Facade

by ForgetMeNotFanFics

Summary

Mireille Milenkovic is a 23 year-old maiden who has found a job at Arkham Asylum as a renowned surgeon. Despite the numerous and better opportunities that she is presented with, she is devout on staying at the Madhouse. Why is that? Could it have to do with her co-workers, or perhaps patients? Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow/OC. And add a dash of Joker into the pot.
*September 18*

I felt my body tremble in both excitement and fear. This predicament was new for me; I was surrounded by the wealthy and significant people of Gotham. Their eyes seemed to bore at the back of my head, waiting for me to slip up so that they could banish me from their social realm. Every glance I received had an inevitable score or rating behind it. They themselves having already met requirements in the tight knit cluster, were now using that position to chastise others. I had been standing by myself for approximately two minutes, yet I already craved the comforting approval of my date. That's right, I was asked to partake in this high stress fiasco. And, I agreed!

Despite the fact that the high and mighty of Gotham acted as if they owned the place, I had a good reason to be here. Arkham Asylum was raising money for the medical department and as a doctor, I was to walk around and discuss the topic of how the money would be spent in hopes of a donation from some of Gotham's philanthropists.

I haven't been a doctor for long though. I finished my residency four months ago and joined Arkham's staff due to my former, and current, bosses recommendation. The reason I was invited to this event was twofold: to keep my date in check, and to raise money. My superiors figured that I could calm down my boss and his know-it-all attitude since his previous efforts at fundraising events had led to fewer donations and more retribution. He held all the facts and I translated them into words the populace of Gotham would understand. It was fun, being in charge of my boss.

I deeply respect him though. He was, after all, the man who granted me permission to intern at Arkham in the first place. A brilliant individual who discreetly displayed his affection for me. That is, until he blatantly asked me out on the first week of my employment as a surgeon at Arkham. At least he was subtle; he cornered me in the elevator and pressed the emergency stop button thinking I wouldn't respond right away. Instead he received a swift reply, but had to wait for an hour while the janitor tinkered with the elevator to open it's ancient doors. I was very grateful he waited for my two year long internship to end beforehand, lest he spoil my reputation as a respectable young lady.

We had been 'dating' for the past few months, neither of us wishing to put a label on our relationship just yet. He was a very refined man. The most we'd shared were passionate kisses and a few gentle caresses, nothing too bold. He had ventured off into the sea of flesh and satin to get some champagne to fuel us for the long evening we had yet to endure. However, my date was not the only man maneuvering through the crowd. I watched as a well-kempt man faultlessly joined in on conversations, making a bee-line for my location. He was beat to the punch though. A long, slender finger prodded my shoulder. Turning to see my savior I reached for the flute of champagne I was offered and held the glass in a light grip, scared that I may shatter the crystal if I held it too securely. My date grasped his own glass effortlessly, giving me a smirk as I struggled with where my hands should be placed. He corrected my grip on the flute and let out a soft chuckle at my beet-red face.

"Thank you Dr. Crane," I paused, he hated it when I used his title outside of work. He raised a slender brow while I corrected myself, "Sorry, thanks Jonathan."
"My pleasure Mireille," he responded, his eyebrows returning to their proper position. As I took a sip of champagne to soothe my tense nerves I noticed that once more, Jonathan was undressing me with his eyes.

As opposed to my usual long-sleeved turtlenecks and skirts, tonight I went all out on my appearance. My hair was free to roam my shoulders and brim my face, released from its usual confines of a French braid. I donned a sleeveless, tight, long dress. The satin clung to my slender form and left little to the imagination. It was a darker shade of purple with black accents. I wore heels to increase my height from a dainty 5'3" to a respectable 5'6". Despite this, I still looked miniscule compared to my tall date. His arm discreetly snaked around my waist and he rested his hand on my opposite hip. Placing my own glove covered hand over his, I looked into my date's light blue eyes.

Dr. Crane was not a very expressive man at times; however, I could always understand how he felt by looking at his eyes. Like so many others, I find them to be windows to the soul. Whenever he was focused on a problem in his work, the blue irises seemed to become icy and hard, but now… they were tender and glimmered like pools of trepid water. His usually tense brow had relaxed as he granted himself permission to just enjoy the moment.

The sound of a man clearing his throat broke me from my trance. Jonathan nonchalantly retreated his arm, fingertips gently brushing against my back as he did so. My date's expression became serious, as did my own. For before us lay the main event in our opinion. Bruce Wayne.

This may have been a date, but we were still here on a matter of business. The playboy philanthropist before us held the money necessary to restore Arkham Asylum's medical wing to its former glory with a mere swipe of the pen.

My mind lost all sense of control as I held an internal conflict. Part of me wanting to curtsy, one telling me to extend my hand palm down, and the final piece recommending I kiss his cheeks. I settled for stunned silence. Thankfully, my partner in crime had my back.

"Bruce Wayne," he started, extending his hand. "It has been a while." Monsieur Wayne took the proffered hand and gave what I can assume to be a firm shake. I interpreted this by the way Jonathan winced slightly and flexed his palm when it was released.

"Dr. Crane," the billionaire replied. "It is good to see you again." Without letting Jonathan return the comment, he turned to me. "And who, may I ask, are you?" He inquired, eyes reflecting the light of a nearby chandelier. His irises were blue as well, but they seemed darker and rather mysterious.

"Dr. Milenkovic." I replied to his query. His hand extended before me, palm up. Recognizing the motion, I placed my right hand in its designated space lightly and allowed him to raise it a few inches as he leaned down to kiss the back of my hand, his eyes locked on mine all the while. A light blush began to form on my cheeks. He was indeed charming, that rumor was correct.

"French?" he asked, referring to the slight lilt of my accent.

"Yes, I'm still working on ridding myself of the accent," I commented, embarrassed to be found out so quickly. I fiddled with a strand of hair and tucked it behind my ear, needing to keep occupied so I wouldn't stare.

"Don't," he smirked, "I find it very attractive." Bruce winked at my pink dusted cheeks, "and I trust you have a first name." he said with a hint of humor.
"Mireille," I offered up for critique.

"Mireille," he tried, pronouncing it 'my'ray rather than 'me'ray. I smiled at his difficulties and heard him introduce himself. "My name is Bruce Wayne."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Monsieur Wayne." I mentally smacked myself, looking to the floor in hopes of him not noticing my embarrassment. He chuckled at the French and then gave me a quick once over.

"It's Bruce," he continued his inspection of me. "Aren't you a tad young to be a doctor?"

"I'm twenty three if you must know," I joked at his obvious curiosity in my age, hoping to expel my former shame. "And my father is also a doctor employed at your company."

"I thought that name sounded familiar," Bruce noted. "So, anything I can do for you?"

Jonathan, happy to once again partake in the conversation, gave his promotional speech and I clarified the more scientific bits every now and then. The basic purpose of the money would be to update the equipment in both the laboratory and the medical wing. The improved chemicals and modern ways of treating patients could promise a faster recovery, quicker releases, thus lower taxes, and hopefully a healthier future. All in all, it was a success and Monsieur Wayne was eager to donate to the cause. He then introduced us to other groups, underlying the message for them to donate as well.

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Jonathan and I had covered all of the large donors, so we took a well-deserved break. Our most recent flutes of champagne now empty and on their way to the kitchen, we decided to venture outside of the hall. The gala consisted of several rooms at the hotel hosting the event. There was a dining hall, dance room and the 'mingling' area which was where all the donations and small talk was made. An orchestra was in the dance room next door, so Jonathan and I ventured over, desiring to be alone with each other at least once tonight.

A slow waltz was being performed when we arrived and Jonathan quickly guided me to the dance floor, bowing his head slightly as he offered his hand. I took it and allowed him to pull me closer, resting a hand on his shoulder I looked up at him as he placed a hand tentatively on my waist, his face slightly flushed due to the alcohol. Our remaining hands were clasped together as we slowly swayed to the music. He delivered one of his rare, genuine smiles and gave me a little twirl. I giggled lightly and smiled back up at him. We soon resumed our steps and I glanced up occasionally only to see Jonathan always looking back at me.

A few minutes later, my date’s eyes began to roam the room and I watched as they halted when he singled someone out and began to glare. Turning to see the target of his hatred, I saw Bruce Wayne. He was currently flirting with a model of sorts, I would guess Russian since I heard he was currently on a bit of a 'Russian model' streak, supposedly five within the month. I raised the hand that lay on Jonathan's shoulder to his cheek, my fingers running down the jawbone. He looked at me and his face began to soften at the caress. I mouthed to him, 'Let me know when he is looking.' Jonathan smirked and nodded, joining in on the plan.

I replaced my hand on his shoulder and blushed madly as our eyes locked together then, unsure how he would take the rather provocative plan I had set up. The blue orbs zipped away and back rapidly, full of uncertainty. His grip on my waist tightened for a second. I considered this a go sign for
Bruce's attention. Removing my hand from Jonathan's grip, I wrapped my arms around his neck. He did the same to my waist with a slight air of uncertainty. As I stood on my toes he began to crane his neck downward, already used to the action prior to kissing me. The whole near foot difference in height was a bit of a bother at times. Our lips met and to better improve Jonathan's confidence in the situation, I reduced the space between us to a mere centimeter. The chaste kiss turned into a series of less innocent kisses, one of which involved Jonathan biting at my upper lip. After catching my breath I rested my head on his chest and breathed in the scent of straw, giggling at the concept of the well-kept Dr. Crane on a farm. He rested his head on my crown and inhaled through his nose.

"You look beautiful tonight," Jonathan commented, a hand rising from it’s placement on my waist to play with my brown tresses. I giggled at his cliché compliment.

"And you sir," I started, poking him in the chest. "Smell like straw." His face collapsed and I stifled a laugh when I saw his shocked expression. I pulled him down a few inches and commented, "I like it."

Jonathan grinned and kissed me with haste and I tightened my grip on his neck so he couldn't stop. Then I felt a wet muscle prod my lower lip. I was shocked at first, finding it interesting that he was the one introducing French kissing. We had yet to try it and I believe his willingness to prompt the act was based on the amount of alcohol he had consumed tonight. Jonathan was a reserved man, as I mentioned before, so instigating this passionate act in the presence of a multitude of strangers was also probably to be blamed on the alcohol.

I opened my mouth and let him take his time to adapt to the new sensation. As expected, he tasted strongly of alcohol, but also a more appetizing taste to say the least. As things began to heat up I desired a tad more privacy and tugged playfully at his tie. Getting the message, he followed me out of the room, allowing himself to be towed. I smirked at Bruce's bemused expression as we passed by him.

While Jonathan and I traveled the halls together, we came across an unlocked room. Curiosity getting the better of me, I opened the door fully to reveal a concert hall. On the stage that lay before us was a grand piano, the curtains surrounding it drawn up and hundreds of lush chairs perfectly set to encompass the instrument. I took a step forward to observe the surroundings better when a squeak of surprise escaped my lips.

Jonathan had lifted me into his arms bridal style and proceeded to run to the stage's raised platform on his long, slender legs. I giggled at his drug induced loopy and affectionate state. He then sat on the piano bench and placed me on his lap so that I was straddling his waist. It was one of those rare occasions where our heads were on equal planes. I planned to take advantage of this.

I started out by tenderly kissing his lips. As he applied more and more pressure I found my fingers sinking into his hair, reveling at the soft feel of the reddish brown locks. His own hands rested on my hips to hold me in place, thumbs gently stroking my waist in small, tight circles.

He prodded his tongue against my lips, asking permission to enter again. I opened my mouth slightly and nipped at his tongue playfully before allowing it inside as I ventured into his own. As Jonathan began to understand the ropes, he moved his hands to my back, pressing us flush to one another. He opened his mouth to receive much needed oxygen before continuing his conquest. I couldn't get enough of that mesmerizing taste. Winding my fingers in his hair, I ran my tongue over the roof of his mouth and enjoyed the small grunts of pleasure he emitted. When both of us needed a break, Jonathan leaned back and began to stroke my cheek. I smiled at the movement and pressed my forehead to his. Our breaths intermingled, lips mere centimeters apart as we regained our composure,
heat radiating off our cheeks. I wrapped my arms around Jonathan and hugged him lightly, my head in the crook of his neck as I took in a small whiff of his cologne, my eyes drifting shut.

Jonathan's fingers had resumed their gentle ministrations on my lower back and I didn't want this moment to end, but time will not stand still for anyone. I sensed his discomfort at my weight and kissing the pale neck that lay before me before standing up, thinking we were going to leave. However, Jonathan turned his body so he would face the instrument now. I watched in silence.

Fingers reaching toward the ivory, he placed his long digits on the keys, and began to play.

Jonathan told me he knew how to play the piano a while back. I had assumed he just meant he could play a tune or two, not an advanced piece. The song he played now was beautiful. His fingers did not trip; they pressed the keys fluidly, and without hesitation. The music was slightly haunting and slow paced; his eyes focused on the keys as he went through the motions. I drew back on memories of my father listening to classical music in his study and recalled this one. ‘Moonlight Sonata’ I mouthed, not wanting to interrupt him.

I draped my arms over his shoulders and took in a deep breath, allowing myself to be swept away by the music. When Jonathan finished the piece I watched as his hands retreated and were placed back on his trousers. I was grateful for Jonathan. Our work at the asylum was strange and scary, yet I felt so safe with him. He took away all my fears.

"Thank you," I said, unsure how else to convey all the emotions I felt for him.
Chapter 2: The Case of the Cooler

Chapter Notes

A/N: Cooler is a synonym for Solitary Confinement… or at least it is in the movie The Great Escape

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: Case of the Cooler

* September 19 *

The following day was a normal one at Arkham Asylum. A few patients had managed to stab each other with plastic spoons. Thankfully the wounds weren't lethal, however they did require a few stitches in both the muscle and epidermal layer. The duo would now recuperate in solitary where they couldn't harm anyone else.

Solitary confinement was considered the most gruesome of punishments available at Arkham, worse than being spoon fed by the orderlies and far more daunting than a simple straitjacket. When the inmates returned from the cold rooms, they were not unscathed. They spoke of unimaginable horrors they experienced in isolation. On the upside though, the cooler didn't have many repeat customers since the patients straightened up their act after a sentence there.

During my wanderings through Arkham's halls, I came across Dr. Crane more than once. Obviously embarrassed by his brash actions yesterday night, he would stutter an apology and then run off to a nameless patient in need of assistance or claim he was already late for an appointment and was in a rush.

I decided to clear up this misinterpretation during his lunch break; he had his own plans though. According to the secretary, he had gone out for a spell. Disheartened by his absence, I returned to my ward and began giving some of the patients their monthly check-ups. This involved asking questions about how they felt physically, making sure they weren't feeling ill in any way, and lending an ear if they wanted someone to confess to who would keep their conversation a secret. After all, doctor patient confidentiality is of utmost importance here in Arkham for the sake of our patients. It is frowned upon to use knowledge gained in these halls to profit from a "tell-all book". And even if I wished to, I couldn't. The only way I could disclose information to anyone was if the law demanded it, and who would ask the physician for information when there are psychiatrists roaming the halls and taking note of every twitch the patients make?

Most often during these scheduled appointments I would hear stories from the patients, some just wanting to get me to shiver and others were scared and desired comfort. And they knew I could provide that as long as they remained docile.

My current patient, a Trejo, Marcy, was telling me about the burns that covered her arms. She claimed to be hiding the appendages so nobody could see the wounds. The girl then rolled up her sleeves to reveal unmarked, yet quite pasty, skin. When I stated she did not have any injuries and was free of such disfigurements, she responded madly.
"Of course you can't see them, that is just what he wants." She shook her head wildly, the twin braids on either side of her head gently tapped her nose when they followed through with the movement. "He told me to tell him my fears, and then he set the room on fire." She became hysterical. "The man said nobody would believe me! But, it's true, doctor! It happened, the man with the mask said he was only trying to help, but he hurt me!"

As I reached for the panic button that resided in my pocket, she grabbed my wrist and looked at me. A mixture of madness, fear, and sincerity lay in her eyes.

"Don't let them take me back," she begged, tears beginning to flow over. "I don't want to go back to solitary. I don't want to see his mask."

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Like I said before, this was a normal day. I received complaints about the cooler on a daily basis. I hadn't ever been to that level of Arkham before, so I didn't know how to comfort the patients who were damaged by their time in the secluded rooms.

With about twenty minutes until my next appointment I descended the iron staircase, the elevator was stalled again, in hopes of finally seeing the cause of my patient's pain. When I was an intern the area was strictly off limits, but now that I was a certified doctor at the facility, perhaps I could finally visit the hidden cells.

After a long descent I reached the block and was met by a large iron wrought door and a surprising piece of technology; a scanner requested my I.D. I swiped my card only to hear a loud buzzer deny me access beyond the doors. My ears perked up however, when I heard the shuffling of feet beyond the entrance. Knocking on the metal barrier, I called out to the being. "Hello?" Receiving no answer, I decided to return to my proper place at Arkham, upset with my lack of progress on the case.

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I was going through some files in my office when I heard someone knock on my door. Opening it a crack to view the caller, I saw Dr. Crane. His eyes darted around the room, unsure whether or not to look at me directly or at the file cabinet in the far corner.

Opening the door wider, he stepped into my office. "It's good to see you Dr. Crane." I greeted. His look softened and he sat himself on my chair behind the desk. I myself sat cross legged on the wood and listened as he spoke.

"It has come to my attention that you were looking for me earlier," he stated matter-of-factly. I couldn't help but notice how tired he looked as he spoke these words. "Is there something you wish to discuss?"

"I wanted to tell you that I won't talk about anything that happened last night at the party if you are uncomfortable with it." I stroked his cheek now. I referred, of course, to his sudden and out of character displays of affection.

His eyes seemed to regain some spirit. "Of course not. On the contrary, I'm all up for a repeat of last night's endeavors." Leaning forward he kissed me lightly. I then wrapped my arms around his neck, seeking a deeper connection, and returned the kiss with more force and passion. Jonathan chose this point in time to sneak a hand between us and unbutton my lab-coat. His slender hands began to
stroke my sides, and then he tickled me. I squeaked at the surprising change of events. Jonathan stood from his seat and continued his onslaught. Before I knew it, I had my back against the top of the desk, my body squirming from the torture.

"S-s-stop," I wheezed out. He adhered to my request and smirked as I regained my breath. "I would not consider that a repeat of last night at all." I pointed out as I leaned up to kiss the tip of his nose.

"I agree," Jonathan remarked. "I couldn't even get you into this position last night." My face reddened, finally taking in our position, me laying down on my desk with Jonathan over me, a devious grin on his lips. It was certainly an improvement on last night's position on the tiny piano bench.

"Shut up," I teased. Jonathan smirked and did in fact shut up. He pressed his lips against mine and let his hands ghost over my hips, running up and down the fabric. One of those hands then ventured under the rim of my turtle neck and stroked the taut skin that lay over my pelvic bone. The calloused fingers of my coworker proceeded to trace random patterns on the skin as we continued our kiss.

After a while, Jonathan stopped to let me catch my breath and brought his lips over to my neck. Pulling back the turtleneck with his spare hand, he nuzzled the juncture of my neck and shoulder before placing his open mouth over a selected bit of skin. He then began to gently bite, nip, and suck on the area, absorbing my whimpers of pleasure until he took it a step too far.

Running his tongue over the hickey slowly, he let the hand under my shirt rise, his index finger tracing the outline of my bra and running a nail along the border of flesh and supportive fabric.

One of my hands rose to his shoulder and gave a small push. His hand retreated upon realizing he had overstepped his bounds. Jonathan's face conveyed his guilt well. I knew he was in the heat of the moment and could have overpowered me in this position with little effort, but he hadn't.

"Thanks," I told Jonathan, kissing his cheek.

"It's okay," he said, helping me up from my desk. "I told you I was willing to wait." After I buttoned up my lab coat I gave him a hug, grateful to be with a man like him.

"Which patients are you with today?" I asked Dr. Crane.

"Ah," he began to straighten his own lab coat. "Edward Nygma, which means I have to go past that dreadful Mr. Bolton."

He had told me plenty of times that the head of security would bully him, I actually had to help cheer him up after some of the rants and raves the dreadful man went on, most of which about how Jonathan would never get a girl. Well, I'll show him otherwise. I pulled out a tube of lipstick and began to apply it, pretending I just wanted to touch up the spread already on my lips. Rather than wait two minutes for it to turn the patented 'No Smear!' I pushed the tube back into my pocket and grabbed Dr. Crane's tie hastily. When he got down to my level, I pressed my lips against his passionately, leaving behind a mark that would not be missed.

Jonathan stood still for a moment before mimicking my actions. My hands tangled in his hair, tugging lightly at the roots as he placed his own hands on my hips. As our lips seemed to dance with one another, I found myself out of breath. So I pulled back and sprinkled his face in gentle kisses, my hands running down his lab coat and resting on his solid chest.
My eyes were probably dilated from the ordeal, and he took note of it and attempted something new. My breath hitched when I felt the doctor's hand travel down to my rear before firmly grasping it, but rather than pushing him away, I found myself enjoying the sensation. It was nice when he acted a bit possessive, and I decided to do the same. Leaning forward, I kissed his neck, running my teeth over the skin roughly to leave a brand of my own. He pulled his away from my lips after I'd finished and kissed them passionately as we resumed our brief battle for dominance. Before he got the upper hand though, I nipped his lower lip a few times, sucking on the agitated area.

Jonathan then pressed me against the door, running his lips down to my neck to hover over the cloth that covered his previously placed hickey. "You're mine," he grumbled, nipping at the skin through the cloth. I nodded in agreement and kissed his cheek.

After releasing Jonathan's hair from my grip, I looked at my work. Wrinkled shirt, loose tie, tossed hair, bitten lip, very evident lipstick kisses, and the startings of a hickey on his neck. I quickly guided him out the door and called out at his retreating figure, "have fun with Monsieur Bolton!"

I was packing up my medical kit and putting some files in my brief case to mull over when the door to my office burst open and bounced off the wall due to a surprising amount of force being used to open it. The papers plummeted to the ground and scattered when I released my grip on the case in shock. Looking to my assailant, I saw Dr. Crane standing in the doorway.

His face was beet red and I wasn't sure whether it was from anger, embarrassment, or if he had rubbed his face with steel wool to rid himself of the lipstick marks I had placed on him earlier. He pointed at me before releasing a held breath and dropping his hand to his side. Moving around my desk, he once again sat in the leather chair, and put his face in his hands.

"It took five minutes for me to realize." He grumbled behind his fingers. "When I entered the cell block, people applauded me for, and I quote: 'hitting for the home team'." I giggled as he continued, a smile appearing on his face. "Mr. Bolton actually congratulated me and patted me on the back. Nygma, though...," he sighed. "Nygma questioned me about it all throughout our appointment and gave me a lecture on 'the birds and the bees'."

I threw my head back and held my stomach, laughing at the idea of sitting in a room and getting a lecture from a madman on intercourse, especially from a madman who didn't spare the details and was quick to throw in some advice and riddles to keep things 'interesting'. I calmed myself down before getting on my knees to retrieve the fallen files, Jonathan joining me moments later.

"Sorry about that," I giggled as I straightened up the files. "I owe you one." I got back up with his assistance and placed the papers neatly into my briefcase, making sure to shut the clasp and spin the combination lock. Folding my lab coat over my arm, I began to walk out of my office with Jonathan by my side. My coworker nodded, taking note of the debt.

It was a struggle to carrying my medical bag, messenger bag, suit case, and lab coat all at once. This predicament soon caused me to slip in my heels, but Jonathan thankfully was able to catch me before I landed on the floor. However, the jerk upward caused my messenger bag to tear at the strap and the now unsupported sack fell from my shoulder; throwing the borrowed psychology books that lay inside onto the floor.

Dr. Crane helped me gather them after I mumbled a ‘thank you’ for his second act of assistance in less than an hour. However, his movements seemed to slow as he looked at the titles: ‘The Workings

"What's all this?" he asked me in a voice devoid of emotion.

"All my patients from the cooler are having severe nightmares. I need to know what I'm dealing with so I can prescribe proper sleeping medications." I explained as Dr. Crane escorted me to the bus station. He held the bag tightly to his side, slowing his pace to match mine.

"That is completely unnecessary Dr. Milenkovic," he told me. I was shocked; he only called me by my title when in a professional setting.

"I've made a lot of progress though," I told him with a smile. "I cross checked all of the patients that have been in a specific section of solitary and those of optimal health, they all have maskaphobia!" I announced with pride. "It's just like a mystery novel."

As I boarded the bus, Dr. Crane handed me my bag and advised me. "Stay in your own field Dr. Milenkovic. The mind is a very dangerous place."

Despite his recommendations, I resumed my research that very night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I understand that favoriting and following is easy, and though it may bring a smile to my face I would REALLY LOVE some reviews, thoughts on the story, ideas, and everything you want to say even if it's as tiny as "LOL Scarecrow isn't getting action anytime soon~ Poor guy". They make my day c:
Chapter 3: Keeping My Nose Clean

* September 20 *

I was currently with one of my regulars. And by regular, I don't mean this individual gets sick or injured often; he is just well rehearsed at faking illness. His acting capabilities usually gain one or two of the orderly's pity, leading him to be brought over to my office. Today he self-diagnosed with 'scarlet fever'. My cure was a cup of hot cocoa.

