers of bruises. He found himself dying to know how far it went down.

"Feeling all… pepped up for the main event?"

Miriam's fingers pulled at a loose thread on the pink cardigan he was still wearing, and she took in his appearance like it wasn't strange at all. He knew he looked unusual and, if he was being honest with himself—always am—he was waiting for someone to say something so he could say the jokes he was absolutely dying to use.

Well, I wouldn't be dying. Someone else would be for that one.

He giggled at the thought, momentarily distracted. The present moment came rushing back when Miriam's fingers found the back of his hand and his nerves gave him a pleasant jolt through the entirety of his spine. She didn't directly reply to his question, but she looked down at his hand and nodded, leaning into his arm. The Joker gave a purr of contentment, even as he wasn't entirely
convinced about her enthusiasm. He forgot about the annoying doctor, the confused idiots he employed who were watching, and the 'innocent' bystanders who were trying not to watch with rapt attention—but the Joker still noticed how Jack Ryder was looking on like a voyeur.

*I can kill him for that later.*

The Joker felt like giving them all a little show. He went in as if to kiss her neck, but took her earlobe between his teeth instead, gently biting down before planting a small kiss on her jaw, making her gasp quietly in surprise. When he pulled away, he was pleased to see it left the red outline of his mouth on her. His finger traced the tendons in her neck as she kept her head down and her eyebrows furrowed together in a way that made the Joker's blood hum.

Miriam was beyond distracting for him, and it made him want to bleed her dry and keep up this tango as long as the ride never got boring. He didn't fail to notice how she was breathing harder; he could see her ribs moving down the gap in her shirt, and when she looked up at him, her face was momentarily blank. The Joker cocked his head to the side, and she gave him a small smile, one that seemed to reach her eyes and transformed her face. It only fueled the Joker's inner battle—one he was quickly losing his ability to properly restrain.

Reaching down into his dress pocket, the Joker grabbed what was inside and held it up in the small space between them.

"Wanna granola bar?"

Downtown Gotham was nearly abandoned when they arrived.

It helped that the explosion that rocked the southeast side of Gotham would have everyone glued to their respective screens for the foreseeable future.

*Wait till they get a load of what comes next.*

When the bus pulled up to the front of the wing of the R&D Department at Wayne Enterprises, the Joker and his men were met by the other teams who were set to converge right on time. They had their guns out, ammunition cases in hand, and enough firepower to form their own small military force. The Joker and Miriam were the last ones on the bus except for Thresh, who had been disappointed to find that the Joker didn't bring back his clothes and was mandated to driving the bus out of sight. Everyone else was shuffled off and sent to wait. The police wouldn't think to look for them there. It was too unexpected. And Miriam was there to make sure no one found out in time to do anything about it.

"I hope you're ready, sweetheart," he said in her ear, drawing her to him. "You're not gonna disappoint me, are you? I hope you know how—how sad that'd make me." What he meant by that was he'd hurt her again for it, badly, if she let him down.

His fingers traced small patterns up and down her arm. He hadn't stopped touching her since they sat down, and her continued presence only kept reaffirming what he'd first admitted to her before.

*She really is bewitching.*

He really thought he was going to have to gut her for it after everything. He wouldn't like it, but he'd do it. There was no other way, it seemed. Couldn't have someone with this kind of pull on him. He was quickly losing the battle with his head, and he couldn't surrender control. He needed to make a decision, one way or another. Didn't matter how much of himself—his old self—she reminded him of, how much he did like talking to her—how she reacted to him, everything about
her that spoke to him—weaknesses and distractions didn't exist in his world. Not for long, anyway.

*Doesn't mean I can't enjoy myself until then.*

The Joker's hand crept up to her cheek, tracing along the sharp bone of her jaw until it found her
full bottom lip. It was split from where she bit it, and the bright line of red and memory of the taste
of iron and *her* drew him in again.

*Focus, idiot. Bask in the victory after you enact the inevitable.*

It was official. The Joker would kill Miriam after her work was finished. He was a generous man,
and he liked her—he'd make it quick. He'd still enjoy the feeling of her blood as it coated his
fingers. And the look of complete *agony* when another one of Batman's *pals* bit the dust.

"I... I won't," she whispered, maintaining eye contact. "I promise."

The Joker believed her. He'd done a good job of scaring her straight. Breaking that defiant streak
took a long time, but she was learning to depend on him, to stay in the shadow that kept her from
being burned alive. But, like all shadows, this one would swallow her, too.

"*Stupendous,*" he drawled with a shake of his head.

She was too busy watching his movements that she wasn't working to predict what he'd do next.
Darting forward, he kissed her quickly before popping up and dragging her along with him. Miriam
trailed behind as he kept a firm grip on her hand, and they spilled out of the bus. More greasepaint
was on her face, making it look like they'd had a campy makeout session—*don't give me ideas*—
and he threw an arm around her shoulder as they strolled to the main door.

"Enter the code, sweetheart," he said, pointing to the panel that would unlock the R&D
Department.

She briefly looked from it to him and swallowed hard, but she didn't hesitate. Entering the code and
pressing her fingers on a scanner, the doors opened and the Joker and his merry men flooded the
building. There would be no security protocols until someone activated them, and only be a
skeleton crew would be there with it being a Sunday—*funday*—and the pandemonium happening,
but any stragglers still needed to be taken care of.

"Fan out, boys. Find some more *friends* to join us. Wouldn't want them to be, ah, *left out* of the
party."

One group rushed to obey, filing down the various white, sterile halls using the blueprints that
Miriam provided. The Joker wouldn't kill them—*yet, anyway; gotta have a backup plan*—but he
wouldn't leave them be, either. He'd give them the privilege of saying they were there when the
revolution began. Heading down the main hall, still holding onto Miriam, the Joker acted just like
he did when he was pulling off a big bank heist—with an easy confidence and a sharp eye out for
any factors that would prevent his success.

The boys and girls of Wayne Enterprises screamed and froze when they saw the Joker and
company, and even more looked shocked to see Miriam walking with him. When the security
guards came to the wrong place at the wrong time, pulling their service weapons, they were
quickly shot down, their bodies hitting the floor as the Joker walked over their corpses. He could
feel Miriam cringing inward, involuntarily clinging to him as she muffled her own shrieks, and his
wicked smile was a signal for Gotham's impending end. At some point, he let Miriam take the
lead, allowing her to show him to the main control room where she could use the remaining drones
to take out every important centre of the established order that supported Gotham's bloated carcass. All of it was going to be brought down at once, and she'd make sure no one could stop it from happening. He knew she would.

*Having a dozen hostages as leverage doesn't hurt either.*

It wasn't long before they found the room they needed, and when Miriam repeated the process of entering in the proper security codes, the Joker strolled in like he owned the place. Someone unexpected was sitting inside. An older black man with a head full of gray hair. He whipped around in his chair at the sight of them and looked close to having a stroke.

"Miriam—"

"Ah-ah, grandpa," the Joker said, pulling up his gun and pointing it at the man's head. He was lucky enough to have found one of Miriam's coworkers. When he looked at her, her expression said everything. This was someone who meant something to Miriam.

*I can work with that.*

"Back away from the computer, please and thank you."

The man raised his arms and obeyed, getting out of the chair only to be immediately seized by the other men with the Joker. He looked around as the older man's hands were bound with zip-ties and he shoved Miriam roughly into the vacated chair. There was a large glass wall overlooking an expansive work area, but the room was otherwise closed off by solid walls. Tilting his head in consideration, he envisioned what it would look like with his planned set up.

"Bring him in," the Joker said to Davie, who trailed in behind and stood in the doorway armed with his TEC-9.

"Wait—bring who in?" Miriam asked, her concentration flipping from the Joker to the tall man in the bowtie in front of them. She didn't look too far from having a stroke, either.

"The Mayor, of course. Can't start the, ah... *proceedings* without him." Miriam looked confused and then terrified. The Joker let out a cruel laugh. "Anthony is going to be a big help. You'll see."

His words didn't give Miriam any comfort, and she looked ready to pass out again. Her expression was hilarious. He kept laughing and he stood there, smiling, as Phase Three ended and Phase Four began.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I'm sorry this chapter is getting to you all so late, I meant to have it out a bit sooner but life likes to get in the way sometimes. I still fully plan on having the new chapter out this Saturday, as usual, so definitely look forward to that and I hope this was worth the wait! Thank you, everyone, and I hope you have a fabulous week :)

"Mayor Anthony Garcia and his family have been missing for the last sixteen hours. Newly-appointed Police Commissioner James Gordon refused to comment as the city searches for its elected leader and—"

Valeria Morales was frustrated.

She'd been sitting in front of the TV for the last three hours, waiting for her favourite show to start. They were delayed by the news, which was running boring stories that she wasn't really paying attention to. Her mom couldn't afford Netflix, so all Valeria had was the channels they could reach from the local stations. The banner on the bottom of the screen kept reading: "WARNING—DISTURBING SUBJECT MATTER. SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED BY CHILDREN 13 YEARS AND YOUNGER."

Valeria was seven, but she already felt grown up. It was her that looked after her baby brother—who was four—when her mom had to work double shifts like she was that Sunday, and it was up to Valeria to keep the house in order. It was an important job and one that she took seriously. Usually, their neighbour, Miss Maria, would keep an eye on them, checking in occasionally and bringing supper, but she was sick. The Morales siblings were on their own.

Because she was the oldest one in the house, she didn't feel bad when the TV kept telling her that she and her brother shouldn't be in the room. Plus, she couldn't understand most of the words flashing at her anyway. What was playing on the TV reminded her of the kind of movies her mom's boyfriends liked to watch when she was supposed to be in bed. She was hanging off the edge of the couch, making the news play upside down and her pigtails skirt the carpet that desperately needed vacuuming.

"Riots have broken out all through the Narrows and the East Side as police work to locate those named in the hitlist released two hours ago. According to our sources, only one has been taken into protective custody and five others have been found dead—killed by roving mobs as the city's police are stretched thin."

They were playing that same message on repeat, just slight variations being the only thing that changed. Valeria felt like she was getting close to memorizing the men's words who were talking on the TV. No matter what channel she flipped to, it was always showing the same thing.

"We live by the Narrows, don't we, Eli?" Valeria asked her brother, who was half-asleep next to her. He shrugged his shoulders and went back to moving the arms of his teddy bear. "Mommy said it was close."

But Valeria couldn't be sure. She knew the way to the nearest 7Eleven for Slurpee's when it was hot in the summer, knew where to walk to school, and she even knew how to get to the diner her mom worked at in the afternoons and evenings—but she didn't know much else about anything in Gotham. Besides those few routes she knew, the only thing ingrained in her mind was that anywhere outside of her house wasn't safe. Her mom told her that every day. It's why she and Eli stayed inside and only opened the blinds that faced the backyard.

When Batman came to Gotham last year, Valeria's mother had hope again—she'd let her children
play outside more and began to relax when she had to go to work to keep the bank from taking her house. Valeria thought of Batman like he was a god—someone who helped people who deserved it, those who believed in him.

But Batman wasn't a god.

"The GCPD are asking people to stay in their homes and to not take the law in their own hands, including participating in the online polls that are fueling the onslaught of deaths that sources are saying aren't of criminals at all, but rather falsified online profiles—"

The concept of death was something Valeria vaguely understood. Her dad died just last year in a drive-by shooting when he was coming home from the grocery store. She didn't remember much about it other than how it made her mom sad and that she never saw her dad again except for the photo on her mom's nightstand, draped in rosaries and surrounded by candles. She twisted her head to the side as if creating a new angle would make what was happening more interesting. One word piqued her hearing—something she vaguely recognized.

"We're coming in with more breaking news this hour. Gotham General has been destroyed in what looks like the latest terror attack by the Joker. Three are confirmed dead and the amount injured is still being determined. The massive inferno that swallowed the building was caused by what our experts are calling 'predator drones' like those seen overseas—"

Inferno.

Valeria recognized that word. She'd heard it when her mom took her to mass. When she asked Miss Maria what it meant, the answer she was given was always the same: "Hope not ever to see Heaven. I have come to lead you to the other shore; into eternal darkness; into fire and ice."

Now, Valeria didn't remember the words in their entirety, only in bits and pieces, but she remembered what it made her feel like every time the words were said.

They made her feel afraid.

When the TV showed a blazing fire and several explosions levelling a building, Valeria and Eli's attentions were drawn to the screen and she found that same fear again. Sitting on the floor now and scooting closer, Valeria watched as the news people talked in worried tones and looked like Valeria's gym teacher, Mr. Jones, did after a hard soccer practice.

"We're receiving live footage from GCN's own Jack Ryder, investigative journalist and in-the-field reporter, with the—the demand—" The sweaty man broke off and looked somewhere past the camera, making small jerks with his hands. To Valeria, he looked like a kid in trouble. "We're going live to Jack Ryder now. Jack?"

Valeria was starting to consider turning off the TV and make her and Eli supper when she saw that this man's face mirrored what she felt—the man looked afraid.

Other than a bloody cut on his lip, the man's brown skin looked colourless. He reminded her of the picture of her dad, with the thick dark lashes and square jaw, but she couldn't remember her dad ever having that expression on his face. It was pure panic.

"Good evening, citizens of Gotham City," the man on the TV said.

A new series of words replaced the warning for children to leave the room, identifying the man speaking. Valeria didn't read or understand it, but the rest of Gotham did. The man was Anthony Garcia and, while it wasn't shown in the zoomed in headshot of his face, his body was bloody and
bruised. The Joker and his men had avoided the Mayor's face precisely so that he would look more convincing on television, free from too many physical signs of duress.

The people of Gotham didn't know it, but his family's life was hanging on his ability to be convincing.

Anthony Garcia swallowed hard and Valeria's eyes were locked on his, her little feet rooted to the carpet. Sitting down, she listened as her confusion grew.

"It should be clear now that the Gotham City Police Department and the—the ruling government bodies have become ineffective. They will not be able to stop the riots or protect you or your loved ones from—from harm." The man's lip shook and his gaze darted offscreen for a moment before latching on to make insistent eye contact with the captive audience. "Come nightfall, this city will be lost. Those who are unwilling to… to play by the new rules can get out now. Those who remain will find no refuge from—from the new world, free of the forces that keep you in the dark. Look out for yourselves and do all that is necessary, all within your means, to make it out alive and usurp all that seeks to keep you subdued."

While she didn't really understand what the man was saying, all while the man spoke Valeria heard an odd sound in the background. It sounded like crackling static, like when she accidentally changed the station to a dead-air channel, but it was different. There was no way it could be laughter because it wasn't like any laugh she'd heard before. It was mean—bitter and cruel. Laughter wasn't supposed to sound like that.

"Beware the tunnels and the bridges and keep your eye on the sky."

And with that final warning, the screen cut back to the sweaty man in the newsroom who looked physically ill. The bigger words were lost on Valeria, but she could tell by the way the man looked that it was nothing good or happy that was said.

"Maybe we should find mommy…" Valeria trailed off, tugging on her hair hard as she tried to think.

When she looked to her brother, she saw he'd finally fallen asleep. Indecision paralyzed Valeria. She was only supposed to call her mom at the diner in emergencies. She didn't know why, but this felt like a big emergency to her. Forcing herself to get up, she went to get the house phone from the kitchen when loud shouts made her freeze.

People were yelling, shouting out in confusion as cars peeled out onto the streets and tore down the road. Curiosity got the better of her. Climbing back onto the couch, Valeria peeked out through the blinds that always stayed closed and saw something that only added to her confusion.

There was a large group of people outside, some holding bats and crowbars. They were looking at their phones and yelling. People were pouring in the street as Valeria's neighbours piled into their cars and drove away. The men were pointing at the different houses with their weapons, their faces hard.

"Eli?" Valeria called, trying to get her brother to wake up and join her. She was only answered by his gentle snoring. "Eli, wake up—"

Valeria didn't feel very grownup anymore. Men were standing on her porch now, looking at the windows. She dropped off the couch and jerked the small spot she made in the curtains closed. Grabbing her brother by the arms, she pulled him up with her as she tried to drag him to their shared bedroom.
Eli awakened and started to struggle, trying to get out of his sister's uncomfortable grip, when several loud knocks on the door made them both look to the only barrier that their mom ever told them was safe. Eli grew afraid because Valeria was, and they started to cry when the door handle shook.

"Holy shit," Colin Flannigan said when he looked at his phone on the way to his car. "What the actual fuck."

He was stuck inside his accounting firm's office in the Burnley district, working hard to compensate for his boss falling behind in their quarterly reports. It was only twenty minutes after five, but Colin felt like he could sleep well into the next day. What he saw on his phone made him stop dead in the parking lot.

_Colin, where are you rn?_

_I need you to answer._

_Have you been watching the news?_

_I need you to call._

_I'm worried—please pick up the phone._

Colin had missed seventeen missed calls from his long-time boyfriend, Henry, and over a dozen text messages, each more urgent than the last. He'd left his phone on silent in his jacket pocket so he could concentrate. That was uncharacteristic for him. Usually, he was glued to it like it was a detachable limb.

Henry had just sent him screenshots of something from Twitter—a series of photos with names, addresses, businesses, and what looked like crimes and felonies listed underneath. Colin was stunned to see his photo staring back at him.

"What is this?"

The photo was his Facebook profile picture. His business and home addresses were accurate. But the name and list of crimes were not. According to what was being posted, Colin was a convicted pedophile who preyed on young girls.

_Oh shit—who the fuck is posting this online? Why would they lie about me? Who am I supposed to call to fix this? Will I lose my job?_

There had to be a mistake. A colossal one. One that could ruin his life. There were over five thousand retweets and likes—people believed what they were reading. And when he saw the hashtag #IfICouldKill, he thought he was going to be physically sick. He heard of the movement happening online now and secretly supported it, but now he stood there as his world ended.

Colin—according to the photos—was a man named "Patrick Hennessey" and was on the hitlist of fifteen that the Joker released for a public execution.

He called Henry immediately, his shirt soaked through with sweat. Henry picked up on the first ring.

"Hun, what the hell is happening? I didn't have my phone for three hours and—"
"You need to head to the GCPD right now. People are getting shot, Colin. Where the hell are you?"

Colin's knees felt weak. He was still thirty feet away from his car, but he picked up the pace, fumbling with his keys.

"I—I'm still at work, what do you mean people are getting shot?"

"Get in your car and drive—don't stay where you are. They know where we live, a group of people was already at the house before. I had to sneak out over the neighbour's fence—"

"Wait, wait—who was at the house?"

Colin didn't get to hear the answer. A tire iron hit the back of his knees and he fell, his head cracking against the pavement and making his vision go white.

"Found 'im," Colin heard through the ringing in his ears.

When his vision cleared, Colin looked up to see a ring of men coming up behind him. He could hear Henry shouting from his phone on the ground next to him, but it was crushed under a heavy pair of work boots. Colin didn't have time to perceive anyone else—even to see who his attackers were. The tire iron came down on his back and the wind was beaten out of him, the pressure in his head building until he thought it would burst.

The air left him, and the acute pain spreading across his back, neck, and head was so bad, Colin ached to just pass out to escape it. He couldn't even raise his arm to defend himself—couldn't utter a word in his own defense, beg for them to stop. The men he'd never met before kept going, using their feet and the weapons taken from their garages and hardware stores they'd looted on the way. The men who were beating Colin were not looking for social justice—not in any way that would make a difference. They saw the Joker's open invitation for brutality and no one to stop them.

Colin spit up blood and teeth but stopped trying to dodge the blows. He was too weak now, the aching reducing down to nothing but hurt that rang through his whole body. He wanted to pass out, to stop the pain that was destroying his kidneys and shattering his bones. It only took two minutes and he was already wishing he was dead.

"Freeze! Back away with your hands in the air!"

Colin was too incoherent to hear, but the other men were worked into a frenzy. They kept raining down blows, caught up in the bloodlust.

"I said freeze or I will use force!"

It was a rookie cop who was shouting. Patrol Officer Aaron Poole was sent as a part of a cross-departmental effort within the GCPD: every available officer was split between the crises with the Gotham hospitals and trying to locate and bring the men and women named in the Joker's list into protective custody. It wasn't until they found the third person dead that they realized the names released with the photos and personal information of the listed citizens were not criminals at all—they'd had the identities of known criminals overlaid with those of ordinary Gotham citizens. All it would have taken for the people of Gotham to know that themselves would have been a simple Google search on the criminals listed. They would've seen that the people they were hunting so ardently weren't the right people at all.

The Joker succeeded. He made the citizens of Gotham—everyone who voted, everyone who promoted and shared the videos and the tags, each person who egged on others for the deaths of
those deserving were accomplices in the murders of those who didn't deserve it at all. The Joker was making a point, and he was succeeding.

"This is the GCPD, and I am ordering you to stop!"

None of the men were listening, and Aaron grew afraid. His service issue gun was drawn, and Colin was seconds away from dying. One of the bigger men drew up his leg to curb stomp Colin and crush his skull when Aaron aimed and pulled the trigger.

As afraid as he was, he'd never had to use his gun in the six months he'd been on the force. He felt like his heart was failing when the shot rang out in the parking lot, and the mob of men went wild. Abandoning their efforts with Colin, some of the men ran when the large man who was about to trample Colin's skull dropped to the ground, dead. Most of them ran toward the parked patrol car, with Aaron taking cover behind the cruiser door, and swarmed him.

Those who were watching from the perimeter of the parking lot were also filming what was happening. They were afraid, but no one made an effort to intervene. Instead, they streamed what they saw online and—as the Mayor's broadcast went city-wide—in that moment the people of Gotham did truly feel like they'd lost their police force. While most were flooding the roads leaving Gotham and finding anyway they could to leave, many were left behind in the thick of a bloody street war fueled by misinformation, permissibility, and a lack of comprehensive oversight to stem the tide of savage violence.

It was just like the Joker said. People were just looking for a reason to kill each other. The Joker's infernal prophesy came true—the rioters grew until they filled the streets, pouring out of the Narrows and the East End like rats from their hole. The Joker got what he wanted—people were jumping out of the passenger's seat and they were driving Gotham straight off a cliff.

Richard Ainsley watched in horror as Gotham General was consumed in flame. His stomach dropped when he saw Gotham's Mayor declare anarchy and the reports that the police were overwhelmed.

*Where's the National Guard? Why hasn't the Governor called them in? Jesus.*

He was glad that he was over four hours away from Gotham, a safe distance from the chaos in his home just outside of Trenton. If there was one thing being the CEO of a paramilitary contract company was good for, it was that he could feel secure in just about any of his buildings throughout North America, and his home was no exception. His wife was out and he had the house to himself, and he expected to have a quiet evening away from the worries of work and the world. That quickly died when his phone blew up with notifications of Gotham going rogue—an entire city sinking under a two-week siege from a terrorist.

Gotham has a reputation for courting insanity. It was a lot of things: a commercial powerhouse, a place to get easy contracts for big money, where you could set up just about any operation with little to no consequences, a city you didn't want to spend the night in, or the kind of place where you didn't get close to the people living there. It was a blight as much as it was a boon. Gotham was built on a bedrock of rot, and not even a super-soldier like Batman could change that. Richard felt a smug sense of distance when it came to Gotham—he could get the benefits of working with various companies like Wayne Enterprises without being confronted with everything that came with a city like that.

"With Gotham General destroyed in the latest terror attack by the Joker, our experts have confirmed that it was carried out via military-grade 'predator drones' like those seen overseas—"
Richard saw the videos of the clown calling himself "the Joker," and as much as his visage scared him, it also made him laugh. First they had a man dressing up as a bat and doing the police's job for them, then the incidents in Gotham transcended petty and organized crime found in abundance to a new level of crazy Richard didn't think was possible.

Why am I even watching this?

Richard shook his head. He had better things to do—more important things. He was just about to turn off the TV when his phone rang. Looking at the caller ID in annoyance, he sighed and swiped his cell phone to accept the call.

"What is it, Bill? I told you not to call me unless it's—"

"Mr. Ainsley, we have a problem," Bill Haynes said. He was the man in charge of their technology initiatives—all the projects that gave them an edge on the competition and led them to get military contracts that took them all over the world. Bill served in the Navy SEALS for ten years, the Army for another ten before that. If he said there was a problem, Richard knew he wasn't exaggerating. "We've been breached."

"Breached? What the hell are you talking about?" Richard started to sweat. A helicopter view of the fire was on the TV and a bad feeling gripped his throat.

"Someone hacked into our drone's system. Our new initiative, HAVOC—it's gone rogue."

Richard blanched for a moment before recovering with panicked anger. He rose from his leather chair and paced his spacious living room, tearing at his hair as he tried to think.

"Explain this. Now. How the fuck did they get in there? Wayne Enterprises said it was secure—"

"It was secure. Someone with access through Wayne Enterprises hacked into our networks and systems. We didn't even know they were gone until they were off base. That was our drone that blew up the hospital."

Richard never knew Bill to sound afraid. He was a hardened man, cold and calculating when it came to military strategy and executing ruthless offensives against those they were paid to take down. Richard was certain the man on some level was a sociopath but hearing him made his own fear escalate. Richard came from a trust fund family. He approved anything that would add to their bottom line and they'd never had a problem of this magnitude since they started Titan Industries thirteen years ago.

"W-What about the other ones? Tell me you have a fucking handle on that, at least—"

"We're trying to override them. They're airborne. I spoke with Lucius Fox; he's trying to fix things on his end but he said there's someone accessing the network and blocking us out at both ends. He almost got them back a few times, but whoever they have on their end is good. Too fucking good. We... there is no chance of recovery. All security parameters have been nullified."

Richard dropped back in his chair and shivered with a sudden wave of cold. This was bad. Very bad.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do then?" Richard whispered. He thought it and hadn't meant to say it aloud, but he needed a man like Bill to take care of the situation. He didn't know what else he could do—he never thought of the necessary contingencies needed to moderate his own weaponry.
—had never thought they would need it.

"We can't do shit on U.S. soil. They'll need aircraft that can try and intercept—"

"Do you know where it's heading?"