I was sitting at my swivel chair as Edward sipped the beverage atop the examining table. He made a point of doing this every other week since I became a doctor here at Arkham. He was even so bold as to request I bring him hot chocolate when we saw each other. I did, he asked nicely after all.

"So, I saw Dr. Crane yesterday and I must say: fabulous work!" He took a brief sip of the chocolaty beverage, "By the time he got to the therapy room, which I can assume calculating the regular route he takes coupled with the slightly faster pace due to the worry of being late after goofing around with you," He smirked knowingly at my now flushed cheeks. "About 3 minutes at 18 seconds to get to the session. And his ears were still a deep crimson by then. I can't tell whether I should feel sorry for him because of all your senseless teasing or jealous."

"What are you talking about?" I feigned ignorance, brushing a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"Your little display of affection of course," Edward smirked at my red face. "I highly doubt that was his great-grandmother's lipstick."

"Well, Monsieur Bolton bullies him for not being able to get a girlfriend, among other things." I explained. "And besides, we're not here to talk about me." I drummed my fingernails on the mug held in my hands.

The Riddler and I had struck a deal on our first meeting, he would update me on what went on in the more covert parts of the asylum and I would keep him posted on what happened in the outside world since most of their news was filtered.

"According to the Mad Hatter, the tea parties have gotten longer, and the drinks, more bitter." Edward started to divulge. This was the reason I was putting up with all his follies and riddles, he had information. However, it was often given in very confusing ways to show off his mental prowess. He continued after a brief sip of cocoa, "Dorothy has joined the tea party as well; she's not in Kansas anymore."

I stood from my seat rapidly, nearly spilling the contents of my cup. "Why wasn't I notified of Mademoiselle Trejo's status change?"

"Simple," Edward put his now empty mug down. "The Queen of Hearts doesn't need help from the rest of her court to rule her kingdom."
"Dr. Crane could have at least told me." I said softly, a small frown now decorating my face. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"Ah ah ah," Edward tutted. "We promised: two pieces of information every two weeks. My turn to ask the questions."

I sighed and conceded. "What do you want to know?"

"How are things going with Dr. Crane?" The Riddler asked, crossing his right leg over his left.

"Huh?" I looked at him, shocked. He usually stuck to questions about current events and the latest robberies in the city; this was totally out of the blue.

"Good?" I asked more than answered.

"Sorry, this is a little hard to explain." He ran his fingers through his crop of brown hair. "I… like you."

My face flushed a bright red and I stuttered a mixture of apologies until he rose both his hands.

"That's not what I meant." He laughed at my sigh of relief. "I mean, I don't want you to ... lose your innocence." I realized he was struggling for words.

"Can I record you saying that," I giggled. "I want to have Jonathan listen to it; he has been trying to get past that barrier for the past two months."

Edward looked at me, dead serious. "Eve, you are in a garden of innocence, do not eat from the tree of temptation lest you see the real world around you, ugly and morbid"

"What?" I asked, all merriment gone.

"You are wandering out of the land graciously given to you Eve." He continued. "Turn back, and don't venture into the abyss."

He didn't talk to me for the rest of the meeting; we sat in silence as I absorbed his words. When he left, I heard him say, "The fruit is in the freezer."

XXXXX

I pulled back the curtain of the only covered cot in the recovery wing. Behind the pristine white curtain lay a girl, I.V. in her arm and a respirator controlling her breathing. The clipboard at the foot of her bed read:

Name: Marcy Trejo

Age: 17

Blood Type: O+

Condition: Bipolar Disorder, Psychological Coma (found in solitary)
I ventured closer to the girl, her body motionless atop the crisp white sheets. The only sign Marcy was alive being the rising and falling of her chest. The twin braids of hair lay on the cushion beneath her head, fanning off in opposite directions.

I stroked the teen’s pale cheek and closed the curtains slowly, so as not to stir her seemingly lifeless body. Dr. Crane had a lot of explaining to do.

XXXXX

I waited for him to finish his current appointment. Looking through the false mirror, I saw Dr. Crane and Harvey Dent having a stare off in the therapy room. No doubt Harvey’s coin told him not to cooperate today.

Realizing he wasn't getting anywhere, Dr. Crane dismissed Two-Face early. After straightening his file and notes, the psychologist left the room too.

When he made his way over the threshold, our eyes locked and his face relaxed. The tall man put a smile on, yet his eyes seemed to harden. "Dr. Milenkovic, what can I do for you?" he asked innocently.

"I want to know why I wasn't notified of Mademoiselle Trejo's current condition." I questioned the man. His face too seemed to stiffen at the topic.

"Ms. Trejo refused to take her medication last night and hit a nurse." Dr. Crane explained. "She was put in solitary for the night and lost consciousness by daybreak. As the coma seemed psychological, she was put into my care after the event. Thus, your help was not needed."

"Marcy wasn't incarcerated at Arkham for violence; she receives treatment for bipolar disorder. And her treatments have been going well. She must have had a reason to attack someone." I was puzzled at what he was saying. "What nurse was this?" I asked, desiring to get a first hand report.

Dr. Crane froze. "I'm not sure." He mumbled. After he excused himself to file away the brief notes he took on Dent, I too left. I needed to prepare for an appointment with Monsieur Dent myself.

XXXXX

Some patients are skittish about their scars, others display them with pride. Monsieur Dent was neither. He did not treat half of his face like a scar, but as a part of him. He rarely changed his behavior for it except when his "other half" emerged.

I met with Harvey every couple of days to make sure there weren't any infections on the marred skin. He had to remove his shirt for the exam so I could see his neck and shoulder as well since the burns encompassed more than just his face.

The former DA of Gotham had injured himself badly in last year's fire. The exposed tendons and muscles required a lot of cleaning. As I ran a cloth soaked in alcohol over his wounds, he flinched a bit due to the burning sensation.
I usually try to start up a conversation with Harvey to draw away from the fact that I spent much of the appointment staring at his well-defined chest. This day was no different.

"Monsieur Dent." I started off. He grumbled his recognition of my existence. I usually discussed politics or news with him, but something was egging me to do otherwise. "Have you ever been to solitary?"

It seemed a fairly innocent question. A yes or no kind of thing, but instead of answering the question he snapped his neck around and looked me dead in the eye. "Doc, the Riddler may tap-dance around a subject, but as you can see." He gestured to the serious expression on his face. "I don't. Stay away from that damned cooler and don't dig into things that don't concern you, capiche?"

I hadn't realized he had grabbed my hand until he let it fall. The alcohol rag still in a light grip, I resumed my job in silence, heart racing as I took in the information.

XXXXX

* October 21 *

After Monsieur Dent's confrontation, I decided to keep my nose clean. I returned Dr. Leland's psychology books the next day, not wanting to be tempted by the paper-clad knowledge.

Instead of pouring over the books, I spent more time with Jonathan. The additional time really brought us closer together. I would even arrive early to work so that I could talk to him in his office for a while before our hectic days started.

It felt a lot like a high school romance. Our relationship was considered unprofessional, but we still met in secret on the Asylum's grounds. Should we cross paths in the hallway, one of us would merge directions with the other until a nearby closet or abandoned room was found.

That's where I was now

I was pressed up against the far wall of a janitor's closet. Jonathan's hands resided on my shoulders, my own tangled in his hair. As our lips melded together, I deeply inhaled the scent of cleaning agents through my nose, causing my mind to grow even fuzzier.

I tugged playfully at his roots, whimpering out of desire. Jonathan smirked against my mouth and pulled away. I grumbled at his withdrawal and leaned up, only for him to push me against the wall again.

Jonathan grinned as he took in my vulnerable position. He first saw my quivering legs, close to failing after being deprived of oxygen for so long. The purple dress I had donned was currently exposed after my assailant unbuttoned my lab coat not long after we had started.

What really caused him to cease his teasing was when he examined my face. My eyes were clouded over with lust, lips parted as I took in the much needed oxygen, and cheeks flushed a deep pink after the intense activity.

Taking pity on me, he loosened his grip on my shoulders and tilted my chin up with his finger to give me a chaste kiss.
The flurries of kisses and fast moving hands were over now. Instead we kissed one another softly, my hands rested on his biceps and his held to either side of my face, palms gently stroking the smooth skin that rested over my cheeks.

Needless to say, these rendezvous were nice, but both of us were left wanting more. If anything, the meetings led our desire for one another to grow. The metaphorical purity ring on my finger was growing heavier each day. Kissing Jonathan on the cheek one last time, I began to fix my appearance.

I left first, my dress straitened and lab coat buttoned. However, if anyone had seen me emerge from the closet, they could tell by my hair what business I had in there.

As my heels clicked on the tile flooring, I toyed with the lint within my pockets. My mind was currently on my next patient. Killer Croc was an interesting specimen. I met with him often so that I could fully understand the way his body functioned. It had to have been the strangest mutation recorded in Gotham City history. It puzzled me how the human DNA even held those dormant genes.

I was about to press the elevator button labeled 'UP' when I heard a loud scream. Turning around quickly, I saw two men drag a third through the hallways. The two orderlies were obviously struggling with the third figure, clearly unable to sedate the man since holding him down took all their effort.

He looked to be around forty five. The receding line of hair and thick glasses helped me determine who he was. I'd heard about this man being brought in last week for finding out his wife had cheated on him and was carrying the baby of the affair. A simple fight would have resulted in prison, but he carved the women open and took out the fetus, chopped the unborn child up, and fed it to his wife as her last meal.

The story alone was disturbing, but the reason I requested he not be put in my care during his stay was his defense. He claimed he had performed that horrendous act in the name of God.

Hurrying over, I reached for the sedative needle that resided in the orderly's pocket. As one man held the patient's head still, I jabbed the needle into his jugular.

Slowly he succumbed to the drug and his thrashing ceased.

"What happened?" I asked the guards. They looked at one another and shrugged, deciding there was no reason to hide the information.

"The other day he got caught fighting over T.V. channels and was hauled down to solitary after he tried to shove the remote down another inmate's throat." The guard rubbed his head as if unsure whether or not to relay the next bit of information. "When we went to retrieve him from solitary though, he was begging the mercy of a god."

My eyebrows rose, curious at the meaning of their words. "A god?" I asked.

"He called him the 'god of fear'" one of the orderlies stated gruffly. "It's pretty strange considering he was such a devout, albeit messed up, Christian." The orderly adjusted his grip on the limp body and nodded at his partner. They began moving again, the inmate's feet dragging on the floor.

I returned to the elevator once they confirmed my help was no longer necessary and pushed the
desired button. The dull rumbling of the gears calmed me down after the incident. As I shuffled inside, I watched as the dingy corridor before me vanished as the two panels slid closed

My day was nearly over. I just had to file some documents and then Jonathan and I could go to the new outdoor bistro that opened across the way.

However, when I finished filling, I found myself unable to move. My hand subconsciously stroked the crucifix that rested above my shirt. The incident earlier today still troubled me.

I glanced over at the shut door and exhaled softly.

I recited the Lord's prayer aloud and breathed in deeply, feeling incredibly calm all of the sudden. "Father, what do you want me to do?" I asked, "There are people here getting hurt, but I'm scared that if I interfere, something worse will happen. Lord, grant me a sign." I looked to the ceiling and whatever lay beyond it.

A loud siren rang out across the asylum. Red lights began to flash as a voice came over the intercom "S class criminal being transported, be on guard, patient is highly dangerous." The transmission looped.

I genuflected and held onto the cross in my fingers. "Is this your sign?" I asked the empty room.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Stay tuned, I am not/ will not abandon this story. It's just a matter of time before the next chapter. So let me know in reviews what you think of Mireille's relationship with Jonathan? Healthy? Adorable? Happy the guy finally gets some loving? Did you get the joke about his Great-Grandmother's lipstick? Hate the Riddler's way of talking? Wish I had make him look like the Jim Carrey version? Ect.?
Chapter 4: The Patient

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, so I know some of you were a little bit shocked at Eddie and Harvey's… generosity I think? I dk, but they probably didn't see anything bad in her and she is one of the only doctors at the place that stands up for their well being. (She brings Eddie hot cocoa too). So… I think it's okay, hopefully not too OOC that it made you cringe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: The Patient

* October 21 *

The sound of fast approaching footsteps tore me from my daze. I turned quickly to watch as the door to my office swung open and a silhouette stood in the frame. I cringed a bit, expecting the worst when none other than Dr. Crane walked over the threshold.

Jonathan's eyes darted left and right to ensure nobody else was in the room before he encircled me in his arms. I nuzzled closer to him while he regained his breath. Kissing the crown of my head once, he then pulled back.

"Let's go Mireille," he grabbed my arm, his cerulean eyes pleading for me not to ask, but I couldn't help.
"What is it?" I asked the doctor. He released his tight hold on my arm in exchange for a tender gaze directed at my eyes.

"He is back." Jonathan revealed. "The Joker has returned to Arkham."

My body froze as I soaked in the information I had just received; however the silence was short lived when an orderly dashed over the threshold. "Dr. Milenkovic, you are needed in the operating room, stat!" I nodded reflexively toward the order and the man hastily returned to his predetermined station.

"I have to go Jonathan." I looked back to the taller man, taking my eyes off the doorway when the orderly was out of sight. Dr. Crane looked more angry than upset at the sudden turn of events. However, he stepped aside to let me pass.

Picking up the recently repaired messenger bag full of notes, I began to exit the room when I whirred around for a quick look to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. After I ran my eyes over my desk, they then moved to Jonathan. He was still clearly upset, and it was understandable since we were probably going to miss out on our dinner reservations. I walked over to the bespectacled man and kissed his cheek before turning around and running toward the operating room. He did say 'stat' after all.

XXXXX

When I finally reached the operating room, I grabbed the clipboard hanging by a hook on the door
and read up on the patient as I caught my breath. The clipboard held a bounty of information

Name: Unknown.

Alias: Joker, Clown Prince of Crime, Harlequin of Hate, Puddin (do not call him this), Mr. J,

Age: Unknown (guessed to be in mid to late 20's)

Blood Type: Unknown

Condition: pretty bad (and a possible concussion)

Notes: Patient exposed to 'Bat knock out spray' (ingredients unknown). No sedatives in patient.

Assigned to: Dr. Milenkovic

It was probably a typical brawl with some lacerations, I had dealt with plenty of the Batman's foes in the past few months, yet this would be my first time working with the Joker.

Apparently a few years back the criminal was able to corrupt an intern over the course of only a few months. They did not want a repeat of the incident so, as an intern, I was kept at arms distance from anything even slightly related to The Clown Prince of Crime. Now things were different. My internship was over and I could meet with him as long as I was cautious.

That's the reason why I had a sedative in my pockets. Since he had already been knocked out once though; it would be incredibly dangerous to do so again, especially when you couple it with the fact that he had a possible concussion and I wasn't sure how the chemicals from the ‘Bat Knock Out Spray’ would react to those in my sedative needle. I took a deep breath and unlocked the triple bolted door. At first, I opened it wide enough so I could see my patient securely strapped to a table.

"Ehh, what's up Doc?" The maniacal man called out after the door had closed behind me. He was facing the opposite wall, his shoulders secured so that he could not turn them more than a centimeter before the leather straps halted him. Even though the Joker was thoroughly held down, I still felt more than a little nervous. My eyes darted toward the array of tools on the table beside him: scalpels, tongs, saws, alcohol, drills, and needles. Only an arm's reach away from him were those exceptionally dangerous tools. I pushed this to the back of my mind as I set the clipboard aside and began to walk toward my new patient, being sure to stay out of his line of sight as long as I could.

I knew that I needed to keep the relationship between us professional, so I replied to his previous comment stiffly. "Bonjour Monsieur J."

It was a Freudian slip; Jonathan told me that I often switched to a French dialect when I was nervous. As I was raised in there as a child and taught the language by my native French mother, I associate the language with my childhood and thus, safety and comfort. My fluttering heart froze and the warm thoughts of Jonathan and his analysis were torn away as I witnessed the Joker struggling against the restraints to try and catch a glimpse of me. He soon gave up, knowing that I would need to approach him sooner or later.

And sooner it was. My heels granted me an artificial height that hopefully made him see me as authoritative. As I rounded the corner to view my patient, I took the sight of him in.
The lack luster notes on the clipboard did him a grand injustice. His whole body seemed to be riddled with small and large injuries alike. I suppose the orderlies gave up on listing all of them after a couple years of the Joker coming in and out of the Asylum, which was incredibly unprofessional. However, I had planned on taking my own notes anyway, preferring my opinions over those of others. I was a perfectionist in that way, though others would liken my behavior that of a 'control freak'. I had to make sure things got recorded properly in this place, some of the older records in were ridiculously sloppy.

As I made my observations, a low whistle escaped his lips. "Well, well, you're new." He commented as he looked me over. "Much better than old Dr. Chen." Today Jonathan and I had planned to go to a bistro for dinner, so I was wearing a tight purple dress and I had even gone so far as to fix my hair up for the occasion. When he stared a bit longer, I glanced down to see what he was gawking at and realized my lab coat had been open the whole time. I hurriedly buttoned up the coat and straightened it. 'Way to keep your composure' I told myself.

"My name is Dr. Milenkovic, if you have any allergies or questions, now would be the time to say." The words came out of my lips like a recording; 'this is a normal operation' I kept telling myself, 'nothing new'. I then began to check the restrains to make sure they were all holding up.

"Well." I stopped tightening the slightly loose buckles to look at him, curious as to what he had to say. "I do have something in my pants that requires attention." I kept my face stoic despite the rude proposition. But evidently I had still gotten a bit red as his impossibly large grin began to widen even more.

"I will keep that in mind," I replied firmly. I had finished tightening the straps and reached for a pair of scissors. Tattered cloth clung to his skin with the aid of either fresh or old blood depending on the location, but I was unsure if it was his or another's. I began cutting around the blood laden cloth and pulling it away layer by layer using a pair of forceps. Out of all the splotches on his suit, only a handful lead to his own wounds, the rest probably resulted from a messy interrogation or 'game' that he had played.

Each minor laceration I met with was dabbed with alcohol before being covered by a cloth bandage. As I cut off the rest of his clothing, more and more marks were revealed. I was happily surprised at his silence until I looked up to see his eyes shut. Placing down the scissors hastily, I pressed two fingers to his pulse and place my other hand against his forehead. His pulse was fine and his forehead displayed an obvious bump. The concussion.

"Monsieur J?" I called out, shaking his shoulder lightly. "Hello?" I looked at his face for any signs of motion, a twitch in his muscles, but saw none. Looking closely at his features, I grew concerned.

"Boo!" he called out, his head jerked up as much as permitted by the straps before he lowered himself back down. The shock caused me to stumble back a few feet and nearly fall in my heels. His face lit up and he would not cease his dreadful cackling. I was growing agitated: I was being pushed around by a man strapped to a table, I was missing my date with Jonathan, and I was only trying to help this guy. I composed myself and decided that it was time for me to regain the upper hand. Reaching for the forceps after I removed the rest of his clothing, I picked up a cotton ball, soaked it with alcohol and then began to swab a deeper cut located on his thigh.

The laughter ceased and he winced as I permitted the liquid to coat both his muscles and tissue. "What caused this cut?" I asked, placing down the forceps in favor of my clipboard.
"Batman's piercing glare," he responded with mirth. I lowered my propped up pencil and looked at him, no more warmth in my eyes.

"If you choose not to tell me, I have to assume the worst possible scenario." I informed him, hints of a threat in my voice.

"Ass-ume away." He replied cockily. "I don't have to say a thing." He pouted. My eyebrows twitched in anger, obviously pleasing him further.

"The worst possible scenario is a rusty knife laced with hazardous material that could be agitated by anesthetics." I told him bluntly. "The procedure would involve filleting you skin, flushing your system with antibiotics, and a thorough chemical scrub to all muscle, skin, and tendon within an inch of the cut as well as a multitude of shots.

The news seemed to bother him, but he coaxed me on. "I highly doubt the board would agree to a procedure like that."

"I am a well respected surgeon here at Arkham, and I have friends in high places." This of course meant Dr. Crane, but he didn't need to know that.

"It was a batarang," he said with a sly grin. I knew it wasn't out of fear that he told me, I may ask Jonathan his personal opinion later. But for a brief second, I felt respected by him. He was happy that someone had enough guts to threaten him even when he was as disadvantaged as he is now. I nodded, letting him know I heard him loud and clear as I once again dipped the forceps into an alcohol solution before disinfecting the deep cut more. I dug into the wound to check for any fragments or chipped bone, but discovered none.

Retrieving my needle and thread, I began to stitch up the muscles, the cut was precise so I only needed to use a few stitches with a special thread that would wear away after he had healed. For the split skin: I intricately placed the loops of thread a fraction of a centimeter apart, in case he moved around too much in his cell.

As I dabbed the next injury, he said without asking, "knife." Unsure if it had also been used on another prior to the Joker I heavily cleansed it, listening to Joker hiss and giggle all the while. Unlike the wound on his thigh, the one on his upper arm was jagged. 'Probably from an opposing gang' I suggested in my head. I made five stitches in his muscle layer and fifteen on the skin.

The final wound was on his shoulder. The cause: a batarang. The odd shape gave the wound a strange depth. After apologizing, I spread the skin further apart to survey the damage. Finding three chips of black metal, I reached for fresh forceps and removed the bits. Placing them in a tray, I noticed one was rounded. Upon closer inspection, I found striations on the metal. It was a bullet fragment. Using a cotton swab, I sanitized the outside of the wound. "When you got shot." I hovered the swab over the wound. "Over here, who took care of you?" I asked.

"Some goon who took biology in middle school…why?" he asked, clearly curious as to why I was concerned about the old injury.

"He left a big piece of the bullet behind, luckily it didn't travel into your bloodstream or it could have gone into your heart or clogged a major artery. Then things would be very serious" I absentmindedly stitched him up and gazed at his face. It held the same ghoulish smile that terrorized the children and adults of Gotham, but the black and white newspapers didn't pick up on his eyes. They were a deep green that seemed far different than the soulless black that the cameras displayed.
I looked at the digital clock on the far wall. It was around ten, our reservations were for nine thirty. Since my plans were already ruined, I continued my work at a more leisurely pace now that bleeding to death was out of the way.

My hand closed around a pristine white cloth. Dipping it in some soapy water, I began to cleanse my patient's body of all the grime and caked blood. He had a scrape on his knee that I hadn't seen yet. Dabbing some alcohol on it, I then put on a cloth bandage. As I wiped away the impurities, a sheet of white skin appeared. I had heard about his condition but seeing it in person still astonished me. As I reached his chest, I couldn't help but flush as I actually took in his undressed body. He may have been thin, but he still had lean muscle that gave definition to his form. There was a reason Batman had trouble catching up to him, I could tell by his slender frame and strong calves that he was a good runner. Couple that with his muscular arms, my eyes slowly drifted toward them, and he could land some painful punches with the proper torque behind him. Shaking my head lightly, I resumed my work. 'Great, another mental patient for you to ogle over, cause Harvey wasn't enough.'

Noticing the attention I had recently given him, he continued his heckling. "Like what you see Doc?" he asked.

I did not reply, but continued my job at a slightly faster pace. When I reached his neck, my hands went on autopilot as I ran the bit of fabric over the creases in his skin and washed behind his ears. I looked into his eyes while the washcloth moved under his chin and over his face. Tugging my gaze away, I called in an orderly. After the Joker's position had been reversed and he lay on his belly, I resumed the cleaning job on his back. The expanse of skin was riddled with wounds as badges from his many battles over the years. 'Most of which were probably treated unprofessionally' I noted to myself.

"Monsieur J," I started, he mumbled in response, face pressed firmly against a pillow. "I will be giving you a check up tomorrow to look over some of your old wounds."

"Wow, that quickly Doc?" he asked, jeering at me. "I understand our relationship is important to you, but doesn't this seem a bit clingy. And trust me, I know clingy."

I finished up the washing and requested a male doctor take care of cleaning my patient's private areas while I took a step outside. I placed my report on the Joker into his skimpy binder. Browsing through, I only saw wounds and treatments. There was no data about height and weight. Not to mention, there were no X-rays. If he rumbled with the Batman more than once, he had to have a few broken bones, yet no X-rays were taken. It seemed as if they just put a Band-Aid on his injuries and hoped it would hold until his next tussle.

I was infuriated by the staff's unprofessional attitude. Striding back into the room out of anger, I got an eyeful of the part of my patient I had chosen not to clean. I slammed the binder over my face to cover the fact I was probably 10 different shades of red.

"Dr. Milenkovic, can I help you?" My colleague, Dr. Riemer, clearly was trying to help me out of the situation.

"I think the Doc saw what she came to see." Joker called out. I lowered the binder enough to see his wiggling eyebrows. I shoved down my embarrassment and looked towards my colleague, removing the obstruction so I could speak clearly.

"Dr. Riemer, would you care to inform me why Monsieur J has failed to receive any X-rays"
throughout his many incarcerations?" My face was red for another reason now. The lackluster performance appalled me.

"Umm," he looked around. "You see." To an onlooker like the Joker, who was giggling madly, it must have been a funny sight: me yelling at an older, taller, and all around stronger coworker then myself and him backing away with his hands up defensively.

I cut off his nonsensical blathering, "There is no excuse. Just because he looks different doesn't mean he isn't human. This is a facility to help, not a place to put the mentally ill in a cage and treat them like they are animals." I took a deep breath to calm myself down and added in a more professional tone, "Now, I need you to take Monsieur J down to get an X-ray of his torso. Those ribs of his could be one swing away from shattering for all we know." Dr. Riemer nodded and wrote down the orders on his clipboard. "But before that," I walked over to the cabinet and pulled open a drawer. Out of it I retrieved a multitude of vials and cups, laying them atop the counter. "We need to do some tests."