There was a long pause on the other end. If it wasn't for Bill's breathing, Richard would have thought he hung up the phone.

"Yes."

"Where are they going?" Bill didn't answer right away, and Richard's grip on his hair increased until he was pulling out the few remaining strands on the back of his balding head. "For fuck's sake, Bill, where the hell are they going?!"

Bill sighed before answering. "Gotham. There's four heading to different locations. All government related—embassies, consulates, City Hall, GCPD headquarters—"

Richard could have screamed. This happened in other countries—Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan—everywhere else but here. Richard was one of the people who made sure the world stayed that way. That the bad things happened out of sight and out of mind and raked in the benefits. Now it was coming back to haunt him. Richard didn't see it that way, but the Joker could appreciate the dramatic irony even if Richard couldn't.

"Get me on the line with that—that new guy. The new commissioner. We…" Words failed Richard. He'd never admitted culpability for anything in his life before. How could he tell them what was going to happen without it all falling back on him?

"Could I go to prison for this?"

He knew Bill wouldn't say anything without his say-so. Bill liked his paychecks too much to bite the hand that fed him more money than he'd ever be able to spend. Richard didn't know what kind of repercussions he'd face, but he didn't want to find out.

"How soon can you bury this, Bill?"

"Sir?" Bill sounded surprised, but he really shouldn't have been.

"Can we… can we make this go away? Deny culpability? Anything—"

"With all due respect, Rich, there is no getting out of this. Our fucking logo is on those drones. This is a joint venture—Wayne Enterprises has records we won't be able to access. There is no getting out of this one." Bill sounded angrier the more he talked. He scared Rich on a good day, but even without seeing him in person, Richard cowered back.

"But we can't—"

"I already have. There's only one way out of this, and it isn't lying. I talked with Governor Hawkes before I called you."

"You—you what?!"

"They're calling in the National Guard. We're not sitting back while a city's about to burn. I didn't serve for twenty fucking years to watch my country go to shit."

"Do you—do you know what you've just done?!"
Richard was angry about the wrong things. All concern for the people in Gotham quickly vacated his mind and he thought only of the things he was about to lose. He’d misjudged Bill. Richard thought everyone had a price, a threshold for when money eclipsed everything else. He thought he found Bill's years ago.

"Yeah. Yeah, I fucking do."

Richard still held his phone to his ear even as the line went dead, staring out at his manicured lawn as his mind worked, even then, how to mitigate the consequences that would ruin him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! Thank you all so much once again for taking the time to read and comment. You're all a bunch of superstars and I wouldn't be able to do any of this without you! ❤

Now, I know this might seem like a filler chapter, but that's why I tried to keep it a bit shorter. In The Dark Knight, we didn't see how the Joker's actions really affected people on a wider and more personal scale. We don't see the human impact, and appreciating what the Joker does (and I don't mean that in a positive way that glorifies what he does) is important and gives the things he does their meaning. It's the average person, those that are vulnerable that are most susceptible to the Joker's plans. Though in many ways he is right about humanity and human nature, it's often the wrong people who suffer because of the way the world works. The Joker wants to point these things out, and he's a very accomplished mass-manipulator, but he doesn't care about the consequences of what he does. I think it's important to show that.
Decent Men in an Indecent Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*What a goddamn, fucking mess,* Jim Gordon thought.

His city—yes, it was his city now, his responsibility—was on fire. He knew that was an exaggeration; *select areas* of Gotham were on fire. Didn't mitigate the damage that was spilling out from his control. He had officers going missing, riots breaking out in the low-income areas of Gotham, looting, fires, Lynch mobs hunting citizens who weren't even criminals, their goddamn mayor was missing—likely on his way to being murdered—and a whack-job terrorist on the loose who clearly had access to sophisticated weaponry many small countries would be envious of. Not to mention that the entire case he'd built against the Mob was gone with Lau. Another man who was surely dead by now. It made Gordon's head hurt, accelerating his heart rate to one constant drum of adrenaline.

What was left of his SWAT force stood in front of him with his riot police at the Major Crimes Unit. Coleman Reese was cowering somewhere in the precinct, opting to wait out the madness in the one place he likely wouldn't be torn apart. He was out of present danger since the hospital already blew, but with the way the vigilante groups were roaming for the remaining fifteen, Gordon wouldn't take any chances.

The men and women in front of him were the only groups available with the expertise to stem large-scale mobs. Many had experience trying to restore order in Jonathan Crane's attack on Gotham, but they managed to confine it to one area in the Narrows. Four districts of Gotham were in chaos and the roads were quickly filling with fleeing people. A great deal of Gordon's remaining officers was used as traffic control, trying to keep order as they figured out what the hell they needed to do, where the new threats might lie.

"Alpha Team One—you're heading to the Burnley District. Get people off the streets and into their homes, round up any officers you find on the way and break up the mobs anyway you can. Clear a path for the ambulances to take people to the remaining hospitals. Suppress but avoid the use of deadly force. Do you understand?"

Gordon knew he was asking for something he had no way of enforcing. Police brutality went with the name in Gotham, and he knew that it only took a wild shot for things to decline quickly. He was faced with the threat of total anarchy, and they needed to suppress it at any cost. Mayor Garcia declaring a free-for-all just short of sanctioning a street war was not a benefit in any way, only serving to throw gas on the fire.

Batman was an ally Gordon couldn't do without, but he had no hope in hell of figuring this one out. There was only so much one man could do, even one as well armed, intelligent, and resourceful as Batman. Rubber bullets, flashbangs, tear gas, and long-range acoustic devices would be the police's best friend that day. Gordon tried not to think about what the world would say when the dust settled.

*If we live that long,* he thought.

He shouted out orders, coordinating between every precinct captain and high-ranking officers now under his command to be at their most effective. He still had the fire department to work with to figure out how to stop the damage the fires were causing. If they didn't get it under control quickly,
the blazes would spread like wildfire.

Gordon was efficient, savvy and intelligent, but this was a different game than he was used to. More was at stake and he wracked his brain to figure out where things went sideways. There was no place he could pinpoint exactly where things had gone so catastrophically wrong, but now that they had he needed to deal with the aftermath.

Gordon drew in a breath, ready to give his next group of soldiers their marching orders when his phone rang. It was the tone he set for his work contacts.

"Benning, what's our final roll call? How many did we lose?"

Sergeant David Benning was coordinating the teams at the now-destroyed Gotham General Hospital. Accounting for the missing and the dead was a priority, as was accounting for Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes. Gordon was wracked with guilt about what happened to them both. In all his years as an officer on the force, there wasn't anything he regretted more than how they were left to die and he had so undoubtedly and irrevocably failed to stop any of it. On top of all that, Miriam was missing again. Her guardian's car rammed off the road. That still confused him, a puzzle he couldn't get the full picture of. All he knew was that he'd failed her, too. He couldn't do anything to help her. Not while the lives of thousands relied on him to fight for them first. There was only so much one man could do alone.

There were so many people he promised to keep safe and he'd failed them all. Even his own family. It would take a miracle for them to get past this. Several. Even then, it wouldn't overcome his mistakes. It wouldn't change that he fell into the Joker's hand like a goddamn fool. Harvey and Rachel needed to be safe. They might never be whole again, but he'd keep them alive so they could try. It was the one thing he had control of guaranteeing.

"We have sixteen missing—witnesses saw a group of doctors and nurses board a bus but haven't been seen since. Eight confirmed dead. Two of them officers and the rest hospital staff."

He breathed out a sigh he didn't know he was holding. The answer to his next questions would determine how much of his mental energy he could focus on what lay ahead.

"What about Dent? Rachel Dawes?"

The pause of silence almost made his heart skip. His gut churned painfully. Something was wrong.

"Dent's missing. He's not on any roll call. We think... there's a chance he was still inside when the drone hit the main wing." Benning was hesitant, talking in a hushed tone. This was bad. Very bad. They couldn't lose their mayor and their DA. Not in the same day. "Search and rescue is trying—"

"No, 'trying' is not good enough. You find him, now. If anyone asks, we got him out. This is a top priority—do you understand?"

He winced at his tone, the harshness of it. Harvey was angry when Gordon went to visit him earlier that morning. Furious. He was right and it pained Gordon to admit it. His own squad—and his inability to eliminate the potential moles—had devastating consequences. Harvey's trust in the GCPD was destroyed. Permanently. Gordon didn't even have time to go looking for Wuertz.

"Yes, sir. We'll keep searching."

Gordon needed to end the call, but Benning hadn't answered the other half of his initial question. Without question, the way Rachel looked now haunted him. She was unrecognizable. Swelling, bruising, and the burned tissue was to blame. The doctor's assured him that time to heal and surgery
would make a significant difference, but that wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

"What about Rachel?" he asked quietly.

Gordon admired Rachel. She was smart and tenacious, a true public servant. Someone who always
had the people's best interests at heart. She was as key of an ally as Batman. If she recovered, the
person she used to be would surely not.

"Yes—she's on a bus to Trenton with the other ICU patients."

Gordon found some peace of mind about that. Rachel was still alive, and she'd get the treatment
she needed. He didn't think she'd ever forgive him, and he didn't expect her to. It's why he didn't
blame Harvey. He'd want recompense, too.

"I want a call as soon as you hear anything," he said before hanging up.

He turned, focusing his mind on using the officers he had left to make what needed to be done as
successful as possible. No sooner than he tucked his phone back in his pocket did it ring again.
Frowning, he pondered whether it was worth answering at that point. It wasn't the ringtone he'd set
for calls from his wife, the sound of wedding bells, but the standard one—a ringer set for people
not in his contacts. He was going to ignore it until he thought better of it, digging it back out and
staring at the screen. "Unknown Caller," it read.

"Gordon," he answered. Whoever was on the other end wasted no time in speaking.

"Commissioner Gordon, this is Governor Johanna Hawkes."

Gordon froze. He'd been trying to find a way to directly speak with her since the explosion at the
hospital rocked the city and Garcia went live forty-five minutes ago. Waving to his second to
continue with giving out orders, Gordon turned from the men and spoke quickly.

"Did you get my other calls? Things are deteriorating here quickly—"

"Has anyone from Titan Industries called you?" she interrupted. Gordon's mind went blank.

"No—no, we've been trying to deal with the fire at the hospital and deal with the riots. Why?"

This was a line of thought he wasn't expecting at all. Stephens—one of his most trusted detectives
—was dead. His body was in the basement of that very building in the small morgue. There was no
chance for him to tell Gordon what Miriam had. The project name HAVOC was something he had
no way of knowing about. Only one question stuck in his mind: what did some paramilitary
company have to do with what was happening in Gotham?

Unless...

"I just got off the phone with their chief of technology. That was their drone that levelled the
hospital. They say they've been breached, and more are on the way. I've requested the National
Guard; they'll be there in an hour with fighter jets." Hawkes was speaking quickly but with a
steady voice. If what she was saying wasn't so horrifying, Gordon would have found it
assuring. "Apparently these drones are nearly impossible to detect. There's four more coming your
way."

"Four?! Jesus Christ—" Gordon had managed to stave off panic up until this point, but now it was
threatening to swallow him.
"Titan Industries was able to determine where they're heading, but we have no ETA or way of tracking them. Evacuation needs to be the top priority. The military will handle suppressing the terrorist calling himself "the Joker." There are too many lives at risk to not take every measure possible. Do I have your cooperation with that?" she asked.

"Yes, absolutely," he started, eager to get all the help he could when she cut him off again.

"Excellent. I'm connecting you with Major Lewinsky. You'll need to coordinate to get this under control. You'll answer to him and I want updates by the hour."

Gordon barely had time to acknowledge that before she hung up the phone.

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The first thing Harvey Dent contemplated was suicide when he woke up from his initial surgery. That was before he found out that Rachel was still alive. Initially, that gave him hope, but now that was entirely taken away. With his face the way it was, without the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, living held absolutely no meaning for him. There was only one thing that held him back from using his newly acquired revolver on himself.

Vengeance.

Harvey was an even-tempered man. Fair.

He tried to be, anyway.

That hadn't always worked out for him during his years in Internal Affairs. The rot he saw there was enough to disillusion most, but it served to make Harvey mean and hard in his adherence to the justice system. He didn't trust anyone to uphold it as he did. Everyone was suspect, everyone capable of being brought down. It was to be expected in Gotham; the city had been dying for years. But not Harvey. He would be different. That's what he always told himself.

Most knew him as someone handsome and charming, affable and good-natured. That was what he always tried to maintain, but he inherited his father's temper. As soon as he caught one whiff of corruption, an inkling that they weren't serving the cause of justice, Harvey would turn on them with a ferocity that left most people stunned. It made him unpopular. Some people were downright terrified of him. He often made it into a joke, a good way to spin the reputation that followed him when he talked with others who weren't on the blunt end of his work. When rooting out corruption became popular when the Batman took down Jonathan Crane, Harvey was held up as a champion rather than a problem to overcome.

"Harvey Two-Face," they'd call him. No one was brave enough to say it to his face, but he'd heard it all the same. Now the name had become his reality. No escaping it now.

There were keys left in the jacket the Joker threw at him on his way out of the hospital, and he pressed the lock button until he located the matching vehicle in the parking garage. He was in pain—total agony. Every move tore the charred skin apart and the creases, reopening them and burning anew with the cool air that passed over it. Harvey knew where he wanted to go. Whom he needed to see.

Michael Wuertz would be the next man Chance and Fate judged. They judged the Joker innocent, and so he was out of Harvey's mind, only lingering in the memory of his words about working for a force larger than himself. He tried so hard to figure out what the Joker was after, but now he saw that it didn't matter at all. If the Joker was a disciple of Chaos, Harvey would be one for Chance.

During his time in IA, Harvey accumulated extensive files on every officer in the precincts under
his purview. He knew where Wuertz would be because he was an old dog unwilling to learn new tricks. "Joe's." A simple bar just outside the Burnley District. Harvey kept the radio off, not even looking behind as the hospital was levelled as he drove away. It didn't matter because nothing else did anymore. Not without Rachel.

Several detours were required to get where he needed to go. The first was getting a different set of clothes from the hospital gown and thick jacket. It was a Sunday evening; most stores were set to close after six. Harvey found the first department store he saw en route and stopped the car. Not even caring who was around, Harvey walked in just as the managers went to lock the doors.

"Um, sir, we're closing—" They stopped abruptly when Harvey turned and looked them full in the face. The young woman screamed and backed up. Harvey gave her a chagrined smile.

That's what he was now. A monster.

Not bothering with her or her shouts about calling the police, Harvey quickly found a dress shirt on a rack in his size and in a similar pattern that he would have worn to a day in the office. Grabbing a suit jacket and pants, Harvey went up to the counter where the woman was cowering.

"Take these off," he growled, motioning to the security tags. Once the terror abated, recognition rocked her. Past the ruined half of his face, she knew who he was. She was one of the many who voted for him. "Now."

Nodding and hands shaking, she obeyed. Harvey took the items and promptly left, getting in the car and roaring down the street. He was narrow in his concentration, completely focused on what needed to be done. His father had been like that, once. Before he was lost to the bottle. His level of concentration and dedication was the one thing Harvey admired about him. He couldn't shake that even when his father applied that to his cruelties with him and his mother. He had that same drive that he applied to his job. Now, it served a different purpose.

Arriving at Joe's in record time, Harvey's expression darkened when he saw Wuertz's car parked out back. The same one used to take him to his would-be execution grounds. Joe's was otherwise near-abandoned, only one other car next to Wuertz's. Harvey pulled on the new clothes quickly, wincing and growling when the movements tore into his damaged tissue more. When he was dressed, he pulled out the revolver from his pocket, opening the back door and walking inside.

Harvey could hear nothing except for the noise coming from the TV. It sounded like the news, but Harvey didn't care. He stopped and waited around the corner when he heard a man speak.

"Sweet Jesus. D'you see this, Mike? They—they blew up a hospital…" The man sounded concerned, almost stricken. This wasn't Wuertz speaking. All that answered the man was a disinterested grunt. "Shouldn't you be out there, y'know, doin' somethin'?" he asked.

"It's my day off." The answer was short and quick, voice gruff from years of smoking.

Wuertz.

Typical. Sitting back when he was needed, leaving the undeserving to die while he wasted oxygen. The first man, the bartender, Harvey assumed, sighed and something clanged shut.

"I gotta take a leak. Keep an eye out on things, will ya?" he asked.

This was a clear opportunity. Harvey waited for the man to go back to the washroom and followed quickly after him. Once the door shut, Harvey locked the deadbolt, trapping the bartender inside.
Judgement time.

Harvey went behind the counter and stood in front of Wuertz, who had his eyes glued to the TV and a glass of bourbon to his lips. The pockmarks on his face showed a long history of alcoholism.

"What, you need me to shake it for—"

Wuertz stopped abruptly when he saw the muzzle of the revolver in his face, the hammer being cocked back.

"Hello."

Harvey leaned into the light, showing his now hideous face. The blackened gums and teeth. Burnt out eye socket. Ashen skin and muscle tissue that looked like raw steak. It was something straight out of a nightmare. That's what Harvey was now. A nightmare.

"Dent, I thought you was… dead."

He wasn't wrong. Who Harvey was did die.

"Half."

Taking Wuertz's drink, he pounded it back, the alcohol stinging his singed esophagus and the exposed muscles in his cheeks, the remnants of his skin as it leaked out past the holes left in his face. Setting the glass down, Harvey raised the gun.

"Who picked up Rachel, Wuertz?"

"It must have been Maroni's men—"

"LIAR!" he roared, slamming the butt of the gun down and snarling. Wuertz nearly fell off his chair and cowered back. "You, of all people, are gonna protect a traitor in Gordon's unit?" His voice went low, convincing but nonetheless menacing. Even completely mad, Harvey was compelling. His ruined face didn't take away from the pull of his charm.

"I—I don't know—he'd never tell me. " Wuertz's fat face was pleading, hands going up as he begged. The only thing it served was to irritate Harvey. "I swear—I swear to God, I didn't know what they were going to do to you—to anyone—"

Harvey raised the gun higher and stuck it in Wuertz's face.

Coward, Harvey thought. A goddamn coward.

He took out the coin burning a hole in his jacket pocket. It's what won him his date with Rachel. His trump card to get what he wanted, a trick that was only permissible because of his delivery. His father's lucky coin. It was a joke he only ever kept to himself. A source of irony. Making his own luck just as his father did the same.

His father would use it, on nights he was especially drunk, to decide exactly what he would do. Sometimes it was nothing, other times it was breaking his wife's wrist and his son's nose. Each time was random and, as Harvey could see now, fair.

What happened to his mother, in the end, wasn't fair—strung up from the ceiling with her hands behind her back—but what happened to his father was. Life in prison for a crime his colleagues couldn't ignore even though they were the reason why it was allowed to happen. Wuertz was that
same kind of cop. *Poison.*

He always thought he was so different from his father. Better. But maybe he wasn't at all. Maybe they were exactly the same and just followed different forces. Harvey wanted that to be justice, but justice was a lie. Chance wasn't. You were faced with that every day. A thousand possibilities that danced around your life that you had absolutely no control over.

"Funny," he said, dropping the coin on its edge on the bar counter and watching it as it spun around and around, "I don't know what's going to happen to you, either."

He got his answer soon enough. It landed, scarred side up. Harvey felt nothing at all—not remorse, not regret, not sympathy when he put the barrel to Wuertz's head and pulled the trigger. Blood and brain matter shot out of the back of his head, but Harvey was already turning away, straightening his jacket and coming out from around the other side of the bar to Wuertz's body on the floor. He dug into his jacket and pulled out the dead man's phone. surprisingly, he didn't have a passcode. Harvey searched through the contacts for any name he'd recognize. He had most of the members of note memorized and he saw one he knew immediately.

*Joe Bandano.*

Harvey typed a message quickly, adopting the style Wuertz used previously.

*I need to see Maroni.*

The reply he received was almost immediate as he walked out the backdoor of the bar, the man locked in the bathroom screaming to be let out.

*No.*

Harvey sighed and tried again.

*I have information. Dent's loose.*

He laughed at the irony.

The next message he received was an address. Harvey smiled, the pain it caused serving to make him feel alive.

*"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."*

He read that once. Dante's *Inferno.* It was during his undergrad when he had a rare free moment of time. He mostly read it to be better versed in the classics and to impress his female classmates. The quote came to him and was consoling. Harvey would no longer be neutral in anything. He would always make a decision, one way or another; Chance taking the burden of choice from him. People thought they had free will, but they really didn't. They were all subject to forces they had no way of governing, and they were foolish to try.

It was Chaos. They needed something to tip the scales into balance. A system of *fairness.* Chance was fair. In its purest form, it had no factors that would seek to distort it. It had no feelings, bias, prejudice. It would give him what choice could not. Gordon and the police were upholding a system steeped in falsehoods. They didn't stand for justice, *fairness.* Neither did Batman. Batman wasn't fair. He was unwilling what needed to be done, driven by motives he couldn't really understand. And he was unwilling to do that now. Rachel was the first person since his mother died that he felt happy with. Truly happy. She was gone—ripped away from him, just like his
mother was. That wasn't fair either. He could be that force. He could seek out those who did wrong and tip back what was taken.

He'd do it until Chance decided it was his time to die, one bastard at a time if that's what it took.

Gordon rushed to the meeting point sent to him by Major Lewinsky. Siren's blared around him as he stood by Gotham's waterfront, the section of the main island that connected the hub of the city to the mainland.

The National Guard was there already, and the sound of powerful jet engines screeching above as the planes went overhead added to the noise. It was chaos—cars lined up for miles citizens yelling in their eagerness to escape. As per the Governor's orders, Gordon's main forces were trying to keep them under control as the inevitable scramble bottlenecked.

"Gordon?" asked a tall blonde man Gordon took for Lewinsky. His shoulders were square and broad, posture rigid and his eyes constantly looking around at his surroundings. Gordon stretched out his hand and shook the Major's, looking around to get a handle on what needed to be done.

"Hawkes said you would be in charge of finding this son of a bitch? What are you doing first? I'd like to—"

An ear-shattering boom shook the air, making everyone duck behind the nearest solid object. Covering his head as small bits of rubble fell on his head, Gordon looked up in horror. Parts of the Gotham bridge was smoking—thick cable lines snapped and barriers keeping the cars from falling into the river gone as supporting pillars dropped chunks of stone and cement into the waiting water below. Screams quickly followed.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he shouted.

It felt sluggish, but he was quick to think about what this meant. The implications of just one explosion when put in context. This was just one bridge. There were eight others that were potentially rigged to blow. It looked like the damage was meant to destabilize the structure, not kill the people on the bridge. A miracle if they could get the people off before something else happened. And, at this point, absolutely anything could.

How could this just keep getting worse? How could they keep back everything that was tearing them apart? Gotham was in revolution. A battle for its future and its soul. It was one Gordon was losing.

Gordon watched in shock as a group from the National Guard poured out onto the bridge, directing his officers. He stood, ears ringing and limbs feeling heavy, as the sheer weight of the daunting task ahead crushed him.

He didn't feel like a police commissioner anymore. He felt like a war general. Contemplating everything that needed to be done to succeed. There was no path ahead that wasn't paved in blood.

How will we come back from this?

That was the heart of the problem. Gotham wouldn't come back from what the Joker had done. Not in any way that would leave them in any state they were familiar with before.

Gordon didn't know how he knew his phone was ringing. Perhaps it was the vibration, but it certainly wasn't because he heard it. Bringing it to his ear, he didn't even bother checking who it was as he stared at the crippled bridge, the people abandoning their cars and being forced back to
"Gordon," a gravelly voice greeted him. He'd know it anywhere. Twisting quickly, Gordon cast his eyes about, looking at the streams of running people as he seemed to be stuck in mud.

"Batman? Tell me you're doing something, anything—"

"I know where the drones are going. They're almost impossible to track with radar; the fighter planes won't be able to hit them unless they sight it visually first." Batman's words were rushed and did not bring Gordon any hope. He was going to ask what the hell they could do when Batman continued. "If I take care of the drones, can you handle the rest?"

Gordon didn't know if he honestly could. His city was crumbling around him. The smell of smoke and dusted cement coating his lungs. As he looked on, saw the terror on people's faces, something instinctual grew in him. It was determination and a resolute stubbornness that would take the city back, no matter the cost. He'd keep these people safe. They relied on him to do that, and he couldn't break now. He'd do it, even if it killed him.

"Yes, but how will you—"

"Do you trust me, Jim?" Batman asked.

Gordon didn't need to think. Batman had done more for this city than anyone else, a force of good Gordon could only envy.

"Yes."

His trust didn't waver even as Batman ended the call.

*Now the work begins.*

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my wonderful readers! I meant to get this out a bit sooner, but summer break (despite all the jobs) has my brain feeling very lazy. Anyhow, I hope you enjoy this chapter and thank you very much again to everyone who's been taking the time to review - your kind words of encouragement mean the world ❤.

I know this is another low-key chapter (and so short in comparison to the recent ones, hey?) in terms of seeing some of our favourite characters, but seeing what's going on outside the tailspin Miri's in and the Joker's reign of terror is still something I think is important to this story. We don't really see Harvey's mental descent into becoming Two-Face, and I think that's integral for what he does and who he becomes. Rachel is still alive in this story, and like many poor fools before him, Harvey believed what the Joker told him. How that plays out will be revealed with time, but I'll tell you now it won't entirely follow canon.

Thank you and I'll be back again next Saturday!
"Miriam Adina Kane, what did you do this time?" Mom asked as she walked into the principle's office.

I was sitting there, cheeks burning after being chewed out by Principle Fawkes, and I could tell Mom was furious with me.

"Miriam had a violent altercation this afternoon. The boy needed stitches. You're lucky we're doing this here and not the police station."

My head bowed further as Fawkes spoke. It was fear that made me look away, but above all that it was shame. I was ashamed of what I did, but there was no taking it back.

"I just—"

"It was unprovoked and, frankly, she's lucky she won't be expelled for this."

Anger of my own flooded in with what Fawkes said. I was thirteen and got caught hitting Marshall Greene after he called me a 'darkie whore.' It shouldn't have bothered me; I was used to other kids finding reasons to explain why I wouldn't interact with them. Being the only brown girl, aloof and anti-social, and almost completely disengaged from the world did not award me the goodwill of my peers.

Any of those things would have been a sign of a socially awkward kid in anyone else, but in me, it was paired with the apparent differences between us and the meaner, more entitled kids found plenty of opportunities to capitalize on it to lessen their own boredom. They were looking for a reaction, and as soon as they gave me a reason to give one, I never disappointed.

"Unprovoked? Miriam, is that true?" Mom asked.

I didn't look at her, thinking she wouldn't believe me. Why would she? I'd been acting out all year, escalating from mouthing off to outright violence. This wasn't the first time I sat in that office, waiting for Mom to get called down from work and lecture me about the importance of human connection. I gave up trying to make friends with my classmates a long time ago, and the frustration underlying that transformed into rage when Mom told me her diagnosis. It only took two weeks for confusion, denial, and grief to give way to unending anger.

"No, he… he called me a name—" Fawkes was quick to interrupt me, her anger rising above anything Mom would have mustered.

"That's no excuse. He's missing tomorrow's game because of you, and that on its own means a week's suspension."

Marshall was a good enough football player to be on Gotham Academy's junior varsity football team. He was old enough to be in high school but stuck in grade eight because he failed a year. He was bigger than me, and it's why he thought I wouldn't do anything.

They were always wrong about that, but he wasn't the only one.
Teachers forgot I was there, telling me to 'apply myself' and be 'present' in class, expressing their concern about my social skills. It wasn't that I didn't know how to interact with them, it was that I didn't think it was worth it. I was probably too young to feel so jaded, but I couldn't find anyone who just got the world the way I did—who saw it as a giant disappointment waiting to happen. People let you down, promises meant nothing, and no one really saw each other at all—just shadows that they took for an accurate likeness.

All of this worked to make it hard to control my emotions. They would be gone and buried until suddenly they weren't, manifesting in ways that were uglier than I ever intended. I hadn't learned the art of self-blame—self-denial and carving recompense on your own soul—and so I blamed the world and I wanted to punish someone for it. That day, the unlucky boy was Marshall.

I was taller than most of the girls, but there wasn't much to me—I was bone-thin and gawky. No one thought the placid exterior would give way to unrelenting anger. I kicked Marshall in the knee and then hard in the balls. When he was on the ground, I kept kicking him until the teachers pulled me off. I didn't believe he was hurt that bad—maybe scared and taken off guard, but I didn't have the physical power to do more than make him cry and leave bruises he wouldn't forget about quickly. His parents said they wouldn't press charges if I was suspended for two weeks and moved to another class. Everyone agreed, and my hate only grew.

When Mom dragged me out of school and into her red Audi, I thought she was going to lay into me like Fawkes. I remember so clearly staring out past the windshield as the falling snow trapped us in the car—caught in a bubble of our own world, one I couldn't get away from because things were hard.

She was tired, I know she was. They already started her on chemo, and one round was enough to entirely change how she was at home. Her energy was gone, the bright spark that kept the corners of her lips turned up disappeared, and the sheer will she exuded evaporated as the day waned. She was already becoming someone I didn't recognize, and I didn't know what my world would look like without her. There was no life I could conceptualize where I was so alone, and I didn't want to try.

I didn't have to think about it in my head. Soon enough, it would become my waking reality.

"Baby, why did you do that?" she asked after several minutes of us just listening to the cars passing by and watching the delicate flakes of white coat the car and swallow us. "Why would you want to hurt someone like that?"

She sounded so... so genuinely confused. Like she couldn't see the anger that was a near constant for much of my life. It wasn't even that I wanted to hurt Marshall—not in a way that was permanent. As much as my stubbornness told me he deserved it, I knew that what I did wouldn't help. It wouldn't do much of anything other than embed my status as a loner—the girl you could wonder about but were afraid of getting close to lest she bit you. Like a rabid dog.

I didn't want to be those things, but I didn't know how to change it—to make people understand. So, I didn't try.

Parker was the first person who made me want to.

When I didn't answer, or even look at her, she sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was paler than before, her skin almost yellow. Her hair wasn't hers anymore—she'd pre-emptively shaved it to save going bald in patches and wore a wig. Every day she looked less like the person I knew, but now I know that's not true. She was always there; I just couldn't see it where it mattered.
"I need you to answer me, Miri."

Draggin my eyes from the soggy floormat to her face, I expected to see anger that matched what I felt before, but all I saw were her eyes welling up with tears.

"I… I wanted…" How could I finish the sentence without making her feel worse, without letting her down? Her face demanded the truth, and the shame I felt in Fawkes' office came back in a burning flush. "I wanted someone to feel like I did. He… he called me a—"

"I know what he called you, baby." A flash of anger came over her then, and hurt, but it wasn't directed at me. "You wanted someone to feel like what? What’re you feeling that’s causing this?"

I didn't bother making others understand, but it was always different with my family. If they didn’t know who I was, if I couldn’t tell them, then did I really exist at all?

"I feel—it’s… why do things hurt all the time? It’s… it’s—I’m never enough, you know?" The words were rushing out, but the tears wouldn't. They were trapped in my throat, choking me as I shut out the world in order to force out the truth. "I just… I screwed up and I don't get them, and they don't get me. So, sometimes… sometimes making someone else feel like me is like, for just a second, they understand. They know what it's like."

Mom sighed and managed to make it sound sad.

"You know that’s not true, don’t you, Miri?"

I did know it, but I didn't know what else to do. The wall was in place and I was hiding behind it. That's what people saw when they looked at me, and as much as I wanted to tear it down, I ended up building upon it instead.

"Yes…"

Mom's arm wrapped around my shoulders and we sat in silence, just like that night when Mom told me never to change for anyone. She wanted to help me, but she was running out of time. And, maybe, I didn't want to help myself. Not in a way that looked at my problems objectively. My sight was always clouded, even if I knew differently in my bones.

"Mistakes are OK, Miri. It's a part of being human—and we all are. Hurting is human, too." I don't know why that was what made me cry, but the tears started and there was no stopping them. "The world isn't fair, and that's not going to change. When we let our mistakes rule us, when we're paralyzed by the fear of pain, that's what causes the most damage. Do you understand what I mean?"

Her fingers worked through my hair, folding me into her as I thought about how goddamn true that was. Life wasn't fair. Not by a fucking longshot. I thought it then, but it feels like a truth that's carved into my soul now. It eclipsed the kernel of wisdom about the power of guilt and responsibility—how consuming it can be, and it made me fail to consider why it had to be that way at all.

"Your father never learned this, but strength doesn't come from your fists—how much damage you can deal out. You're smart. Wicked smart. You get it from me."

She laughed and leaned her head on mine. Mom even smelled differently, her perfume diluted by the smell of hospitals and sickness. I'd already learned to hate that, too.

"We don't know what the future looks like, but that doesn't mean we give up and die—we don't let..."
I thought this was just like before, when she imparted truths that didn't make sense outside the pages of a book. Maybe I wasn’t in a place to understand that then, either. I may not have learned self-blame yet, but I was well-versed in the art of denial.

"Hurting others won’t take away what you feel—you can’t beat empathy into someone. That's not where it comes from, Miri."

I always liked listening to Mom talk, even when I didn’t totally understand. Upset and convinced that the mistakes I’d already made would follow me for the rest of my life, I wanted to latch onto what she said. If what I’d done wouldn’t help me, what else could? What would take away what was already drowning me?

"Where then, Mom?" I whispered after a long time.

I thought she was going to leave it in silence, like maybe she forgot or didn’t know herself. The tumors hadn’t started to affect her memory yet, but she told me to expect it. I didn’t want this to be the start of when I’d lost that part of her, too.

“It comes from the heart, and sometimes you have to hurt a little more until you find someone who can help ease the burden. That doesn’t mean you stop trying, baby.”

That was something I always kept with me—the idea of someone coming along to take the load that made my knees buckle. For a long time, I thought that person could be Bruce. When he let me down and disappeared, Parker was the next person in my life to make me believe in that again, but even now I see that was another mistake.

The Joker told me to let go, and maybe I should. Maybe I should let go of the idea that someone will come along to find me in a life raft, that they'll keep me from tearing myself apart. Maybe I just need to swim until my body refuses to draw in air; until I burst or my muscles give out. But I’ve been treading water and taking it in my lungs when the shore was through the mist. No one else is going to take me there. Only I can do that. If I die never knowing the touch of dry land again, I can know I fought for it, that my body will eventually drift ashore.

If I’m going to drown, then it won’t be because I let myself be dragged into the dark. It'll be on my own terms, when my body decides its had enough. And I’m not there, I’m not done fighting. Not yet.

Something comes over me when Mayor Garcia speaks into the camera, the sweat dripping off him with the small trails of blood that fall from his fingers to the floor. His face is like it's ever been from what I can remember of his campaign commercials, but his body is another story. Patches of blood have soaked through his suit and it's ripped in several places.

What I'm feeling now is like when I watched Bruce at the press conference. A sense of clarity that comes with detachment. The pain is fading, but my mind is sharp, cutting through the haze. My body might be useless right now, but the rest of me can't be.

I’m remembering and, for the first time in years, I’m welcoming it.

"It should be clear now that the Gotham City Police Department and the—the ruling government bodies have become ineffective. They will not be able to stop the riots or protect you or your loved ones from—from harm."
This entire thing's a farce—a play at revolution while espousing the opposite. The Joker's standing next to me, his hand on my neck, giggling as Garcia struggles through his lines. His family's here somewhere, it's the only reason he'd be doing this. He's like me, trapped by the ties we hold to others and one man's ability to exploit them.

Garcia's lip shakes, but his voice steadies, looking at the camera with a type of intensity that would be entirely convincing to someone none the wiser. But I know. I know this is a lie meant to hurt and unleash pandemonium.

"Come nightfall, this city will be lost. Those who are unwilling to... to play by the new rules can get out now. Those who remain will find no refuge from—from the new world, free of the forces that keep you in the dark. Look out for yourselves and do all that is necessary, all within your means, to make it out alive and usurp all that seeks to keep you subdued."

Garcia takes a deep breath, wincing as his surely bruised ribs suck in large bouts of air. His mouth opens once, the hesitation coming out in a small gasp before spilling out in a warning: "Beware the tunnels and the bridges and keep your eye on the sky."

_The Joker's going to set the entire city on fire._

And I agreed to help him.

_Does it matter anymore?_

Lucius is still in the room, staring at me. He hasn't stopped since the Joker made us march in here. He must have guessed at something, or maybe Titan Industries was on top of things more than I gave them credit for. I blocked them out of their own systems, but I didn't stop them from seeing where the drones were heading. They could still get people out in time.

Seeing Lucius—seeing all the people in this building riding on the whims of a madman—did more than I ever could on my own. The fog is lifting, and something else is fighting to come through. It's hard, wading through quicksand, but I keep going—pushing myself farther.

I might not deserve to save myself, but they deserve to have someone help save them.

_You ruin people._

That's what the Joker told me, and it's true. I do that. I'm alone and my presence is a blight. He was right about all of that—but I've been so consumed by my own pain that it's held me back, made me latch onto others who could show me the way. I don't know if that realization matters anymore, what exactly it'll accomplish. It'll only hurt me, just like everything else does.

_Fight, Miri._

Why is that voice coming back? I don't think I have anything left.

_'You're all alone, aren't you?'_

He was right about that, too. What else is there that's left for me? There is nothing. Nothing at all.

_Don't stop fighting._

When the camera lowers, the Joker skips over to where Davie's holding his cell phone, humming with giddy joy. I stay rooted where I am, and I try hard not to make eye contact with Lucius. He's worried, I know he is, but acknowledging what he means to me would only serve to do him harm.
The Joker would make sure of that.

_Fight._

"I-I did what you wanted, let my children go—" Garcia starts before the Joker raises his gun without even looking. His finger's on the trigger, not pulling it back yet, and Garcia crumbles to the ground.

"No one, ah, said you could speak." The Joker jerks his chin to one of the many men in the room, motioning to a now weeping Garcia. "Take him back with the others. He'll get what's comin' soon enough."

Garcia's dragged from the room; no sound other than choked groans following him out into the hallway. When the door shuts again, the fear I managed to push away finds me again. I know what's coming next and I don't know what to do. What I saw on the ship—how all those men just died and I was helpless to make it stop—comes rushing back. Exhaustion makes my thoughts rotate between the desire for mental escape and pouring everything that's left in me into resistance.

'_Never give in because it's easy._'

Mom's voice creeps back in. I can see her now in my mind's eye, too. She's standing next to Parker, imbuing me with the desire to try. They're urging me on, ghostly specters that never leave entirely.

The feeling of potential bravery dies when the Joker turns to me and smacks his lips, eyebrows doing a pump to show his excitement. My skin crawls, and my eyes stay fixed on him, just like he wants.

"You ready to go, sweet peach? Need to get things prepared for an, ah… extra special visit. Who knows, you might see your bestie in black," he teases, standing in front of me and planting his hands on my shoulders. His touch starts the war again with my thoughts battling my instincts.

There's only one answer I can give without this getting bloody.

_Think, Miri. C'mon, think._

I don't want to answer him or drift into the pull of mindless obedience of relying on another, but it would be so much easier. The pain would go away, I'd never have to feel it again.

_No, Miri. Don't you dare._

Why is it so important now that I'm trying to fight back? Why bother when I already know what he said was true, that I'm everything he said and more?

_Because this isn't about you anymore. You know what will happen._

I don't want to do this, but I have to. I know too well what will happen if I don't.

"Yes, J."

The words are like literal glass in my throat, cutting my trachea so that I choke on the blood. His face lights up at the nickname, the same one I used in another lifetime on the ship.

"Stu-pen-dous," he says, clapping his hands together. Twisting my chair around, he pushes me against the terminal until my knees hit the lip of the metal desk. This is the terminal that will give me access to Titan Industry's flight servers. "Get crackin'."
No, Miri. Fight it.

"What the hell are you doing?"

No, no, no—why didn't he just stay quiet?

It's Lucius who spoke. Lucius just brought down the attention of the Joker. This won't end well.

What can I do?

There is nothing I can do. The apathy might be fazing through with streaks of someone I never thought I could be, but helplessness is a constant I can't shake. I don't have the power here, he does.

I see the Joker's expression before he turns. It's anger, but it's quickly covered up by a familiar expression of mocking. He's always looking to be entertained, for someone to think of a new form of sick fun. The Russian man. The poor stranger left to burn to death. That could be Lucius.

What can I do? How do I stop this?

"Got somethin' you wanna say, grandpa?" the Joker asks, traipsing over to where Lucius has been forced to stay on his knees.

To his credit, Lucius looks undaunted. Defiant and incredulous, he's already shown more bravery than I could ever hope for. He's looking past the Joker to me, begging me to stop with his eyes, to show the same resistance. Shame heats my cheeks and I stare at the ground. The Joker's greasepaint is still on my face, the large cut on my chest visible. He'll see it all and know. I'm broken now.

Are you?

Why am I thinking about this, trying anymore? What has it brought me?

You can't sit here and take it.

But I already have.

"Do you even know what you're doing? Miriam, stop this. You know what those can do."

He's begging me, trying to make me see reason like it's so simple. It hurts because it should be that way, but it isn't. I know exactly what these will do, and I'm going to have to do it anyway.

You don't matter. You never did.

Heat burns and compels me to look up. I'm met with the Joker's glare. What I say will determine whether Lucius dies.

It doesn't matter. It's not real.

The shaking starts again and I can't stop it. The Joker's energy has changed, choking and stifling. Helplessness threatens to swallow everything else again and I can barely take it. His gloved hand grips the back of my neck possessively, sliding down to rest at my lower back. It's too intimate and it will tell Lucius all he needs to know. I'm not getting away from this. My mind retreats back to safety, welcoming the numbness.

Stop it, Miri. This is real.
"I-I'm sorry, Lucius."

I can't bear to face him anymore, feel the heavy weight of his disappointment. I've broken every promise I ever made, everything I thought I held sacred. The Joker was right about this, too: I am a liar.

Turning around, I start working through the Wayne Enterprises' systems, accessing the programs that control the HAVOC drones. I know what the Joker wants and doing it will save everyone I have left.

At what cost?

The Joker kisses the top of my head and I want to stop and cry, let the overwhelming dark take over everything like it wants to. I hear Lucius struggling, the men dragging him out as the Joker chuckles, and I want the floor to swallow me. Anything to get away from this.

Not real not real not real—

"Miri—don't—"

It's too late. Whatever Lucius was going to use to convince me won't reach me now. I want him to understand, but I know he never will. I make myself keep going, even as I want to curl up and die. The only person left for me is a monster. This is the ultimate betrayal. I turned my back on everything I thought I stood for.

What are you now?

"No, ah, mistakes, sweet peach. Gotta make sure the surprise stays that way."

Nothing.

He watches me program in the coordinates, his hand squeezing occasionally. My fingers are slow and shake, but the information I need is written on a torn piece of paper with a messy scrawl I can barely decipher. After each number's entered in, he hums with excitement. City Hall. The Gotham City Police Department. The downtown core of Gotham that holds all the consulates and embassies. The Joker wants to hit them all.

And he can because of me.

It doesn't matter. Doesn't matter doesn't matter doesn't matter—

The Joker leans over to watch the last of his demented plan come to life. A glint of gold catches my eye and I stare, my fingers freezing and mind coming to a slamming halt.

It's Mom's ring. He still has it, dangling on the chain Bruce gave me to hold it when it was too big on my fingers.

A sharp stab of pain makes my head spin, and I gasp out as my vision darkens. Everything—everything I wanted to leave comes rushing back. Going to the bank on a day that would alter the course of my life. Seeing Parker smile, him walking me to the station. My room becoming a place of fear and pain. Bruce when I thought maybe things would be alright. This never-ending nightmare that swirled with parts of my life I always wanted to leave behind.

I wanted all these things to be separate, to have a clear distinction between the "then" and the "now." But I realize that wasn't right. Not entirely. It's all connected, it always has been. I didn't
want to be that angry, bitter, and reckless person anymore, but I changed into someone else I
couldn't live with in the process. I'd forgotten the things that mattered because they hurt, not
realizing that they would be what will save me.

Mom's ring isn't just a reminder of her, but also what she'd always tell me.

'You are my light.'

I might not be that, but… but maybe I'm not entirely worthless either. I wanted to do good, to save
Parker. I couldn't save him because I let inaction get in the way, because I lied to him for so long.
In more ways than one, this is my fault, but I can help. I know I can.

"What? Your, ah, brain stop working?" the Joker asks, right close to my ear. This time I don't
flinch, I don't back away. My body has never been this tired, but my mind's never been more
awake.

"My… you still have my mother's ring," I finally reply.

Pulling back, he tugs on the chain and giggles. The ring rolls between his fingers before he tucks it
back in his dress shirt, down inside so it touches his skin. I thought my fire was gone, that he
managed to extinguish it—but I've found it again, discerning a path in front of me that might lead
to some kind of salvation.

This is real and you can stop this.

"I'm keeping it safe for you, sweetheart. It's pretty, isn't it?"

There's nothing I can say without turning his ever-present wrath on me. He's mocking me, saying it
because he wants a rise out of me when he believes I can do nothing to stop him. He's right—I can't
right now. But something is stirring and coming back alive, something I thought I let him kill.

No. You just kept it buried like everything else.

It's rage. Blunt anger that used to strangle me but now feels like a tool I can grasp.

The air is coming in sparsely to my lungs, and I force myself to take in more, bringing my head
back down as he strokes my hair. I want to break his wrist.

"One more thing left to do," he says, directing my head up to the screen by a firm grip on the back
of my neck.

"What else could you possibly want?"

My response isn't one I thought about, and my eyes widen at the tone of it. I can't do what I need to
if he catches on now. His grip tightens and I think he's going to slam my head against the table
when he releases me, lowering his face in front of mine. What would have made me cower before
makes me stay resolute now, even as his lips almost touch mine. Apathy has become my friend
rather than an enemy. If I don't care about his response, it'll make the rest easier.

"There's a lot I could do, sweet peach, but this is about, ah… showing Gotham who they really
are. All of 'em."

Confusion makes me furrow my brow involuntarily.

What the hell is he talking about?
He doesn't leave me wondering for long.

"You remember that app that Zsasz so unkindly asked you to, ah, break into? Parker managed to do some of the, ah, work for you. Just need you to execute it."

He's talking about *Gotham Mingles*. What the hell could he possibly still want with that? What could he hope to gain?

"W-What do you want me to do?" Playing along is important. He still has the advantage of physical strength and a willingness to be unrelentingly violent.

Wait for an opportunity. Don't give up yet.

It's hard because I want to. Being close to him does that, pulls me into the allure of his explanations, the assurance of having an identity even if it's one he's made and it's steeped in mud. Even looking in his eyes pulls me back in, kills the thoughts that give me strength. It's hypnotizing and effacing, and I can't let him win. I can't be swayed. Not on this.

He pulls out a flashdrive from his pocket and waves it in front of my face like I should know what it is. He smirks and sits on the desk, leaning towards me like he's a coworker. Staying still and seated is the new challenge I force myself to continue meeting. There are two other men in this room. Nothing I could do would take them all out, and I would be stupid to try.

*Think, Miri. Think.*

Leaning down, he plugs the drive inside the CPU. File folders appear immediately, showing worm files that haven't been launched yet. When I click on them and read their programming, the blood drains from my face and pools in my feet. It's incomplete, but it's malware on a scale that I can only understand in it's smallest form.

"Anyone who used my special hashtag. I want their, ah, names. Publish 'em on the 'net for all their friends to find. See what kind of people they're, ah… neighbours with."

The confusion doesn't leave, and I can't help the questions coming out of my mouth.

"What hashtag? I... I don't understand."

He laughs and rolls his eyes, tilting far to the side to place his face close to mine again.

"I was playing a little... a little game, of sorts. Call it a, uh, social experiment." He cackles, drawing back to bend over as he laughs. He makes a show of trying to control himself, but I can tell this is everything he wanted and more. "The good people of Gotham just showed themselves to be who they were all along, Miri. I just... helped."

His smile is one I can describe as evil without fear of embellishment. I think of the video he made on the ship, the one with Zsasz just hours ago. Criticizing a population for participating in an ugliness he facilitates. The mention of fifteen of Gotham's most wanted, filming a man die and saying he was getting the ball rolling.

*No, he didn't... no, no, no...*

But he would do that. He must have.

The Joker somehow got people in on his sick game, had them participate in some manner on these platforms. They likely thought they had the shield of anonymity to protect them from egging on a
murderer, and the Joker wants to pull back the curtain. He wants to show everyone who exactly is just as willing to be as ugly as he is.

Now this... this is something I can agree with. Opening up the *Gotham Mingles* platform, it's easy to see what the Joker's done, how it's spread like wild fire. Thousands of people have used this—wished death on someone else. There are videos of people dying, killed by packs of mobs. Somehow, it makes me feel sicker than anything the Joker's done.

*How could they do this willingly? Don't they realize what they've done?*

They might have, but I realize that there are many who must not care at all. Posts start popping up, saying the fifteen he named weren't criminals at all, just bystanders the Joker chose to help him make a point. At some point, my fingers stop moving and I just stare. The Joker was right about this, too. People are ugly, and they were just waiting for a chance to go feral. The Joker gave them one and they didn't even question it.

He doesn't have to prod me. I get into the servers of *Gotham Mingles* after twenty-five minutes, breaking through their encryption software easily because of the systems Wayne Enterprises has. I can see why the Joker wanted to come here; I wouldn't have been able to do this on my laptop.

At the end of it, uploading the worm and watching it do its work, infecting the computers of thousands and feeding me back the information, I can put a number on the number of people who made themselves third-party to murder. Twenty-three *thousand* people voted. They voted for people to die because they thought it was deserved. The Joker threw it in their face that they didn't know anything at all. They just wanted to watch someone hurt from a distance.

*Were you any different?*

Maybe I'm not. But it doesn't mitigate what I need to do. What I have to do.

The names come in large swaths, filling up the Joker's impromptu database. This is the only thing I won't stop him on. Let him expose who would do that, but I'll take him down for enacting it all in the first place. I can't stop the plague, but I can take down the main source of infection.

My eyes are taking in the names, involuntarily looking for anyone I know, when a warm kiss is planted on my cheek.

"*There we go.*" He sounds smug. Validated. Gotham gave him everything he wanted and then some. And I helped. I don't know who I hate more, him or me. "$I got the rest... figured out."

Taking me by the shoulder, he shoves me away from the terminal. The chair rolls until it smacks into something solid. He's still standing by the computer, his mind already occupied. I need to find out what he's doing. The plan in my head isn't solid, and it might work or I could have a bullet in my head soon.

*That doesn't matter. You can't let him do what he wants. You don't want people to die, just think about what will happen if the police are entirely gone.*

"What are you doing now?" I ask, keeping my voice quiet like it was before. Disinterestedly curious. Detached. He still looks at me with surprise. The Joker didn't expect this out of me, to be coherent at all. He did his job well, wearing me down, and he succeeded to a degree. I'm not who I was anymore; everything's falling away and leaving something else behind.

"Why, waiting for the, ah, *fireworks* to start," he says, the high, nasal pitch of his voice ascending with his excitement. Everything's been going so well for him, he doesn't have any reason to think
that would stop now. "And if I'm a, ah—a real good boy, I might just get to watch 'em with my best friend—sorry, toots."

**Best friend?**

The answer dawns on me. He's talking about Batman. Of course he is. As much as he did this to upset the balance of power in Gotham, to totally rip her to pieces and bathe in the bloody aftermath, he also did this for Batman. Why does a man like the Joker exist? It's a response, an escalation to a force that upset the balance. Cause and effect. Action and reaction. He's doing this to demand a response equal to the attack—he wants Batman to hit him back for this. A battle for the ages. Why didn't I see that before?