"Shall I tighten the restraints?" Dr. Riemer asked.

"Quite the opposite, I need you to loosen them a tad." I informed him as I pulled out a sphygmomanometer.

"What?" Dr. Reimer questioned me, a tad startled.

"Yes, otherwise we won't get an accurate reading." I uncapped a plastic thermometer and walked over. "Say ahh," I told the patient. The Joker complied and rolled the bit of plastic around with his tongue.

"Do I get a lollipop afterwards Doc?" he asked around the stick. After I secured the Velcro strap, I squeezed the pump repeatedly and then wrote his blood pressure down as the air exited the cuff. It was actually rather healthy despite his current state.

Withdrawing the thermometer, I took down the average temperature. "You will have to wait until I'm done, otherwise it could affect some tests." I discarded the disposable thermometer and put away the cuff. "Tighten the restraints Dr. Reimer, not too tight though." He complied with my request and I pulled out a needle and attached a plasma laced vial. Then I unraveled a tourniquet and tied it taut around Monsieur J's arm. "Open and close your fist please." I requested.

Joker complied and a thick vein popped up into view. "Deep breath," I recommended before pushing the needle through his skin and into the vein. Almost immediately, blood traveled through the tube and into the vial. I filled up five of them before withdrawing the needle, a turf of cotton quickly placed to cover the puncture. I applied pressure with my thumb and set down the vials. As I reached for some bandages, I was interrupted.

"Do you have purple?" The Joker piped in, "I like purple."

"Actually I do." I grinned at the clown. "I'm partial to purple as well." I set the plain white bandages on top of the table and reached over to retrieve the purple ones from inside the drawer instead. After five solid wraps, I was sure there would be no leaks. Letting go of the Joker's arm, I placed the vials in a biohazard tray and handed them to Dr. Reimer.

"Where should I take these?" he asked.

"Dr. Crane should hopefully still be here, see if he is willing to run them quickly through the
centrifuge. I need all the information he can get." The tall man nodded, eager to be back on my good side. Once again I was alone with the Joker.

At least he had his pants back on.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Now as you may recall, at the beginning of the chapter, I said that the next chapter is awesome. And I stand by it. It's my favorite chapter in this section of the fic (probably going to have 3 or 4 parts?). It's great. I have about a dozen one shots I can do alongside this fic, but everything you read in these chapters is entirely necessary.
Chapter 5: A Lost Golfball

Chapter Notes

A/N: Once again, this is my favorite chapter in all of part 1. Now that I have a feel for my workload this school year, you should probably only expect some light one-shots rather than actual plot developing chapters. I am taking a college level English class this year and it is NO JOKE. So I am going to have to devote a lot of time and focus to it. Anyway, please read and enjoy! Also don't forget to review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: A Lost Golfball

* October 21 *

Expecting to find Jonathan at the asylum this late at night was a shot in the dark, but I didn't want to walk home alone at eleven thirty. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on Dr. Crane's door and was pleasantly surprised when it swiftly opened to reveal the man.

"Thank goodness you're still here." I sighed, placing a hand on my chest as a smile broke over my face.

"But of course, we have a date after all." He commented as he walked out of his office and locked the door behind him. Holding onto his briefcase with one hand, he used the other to tilt up my chin and kiss my cheek softly.

"I highly doubt our dinner reservations work after hours." I rolled my eyes after he pulled back from the kiss.

"I'm aware, I have other plans." He held out his hand and allowed me to clasp onto it as we made our way down to the parking level. The scent of gasoline permeated the air, present due to the many vehicles that passed through the subterranean level throughout the day. Only a few cars remained at such a late hour. Jonathan guided me to his and opened the passenger door before gesturing to the interior, "After you."

"Merci," I lifted the corners of my dress slightly in a mock curtsy prior to getting into his car. Jonathan quickly circled the vehicle to get in on his own side. Placing the keys into the ignition and twisting them, he put the car into drive and maneuvered us out of the underground parking lot and onto a freeway.

XXXXX

I rested my elbow on the armrest and my cheek sat on my closed fist. Jonathan and I had been driving in silence for the past fifteen minutes. My window was lowered slightly to let in the fresh night air as I began to wind down from the days worth of excitement. The silence between us was comfortable, life was hectic and time spent together rather than apart was a blessing. Even if at times we preferred to spend it mute. I looked over at my date to see him staring at the road ahead of him,
like most things he does, Jonathan drives with precision. I reached my hand out so I could comb my fingers through his hair, which had been blown slightly out of place. He stole a glance in my direction to flash a quick smile before returning his eyes to the road. After a while, I pulled my hand back and rested it on my lap. I pondered our destination and stared out the passenger’s side window.

That's when I saw the flashing lights in the distance. I squinted my eyes to try and get a clearer image, but as we drew nearer, a windmill far too small to be of use came into focus. While I was busy trying to discern the purpose of the structure, Jonathan pulled us into a mini golf course that contained the petite and well lit windmill. After I realized our whereabouts I giggled in glee.

"Well this is a first for me." I said as he helped me out of the car. "I think I am way overdressed though." He smirked as I looked down at my outfit. The short, purple dress was not made for cold weather. My arms crossed over my chest as I shivered, now fully exposed to the chilly night air. Jonathan himself was wearing a suit, so being the gentleman he is, he removed his jacket and placed it on my bare shoulders.

"Sorry for the drastic change in scenery," Jonathan apologized, probably rethinking his choice in venue.

"No," I beamed at his chivalry and held the warm coat closer to me. "I haven't been mini golfing in years. I think it's a splendid surprise" Jonathan relaxed at my enthusiasm and offered me his arm. I gladly held the limb close to me as we approached the building.

The sign next to the gate informed us that the golf course would be open until one in the morning, but the arcade would stay open until three o'clock. As we exchanged paper currency for plastic sporting goods, I realized that the park was actually rather crowded considering the late hour. An assortment of couples were scattered over the park and a few adults who had nothing better to do.

When the purple golf club was placed into my hand alongside a neon yellow golf ball, I felt young again. Grabbing Jonathan by the wrist, I dragged him to the first hole, snickering all the while. Jonathan had insisted that, as a lady, I go first. It was a simple L shaped course, I needed to bounce the ball off the wall opposite to the smaller leg of the course and hope it got in the hole, or at least into the other end of the bend.

Placing the ball in the rightmost of the three designated divots, I placed both hands on the club and gave it a solid put. Jonathan and I watched as the ball rebounded off the side and sailed smoothly into the hole after bouncing off the walls of the course two more times. My date congratulated me with a kiss on the cheek before he too gave it a shot.

Jonathan tried to repeat my stroke, however the ball rebounded back at him. He was able to get it on the other flank after two more tries and in the hole after another two. He wrote down his score, his brow furrowed and clearly upset. I knew that if I did poorly on purpose, it would only hurt his ego more, so I took another route.

Walking over to the next hole, I saw it was volcano shaped and huffed out. "I hate these ones, I always hit too hard or not enough. Jonathan observed the layout and nodded.

"That is true, only a small margin will yield the desired result. However," he approached the plastic covered dome with a newfound focus. "I believe that the proper force can be applied." He returned to my location and placed his ball in the middle dent. Pulling back his club, he gazed at the goal, and swung. The ball sailed quickly at first, but slowed its pace as it climbed the mountain. When it
reached the top, it fell into the hole with a resounding 'plop'.

I giddily clapped for him as he went to retrieve the ball. Placing my own ball in the indentation, I looked at the mountain and bit my lip. "Can you help me?" I begged Jonathan with my eyes.

You could compare a tomato to the redness of Jonathan's face as he took in the request and nodded. Standing directly behind me, he placed his hands over my own, his chest pressed to my back. As he lowered his head to the crook of my neck, I heard him breathe lightly, "One." He lightly tapped the ball, "Two." He drew back more and repeated. "Three," he followed through with the stroke, his pelvis lightly brushing against my rear as he leaned in to watch.

Much the same as his, my ball glided into the hole without wavering. Jonathan had a smile on his face as he wrote down the totals this time around.

The next sixteen holes were enjoyable; Jonathan 'misplaced' his ball around the fourth hole, so we worked as a team for the rest of the game. The eighteenth was the most fun though. It was in the shape of a giant clown's head. The objective was to hit the ball so that it followed the slight ridge of a clown's tongue, flew into his open mouth, and hopefully hit the uvula.

This was considered a hole in one and winners got their next game free.

Seeing as we only had one ball, Jonathan and I had to make it count. Placing the ball on the center divot, I turned to look at my date, telling him to join me. He smirked and rested his chin in the crook of my neck, placing his hands atop mine.

We didn't need to count this time, already used to the motions. Our bodies moved as one entity as we hit the ball. It followed the ridge well, but once it reached the opening of the mouth it sailed down his throat rather than hit the uvula. The machines eyes lit up as mechanical laughter played from the speakers that resided behind his head. Jonathan sighed and pulled away from me.

When my date took away my club and left in order to return it, I called out: "well, maybe next time." He turned to look at me, stunned.

"Next time?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah," I stated the obvious. "I like mini golfing with you." I hurried over to him, got on my toes, and pressed my lips firmly against his. Jonathan flushed but nodded, turning to return our clubs to the register. As I waited for him to finish the transaction, I found myself drawn to the flashing lights of the arcade.

After he returned, I pulled him from the dark and cold night and into the well-lit game room. "What are we doing here?" he inquired. While five different people bumped into us, I placed ten dollars into token machine.

"The night is still young, and when was the last time you had a skeeball ricochet and hit you in the stomach?" I scooped up the tokens and poured them into my clutch as I recalled the now humorous childhood memory.

As Jonathan and I zig-zagged through the arcade, we hit every other machine. Thankfully, the skeeballs chose not to pelt us tonight. Whilst I played the games, Jonathan would meticulously fold
the tickets onto one another so they looked like little accordions. He had insisted that he wasn’t fond of these sorts of things and ushered me to have a good time. Jonathan was working on a fifty three ticket long project when I finished my latest game; I quickly removed the paper stubs from his grip and pushed him to try his luck at a game in hopes of he would have fun. While he was surveying the room for a suitable game, I spotted a claw machine.

Jonathan followed my gaze and smirked, walking toward the prize laden machine. As he rolled up his sleeves, I searched for a goal. The bin was full of stuffed elephants, giraffes, cats, penguins, and the occasional teddy bear.

"Which one do you want?" Jonathan asked as he knelt to put in the two required tokens.

"That bear in the back, the one lying face-down." I pointed to the plush object beyond the glass. A giraffe and penguin had the fuzzy black animal pinned by the arms and the poor bear’s head was buried in the belly of a Halloween themed doll, making it pretty tricky to grab.

As the machine registered the coins inserted, it came to life. The flashing lights gave the time remaining as Jonathan maneuvered the claw around the top of the machine. Pressing the red button, it descended and the claw opened.

The claw brushed over the plush head and dipped lower before proceeding to close around the bear’s cranium and pulling up. Even though it was a decent grab, the plush toy was fixed, refusing to move. It’s head squeezed through one of the claw’s gaps and then the empty prongs glided over to the chute, releasing nothing but air.

I was content with stopping there, but Jonathan was already loading the machine with quarters from his own wallet. I watched as time after time, he tried and failed. His greatest success was lifting one of the bear's legs.

After attempt number six failed, I grabbed his hand before he could put in more money. "Jonathan," I smiled warmly at his look of shock at my tender caress. "It's okay."

"But," he paused. "You love that bear." he stated simply.

"No," I giggled. "I like that bear, I love you."

My body froze up. Only after I said the words did I realize how true it was; I had fallen in love with Jonathan. His eyes widened, having been astonished by the news. He slammed the coins in his hand onto the panel of the machine. Jonathan guided me to the back of the arcade and trapped me in a barrier made of his arms.

"What did you say?" He asked, his voice hoarse as he tried to process the words.

My face heated up and I looked into his crisp blue eyes as I said. "I love you Jonathan." My shoulders rose slightly, as if saying that I didn't know when, but I had fallen hard for the doctor.

A broad smile grew on his face as he took in the information. He rested his forehead on the wall behind my left shoulder, breathing in the scent of green apple shampoo that still lingered from my morning shower. "I'm glad," was all he said.

XXXXX
The rest of the tokens were slowly spent, Jonathan chose to spend most of the time kissing me and holding my hand rather than fold the now crumpled tickets that resided at the bottom of my clutch. As the arcade emptied out, we gathered up our tickets and looked at the vast array of prizes. The styrofoam stuffed lions were far out of our price range, so we chose to go after the prizes behind the glass counter. A majority of the items were quickly crossed out for being either childish or lame.

In the section under two hundred and fifty tickets were an assortment of key chains. One of which was under a category all its own, 'Old Movies'. Inside the bin was a yarn doll of the Scarecrow from The Wizard of Oz. The doll's black bead eyes looked up without emotion at the smudged glass from the confines of its tiny box. I could tell by the yellowed tag around the metal chain that he had been there for a while.

"Excuse me?" I called for the attention of the teenage boy behind the counter.

"Yes?" he responded. "How can I help you?" He gave me a once over, taking in my chest as I leaned over the class. I quickly tugged Jonathan's jacked closed to block his view, his smile lowering as I did so.

"How come that Scarecrow hasn't been taken?" I asked the boy. His brows furrowed at the question.

"Well, when The Wizard of Oz was re-released a few years back, as a promotion they sent some toys here. Naturally Dorothy and Toto were the most popular, then the Lion and the Tin Man. But nobody really likes the Scarecrow. Most people consider him 'moronic' and a lame character." He prattled as if it was obvious.

"I'll take it." I told him, placing the tickets on the counter.

The older teen shrugged his shoulders and pulled out the doll before placing in on the counter. "Thank you," I said to the nameless boy, my eyes fixated on the doll instead.

The body was made of tightly rolled tan yarn with a little felt hat affixed to its head. Some tattered clothes were on its tiny body and secured with small bits of string around the arm and ankle cuffs. The bead eyes seemed to stare at me, impassive, as I studied him.

"Why get the Scarecrow?" Jonathan asked me, looking at it as well.

"He never did anything wrong, you know." I told him. "A farmer just set him out in the field and let the crows have at him." I ran my index finger over the side of his face. "It must have been so lonely; the only company he had were the crows pecking at his bound body."

I opened my clutch and dropped the charm in. Looking back to my date, I saw him gape at me in astonishment. Jonathan soon shook it off and instead lowered himself to my level before he kissed me. "He has been through a lot." He commented. "It must be nice to know that he is safe with you."

"It's just a doll." I reminded him.

"Yes, of course." Jonathan agreed. "Just a doll."
A/N: when I first thought of the chapter, I was going to have Crane say something like this when he got to the claw machine "They don't call me 'Doctor Crane' for nothing" then Mireille was gonna say: "But it's a 'Claw' machine Jonathan." And he would just mumble "same difference.". If anyone is curious what the scarecrow doll looks like, google image this: "wizard of oz scarecrow voodoo doll". If you don't know what to say in the reviews answer this question "WHY DID JONATHAN JUST SAY "I'M GLAD" TO MIREILLE'S LOVE DECLARATION?" Thoughts? Theories? You feel sorry for Mireille?
That bullet fragment I found the other day was only the tip of the iceberg. After getting back the X-rays I requested, I was both pleased and disturbed at what I discovered. Pleased because Monsieur J was in no imminent danger and disturbed by the plethora of foreign objects lodged inside his body. A chip of what I can safely assume to be a crowbar had even taken up residence dangerously close the Joker's liver. I had to take around fifteen X-rays of the patient to help me plot the points to begin my search for the remaining remnants. One frame would help me to find the location of the fragment on the frontal plane and others would help me locate the object in question on the sagittal plane, giving me perfect X-Y-Z coordinates. Then came the cutting, digging, and careful removal of the bits.

Fifty six fragments in total. Fifty six jars, one for each fragment, piled on the nearby table. Fifty six coordinates to be performed to find out the fragments form prior to becoming lodged in the patient. Were they bone, shrapnel, a paper clip? Thankfully, I didn't have to determine that. It was up to Dr. Crane, our local chemist, to discover what they were. My own job was over, after five hours of double checking X-rays, rooting around my patient's body, and making exactly forty-eight incisions through the epidermis, dermis, and muscles. Once during the operation, I even utilized some oddly shaped forceps to retrieve a tricky bit of metal lodged behind his fourth left rib. How it got there, I don't want to know. The surgery itself was a complete success, however the Joker was going to be on bed-rest for a week or so until the stitches get removed, all two hundred and seventy two of them. In the meantime, I just had some routine checkups and spot exams. There was my appointment with Waylon Jones to look forward to tomorrow, but he usually isn't too much for me to handle.

I had just delivered the lollipop I promised to the still comatose Joker, filed my reports, and delivered the samples to the lab to be studied tomorrow. But for now, my day at the asylum was over, as was Dr. Crane's.

Jonathan joined me in the elevator, having insisted on driving me back to my apartment so that I could get ready for our date tonight. We were going to see a movie and then get some drinks at a local bar. It sounded like a relaxing date with little talking involved. I was too tired to keep up a decent conversation anyway. Standing upright for so long with deathly sharp tools and performing a task requiring much concentration will do that to you. Much like a gentleman, Jonathan carried my briefcase alongside his own into the elevator. It looked a bit funny since they were so diverse.

Jonathan's briefcase was a brown leather, vintage, classy, and had metal corners riveted to the case so that if it should bump into a wall, the latter would get the brunt of the hit. However, the well treated case didn't have a single scratch upon it. Mine, on the other hand, was a bit of a wreck. My case was black faux leather with as many scratches as there were stitches attempting to hold it together. Although it was incredibly organized on the inside, the outside made it seem as if it had been quality control tested by an elephant.
Around my shoulder was my one other bag. I had decided to merge the contents of my medical bag with my messenger bag, since without the psychology books it merely contained my keys, wallet, some granola bars, and an emergency make-up kit. Jonathan fixed up the bag a short while back and although the stitches were in plain sight, the thread he used was incredibly durable and he had assured me that it shouldn't snap again. Attached to the zipper of one of the side pockets of the bag was the little scarecrow charm we had won a few nights ago. I had secured it to the newly repaired bag as soon as Jonathan returned it to me. Recalling the memory, I absentmindedly reached for to doll and listened to the light jingle accompanying the motion of my hand as it brushed up against the charm. Jonathan smiled when he discovered the source of the noise and proceeded to lower himself slightly to kiss my cheek. I flushed in response to the tender action and leaned on my beloved as the elevator began its descent.

Soon afterward, the sirens went off and the intercom beeped, an indication that an announcement was about to be made. "S class patient escaped, patient's name is Edward Nyg-." The frantic voice was cut off, there was a brief moment of static, and then a familiar voice came over the system, the voice of the Riddler himself. "Let's play a game of cat and mouse, shall we? I will give you three hours to find me before I am gone from this hellish prison for good. If you somehow manage to capture me, then I will go back to my cell without a fight. For now." There was a slight pause before Jonathan's pager and walkie went off simultaneously, both however were ignored temporarily as the speaker continued. "This could be made much more interesting however, how about we take out the power. And the reception?" First the beeping and buzzing stopped, then the lights shut off, but the room was by no means dark. It was well lit by luminescent question marks that littered the walls. They were everywhere, even on the ceiling. When did he have the time to do this, to go so far as to even 'decorate' the elevator, to manufacture a surplus of glow in the dark green paint, to pull out a ladder to reach the nine foot tall ceiling of the precarious cage?

I started shivering, it felt ten degrees cooler in the small, metal, impenetrable room. Walking slowly forward, I listened to the slight patter of my feet as I approached the thick doors of the elevator. Putting one hand on either side of the narrow crack in the door I attempted to pry it open. Only after thirty seconds of trying to open the doors, did Jonathan come up behind me. His footsteps were so loud. No surrounding machinery was running so I heard the sound clear as day. No machinery I quickly realized meant no electricity.

"Jonathan I have to get out of here." I turned my head to look at him. "I-I need to." My nails scraped along the elevator door in attempt to gain purchase on the smooth metal as I pleaded with my eyes for him to do something.

Jonathan got a knowing look in his eyes when he met my gaze and proceeded to approach me slowly to encase me in his arms. He felt warm; I turned around to wrap my own arms around him and nuzzle into the hug. I was still trembling, but it wasn't from the cold. "Why do you need to get out Mireille?" he asked me very calmly, but with a subtle air of eagerness. "Do you fear small places? Or is it the lack of light that disturbs you?"

"The- the patients. Some of them require those machines a-and the power is out, I have to help them." Gently, he removed his hands and rotated my head slightly so that my ear was pressed against his chest. I began focusing on the rhythmic beating of his heart and started calming down. His long fingers traced lines down my scalp as my heart rate decelerated in an attempt to catch up with his. Then I heard the scream.

Someone just beyond the metal door was pounding on it, begging it to open, and crying out for help. Then, clear as a bell, his voice broke through the screams. "Now now now, no phoning a friend." A sickening crack reverberated throughout the room, the origin of which I presume to be the Riddler's
trademark cane against the innocent man's skull.

I tore myself away from Jonathan's grasp and lunged at the door, tears already falling from my eyes as I clawed at the metal barrier. "No no no no no no no" I cried out the mantra. Then I heard the sound of men's dress shoes periodically click against the floor. I took a step back for each one I heard advance toward me until I heard a contrasting 'pliping' noise. The blood. The Riddler was walking in the man's blood. I ambled backward until my back was pressed against the elevator's far wall.

"Well, well well." I heard a tap against the metal door, then a much louder sound, as if it were struck by the melee weapon. I jumped up and my heart began to race. "If it isn't the little lovebirds, don't worry, I can't see you two right now, but I did catch a glimpse of you through the camera feed before cutting the power. Oh and Dr. Crane, might I say you are incredibly docile when around your little pumpkin. Now I don't wish to remove you both from the gene pool tonight, but I can't be one to show favorites. So, riddle me this Dr. Crane. 'If it's information you seek, come and see me. If it's pairs of letters you need, I have consecutively three. Who am I?""

"A Bookkeeper." He snarled out, wrapping his arms around me once more and drawing me in close. I relished in the warmth but couldn't shake the fear deeply embedded in my body. Jonathan kissed the crown of my head, stealing my attention away from the present situation for just a second. He flashed me a smile when I looked up at him. "We're going to be fine," he whispered. "I won't let him touch a hair on your head." I stared blankly up at him. I don't know why, but after that statement I felt less terrified. Instead I felt almost secure.

"Good," the chilling voice returned. "Now a riddle for the lovely Dr. Milenkovic. What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?"

Jonathan lowered his head to whisper the answer in my ear, but I responded to the riddle before he could give it to me. "The g-gravedigger, for his houses will l-l-last forever." I choked out.

"Splendid, splendid." The narcissist clapped slowly just beyond the metal doors. "Now, I will take my leave and you two live to see another day." The Riddler resumed his walk down the halls whilst whistling a joyful tune, the clicking of his shoes slowly diminished alongside his happy jingle until silence once again returned to our nook of the asylum.

Almost immediately after the dead silence returned, my legs collapsed and I began to fall. Jonathan quickly latched onto me and slowly lowered me to the ground instead. Once there he joined me, pulling my back up against his chest and positioning his legs on either side of mine. "It's going to be okay." He repeated softly, combing some stray hairs behind my ear. "Say it with me: I'm going to be fine." Jonathan repeated the phrase several times until I joined him in reciting it. I stuttered the first few times but it slowly became easier to say until I repeated the phrase numbly, not because he ordered me to, but because it soothed me. Jonathan rubbed my arm and praised me for doing a good job. Finally, I seemed to be in a right state of mind and he began to explain what had happened. I had had a small panic attack, and needed to relax now. After I shut my eyes and rested against Jonathan's chest for a couple of minutes, I turned around and knelt between his spread legs. I briefly kissed his cheek and then moved to his lips, resting mine there for more than a few seconds.

"Thank you Jonathan." I sat down next to him now, my legs outstretched and head coming to rest on his shoulder. Flexing my feet I noticed now how long his legs were in comparison to mine.

Seeing that I had calmed down, Jonathan unclasped his briefcase and slipped out a flask hidden in one of the pockets. He unscrewed the container and took a swig of it before offering it to me. I pondered it over before taking a nip and handing it back. Scotch, nasty tasting stuff but it helped
numb my mind. Jonathan took another long swig before putting the flask back in his briefcase and shutting it.

I had watched him perform these simple movements. His Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed the drink and hands delicately returning the container it to its proper place in his suitcase. Everything he did seemed so precise, thought out, and for lack of a better word, perfect. Jonathan turned to look at me after he tucked away the drink. It was hard to see his cerulean eyes in the dim green light, but I could easily recall what they looked like. I imagine he was giving me an inquisitive look this time, pupils most likely dilated due to the insufficient amount of light in the chamber. But not so lacking that he would be unable to see me observing him.

Embarrassed at the likelihood of being caught staring, I looked down and began fidgeting with my hands when I felt something hot and sticky. Blood? I curled in my fingers to look at the nails. Some of them had been bent back, breaking connections with the skin underneath thus leading to the rivulets of blood I was now staring intently at. They were back in their proper place, but bruises were already forming behind the nail. Had I been scratching that intently at the doors when I attempted to open them? My fingers were bleeding quite badly. How had I not noticed? Without much thought I reached into my messenger bag and began to sanitize them with the medical wipes that lay inside. Once done, I wrapped the bleeding fingers in gauze and tucked away the med kit. I stared at my handiwork; a good coat of opaque nail polish would cover the bruises up until they faded. But even that would take a while. My mind continued to ramble, thinking about everything but the present situation.