*If that's what he really wants, you can't let him have it.*

"Lewis, be a dear and take Miri to the meeting room down the hall." He looks over my head but motions me to stand. Legs shaking, I obey. This isn't the time to resist, but I'm quickly running out of options. He doesn't look at me until his fingers run through my hair and he smiles. Something in my guy twists. "Don't worry, I won't leave ya for long, sweet peach. Then we'll... talk. Get some rest and we'll have some, ah, fun when I get back." He takes my face in his hands and kisses me quickly, and I don't even try to pull away.

He lied.

I don't know how or why I know, I just do. He's going to kill me. It shouldn't surprise me, but it does. I don't know what that will look like, and I don't want to know, but something solid takes shape when Lewis tugs on my arm. Staring back over my shoulder, I want to see if he'll meet my eye. The Joker's not paying attention to me anymore. He's typing away at the computer, prepping the files for uploading. He doesn't need me for that.

*Then what does he need you for now? Killing you makes sense. You've given him everything.*

Not yet I haven't. And I won't. I won't.

It doesn't matter what it costs. I won't let him win.

Lewis drags me away, leaving the Joker and two other men left in the terminal room. We're out in the hall, heading for the conference room. It's where I would give presentations on new projects and listen to Lucius' big plans for the year. It used to be a place of excitement, but now I know it's where the Joker plans on ending me.

He opens the door and throws me in, not looking back at me. I saw this at the shipyard: conflict. He doesn't want to do this either.

*Then convince him.*

Lewis is about to shut the door when I find a strength in my voice I didn't think I had anymore.

"Wait—Lewis, please."

The door stops just short of closing, but Lewis doesn't look back. He's hesitating, but he would have ignored me outright if he didn't want to hear what I had to say. His face is hard, the white bandage around his throat stark against the black of his skin. I try to find something in his eyes I can plead with.

"Lewis, you don't want this either, do you?" He doesn't reply or acknowledge my words, but he
doesn't shut the door either. "You know just as well as I do that this is wrong."

I've said something that doesn't matter to him. He looks away and starts shutting the door.

*Don't give up. You can't.*

Picking myself up, I rush to the door and ignore the pain twisting my muscles, the exhaustion that makes it hard to breathe.

"*Wait! Please!*"

I land my weight against the door. If he wants to close it, he'll have to shove me down again. He looks down the hall, his uncertainty becoming more apparent. He's staring at me and seeing what that officer saw at the MCU. A bad omen, someone the Joker's laid a claim on. That might be true, but I need Lewis to see beyond it. The craziness I saw in him back on the ship a lifetime ago is gone. There's only fear there.

"He almost killed you. He's killing dozens more. Let me stop him." Lewis loses the grip he had on the door. He tries to speak, but only wet rasps come out, the ghost of a syllable before he gives up. The doubt I see makes me draw in closer. "I can do it. You... you won't be here for it."

Now I'm the one trying to draw in people with words, and it seems to work. Lewis leaves the hallway and comes back in the boardroom, closing the door behind him.

*You can do this. You know what needs to be done.*

"I never wanted you to die, Lewis. If you get me back in that room, I'll get you and the hostages out, but I need your help." He raises an eyebrow at me. If he could talk, I'm sure he'd be asking me how the hell I planned on doing any of this. "Please, Lewis. You know it's only a matter of time. You know what he'll do. Is that really something you want?"

It wasn't long ago that Lewis punched me, called me a bitch. Looked on in excitement as the Joker tormented me. But he wasn't immune from the Joker's violence. He has the broken wrist and a destroyed voice box to prove it. I could see his face before, complying out of fear rather than thinking this was some revolution where he'd end up as a prince serving a king. There would be none of that. He's just as terrified of the Joker as I am, and I need him to move past it to help.

"I can do this. He won't leave here. I'll make sure."

Conviction: that's what I hear in my voice. A certainty I've never known before. There's only one way this ends, and I've found comfort in that. Bruce won't be here to save me, and I don't want him to. It won't be long now, but I'll see Parker and Mom again and, this time, I won't be ashamed to look at them. I won't let them down.

Lewis searches my eyes and I don't look away. He'll either think I've lost my mind or it's worth giving this a shot. Slowly, like he isn't quite convinced yet, he nods his head. Relief brings fresh tears that almost spill over.

"Thank you," I whisper.

What I saw of him before changes, but I don't have time to stop and stare. I need to move before it's too late. The drones were fifty-three minutes away from Gotham when I locked in the coordinates. That means I have just over ten to get this done. Motioning to a large vent ten feet up, Lewis follows me to the wall.
"Give me a boost. I'm small enough to fit and no one will know you helped. Just... stack chairs over here or something. Go with the rest of the hostages and leave with them, alright?"

He nods again and braces himself. Stepping into his clasped hands, he grunts as he lifts me up. Working quickly, I pries away the screws holding it in place and take off the cover entirely. The stitches tear and I can feel the blood flowing again, but that doesn't matter. My body reached its limits a long time ago but I can't let that get in the way. Crying out in effort, I pull myself up until my torso's in the vent. It's a tight fit, no room to wriggle much, but it'll work.

It has to.

"Be brave," I whisper to myself. This time, I feel like I can be. Like it's not something temporary I can hold onto.

I'm making too much noise as I force my way through the tight space, the metal hot with the pumping air and thick with dust. I've been in this building enough to know what direction I need to go in, and it isn't long before I find the terminal room. There's a slatted opening, and a mad smile breaks out when I see the Joker isn't here anymore. He's gone off somewhere to wait.

Now or never, Miri.

There is no going back. A man's directly underneath me, and I go off pure instinct alone. Putting my weight on the vent opening, it drops open and I fall, landing hard on the man. All the air rushes out of both of us and the other man in the room shouts, the dust rising up to add to the confusion. The man I landed on dropped his gun. Without thinking, I pick it up and aim, my head still spinning from the landing.

Think. Breathe. You can't lose. You can't.

"Get out," I growl, getting off the now limp man and keeping the gun steady. I have no idea how this one works, but I'm more than willing to find out. The man left standing keeps his gun pointed at me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he shouts.

You don't have time for this.

Pointing the gun just off to the side of his head, I fire. An explosive ring deafens me, but I keep the gun high and my finger on the trigger to go again. Both men are on the ground, taking cover. I can only imagine how I must look.

You probably look insane.

I feel insane. A laugh bubbles up, short and hard like a bark, before my voice hardens.

"I said. Get. The. Fuck. Out."

The men look at me in absolute terror. When they see I won't move, that my will won't falter, they raise their hands and back up. When they reach the door, it's a mad scramble to get out and the laughter comes back and nearly topples me.

Think, Miri.

Giggling, I go back to the terminal I used to seal Gotham's fate and get to work. The first thing I do is bring up the CCTV cameras online. It doesn't take me long to find the other hostages stashed
away in another meeting room. Two men armed with assault rifles stand over them, but I don't see the Joker yet. Lewis joins them and I breathe out. I won't have to break that promise now.

Just like when I used to mess with Wayne Enterprises' systems, manipulating the systems in the building is second nature to me. Locking the electrical doors leading to the terminal room, I sound the alarm in the building. Red lights go off and sirens blare.

The guards in the rooms swing their guns up, going to the doorway to peer into the hall. As soon as they cross the threshold, I activate the storm doors, cutting them off from the doctors and employees on the other side.

*Perfect.*

I block all the doors except for the ones that will lead the hostages to the exit. The laughter starts again and I hold it back as I activate the PA system.

"Attention civilians, please follow the marked path that leads to the exit. Go now and move quickly." My voice doesn't sound like I'm taking this seriously. I sound crazy.

*You'd have to be to do what you are.*

The hostages get up to leave immediately, following the emergency lights I switched on that leads outside. As soon as they're clear, I'll open the storm doors again and wait for what was always coming for me. I want no barriers between me and the end.

I'm about to switch cameras when I see one man hasn't left yet. It's Lucius. He's staring up at the camera, confusion and concern carving deep grooves on his face. Tears spill over as my face stretches into a smile I don't want to make. I'm suddenly grateful no one can see me.

"Go, Lucius," I say into the speaker.

It takes him a long time, long enough for me to think I need to scream at him, but he turns around and obeys. The laughter I was fighting turns into sobs as I open up the HAVOC program. I don't want to stop them, but I want to redirect them. The Joker needs to die and so do I. We both need to go, and I'm going to make sure it happens. The drones will hit us and fly into the river. Neither of us will be alone, and no one else will die, and... the Joker and me, we won't be able to hurt anyone ever again.

"Ah... Miri, whatchya doin'?"

As if my thoughts summoned him, I look and see the Joker staring at the other side of the glass wall. He's speaking through the intercom.

*He can't hurt me anymore.*

No, he really can't. I smile, but it isn't kind. I feel like a vengeful goddess seeking retribution. And I'll get what's mine.

"Making sure you never hurt anyone ever again," I reply simply, pushing down on the button that will let him hear me. He laughs and smiles, but something I've never seen before is on his face.

He's nervous.

That in itself is a victory.
"Looks like you're, ah, goin' kamikaze on us, sweet peach." He tries to laugh, but for once it doesn't sound genuine. "This isn't funny, Miri."

Yes, it is. For once, I'm the one in on the punchline.

The thing he worked so hard for me to help with, all the work he put in, it's going to turn into ash right along with him.

"Get ready to rot in hell."

I hit the execute button and watch as the coordinates change. The drones aren't going to the rest of Gotham anymore.

No, no. They're coming here. The Joker might have been right, he did own me, but not for much longer. There will be fire, but the only place it'll be is here, just for him and me.

"Miri—don't do something stupid."

Too late for that. Should have stopped me a long time ago.

I don't know where it comes from, but I start to laugh again. It's a giggle at first, but it builds until I'm cackling. The Joker looks at me, stunned, and it makes me laugh harder. There's a thick sheet of glass between us, yes—but I would have still laughed even if he was standing next to me. It becomes hysterical, rising to a crescendo of madness I'd only ever heard from him.

I finally understand. He had a grand plan of what this would look like, how he'd get there. He had a point to prove and an agenda to follow. I was part of that, but he wouldn't need me forever. He was doing this for the same reasons I did any of my hacking—what caused all my problems to begin with. He was bored and he wanted someone to understand—he wanted someone to see what he is. He found that in Batman, but I'd take his happy ending away from him just like he took mine.

He raises his gun and points it at the glass, shooting and making it spiderweb as the cracks spread. I'm not afraid anymore. We're going to die anyway, and there's nothing he can do.

I can hear his roar over my laughter, but I don't stop. I won't. Because I finally get the joke. He doesn't understand that yet, but I know. It makes me bend over at the waist as the force of it seizes my chest and the tears make me weep.

I'm going to die alright, but I'll be the one dragging him down with me. I found what mattered, what the point was, and I'm taking it away. And there's nothing he can do to stop any of it. The Joker lost all his laughter when the mocking cackles are directed at him. I'm the one getting the last laugh.

Me.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! My deepest apologies for getting this out late for you. I had my graduation on Friday and I've been so burnt out that I've been struggling with my writing more than I would like. I wanted to make sure I got what I was going for before I published this, and I really hope it doesn't disappoint.
I want to say thank you again for everyone who's stuck around to read and comment. It's what's gotten me through the last few months and it means the world to me! And I want to give a big thank you to Boag whose helped me get through my slumps and give me her kind advice! There's only four chapters left, and I hope the ending is everything you hoped for and more. I can't wait to hear what you think, and I will have my next update on the weekend!
Evening the Odds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Batman was as ready as he'd ever be. Armed with the long-range EMP rifle Lucius developed and armed Batman with over a week ago, he stood vigilant atop one of the highest points on the west side of Gotham. Lucius hadn't been able to stop the drones, but Batman knew where they were coming from and what their target was. He didn't know if Miriam did it on purpose or not, but it was too much of a boon to have been a mistake. He took that as a sign that there was enough in her that remained whole.

He was worried, he'd be foolish not to be. No sooner had Lucius sent the coordinates to Batman and informed him of his progress on diverting the drones than the sounds of gunfire and screams overshadowed Lucius' voice before the line went dead. Batman knew where he needed to go next, but this came first.

Jets zoomed overhead as dusk settled on the city in a heavy blanket, bringing the cold with it. The wind was especially strong from atop the skyscraper that overlooked the Gotham River, but his perch overlooked the direction the drones should be coming from. Lucius had also managed to give Batman one more advantage in the revamping of his suit: it was augmented to pick up energy signatures. He could see the ones particular to the drones in the approaching dark when they got in range after Lucius synced his HUD to the signal.

Gordon was somewhere far below, working to contain the riots. While he stemmed the tide of total upheaval, Batman was the force that would keep the crippled system from crumbling completely. The Joker did his work well, and now it was Batman's turn. There could be no hesitation, no doubts that could hinder him from succeeding. He entrusted Gordon with the task of keeping the people of Gotham safe, and it was up to him to ensure Gordon could succeed.

Armed with his rifle, his utility belt, and the ability to glide through the air, Batman had nothing else to help him now. Perhaps it was arrogance, too much self-assuredness and hubris, but he felt like the odds were even in this specific theatre. He could do this. Batman had no other choice.

The drones might have been near-silent, but the fighter jets weren't. When the first missile shot through the air, Batman readied himself, watching the horizon for the drones. A burst of fire lit up the darkening sky, debris falling in arcs of smoke to the river below. The jets screamed past, getting ready to chase the other three, but Batman couldn't leave anything to chance. He had to get them before their paths diverged for their different targets.

With his modified specs, Batman could see the three heading right for him. Bracing against the small ledge of the high-rises' uppermost floor, he aimed the EMP rifle. Lining up the sights and holding his breath, he fired. There were no human pilots to worry about, and if he got them early enough, they'd fall into the river.

The effect wasn't as immediate as the fighter jets' missiles, but Batman saw his first target go dark and fall right out of the air. Lucius had also told him about a design flaw in the drones—something they hadn't been able to fix with the manufacturer: the might be silent, autonomous, accurate, and now incredibly deadly, but their outer skin wasn't thick and didn't have the shielding properties to protect it from electromagnetic pulses. Especially ones as powerful as this one.
Batman couldn't allow himself to linger on the single drone falling through the air; there were still two left.

Just as he hefted up the rifle to aim again, the two drew closer, weaving through buildings to avoid the tracking of the jets that zoomed after them. A swell of urgency hit Batman until he saw that they weren't splitting from one another like he knew they should; they were staying together in their previous formation.

Was Lucius wrong?

It didn't matter. He didn't have time to dwell on it. The jets would have a harder time hitting the drones once they got past the first line of buildings that led to Midtown. Attaching the EMP rifle underneath the same glider pack Lucius developed for his impromptu visit to Hong Kong, Batman took note of the drone's trajectories and leapt off his perch.

Falling through the air for ten gut-wrenching seconds from the top of the over three hundred metres highrise, Batman landed on one of the wings of the incoming drones as it passed, scrambling to hold on with the rubber tips of his gloves. He grunted and groaned, using every ounce of strength he had as the wind threatened to tear him off to pull himself up onto the drone. Stabbing a tethering spike into the drone's shell, Batman clipped himself to it to keep from being blown away.

Using the pneumatic cutter attached to his gauntlet, Batman sliced an opening into the drone, exposing the central lines of wiring that allowed it to function. The drone next to him was gaining the lead. He needed to be faster. Jamming his fist into the wiring, he pulled them out until the altitude of the drone faltered. The remaining drone was still ahead, and he hoped Gordon fulfilled his end and evacuated this area of Gotham. The gap was wide and failing to jump to the next one meant plummeting to his death below.

There's still enough time. You can make it.

Just as the drone he was kneeling on took a nosedive, Batman unclipped himself and leapt. His arms swung in the air as he flung himself forward, the bright city lights blurred and blinding as his senses heightened with the adrenaline. He just missed landing on the middle of the drone and barely managed to grab hold of the tail end. Crying out, he struggled to maintain his grip. A violent force of vertigo made his head spin, but he forced himself past it.

I will not fail.

Managing to get an arm up to drag himself into a better position, the comms unit beeped in his cowl. Someone was patching themselves through. Bruce ignored it. Alfred would know better than to call, but he didn't necessarily need to do anything for it to answer all on its own.

"Hello, can you hear me?"

Lucius.

He was eager to speak to Lucius before engaging the drones, and now all he could be was hopeful that he had a different solution that didn't involve him hanging off the back of a drone until he lost his grip and plummeted to his death.

"Busy right now," he answered, grunting as the turbulence and wind whipped at him. Gotham was a city he never tired looking at, but all he wanted to focus on was never seeing it quite like that ever again.
"Yes, I can imagine. You need to stop those drones."

If Batman had the ability to roll his eyes at that moment, he would have.

"Working on it," he forced out between gritted teeth as he managed to extend an arm and drive a spike into the metal as it took a steep bank to the right, nearly throwing him off. His grip on the spike kept him from falling and, using every ounce of upper body strength he possessed, he grabbed the cable attached to his belt and hooked it to the tethering point. Lucius kept talking all the while.

"No—they're not heading for their original targets. They're being redirected to Wayne Enterprises —the R&D Department."

This was new.

Why are they heading there? Unless...

Unless someone changed the coordinates. He doubted the Joker was aiming to go out in a suicide mission. That would defeat the purpose of everything else he'd done. No, if it wasn't him, then there was only one other possibility.

Miriam.

The roar of the cold wind around his head was suddenly eclipsed when, in between weaving through the dozens of buildings leading to Midtown, one of the jets caught up to him, following and waiting for a clear shot. Batman looked over at the jet just as a missile was launched in a spark or red, orange, and gray smoke against the electric blue of the Gotham evening skyline.

"That… would have been good to know earlier."

It didn't take Harvey long to find the address Joe Bandano sent him. A trainyard in Gotham's west-end; the stations packed with the hundreds of people rushing to get out of the city. Dusk set upon them, making the sky warm even as the wind took a bite out any exposed skin. Salvatore Maroni wasn't waiting with the rest of the passengers. He sat in his black limo, gearing up to flee.

Cowards. All of them.

Maroni wasn't looking to bask in the aftermath of the hell he helped unleash, and it was to Harvey's advantage that the man was foolish enough to stay in Gotham long enough for him to find his undoing. He might have been the new king of the Mob's empire after Carmine Falcone found himself involuntarily committed, but kings meant nothing if you destroyed their symbols of power. The Joker had destroyed their throne, burned their treasury, and looked to tear the castle down, brick by brick. Harvey had no interest in their struggle, only the urge to kick at their ashes until it dispersed completely and nothing remained.

Harvey used to fantasize about the day he could prove in court, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Maroni was guilty of all the crimes he committed and more, thrown in a cell to rot for the rest of his miserable life. That fantasy was gone, only to be replaced with one involving blood. Rivers of it. His would be included, too. He knew there was no precluding him from this. His body belonged in the stack of those he was amounting, but it'd be on the top. The last one after his work was finished.

Parking a fair distance away, Harvey waited as he watched Joe Bandano acting as a lookout for Wuertz's arrival. He didn't know that Wuertz would never come with his promised information on
Harvey, and he just had to wait until the man turned his back to make his move.

Going quickly, Harvey snuck up behind Joe and wrapped an arm around his throat, choking him as he dragged him back away from Maroni's car. The intention wasn't to kill him—he had no reason to have Chance level her judgement with so little time, and the man was but a peon in a larger game he held no control over and not worth Harvey's efforts. He aimed for the king, and there was no use in treating a pawn in the same manner. Once Joe wouldn't be able to get up right away, Harvey took his place at the car, hopping into the back, on the driver's side, with his gun drawn. They wouldn't expect this.

And he was right.

"Don't stop for lights, cops, nothin'," Maroni said, looking out the window with a smug grin. When he turned his head to peer out the front of the car, he didn't see Joe. He saw Harvey. With nowhere to go and a revolver out and a finger on the trigger, Maroni made himself sit still, even as the sweat started to collect along his back.

"Going to join your wife?" Harvey asked at last. He stared out the window, embracing the feeling of numb acceptance that came with his maintained high of adrenaline. He sounded conversational, surprisingly friendly for a man who swore to make Maroni pay through the legal system. Now it was clear that wouldn't be Maroni's fate at all. "You love her?"

Familiar with danger and unbalanced men aiming guns in his general direction, Maroni adopted a practiced air of calm. Antagonizing Harvey or doing anything to set him off would get him nowhere. His best option lay in placation until he could either get away or put a bullet in Harvey's head himself.

"Yes," was his simple reply.

"Can you imagine what it would be like to listen to her die?"

Maroni looked at Harvey with confusion. Where was he going with this?

"What're you… your woman didn't die."

Harvey turned to look at Maroni full in the face and he sucked in an involuntary breath. His sources told him what happened to Harvey and Rachel was beyond brutal, but he never thought someone with injuries that extensive and raw would be able to do much beyond laying in agony somewhere. Maroni's own injuries were agonizing enough after what Batman did to him, but they paled in comparison to Harvey's. It would have made sense if Harvey sought retribution for his ruined body, but why mention the woman he loved dying? As far as he knew—and his knowledge was extensive—Rachel might have been in intensive care, but she was still alive.

This guy's lost more than a few screws, Maroni thought.

Maroni, in addition to being able to maintain a sense of calm, also had a practiced silver tongue. If Harvey had indeed left rationality and sanity at the door, then Maroni needed to bring it back.

"Look, if you're looking for someone to blame, take it up with the Joker. He's the one who made you… like this," Maroni said, motioning to Harvey's disfigured face with his eyes.

Maroni might have played a role in the attack on Gotham, but he was by no means the mastermind. He had no way of knowing what the consequences of his actions would be. To Harvey, that's exactly where the problem lay. Men like Maroni ruined lives without a thought, searching for short-term gratification while crippling others to get it.
"Don't you LIE to me." Harvey's voice, hard and biting, silenced anything else Maroni might have tried to say. His teeth ground together, exposed muscles in his jaw jumping with the tension he wouldn't let go of. "The Joker's just a mad dog. I want whoever let him off the leash."

Is he being serious? Maroni thought. Surely Harvey couldn't mean that—or know entirely what he was saying. He really had lost his mind. How could Harvey not see exactly what the Joker did, how he played them all for fools? Maroni didn't consider himself unintelligent by any means, but he felt like a moron in the aftermath of the Joker's actions. He enabled a terrorist and gave him the means to succeed, but that didn't leave him as the culpable one. He didn't make the Joker, or anyone else really, do anything they didn't already want to.

"I ain't lying—"

Harvey levelling the gun at Maroni shut him up quickly. Harvey didn't want to listen to reason. Unless something changed and he was unaware of it, then Harvey was fed the wrong information, and nothing Maroni said would likely change his mind. He could only keep himself pressed against the back of his seat as his heart sped up.

"I took care of Wuertz, but who was your other man inside Gordon's unit? Who picked up Rachel? It must've been someone she trusted."

Now vengeance was something Maroni understood. His own family's blood feuds with the Dimitrov and Falcone families were proof enough. If Harvey was looking for the people who betrayed him, then Maroni was more than happy to offer them up on a silver platter.

"If I tell ya, will you let me go?" he asked. Self-preservation was another feeling he knew well and embraced. Its driving force was the only reason he'd managed to live as head of the family for so long.

"It can't hurt your chances," Harvey replied.

Maroni took it as all but a guarantee. Exchanging information for a life was a routine procedure. He had no reason to doubt that's what would happen here. He didn't know that Harvey wasn't really the one making decisions. Not anymore. Chance, in his mind, is what would steer him as he took on the role as its oracle and enacted its will.

"It was Ramirez," he said with an air of conspiracy, as if they were playing for the same side and exchanging secrets.

The revelation hit Harvey as no surprise. He'd investigated Ramirez in the Internal Affairs department and knew she didn't have the iron will to refuse bribes. She was easy to manipulate and buy, and now Harvey finally would have his chance to act on what he couldn't before.

Pulling back the hammer on the revolver, Harvey dug his hand in his pocket and took out his now two-sided coin.

"But you said—"

"I said it couldn't hurt your chances," Harvey interrupted. Flipping the coin in the air, he caught it and slapped it against the top of his other hand. Drawing back, he stared at the verdict. "Lucky guy."

Harvey shrugged. Chance said he couldn't kill Maroni directly, but there were other ways to see if the outcome he wanted could be made into a reality. Flipping the coin again, Harvey repeated the process.
"But he's not."

Reaching around, Harvey grabbed his previously discarded seatbelt and strapped in. Maroni took in all his actions like he was staring at a madman.

_Maybe he is._

"Who?" Maroni asked, the fear making his voice high.

"Your driver."

Pointing the gun to the back of the driver's headrest, Harvey shot the man in the head as Maroni lunged. No one else wore their seatbelt, and so when the car veered off the road, over the guard rail to the underpass five meters below, Harvey was left with more injuries but the satisfaction of staring at another dead man.

Stumbling out of the smoking wreck, Harvey limped off and ignored the fresh flashes of pain. He had his next target, and he wouldn't stop until he saw his mission through. Fate and Chance had guided him this far, and he had no doubts or qualms about what lay ahead.

The Joker hadn't known this kind of fury in a long time. Its forcefulness, made worse by Miriam's unending laughter, spun him into a storm of uncontrollable anger.

She was still going, _laughing_, falling on her knees, holding her stomach. The glass the Joker shot at was thick, stopping his bullets before they could go through and hit his target. He knew he needed to kill Miriam, but he imagined something more _intimate_ than this.

But that didn't matter anymore.

Miriam ruined _everything_. If she did what he thought she did— _and I know she has_ —then they had no time at all before the HAVOC drones pancaked them into Gotham's bedrock.

"One morning when I was out shopping
Though you'll find it hard to believe
A little blue man came out of the crowd
And timidly tugged at my sleeve."