"We're perfectly safe." Jonathan told me, taking my trembling right hand in his. He probably recognized I was still in a state of shock and wished to comfort me.

"What if he cuts the cable?" I asked, looking around for evidence of an explosive or recording device to monitor our actions.

"We passed his little test and even if he did manage to cut all three cables, we're on the fourteenth floor and this car only goes down to the tenth. The drop would barely be enough to injure us, however if that does happen, feel free to use me to break your fall." He took my left hand now, covering up the injured fingers attached to it with his warm grip.

I giggled and nodded, accepting his proposal. I swung myself around to sit straddled on his lap. With one knee placed on either side of his legs, I put my hands on either side of his face and leaned forward to kiss him passionately. "I love you Jonathan." I mumbled after the heated kiss. "Thank you for helping me keep a level head." I quickly tagged on before continuing to kiss him.

My bandaged fingers ran through his hair, and his own slowly wrapped around my midsection to hold me in place. Drawing my right hand back I placed my palm on his heated cheek. I couldn't see red well in the dim green light, but just by touch I could tell he was blushing. I opened my mouth slightly before nipping at his lip. Jonathan opened his own mouth and took my lower lip into his, sucking lightly on it as he slowly pushed me back. Before my head could hit the floor of the elevator, he reached inside my messenger bag for my neatly folded lab coat. Placing it just where my head would land, he finally let me lay back all the way.

The floor was chilly, causing me to shift my legs slightly as he knelt between them and resumed his gentle teasing. Jonathan clamped his teeth down on my lower lip before pulling back slowly, tugging my lip along lightly before letting go. Pulling both of my hands back from behind his head, I began unbuttoning his shirt. Jonathan was surprised at first but brushed it off and continued kissing me, slowly snaking his tongue into my mouth.
I was warming up rapidly despite the cold surrounding. Mainly because Jonathan’s body was mere inches above mine, his tongue gently playing with my own. I giggled, it had tickled a bit when he untucked my shirt and began to run his hand over the bare flesh of my abdomen. Drawing away from his kiss, I gave him a peck on the cheek. He started to pull away, figuring I was signaling for us to call it quits, but instead I continued to trail kisses down his jaw and toward his neck. I then latched onto a bit of flesh with my teeth and began sucking.

I always experienced a euphoric sensation whenever Jonathan marked me. I could only hope that he felt the same way as I scraped my teeth along the targeted plane of skin before biting at it. I heard a deep inhale of breath before a low groan and suddenly he was back in the game.

I felt him stiffen for a split second as he took in my words. Then Jonathan swiped a nail in desperate need of a manicure down my thigh. I felt the fabric snag and my own flesh get harshly scraped by the nail. A run formed in the nylons and Jonathan pushed his finger through the weaker area, curled said digit, and pulled so that the small hole became a huge gash. From there, it was easy to rip them off at my mid-thigh.

Jonathan used his newfound freedom from my leeching mouth in a different way. Tugging off my heels, he freed one leg from its torn, nylon cocoon. Hoisting the now naked limb up, he moved his hand slowly from its position at the back of my knee up to my thigh. Once there, I wrapped the liberated leg around his waist and pulled closer by yanking roughly on his now loosened collar. Jonathan quickly complied with my plea for another kiss and as he tilted his head to kiss me even more passionately than expected, I ran my fingers over the newly formed bump on his neck and smiled into the kiss.

I was turning crimson for two different reasons, both in dire need of being thought over, but each fighting to be discussed first.

'Pumpkin'. It was cute, that was for sure. It was also the first pet name Jonathan had given me other
than the occasional 'dear'. Perhaps it too was a special occurrence or one time event. Either way it was endearing, even if the nickname was offered up by our captor.

Next was Jonathan outright proclaiming that he wanted to have sex with me and would have done so right here, had my virtue not been an issue. Oh there were plenty of things we needed to talk over when it came to my chastity. But that debate should wait for another day. His inability to run out during the conversation now was a bonus, but after everything that happened, a deep conversation was the last thing on my mind. And a topic that intimate shouldn't be discussed in these surroundings. Besides, how would he feel if I told him I wanted to wait until my wedding night to lose my innocence. It was, after all, the last request made of me by my late fiancé.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Riddler referred to himself as a mouse. Do you guys recall that he is called the "Dormouse" by the Mad Hatter (in fics and comic strips as far as I know). I included that tidbit for fun~ Now. What did you guys think? Will Batman find them? The staff? Will anyone notice Jonathan’s hickey or Mireille's missing stocking?

What did you guys think of Riddler btw? Scary? Understand Mireille freaking out when enclosed in a mini death trap (if it was indeed one)? Pumpkin! And did you see how she considered their future discussion to be a debate. She knows Jonathan will be upset. What do you think? Will Jonathan think she stringing him along? How will he react? Would a man like him consider marriage?
Chapter 7: Monsieur Pierre Lepretre

Chapter Notes

A/N: Finals are next week so I sort of stinted on studying to type this up. In all, I put in about 12 hours into writing this chapter over a span of three days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7: Monsieur Pierre Lepretre

* Early Morning, October 25 *

My hair and makeup were fixed and the ruined stockings had long since been tucked away in my bag. Jonathan had a bit of a harder time tidying up though, since he didn't know how to conceal his hickey at first. Surprisingly, he found a plaid scarf inside his briefcase and used it to cover the bruise.

Now that he and I had no evidence remaining of our prior engagements, we leaned against one another and listened to some of the soothing French songs I had programmed on my MP3 player.

We were eventually rescued from the elevator, but by the time the Batman ripped open the doors we'd long since succumbed to drowsiness. My coworker and I had fallen asleep after only the first hour in the elevator. The last thing I remember seeing before my eyelids drooped shut was Jonathan's hand enveloping my own, his slightly calloused thumb running over the crests and troughs of the metacarpals that rested just beneath the skin on the back of my hand.

I imagine it must have been quite a scene for Batman. The entire asylum was in a state of panic, some people were probably killed, and in he strides, coming to the rescue only to find us behind those doors. A couple huddled close together to retain heat and sharing a pair of earbuds, our heads slumped over one another's Obviously this scene did not depict a pair of cowering coworkers scared out of their wits. Thankfully, he still chose to wake us up.

When Batman shook me awake, the first thing I noticed was the open elevator door beyond the vigilante. With a quick ‘merci beaucoup’, I dashed out to stare upon the crime scene. Sure enough there was a corpse resting against the far wall, a smear of blood leading up to the body showing he had been dragged away from his place of passing. After a quick prayer I checked his pulse anyway, just to be sure of his demise. I pressed my index and middle finger against his neck and as expected it was cold and stiff, rigor mortis had already started setting in. "Where did you put those requiring medical attention?" I asked the Bat while reaching into my bag for a bottle of chloroprocaine.

"They're in the library; the Medical Facility was where the Riddler was last spotted before escaping, so the patients there are barricaded in with some of the staff. He didn't seem to attack the areas containing patients as much as he did those holding employees. Some of the security guards from intensive care are worse for wear, as are the psychologists. I patched them up the best I could, but bandages aren't going to keep them stable for long, especially with most of the medicinal doctors boarded up in their facility." He looked at a gadget on his gauntlet and read off the list of injuries. "There are broken limbs, one punctured lung, a crushed hand, severe lacerations, a few knocked out teeth, and some sprained ankles." The Bat closed his device and looked back up at me. "Do we need to stop by the Medical Facility to pick up anything? The stock room should still be accessible."
"I have what I need for some of the more stable patients in my bag, but for others I do need some tools. Is there any way you could drop me off at the library and then pick up a list of items from the Medical Facility?" I had already begun jotting down the necessary tools and some extra ones just as a precaution.

"I can do that." Batman took the now finished list and extended his arm. "It would be faster if I carried you to the library."

"Yes, just give me a second." I turned to see Jonathan groggily getting up and stretching his neck. I had known for a while that he was not someone to interrupt while sleeping, especially since he barely got any rest. I ran up and kissed his cheek. "I have to go, I'll be in the library taking care of some of the injured if you want to join me. Or you could just go back to your house if you want. I'll take a cab home."

Before Jonathan could say anything, the Dark Knight remarked, "Deal with carpooling later Dr. Milenkovic, we need to go. Now!" The man yanked my arm to draw me closer to him. Once he did, he put one arm under my knees and the other around my middle. Lifting me up like I weighed nothing, he carried me bridal style and began running down the hall.

I can lie and say that I was behaving appropriately for the situation: keeping quiet, giving necessary directions, asking about the patients. However, I was terrified. Imagine being held firmly to a Kevlar suit, not a soft material, and jolted up and down with each long stride.

Power was down in Intensive Treatment, so I understand Batman taking a unique exit route through the window, onto a nearby hill, and then sliding down the grassy slope to the grounds, but stairs were always an option. Throughout the trip to Arkham East, he also decided to take a few shortcuts, shortcuts of course being thirty foot drops cushioned only by his cape acting as a makeshift parachute near the end of our decent. I stopped screaming after the first few minutes, but still latched onto Batman for dear life until the end of our journey.

The first thing I did once I reached the library was instruct the few medical assistants there to organize the patients and staff by severity of injury. The nurses were concerned that I didn't wish to treat the staff first, but my resolve wore them down. Only a few patients had been harmed by the Riddler and based on what they muttered under their breath about the rogue while I treated them, he was not a pal of theirs. Staff injuries were more severe and numerous. Batman, as I was told by one of the staff members, had already connected them all to the Riddler. Evidently they had gotten on his bad side during his incarceration and he deemed it fit to seek revenge upon them. The most severely injured of them was his old psychologist. Her hand had been crushed, left lung punctured, and more than a few of her ribs were broken.

After treatment, I identified the probable cause. A heavy paperweight could explain the hand, as she was found in her office, and the ribs were most likely from repeated strikes to the thoracic cage by means of the Riddler's trademark cane. Her primary hobby, I later found out, was drawing. The Riddler had hated how she saw fit to doodle during their sessions so long ago. ‘Unprofessional’ he called it, ‘and sloppy work at best’.

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Once all the major cases were taken care of by Dr. Reimer and myself, I asked him to tend to the minor injuries while I checked on some of the bedded patients over in the Medical Facility. The walk over there was more than a little scary, however I was accompanied by a security guard who helped
me keep calm during the fifteen minute walk. Sometime during the seven hours spent working in the
library, the medical staff had decided the threat was over and began disassembling their barricade,
allowing me to enter the ward without facing any difficulties.

The only place not to lose power was the Critical Ward in the Medical Facility. Gas powered
generators there turn on automatically after power outages to ensure the machines that patients there
depended on kept running for the duration of the blackout.

It was six in the morning now. The nap in the elevator helped give me enough energy to keep
working. While I took care of patients in need of medical attention in the library, Dr. Crane was
helping do a headcount of the remaining patients. He performed the count in solitary first before
bringing the inmates back out to their cells. The man was in charge of counting more than two floors
of patients. Periodically I would hear from him on my walkie, asking if a specific patient was in the
Medical Facility or being treated in the library. Although it sounded easy, Dr. Crane had to not only
check if there was someone present in the cell, but also inspect said inhabitant to see if they were
harmed or had been swapped out with another patient. Thankfully, these occurrences were rare. Dr.
Crane deduced that Riddler had swapped some deadly patients with more tolerable ones so that
when retrieving what should be low threat patients, guards wouldn't realize what hit them. It was
brilliant in a way, chaos carrying on without the rogue even being present. Like a kick in the belly
after beating an opponent down, just another thing to remind us of his intellect during his absence
besides the thirty seven wounded and eighteen dead.

I traipsed through the Critical Ward of the Medical Facility after conferring with my shaken
coworkers. Patients in this ward were divided by level of threat to those around them and how
critical a condition they were in when hospitalized. We had saved looking in on these critical patients
for last since they were well tied down and in no threat of dying because the generators supported
them throughout the attack. Plus, those in the Medical Facility were recovering from injuries rather
than enduring them, so few really needed attention besides the regular sponge baths and daily
medications thanks to the machines.

I checked the low threat patients first; everyone there seemed fine if not shocked. When I called out
the names of the patients from the clipboard on the door, they all responded in turn and confirmed
that they were all right. The only one who hadn't replied so far was Mademoiselle Trejo, the young
woman in a coma. The final room in the ward was occupied by a single patient, the Joker. Our
number one patient was supposed to be medicated to keep him relaxed while his body healed and aid
him in maintaining a cool temper while around the defenseless patients. Several thick leather bands
secured his arms to his sides and his legs together to prevent him from running off. He was, however,
not linked to the bed. This was purely for convenience of course, so that every time we changed his
sheets we didn't have to unbind him from the cot. He could roll off the bed though, and theoretically
he could stand up, head-butt, bite, body slam. He could do quite a bit without use of his limbs, which
I why I had him medicated with a muscle relaxant that prevented him from wiggling around too
much. I took in a deep breath before opening the door slowly.

The Joker had escaped from his bed, but it was no mystery where he had gone. A mere ten feet away
from the bed lay the Joker, resting on his side with a broken nose and a small pool of blood beside
him. I giggled a bit, gaining his attention. He rolled around and scrunched himself up so he was on
his belly, looking up at me from his place on the floor. "I was wondering where you'd gone to Doc. I
have to admit, I'm a little upset you didn't visit little old me first." I nodded and walked over to the
machines he was supposed to be hooked up to. The muscle relaxant probably wasn't administered on
time because of the incident, allowing him to regain some of his faculties and dislodge the other tubes
that contained various additional medications. With eight hours to get the drugs out of his system, it
being six in the morning now and his dosage prescribed for ten at night, most of his capabilities
should be restored to him by now. I turned back to my patient and smiled, best to keep calm in this sort of situation.

"Let me guess." I surveyed the situation. "You fell out of bed, landed on your nose, rolled around a bit, stood up for a while," I referenced the smear of blood on the wall in the corner. "Fell down due to the residual muscle relaxants in your system and then tried to kick open the steel air vent." I concluded after looking at the small dents in the sturdy metal. "Then gave up." My eyes fixated on those dings, steel didn't budge easily. Perhaps I was in a worse situation than I figured.

"I hardly gave up Doc; in fact." The Joker attempted to stand once more by scrunching up his body and succeeded. "I feel the tides are starting to turn in my favor."

As the Joker 'dauntingly' hopped toward me, I reached into my bag and pulled out a syringe filled with sedative. This did not deter him though; as he neared me I flicked the metal needle to remove air bubbles and pushed a bit of the sedative out of the disposable syringe. He was three feet away from me now. I took a deep breath before making a broad sidestep. While he turned and lunged at me, I dodged and shoved the Joker with enough force to make him lose his balance and land on his face once more. Placing my knee on his back I held his head down with my hand, being sure to keep my wrist a safe distance from his snapping jaws. I jabbed the sedative in his neck and pressed the plunger down. Soon afterward, he ceased biting the air and his body relaxed.

"Mmmm," The Joker hummed lightly in a half dazed state. "You're pretty fun Doc, we should play again sometime."

He snickered knowingly as he angled his head to look at me, "I appreciate the panty shot you provided too." My patient proceeded to lose consciousness.

I looked down and saw that while my right knee was on the Joker's back, the left was on the floor at a ninety degree angle of the other. Throw in the added height of the knee that rested on the Prince of Crime's back and my skirt was drawn up quite a bit. To add insult to injury I had taken off my nylons in the elevator, so he got a clear view of my pink and purple striped panties when he craned his neck. I slammed my legs shut and stood up to pull down my skirt. Even though he'd passed out, I was beyond embarrassed and gave him a light kick to the side. "Jerk," I mumbled.

After calming down, I rolled over the Joker to examine his nose. It was indeed broken and bleeding once again due to his latest tumble. I pulled out some gauze from my bag and apologized to the comatose man before yanking the hyaline cartilage back into place. The Joker jerked in his sleep, but didn't wake up. Holding the cartilage in place, I took care of the blood with the gauze in my hand. Once the bleeding halted I called for an assistant on my walkie to bring some cast cloth and warm water.

I molded a cast to the Joker's nose and secured it to his face with medical tape, the extra-adhesive type of course, should he roll off again. Together, the medical assistant and I lifted the Joker onto his bed and reattached him to the machines before giving him his dose of muscle relaxant.

Everyone in the library had been taken care of and were now being transported to the Medical Facility so that they could rest in some of the many beds scattered throughout the wards. Jonathan had finished his headcount and joined me as I double checked some of the other doctor's work while the injured trickled in. He mumbled 'control freak' in my ear as I finished with my last inspection. I turned to deliver a rebuttal, but when I looked up at him my head rushed and I nearly fell backward. Jonathan grabbed me and inadvertently pulled me into his arms when he prevented me from falling. The adrenaline in my system was dropping and I found myself suddenly exhausted.

Using the excuse that he was planning on driving me home, Jonathan instead brought me to his
house and tucked me into his own bed before leaving to sleep on the couch. Later, he would tell me that I fell asleep in the car ride at around seven in the morning, after eight hours of nonstop work on top of my typical ten hour work day. Not, of course, including the one hour lunch break I had.

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When I woke up a few hours later, I was more than surprised to find myself in Jonathan's bedroom, but after realizing that I was still very much clothed and alone in his bed, I pushed aside those concerns in favor of more rest. Nuzzling into Jonathan's pillows, I smiled at the familiar scent and tugged the covers higher up. I couldn't understand how he had difficulty sleeping with such a lush bed. I once again fell asleep, this time under my own volition.

Jonathan played the role of the perfect boyfriend throughout my stay. He helped sit me up and fed me breakfast at around noon when he had just woken up. Half-awake, Jonathan accident burnt the pancakes, but the deed itself was beyond touching considering he was in the same dismal state as me. And this disorderly state of his was proven beyond a doubt when he fell asleep on my shoulder after just barely finishing his own home-made breakfast. Moving the dishes to the bedside table, I shifted closer to Jonathan and put his head down on a pillow before joining him in slumber.

We were much more alert when we awoke the next time. The clock informed me it was eight at night, but rather than acknowledge the late hour, I focused on the arm around my waist. Sometime during my slumber I must have turned around and Jonathan proceeded to spoon me. I turned to look at him, he was above the covers and I underneath. Concerned about his warmth, I pulled the blankets down and over him. Sure enough, he was relatively cold compared to myself. Getting out of the bed, I washed and put away the dishes from earlier. When I returned, Jonathan was wide awake.

"I thought you had left, but I heard the sink running." He commented and drew back the covers to invite me in again.

I bit my lip, "Jonathan, I can't do it, even if it is platonic. I- I don't want to lead you on anymore." I sat down beside him, above the comforter. It was as good a time as any, he was too tired to go storming off and it was his house, where would he go if he did?

"What do you mean?" Jonathan sat up and fixed the nose pads on his glasses, which had evidently shifted in his sleep. "I told you I was perfectly willing to wait before having sexual relations with you. I have been making advances, and I apologize for that but I've been trying to warm you up to the idea so you don't have to make an uneducated guess on when to begin such a relationship with me. I didn't intend on appearing nefarious."

"That's just it Jonathan, I'm not waiting for the moment it feels right, I'm waiting for a specific time. That being my, um, my wedding night." I cringed, awaiting the yelling, the pushing, anything. My eyes were shut tight, not wanting to see the hurt in my beloved Jonathan's face.

"I am not going to harm you Mireille." He spoke calmly, clinically. "I am, however, a bit upset. You told me a while back you were just waiting for the opportune moment, and I respect that. I also respect your right to keep your maidenhood intact for as long as you wish. Yet I know you are struggling with this yourself. You've been more than willing to participate in amorous activities with me, so I doubt it has something to do with the church or you would avoid even that. So would you care to tell me the reasoning behind your decision of abstinence?"

"You're right, the choice was not my own." I confessed. "It was the request of my beloved fiancé, Monsieur Pierre Lepretre. I've told you about him before, but only that he was a boyfriend of mine.
before medical school. That is true, but there is so much more to it than that. I must tell you about Pierre, I won't skimp on the details though. This man is very important to me and deserves more than a passing comment in a conversation."

"Alright Mireille." Jonathan folded his hands on his lap, open to hearing my story. "Tell me about Mr. Lepretre."

XXXXX Mirelle's Story XXXXX

When I was a little girl, I spent my summers in France with my mother. She's an artist who works on commission, so she can travel as she pleases. Back then, she took me along with her sometimes. But without fail, every summer my mother travels to France, her home before my father married her and brought her to America. At around the age of five, my mother took me to a park to play while she worked out a sketch. Naturally, I began running around and quickly lost sight of her. In my tearful search for my maman, I walked right into the leg of a man. I looked up to apologize only to find a face of white and a horizontally striped shirt. It was a mime.

The man knelt down and smiled at me, patted my head, and began to talk to me. You must understand he never said a word, he didn't need to. His face, his actions, they were an open book. He asked me where my mother was, I told him I was lost, he asked if he could assist in my search, I said yes. We found my mother a few minutes later on the opposite side of a bush wall. She embraced me and thanked the man profusely, he simply nodded his head and walked away.

"Maman," I asked, "Who is that guy?"

"That, my bella fille is a mime," She explained in French. "It's a performer who doesn't utter a word but tells stories, expresses emotions, and even speaks through actions."

"Can we see him again?" I asked.

"Oui, tomorrow. Perhaps we can make some macrons to thank him." I nodded vigorously and the next day we returned with the cookies.

The mime thanked me and informed us that he had a son around my age who had come with him to the park today. And out of the bushes came a little boy no older than seven with jet black hair and bright green eyes. He was wearing what I can safely assume to be one of his father's old striped shirts and a pair of black pants. His face was caked with greasepaint and sloppily detailed. The boy sauntered over, attempting to look like he was struggling to walk against a fierce wind.

While I thought his performance was funny due to the unprofessionalism, his father was infuriated. The mime began to scold his son and instructed him to wash his face and remove the shirt. The boy did so before returning. His face newly cleaned and over shirt removed, he stood before me in street clothes and introduced himself as Pierre Lepretre and his father as Travis Lepretre. "He can't tell you himself you see, he has taken an oath of silence, I myself haven't heard him even mumble a word in my entire life." Pierre explained this to me while my mother and Monsieur Lepretre 'talked'.

The park became my favorite place to go during the summer, even when Monsieur Lepretre wasn't there, Pierre likely was. It was funny, I enjoyed watching his father perform and he loved watching my mother draw. He wanted to be an artist you see; he confessed he was awful at all other subjects in school. And I, I couldn't draw a stick figure. He taught me what he knew about miming when I asked and I helped him with his math. In this way, we bonded and became close friends. I wasn't well liked at school. Kindergarteners had trouble grasping the concept of different languages, so
when I arrived at school with a French accent I was deemed daft and was ostracized by my peers despite my numerous explanations.

Pierre and I became pen pals around third grade, pinky swearing to send letters at least every month. I would send him stamps alongside my letters to assist in the overseas postage and he would send me drawings in payment. I kept each and every one of them, and over the years I saw his artistic talent blossom. Oh Jonathan, he would have surely become magnificent with the proper training.

At around the age of fifteen, I returned to France per his request. I could only stay a few weeks though; I was attending summer classes to help speed up my education. But those weeks were all we needed. I hadn't been to Pairs in a while, too focused on my studies. In that span of around three years, Pierre had grown into a young man of seventeen. He became less clumsy, more mature, handsome, and above all else, he was the same boy I had been friends with for more than two thirds of my life. After a week spent together, I was in love, and he later confessed that he was as well. It was young love yes, but it was most definitely real.

The day I was scheduled to return to America, he took me with him to the park we met and gave me my first kiss. Once I was home I began writing to him fervently once more. We talked about everything, from my classes to his paintings and even held deeper conversations about beliefs, politics, and ultimately our feelings. In that year alone we sent over sixty letters to one another, sometimes sending back to back messages without yet receiving a response from the first.

After Pierre finished school, he sent me a letter saying that he wanted to go with me to America. He planned on using part of his school money to pay the fare and once here he would attend an art school and begin his career. Pierre told me he didn't want to be apart from me anymore. So, right after I graduated high school, about two weeks after I received the letter, I flew over to see him and converse with his father about living arrangements. My family had a spare room for guests that Pierre could live in; I planned on offering it to help him make his decision on whether or not to let his son utilize the money to aid in relocating to the United States. But by the time my plane had landed, something awful happened. Monsieur Travis Lepretre had passed away in his sleep, doctors later diagnosed it as a stroke.

Adding together the medical diagnosis, corner fees, funeral arrangements, burial, and flowers, Pierre lost almost all of the money his father gave him for school. The will his father left dictated that Pierre was his sole inheritor, but upon looking at what was left behind for him, Pierre realized that the school money his father gave him was his entire life's savings. You see, Monsieur Lepretre lived in a nice neighborhood to allow Pierre to attend the best schools, spent his hard earned money on new clothing for his son, fresh food, and giving him all the finest opportunities he could provide for his only child. He wanted Pierre to grow up in a nurturing environment, even though he had only one parent.

Monsieur Lepretre had only just finished paying off the apartment they lived in and was beginning to save up more money to pay for his son's tuition when he died.

Pierre was quiet for a few days; he didn't know how to take the news. I offered him housing in America along with the fee for the plane ride. Pierre denied the opportunity.