_What is she doing?_

He knew the song— _of course I do_. During Miriam's little adventures into _Concussion Land_, she'd told him a lot of things. One of them was that this song scared her. It's why he hummed it at her the morning his boat blew up. She was singing it back to him now, giggling in between the verses and humming the 'I _wuv_ you' bits along with the melody. She'd really lost it.

_Yeah, it'd be a turn-on if it wasn't in celebration of our death by impending-fucking-fireball._

"I hurried back to my apartment
I rushed in and I closed the door
But there on the desk stood the little blue man
Who started to tell me once more."

It took almost an entire clip to make the glass completely shatter, and when it did, he smashed through the rest and tackled Miriam to the ground. She was still laughing. It was hysterical, _mad_, something he craved before but now wanted to never hear again because it was
directed at him. The Joker wanted to break her—had all but guaranteed she would—and now that he stood in the consequences of his work, he hated her for it.

And she was still singing, even as new lines of blood coated her chest and the small halo spreading from the back of her head. It was haunting, unsettling, under his skin and filling him with an emotion he didn't recognize.

"Shut up, shut up!" he roared. Miriam kept laughing, tears pouring out of her eyes as she stared past him.

"For weeks after that I was haunted
Though no one could see him but me
Right by my side was the little blue man
Wherever I happened to be."

It was hard not to see the connotations—how it so intimately related to the two of them. He shook her hard and still she didn't stop. His weight should have been crushing her, but where she had so sweetly begged before, she looked like he wasn't even there. Miriam had reached the point he had years ago. She just didn't care. Total self-destruction was the only thing that mattered.

Looking up at the computer terminal, he could see exactly where the drones were heading. His suspicions were confirmed. Miriam had set them both up to die, locking the electric doors so he couldn't get out. He could shoot her in the head and try to stop it, but there wouldn't be time. No matter what he did now, the end would be the same. She'd taken away the punchline and he allowed her to do it. Miriam knew she was going to die either way and now she was making sure he did, too. Even as he looked on and his chest swelled with impotent fury, she still kept singing.

"One evening in wild desperation
I rushed to a rooftop in town
And over the side pushed the little blue man
Who sang to me all the way down."

He roared again and wrapped his fingers around her throat, his gun forgotten. The Joker was nearly frothing at the mouth in rage. She gasped and choked, but she didn't even try to pull his hands away, only smiling as her eyes went red from oxygen deprivation.

The Joker knew how the song ended. Miriam didn't need to finish it for it to ring in his head as if she could still use her voice.

I whispered, "Thank goodness that's over!"
I smiled as I hurried outside
But there on the street stood the little blue man
Who said with a tear in his eye
"I don't wuv you anymore!"

This isn't how he wanted things to end. In his mind, he saw a final battle between two cosmic forces trapped in the bodies of mortal men. Yes, he didn't care about dying, but he wanted to control exactly how he went out. He wanted Batman to kill him. For his rage to overcome his morals and bury the Joker to rise like a cruel god and continue his work.

"Well, sweet peach, looks like you wanna get the last laugh, hmm?" he asked, squeezing tighter. The smile never disappeared, even as her brown skin went blue and she gasped for air. "Haven't you learned anything? I, ah—I tried so very hard to make you see that, uh, that's not how
this works, Miri. Not at all."

But what exactly could he do now? Nothing. Miriam guaranteed that. Her hands finally went to his, but it wasn't to make him stop. They pressed on him, encouraging him to go harder. Her legs were squirming, her body fighting back even if her mind didn't want to. She didn't have to speak for him to know what she was saying. Miriam found the fight he thought he snuffed out, and he hated how beautiful she was for it.

'Finish it, coward,' she said with her eyes. It wasn't the first time she called him that, and even though she couldn't utter the insult, he could feel it in his burning blood.

"Looks like you're gonna get your wish, Miriam," he growled, pressing his weight on her throat as his arms shook. Her smile turned sweet and hands went slack. A thumb brushed across the back of his hand as her eyes closed, and he felt his grip involuntarily release.

*Maybe you are a coward.*

The Joker didn't know why he was doing it—he wanted to kill someone, but he doubted himself, suddenly overwhelmed by another feeling he wouldn't name. His hands shook around her pulsing throat as an earth-shaking *boom!* threw the Joker to the ground. Debris pelted against his back and dust coated his lungs with his intake of air. He thought this was it—how his life would end. He heard the rest of the glass wall shatter and felt it coat him in its biting shards, chunks of the supporting beams and ceiling tiles falling on him as he covered his head.

The shaking and rumbling and building materials hitting him and the floor with the violent tremors that shook the entire building in a deafening crash didn't last long. He could feel his blood flowing into his eye from a new cut on his head, the heavy weight of a metal bar across his back. All that information served to tell him he wasn't dead yet.

*Then what the hell was that?*

If he wasn't dead, that meant that Miriam's plan didn't work. Not entirely. Or perhaps more were on the way.

*Doesn't matter.*

The anger had cooled into frozen wrath. Arching his spine, he lifted the fallen materials off his back and blinked the blood and dust out of his eyes, his hand reaching for a knife in his pocket. Maybe he did let Miriam live too long, and now he was going to rectify that error.

*Sometimes you gotta take Fido out behind the barn and put a bullet in 'em. This is no different.*

Before he had time to draw up his arm and return to Miriam's prone body, something sharp took his breath away. Looking down, he saw why. Miriam's bandaged hand was holding a large chunk of glass, and she'd stuck it right between his ribs. The Joker was impressed; she got through the layers of his coats and clothing and shoved it deep enough to puncture a lung. He planned on repaying the favour.

"Oh, Miriam," he groaned, falling onto one side. "That's no way to treat a friend, is it?"

*I sure know how to pick 'em.*

Laughter of his own bubbled up as he looked into her eyes, and her wide smile was still stuck in place. Just like he surely was, Miriam was covered in dust and blood. More of it bloomed from her ribs. Faster than he thought she could move in her condition, Miriam straddled him—pinning him
"Only for you," she forced out. He was surprised he hadn't completely crushed her trachea. Silent giggles overtook her as she took the glass out from his ribs, and he let her. "Just for you."

Miriam's giggles turned into full-blown sobs as she rested the tip of her makeshift knife against his throat.

"Why didn't you just kill me?" she rasped. The tears dripped from the tip of her nose onto his cheek.

The Joker had no answer to give. He didn't kill her because he thought she was fun, because he saw something in her that was so familiar that it ached in a way that he couldn't kill it a second time—not right away. Because he had a grand vision and she fit so well into it that he was unwilling to let her go. Because she was his and he liked being around her—because he was always one to break his toys rather than throw them away. This wasn't what he wanted—not in a million years—but perhaps it was fitting.

He gave her no answer. The tip of the glass pushed in harder as he reached back for his discarded gun buried underneath a small layer of rubble.

Anna Ramirez.

That's who was next on Harvey's list. It was nightfall by the time he arrived at the MCU. He still had Wuertz's phone, and he used it to tell Anna to meet who she thought was Michael Wuertz for a special assignment to find Harvey at the station. For a rat, she was awfully trusting. Anna showed up in record time, speeding into the Unit's parking lot and sprinting to the shadowed corner Harvey indicated in his texts. When she rounded the corner of one of the outlying buildings, she was greeted with a gun in her face. Harvey's face is what she saw next, and it was enough for her to fall to the ground.

This wasn't what she wanted. Anna never intended to hurt anyone, and now she was faced with the consequences of her inability to bear her burdens alone.

"Get up," Harvey growled. Anna, shaking, obeyed.

"Wh-What do you want?" she asked, her voice trembling with the rest of her. Harvey sneered. How dare she act like he was the one in the wrong after what she did. It was a great exercise of will not to just shoot her then. It wasn't his place to judge. Chance would do that for him.

"Need you to make a call," he said, pointing to the phone clutched in her hand. "Call the unit outside Gordon's house."

Anna looked at him in confusion until the answer struck her. Harvey didn't want anyone there that could stop him from doing the unthinkable, but she couldn't see why he'd want to punish Gordon for what happened to him and Rachel. Even to her, it was clear where the blame lay. Harvey, being beyond reason, didn't care to think about how he let the source of his pain slip through because he was now living according to an ideology that wouldn't hold up to scrutiny in the light.

"W-Why would—"

Harvey raised the gun higher, nearly pressing the barrel of it against her head. She choked and her eyes welled up with unshed tears, but she sucked in a breath and steadied herself. Anna was ultimately a creature of self-preservation—all that mattered was living, no matter what that life might have looked like. She knew she did something wrong—doomed Rachel to a half-life. She
also knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself sober, but she didn't want to die either. Death and the uncertainty of the unknown made her willing to live as a traitorous bottom-feeder as long as it meant staying alive.

"Don't make me ask twice," he warned.

Anna didn't need the second reminder. Dialing the numbers of the officer's she knew were waiting just outside Gordon's house in the downtown core, Anna called them away—citing a need for assistance with the riots a few blocks from Gordon's house. They would find havoc alright, and a desperate need for help, but she knew she was sending someone else to die. When she hung up the phone, she stared down Harvey. This wasn't over yet, and he didn't lower the gun.

"They believe you?" he asked.

Looking at his face was challenging. She knew she was partially responsible for it, and she knew she was about to get exactly what was coming to her. The knowledge didn't stop the tears from falling. Anna nodded her head.

"That's because people trust you. Just like Rachel did."

How Rachel sounded when Anna took her to the warehouse haunted her and no amount of bourbon could drown out Rachel's screams.

"I—I didn't know—"

"What they were going to do? You're the second cop to say that to me," Harvey spit. The gun shook with the force of his shaking grip, and he resisted pulling the trigger. "What exactly did you think they were going to do?"

Anna's excuses weren't enough. Pitiful and insulting is what they were to Harvey. Anna and Wuertz didn't know because they didn't want to know. And that's what made it so much goddamn worse. She still felt the need to explain, to justify it to herself more than anyone else.

"I-I'm sorry—they got me early on. My mother's hospital bills and my—"

"DON'T!" he roared. At this point, he was beyond caring if anyone heard him. He'd purify this city with the time he had left. Let any stragglers come his way. He'd judge them, too. Taking out his coin, he flipped it in the air and caught it. Anna didn't fully know what was happening. She thought she could sway him with words alone.

"I-I took a little from them. Once they've got you, they keep you. I'm sorry, Harvey," she said. Her voice grew quiet when Harvey opened his palm, showing the coin he gripped so tightly. He let out a sigh of frustration before letting out a pent up breath.

"Looks like you get to live to fight another day, officer," he muttered.

Anna looked from him to the coin before he brought up the revolver and whipped it across her jaw. She was bleeding on the ground by the time he stepped over her. It wasn't the outcome he wanted, but it was the same chance he'd given everyone else. Anna had received her judgement, and now it was time for Gordon to get his. He was going to go to Gordon's house and take away everything that mattered just like it had been taken from him.

His death was inevitable, but he'd bring balance first. They'd all get what was coming to them and it would be fair. Unlike what happened to him. There was nothing fair about that. He'd do this for Rachel and bring her justice from beyond the grave.
Harvey just didn't realize he was doing it all for nothing.

Batman only managed to cut the line tethering him to the drone just as the jet's missile hit its target. Creating a flash of fire and a blowback that knocked him off course, Batman unfurled his glider and tried to steer away from the impact of the explosive hitting the six by 10-meter drone, but he didn't act in time. The force of the explosion made him spin out of control, narrowly avoiding running headlong into the glass of an oncoming highrise.

But the missile and Batman were too late.

The drone wasn't destroyed completely, and it was making its descent. Batman recognized the landscape hurtling towards him. They'd made it into Midtown, and the R&D Department was coming up quickly. The drone hit first, crashing through the five floors that made up the side building attached to the main branch of the company.

Batman had nowhere else to land without finding a way to soften the impact of hitting the sidewalk without breaking his knees. He took the next available option to him. Tucking in his arms and breaking his downward descent, he shot through the air and dived into the hole left behind by the drone.

Fire and wreckage surrounded him as he rocketed past the first two floors, landing hard on a pile of smouldering beams. Groaning, he pushed himself up just as more debris from the roof above plummeted down—nearly hitting him in the head. Righting himself and tapping his comms unit, Batman looked for the nearest set of stairs to take him down to the first floor.

"Lucius, you still there?"

"Yeah—what the hell was that?" he answered.

"Dropping in on things," he answered, kicking open the door leading to the stairwell. "Tell me everyone got out with you."

"As far as I know, Miriam and the Joker are the only ones left."

That made Batman's life easier in some ways and infinitely more difficult in others. He could already be too late.

_No, you can't afford to think like that. Time to find that bastard and make him pay._

Batman was flying down the stairs, taking three to four at a time. He was nearly on the first floor when a loud shot rang out and stopped him dead in his tracks. That was gunfire. He listened, waiting for any other sound to break through—a cry of pain to know who it was that could be dying. When he heard nothing else, instinct and training took over and he rushed through the door, willing Time to be kind—for him to not be too late.

Chapter End Notes

Holy catfish, Batman, we're almost at the end! Only three more chapters and this part of the story comes to a close. Now, to make everyone's lives a little easier I'm releasing the last two chapters at once (which I'm still hoping will be on the 22nd of June or so) because they will be more of a wrap-up and an epilogue, and there's no
sense in making you wait for both (especially since they will be shorter). They will also act as a set-up for the sequel to this story, which I plan on starting in the end of July/beginning of August. I'm not sure how to best alert you all to that when it comes out since I think it's unfair of me to ask you to follow me as an author. If anyone has advice on that, I'd love to hear it!

And (as always!) thank you so, SO much for all the love, support, and reviews you've given in this wild journey of mine. I feel so incredibly lucky to have readers like you and I genuinely hope you've enjoyed this story. I've put a lot of time, tears, and thought into it over this last year, and I sincerely hope it's paid off. Thank you for sticking with me and for giving me so much love, I will always be incredibly grateful! ❤
The Gordon home was rough, dank, cold and at the bottom floor of what might as well have been a shanty complex. It wasn't an uncommon sight for this area of Gotham, being only a short distance away from the Narrows, and being a cop like Gordon didn't pay well. That might change with the new title, but Gordon wouldn't live long enough to get the full benefits.

Not if Harvey had a say.

Every street was dark and sirens—muffled by the layers of houses between them and Harvey—were as abundant as the flashing of red and blue lights. He didn't really know what he was expecting when he knocked on the paint-chipped door—or really what he was going to do—but Gordon and Batman were the last ones on his list. Harvey could die after that.

Rapping his knuckles against the door, Harvey kept the right side of his face toward the door. In any other state of mind, the anxiety that stayed with him before when meeting new people would make him jittery. Nervous. Trying too hard for the approval of others. He didn't have to worry about that anymore. No matter what he did, people would have the same reactions now. Terror or sympathy. Harvey wanted neither.

There was no anxiety now—no feeling except a dull nudge in the back of his mind. He shoved it away and didn't wait long before a new distraction appeared. Barbara Gordon, with her head of auburn hair, opened the door with a look of confused shock.

"Harvey Dent?" she asked, looking over his shoulder to see if Gordon was behind him.

Harvey turned, showing the full horror of his face. Barbara's mouth opened to let out a scream when he raised the gun and pointed it at her. He pushed the door open when she went to slam it, stepping in without really taking in the details around him. They didn't matter. Not in the end. What he was going to make Gordon feel—now, that's what mattered.

"Sorry about this," Harvey said, forcing his way further into the Gordon home, "usually I like to give some warning when I make house calls." He sounded blasé, but Harvey truly meant it. As much as he could mean anything then. His stomach twisted and what remained of his conscience and rational mind tugged at him.

"This isn't what Rachel would have wanted.

But he thought Rachel was dead, and he couldn't bring her back.

Barbara raised her hands and looked at the good side of his face, trying to stay calm as the tears nearly spilled over.

"J-Jim isn't here. Please, my children—"

"If you try anything, you'll regret it," he warned, the burnt side giving him a permanent sneer where the skin twisted up and exposed his teeth. "Call him. I want Gordon here. Now."

A tremor shook his hand and nearly made him drop the revolver at the sight of her expression.
Did Rachel look like that when they dragged her out of the car? When she watched the clock tick down alone?

He forced himself to harden. Only justice mattered. The scales would balance just as they should. He was an agent of Chance, he had to remind himself. This was part of that. Just like the Joker enacted chaos, Harvey would bring the force to keep it all in check. Order and Chaos. Fate and Chance. Harvey inserted himself in the cosmic war of opposites and believed he could affect them.

It didn't occur to him how delusional those notions really were, how there were holes large enough for the truth to fall through and never be seen again.

But, at that moment, it didn't matter to Harvey. He'd lost the ability to distinguish between vengeance and justice and there would be no finding it. Before Harvey was never one for walking the middle ground, always bouncing between extremes, and he lost the will to find it. Chance decided what path to take for him and he just needed to carry out its will.

Simple. Fair.

And now Gordon needed to face what all the others had. What Harvey would at the end.

A small redheaded girl walked into the living room, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and taking Harvey off guard. He raised the gun in her direction as a gut-reaction and lowered it immediately at the sight of a child so small.

Rachel wouldn't have wanted this, he thought again.

"Mom?" she asked, looking from her terrified mother to the monster standing in her house. The little girl screamed, and Barbara rushed to cover her mouth. He wanted to leave right then, pretend none of this happened.

But reality was never that simple.

"Shh, Eileen. Mommy needs you to be real quiet, OK?" Barbara looked from her daughter to Harvey, unsure as to how exactly this was going to go. She only knew it wouldn't end well.

When a blond boy came down the hall and froze, Harvey realized exactly what he walked into. What he signed up for. And there was no going back.

Three inches.

That's how far the Joker had to go before his fingers wrapped around the 9mm handgun behind him. Miriam was too busy to notice, her eyes glazing over from the lack of air and tears. She held the glass against his throat, the pressure in her grip alternating between firm and light and trembling.

Doesn't look like she wants to let go of me either.

A plum-leathered hand found its target.

Waiting until her grip went weak, the Joker pulled up the gun and pressed it against her sternum. It took a dozen rapid beats of her heart before she looked down and noticed the warm metal against the bare skin of her chest. Her brows rose in confusion, like she didn't quite understand, and her eyes met his.
"Do it."

The Joker pulled back the hammer.

"Do what you should've in the beginning."

Miriam released her grip on the glass altogether and the tears stopped. She was empty. Void. The Joker looked down at the bright, new chrysanthemum of red spreading across her shirt. The small hole left behind in the fabric.

He'd already managed to shoot her and didn't even realize. From the speed of the blood fleeing her tired body, she didn't have long. If the Joker didn't treat the gouge in his own side, he wouldn't either.

"I think you like me more than you, ah... let on." Antagonistic and biting until the end. The building gave another heave but neither moved. "You call me a coward, and yet. Here. We. Are."

The Joker's turn to laugh came, hard and scathing. Laughing at just how ridiculous this all turned out to be, at what all his planning came to. In any lesser man, regrets would have been running through their head if they were in the same position. But the Joker had only one: that Batman wasn't there with them to revel in the collective disappointment humanity showed themselves to be. He managed to tear the mask away for them, show just how ugly they were. He was the prophet of destruction and they fell at his feet looking for wisdom. The Joker gave the people of Gotham just enough ammunition to light the fire, and they willingly destroyed everything they thought hid them.

The Joker imagined a cataclysmic confrontation—something out of legend made real. Because that's what Batman was—a living, breathing, legend. It was the challenge his mask posed, the dare his cowl etched into the night, that first lured in the Joker in the beginning. Where would he have been without those first few glimmers of something so great?

But where was the Batman now?

Miriam took him away; robbed the Joker of the satisfaction of bringing Batman down just like he did Harvey. And the worst part was that she did it on purpose. She knew him—Batman. She must. Miriam added it to the list of things she'd deny him, and his anger and slavering rage became just as present as impotent. What could he do now?

What he'd always done.

Drive in the knife a little further, even if the target wasn't who it was intended for.

The Joker was never one to let someone have the upper hand for long. That's how his brain worked. He could always find a way to twist the situation around. A new punchline—a verse from this divine comedy called 'life'.

"I knew you didn't have it in ya, Miri." His lung hurt and his chest tight with the effort of breathing, but the Joker still smirked. Miriam had no weapon now, the glass discarded on the floor, her eyes blank. "Too little, too late, sweetheart. Where was all this... before? A bit useless now, ain't it?"

Miriam said nothing, but something sparked in her eye. A small sign of life as her chest convulsed. The Joker reached up and touched the bleeding wound on her side, smiling.

"Y'know, I always imagined this happening differently. It was more... intimate." He pressed his finger against the small opening that produced so much blood. Miriam didn't even flinch.
"There were knives involved. That's how I wanted to do it; watch you bleed out."

An infinitesimal reaction. A twitch of the eye. Tensing of her muscles.

*It's working.*

"You do bleed so—so nicely." He giggled. The Joker was going to watch her bleed out, he just didn't get the satisfaction of feeling the knife go into that soft skin he'd grown so fond of. "I know, I know. No time for that now, is there? That's OK, we're making do, aren't we?"

Something snapped in Miriam. The Joker could see it happen as if the air around them thickened into half-formed ice. A metal pipe, dislodged from the ceiling, sat close by. Wrapping her fingers around it, Miriam brought it down on his chest, wounding him. He was laughing just as hard as she was screaming as she slammed it against his head.

*Always has more fight in her than she lets on.*

The Joker would miss this, too, when all was said and done.

Miriam didn't give him time to dwell. She smacked away the gun in his hand, making it hit the floor and misfire. The shot rang loud and the Joker caught the pipe, gripping it hard and keeping her from knocking his brains out all over the floor.

*Looks like Miriam's found it after all—murderous intent.*

Abandoning the pipe, Miriam reached for the gun, crying out when the pain finally reached through to tell her exactly what her limits were. The Joker got the gun first, knocking her off him and bringing it around. She tried to fight him for it, the metal biting into their hands and catching their skin but, even with a collapsing lung filling with blood, he was stronger than her.

He backhanded Miriam. *Hard.* When she fell to the ground, yelping as she landed on her side, the Joker was back on her again, pressing the gun to her head. She struggled but couldn't say anything, her throat already sporting new purple bruises that matched the colour of his gloves, but defiance was there. He thought he killed it, but he realized he might not be able to. It would hide and always come back again. He could appreciate that, even as the vengeful part of him wanted to wipe that expression from the face of the planet. He panted hard, but he made himself chuckle.

*No point in living if you can't have a good laugh at yourself.*

At one time in his life, it felt like the entire universe used him for the butt of some cosmic joke. The funny thing was that it couldn't do that if you laughed at them first. So, that's what he did. He'd keep laughing.

"I really wish we could've done this another way, sweetheart," he murmured. The rage in him made the Joker feel beastly. "I imagined so many… outcomes for this, but, ah… you make your bed, you gotta lie in it."

He cocked the gun, finger on the trigger. The Joker imagined pulling it, looking at Miriam as a crown of crimson swallowed her head and the light left her eyes—imaging what she must be thinking, how the last thing she'd ever see was him smiling at her and nothing else. This is what he wanted, what he always wanted when he killed someone. For the remnants of their lives to be dedicated to the gifts of pain he gave them. He liked the way Miriam looked back at the Mayor's house—exquisite pain forming under his practiced hand.

His mind was alive with the visions, but no action followed. She didn't look like that anymore, and
it undercut every sense of satisfaction out of the task. He seemed incapable of doing it—some part of him hesitated.

Do it like you've done it to so many others.

But Miriam was just staring at him. He couldn't even see hate. Only a sense of understanding.

Her eyes, still so big and open, left his as she reached to take the dangling gold ring hanging from the Joker's neck delicately in her fingers. A pained smile, one tainted by the curse of memory, showed that she wasn't in the room with him anymore. Not really.

If pressed, the Joker wouldn't really be able to say why he still had her mother's ring. Yes, it was a way to torment her, a soft spot to poke at, but it became something else when he read the engraving. He kept it and tried to forget about it—but he was confronted with the tie it created between them. The memory of when he broke into her room and raided it like a lost treasure site, the desire to see if the engraving was an adage she lived up to, hit him harder in his exhaustion.

"I deserve it, right?" she whispered,

The Joker jolted back, the gun coming with him and the barrel leaving her skin. He made her say that very phrase less than twenty-four hours before, and now it was Miriam throwing it back at him. The funny thing about it was that she didn't deserve it—not really.

And yet here we are.

"Just kill me."

Never been one to deny a dying last wish, were you?

He pulled on everything that had made him so deadly and brutal everywhere else. It felt harder now, but he was going to do it. He'd make himself do it.

"Was never good at goodbyes, so I'll, uh, see you in the next life." More debris fell around them and neither flinched. Something solid smacked into a wall. "Nice knowing ya, sweet—"

Before the Joker could finish his final farewell, a black mass tackled him to the ground and held him down by the shoulders. He recognized this feeling—had felt it before. Back at the arcade. When his head was cracked against the glass and ended with those second-degree burns.

His Batman came back to finish the job after all.

Miriam's cackling sobs of madness resumed as the Joker's smile grew wide.

There were many things Barbara Gordon worried about.

Before she had James Jr. and Eileen, it was Jim when he'd go out on patrol in the early days. Back when the good cops—those who didn't take bribes and held their partners accountable—were sent out on patrols by themselves in the Narrows or the East Side of Gotham. Most times you didn't even need to go into a rough neighbourhood, officers who went against the grain could expect to get shot in the back by the officers meant to watch them. Those days left her wracked with anxiety—tossing and turning and sleepless every night he was gone and checking her phone every twenty minutes at work, just in case she missed a call when he needed her.

Everything changed when they had their kids. Barbara wanted Jim to quit the force. How could she
raise her children alone if he died? Gotham wouldn't get any better. A downslide lasting thirty years was proof enough. She tried to convince him, but Jim stayed adamant. She could respect his dedication, the drive to make Gotham better. Barbara even admired Jim for it.

That stopped a year ago.

Batman did what an entire generation failed to do. Taking on those no one else could, making the criminals run scared and those in Gotham who hid in fear before feel safe. He gave the city hope, and that was a rare thing.