"I want to be like my father Mireille," He said. "I want to be a self-sufficient man who provides for others, a selfless man who brings joy to the world through his trade. My father, he never told me how hard he worked for the shirts I ruined nor how much our apartment cost. But I will practice his trade for now, until I have raised enough money to travel overseas and provide for those I love. I want to honor his memory in this manner. Mireille, I am going to take a vow of silence for a few years, to
experience my father's work firsthand before utilizing my own trade to spread happiness. I will still write you of course, but before I seal these lips, I must tell you that I love you. And one day I will prove myself worthy of becoming your husband." He kissed me then, and I never heard him speak another word. Even though I pestered him about what he just said, he simply smiled and winked.

Gaining the money to travel overseas didn't take terribly long since the apartment was paid off, but he chose to remain in Paris for a reason he refused to tell me. We still wrote to one another nearly every day, but when I came over during Christmas break to visit him he wouldn't say a word. Like his father, he was a great mime, speaking fluently through actions. Our love for one another only grew, even to the point we discussed marriage openly in front of my parents. Imagine that, a girl of seventeen and a boy of nineteen discussing living arrangements, family pets, children, gardens, and cooking schedules. He even insisted on having a separate room for his paintings or a shed in back to prevent our fictional children from inhaling the harmful fumes.

The next time I saw Pierre was during the Summer I got accepted to medical school, he greeted me not with a hug, but with a ring. For the past year and a half, Pierre had been raising money to buy me an engagement ring. He knelt down and presented to me a dainty seafoam tourmaline ring in hopes of me accepting him as my future husband. Of course I did.

Oh we were so happy that day Jonathan, we intended on painting the town red and how better to start, then at a hotel. I tugged Pierre toward an elegant place, a few hundred dollars for a night, something I was more than willing to front. I had just turned eighteen and was more than willing to give myself to my fiancé now that I was of a proper age. But he stopped me when he realized our destination.

‘No’ he told me. ‘You are not like those other girls who give themselves away on a whim are you? We can wait, and we will. Because we are going to spend the rest of our lives together, that is more than enough time to satisfy our lust for one another. Promise me Mireille, promise that no matter what you will wait until your wedding night before losing your virginity.’ He extended his pinky, and I locked mine around it, like we did so long ago. Shaking the smallest digits of our hands, the pact was sealed.

Little did we know that a robbery had just been committed a few blocks away, the felons had dressed as mimes when they held up the bank in attempts to hide their identity. So imagine what a police officer thought when he rounded the corner and saw me and Pierre from behind. He had one arm around my side, holding me close to him as we walked. Later in court, the officer would testify that he thought Pierre was a burglar and had a gun pointed at me so as to use me as his hostage.

He fired without thought.

Three shots just to the right of the heart.

Pierre fainted in forty five seconds.

He never regained consciousness.

In fifteen minutes when the ambulance arrived he was declared dead.

I could do nothing. All those years in school, all that talk of becoming a brilliant doctor one day, and all I could do was hold onto him, look him in the eyes as the life left them, and tell him how much I loved him, how I couldn't live without him.
The rookie cop got off scotch free on his charge of manslaughter. I was given a few thousand dollars by said flatfoot to help pay for the funeral. The officer attended the burial, presented flowers, apologized once more for his accident, and never returned to visit the grave of his victim. I myself mourned only a few days in Paris before departing, unable to bear the mishmash of good and bad memories anymore.

My deceased husband-to-be's gravestone reads:

*Here Lies Monsieur Pierre Lepretre*

*Beloved Fiancé and Son*

*6 August 1979- 27 June 2000*

Pierre left everything he owned to me, I still pay for the facilities of his apartment in Paris but it remains untouched, trapped in time. I never visited it before I left. I- I couldn't look upon my dead fiancé's home, see how he left it when he went to meet me at the airport that morning to propose, his more than likely unmade bed, the piles of letters he claims to have kept on the coffee table so he could leaf through them while he pondered what to write. And that piece of art resting upon his easel he said he was going to give me as a wedding present.

So you see Jonathan, how can I not honor the request of my oldest friend, my departed fiancé, and my soulmate. It's the least I can do after all he did for me.

XXXXX End Story XXXXX

I openly wept in Jonathan's arms; he must have wrapped me in them sometime around the middle of the story. "God I miss him Jonathan," my eyes streamed with tears. "Why must the world be so cruel as to take a man like Pierre, someone so young and innocent?"

"We live in an unkind world Mireille." Jonathan whispered in my hair before kissing the crown of my head. "Everyone must learn this eventually, some earlier than others."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whadidya guys think? The story of Pierre has been one tumbling about my head at night for ages, I am incredibly proud of how it turned out. But what do you guys think?
Wiggling the lock of the basement door, I ensured it’s integrity before departing. Mireille was taking a shower now, and I planned to have some clean, comfortable clothes for her by the time she finished up. A nearby department store would suffice in providing such apparel. Walking out of my abode, I shut and locked the door behind me. Taking in a deep breath of the cool, crisp, morning air, I proceeded to my car. In all honesty, I had a purely selfish reason for leaving her home alone, I needed some time to think. Driving away from the rented house, I began my contemplations.

So what if Mireille was more conservative than I would have liked? At least she was being honest. Things between us were becoming elaborate now, I felt like a carpenter hastily building a house around Mireille as she walked through it. She never noticed my behind the scenes shifting, but admired her surroundings as if they were an ever-present sanctuary. The façade was becoming harder and harder to keep up. Soon enough she would wander past the world I had created for her and look beyond the set. I both longed for and despised that inevitable day.

Would she accept me for who I was, or flee from the man beneath the mask? This question had been nagging me for a while.

My twisted social experiment had gone on long enough, I’d grown attached. When I first requested Mireille’s company it was curiosity, not lust that drove me to it, but now neither of these baser urges ushered me forward. I had grown fond of Mireille, and she clearly cared for me.

I had reached an impasse. Should I cut the relationship now and save Mireille the heartache or allow it to go on indefinitely and hope for the best.

I always was a selfish individual.

Arriving at the department store, I picked out some clothes for Mireille: a medium purple V-Neck and a simple pair of mid-sized grey sweatpants. Hopefully the ambiguity of the sizes would help me avoid any sort of interrogation pertaining to her weight. On my way to checkout I paused as a thought ran by me: she could probably use some hygiene products. Placing the clothing in a nearby mesh basket, I took it by the handles and proceeded to the desired aisle. Selecting a toothbrush at random and a suitable stick of deodorant, I resumed my walk to the cash registers. My feet were on autopilot and I began to read the signs of nearby aisles absentmindedly. 'Band-Aids, Feminine Care, Condoms.' I once again halted my movements. I wouldn’t need the latter-most any time soon, making my most recent purchase of the contraceptives a misuse of funds. I could have spent that money procuring some of the more pricey components of the latest formula, not on wishful thinking for a night of passion with Mireille.
A night of passion. I shut my eyes to imagine the impossible. The lovely brunette with her legs spread atop my deep blue comforter, her nails lightly digging into my back as I slowly worked my way inside her, the cute sounds she would emit as I nibbled her ear and whispered sweet nothings. She would giggle as I kissed her breasts and cry out as I circled my thumb over the small bundle of nerves just above her center. She would call my name, not cutting a single syllable to use a shorter reiteration like "Jon" or "Jonny". Mireille would only utter "Jonathan" in a lustful voice as I pleased her so completely. Finally, she would wrap her legs around my waist, drawing me deeper into that tight, incomparable warmth as we entered the throes of passion, abandoning muddled words in exchange for lustful moans as we strived to reach completion.

"Would Jason please come to the customer service desk, your family is waiting." An announcement over the intercom jerked me away from the daydream.

Fully alert again, I glanced at my watch only to realize I was running late. I promptly began a brisk walk toward the cash register. Thankfully, as a twenty eight year old man, I was more than able to contain my 'excitement', thus there was no evidence incriminating me aside from my reddened cheeks.

After enduring some idle chit chat with a fellow customer behind me, I had to face the young cashier, Rebecca. I could recall her name because she was the most talkative but also the fastest cashier at the store. I chose to risk the possibility of a conversation, needing to get back home quickly.

"Good morning sir, find everything okay?" This was a ploy. If I uttered more than a few words, she would take it as an invitation to chat me up.

"Yes." One word, I should be safe. And I was, until she got to the clothes at the bottom of the minuscule pile.

"Ah, takeaway gift for yesterday's one night stand?" Rebecca slowed her progress, eager for a bit of gossip.

"I beg your pardon?" I forcefully pushed my glasses up my nose.

"Nobody buys an outfit like this at seven in the morning, unless you want last night's fling to be a bit more comfortable on the bus ride home." She placed the items in a paper bag. "It's actually kinda sweet, I never figured you for that type. You always just come here for groceries. Well, except for last week."

"She is not a 'fling',"I spat out the crude term. After a few seconds of glowering, I read the price depicted on the register, as she had yet to do so for me. Retrieving my wallet, I pulled fifteen dollars out and offered them to the employee. The insufferable girl rose an eyebrow and accepted the money. She then put the bills away and drew out my change.

"Then what is she." The nosey girl asked, most likely trying to get a rise out of me. Taking the change, I leaned close to tell the girl in my most demeaning voice.

"None of your business."

Yanking the paper bag away by it’s flimsy handles, I stormed out of the store, resolving to talk to the manager the next time I shopped there. For now though, my priority was Mireille.
The uneducated brat did ask a good question though, what was she to me? We’d been dating for a little over five months now. This stunned me, it certainly hadn’t felt so long. Shouldn’t it be about time for things to progress? Besides in the means of sex obviously, that was just recently flung right off the table.

Stepping into my car, I placed the bag atop the passenger’s seat and paused to contemplate. I did have everything set up, but following through was the issue. It wasn't fear that deterred me from implementing the plan for the past few months, it was whether or not I could handle Mireille’s response. She wasn't the simplest of girls, I knew that from experience, and that intricacy intrigued and annoyed me. How was I to plan things out when she kept throwing wrenches into my plans with her peculiarities?

Like on our first date: I asked Mireille to a nice restaurant just outside of the city. I’d heard that the fresh air was wonderful and the food they offered was delicious.

It had been two years since I interviewed her for a job, ample time for me to forget that she didn't drive and chose to walk, bike, or take the bus everywhere. So, when I arrived ten minutes early to our date, I was shocked to see her already there, admiring a painting on the wall near the front desk. Mireille later revealed after much questioning that she had gotten there forty five minutes ago, the buses next stop there would have been thirty minutes into our scheduled date after all. She hadn't asked for a ride, not wanting to be a nuisance to her superior. After that, I drove her home and promised to pick her up for our next outing, telling her it wouldn't be an annoyance at all with her company as a fair trade for the extra gas.

I smiled, thinking back on the memory, she was very timid back then, but had since opened up to me. I was glad I asked her out, even if it was on a whim. Turning back to the present situation though, my grin faltered.

I'd been thinking of asking her this for a while, but the timing was never right. It had to be today, this was the second and last day of our recuperation from the all-nighter. I just needed to pick something up, make reservations, drive Mireille to her apartment to get ready, and carry out the well formulated plan.

Scrolling through the contacts on my phone, I located the number saved only three weeks ago. "Yes, hello I would like to make reservations for two tonight under the name 'Crane'… A table would be wonderful if one is available near the back window… Great, seven o'clock then?...Thank you.” Revving up the engine, I took a detour. It was still technically putting Mireille first after all.

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All of my mail was sent to a PO Box since the house I rented still technically belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Shuu, and thus the mail I received was theirs. I didn’t mind having to send a box of their mail each month to the couple’s new condo in Florida, they did give me a decent price on the property’s rent and often overpaid for necessary repairs on the house. Still, I found time in my schedule each week to pick up my own mail from the post office. Well, almost all my mail. Two boxes had rested in back of the steel cupboard, gathering dust, for a little under a month. The contents were as legal as a pair of mittens, but having them in the house would only make me feel uneasy and pressured. They were a sign of commitment after all.

Begrudgingly, I retrieved the boxes from the government owned facility, flinging the rest of the assorted mail into the backseat. Deciding to unwrap them now, to confirm my order had been properly fulfilled, I opened the pair of boxes delicately. The contents of the first box held the luster
I’d been promised and fitted perfectly in the case provided in the second package. I sat for a while in the car, contemplating my decision and the route it may lead me down. Snapping the box shut, I gently placed it in the car's glove compartment. Tonight, no more procrastinating.

I’d been contemplating what to do for a while. Should I leave the bathroom in a towel, wait inside, or put on my grimy clothes. Sighing, I rubbed my face, the towel slipping down a bit. Quick to replace the cloth shroud, I decided to use the process of elimination. Well, I certainly wasn't going to put on my old clothes. So, wait or go? The towel was pretty big; it went down to my mid-thigh if I let the top border rest a tad low on my chest and the overlap of the fabric gave me room to move my legs normally without letting anything more than a sliver of outer thigh peek out.

It would, however, be cruel of me to walk around. I knew Jonathan desired me and this went beyond teasing, but I was bored. It had already been fifteen minutes since I finished showering, so he clearly ran into some form of complication. I figured I may as well tidy up the bed or fix Jonathan some lunch with the spare time, but both were rendered impossible given my clothing situation.

Leave the room to get my bag, I decided. Inside was a small novel to keep me occupied and some chewing gum to clean my teeth. Standing upright, I opened the door and peeked outside. Jonathan wasn't here, or at least walking through the door. I dashed as quietly as I could to the bedroom and uncovered my messenger bag from its hiding place beneath my lab coat. My ears were pounding, I’d grown flustered in my search, afraid Jonathan would come home in the midst of it and walk in on me. Taking the bag in hand, I hurried back to the bathroom and in choosing speed over precaution, I failed to look down the hall and see my beloved having just entered the house. But when I was inside, my bag placed on the lid of the toilet, I heard the door shut. The door shut but didn't open. It was a quiet door, I reasoned, Jonathan oiled it regularly. So perhaps he opened and shut the door quick, having just got home as I retreated inside the bathroom. No, he wasn't one to act as if he was in a hurry, even if he was in one. Jonathan had seen me.

"Jonathan?" I asked, calling out to the man still stood in the entryway.

"I only saw a bit of your leg Mireille." He replied. "Don't be embarrassed." It felt like Jonathan was talking to himself as well as me. I heard the his footfalls as he slowly approached the door with the telltale crinkle of a paper bag in his grip. Knocking on the door, he received no response. I couldn't open the door. "Mireille, I have a change of clothes for you, among other things." Still, I could give no response. "I only saw your leg Mireille, and not even the whole thing, the towel's slit only showed an extra inch at most." There was a pause and Jonathan decided to lighten the mood. "Your run was very cute, you looked as if you were going to leap through the door frame it was so graceful. I forgot, did you say whether or not you did ballet as a child?"

"I never did ballet." I spoke softly, barely a foot from the door. "I wanted to as a child, but we moved around too much. My college roommate Teresa took ballet her whole life though, and she taught me the basics. She did those same stretches every morning without fail and I joined her after a while. Needless to say I never went beyond the fundamentals, but the experience was fun. She's a pediatrician now, but teaches ballet on the weekends to kids between the ages of five and thirteen." I hadn't spoken to Teresa in a while, perhaps I should pay her a visit sometime soon. "I'm glad I never became a ballerina though, being a surgeon is enough stress, I don't think I could handle that much more." I took a slow, deep breath. "I'm sorry if I upset you Jonathan."
"Mireille?" he asked, unsure what to say.

"I hope it didn't appear as if I was teasing you. I know you desire me in a way I cannot satisfy, but I didn't leave the room to draw a rise out of you. I- I got bored and wanted to get a book from my bag." I spoke to the wood barrier between us.

"And that's my fault-" he started.

"No, I'm not saying that." I was quick to refute his claim.

"I am. I made us reservations for tonight at Abbracci, it took a while to get a hold of the maître d' so I had to wait in the car for a while." I was shocked, and opened the door a crack to see Jonathan smiling at my expression of disbelief.

"That Italian seaside restaurant everyone is always talking about?" I asked softly, to which Jonathan nodded. Reservations weren't hard to come by, the place was huge; it was the price that made it a place of luxury and with Jonathan saving up for a place of his own and myself still paying off some student loans, it wasn't in league with our usual dining experience. Although I would have refused the invitation under regular circumstances, he was clearly committed, having already made reservations. "I- I would need some time to get ready." I said after a short while. Hopefully one of my dresses would be suited for the atmosphere.

He smirked. "That's fine, the reservation is at seven o'clock." I nodded, still a bit uneasy about running around in a towel. However, Jonathan fixed my discomfort rather than let the issue fester. Opening the door a bit further with his foot, Jonathan placed his hands on my bare shoulders, eyes never wandering from my face."You're beautiful Mireille," he gave me a chaste kiss after saying this. "But don't ever think that it is lust that draws me to you, my adorable little pumpkin." He kissed my cheek, handed over the paper bag, and left to wash up in his own bathroom.

I couldn't help but calm down after hearing Jonathan's confession. Closing the door when he left my line of sight, I dropped the towel to the ground, and pulled on the deep purple V-Neck he procured for me as well as the spacious sweat pants. Noticing the bag still held two more items, I retrieved them. Smiling at Jonathan's consideration, I put on some deodorant and proceeded to brush my teeth. Throwing the old clothes into the paper bag, I left the bathroom with both the paper bag and my messenger bag in hand. Placing them by the doorway, since I would probably be leaving soon, I wandered back into the bedroom to retrieve my lab coat.

Hearing the shower running, I paused in my quest to reclaim the lab coat to fix up Jonathan's bed. I would feel a bit guilty using his house as refuge without lending a helping hand. As I fluffed the pillows, something underneath the cushion caught my eye. Was that? I giggled and picked up the stray, mint-in-package condom, surprising even myself with the response. I wasn't repulsed with Jonathan's blatant preparedness, I actually found it endearing that he had thought of using a contraceptive rather than rely on a more damaging 'morning after' pill. My Jonathan was ever organized. Replacing the condom under the pillow, I curled up on his side of the bed atop the covers. Breathing in the familiar scent, I relaxed and waited.

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When I came through door, it was to see Mireille resting on my newly made bed, her eyes shining as she looked upon me with adoration. I had changed clothes in the bathroom already, so I didn't have to face the embarrassment she had. Mireille reached a hand toward me, and I approach her slowly to take it in my own. Giving her some assistance, she stood up and hugged me. Resting her ear against
the center of my chest, she still held my hand firmly as she listened to my quickening heartbeat. "I love you Jonathan." She leaned up to kiss me, but paused to giggle.

"What's so funny Mireille?" I asked, spurring on even more giggles. I thought we were having a tender moment, but here she was laughing.

"Hmm, it's just that your façade is slipping Dr. Crane." My blood froze. "You usually look like such the gentleman with your clean-shaven face, but right now you look incredibly sensual with your towel dried hair and irresistible stubble." My heart returned to its pericardial cavity after a quick trip to my throat. Laughing lightly to smooth over my temporarily vacant expression, I then kissed Mireille.

"Oh really, well don't get used to it. I have to keep up my appearance at work after all." I joked.

Mireille grinned and shook her head, "No, just get a new job modeling for the covers of those risqué romance novels." She let loose a giggle in the middle of her matter of fact statement only to be joined by my own hearty chuckle after hearing the recommendation.

"You sure you won't get jealous?" I asked, kissing her cheek before running my lips down to her throat, nipping at a bit of skin.

"J-Jonathan, we're eating dinner tonight." Mireille pushed me playfully, the stubble most likely tickling her.

Stopping, I pulled back to look her in the eye. I figured I may as well put that ‘irresistible stubble’ to good use. "Then where can I mark you, my dear Mireille?" I asked. She flushed pink before pondering over which patch of skin would be a good substitute.

"My- my midsection is fair game." Mireille looked away as she lifted up her shirt a tad. My eyes darted between her pink complexion and smooth abdomen. Grinning, I pushed her back toward the bed.

Mireille lay down, clutching tightly to the hem of her shirt as she held it up, letting me choose the bit of flesh to claim. My hands ran over the skin, sending a jolt through her body. They soon stopped however, and rather than lower my head to begin the marking process, I sat up. "Mireille, what is this?" I pointed at a faint scar; the smooth line started at her left side, slightly above the same level as her belly-button and stopped a few centimeters above the waistline of her pants. It was about five inches long and ended about an inch and a half to the right of where it started. It looked like an appendix scar, but it was on the wrong side and a tad too high up. Mireille shivered as I ran my finger along the smooth scar. Pulling down her shirt she got up off the bed.

"Jonathan, do you think you could drop me off at my apartment soon. I need to get ready for tonight." Mireille attempted to walk away, but I grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. She held a straight face, but her eyes were watering.

"Mireille." I cupped her cheek in my hand.

"I don't want to talk about it." She looked at a spot on the wall.

Slowly, I delved my other hand beneath the shirt so as not to surprise her and ran my thumb over the slightly raised skin. It was an old scar, I knew that much by its color and how smooth it had become over the years. Mireille trembled as I continued following the path of the mark, her pupil dilated,
breath quickened, and those held back tears fell. I would know that look anywhere.

Fear.

I drew back my hand and swiped away those tears with my thumb. Fear was an intimate subject, nothing to tread on lightly. As such, I knew that now was not the time. I wanted her to be happy for tonight, not distressed by prodding questions. So, I resolved to ask another day. Opening my arms, I was shocked when she immediately latched onto me "Some other time then?" I dared to ask, holding her tightly to my body.

"Yes. But I will give you a bit of information to keep you sated. That scar and the memories associated with it, are the reason why I will never set foot behind the wheel of a car." Mireille closed her eyes tightly, most likely not wanting to see the onslaught of memories barraging her mind.

We had just been seated in our booth, the wait had been minimal and the ocean view was incredible. So far, the restaurant lived up to my expectations.

Mireille was wearing a strapless plum dress with a sweetheart neckline. The top part was tight around her chest, with a thick band wrapping around her waist. From there down it was pleated, ending just before her knee. She wore basic black heels for the occasion but left her hair down. Mireille also donned triangular cut Amethyst earrings alongside her simple white gold cross necklace. I had long since shaved and wore my tailored suit with a steel grey tie, since the color matched all occasions. Together, we made a stunning pair.

"Mireille," I spoke, pulling her attention away from the menu.

"Yes, Jonathan?" The brunette looked up, smiling widely at me.

"Would you mind ordering for the both of us tonight? I'm afraid my knowledge of Italian cuisine is limited to spaghetti and pizza." A bit of an exaggeration, but I wanted to hand her the reins and allow her to control the night as she pleased. Tonight should be special.

"Are you sure?" Mireille asked.

"Yes, very much so," I smiled at her, folded my menu, and took a sip of water.

Our waiter was a young man, probably working a part time job for college. "My name is Achille," he told us, "And I will be your server tonight. May I start you off with drinks?"

"A bottle of White Bordeaux and two glasses would be wonderful," Mireille told the man, recognizing that today's dishes would comprise of plenty of tomatoes. The waiter nodded and jotted it down.

"Could I get you started with appetizers?" He stayed facing Mireille, recognizing she would be making the orders tonight.

Everything was going perfectly, Mireille had ordered caprese salads for an appetizer, a cioppino to share, and a margherita pizza to split between the two of us. Thankfully, she stayed away from the
overpriced lobster, not that I would have complained. Mr. Shuu would have done that when I wound up late on paying the rent. Now as she finished up her rant on the inability of her current physician to recognize the name of the 'sphygmomanometer', I brushed my hand over my coat pocket. The box was still there.

"Something wrong Jonathan?" I grinned at the Mireille's worry for my well-being. To an outsider it would look as if I was clutching my heart, thus sparking the doctor's response.

"No, dear." I smiled as I looked at her. Her face was filled with concern, with love. "Mireille, there has been something I have been meaning to ask you, for a while now." I straightened out my back in preparation. "We've been dating for almost half a year now, and although I should have asked this sooner I've been putting it off because of how well things are going between us. In light of previous events, however, I feel it is necessary that I do this now rather than wait for our actual anniversary. Mireille, I understand this concept is something for teenager, not adults, but I would like to have us both fully commit to this relationship by making it exclusive. I would like for you to become my girlfriend, and you may call me your boyfriend if it would please you." I was pleased with myself, having gotten it out cleanly and efficiently.

Mireille giggled a bit, causing me to draw away. Since when had I been earnestly pressed against the table, eager to receive an answer? "Jonathan." She started in the middle of her fit, only to be cut off.

"I have a token, if you need a sort of dowry for this commitment." I scrambled to withdrew the long leather box, holding it out to her.

Mireille pushed the box down onto the table, stood up from her chair, and walked around the small table to stand beside me. Shifting a majority of her hair to one side, she tilted my head up and bent down to kiss me passionately for a few brief seconds. "I'm sorry for laughing Jonathan; I just never thought I would hear you utter the word 'boyfriend' in reference to yourself." Mireille then proceeded to respond to my request. "Although I agree that the premise of labeling ourselves as boyfriend and girlfriend would certainly make our relationship status more definite, it wouldn't change much but add to our level of intimacy with one another. Also, a dowry is something given at a marriage proposal, you just have to take the risk when you ask someone to be your girlfriend. However, you do get bonus points for presentation, this night was enchanting." Mireille straightened up and took my hand, "as for your request, I accept. But know that now that I am your girlfriend, we're going to have to do something about getting you to a healthy weight, and dealing with that anemia of yours."