But Batman also made things worse.

Small time gangs either disbanded or doubled down in their operations and held onto their territory with vicious entitlement. They grew sophisticated in their terror and wild with their sense of retribution. Crime might have been down when it came to the statistics, but those few who remained were worse than all who came before. Barbara had felt it for years—how close the city was to the edge—and now that manifestation of what Jim called an 'irrational fear' became reality. Maybe it was because she was from Chicago and Gotham wasn't her original home—she could see the fractures where Jim wouldn't. He explained it to her once, before their son was born.

'If I lose all faith in the system now, then everything's meaningless. All this can't be for nothing, Barbara.'

She knew it was true. Jim dedicated his life to protecting people and he couldn't do that if he truly saw what a hopeless endeavour it really was. Barbara didn't want to take that away from him, but she began to doubt. What would their lives have looked like if it wasn't in Gotham?

The Joker's appearance in Gotham was the embodiment of the sickness Barbara saw festering for the eight years she'd lived there, and she told Jim they needed to leave. She let Jim reassure her, keep back the feeling in her stomach that told her to find some quiet town far away from the pollution that was Gotham, so she didn't have to worry about her kids at school every day, her husband getting shot for trying to do what was right, or even walking down the street and constantly being afraid. Always afraid.

But Jim didn't listen to Barbara, and now she could see all too clearly the map of consequences she should have saw coming. She was left to think Jim was dead for an entire week. She had to tell her children they would grow up without a father, had to grieve Jim and dread living her life alone all because her husband died for valour. Barbara was left to mourn and then accept when he came walking through the door like what he did was nothing short of heroic rather than traumatizing. Like she could forgive him for that because it was all done in the name of The Greater Good.

Where did that take Barbara?

People were tearing each other apart in the streets, the Joker was killing people by the dozen and aiming for more, her husband was in the thick of it all and likely to never come back—for good this time—and a man was in her home, waving around a revolver.

And that man was Harvey goddamn Dent.

The man she put so much faith in. She wasn't alone in that, at least—the entire city had. He was going to clean up the city for good, give the legal system the teeth to fight back against organized crime. And there he stood, in her living room, face half-blown off, ready to kill her and her children.
Being married to Jim might have given Barbara an entire host of anxieties, but it also gave her tough skin in the face of extreme stress.

"What do you want, Harvey?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm as she held her children close. Harvey was agitated and clearly in pain—that would make him volatile. He growled impatiently.

"I want you to call Gordon. Now."

Barbara's hands shook. Calling her husband home likely meant he would die. Not calling him would mean her children stayed in danger. Either choice was heart-shattering. They could all die either way, but she couldn't willingly risk her children's lives. Holding James and Eileen tight to her body, Barbara struggled to keep her gaze locked on Harvey's remaining eye.

"I—I don't know if he'll answer. He's in the middle of the riots."

No discernible emotion passed over Harvey's face. He was just a walking embodiment of wrath. Raising the gun and pulling back the hammer, Harvey pointed it at her head. Barbara was glad her shaking knees still held her upright.

"Then we'll keep trying."

Barbara had no choice. The tears hadn't started, and she willed them not to. Nodding her head, she slowly reached into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out her cellphone. Motioning to the couch with the barrel of his gun, Barbara shushed her children as they called to her, wondering what was happening.

Sitting like they were about to watch a family movie, Harvey stood over the remaining Gordon's as the touchscreen lit up and she selected Jim's contact icon. It was set to a photo of Barbara and Jim from the last time they managed to get away for a vacation before Eileen was born six years ago. They looked so much younger, happier even with all the uncertainty Gotham kept at a constant frequency. Fingers shaking and lips trembling with pent up fear, Barbara pressed the phone to her ear and closed her eyes as she listened to the line dial. Jim answered on the third ring.

"Barb? Listen, I can't talk right now—"

"Honey, I need you to come home," Barbara said, squeezing her eyes shut as she pressed Eileen to her chest.

"Wait, why? Is something wrong? What—"

She couldn't take it anymore and started crying. What kind of person was she, calling her husband to his own execution? Barbara slapped a hand over her mouth as a sob ripped out and Harvey snatched the phone from her, pressing it against his ear and breathing hard.

"Hello, Jim."

Batman landed hard as he tackled the Joker to the ground. He saw the gun in the Joker's hand pointed at Miriam, the mess of blood and debris, and acted on instinct. Wiry muscle and sharp bone collided with Batman's bulk and a blunt fist connected with the Joker's jaw. He seemed temporarily dazed enough for Batman to take in his surroundings. The newest wing of Wayne Enterprises suffered extensive structural damage. With each passing minute the danger of the ceiling collapsing on top of them increased, and Batman could hear the structure groaning and the smell of smoke billowing out from above. He needed to move. But the laughing behind him—not
from the psychotic clown on the ground—shook Batman awake from the dream of vengeance and retribution at the sight of the bloodied face of the Joker.

Miriam was on her back, eyes open and staring, and howling with an inappropriate amount of mirth.

Why is she laughing?

Batman didn't have time to linger on that question. The rapidly expanding pool of blood underneath her made him abandon the Joker. He was next to Miriam immediately, pressing his gloved hands against the gunshot wound that seemed to have gone right through the left side of her abdomen.

"Talk to me," he demanded. Anything other than this strange laughter he'd never heard from her before. Miriam said nothing; didn't even seem capable of seeing him. She only stared ahead at the crumbling ceiling as the cackling turned into a pained sob. "Miriam—"

Batman didn't register the click until it was too late. The Joker, now on his feet, kicked Batman in the ribs. Batman's armour would have absorbed most of the impact, but it didn't account for there being a blade protruding from the toe of the Joker's shoe. Or the knife sliding into his ribs and nearly piercing his diaphragm.

"I'm so glad you came! I'm touched, really—"

The Joker drew back his foot for another swing. Ignoring the pain and dodging to the side, Batman tensed, ready to leap when something hard hit the side of his head. Grunting in pain and gritting his teeth, he raised an arm to protect his head as the Joker rained down blows with something solid and metal, roaring with the rabid excitement of a wild dog.

"But it, ah, doesn't seem like you came to visit me," the Joker forced out between the bursts of air as he hit and kicked, lashed out and struck at Batman. Even when he was in the middle of laying down a beating, the Joker didn't know when to shut up.

Batman took a hard blow to the jaw before he was able to catch the pipe, sweeping out a leg and dropping the Joker back to the ground. He launched himself forward to wrench away the thick pipe that the Joker wielded. The Joker, Batman realized, was bleeding too, but his grip on the pipe was firm and unyielding. They grappled; the Joker filled with a renewed burst of energy that exploded out of him as Batman's waned, depleted from the draining task of taking down the drones.

"I'm hurt, Batsy. What, I'm not your type?" the Joker giggled, exuding mock-offense. Batman punched him hard in the teeth.

In their struggle, the Joker managed to straddle Batman, forcing his weight into a leveraged position to keep Batman down. And, once again, Batman failed to register the sounds around him as he struggled to subdue the Joker, and he barely managed to catch the Joker's hand as he abandoned the pipe and tried driving a long switchblade into Batman's throat.

"Oh, all the familiar places," the Joker sang as he pushed all his weight on the hand holding the knife. Batman fought against the pressure, groaning as he twisted into a position to throw the Joker off. "Did you like the show outside? I thought it was something special—just for you!"

The Joker cackled and pressed harder, bringing up a knee to agitate the knife wound. Batman's concentration slipped as movement caught his eye. Miriam was standing up, and she wasn't laughing anymore. She held the metal pipe and raised it above her head. Miriam wasn't herself—not as Bruce Wayne ever knew her. She looked murderous.
And ready to crush the Joker's head in.

Of all the things that could go wrong, Gordon never suspected this.

"Harvey, what have you done?" Gordon asked, forcing himself to stay calm. That was the last thing he wanted to be, but he treated the truth unfolding in front of him like it was a situation at work and not his own family. "Where is Barbara? My children?"

Smack in the middle of suppressing riots was not the place to have this conversation, in front of his eavesdropping men as they worked to pen in the rioters. It was working—moving in and closing off the streets to act as a net, they cordoned off the streets and cinched in tighter, block by block. They'd learned from the disaster in the Narrows the year before, and the benefit of the National Guard was something they couldn't have managed without. Those who were afraid were quick to go home at the first signs that their police weren't as dire straits as Garcia had made it out to be. Many of the officers were eager to avenge their fallen, and they worked hard overthrow what the Joker attempted to establish.

The ones looking to take advantage of the chaos—thinking they lived in a newfound Wild West—were close to being corralled into the waiting police wagons until they could sort out who exactly committed what. The fresh onslaught of violent content online would be a useful tool in that.

When the drones were shot out of the sky and blasted into the Gotham River, Gordon cheered on with the rest of the officers on the ground. He didn't know how Batman did it, but Gordon felt like he'd done something right. It was a feeling that was so easily undermined.

"Where you abandoned them," Harvey answered.

The National Guard commander, Major Lewinsky, stood back in the distance. He looked at Gordon with concern as he saw the Commissioner's face turn ashen.

"I didn't abandon them—"

"Come alone. No cops—or you won't have a family to come home to."

"Harvey, wait—"

The line went dead. Gordon held his cellphone, sweating as reality set in.

A furious Harvey Dent was with his family.

He was likely armed.

There was only one way into his house, and Harvey had all the leverage.

"Everything OK, sir?" one of Gordon's patrolmen, Carlos Amaro, asked, peering at Gordon's face.

Gordon didn't have a choice, but how would he explain this without them following?

"There's... there's a situation," Gordon said, his eyes darting around as the flashing sirens blinded him in the dark and Special Forces walked in line with the National Guard, all holding their issued M16's aloft. "I need to take care of it. Send a small detachment to the 800 block of Elgin Street. No one moves without my say so." Gordon took on a voice he wasn't familiar with—the voice of a commander. He needed them to listen. He'd be dooming his family otherwise.

"Sir, can't we—"
"This is covert," Gordon interrupted. They couldn't ask questions he didn't have answers for. "Part of this mess. That's all you need to know."

The patrolman looked affronted, but Gordon didn't care. He was sending a squad to wait a block away from his home. If it came down to it, when they heard the shots, his family would have the benefit of immediate medical attention.

Shouldering past everyone in his way, Gordon ran through the mass of roving crowds that were either looking for help, a lost friend or family member, or were zip-tied and bloody on the sidewalk as they waited to be transported to any available processing unit. Gordon didn't care about any of them anymore. He made a promise to Batman, and a vow to Gotham, but his family's safety was more immediate. He and Major Lewinsky did their work, and it could be finished without him.

It took too long to find his car—too long to speed through the line of cars that were jammed together in a long line of sticky molasses. He took to the sidewalk, fighting through the streets like it was a raging river rather than a mass of pavement.

Gotham in the late fall was usually one collective rain trap, with showers happening extensively for long periods. No one enjoyed them because of the smell they brought up from Ace Chemicals, and because it only served to drown the streets and flood storm drains rather than feed the small number of green spaces. Gordon didn't often wish for rain, but he wanted it now. It'd help clear the people out of the way.

Twenty-two minutes is what it took Gordon to get to his house. The sounds of the riots had moved down and away from his neighbourhood, but he could still hear the sirens and shouting over two kilometers away. The other units would be in position soon, and Gordon stopped thinking about them as soon as he took the first step of his porch. His vision darkened. Nothing else mattered except seeing his family, making sure they were alright.

"Barbara?" Gordon called as he burst through the front door, gun drawn. He saw them sitting on their couch, his wife's arms around their children. The pressure in his chest tightened and he rushed forward. In his relief, he neglected to check the corners. A hard crack on the back of his head with the butt of Harvey's revolver was reminder enough.

Gordon fell to the floor, cradling his head, and Harvey stood between him and his family, kicking the gun out of his hand and across the floor.

"You can't even protect your own family," Harvey said, his chin tilted up as he looked down at Gordon with searing hatred. "Maybe I shouldn't be surprised you couldn't protect mine."

Gordon raised his hand, a motion of vulnerability begging for mercy. He panted hard, the air leaving him as the panic closed his throat at the sounds of his family crying.

"Harvey, I'm sorry about what happened. I tried to help her—"

"But you didn't, did you?"

Harvey stepped away from Gordon, eyeing up the family photos on the water-damaged walls. Even in near squalor, Gordon had more than Harvey ever would. His chance at happiness evaporated in the span of a day, and there would be no reclamation.

"I tried, but we—"

Harvey turned back to Gordon, showing him the full damage his willing ignorance inflicted. What the price Harvey paid turned out to be.
"Yes, you could. If you'd just listened to me—if you'd stood up against corruption instead of doing your deal with the devil."

"I was trying to fight the Mob—!"

Harvey stepped toward Gordon, still laying on the ground, and shook the gun in his face, spitting in his rage.

"You wouldn't dare try to justify yourself if you knew what I'd lost," Harvey whispered, his fury barely restrained.

All this because of what happened to his face? Didn't the doctors talk to him? Gordon thought. It didn't make sense. Why was Harvey so angry?

"Have you ever had to talk to the person you love most, wondering if you're about to listen to them die?" Harvey asked, the restraint breaking with emotion. "You ever had to lie to that person? Tell them it's going to be alright, when you know it's not?" he asked, a small tear rolling out of his remaining eye. Gordon's stomach flipped.

"Harvey, please help me understand. I don't... who died?" A sick feeling of comprehension slammed Gordon further into the floor. He looked to Barbara, her eyes trained on the gun and where it was pointed, and his terrified children staring at him in fear. Harvey wanted vengeance, he realized. But vengeance for what?

"Don't you DARE pretend you don't know," Harvey roared, pressing the gun to Gordon's head, baring his teeth and filling the room with suffocating fire. Gordon raised his hands higher, seeing a path that might save his family. "You're going to feel what I felt. What I've suffered. Then you'll be able to look me in the eye and tell me you're sorry."

Harvey, clearly unbalanced, was wracked with grief—that's what underpinned the rage. Sitting up straighter, Gordon spoke calmly and made his breathing slow.

"Who have you been talking to, Harvey? Rachel is alive."

Harvey barely registered the claims. He pointed the gun at Barbara's temple and his fear spiked to an unholy spasm that seized his heart.

"Harvey, put the gun down. You don't want to hurt my family." Harvey stared him down and glowered. Gordon kept inching up, moving at a glacier pace to the gun behind him. "Rachel isn't dead, Harvey. You're hurting the wrong people. She's hurt, but she—"

"STOP LYING!" Harvey screamed, his face coming alive with burning denial. "She's dead, I saw the medical report—"

"Who showed you, Harvey?" Gordon asked and Harvey froze. Conflict transformed the part of his face that remained whole. "Rachel is in Trenton, in a special burn unit. She... I failed her, I know that, but she isn't dead." Gordon's voice grew thick at the thought of what she looked like now. Her bubbling skin, the leagues of red that claimed the once fair skin, the exposed muscle on her hand. Gordon had done more than fail her, they both knew that.

"You're lying." All the certainty Harvey had—everything he'd done in her name—amounted to nothing.

*Just like everything else you've done,* Harvey thought.
Harvey pulled out his coin, the object that gave him direction. He needed it more than ever.

"It's not about what I want, it's about what's fair!" he screamed, waving the gun. "You and Batman. Our team of three. You—you all thought we could be decent men in an indecent time. You thought we could lead by example. You thought the rules could be bent and not break."

Harvey's voice escalated to a pitch of despair. The tears were coming down hard and he didn't try to stop them. Confusion made everything that was so clear before as muddy as the blood that would coat his soul forever.

"You were wrong," he said to Gordon as much as himself. Gordon tried again; the chances of getting through to Harvey were dwindling.

"Someone lied to you, and I'm sorry. But—you need to put the gun down, Harvey. You don't need to do this. Rachel's going to wake up and she's going to need you." Gordon didn't know that for certain, but he needed to appeal to Harvey—make him realize the truth of what he was doing.

Harvey's mind reverberated with body-wracking turmoil. What did he actually remember? Why did he believe the Joker; why was he so convincing? What did he actually see when he saw that medical chart?

Nothing.

Harvey realized he could be certain of nothing.

He didn't see Rachel's body. No one admitted her death to him except for the Joker, and he was a practiced liar. The rational part of his mind knew this.

Then what was all this for?

He'd murdered so many people. Harvey made himself a killer. He stood in the Gordon home, ready to massacre an entire family, and for what?

Nothing.

A scream of pain and suffering erupted out of Harvey. He pulled at the remaining hair on his head, pressed the hard metal into the angry, burned skin and roared.

Where were Fate and Chance now? Why did they abandon him?

Horror and tears blinded Harvey to Gordon moving back and grabbing his gun. Harvey didn't care anymore. Gordon, Batman, and the Joker might have destroyed his life and his face, but he did all the rest. He shoved the pistol against his chin and went to pull the trigger, bypassing his new process of having his coin make the choice, but Gordon was faster. Taking aim for the bicep and shoulder of the arm holding the gun, Gordon fired twice in quick succession.

Harvey hit the floor hard, and Gordon was in front of his family in an instant. Screaming and a flurry of movement filled the small space, and the arms of his children wrapped around him and took Gordon's attention away from Harvey. He wouldn't be able to use his arm, and that's all that mattered.

In the time it took to untangle himself from his family and make sure Harvey was alive and incapacitated, the space Harvey had fallen to was empty. A large trail of blood led to the kitchen and their backdoor swung open and slammed into the wall. Harvey would have to scale the fence and run down the connection of alleys to get away. Weary exhaustion gripped Gordon as he held
his family. Pulling the radio from his jacket pocket, he pressed down on the receiver.

"All units converge on 746 Elgin Street. Create a perimeter—we need to begin a manhunt, put out an APB."

"10-4, Commissioner. Who's the POI?"

Gordon closed his eyes and willed the feeling of his family, whole and alive, to be enough. He sighed and marvelled with a sickened sense of awe the devastation that upended an entire city in such a short period of time.

"Harvey Dent."

Batman pushed the Joker off just as Miriam brought down the pipe, catching it in his hand just before it caved in the clown's head.

"Miriam, stop—"

But Miriam was beyond hearing him. She struggled to rip the pipe away to take another swing. When Batman jumped to his feet, he pulled out the long switchblade that the Joker managed to dig into the muscles above his collarbone. Growling, he tore the pipe away as another sharp kick—with the same shoe with the knife in its toe—found a home in Batman's abdomen.

*You need to end this. Quickly.*

Smoke filled the room, choking him. Wood and plaster crackling made him look up as he trapped a screaming Miriam in the vise of his arms. Fire engulfed the ceiling. Rolling thunder in the form of massive structural failures made the building heave.

The pain didn't matter. Batman needed to take the Joker down and get Miriam out. That was his goal and it's all that mattered.

"Looks like I won't miss the fireworks after all," the Joker giggled. Batman wasn't the only one staring at the death coming for them if they didn't get out first.

His attention was dragged away again when Miriam stopped struggling. She was staring at her hand, and it was covered in blood. Her blood.

"Bruce?" she mouthed. No sound came out, and her brows came together in confusion.

Batman shook when she went limp, but the Joker gave him no time to help. He was more determined than ever that they get the fiery send-off he always wanted. A hard *thwack* to the head made his knees buckle.

"How did you like all my handiwork, hmm? I put so much *time* and *effort* in, I was worried it wouldn't turn out just right—"

The Joker savagely kicked Batman in the bleeding ribs. Batman, weak and struggling to breathe from the billowing smoke, was on his back again with the pipe on his throat, the Joker pressing down hard as he laughed maniacally and licked his lips.

"See what my problem was? Ya can't rely on anyone these days, and I *relied* on people a *little too much*. Look at where that got me!" The grin never left as the mania heightened what the Joker's excitement brought. "Little Miriam, there, was *so* helpful, wasn't she? Bet you just *loved* what our
gal pal cooked up. Needed to keep a tighter leash apparently. But, y'know what they say... 'live and learn.'

He cackled at his own joke and pushed down until he nearly crushed Batman's throat. The Joker leaned in close, greasepaint tainted sweat dripping onto Batman's cheek.

"And I learned that you've gotta do everything yourself," he sang. Batman struggled to breathe and the Joker laughed, smiling at some remembered moment. "I always have, Bats—and it ain't easy... speaking of which, you wanna know how I got these scars?"

The Joker's smile froze as the hammer of a gun pulled back. Miriam, her eyes ringed black and cheeks ashen and hollow, smiling painfully as she started laughing again, held the Joker's gun tightly. Her hands didn't shake, and no hesitation was present on her face—only unhinged, ethereal laughter coming from her bleeding chest. She wanted the Joker to die, and she wanted to be the one to do it.

Batman summoned his last reserves of strength, the deepest pits in himself that he hadn't tapped into since he was a boy and the weight of his parents' death nearly suffocated him, back when every day of his life was a struggle for survival when he was gone. The heat of the fire, a pertinent reminder of the fire that destroyed Wayne Manor, licked closer to them. Soon, there wouldn't be a path to leave.

"Miriam, put down the gun," he wheezed, struggling to maintain the pitch that disguised his voice. The Joker twisted to smile at Miriam, egging her on.

"Oh, still lookin' to cause some trouble, hmm?" he taunted. The shaking came back with violent force in Miriam's arms. Tears streaked down her dirty cheeks, now stained with ash. The Joker looked back to Batman, giving him a knowing smirk. "See? It's contagious in this town. Everyone's just looking to tear each other apart!"

The Joker burst into hysterical peals of laughter. He thought he won. He knew the eagerness that the citizens of Gotham embraced when it came to inflicting harm on others. Sweet Miriam was welcoming it just like all the others. She tried so hard not to hurt anyone that she inflicted harm all by accident. Now she was willing to inflict it with purpose. The Joker might have not been able to turn Batman, but the Joker got those closest to him. It wouldn't take much at all for Batman to lose everything else. Madness would follow after, and the Joker could bask in the aftermath.

"Miriam, you don't want this," Batman said, his mind going fuzzy as he fought for air. The Joker responded by putting all his weight on the pipe and the knife wounds on Batman's chest. "Don't be like him."

Miriam's eyes snapped to Batman's and he could see the extent of her suffering. The Joker didn't try to stop her from aiming at him. He was caught in a moment of poetry; an epic tragedy that was fitting for the legend he wanted to leave behind. It involved pain, and that was what mattered to him. She stared into Batman's eyes as beams coated in flame dropped around them, and she slowly lowered the gun.

"Oh, come on, sweet peach—get off your high horse and grow a spine—"

As soon as the pressure lessened, Batman pushed up, smacking the pipe into the Joker's head and dazing him. Batman's fist landed against the Joker's jaw again and again as the same rage he felt in the interrogation room at the MCU, when he was searching for Miriam and beat Jahan Shaddid and Maroni to a pulp, in the arcade at Amusement Mile and stared at exactly what evil he allowed the Joker to inflict on Miriam, as he struggled and strived to do what was right left only ruin behind
ripped through him. He wanted to beat the Joker to death. Bruce Wayne, peeking up past the defenses Batman put in place, wanted the Joker's blood to cover his fists more than anything.

But Batman held himself back. He trembled with the violence of his anger, but he wouldn't unleash it. That's not what justice was. He wouldn't let Miriam sink to the Joker's level, and he couldn't either. The Joker stared up at him, the blood and greasepaint mixing to coat the entirety of his lower mouth in red.

"Just can't let me go, can you?" Smug certainty slicked his voice, practically dripping from it. Batman wanted to resume his beating, but he gritted his teeth and held back. He wouldn't kill for R'as, and he wouldn't kill for the Joker either. "I guess this is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you?"

The Joker got it wrong. Bruce Wayne was corruptible, just like everyone else. It was because he was corruptible that he had to fight harder. He couldn't make change if he didn't learn from history, and that's what Batman allowed him to do. Detach from the mistakes of his past. He couldn't fall prey to them now or he'd be doomed to repeat it. And what would happen to Gotham then?

"You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness..." The Joker grew serious, but the smile of familiarity never left. "And I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are, ah... destined to do this forever."

Batman closed his eyes and a breath of pained weariness almost made him fall to the ground. The smoke grew thick and black. They were almost out of time. Flipping the Joker onto his stomach, he pulled his arms behind his back and secured them with zip ties.

"You're going to be in a padded cell, forever," Batman answered, moving to the Joker's legs and tying those together and securing a cord around them. He wouldn't carry the Joker out, but he had no qualms about dragging him.

"Maybe we can share one." More cackles. But the tone was different. The Joker was in on a joke Batman didn't know. He flipped the defeated clown over and was greeted with a look of twinkling mischief. As if what the Joker was about to say was entirely benign. "They'll need to double-up with the rate of the city's inhabitants are losing their minds..."

Oh no.

"You tried your little game and failed. What were you trying to prove? That all of humanity was as willing to be as ugly as you?" Batman demanded, grabbing the Joker by the lapels of his jacket and shaking him. The Joker's tongue snaked out and lapped up the blood oozing from his split bottom lip.

"Yeah, not everyone joined the party, but we'll see what happens when they find out what I did with the best of them. When they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent, and all the 'heroic' things he's done." The smile disappeared and the Joker leaned forward, eyes rolling up and landing back in place, trying to press his nose against Batman's. He was caught by the horror of the Joker's revelations. At this new circle of hell unveiled before him. "All those criminals Harvey worked so hard to lock up, all those nights of beating petty criminals to a pulp—sacrificing your, ah, personal life... it'll be for nothing. Gotham's gonna get a real look at the true nature of heroism."

Batman's eyes went wide. He didn't think there was any other way he could fail. Once again, the Joker proved him wrong.
"You didn't think I'd make things so simple for you, did ya, Batsy? When Gotham's soul was on the line?" The Joker laughed, but it was mirthless and he didn't smile. "You've gotta have an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey."

"What did you do?"

Miriam and the encroaching fire were forgotten. Only the Joker remained. And he smiled, revealing the secret to his last card trick.