My heart picked up pace. The radiant girl stood before me, unable to return to her seat because of my tight grip on her hand. I hated the patrons of the establishment silently. If they could disappear then the two of us would be alone with one another to rejoice in our newly defined relationship. I would mark, kiss, and simple hold Mireille, my girlfriend. The one person who truly seemed to care for me.

Compromises had to be made, but not many. I looked at Mireille with a smug grin and patted my lap. "Jonathan we're in public." She squirmed a bit, trying to retrieve her hand.

"Come on Mireille nobody's going to pay us any mind." I tugged her down myself, forcing Mireille to sit side saddle on my lap and leaving her to look at the surrounding customers from her new seating position. And just as I said, nobody was looking at us. "See." I took a hold of her chin, pressing my lips against hers lightly before placing a hand on her bare back to draw her closer.

We kissed one another passionately, no longer caring about those around us. I kept a hand on her back, tracing small circles with my thumb, and Mireille wrapped her arms around my neck. From where I sat, I saw the waiter approach and paused while Mireille started kissing my neck. Silently,
Achille mouthed 'should I go?', to which I responded by gently pushing Mireille away from me and beckoning him forward.

Still a tad light headed from the kiss, Mireille rested her head against my shoulder, breathing gently on the patch of my neck nearest to her. The waiter then approached us and asked about dessert.

I had expected my girlfriend to jump up in embarrassment, but she turned her head toward him slowly and gave the waiter a lazy smile that shone with serenity. "A tiramisu and two forks," she placed one of her hands on my chest before adding, "for me and my boyfriend."

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I hummed lightly after my most recent forkful of the coffee like cake before feeding some to Jonathan. He was primarily shocked at the arrangement, but understood it would be hard to eat around me and conceded to being fed. Setting down the fork, I looked at the abandoned leather box and asked, "what's inside?"

"Go ahead and look, consider it an anniversary slash commitment present." He twirled his fingers in my hair idly. Jonathan's eyes then locked onto my expression, impatient to see my response to the gift. When he saw my face light up, he also smiled.

"J-Jonathan is this?" I pulled the expensive syringe out of the long leather box. "Is this a three milliliter Becton-Dickinson multifit glass syringe?" I ran my fingers down the smooth glass barrel before placing them in the three designated holes for fingers. Pulling back my thumb, I withdrew the plunger before pushing it back in and letting the collected air be released from the hub. This syringe was, in my opinion, the perfect combination of new and old varieties of the useful medical tool. It provided the vintage look and durability with modern day ease of use and versatility. "This is too much Jonathan." I replaced the syringe snugly in its custom box before looking back at him. "The dinner, the gift, I'm very appreciative, but it seems like a lot."

"And how do you propose to balance the scale's Mireille?" Jonathan asked, wrapping a hand around my waist and stroking my hip gently.

"Let me take you someplace nice for your birthday, or at least cook for you." I was excitement by this method of payment.

"That sounds more beneficial for you, you know I dislike my birthday." Jonathan reasoned.

"Then." I didn't want to argue tonight, besides, there was an alternate exchange. Placing my hand over the one he had resting against my waist, I curled in all of the fingers but the index and traced the lone digit over the clothed scar he had seen earlier. "I can tell you a story."

"Now that sounds like a fair trade if there ever was one." Jonathan nodded his head solemnly.

"Okay." I gave him a sad smile, "as soon as we get the check and go back to your place, alright?"

"Agreed."

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Ahh, I know I had you waiting for a while but man am I satisfied with this chapter. Antique syringes are too hard to research, so I decided to have Jonathan gift a brand new one. Now, as for the 4 month wait. I am a senior at high school, I have literally 3 projects due in around a week and a convention on the 30th, and writing is no easy matter. I wrote this for… 4 hours on Friday, 10 hours on Saturday, and now 3 hours on Sunday [17 hours]. I may not be a quick writer, but I am sure to keep up quality of work. I apologize I cannot crank these out like others can but I do my best to make the ones I do produce are decent quality. Now you may have notice, yes, there was no inner scarecrow, voices in your head are associated with schizophrenia and I don’t think even Scarecrow fits that bill. I consider Jonathan to be more maniacal in my iteration then mentally unhinged. Do you like that, hate it?
Chapter 9: A Bridge

* November 11 *

Jonathan wanted to rid me of my phobia of driving. He told me I would be much happier without a burden like that constantly pulling me down. I didn't want to undergo the therapy, but he had made several valid points in his favor. Primarily that, one day, a taxi or a bus wouldn't cut it. I would need to get somewhere or to someone, fast. He said the therapy would be a grueling process, but promised to have me piloting a vehicle within the next five months. It seemed an impossible task for my boyfriend, he wanted me to overcome a fear that had plagued me for over fifteen years in a measly five months.

The manner of therapy we were using was 'systematic desensitization.' I was never any good at psychology in college, but I understood the basic premise behind the technique. There would be eight steps in the process, and Jonathan was about to come over to commence the beginning of these sessions.

I sat down at the tiny dining room table. The apartment I lived in was meant for two people in a starting relationship. There were four primary rooms in the simple apartment. The first was a combination of a living room and a dining room. The couch which faced the thirty inch screen had seen better days. It was the same one I used to crash on during midterms in college, and had been with me too long to warrant throwing away before it became utterly destroyed. Everything else in the room was fairly new though. Since I had jumped from intern to doctor, I was slowly replacing hand me downs with newer, albeit not top class, furniture. My quaint dining room table, fit for two, was made of solid oak as were the two chairs beside it. These were situated just behind the back of the couch, as I still enjoyed watching the news in the morning and there was only one television in the apartment. My kitchen, like the living room, held a relic. The teal fridge, much like the couch, was old and reliable, thus it had yet to be replaced. Similarly, the many tools in the kitchen were primarily from my mother when she decided to upgrade her own cutlery. She took good care of her belongings, thus the equipment I had received was in great condition. I had splurged a bit however, and bought myself a nice new mixer with a canary yellow paint job. The single bedroom, attached to the living room, housed a queen sized bed, the one thing my parents insisted on buying for me themselves. They claimed that you should never be cheap when it comes to a bed and promptly
bought me one of the softest, most expensive ones on display at the mattress store. They had at least allowed me to buy the frame and soft lilac coverlet. Adjoined to the bedroom was the en suite, housing a bathtub shower combo. It was a small apartment, but it was home.

I heard a knock at the door and promptly awoke from my most recent daydream. Taking a few steps from the dining room chair to the door, I opened it to see my boyfriend of three days, and currently my new therapist. I dislike associating Jonathan with his occupation. When your workplace is littered with psychologists with less than reputable intent, you tend to lower your opinion of the profession in general; Jonathan was one of the few exceptions to this schema of mine. "Hi Jonathan," I opened the door wider, allowing him to enter my apartment. As he walked in, I saw in his hands a small standard composition lab book. "Umm." I pointed at the notebook.

"It's simply a formality Mireille. I do not plan on publishing anything you tell me, believe what you will, but I am not out to make a profit off of your fears. This is simple to allow me to view your progress in a manner I am used to." Jonathan pulled one of the dining chairs over to the couch, facing it toward the upholstery. "If you wish, you may hold onto the book while we are not in session." He gestured for me to lie down on the couch before reaching into his pocket to withdraw an electric heart rate monitor. Although it could easily be mistaken with a watch, the brand name printed above the display was a dead giveaway.

"It's okay, you can hold onto it Jonathan, I trust you." I slipped off my shoes and lay down on the couch, staring up at the popcorn ceiling. I wasn't aware of what was about to happen, shutting my eyes, I simply listened. Dr. Crane began writing in the composition book, probably the date and time or some other generic information. His shoes scratched lightly against the floorboards as he walked over to wrap the monitor around my wrist, the device beeped to life.

"I need to get a resting heart rate so just stay silent for a few minutes and relax all right?" Dr. Crane asked, his soothing voice had once again returned to the chair before he joined me in silence.

* November 15 *

Our third session had just finished, it being a little less than a week since we had started. Each day followed the same routine: Dr. Crane would take my resting heart rate, hand me a stimuli, ask me to speak my thoughts aloud, and it would end with me reflecting in silence. This was the third time he handed me a plush kid's steering wheel. I was a bit uneasy at first, but with each session, the time it took for my heart rate to return to normal shortened. The scariest part was when he asked me to close my eyes and pull out the memories. I was unsure if they had warped due to age, but Dr. Crane never lead me, not once pushing me to recall specific moments more clearly. He was a silent observer each time. He didn't even want to interrupt with writing at these moments; instead he used a voice recorder to take notes off of at a later date. I figured he was tired of hearing the same scene over and over, but at the end of each session he would have the largest grin on his face, make final notes, and then reward me with a kiss on the forehead.

"We will be upgrading you to a real steering wheel next time, alright Mireille?" Jonathan asked as he replaced the dining room chair. He was quieter than usual during today's session. The reason behind which was blatantly obvious. His annual sick day, which coincidentally coincided with his birthday, was in two days. "So, I'll perform my next visit in, three days?"

"Two." I stated in contradiction. "We set a routine for every two days, you said yourself that periodic
visits are better than sporadic ones." I knew I was pushing it, but I at least wanted to be with him on his birthday, whether or not it involved celebrating.

"I must refuse Mireille, and advise you to drop whatever protest you have in queue." Jonathan sighed, sliding the composition book into his briefcase.

It felt hypocritical, Jonathan had me air my dirty laundry but kept his own secrets so close to heart. I loved him, but I wish I knew just who I loved. Slipping off the couch, I wandered over to the kitchen to pull a meat and vegetable stew out of the fridge. Ensuring the lid was on tight, I returned to the front door to hand the meal over to my boyfriend on his way out. He had started looking healthier since I began providing him food. Although weight gain was a ways off, his iron levels had risen since last week, as evidenced by an increase in energy.

Toting his bag, Jonathan joined me at the door. But, rather than take the dish and leave, he put down his briefcase and asked me to put the stew back in the fridge. I looked up at him, my eyes previously examining the pattern atop the ceramic container. Jonathan used his fingers as a makeshift comb to and dragged them through his hair, he looked apprehensive. Furrowing my brow I nodded before replacing the stew. When I turned back to ask what was going on, he was sitting on the couch in the living room. Taking a seat next to him he put his arm over my shoulder and tugged me toward his chest.

"My mother gave birth to me when she was sixteen," Jonathan started to confess. My eyes opened wide at his declaration. He’d only ever told me about his college life and beyond, never delving too deep into his past. "I was born into a family of religious fanatics who held themselves too highly for their low social status. So naturally, my grandmother and great grandmother didn't want the disgrace of having a bastard raised in the family. They switched around my last name at birth and had me play the role of the orphaned child of distant relatives. After she gave birth to me, my mother never really saw me. She had resigned to straighten out her life after her ‘mistake’ and moved cities, leaving me in the hands of my great grandmother on her run down, miserable excuse for a farm. There I was raised not as a beloved child, but as a scorned worker destined to slave away for hours every day on the fruitless farm." Jonathan looked dead ahead as he relayed this bit of his life story, as if reciting it from a script rather than recalling it right then. "I dislike my birthday, not simply because it is a foolish thing to celebrate in the first place, but rather because it marked the beginning of sixteen years of torture."

"Jonathan-" I started, but was swiftly cut off.

"I do not want to hear words of comfort or of pity. I don’t require those. I have long since gotten over my wretched childhood. My dislike of my birthday is simple that, an echo from the past but there is no deep meaning or hole to mend regarding it." He spoke methodically before turning his head to flash me a somewhat forced smile. "I apologize if my story upset you in any way, but I feel that you have shared enough of your past with me to merit some of my own in exchange."

I smiled and nodded, pecking his cheek as I leaned against him. I didn't want him to leave anymore. "Thank you for opening up to me Jonathan." I took solace in his slowly opening heart, but inwardly began disliking his mother for putting her son's needs aside for her own desires. She couldn't have meant any harm in placing him into the hands of his great grandmother though; it was just a poor decision on her part, right? I intertwined my fingers with his. "You can always tell me about your childhood Jonathan, I may have varying opinions about it, but I will never ridicule you for your past. It's what made you, you after all." I brought his hand up and kissed the back of it before holding it to my chest and cuddling a bit closer to him. "Plus I'm always eager to learn more about the man I love."
"Thank you, Mireille. I will keep that in mind." Jonathan spoke slowly, as if having trouble swallowing some part of my statement.

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* November 20 *

Jonathan's birthday came and went, just like every November seventeenth. He wasn't at work due to a spontaneous flu, but rebounded in twenty four hours, ready for work the next day. Right now, I was in the middle of a session with Jonathan, clutching onto a real steering wheel as beads of sweat ran down my temple.

It was interesting to see the response myself. The plush wheel was simple to overcome, but I had been holding onto the authentic steering wheel for more than twenty minutes and my heart rate hadn't gone below a hundred.

This time, the stimulus was something I could tie back to that night. And the memories I recounted with the doctor seemed much more tangible, more lucid, more terrifying.

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I handed over the steering wheel at the end of the session before curling up on the couch. I directed my attention toward the back of the sofa, away from Dr. Crane's scrutinizing glare. It wasn't his fault that he held such an expression when observing me, at least I hoped he wasn't intentionally trying to demean me. It had been forty five minutes before he ordered me to give up the steering wheel for a break. I had begun shivering at that point and he demanded we withdraw, saying my eyes had been dilated for too long and my heart rate was showing no signs of decreasing. I despised my fear, but at least it was somewhat improving.

"Mireille, did you hear me?" Dr. Crane asked.

"Hmm?" I turned toward him, my body still lightly coated in a cool sweat.

"You've improved dramatically, whether or not you choose to believe it. Last session, you lasted twenty minutes; you've more than doubled in endurance." He granted me a calming, if not awkward, smile and placed the wheel in his duffel bag. Out of sight, out of mind.

"C-can I get some water?" I croaked out, my throat was parched.

"Of course, I'm just going to jot down some information and then we will be done for the day." Flipping a few pages, the good doctor began writing out the data.

The shift from horizontal to vertical was a slow one. It wasn't light headedness I was afraid of, my heart had more than kept up with the typical heart rate of a jogging individual, I just felt the need to avoid sudden movements. When I finally sat up, I reached for my water and proceeded to take a sip, then a gulp, and then another and another, until the glass was empty.

Jonathan stood and offered a hand to help me up. I accepted the assistance and wobbled a bit before letting go and walking to the bathroom to splash my face with water. As much as I dreaded our sessions, I felt I was growing closer to Jonathan with each one. Smiling at my drenched reflection, I patted my face dry with a nearby towel before returning to my boyfriend. His pen danced across the
lines of the lab book as he thoughtfully scripted the events of the evening. Sitting back on the couch, I crossed my jean clad legs and smiled at his bright blue, energetic eyes as they raced alongside his print.

"My parents have been asking about you." I told him, fiddling with my hands as I spoke.

"Hmm" he grunted, hearing what I had said but not contemplating the meaning.

"They've invited you to Thanksgiving dinner." I watched as the movements of his pen halted and his eyes seemed to dim. Turning to look at me, I recognized that he didn’t appear amused, nor exited, nor angry. Just blank.

"Who did?" He asked for elaboration.

"Well, at first it was my mother, then my father joined in, my aunt caught word and insisted upon it. Then my grandfather and grandmother, and well, the rest is history." I rattled this off with a grin. My entire family was ecstatic when they discovered I had gotten a boyfriend, and a doctor to top it off.

"How many would be attending?" Jonathan seemed to be thinking it over, resting an elbow on the notebook as he drew circles in the air with his pen, looking me dead in the eye.

"Eleven, including myself." I did a quick count on my fingers to confirm before nodding. "So, there won't be too much attention on you with so many people around." I tried to back it up further. "Plus my little cousins will probably hog the spotlight with their shenanigans every once in a while."

"Little." Jonathan zoned in on the word. "Define 'little'" he glanced away, directing his attention to the wall instead of me.

"Michael is eight now, and Linus turned three a little while back." I grinned "They are fairly well behaved children if that's the issue."

"No, no. Children are simply selfish, not truly understanding the concept of perception until a much later age." Jonathan pondered his words before continuing. "As such, I must decline. Not simply because of your cousins, but because the concept of sharing a meal with complete strangers is something I only do for work, and even then it is with much resentment. However, I would prefer if you simply told them I was busy rather than convey my true emotions to them. I may have to inevitably deal with them at a later date." His vagueness along with the statement was more than offensive, but I suppose it would be odd to share a dinner with another person's family without first getting to know them.

"Okay." I shrugged it off, Aunt Violet would be more than a little upset, but it wasn't her I was concerned about. "What do you intend to do on Thanksgiving then?" I asked; I didn't want Jonathan to spend the day alone after all.

My boyfriend shut the composition book before slotting it away. "I intend on spending it in my house, perhaps using the occasion to reorganize some of my books."

"Well," I needed to do this carefully. "Maybe I could cook a dinner just for the two of us? I'm not going to miss out on my family completely though. I could spend the morning with them and the evening with you. I'm sure I could find a few good recipes in time, and I'm no shabby cook as you well know."
I could see him processing it, as if tallying things in a pro-con list in his mind. "No surprise visits?" He asked, clearly wanting to avoid any form of confrontation.

"I'll make sure of it. And if anything happens, you are free to leave through the fire escape." I stood up to bring myself closer to my boyfriend before bending down to kiss his cheek. "What do you say?" I asked.

"Very well. But do not bother baking pie, I can handle that much." He said, grabbing my chin and kissing me more directly on the lips.

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* November 24 (Thanksgiving Day) *

"Uncle Ian, how many times do I have to say this, Jonathan is not forcing me into a relationship by using my position below him as leverage." I blotted away some drool from my sleeping cousin's mouth as he slept comfortably on my lap.

"Okay, I've had that card used on me too many times to count when a girl left me hanging. I just want to ensure he isn't someone like your Uncle Ian." He chuckled, messing with Michael's hair as he pieced together some Legos. The eight year old proceeded to move over a yard to avoid another attack before resuming his construction.

"We all hope Jonathan isn't anything like you." My father commented as he ate another cheese covered cracker from his plate. "I still can't believe he isn't here, but is having you cook him a meal anyway."

"It was my suggestion, papa." I moved my fingers deftly though Linus's curly blond hair. "Besides, he doesn't know any of you, so it would only be an awkward evening. Now, for the third time, can we move the topic of conversation away from my boyfriend."

There was silence for a few seconds as everyone began to ponder a new conversation topic when my aunt returned from her position in the kitchen, evidently kicked out by my mother once again. She squatted beside me to rub Linus's back before kissing his cheek. Standing once more, my aunt stretched as if having just worked hard before taking her seat between me and my Uncle Trevor. "So, How is my favorite niece?" She asked me, closely examining the soles her younger child's shoes.

"I'm great." Although not a mile away, it was certainly a different topic from Jonathan. "Work at the Asylum has been going wonderfully; I've got more than a few coworkers trembling when I yell at them for their incompetence. Plus, my salary got raised, although somewhat marginally, just a few weeks ago. With a bit of work, I should be done paying off my student loans in around twelve years." I was happy of my success. Both of my uncles and my aunt were in business. The only exceptions in the family were my own parents. My father performed biological research for the Wayne Corporation and my mother still worked as an artist, although a much better known and more experienced one than she was when my parents first met.

My grandmother took advantage of the lull in the conversation and spoke up. Although her question was in French, leaving my American relatives in the dark as to what she was saying.

"This boy, he is nice to you yes?" She asked slowly.
"Yes, Grandmother." I relayed this back to her with a smile. My French grandmother had endured an abusive husband for a good portion of her life before his death around fifteen years ago. Since my grandfather had passed on, my grandmother had begun to heal, but was concerned more than any other member of the family for my happiness when it came to the people I was seeing. She reflected my smile before shuffling back in her seat, returning to her deep thoughts.

"Cousin Mimi." I turned my head to look at Michael. "Look what I made." The boy held a proud grin as he lifted up the dog like statue, asking for my approval on his completed project.

"It's lovely Michael." I slowly got up, being sure not to disturb Linus, before coming in for a closer look. The mishmash of colors was clearly not intended by the artist. The majority of the bottom was composed of browns and blacks before the realization was made that those brick colors were not plentiful enough to complete the dog. Thus from the waist up, the sitting dog was composed of a rainbow of colors. "It makes me think of a colorful dog wearing brown slacks," I picked it up and moved it closer to him, mimicking a dog's bark as it grew nearer. The boy erupted into laughter and took back the dog before having it encroach upon his neck, feigning fear as the dog 'attacked' him.

A family. I had always taken such a thing for granted. But looking around me, I truly took in what I had to be grateful for: a loving if not overbearing family, and a boyfriend who appreciated me in his own unconventional way.

I stood up and ruffled my cousin's hair, receiving a more positive response than when my Uncle Ian did the same. Grinning widely, the eight year old boy asked "You gonna check up on the food cousin Mimi?" Michael then stood up to accompany me. Whether his target was to be the latest taste tester or he simply wished to follow me around, I was unsure.

I stretched my arms before replying. "Nope, I've got my own bird to cook at home, it's much smaller than the one you have here, but I should still get back to my apartment to get it done in time. Plus, I still have many more side dishes to prepare." Looking at the clock, I saw it was around 2pm. About seven hours spent with the folks, shouldn't get too much resistance if I left now.

"I can help you!" Michael piped up. "I'm really good at mashen potatoes, Aunt Jeanette said so herself!" He bounced on his feet.

"Another time okay? We have the whole weekend to spend together. I just want to spend tonight with my boyfriend." My voice faltered as I saw his face crumble. "S-say Michael, how about us cousins go to the pool tomorrow. My treat!" I knelt down to whisper in his ear "We can even get those jalapeno nachos your mother detests."

"Promise?" He extended his pinky.

"Promise." I grinned and linked our pinkies, shaking them lightly I swore an unbreakable oath to my cousin.

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Jonathan arrived around 4pm, and proceeded to pull up a chair in the kitchen to read a book. Although I told him he could watch television or read in the living room, he insisted upon keeping me company. His nose wasn't always in a book however, every once in a while I would see him look up at me as I cooked. I figured the multitasking wouldn't be so difficult, but I had yet to handle three pans on a stove, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, a loaf of bread in the upper oven and a bird in the lower one, plus a boyfriend to converse with. About a half hour in, Jonathan snapped his book shut
and proceeded to stir one of the pans, giving me ample time to finish my current task without fear of the contents burning. I called on Jonathan around three times during the meal prep and he was more than willing to assist as soon as I provided instructions. When we had finished, I realized I’d gone overboard.

"So, Jonathan. I think I might have made dinner for five rather than two. I hope you're hungry." I smiled sheepishly. After setting the table, I asked what he wanted and ferried the food between the kitchen and the dining table, as the small surface could not handle the bounty I had prepared. Biting into my own meal I nearly collapsed with relief. Everything tasted wonderful, nothing was burnt and I couldn't be happier. But then Jonathan pulled his pies out of the fridge, one pecan and the other pumpkin and I was in heaven. Although Jonathan had confessed earlier that he was a less than prolific cook, he was an astounding baker.

After the kitchen was cleaned up and my fridge was fuller than it had been in its entire stay at the apartment, I pulled out a Japanese horror film Jonathan recommended a few months ago on one of our dates.

"I haven't watched it yet, but that's because it only just arrived. You were right in saying it's tough to get your hands on a director's cut edition of the film, especially one with English sub rather than dub. I found this copy on an online auction." I smiled upon seeing Jonathan's mischievous grin grow.

"You sure you want to watch that Mireille? When I spoke about it I recommend you watch it during the day with the blinds open. It's what, eight now, and you want to watch this movie right before going to bed alone?" His eyes seemed to glow with excitement.

"Well, I'm not alone now, am I?" I put the DVD down before walking over to kiss Jonathan and then, perhaps something more.

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Mireille was more enthusiastic tonight.

I suppose that is one way to put it. As opposed to becoming sleepy from the turkey, she instead became more forward than ever. At present I was sitting on the couch we typically use for therapy, but my 'patient' was seated on my lap as opposed to reclined on the sofa. And it wasn't the type of sitting reserved for mall photos with Santa. Rather, she was straddling my waist and furiously kissing me as she unbuttoned the upper half of my shirt.

The only assumption I can make is that she is acting this way due to our most recent relationship shift. Our 'commitment' as it were, has been nothing but beneficial as of late. My typical thanksgiving dinner of leftovers alongside a night of studying chemical bonds had been replaced with a homemade dinner that didn't disappoint and a beautiful young lady, who happened to adore me, making out with me as if she required my contact as much as she did oxygen.

Just as I pondered this over, her hand snuck up my untucked shirt to rest on my abdomen. Mireille grinned widely against my lips. No doubt she was happy to know I had been putting on weight. Withdrawing her arm, she pushed her body flush against mine. With no space between us, I felt her soft chest squish against mine and exhaled a sigh. Mireille used this as a prompt to shift her attention, now opening what she could of my half unbuttoned shirt to latch onto my neck. She seemed to have learned from last time and was using more teeth than before, raking them over the selected skin before lightly licking the irritated area. When she had finished marking me, I pushed her back to begin unbuttoning her own dress shirt.
Halfway down, I realized something, she had not begun to resist yet. Leaning up I tackled her lips once again, groaning when she squeezed her legs on either side of my own and began to weave her fingers through my hair. As much as she satisfied during foreplay, she would always retreat when things went too far. Our intimate encounters were somewhat like a game of Bullshit. Anything was fair game so long as someone, typically me, didn't take things too far. Before I knew it, however, the last button was undone. Helping her shrug off the shirt I looked at the spaghetti strap top that rested underneath. Lacy, white, and somewhat loose. All things that didn't match the description of the black and pink polka dot undergarment that failed to hide behind the wimpy shield of cloth.