"I took Gotham's White Knight, and I brought him down to my level," he confessed with glee. "It wasn't hard. Y'see, madness—and I explained this to Miri—is like gravity. All it takes is a little push!"

The Joker's laughter belted out, loud and unending. Batman didn't have the luxury of killing the Joker now or stewing in the full breadth of his failure. He took the cable attached to the Joker's feet and hauled up a now unconscious Miriam and dragged them out of the burning room, fighting through the collapsing hallways and oxygen deprivation.

He would never admit it out loud, but the Joker won. He won and there would be no going back for Gotham. He and Gordon might have saved her from being torn apart, but a new era would be ushered in. One unprecedented in its history. The battle for Gotham was only beginning.

The Joker made sure of that. And Miriam helped make it happen.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Holy smokes this one took me longer than anticipated to get out. Part of it was the small vacation I took, and the other part is that I'm just really nervous about this chapter. I've been building to this for 37 chapters. 37! Over 250k words and almost a year, and I really, really hope that it's everything you could have hoped for and more. Anxiety has not been my friend in writing this, but I sincerely wish this story has been one you've enjoyed. Thank you to everyone who stuck around from the beginning and those who joined along the way. Your support made this crazy endeavour worthwhile - so I owe you all everything from the bottom of my heart.

There are several marked differences from the canon TDK. Harvey Dent is still alive - I thought his potential as a villain was short-lived in the series (for understandable reasons) and since this is canon divergent, I have the opportunity to give his character more exploration that was limited in the film. Rachel is also still alive. This isn't a knock against Christopher Nolan (he's still a filmmaking god to me, and he isn't the only one guilty of this), but her dying in the film felt solely necessary for Bruce to have a reason to go into an eight year stretch of solitude and Harvey to lose his mind about rather than existing as a character in her own right. Her being alive, and severely scarred and injured, complicates this. So I've changed this to give myself a new avenue to pursue in the sequel (which is totally different from the TDKR). What that looks like shall remain unknown for now!

Perhaps the biggest change is the ending message of the Joker's reign of terror. There is no sense of hope right now, unlike the false one given about Batman being the Dark
Knight Gotham deserves but doesn't need and Batman being subsequently hunted for taking the fall for Harvey. Ultimately, the Joker was right in TDK. I've explained why before, but it still holds true here. Rather than the Joker's schemes being something that Gotham can put behind and set the stage for Bane, it becomes a stage-setter for future conflict and the potential for more of Batman's rogue gallery to come to the fore. What that looks like will be hinted at in the epilogue, but the craziness isn't over - it'll just look different.
Retreat and Reveille

Harvey, wounded and badly bleeding, raced down the dark alleys after fleeing the Gordon home. He berated himself as he tried to stem the flowing blood coming from his shoulder and arm, but his head—a new war zone he couldn't control—made the encroaching darkness harder to understand. The divide, which started as a small fissure and expanded into a crevasse, became a gaping chasm, splitting his psyche into competing parts that tried to keep him whole.

It didn't work.

Did Chance abandon him, did he put his faith in the wrong things again? The justice system was a lie perverted by years of corruption that diluted its purpose. Harvey was a fool to believe it could've been different, and he could only marvel at where it left him.

But Chance couldn't be the same. *It couldn't.*

Something struck Harvey’s troubled mind as he collapsed into a pile of rotting trash bags, falling back down every time he tried to push himself up with his good remaining arm. Pain made his thoughts clear. So did the sound of sirens coming from two blocks away.

Harvey got shot because he reacted on emotion. The revelation about Rachel was enough to break through everything else and upset the balance. He failed to exact Gordon's payment and it blew back onto himself. Duality isn't what brought him low, it was the mistakes he made in the *before.* He couldn't repeat the same patterns again.

Harvey Dent was weak. *He* was the one who went easy on the scum permeating the police. *He* was the reason trust was put into Jim Gordon and Batman in the first place. A large part of him blamed Batman, for giving him hope and the delusion that he could make a difference. That this city had a heart worth saving. It didn't. The *world* didn't. Harvey Dent, once called Gotham's White Knight in half-serious jest, was dead. That was the side of himself he tried to hard to cultivate, and for what?

Harvey Dent might be dead, but he had another name.

Coming upon a small pedestrian bridge that went over a long set of railway tracks, he took the small path that led downward, the blood dripping down his sleeve all the while. He needed a plan and get away from the cops. One thing was certain, he wouldn't go to prison. He'd die first.

Being Gotham's DA meant he had an inside scoop on the criminal underworld in the city. He didn't stop being intelligent because he was scarred, and survival was all that mattered. He was a murderer; he had no means to deny it. He burned any option of redemption like the flames marred his face. There would be no going back to anything he knew.

Maybe it's time to start anew.

What did they call him, back in Internal Affairs?

"Harvey Two-Face," he grunted as he walked down a long line of tracks into the welcoming black of a tunnel ahead.

Harvey Dent was dead. Two-Face would be a suitable replacement.

Pain on this level shouldn't be something anyone was capable of feeling.
Every nerve was being pulled out with a thousand needles simultaneously. There was no skin, only a hot, boiling blanket that took its place. Bones ceased to exist, replaced with brittle sticks that wouldn't move.

This body was a foreign one, but Rachel Dawes felt everything.

The tugs on the burnt, tight skin, the groaning creaks of her joints. But above all that was the burning. It consumed everything else. Before she could open her eyes, that's what she felt. It became a prison all on its own, trapping her in a place that held no reprieve.

If there was a hell, Rachel was in it.

*Why does everything hurt so bad?* Rachel thought not for the first time.

She didn't know why she couldn't control her body, or why she was there. The only memory able to break through the crushing black that tore at her mind—one piece at a time—was that almost *nothing* broke through. Rachel remembered her own name, who her family was, her years playing with Bruce, the hours spent in the library for law school, the way her hand cramped as she wrote her exams, Harvey Dent's smile, a night she wasn't sure was real, and fear. Rachel remembered being afraid. But she knew something else was missing. Skirting images that didn't stay still long enough for her to place them.

A finger moved. And then two. Muffled voices spoke in her ear.

*Maybe I'm underwater.*

It would explain why she had a hard time breathing. Why each inhale was a fight.

*Am I alive?*

"Can you hear me?" came a voice.

*Yes,* Rachel wanted to say. No sound came, and the dull feelings of panic swelled. You didn't feel panic when you were dead—or maybe you did, Rachel considered on reflection—but it had to be different from this, didn't it?

*Why can't I move?*

Ghosted movements, a light brush of something cool—finally something cool—touched her hand. Rachel made her hand move, to trap the movement under the tips of her fingers and pin it in place. More muffled voices, gentle prodding along her neck.

Slowly, Rachel managed to open her eyes.

Jim Gordon stood outside in the cold October air as the skies of Gotham opened. They were finally gifted with rain, and it would wash away any trace Harvey Dent left behind. He didn't know what to feel, but he began to recognize the ache of failure.

The Joker won.

He won and there was no going back. Gotham had reached a turning point. Turning back was an option decades ago; it wasn't anymore. Gotham saw that their police couldn't protect them, that they were too weak to make a difference that mattered. Gordon was the Commissioner now. That in itself should've been a victory, but it wasn't. The title acted as a new, heavier reminder that the
responsibilities he swore an oath to uphold were broken.

His family was in protective custody. They'd never be able to go back to their home again. Just thinking about how he'd make things with his family resemble anything 'normal' was beyond him. There was no going back for them either.

Harvey was gone and, as Gordon stood in the streets with the rain pouring down on his head, he wasn't sure if he did Harvey a mercy by not going for a kill shot.

"I'm sorry, Jim."

Gordon swerved to the sound coming out of a dark side alley, whipping his service gun out and shaking. It took several beats for Batman's gravelly pitch to register as something familiar. Sighing and wiping off his glasses, Gordon joined Batman at the mouth of the alley, watching as his men searched his entire neighbourhood.

He'd gotten the call about the Joker's capture. The bastard would be treated and operated on—his infernal life spared—and shipped off to Arkham's new supermax facility. Gordon wanted nothing but to think of that demon in the guise of a clown as a distant memory, even as the world around him would let him forget nothing. The National Guard, with their jets and helicopters, circled overhead. The rioters were corralled, and soon the real work would begin. They'd need to sort out a viable prosecution against hundreds, and Gordon didn't even know where to begin.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry too," he said, voice heavy. He was glad for the rain. It would make the wetness in his eyes indistinguishable from the water pelting him. He wanted to be with his family. Barbara's arms around his shoulders. Holding his children. He never wanted to let them go. "We... we failed."

Even the admittance of failure felt like too little. What could be said that would encompass everything he felt, the enormity of what was lost? Language failed him.

It seemed to fail Batman, too. He stood in silence, head bowed as the rain bounced off the back of his cowl. Of course he knew about Harvey. Gordon appreciated that about Batman just as much as he resented it. Batman knew Gordon's mind just as well as he did; their goals were the same. But that meant when Batman didn't have the answers, Gordon didn't either.

"Harvey's prosecution, everything he fought for—what we fought for. Undone." The bitterness was blatant, and Gordon hid his pain in anger. "We—at what was it for? In one goddamn night, everything we worked for was obliterated. Obliterated!"

Gordon ripped off his glasses and his body seized in his rage, but he had nowhere to direct it. No one to take it out on. And he found, deep down, that he didn't want to. Dent couldn't have gotten far, he knew, and Gordon didn't want him to die.

Ever since he was a little boy, all Gordon wanted to do was help people. Big or small, if there was a hard choice, someone who needed help, Gordon wanted to be the one to mend the fences, remedy and rectify every problem. Even then, as the horror of what could have happened to his family squeezed the air out of his lungs, Gordon wanted to make things right with Harvey. He wouldn't let him go, but he could get him help. He could do that much when he failed everywhere else.

"It wasn't for nothing," Batman answered.

"Wasn't it?" Gordon looked hard at his friend in black. He never tried to guess who the man under the mask was. It didn't matter to him. Before when he looked at the eyes ringed in onyx
greasepaint, he saw a friend. An enigmatic stranger who held the key to his redemption and his city's salvation. But Gordon couldn't see either of those things then. "Whatever chance Gotham had of fixing itself—whatever chance you gave us of fixing the city—dies with Harvey's reputation."

Batman's powerful build slumped forward, and a hand unconsciously touched his abdomen. It took a moment for Gordon to notice, but Batman was in a great amount of pain. Physical pain. The look on Batman's face told Gordon he should know better than to ask.

"We bet it all on him, didn't we?" Gordon said quietly. Batman still heard him over the sound of the rain slapping against the pavement, the sirens ahead. "The Joker took the best of us and tore him down. People... people will lose hope."

_I've lost hope_, he thought.

"No. They won't."

Gordon snapped his head up. How Batman could have any shred of optimism after this all-consuming nightmare was beyond Gordon's ability to drive blindly into the future and hope that his faith in others would be rewarded.

"Pain doesn't stop because we hope it will. It's a fight we signed up for. We three." Batman grunted but remained upright. Gordon could swear he saw Batman's leg shake once. "We lost, but we didn't fail. Harvey fell, but Gotham didn't. The day we fail is the day we stop trying."

Awe. That's all Gordon could look at Batman with.

"Will you keep trying with me, Jim?" Batman asked. Gordon could finally see something resembling human emotion in Batman's eyes were he'd only seen hardened determination before.

He stared at Batman's outstretched hand and took it in his own, sealing their fates. Binding them together. Gotham would stand as long as they did. Even if the people lost hope, they would guide them back. Success or failure, perhaps, wasn't determined by one night alone. In the carnage of one man's destructive vision, Batman and Gordon renewed their pact.

Gotham wasn't beyond saving as long as there were those who stood for her. Just like in the beginning, when they were just two, Gordon and Batman would rally others with them. Even if they had to start from the ground up, they'd begin again, hoping they wouldn't repeat the mistakes they made before.

Hope ignited in Gordon's chest even as Batman rode away, and the rainy dark descended with the early streaks of dawn.

Bruce Wayne couldn't stay with Miriam without revealing his own injuries. He went to the docks, the shipping yard that held his small hideaway, after calling Alfred. He stumbled down, peeling off his armour as he went before finally collapsing.

_Miriam is with doctors who can help. They'll look after her; she won't die._

He made himself believe that was true.

Alfred came shortly after he did, kit bag in hand. His skills as an army medic were more than useful in the first year of Batman's existence. Alfred resented the need for it, but it was a necessary evil. Alfred didn't want to be the one to fix up this young man—this person he sometimes didn't entirely recognize but still saw as his own. Alfred's attention couldn't be divided. Bruce was
bleeding, his cuts running deep, and cracked several ribs in addition to fracturing an arm.

It took Alfred three hours to set Bruce's bones and stitch and glue his injuries. Bruce would feel them for a long time, he knew, and going out again would be an impossibility. Once he was sure Bruce was stable, properly hooked up to an IV and unable to get up on his own, Alfred left. Miriam would be in surgery to repair the gunshot wound—and who knows what else—and Alfred would not have her wake up alone. He felt divided, but he mended one child and would oversee the mending of the other.

That's what they were to Alfred; his children. He'd been there since the days they were born, and he didn't want to be alive they day they weren't.

After Alfred had gone, Bruce lay in the cold silence of his underground bunker. He'd done it—saved thousands. But what else had he done?

He didn't forget his promise to Gordon, the vow he'd never break, but it required another sacrifice.

There could be no Bruce. He'd resolved as much before, but Batman etched that resolve into stone. Bruce Wayne would exist as a passing performance. Something he did—just as before—to cover his true purposes. Bruce Wayne would be a lie. Gotham needed Batman. The road ahead was broken and cratered, but it was still a path he could help heal.

That night—when his parents died—Bruce made a silent vow that he'd never let anyone feel the agony he did. As long as he could draw in air, he'd keep fighting for those who couldn't do so for themselves. He lost sight of that, he knew. It couldn't happen again. He let it happen to Miriam because he allowed himself to be weak. How many more had to die for him to realize that?

Never again.

Even with that assertion came a new wave of hurt that rippled past the physical. This was a gut-wrenching hit to his being. The weight of it—the pain and loss amassed in the span of two weeks—made hot dampness run down his cheeks. And still more was demanded from him, and he was willing—why did he have to be willing?—to answer the call. He would do all he could. He'd make Gotham better. And that meant mitigating the risks that would do her harm. Miriam proved to be one of those risks, and his inability to think clearly when she was involved was a liability he couldn't test the limits of again.

Miriam couldn't stay in Gotham.

Then where will she go?

No answer came. He didn't even know how he would face her. Miriam's blood was caked into the small crevasses of his suit, leeched through to touch his skin. Her voice was in his ear, asking why he wasn't there. Again.

Miriam will understand, won't she?

As the lights dimmed and Bruce's thoughts roared in his ears, he looked up at the granite ceiling and cried.

The wonders of the Hippocratic oath and the modern sensibilities of 'due process,' the Joker mused.

His stab wound—courtesy of my sweet peach—was treated. His cuts handled with rough but loving
care. His fractured bones examined and set and tests run to make sure he wouldn't die in his sleep. 

*Can't try a dead man. Lord knows they've tried before.*

The Joker was relatively comfortable. He'd had a taxing week, and that was discounting the last whirlwind the last twenty-four odd hours turned out to be. Morphine helped. And so did the other half-a-dozen other sedatives they were pumping into him to keep him subdued like some kind of wild animal.

*That's 'cause you might as well be one.*

He wondered if Miriam was being in the same hospital he was. It was almost worth getting up to check, but the nurses got their opioid cocktail *right*. The Joker couldn't get up even if he wanted to.

When Batman hauled him out of the burning husk of the R&D Department, his gleeful laughter descending into chiding remarks as his head was smacked against more than one heavy object. Just after getting a *real* taste of Batman, he was being hauled away. It was addictive, the feeling he had. Being so close to greatness all the while enjoying the agony of someone whose company he enjoyed while his literal surroundings burned was *exactly* how the Joker wanted to spend his night. Gotham might not have went up in flames in the spectacular fashion he wanted, but he could work with this, too.

Batman wasted no time in gingerly handing Miriam over to the paramedics as the Joker had the distinct pleasure of watching emergency care workers and law enforcement alike struggle with what *exactly* they should do with him. He could *feel* their hatred rolling off in smothering waves, and the Joker basked in it like it was a warm bath. That made them angrier, but they helped him nonetheless.

His surgery was done, hands cuffed to the hospital bed frame, the muscular male nurses placing *sweet* bruises with tender thought, and was ready to start his vacation. Because that's what this would be: a *vacation*.

He'd heard about the new super-maximum security asylum built by TYGER Limited, a competitor of Titan Industries. The *new* Arkham Asylum. With the last one going up in flames during the previous year's riots, the city was content to leave its patients and the surely angry ghosts haunting the place to their own devices. The rest of the world was, anyway. But they needed a new place to store their resident *freaks*, and Gotham's answer was building a new facility. One that wouldn't be so easy to escape. It would take some time, a hell of a lot of planning, but the Joker could get out. He was certain about it.

*I'm afraid I'm starting to sound cocky. Blame the drugs. I know I am.*

As soon as they could slap a band-aid on him in good conscience without the fear of him dying from surgical complications, the Joker was sped over to Arkham, now located just outside of the city's limits. They wanted him to stand trial, and Blackgate Prison held too many risks.

*Getting shivved before the special day is one of 'em.*

So the Joker waited patiently in his straightjacket. He was too sore to do much wriggling anyway, but he was antsy. The Joker had seen doctors—*a generous term for 'em*—before—*in another life, kid*—and knew what to expect.

When the transport van stopped and orderlies wearing full suits of body armour on top of their scrubs came to drag his gurney out, the Joker got a good look of the place. Massive and imposing,
gothic architecture set against the haunting silhouette of tall trees, Arkham Asylum was almost a goddamn resort. Rolling green hills on the front lawn, patients gardening, a large facade meant to look welcoming, guards standing at attention with assault rifles at their thirty feet high electric fence—the Joker was certainly in for a treat.

Nothing was said to or around the Joker the entire time since he'd left the hospital. The silence was off-putting, and they didn't even respond to his jokes—the audacity, really—but the Joker didn't give up trying. As they wheeled him into the grand lie of the idyllic tinged with militarism into the foyer, the Joker smiled at his greetings. Flanked by an escort of four armed guards stood a man. His skin was brown and eyes slanted. Thick, circular lenses sat on top of his nose—barely held together by the thin wire of its frame—and a full on chin beard that extended along the entirety of his jaw completed the look with the white lab coat. The man was small and slight, but something about him resonated with the Joker. A call of familiarity.

He's like me.

Similar but different. One on one side of the glass and one on the other.

"Wow, all this for me? Shucks, you shouldn't have," he drawled with a half-smile through the haze of his medication. That was another thing he'd felt before. For years. The annoyance of being muted by heavy meds. It was something he could acclimatize to.

Eventually.

The man in front of him smiled, and the Joker was right. There was something about him that the Joker intrinsically understood.

"Welcome to Arkham, Mr. Joker," the man—clearly a doctor—said. He stepped closer and leaned over the Joker. The doctor had an accent he didn't recognize. "I do hope your stay with us will be a pleasant one."

The Joker narrowed his eyes. He was one of those doctors. The ones who smiled as they poked and prodded. He started having his own imaginings of what he'd like to do to him.

Something in the same vein that I did to the last one.

The man's smile grew at the sight of the Joker's suspicion. "You may call me Dr. Strange."
"I didn't know they made houses this big!" Parker said, twirling around the main foyer of Wayne Manor like he was some dazzled princess in a Disney movie. It was as annoying as it was endearing. "Did they model this off English estates? This is right out of a magazine. It's totally filled with ghosts or something. Can you feel it? I know I can—"

"Parker," I interrupted, trying not to laugh and giving an unconvincing glare instead. "The project. Let's work on that, yeah?"

He was like that, always so eager to start some half-baked adventure that took place in our heads more than reality. Parker was unfazed by my brusque answers, going on and on about how reminiscent the architecture was to Arthur Holmwood's estate in Dracula, one of the books he'd roped me into reading. He was still caught up on the idea of 'ghosts,' and brushing up against the unexplainable to get that intangible high of being afraid all the while knowing you were never in danger at all.

Is that what made him help his parents—sign up for something he thought wouldn't blowback on him, that would stay at a safe distance if he did all the right things? Didn't he know better than anyone that pain can find you no matter what you do, that there is no hiding from it in the illusion of the grand tales we place ourselves in? I thought I forced that lesson on him with Ivan, but maybe Parker was always caught up in the ideas of stories bigger than us, and really believed he could help; that the intentions of his heart would overcome what was lacking in others.

Would things have been different if I believed the same?

"Seriously, this house is amazing," he told me again as I gave him a tour.

Most of the furniture was covered in white sheets, giving every shape a permanent, haunting silhouette that hid unsettling imaginings I'd never thought to conjure before until I started devouring the books he picked.

There's another thing I can regret now—I never told him how much I learned to enjoy reading. He taught me that—the simple joys found in a good book. Imagine my surprise when I sat down to read The Haunting of Hill House, expecting to be bored and Googling the Sparknotes to pretend I knew what I was talking about when I found myself enthralled by the words on the page, the feeling of paper between my fingers, the smell of pulp and glue and something that reminded me so much of Mom that I had to put it down to keep myself from crying. Parker gave me those things. And what had I given him?

I unconsciously drew closer to Parker as we wandered the wings that hadn't seen visitors for years. Alfred kept the place clean, and he was content to let us wander—hiding his own glee in a sudden need to 'garden'—as Parker looked at everything like he hadn't seen it before outside of grand children's stories. Wayne Manor was like that—so out of place, disjointed from reality when it lost the people who made it a home.

"Yeah, Bruce's family was loaded," I answered. Technically, all that money went between Alfred and the different organizations the Wayne Foundation oversaw. "It needs more people in it though. Waste of space, otherwise."
"It must get lonely," Parker said after a long moment of silence. I stopped walking and so did he, subduing his energy as his eyes were stuck wide in wonderment. Eventually those brown eyes landed on mine, disarming me and the front that quickly crumbled in his presence. "My house always feels full, but it’s smaller than this—obviously."

He laughed, looking around at the wainscoting, wood beams, high ceilings, and art that could pay for someone’s entire education. It was too much for any one person to own, but he didn’t comment on it. Didn’t even judge me for how indifferent I seemed about the amount of wealth around me. I probably looked—and sounded like—a real rich brat.

"You don't ever want to move somewhere else?"

"No," I answered, turning away from him and walking quickly.

What else could I say? Nothing I was willing to admit. I didn't want to leave in case Bruce came home, as if he was a lost kid who wouldn't be able to find us if we weren't in the exact same spot he left us in. Another part of it was the memories. My happiest ones were there. It was where I spent Christmas, birthdays, and holidays with Mom, Alfred, and Bruce. It's where I remembered feeling happiest. I didn't feel happy anymore, and I'd started to forget what that meant. Just like Parker was chasing adventure, I was chasing memories—trying to capture them and hold them tightly, even as the harder I gripped the more seemed to leave me.

I was alone and the people who mattered always found a reason to leave—they were gone, leaving me and Alfred behind like we never meant anything in the first place. I didn't see that Parker—and who knows else—could have made things different if I let them in sooner.

But, does it really matter now? What can I change, take back and make OK?

Nothing. I can do nothing. Just be trapped in the memories that will never release their hold on me.

Our first meetings at the Manor were awkward and stilted, with Parker trying to thaw my icy walls and gradually succeeding. It wasn't long before he and I would race around the long halls of the West Wing, the grassy hills surrounding the property that fed into the massive treelines.

When we weren't procrastinating on our project, Parker was repurposing meat thermometers as a valid measuring device to determine temperature drops in potentially haunted rooms. The recording app on his phone was suddenly good enough to pick up any whispered phenomena from "beyond the veil," as he'd say.

We did that for weeks, getting closer each time we were together. I warmed to him in degrees, letting a little more information slip each time, until one day Parker suggested staying the night in the Manor basement. I refused to tell him to his face, but the idea was terrifying. I had an image to maintain, one of a girl who didn't care—one who wasn't afraid when, really, I was afraid of everything.

"Don't need to be scared," he told me, smiling wide with a confidence I couldn't even pretend to have, "I'll be there. Ghosts like groups—they're friendlier, looking to start a conversation. It's only by yourself that the scary stuff happens."

We were descending into the basement, sleeping bags, pillows, chips and soda in hand. The Manor was filled with the humid heat from outside, the windows open and trying to catch a breeze, and the basement was a cool reprieve. I didn't mind the hotter weather, but it made Parker go bright red and tired, so I threw on a sweater and my thickest sweatpants as we went to set up our 'base of
" operations.'

"Where did you learn that, the internet? You clearly haven’t seen Scooby Doo. Ghosts chase them all the time."

Parker snorted. "Yeah, but those are never even real ghosts. They were people dressed up as monsters. Your point is invalid." He sounded haughty, but the giggles breaking through were the only thing I needed to know he was joking around.

"Oh my—why am I arguing with you about this? Ghosts aren’t even real."

I didn’t like thinking about the supernatural or confronting what the afterlife might look like. Some part of me thought Mom might be trapped here—left behind because we took too long to bury her. That was petrifying—and something I didn’t know how to confront to take away my fear.

Still, despite my protests, Parker could hear the hesitation and gave me a light elbow to the ribs. "Then you have no reason to be afraid then."

"Shut up. As if I’d be afraid of something like that." He was grinning—I knew he was, even if I couldn’t see it—and I was too. We both knew I was scared; I would just never admit it aloud.

The basement of the Manor was a large wine cellar, stretching back for what seemed like miles. Vintage bottles of alcohol I couldn’t pronounce filled the wood shelves, large casks in oak barrels sat in corners with thick cobwebs, and the damp cool air made me shiver not just with cold. Even shining our flashlights down the narrow walkways didn’t fully illuminate the end, and the creaks from above made me jump. Parker responded to all of this by rubbing his hands together and grinning.

"Perfect," he said.