I pivoted my body and pressed her onto the couch, placing my right foot on the floor to give her a majority of the space on the small sofa. Joining her in the horizontal plane, I continued to kiss Mireille. Her arms wrapped around my neck and she arched her body into my own once more. Moving my lips downward, I began to nip at her neck before she yelped.

"Not there, I'm going swimming tomorrow with my little cousins. A hickey would be hard to explain." Mireille blushed and looked sideways, refusing to propose another piece for me to mark. So, I chose one she had offered before.

Lifting up the rim of her flimsy top, I once again looked upon the smooth skin of my girlfriend's abdomen. In this light, her scar was much clearer. I ran my finger along it and smiled as she shivered from the stimulation. "I don't dislike this scar." I felt the need to tell her this. "In its own way, this imperfection makes you all the more perfect." I stopped there, how was I to explain this more fluidly without presenting my own interest in fear. This bit of mended flesh would perhaps save our entire relationship when she discovered my secret. It would act as a bridge to link us together, as such it required reverence.

Before Mireille could question my diction, I began to kiss the scar delicately before moving to the right half of her body and running a fingernail along her side, almost symmetrical to the original scar. Mireille gasped at the rough treatment before groaning as I ran my tongue slowly along the new red mark. I had pressed harder than I had intended. Tasting iron along the path, I realized I had inadvertently broken skin. Biting alongside the mark I brought more blood to the surface to be toyed with. Swirling the red liquid like a child toys with finger-paint, I looked up at my counterpart to see her face flushed bright red. She was clearly not an intense masochist, but she seemed to have enjoyed the bit of torment. Moving to the upper half of the mark, I sucked on it much like one would a typical hickey. Ignoring the bits of blood which would evidently latch onto my clothing, I slid up Mireille's body to kiss her with more intensity than before, using my right hand to cradle her head and bring it even closer to my own. Biting down on her lip I reveled in the cute squeak she emitted. Admiring the drop of blood that emerged from the wound, I watched it run down her cheek, under her ear, and into the mess of brown hair splayed so wildly on the couch below.

Her eyes captured my attention instantly. It wasn't lust, lust would have her mewling like a cat in heat. She appeared enamored. Like a kitten who found a new use for her latest toy, Mireille looked as if she had unraveled me if only somewhat. "Is this another part of you, Jonathan?" she mumbled, raising one hand into my hair and combing it back lightly.

"Yes, I would say it is." I grinned. Mireille was clearly okay with what had transpired, but the confirmation of words was always welcome. "What do you think?"

Mireille hummed in delight as she moved the hand in my hair onto one of my biceps, as if admiring the little muscle that was there. "It is most certainly a welcome development." She smiled cutely before darting her tongue out of her mouth to lap at the blood currently pooling at the juncture of her
"That's good." I said quickly before forcing my lips against Mireille's once more, my right hand lightly skimming the area just below the underwire of her bra. "Just one more mark to make." I mumbled against her lips before quickly raising the white spaghetti strap top over her head. Running the nail of my left index over the upper border of her bra I watched as her entire body arched.

*DING DONG*

*DING DONG*

*DING DONG*

*DING DONG*

"Do you think she heard us?" The eager voice of a young boy cut through the moment like a chainsaw to a pristine cake.

"You said." I started, but when I looked up at her, I saw her eyes alight with flames. No doubt she too was upset by the interruption. Standing up, she retrieved her undershirt and blouse before speedily putting them on. Grabbing an abandoned hair tie off of a table Mireille rushed her hair into a ponytail, wiped the bits of blood on her mouth and cheek away as best she could, and made it to the door in a record minute and a half. I had also buttoned my shirt before retreating to her bedroom and shutting the door softly behind me.

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Once Jonathan was out of the room I opened the door, chain lock still in place, and saw behind it my Aunt and two cousins. "Aunt Violet--." I started only to be cut off.

"Oh my, don't you look lovely dear, I do hate to interrupt your evening." She craned her neck so she could examine the room behind me, clearly eager to catch a glimpse of my boyfriend. "But these two munchkins saw fit to use your mother's fine oil paint to decorate the walls, and they have been banished for the night. Naturally your uncle and I tried to locate a hotel but all the decent ones had no vacancies. So, I was wondering if you could house them for the night?" She gave me an apologetic smile.

"I told you a hundred times." I sighed, my fist clenched tightly and my eyes shut in frustration. "Just tonight, all I asked--" I then opened my eyes to look at my cousins. The pair of them looked incredibly upset, their cheeks and torsos caked in my mother's rich, colorful paints and their eyes and noses running from a recent scolding. "But these two munchkins saw fit to use your mother's fine oil paint to decorate the walls, and they have been banished for the night. Naturally your uncle and I tried to locate a hotel but all the decent ones had no vacancies. So, I was wondering if you could house them for the night?" She gave me an apologetic smile.

"I told you a hundred times." I sighed, my fist clenched tightly and my eyes shut in frustration. "Just tonight, all I asked--" I then opened my eyes to look at my cousins. The pair of them looked incredibly upset, their cheeks and torsos caked in my mother's rich, colorful paints and their eyes and noses running from a recent scolding. "Only them," I consented. I closed the door to unbar it and opened it enough to let the two in alongside a small suitcase. "You owe me big Aunt Violet." I shut the door on her sheepish grin before looking at the mess before me.

"Sorry Cousin Mimi" Michael mumbled as he wiped his eyes with his shirt.

"Soory Mee Ray" Linus chimed in afterwards, spreading his arms for an apology hug.

"It's alright kiddos, and no hugs yet." I regained my smile as Linus put down his raised arms. "First a bath and then bed okay? We'll have more fun tomorrow." The two followed close behind me as I walked through the tiny apartment. I knocked lightly on my bedroom door before opening it. Jonathan was seated at the edge of my bed, he looked as if he was about to say something when the
children rushed inside to get a closer look at the stranger. "Hey Jonathan, turns out we're not alone tonight." I smiled apologetically at my boyfriend before walking deeper into the room to open the door to the adjoined bathroom, ushering the children inside. "You can leave if you want. I-I'm sorry." Jonathan stood up and shut the door to the bathroom, leaving us alone for a second.

"Is something on your mind Mireille?" Jonathan asked, his hands resting on my waist, holding me still and soothing me at the same time. His eyebrows came down a tad as he questioned me. My boyfriend, ever the analyst.

"Why would you ask that?" I mumbled, my hands moving to rest on his forearms.

"Tonight, you had a plan didn't you? You cooked the perfect meal, got a copy of one of my favorite films, and demanded no interruptions from your family". His right hand moved up to rub the latest bruise he had placed on my body. "What exactly were you planning to soften me up for?"

"I wanted to--" I started before being interrupted once again by my cousin.

"Cousin Mimi, the faucet is stuck," cried out Michael, clearly afraid to flood the apartment.

"One second." I told Jonathan before rushing inside.

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I waited in the living room for around fifteen minutes; the room seemed much more desolate without Mireille. My girlfriend was slowly taking over my thoughts. Although such a development was not unwelcome, it was certainly something to take notice of. I put my elbows on my knees and placed my head in my hands. That girl was nothing but trouble.

Upon hearing the bedroom door open, I lifted my head and turned to watch as Mireille took a seat beside me on the couch. My girlfriend then reached for my hand and ran her fingers over each of the metacarpals in turn. "Jonathan." She spoke in a near whisper, bringing my hand closer so she could flip it and examine the grooves on my palm. "Do you remember when we first met?" Her index finger ran along the lines on my palm like an ice skater following a routine. "And when you asked me out for the first time?" Mireille now held my hand gently as she leaned against me.

"Of course," I replied, admiring her soft grey eyes as she turned her head to look into my own.

"Could you tell me about it?" Mireille requested, turning her face toward the blank screen of the television before resting her head on my shoulder.

"Sure, I suppose. Around two and a half years ago, I found myself forced into handling the spring applicants for a medical internship at Arkham. During that string of interviews, a pretty young lady with a hint of a French accent walked through my door. With a resume to match her flawless interview, I had no choice but to give her the internship she requested. After that, I figured she would quit working at the asylum due to our colorful inhabitants, or I wouldn't see her apart from my rare visits to the Medical Facility. But to my surprise, she seemed to be everywhere I went: asking for directions to a patient in need of transferal, shivering in excitement as she followed Dr. Kellerman into surgery, prattling on about some random subject to either myself or one of my coworkers. She was different when compared to the other interns at the madhouse, instigating a conversation with me when within a ten foot radius or nodding in recognition when I passed by her while busy speaking with another employee. Two years after getting the internship and after becoming a salaried employee at the building, she still kept up her pleasantry. I was certain something was off. This
beautiful, intelligent, prodigy of a woman was still acting nice around me despite the fact I no longer controlled her wage. So, I decided to act upon my suspicions and ask her out, and to my surprise, she said yes.” I turned to see Mireille’s face dusted a light pink as she recounted the memories along with me.

"That seems fairly accurate." She hummed before adding. "Let me tell you how it happened from my point of view. While interning at Arkham Asylum, I was constantly being warned about a certain doctor in the facility. 'See him, that's Dr. Crane, never get on his bad side' and 'watch out for the tall psychologist, rumors are that his patients always wind up in the critical ward screaming in agony' were not uncommon statements. I became curious, how could I not? So, I made it a point to converse with the man, ask him about his day, and talk to him about my own insights on the goings on at the facility. It became a private goal of mine to get him to smile at least once. Eventually, talking to him became a part of my routine; I had forgotten my objective and instead paid attention to what he had to say. He shared stories about his interactions with patients, informed me of the less than stable employees, and asked for my opinions on the latest developments in psychological or medical research. And just when I thought the guy wasn't too out of the ordinary, on my second week of employment as a full-fledged doctor, he pressed the emergency button on the elevator, trapped me inside with him, and asked me out. But, surprisingly, I didn't think 'I have to say yes, I'm sort of trapped in an elevator with the guy', I actually thought 'Well, that will certainly be a night I'll never forget.'" Mireille sat up slightly, removing her grip on my hand to run the tips of her fingers over my cheek. "But, I couldn't stop seeing the man; he had proven to be far too enticing for his own good."

Mireille brought her face closer to my own, shifting into a whisper as she continued. "Before I knew it, he had captivated me and I grew to crave the man far more than I should have. Every time he held me, I felt as if I was unraveling in his arms. And each kiss engulfed my body in flames." Mireille kissed me then, her hand still cupping my cheek.

Kissing was enough then, I didn't feel further contact was necessary, I hoisted her onto my lap for no reason other than to bring her closer, and ran my tongue over her bruised bottom lip. Mireille's breathing grew ragged as she drew in the occasional breath during our frenzy. However, the lightheadedness was only aiding in our rapture. She grew hypersensitive, shivering as I ran my hands along her shoulder blades and down to her elbows. Finally grasping her free hand in my own I relished the connection between us. Using my remaining hand, I grabbed the back of her head and freed the soft brown tresses from her constraining hair tie as I pulled her closer. Running my tongue over her own, I groaned lightly as she pushed back in response.

Mireille finally needed to pull back to breathe however, letting our breath intermingle. I watched her dilated pupils gaze deeply into my own until my glasses fogged up. My girlfriend giggled and removed the lenses with her left hand, placing them on the nearby end table. The hand resting on my cheek moved up a tad, her thumb running along the crest of bone just below my eye. The stroke was soothing, and I found myself shutting my eyes to allow her to run the same thumb over the upper ridge of my eye.

"I love your eyes." Mireille whispered, finally breaking silence that previously engulfed us. "They are incredibly expressive." She was smiling when I reopened them, her thumb resting on the lateral canthus. Mireille hummed lightly, pressing her forehead against my own, her eyes still somewhat dazed.

"Mireille, you said you wanted to talk earlier." I felt bad destroying the moment, but I wanted to know where this was heading. "And I doubt it has anything to do with us meeting one another."

"Well, in a way it does." She still spoke softly, her smile seeming to somewhat fade.
"Mireille, where are you going with this?" I questioned her directly; this charade had gone on long enough.

"What I wanted to ask you earlier is, what do you want from our relationship? Why was it instigated in the first place?" she asked me softly. "I won't get mad, even if you say you just want me for physical pleasure. I just want to know where we stand almost half a year into this." Mireille kissed my cheek and buried her head in my neck as she awaited my response. I ran my fingers through her hair, pondering it over myself.

"Originally, I suppose I thought of you as an experiment. Yes or no, what would she say to me asking her out, or how long before she uses our relationship to her advantage. But now, I can't see you as something like that. I can't say what you are to me, I've never been in a relationship like this one before, but I can say what you are not. I don't see you as a target in need of conquering, nor are you someone for me to toy with emotionally. Right now, all that is on my mind is letting our relationship run its course, wherever we may wind up." I took in a deep breath before asking. "Now, what do you want?"

"I want a companion."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, whadidyaguys think? Here are some questions to answer along with your comments if you don't know what to say. Did you flip out when Jonathan brought over a lab book? How about the light blood play? Do you believe that the Scarecrow can whip up a good pecan pie or is it store-bought? And companion~ So many ways to interpret that one word~! Until next time! Bye!
One Shot #1: Killer Croc

Chapter Notes

A/N: So… this sort of just…happened. I thought up the concept, seemed great. However, it was not necessary to the plot. THUS, one shot #1. Took about 6 hours, and it's a good 2k~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Shot #1: Killer Croc

*November 28*

"Dr. Milenkovic." I held up a finger to shush the latest medical intern as I was currently gawking over the skeleton of my next patient. Of course, his actual skeleton wasn't before me, but in a document on my computer. After multiple snapshots were taken of his bone structure, we were able to render a frontal and side view of Monsieur Jones, or 'Killer Croc' as he was better known by the public. The edifice I was currently ogling over were his shoulder blades.

"Dr. Martell, have you seen these scapulae? They're nearly three inches thick!" I ran my finger down the pixilated side view of the skeleton. "I can't wait to see the back view of his skeleton, I'm incredibly curious about the curve of the spine on his scapulae. He has a lot of neck and back muscle to support after all."

"Yes Dr. Milenkovic, very thought provoking. Now the patient is waiting, so why don't you go see the real thing." Dr. Martell tried to hurry me along. Getting up, I grabbed my bag and began walking with the intern.

"You say that, but I haven't been given clearance to investigate the entrails of my patient, let alone his bones, yet." I giggled as soon as I saw his horror struck face. "I'm only kidding Dr. Martell, I do not wish to throw Monsieur Jones out of his delicate homeostasis and onto an examination table like some half-witted Frankenstein."

"No Dr. Milenkovic, you will have all of your wits about you when that day comes." I grinned as I took in the complement. Dr. Martell had only been here for a few weeks; he took the summer off after finishing school and got an internship here during the fall. Devon, as he was known by his fellow interns, was very professional for his standing at the facility; he made sure to dress well each day, prepared every examination room to a T, and worked hard to make sure everyone kept up with their daily schedule. Even some of the doctors. "Now, I cannot pass beyond this point." He gestured to the 'no interns' sign, as we were entering the research ward. "But I made sure the proper tools got to the examination room, so have fun with your 'delicate' patient."

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"Monsieur Jones, you are truly an astounding individual." I marveled while examining the scale currently developing on his thigh. "I plucked a scale from this location just last week and a new one is already far into development." Pulling a Vernier caliper out of my medical kit I measured the newly formed scale. "Although it's only half the thickness of your older scales, it is still very durable and incredibly flexible, but that is to be expected. Currently it's only three quarters of the appropriate
size, but I assume it will quickly fall in line with its neighbors in all respects, aside from its lack of cracks and scrapes." Putting away the measuring device, I instead pulled out a pencil. "Now, would you kindly tell me when you feel something?" I prodded the older scales with the tip of my eraser, pushing harder each time until hearing a grumble, moving to the new scale I performed the same test, except receiving a positive reply much sooner. Throwing the pencil back in my bag I sat on my swivel chair and let my shoulders collapse in disappointment.

Fiddling with the end of my braid I looked up at my muzzled patient. Monsieur Jones's arms were attached to their opposing leg beneath the sturdy examination table, leaving his feet in front and his arms pulled back so they were almost below the edge of the table top. A conflicting set of chains attached to his collar were latched to the ceiling, preventing him from lying down and gaining more freedom to move. These chains were all drawn incredibly tight, limiting his movement to a few centimeters. As inhumane as it was to treat a patient this way, it was the only surefire way to put at least a moderate barrier between the two of us during these research sessions. I often let him talk at least, but when I was in the zone it was rather obnoxious to hear him prattle on about how delicious I smelled. Seeing as the major portion of our session was near its end however, I felt the need to discuss the findings with my subject. Rooting in my pocket for the remote to his muzzle and collar, I recovered the device and used it to remotely loosen the grip around his jaw to the point where he could audibly mumble his various curses. "What the fuck do you want, you bitch!" he growled through the steel links over his nose and mouth.

"Sorry, but more disappointing discoveries." I told him as I wrote out the newfound data in my lab book. "Your new scales are too slow to develop to prove useful in deadly situations. And the old ones, although durable on the surface, cannot handle the tension of even twenty pounds of force without popping out, as we learned last week."

"Didn't hurt much." He growled, his tough appearance further backed up by his matching attitude.

"That doesn't matter." I snapped the book shut to explain the predicament. "Let's say you come into the asylum with a serious injury, a deep gash across your arm for example. Now, most people can handle having their flesh sewn shut since the dermis is fairly flexible and can handle the force applied to yank the separate pieces back together. You, on the other hand, are different in those regards. Your scales are tough, so I could hit you with a hammer with little pain felt on your end.--"

"Cuz you're a fucking wimp."

"-- but the grip that holds them in place gets weaker over time. So, stitching the old scales together to halt bleeding would prove inefficient because they would detach with that much force working against them. You're bare skin is also useless when it comes to mending since, although flexible, it is unable to handle the tension of holding the two halves of your flesh together. I figured new scales would be better for the job, but they are pretty sensitive, and since they are quite rigidly attached to your skin, I would have to go through the scale, into the dermis, and over to the scale across from it to seal the gash. Now, this all works out in theory, but if you come in with a serious injury I won't have a week to wait for new scales to grow. This is all too frustrating." I walked back over to reexamine the scale. "As it stands, your current method of treatment is idiotic, so even this knowledge will help us develop a better one."

Presently, the method for treating Monsieur Jones was: tightly wrap the limb with high durability cloth to force the flesh together, cross your fingers in hope of it not getting infected, and unravel those same bandages in a few weeks to a month. We couldn't risk untangling it any sooner as the skin could easily spread apart and destroy all of the sealing that had taken place, scales needed to form between the gash to ensure its durability.
"Well." I turned to look into his bright, yellow eyes. "I think we will stick to the old method, in a sense." Pulling out the file on my patient, I began to fill it out as I explained the plan to the man before me. "First we will remove scales periodically along the edge of the wound. Then we will keep your wound cleaned; tie it shut with cloth, etcetera. The difference is, we will freshen the bandages each day if not more frequently. Although you're wound won't be closing for the first week, the removed scales will rejuvenate and leave behind patches we can use to stitch your flesh shut. Then, we will treat you as we do the rest of our patients, replace bandages often, sterilize the wound regularly, and the like."

"Not gonna pump me full of drugs?" He seemed happy about the lackluster forms of restraint we had for him. Originally, my coworkers would inject him with anything to shut him up, but now that I demanded proper research to determine dosages and their effects on his body, he was stuck to physical restraints rather than medically induced ones. We had only just found a suitable dosage of penicillin for the man, so sedatives and vitamins were the next step, as soon as Dr. Crane finished with those tests.

"Don't count on that." I smiled widely. "I've actually got a few people on staff working out dosages as we speak." That caused his grin to fall instantly. Monsieur Jones reveled in his ability to remain fully conscious during his stays at the Asylum, now he would be just like the others. "Speaking of which," I withdrew a high gage needle and brought it close to one of the newer scales on his inner elbow, as the area would be easier to penetrate. "I just need a bit of blood, you said yourself it doesn't hurt much." Aiming the needle tip to rest just under the edge of the developing scale, I pushed hard and with more than a little effort, was able to get through the skin. "Sorry about that." I pulled back the plunger and smiled as the red liquid filled up the glass canister. "All the same on the inside."

"Shut the fuck up." He growled, clearly not amused by my statement.

As I withdrew and capped the syringe, I spoke up again. "Okay Monsieur Jones,--"

"Another thing I fucking hate about you."

"--all that is left are some allergy tests, your weekly claw measurement, and another X-ray." I rushed over to the counter to look at what we were using today. The spread looked pretty basic: iodine, latex, and some minor doses of medications we planned on using later on.

"You act like you're some fucking saint, but you gonna kill me with all that radiation you sadistic fuck." The words passed through his lips as fluidly at water down a stream. Although language wasn't something I was unaccustomed to, it still threw a wrench into my thoughts, and Waylon Jones knew that very well.

"Those X-rays are for your benefit. I'm working on compiling a bit of a 3-D rendering of your skeleton in case I need to reset a bone or two." I retrieved a bag of disposable syringes from the tray and returned to my patient. "This is the same test as last week, except with different stimuli."

Allergy tests were easy to perform on my usual patients, for Monsieur Jones however, I assume it is torturous. I couldn't remove the scales beforehand, as it would affect the results. So instead, I had to inject the medicine underneath them, wait a while, and then remove the scales quick enough to discover whether or not an allergy is present. This was my second and final day of testing. The first time was on his right obliques, this time it would be on the left. I chose the area for its pliant scales, which made the injection process easier as well as the removal. Despite his earlier comment that removing scales wasn't painful, I saw more than a trickle of blood come from the pocket's of flesh last week, as well as a wince from the rugged man.

He got back at me during these parts of the session. This was when I was nearest him, and he would
use the proximity to describe how easily he would remove my flesh, slurp my blood, and use my ribs as toothpicks. Monsieur Jones took a different approach this time around however.

"That smell." His sniffing became more audible, as if he were flaunting his heightened senses. Ignoring the comment, I continued writing numbers on the selected scales and jotted down the corresponding stimuli in the file. "It's familiar. Say, whadidya have for lunch Doc?"

"Turkey, just like the rest of the asylum I'm using Thanksgiving leftovers for lunch." I injected the allergens under the corresponding scales and moved back to my swivel chair. Taking a seat, I set my watch and began to wait.

"No, no. You see. I am somewhat a specialist when it comes to scents." He grinned as much as he could beneath his muzzle. "And I found a mate to that particular smell earlier today during my walk over here. That wackjob Crane smells just like you." I didn't mean to flinch, but he latched onto it like a tic and wouldn't let go. "Aha! Well whadaya know? You're fucking that sadistic shrink! Wait'll the guys hear this one, what a riot. And oh, Warden Sharp is gonna love this." The man ran his mouth as I sat there, staring at my knees in terror. We were going to be found out. I needed to throw in some opposition, counteract his arguments. "I'm sure there's something in the handbook about not screwing your coworkers. If not, maybe they'll make it a rule and have it named in your honor."

"I suppose his lunch could have been made of the same meat as mine, if he purchased the same brand of store bought turkey as me. My oven was on the fritz last Thursday--" I strung the words together with ease, but my lie quickly unraveled when I heard him laugh in a low, baritone timbre.

"Don't think you're kidding anyone doll, now I've got some dirt on you, so listen up and listen good if you and your fuck buddy wanna stay employed." Croc quickly explained it to me, I was to rewrite his future sedative dosage so he received half the allotted amount. It needed to stay at this low level for as long as I wanted my secret maintained. To add to the regulations, I was also supposed to keep Jonathan in the dark.

A fully functioning Killer Croc. The consequences of this were far more deadly than a hot cocoa fueled Riddler. As such, I would have to refuse to follow through with his terms. For now, however, I needed time and a compliant patient. So, I feigned agreement before proceeding with the rest of the appointment. Besides, who would believe him?

Nobody. Right?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey when you read "That smell." Did you think of Mr. Krabs too? Also, this rendition of Killer Croc has scales like a pangolin (weird, I know)
Chapter 10: Happy Anniversary

Chapter Notes

A/N: There are some throwbacks to earlier chapters, like 4, 6, and 7 so I hope you have read up on them recently or have a decent memory~ Without further ado, please enjoy the following chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10: Happy Anniversary

* November 29 *

The first item on my agenda was to check up on Monsieur J. Next, I had a surgery scheduled for a patient who had fractured his ulna. Lastly, I would perform five checkups on some of the asylum's residents. As I began my walk down the mess of corridors, I thought about my current job and its many pros and cons.

Work at the asylum was sporadic. As intense as you may think a surgeon's job is, it's pretty boring when you have one severe operation a week. I still got paid of course, and take over the duties of a physician more than anything, but that isn't what I love to do. The only time I get to work back to back on patients like a normal surgeon was during some of the more aggressive breakouts. But I knew this coming into the job. The main reason I wanted to work at the asylum was the opportunity to gain experience with the plethora of injuries and illnesses that would land in my hands. For example, one of my past patients was Monsieur Tetch, a rather short man with an obsessive attachment to Alice in Wonderland. When he was brought in after being found with a few of his departed 'Alice's and another on her deathbed, Batman had gone to town while restraining him. I dealt with a bruised lung, a cracked humorous, two broken ribs, fractured metacarpals, and a dislocated pinky all in one six hour long operation. I hated to admit it, but those rare instances made me grateful I wasn't at Gotham General dealing with people who lost a fight with a bagel knife. My job was interesting. I had the opportunity to document Killer Croc, study the cells of Mister Freeze, and test Poison Ivy's immune system with some of the deadliest illnesses known to man.