Parker worked at making me feel at ease, telling me stories until I forgot where we were. It was just him and me, the darkness only shutting out the existence of everything else that hurt. When, hours later, the yawns crept up on us, we shuffled into our sleeping bags to wait for the extraordinary. To me, this seemed like something kids much younger would do, but Parker was so excited. He made it seem like the most natural thing in the world. Eventually, our laughter died down and his breathing slowed. I was still wide awake, keeping my flashlight on to push out the dark, and I felt desperate to hear someone talk—to not be left alone in the silence with my own thoughts.

"Do you… do you think people actually become ghosts when they die? Like, if something bad happens to them?" I asked.

His breathing hitched and, for a second, I thought he would ignore me and go back to sleep. But Parker was never that type of person.

"I mean, maybe. That’s what people have been trying to figure out since the dawn of time. Not the ghost part, necessarily, but where we go. What happens."

The dark was suffocating. I couldn’t help but think that Mom felt the same way when she was waiting. Was she aware, down in that basement in the morgue, locked behind some metal door as they kept her body cold just to place her in the frozen earth? I didn’t know what was worse, no trace of her being left behind—just a sick body that failed her—or one that had a piece of her that couldn’t escape, left to scream and never be heard.

"I guess so." My voice grew thick, the thoughts in my head overwhelming me. Parker shifted in his
"My grandma died a couple years back," he started, and the tears I felt form stopped in place. I drew closer, taking in the warmth of him. "She was old and was sick for a long time. It wasn't surprising, but it still... she lived with my family—we were taking care of her. One day I went to bring her breakfast and she was just... gone."

Parker sounded distant, leaving me behind as his mind took him back to that moment. I knew that feeling intimately. Pain, more than anyone ought to know, usually accompanied it.

"I'm sorry, Parker. That must've been hard."

He took in a big breath of air. "We were close. She always encouraged me, you know? My parents have some... heavy expectations. It got to be a lot, and I—I don't always deal with the pressure well." He hesitated, but my own sense of curiosity wanted to know the rest.

"What do you mean?"

Another big breath, a long exhale through his nose before he answered me. "Do you ever just—just feel like you can't do anything right? That everything's too hard, it won't get easier and... and there's no point in trying at all? It's... Grandma said that my heart is too heavy, that it weighs me down. She said I never learned how to make friends with myself."

Parker was always so willing to be vulnerable, open his heart to others even when they'd hurt him for it. I did know that feeling, and I knew what he was talking about. Depression was something I learned to recognize through him, but I never knew how to be honest about my own.

"My parents want what's best for me, but I'm terrified of failing. I never want to let anyone down. So, I push myself too hard, don't make decisions for myself. It's like they're looking at someone else when they see me. It made me believe that I could be what they saw because I wanted to be that good, too." He tossed in his sleeping bag, trying to get comfortable as the long pauses and shared awkward teenage insecurities left us embarrassed.

"Then why don't you change it?" I asked. Parker chuckled.

"Grandma used to say that, too. 'You can see the problems, but you won't take the path that'll make it better. Now that's just foolish,'" he mimicked in a hoarse falsetto.

The laughter died down and that suffocated silence returned long enough to wrap its fingers around my throat.

"I still hear her, sometimes. Not in a crazy way," he was quick to add, "but, like, in a way that tells me she never left. Most of the time it's quiet, and other times I just see something and know it's from her—that she placed something special on it."

Parker's words were captivating. They made me reanalyze everything I'd seen since Mom died. Did she try talking with me, too? Was believing that easier or harder?

"It's real if you want it to be, and that's what matters, I think. Ghosts don't have to be some lady in an old dress waiting to scare you. But maybe—just maybe—the people we used to know are trying to let us know they're still here, even if we can't see them."

Suddenly, I was glad for the darkness as hot tears trailed down my cheeks. I didn't know what to say to any of that. Parker just opened up his heart to me, showed me more than anyone else had in my entire life. Mom wouldn't lie, but she kept her stories hidden and close—only giving me bits at a

sleeping bag.
time when alcohol loosened her tongue. Bruce was a wall, hardened by the deaths of his parents. He didn't know how to tell me anything—hiding everything behind sarcasm and aloof detachment because showing he cared too much was asking for it to be taken away. Alfred was so much older than me, and I think he saw his stories of vulnerability as a reason for me to worry about him, and he'd never give me one.

Oh so quickly Parker became the first person outside of my family that I cared about. But I was still a bad friend. I didn't have the words to tell him I understood, that I felt the same.

"Parker?" I tried my best to sound normal, but it didn't work well. We both knew I was crying.

"Yeah, Miri?"

"Would it be weird if we held hands?" I realized what that sounded like and had a full-body cringe that made me bury my face in the pillow. "Never mind, never mind—it's weird. Definitely weird. Pretend I didn't say anything."

Parker burst out laughing, attempting to force out words but cackling like a hyena instead. My face went hot, and I smacked him with the pillow I was just trying to smother myself with.

"Not like that, you idiot!"

In truth, I felt like the idiot. But, in the poor light of the dying flashlight's beam, Parker found my hand and held it in his. My cheeks flamed hotter, but I didn't dare move. His hand felt nice in mine. Warm and familiar. A welcome form of contact I didn't know I needed.

"You know, I don't think I've ever had a friend quite like you, Miri," he said. I could hear the smile without needing to see it.

Those words haunt me as if he was right all along—maybe the voices of those who leave us try to break through, impart some form of guidance. Or maybe it's to remind us of our mistakes.

"I… I haven't either."

"Then let's make a promise."

"What… what kind?"

Dare to hope; that's what Parker did for me. He made me believe in others again, that they wouldn't leave me every time. That maybe there was good in the world after all.

"That we never stop being friends. There through thick and thin, no matter what." Parker squeezed my hand tight and I returned the pressure. "Promise?"

I should be angry with Parker. If I traced everything back far enough, it leads to him. He knew what I could do because of him. He knew where to find me because Parker told him. All that pain because of one mistake.

Didn't I know that feeling better than anyone; had I not unleashed that same agony on Parker?

I had, except he paid with his life and I'm still here, surrounded by broken promises I could never keep, a pain I don't know how to shirk. That was the thing about Parker—it didn't matter what it was, what was trying to hurt him, he always had a way of turning it around. Finding the silver lining even when a large part of him never wanted to wake up again. He kept fighting, kept repeating the same mistakes that hurt him over and over just because it might help someone else.
How can I blame him for that?

I can't blame Parker for making the same bad choices I did, not when I didn't have the courage to ever say sorry; to tell the truth, even if it cost me everything. I paid sevenfold, and it recompensed nothing. Everything was taken and nothing left behind. But the Joker was right—I did it to myself. I am poison. There's nothing left; no way to fix what's been broken.

Maybe the only path ahead is to leave the old one behind.

"Yeah, I promise."

This body isn't mine. Not really. Not anymore. The mark on my chest tells me as much.

It hurts, and it's frustrating, but it's a prison now, nothing more. I'm tied to it, and the option to sever it grows more appealing with every passing hour. I've refused the pain meds. Reminders that I'm still here, that I didn't actually die, are necessary.

_Don't kid yourself. All the things that mattered are dead._

After three days in the hospital and major surgery to repair the damage from the bullet that tore through my left side, my mind is made up. I'm not going home. Or, rather, not going to my temporary home. Bruce and Alfred will want to take care of me, and they can't. I don't want to see the disappointment and pain in their eyes as they look for someone who isn't coming back.

Moving hurts, but that's OK. Pain is important now. If I can still feel _something_, then I take it as a good sign. I felt too much before—just how _pointless_ everything is. For once, I could understand what _he_ meant. How the world was one cruel joke. Numbness—easy breathing, effacing _numbness_ waits beyond, and I can't embrace it yet.

_But where are you going to go?_

I haven't thought that far ahead yet; I just know I can't stay here.

"Are you ready, Miri?" Alfred calls to me from the doorway.

Learning that the Joker never had Alfred was a blow I didn't think I could recover from. I had no way of knowing otherwise, but I never asked for proof. I took a liar's word as truth and had nothing to show for it except how fucking _stupid_ I am. I could've let the Joker kill me at any time and _saved_ everyone the trouble. I think I said as much, when I first saw Alfred at the hospital, and it didn't help my case with the doctors.

The doctors want to give me a psychological evaluation before they discharge me, but I refused. I guess I was still laughing when they carted me away in the ambulance. Bruce already wants me to see one. If I stay, there'll be no helping it. But I don't want to talk about it. With anyone. They all saw the mark on my chest. Everything else is clear.

I can't think about Bruce. I saw him briefly yesterday, but the way he looked told me all I needed to know, too. Gotham wasn't home anymore. I was born here and known nowhere else, but everything that tied me here evaporated, ashes in my hands, and staying would surely be what buries me. For good, this time.

"We think it would be good if you went away for a while," Bruce said to me as I lay in the hospital bed. He tried to hold my hand but I wouldn't let him. Part of me was still angry with him, looking for an outlet to place the blame, an easy answer to say _this_ is why I'm hurting. _This_ is why
everything's gone.

But I'll never have any of that because no answer is ever that easy.

"Mom and Aunt Kate have family in France, I thought—" I didn't want to hear it, but he kept going. Outlining this trip he made up like it could fix something that was permanently broken. Bruce didn't know he just erased any lingering doubts.

Bruce thought I was crazy too. Unbalanced. A burden. Maybe even dangerous. I'd never be able to work for Lucius or Wayne Enterprises again. Bruce and Alfred wanted me somewhere they think I could heal, where nothing would remind me of what happened. I didn't need to stay in Gotham for that to be my reality. I just had to look at myself in the mirror shirtless now. My body bore the marks that reflected the agony in my mind.

"You need time to process. There are good doctors that—"

In all honesty, I stopped listening to Bruce. The anger sapped away into grim understanding: nothing Bruce said had to do with stopping being Batman. Bruce made his own promises; oaths he swore to uphold. Gotham needed help, and that trumped any foolish fantasies about staying at the penthouse and rebuilding what died years ago.

No. Better not to be part of any of it.

With Alfred's help, I put on my jacket and leaned heavily on his arm as we went to leave. I talked to him already. Mostly through thick tears. I told him I loved him, that I was sorry more times than I remember saying. Probably didn't help the 'I'm not crazy' argument, but Alfred knows now. He knows I mean it.

Though the pain keeps me in my body, it doesn't pull my head out from the fog. Alfred tugs on my arm, stopping in us in place as we enter the hall. For a moment, I'm afraid it's the press again—here to inundate me with flashing cameras and screamed questions.

"Miriam Kane?"

The fog clears. A woman in a long coat and business suit stands in front of us, leaning against a wall. Her hair is jet black and shoulder length, dark eyes slanted and framed by thick lashes. The structure of her face is severe, the line of her mouth sharp as her gaze. When it lands on me, it's like I'm frozen.

"If you're with any of those media stations, you'd be wise to leave," Alfred warns. Bruce paid good money for them to be kept back from my floor, and Alfred stands in front of me, a glare transforming his exhausted face. Just like the first time I was in the hospital, Alfred hasn't left me. It makes my heart hurt as much as the wounds. "We've had quite enough—"

"I'm not with the press. Relax." She smiles, but it's like it doesn't entirely belong on her face. It's easy and charming, but the look in her eye isn't. Detaching herself from the wall, she stands next to us, surpassing me in height by an inch. "Colonel Naomi Matsumoto. May I have a word?" she asks, jerking her chin to the room we just vacated.

Colonel? So, she's military?

It would explain the clean lines of her coat, the rigid posture underneath the casual lean as she favours one leg over another, and the look of measured calculation. Giving Alfred a squeeze of assurance, and ignoring his protests, I follow. Once we're in the room she shuts the door behind me.
"You know why I'm here?"

*Doesn't like to mince words, does she?*

I have to clear my throat twice before I can speak. The bruising around my neck is still bad enough that it hurts to swallow. The damage *he* and Zsasz did might be permanent, and part of me hopes it is.

Even now, I'm craving a manifestation of permanent pain to make up for so much.

"No, I don't," I rasp.

I'm exhausted already. Planning takes up most of my thoughts. Where I'm going to go, if Mom left me enough to make it on my own, how to learn to care for myself after years of taking Alfred for granted.

"I'm here to make you an offer. One you should consider carefully." The smile is gone, and so is the thousand thoughts racing through my head.

"What? Look, talk to my lawyer—" A practiced answer. One Bruce told me to give. He doesn't think I'm stable, that I'll let something slip. Gotham's a mess, and he doesn't want to add to the chaos. He doesn't realize I don't want to talk to anyone at all.

*SAY NOTHING TO ANYONE UNTIL WE FIGURE OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.*

"No, this isn't that kind of conversation. We both know what you did. Yes, you stopped those drones from doing more damage, but the fact that you launched them at all means you're looking at prison time. That's not even including the video of you acting as an accessory to murder."

My mouth drops open, but nothing comes out. I'm still too tired; too weak. What she's getting at isn't clear; whether she's trying to throw the mistakes I made and people I hurt in my face. The tightness in my chest returns as I try to breathe.

"I-It was under duress, I—"

"You can argue that in court, but it'll take you *years*. The Gotham judicial system just got the bottlenecking of the century. Your cousin's money might keep you out of jail until then, but his money can't keep you out permanently."

All my fear is tied up with another, and the pain *he* left me, and I can't tell if this is meant to be a threat. The idea of prison is unpleasant, but it holds the same place in my list of priorities as everything else—it doesn't matter. She's inching closer to me, eyes growing more intense as she forces her body to look relaxed.

"Is that what you want? Risk going to prison?" Colonel Matsumoto asks.

My mouth closes and my first defense mechanism comes back—hacksles raised aggression.

"Doesn't matter," I say, moving to brush past her to the doorway. She puts a hand on my shoulder and stops me. When I glare, she lets go slowly.

"It should." The Colonel takes a seat on one of the multi-coloured, plastic chairs meant for visitors, splaying her legs and resting her elbows on her knees. "You're not like him. The Joker. You didn't want people to get hurt, did you? Probably tried to keep them safe the best you could. Saw the only solution he wanted you to see. Made some shit choices that only became clear in hindsight. Riding
on fear and adrenaline. Am I wrong?"

In essence, she isn't. All this time, I've been trying to stop people from hurting because of me, but I made it worse. Now they're dead and I'm not.

"No, you're not," I say. She gives a small nod.

"Now, you have two choices. I leave and you pretend you never saw me. You take your chances with our bloated legal system—a gamble, really—and see where that takes you. Every day becomes a reminder of what happened. You'll be labelled a national security threat for the rest of your life. Likely never touch a computer again."

Reality slaps me hard as she speaks, outlining the practical consequences I never considered.

*Would that actually happen to me?*

She's talking like I'll somehow attempt to have a normal life after this. Can't they see that possibility's gone now?

"What's option two?" I ask after a beat.

Colonel Matsumoto smiles.

Now that I'm standing in front of it, I realize I've never been inside of a church before.

Mom was never a fan of religion. I think we went to a synagogue once. The only reason I remember that is because she and Jahan fought about it. Churches were always something I looked at with disinterest, never understanding why people put so much faith in them. I saw on TV how people went there like it would solve their problems or give them some kind of answer. This one would only bring more pain.

Parker's memorial is being held here.

It's scheduled for later, but I need to see him before I leave. Just like before, when I went to his door with rehearsed apologies for his forgiveness, I need to ask for it again. But, this time, I have nothing I can say. There is nothing that can fix what I did, what he did.  

I don't know what I expected when I walked into the building. I guess something more Catholic—those big, grand ones you see everywhere when you think of churches with the elaborate stained glass created to give the peasants a taste of the divine. This one is simpler, plain. There's one mosaic of stained glass, an array of blue with the image of the man whose name I take in vain on a regular basis. My footsteps echo in the empty nave, vaulted ceilings making the smallest sound ring loud. Flowers line the pews, and at the front altar sits a large picture of Parker. An urn of ashes sits in the middle of the table, guarded by sticks of burning incense.

*You don't deserve to cry here.*

That doesn't stop the tears from gathering in my eyes anyway.

He's smiling so big, head thrown back as they caught him in the middle of a laugh. I remember when this picture was taken. It was during his niece's first birthday. Jun and his wife came up from New York and the Kwan's threw a huge party. Parker was great with kids and as much as his family stressed him out, he loved being with them. It was so easy for him to forget what bothered him, to live in the moment and enjoy it for what it was.
'If you opened your eyes a little, you'd see—everything you need is here. It's all right here in front of you.'

No, it's not. It's gone, Parker. It's gone and I'm the one who made it that way.

"You were right." A laugh comes out, but it's hollow. "You had a knack for that, didn't you?"

The memories that were once so clear are already fading. They're changing, tangling with the videos of a scared boy in pain. Begging for his life and wanting the suffering to end. A man who was concerned about me, always trying to make me feel OK at the expense of himself.

*Why didn't I tell him everything? Why did this happen to him?*

"Why didn't I listen?" That's the only question that makes it out. I have no answers to any of it. The tears spill over. Maybe this is it—all I'll ever know. "I'm sorry, Parker," I say to no one. Maybe he was right before, about what happens when we die. Maybe he's not really gone.

*You're lying to yourself again.*

I wanted to never lie again. I said as much to myself and…

*Don't think about him.*

How could I not? He was right. He'll never leave me now.

*Then don't think about him now.*

Parker is all who should matter.

The words won't come up past my throat. Even now, I can't say it out loud.

*There's no one here to listen. Just say it.*

"I… I'm sorry I never told you what happened. It was my fault and I… I lied." My chest shakes and a sob tears out of me. It hurts—the muscles in my abdomen pulling and tearing again. "I'm sorry I never told you how I felt. I'm sorry you were alone when—when—"

I can't look at his face anymore. The last time I saw him he was in pain. He was dying. And I couldn't do anything. Dropping into the nearest pew, I hold my head in my hands and cry.

"He loved you, too, you know," Soo-ah whispers.

I snap my head up and nearly jump out of my skin. Her small frame is next to mine, sturdy and quiet. Her face is the opposite of when I saw her before. When she gripped Parker and screamed. I bolt away from her like she burned me, not caring that my stitches start to tear.

"For how much time you spent together, you never talked about what mattered."

She's not looking at me; she's staring at the picture of Parker. Her eyes are red-rimmed and hollow. Soo-ah's hair looks grayer, even though I know it couldn't have lost so much colour in a week. When she doesn't move, I sit back down, turning away to stare ahead with her. Looking at Soo-ah hurts as much as everything else does. The carving on my chest burns like he's staring at it. I know he's not. I know he can't.

*He's in Arkham. Don't let him be here.*
"How did you know?" I ask.

Why isn't she screaming at me?

How did I ever think I could be angry at Parker? Soo-ah lost a son. It was her family.

And he's gone because of you.

"He never told me, if that's what you mean. He didn't need to." She shifts and swallows. "My boy was strong. Stronger than anyone I've ever known."

Soo-ah's right. Parker was stronger than I could ever be. My head hangs in silence. Parker and Mom. The two people in my life who made it easier and I lost them both. I cry and Soo-ah lets me, her own tears rolling down her cheeks. It feels sacrilegious to cry here—a right I'm not worthy of. She doesn't try to hold me, and I don't touch her either.

"Parker knew you were there that day, Miriam."

I freeze. Uncertainty, guilt, horror, and panic stop my heart. If Parker knew, why didn't he say anything? Why did he let me live that lie? Why did I let myself do that to him? How could he even stand to look at me? How did Soo-ah tolerate me being around her son after everything I did?

You could have stopped this. This didn't have to happen.

"I—I—"

What could I possibly say? How do words alone make up for this kind of loss?

They can't.

"He didn't blame you for it. He never blamed you for anything, and perhaps he should have."

My spine contorts and I pull at my hair. The weight of my grief expands. It's crushing me. The cut on my chest sears and I know these feelings will never end. Never. Soo-ah surprises me, pulling my hands from the tight grip that nearly pull the hair from my roots.

"My boy could never stay angry for long. He saw—saw the good in everything and everyone." She chokes and sobs and the sense of permission is all I need. "He made his own mistakes, I know. He shouldn't have taken on absolving our debts on his own. Children aren't meant to take on the burdens of their parents."

A wail—like the one I heard tear through the hospital—shakes her small body. Inadvertently or on purpose, Soo-ah holds my hand tight. Just like Parker used to.

"He wanted to be a good son, to pay back the debt he knew would ruin us. He was a good boy and this world ruined him for it."

It really did. Maybe I'm not the only one guilty of that. I'm just part of a larger, toxic system that will always corrode and never heal; will just keep taking everything that's good and losing it in the mass of corruption that perverts the world.

"It's my fault, Sooh-ah. Why aren't you angry with me? He's dead—dead because of me." I can't look at her. I can't see how much her pain eclipses mine. "It should have been me," I whisper.

It's like Parker really is here. I... I think I can feel him, but I can't tell what he's trying to tell me. Maybe he's angry at what I've left for his mother, the agony she'll always have. It's like when I saw
him on the boat in that godawful room with the burning money when I—when—

*When you were too weak to avenge him.*

And again, when I waited to die at Wayne Enterprises. All these opportunities for me to be gone, to never be a problem again.

Colonel Matsumoto's offer comes to mind with one of the most honest things anyone's ever told me apart from him.

"You're a risk on your own. Go where you're useful. Otherwise, what good are you? Another liability waiting to go off."

She was right. It's why I have to leave. If I can't die, and I'm too cowardly to do it myself, then I need to go somewhere far away.

*And never hurt anyone ever again.*

I made that vow, didn't I? My track record has been abysmal. Nonconsequential. It can't be anymore. But I need to earn the ability for my word to have weight. Because, right now, it means nothing.

It meant nothing when I promised Mom I'd try. Nothing when I promised Lucius I'd keep his secrets safe. Nothing when I silently promised Parker I'd never let him hurt again. And anything I ever told myself meant nothing at all, too.

*Just like you.*

No one can save me from this. I know that, and I don't want them to. Maybe my life doesn't have meaning anymore, squandered on things I should have seen the consequences of a long time ago.

"That may be true, Miriam. You are not blameless, and neither am I," Soo-ah says after a long silence. There is no blame here when there should be, only acceptance. "Innocence is an illusion. Our choices are cursed with weight and the ripples they create go beyond the reckoning of any one person. You couldn't have known what would happen any more than me."

Soo-ah might believe that's true, but I don't know if I ever will. How much blame can I accept and push away? How do I place it on someone else without taking my fair share? Who else deserves that culpability?

"He is my son; he will always be with me long after his body's returns to the earth. Part of me will stay with him until I join him, just as surely you will. Because you loved him, too."

Guilt. That's what I hear in her voice. She understands. Not like Bruce and not like Alfred. Soo-ah understands. I'm crying too hard to speak, my throat swelling and warm blood seeping through the fabric of my sweater. When her arm goes around my shoulder, I don't push her away; I don't jump. She's so small, but she has the same power Parker did. After a long time of just holding each other, I find my voice again.

"Someone... someone made me an offer. I can leave and I don't have to come back," I say, thinking of Colonel Matsumoto. The smile she gave when I said yes. I might have almost nothing left, but the things that remained behind will be gone entirely now. "Do I deserve that, Soo-ah? It's not fair. *None of this is fair*, and—and it's *killing me.%"}

The words die in my throat again. I don't know what I was looking for when I came here.
Absolution? Divine penance exacted in the form of striking me down?

_You're looking for permission._

Permission to move on and try to stay whole. But who's alive to give it? The people who could are dead.

"I think you should leave."

I pull away from Soo-ah, expecting to see that share of anger I know needs to be levelled at me. I find none on her face.

"Some places hold onto memory better than any human mind ever could, until it becomes the soil beneath your feet, the air you breathe. Gotham is _poison_. It might have been different once, but now..."

She could be right. Gotham could be just as cursed as I am.

"It doesn't matter what it's _trying_ to be, we only have what it _is_. Gotham might have been good once, but it isn't anymore. Don't stay here. Don't let it take you, too." She takes my head in her hands and leans her forehead against mine.

There was a time when I used to think of her as a surrogate mother. Back when I'd come to the Kwan home for dinner, parties, or for her to share her baking. She was always so kind, willing to give me advice and criticism with blunt but fair wisdom. Permission shouldn't be what I'm looking for, but she's giving it to me now.

Bruce needed to leave for his own journey. It took him somewhere he could try to do good, but the cost was enormous. Didn't he tell me that he couldn't combat the evils in Gotham without the proper tools to treat its sickness? I have no such noble intentions. There's no kidding that I'm anything like him. Bruce left and never looked back. His will was tempered steel, resolute and rigid. There's no room for me there.

As I sit, holding the woman who should have hated me more than anyone but didn't, my own resolve hardens. I was right all along—one thing Bruce does well is looking forward, never backward. Maybe it's time I learned to do the same and leave him, and Gotham, behind.

Chapter End Notes

Oh holy dyna. Here we are, folks. The end of this fic. As I sit here typing this the shock's still leaving me pretty speechless. It's been a wild ten months, but I am beyond grateful to all of you who have been following along, leaving reviews, and being so kind and generous in your encouragement. I couldn't have done it without you.

I know there are some loose strings that haven't been tied up, but though this fic is finished, this is not the end of the line for the story. One of my plans for July is to do a short Arkham series for the Joker as a set up for what he gets up to before the sequel starts (which is set a year and a half after this). It'll be short, only a few chapters, and I hope to have it out at the beginning of August before I move. The sequel itself will hopefully come out at the beginning of September, and I hope you'll all check that one out and see what madness I can cook up then.
Since this is the end of a massive fic, and I'm going on to write more, this would be a wonderful time for any advice you might want to give. Things you liked or you think could be done better - I would appreciate all of it. I just ask that you give me criticisms gently, because I am a sensitive bean, but I will take everything into consideration as I go on writing what comes next.

Thank you all again. You are beyond amazing, and I appreciate each and every one of you! You made this not only fun, but one of the biggest highlights of my life (that might sound sad, but it's true).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!