The slow days like these though, they made me want to switch jobs to become a combat surgeon. The work there would at least be less dangerous.

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As gently as I could, I removed the medical tape securing my patient's bandages to his nose. After a month-long wait, I was certain his cartilage had mended to a degree that made his cast unnecessary. Looking at the straight nasal bridge, I smiled. The swelling had disappeared since last week and his nose had regained its usual white complexion.

"Well, I'm sorry Monsieur J, but it appears I can no longer call you Rudolph." I poked the tip of his nose and disposed of the cast in a nearby bin before washing my hands.

"As unfunny as you are Doc, you were sure able to put me in stitches." The Joker quipped back,
giggling at the play on words himself.

I smiled at my patient. "Very funny Monsieur J, now I only need remove them." Rolling up the loose sleeve of my patient, I saw the deep gash I had stitched together only last week. The Joker's multitude of stitches from his surgery last month had long since been removed. But, only a few days later he was wheeled into the facility with another gaping wound. I couldn't make sense of the style of it however. Most injuries were caused by makeshift weapons at the facility, but his was clean, precise, and deep. To add insult to injury it went against the lines of cleavage on his bicep, causing the flesh to spread apart more dramatically.

I could tell what caused it however. It wasn't too hard, the weapon was found in his cell with him after all. It was a knife, a very well maintained knife which held no prints. The odds of a patient getting his hands on the tool were minimal; it had to have been an employee out for blood. Since then, the Joker had been relocated to the critical ward, not permanently, but until the assailant was found.

"Say Doc, you seem in good spirits today, what's up?" The Joker poked me for an answer as I pulled out some scissors. Well, I suppose I was in a good mood for two reasons today, but I would only disclose one of them to my most dangerous patient.

"I have a pretty sparse schedule today, so I get to go home sooner." I snipped a thick black loop of thread near the middle of the mended injury before grabbing a knotted end. "Now this may tinkle." I pulled and watched as the black snake slithered backwards, in and out of the holes used to secure the wound of the patient. All the while the Joker laughed hysterically, as if Batman was performing a slapstick routine right before us. But, when his newly forming scar was free from stitches, his laughter ceased almost instantly.

"Tickled." He grinned widely.

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The second reason I was happy.

"Happy six month anniversary Jonathan!" I once again announced to my boyfriend as I gestured to the boat before us. Jonathan had of course driven us to the pier, but didn't know which restaurant we were eating in tonight. "It's a dining cruise. We go aboard, head out to sea, and eat dinner before coming back to port." I rocked in my ribbon heels and pushed my billowing green dress down as a gust of wind attacked us. "We will be below deck of course." I looked toward him in the evening sun, eager to hear whether or not the adventure interested him.

"It sounds very interesting Mireille." Jonathan gave me a reassuring smiled and kissed my cheek as we approached the boat together. "Is there anything else aboard the boat besides food?" Jonathan asked, curious as to whether or not our entire date would be spent sitting and eating.

"Yes, there is poker, roulette, blackjack, and a lounge. We can also go up top, but I think it'll be pretty windy tonight." As we got aboard the ship and waited in line I marveled at the lovely architecture of the vessel. The outside, although laden with windows and coated with a well maintained white paint, was incomparable to the majesty within the boat. The inside was colored with rich blue drapes, light wood chairs, and pristine white tablecloths. As people began to sit down, those drapes were pulled back to reveal the ocean through the multitude of windows. Each one was like a moving painting, breathtaking and ever-changing.
"How much does this cost Mireille?" Jonathan spoke as he eyed the elegant crystal chandelier hanging over the center of the dining room.

"Not much." I lied lightly. It wasn't overly expensive anyway. "Besides, I had to one-up you somehow. You took me beside the ocean last month; the next best thing I figured was taking you out on it." I was, of course, paying for this outing. I had insisted upon it after receiving the four hundred dollar commitment present from my boyfriend on top of a three hundred dollar meal. "Just enjoy yourself." I grasped his hand in mine as I took my turn in telling my name to the maître d'. We weren't seated in the prime real-estate area near the stern or bow, but we did have a lovely window just beside us with no tables to block the view.

Jonathan pulled out my chair as we approached said table. Sitting down in my deep green cocktail dress, I admired my date as he took his seat across from me. He had donned his usual tailored suit and accessorized with a navy blue tie and his usual box shaped cufflinks. As his eyes locked with mine, he started up a conversation. "So, Mireille, we have been together for six months exactly now, what do you think of our relationship so far?" He moved his glasses up his nose a tad, using his new window of vision to dissect my next statement.

"I think everything is going great so far." I ran my finger over the single rose that lay between us. The deep red petals was lovely, and the flower’s stem was strong. "Just like this rose, it has no signs of wilting."

"I must agree, we are progressing nicely as a couple." Jonathan turned his gaze back to me after examining the rose himself. Tonight I had my hair tied back in a neat bun, only my bangs lay unrestricted as they framed my face. Jonathan eyed my exposed neck and smirked at me, believing most likely that if he were to mark me tonight, I would have a hard time covering it up. Little did he know I had a pashmina scarf neatly folded in my purse, brought along specifically for that possibility.

I glanced down at my painted nails and recalled the reasons they would be coated in lacquer for the next month or so. The incident in the elevator, although not an earth-shattering experience, would certainly leave its mark on me for the foreseeable future. One of which being my bruised fingernails. Jonathan's look toward me shifted to concern.

"Mireille, is there something on your mind?" Jonathan quickly added to his question, "Does it have to do with us?" I shook my head, a faint smile on my lips. Of course he would assume it had to do with our most recent conversation topic.

"No, Jonathan can I ask your opinion on something?" I placed my hands on my lap and gazed out the window to the ocean scene beside us.

"Of course Mireille." He scrunched his brow, eager to get inside of my head once again. "You can talk to me about anything."

Exhaling a deep breath I turned to him, my hands curling into fists out of anxiety. "I don't know if I should keep up work at the asylum." Jonathan's brow straitened, he was surprised. "It's interesting beyond belief but I rarely get to practice my trade and the danger of working at the facility is only growing more apparent over time. I've had to tackle the Joker, receive threats from Killer Croc, and now there's an employee running around with a thirst for vengeance." I shrugged my shoulders, looking into my boyfriend's cerulean eyes. "Do you have any advice to give?"

Jonathan reached up to adjust his glasses before speaking. "If self-preservation is your main motive, by all means I implore you to leave the asylum. But if you enjoy the work there, even if it is minimal,
I don't see why you would want to leave. You said yourself it is an interesting place. On another note, what do you mean Killer Croc threatened you?' He had seen me flinch when I commented on Monsieur Jones, and was now zeroing in on that incident.

"He found out about us, through our scent." I looked down at the tablecloth. "Evidently we both had turkey yesterday and he was able to connect the dots. My marinade is pretty unique after all." I looked back up at him, an apologetic smile already on my lips. "He threatened to talk if I didn't lower his dosage of sedative to a nonconsequential level."

"Useless." I flinched a bit, my eyes returning to my lap as I took the insult. "Not you, his plea. He'll talk no matter what, but I think I can ensure he isn't taken seriously." Jonathan extended his hand over the table; I took hold of it after a brief pause. "This was through no fault of your own Mireille." He grinned at me, rubbing the top of my hand with his thumb before adding. "And that employee handbook will by no means split us up. I'm not admitting defeat just yet."

"Oui." I smiled back at him and held his hand a tad tighter.

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I set down my wine glass and watched with rapt attention as a man across the room knelt before the woman opposite him. The nervous gentleman slowly reached into his pocket and procured a ring. The volume of the restaurant dampened as a majority of the customers watched on, eager to hear what the prospective bride said.

"Yes," was clearly heard through her happy cries as she let her new fiancé slip on the engagement ring. Alongside the rest of the restaurant, I clapped for their merriment before turning back to my date, who was currently giving a lackluster golf clap to the couple.

"What do women see in diamonds Mireille?" Jonathan asked me, his eyes swinging to the right as he saw the blond woman faun over the bit of compressed carbon. "They are more useful in drills than they are on a lady's finger."

"Honestly Jonathan." He moved his head back toward me, an eyebrow raised to hear my argument. "I think it may be because of how sparkly they are. My mother loves her engagement ring, proclaiming it glitters beautifully in the sunlight. But, I'm not a big fan of diamonds." I confessed this to Jonathan with a somewhat embarrassed expression. "I understand a lot of girls love the gem, but I prefer my jewelry to have a rich color rather than just sparkle."

"So, what gem do you prefer?" Jonathan asked, his eyebrows knitted together as he tried to decipher my personality further.

"I have two favorites, one for its appearance, and the other for its meaning. In turn, they are alexandrite and emerald." I admitted with a smile.

Jonathan absorbed the information before nodding and exhaling a sigh. "And here I thought I was going to be getting lucky with amethyst or citrine." Jonathan smiled before pointing out the obvious, "both of those are far more expensive than diamonds."

"Yeah, but well worth the price in my opinion." I grinned, tapping the tiny emerald earrings I was wearing for tonight's special occasion.

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After dinner we walked upstairs, skipping the second floor casino to instead relax in the lounge. I had already spent enough money on the date and Jonathan disliked gambling in general. Sitting beside Jonathan on the third floor of the boat, I listened to the relaxing classical music in the comfort of a luxurious sofa. In my hand was a mimosa, my second of the night. Setting the half-full glass down on a nearby table I moved closer to Jonathan and joined him in viewing the lovely scenery before us. The sun was near setting, the ocean reflecting the colorful hues of the sky in its delicate waves.

"I got you something." I sat up a bit, reaching into my bag for the item.

"Mireille, you didn't--" his complaints ceased as I pulled a tightly sealed jar out of my purse and placed it in his hands. "Is this?" His eyes darted around before he ensured the coast was clear. Lifting the glass jar which contained a colorless liquid, he examined it against the sunlight. "Now, I know you didn't get me water. What compound is this?" His eyes squinted as he looked around the jar for markings.

"It's benzyl chloride." I whispered.

Jonathan stuffed the compound back in my purse before asking me. "How did you get that much of it, and where?" He seemed excited, but also doubtful of my ability to procure the chemical building block.

Giggling I stated the obvious answer. "My father, remember? He works in biological research at Wayne Corp. All I had to do was ask nicely and he got me a large batch. He was curious what I wanted it for, so I told him you were planning on making me perfume." I shrugged my shoulder in embarrassment at the white lie.

"H-how did you know I wanted some?" Jonathan pestered me, seemingly nervous about how I had gained this knowledge.

"Well, for the past month and a half, whenever I place orders for gauze, anesthetics, needles, and blood alongside some of the basic drugs we need in the Medical Facility, I always get the order sheet returned with one item highlighted in red on the list. It's the same one each time, benzyl chloride, but neither my coworkers nor I placed the order. After the third week in a row, I performed a little investigation and discovered that the chemistry lab had the chemical, but every milliliter had to be accounted for since it's a federally regulated substance. By process of elimination, I found out you were the one placing the order." I zipped up my purse and grinned madly, pleased with my boyfriend's reaction to the gift. "Although," I looked at him closely, trying to detect any form of lie. "I still don't know what you want the substance for."

"Call it a pet project," Jonathan commented lightheartedly. "I had wanted to use the chemicals in the laboratory, but with all those chemists staring over my shoulder, I thought they would steal my discovery and try to claim it as their own."

Not a twitch, no trembling, his eyes didn't shift. "Okay." I smiled and kissed his cheek. I also got you these as a regular gift. I pulled out a small velvet box and handed it over. Jonathan opened the case and pulled out its contents. "They're howlite cufflinks, I figured they would be much more elegant than those plain stainless steel ones you usually wear." I pointed at the white and grey stone before explaining. "A lot of people also say that howlite relieve stress of all kinds, should make meetings easier huh?" I watched as Jonathan removed his own cufflinks to put the newly gifted ones on.
"They are very nice Mireille." He held up his wrists and rotated them to show me how they looked before reaching into his jacket pocket to pull out a box of his own.

"Not fair." I scoffed as he offered me the polished wood box. "You already gave me a gift, and now you're going to upstage mine as well."

"I doubt that." Jonathan pushed the box into my hands before explaining. "Please, consider the syringe my gift for the anniversary, but this is a present to ensure I don't get scorned for showing up without even a token." He smirked as he saw me open it and smile. "I'm not a religious person myself, but I figured you would appreciate it."

Out of the box, I pulled a blue lace agate rosary. "Pretty," I spoke in awe as I brought the rosary closer to examine the beads it was composed of. The agate stones were sky blue, with ribbons of white streaked across the semiprecious beads. Returning the rosary to the box gently, I turned to my boyfriend. "I'll take it to confession each month."

"Do what you will Mireille, it's yours now." Jonathan put his box of old cufflinks in his now empty pocket and rose from the couch. Staring at the near sunset from his standing position, he extended his arm to me and helped me up. "How about we go above deck?" Jonathan asked, pointing to the stairs just across the room.

"Don't you think it'll be chilly?" I asked, imagining how strong the gusts of wind would be up top.

"Yes, but I will also be up there to keep you warm." Jonathan moved his hand to my lower back as he ushered me toward the stairs.

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I had never been more grateful for having my hair in a bun than I was at that point in time. The sea wind whipped at us as we admired the setting sun, the furniture on the deck firmly bolted to the boat, allowing us to sit comfortably while viewing the sunset. It wasn't a surprise that we were alone on the top deck, it was freezing, but when the sun finally set and the party lights circling the deck lit up, I knew the cruise was worth the price. The whole boat seemed to light up as well, the strings of light placed all over the vessel reflecting in the deep blue water.

Jonathan removed his arm from around my shoulders before standing up and bowing. "Would you care to dance, Mireille?" I giggled and accepted his hand, but upon standing, my dress began to lift without shame in the strong ocean breeze. Pulling back my hand I pushed the dress down and smiled up at my date.

"I'd love to dance Jonathan, it's been a while after all, but I'm not sure this is the place." I tried to reseat myself, but he simply pulled me incredibly close to him, canceling out the wind's effect on the front of my dress, but simply amplifying what it did to the back. "Jonathan, you're merely displacing the problem." I eeped as a strong gust of wind blew up my dress almost completely. Thankfully, my back was toward the ocean rather than the crew steering the ship, and they weren't even facing us.

"Okay, so no dancing," he ran his hand down my back and over the billowing fabric, pushing it back against my body and effectively grabbing my rear as he did so. Slowly my boyfriend brought me over to the railings and sat me on the wood bar. Immediately I latched onto him, my nails digging into his back as he took his place in front of me. Although my dress was in no danger of fluttering around, I disliked the thought of being lost to sea to satisfy my boyfriend's desires. "Jonathan--"
Jonathan’s lips pressed against mine almost ferociously, the hand he placed on my lower back holding me securely in place. He nipped at my lip, cradling my head in his spare hand he began kissing me with passion I hadn’t expected from him in such an unfamiliar place. I felt close to tears as another gust of wind hit us, terrified at the thought of being thrown overboard. Jonathan felt my trembling and withdrew for a second, whispering lightly in my ear. “You trust me, don’t you Mireille? I won’t let go, I promise.” His mouth then moved to my neck, his hot breath wavered over my skin for seconds before the cold, salty, sea breeze chilled my throat once more. Kissing the part of my neck he hovered over, he moved downward. Choosing the midpoint between my shoulder and my neck, he bit down on the skin gently before sucking at it until surrounding blood vessels popped and a bruise began to form. He continued the pattern, slowly making his way down my chest, leaning me further back as he went to allow himself more room to maneuver. Now as he bit at the revealed swell of my breast, not yet audacious enough to go beyond the border of the deep green dress, he whispered. “Do you find it exhilarating Mireille? So close to danger, but at the same time you know you are safe. When you are with me, my darling pumpkin, you have nothing to fear.” Jonathan kissed my chest once more before leaning back to admire his work.

I looked at his consuming stare through damp eyes, my nails still holding tight to my boyfriend’s jacket. “Take my hand.” Jonathan pulled away the hand he had placed behind my head. I unlatched my own hand from his back and held onto his until my knuckles were white. “Now the other.” I did as asked and watched in near terror as Jonathan un tucked his elbows, extending his arms so I was lying practically parallel to the boat, except above my torso I was not supported by the railing, I was hanging over the ocean. If he had let go, I would surely fall overboard. But he didn't. Slowly, the terror of falling slipped away, even the harsh sea wind seemed playful rather than menacing. I looked at Jonathan and smiled before extending my own arms, letting my back bend almost painfully as I observed the world upside down, the ocean was the sky and the sky became the sea. After a few minutes, Jonathan pulled me up and offered me his jacket to help conceal the haphazard string of hickeys he had left down my chest.

Once we were back in a heated room I turned to look at my boyfriend. “What was that you did back there?” I asked him. How had he turned a mortifying situation into a childish game?

“I eliminated the illusion of fear in the activity. Without that, you were able to enjoy the experience free of trepidation.” Jonathan ran his knuckle over my cheek as he looked closer at me. “I have to admit, I thought you would scream or kick me for pulling such a stunt. Why didn’t you?”

“I trust you Jonathan.” I caressed his cheek before leaning in to tenderly kiss his lips. “I figured you would have learned that by now.”

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I had enjoyed Mireille's evening of enchantment, and even more so her gift. Eight hundred milliliters of benzyl chloride would last me until June if I used it wisely. This chemical building block was among my favorites to work with and now that I had some, I could finally advance my latest formula. Perhaps this time I could get past some of the more gruesome effects of an overdose of the toxin and improve its potency while I'm at it. I still had more than enough vermin test subjects in my basement and suitable, although not willing, patients were constantly being sent into solitary.

The ship slowed down as it reentered the bay and neared the pier. Taking the hand of my dozing date, I shook Mireille lightly before telling her we had returned to port. She nodded and stood up, not tired out of drunkenness but because of the light sway of the boat. My girlfriend held onto my arm, her eyes still half lidded as she followed me down the stairs and onto the docks. “Did you have fun?” Mireille asked me sweetly, now fully awake and ready to converse.
"It will certainly not be forgotten anytime soon." I placed my hand on her back as we walked down the pier and into the nearby parking lot. "You really know how to plan a romantic evening, Mireille." I gave her the compliment before kissing the crown of her head.

"What?" Mireille got a mischievous smile on her face, "the date isn't over yet. I've got something waiting for us back at my place." Nodding in agreement at her antics, I opened the car door for her and closed it once she was safely inside. Taking my own seat in the driver's chair, I began piloting our trip back. Beside me, Mireille fiddled with the radio before finding a station she enjoyed. She then leaned back in her chair and admired the lights of the city while listening to the upbeat music.

How could a girl who was dangling from a boat no more than thirty minutes ago now be blissfully enjoying the scenery around her? Part of what I did had valid reasoning behind it, but the notion of holding her nearly upside down atop the four story ship was something that happened in the spur of the moment. And she had taken it in stride, even to the point of marveling in her world being turned quite literally upside down.

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"Make yourself at home, I'll be back in a second after I change out of this dress." Mireille shut her bedroom door and locked it, leaving me to sit on her couch, wondering where this date would now lead. Beside me was the movie we had planned on watching last Thursday. Perhaps that was what she had scheduled. I sat back in the couch and loosened my tie before removing it completely. Mireille was an astonishing woman. As I thought back to what had transpired on the boat I felt myself relax concerning our somewhat unorthodox relationship. We would be fine. As for Croc, a visit to solitary should settle him down.

I grabbed the foreign film's box and examined the images on the back. I was by no means scared of the movie; I had an appreciation for it. Rather than rely on blatant gore and jump scares to terrify the audience, the director had focused on slowly revealing the severity of the foolish and defenseless family's situation. By far, the best part of the film were the ghosts which haunted the building the people were locked in. They were corrupted, decades of suffering in the same anguish they had died in swayed them to desire instilling their misfortune in whoever crossed their path rather than assist them. That should be what sticks with and torments Mireille the most, with her belief of salvation after death being stomped upon.

Being cruel to my girlfriend was not my primary objective, I simply felt the need to test her ability to acclimate. Already she had proved herself to be a suitable confidante, but I couldn't help but feel further assessment was necessary. It was strange to look at her and think she would be perfect, that nothing would go wrong like before. I knew it would be a long time before I could confess to her, I needed to strengthen our bond more. I wanted to.

"I'm back!" Mireille emerged from her bedroom in a maroon spaghetti strap shirt and plain jeans. As my girlfriend made her way over to me I saw the hickeys I had placed on her earlier tonight were bruising nicely. Just a bit more culturing and she would do nicely. "Ah, you already caught on." She poked the movie in my hand before kissing my cheek. "And I thought I would surprise you."

"Sorry Mireille, I suppose I'm a tad too smart to overlook a clearly placed DVD case." I commented before she snatched said item away with a grin.

"I meant to hide it," Mireille admitted as she opened the box. I saw her jump and grinned. "Creepy cover art, they put the clear hub of the disc directly over a dead child's face." She lightly laughed it
off before putting the movie in the player.

"Do you like horror movies Mireille? We've gone to see a few at the cinema, but those were pretty tame." I felt the need to ask her this out of courtesy.

"I usually enjoy intense horror movies after they're over. Then I have a chance to think over and appreciate the film, but during the showing I am often terrified." She slid the disc tray closed and took the remote off the top of the television. "But, I have my boyfriend with me today, so I think things will go a lot smoother than usual."

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I refrained from putting my arm around Mireille until we were forty five minutes into the film, at that point her legs were tucked in front of her and her arms wrapped around them. It was a chilling movie, that was easily confirmed. A deceased child with half of his limbs dismembered had just cornered a living mother in a room. Sobbing hysterically through bloodied teeth, the boy cried out for comfort by the means of his stuffed dog 'Taro'. The instant my hand touched her shoulder, Mireille screamed for a good three seconds before realizing it was me. After a brief apology, she moved closer and let me drape my arm over her shoulder.

I had heard my girlfriend scream before, but the most guttural had to have been last month in the elevator when Edward had captured us. Other than that, Mireille only really shrieked in excitement at rare instances and gave out soft cries of distress during some horror movies at the cinema. Her most recent scream was different from the others, it was higher pitched, it was a cry for help more than a release of pent up terror.

Rubbing her shoulder with my hand I felt her muscles relax as she lounged against me. Although I compromised her reaction to the rest of the movie by offering comfort, I felt my choice was superior to having Mireille curl up beside me in a traumatized stupor.

As much as I was changing her, she most certainly had an effect on me as well.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who stabbed Joker? Leave a comment and tell me your theory as to what went down! Also, what do you think of Jonathan's motives, or Mireille trust in the guy? Should she keep her job at the asylum? Do you think Jonathan will actually try to pump Croc with Toxin?

I was on a stone kick this episode, because when I did research on chemical compounds and elements (I was reading up on soooo many of them, too much chem) I found links to gems and then decided to do some research on some of them and their meanings. In this chapter I used: "Blue Lace Agate", "Howlite", "Emerald", "Diamond", "Citrine", "Amethyst", and "Alexandrite".

Remember to Review!
Chapter 11: Mad Love

* November 30 *

I was humming this morning, still in a state of bliss after my anniversary dinner with Jonathan. Although some of the events left me wondering about his character, I was by no means deterred on my path of pursuing him. I had only just made it into the Medical Facility when an intern donning surgical scrubs started running toward me. He was talking rather fast and his Russian accent was thick, but from what he was saying I pulled out the words 'operating room', 'clown', and 'throat'. The 'quick' is something I felt was implied. Dashing over to the operating room I took the clipboard off the wall without paying attention to its contents. I prefer an actual specimen to slapdash information any day.

"When." I spoke quickly as I pulled on some gloves and covered my outfit with a set of sanitized scrubs. "Where, and how." Grabbing some tools I placed them on a nearby cart and wheeled them over to the patient. Upon looking at the person, I froze for a second. It was not who I assumed. "Mademoiselle Quinzel." Harley Quinn, as she was better known, was lying on our usual operating table, her arms and feet bound to the surface alongside her head. A sheet covered her from the chest below for modesty's sake but it looked as if she was entirely stable. Well, except for one thing in particular.

"Miss Quinzel was found in Intensive Treatment early this morning; obviously she was attempting to blast the Joker free his cell. But, as we both know, he has been relocated. Not knowing this, she set off the explosive and was pierced in the throat by a piece of shrapnel she was unable to evade. Miss Quinzel was able to breathe for a while before swelling cut off her airway. Luckily, by that time we had installed a tracheostomy tube to allow her to refill her lungs. All that's left is removing the projectile, but due to the trajectory and unknown length of the item at hand, we are unsure how close it is to the left vertebral artery." The more level headed Dr. Chen reported as I stood across from him. "I was on call last night, but when I saw this… I'm sorry Dr. Milenkovic, I thought you should be the one to remove the item. I've stabilized her other wounds but as you know, I primarily deal with invasive surgery where I have plenty of visibility on the subject at hand. This, this is merely a delicate touch and lots of luck."

I brought myself closer to the wound, using a magnifying lens to observe the surface of the item. It was smooth, thank goodness. Taking it out would not be terribly difficult or destructive as I had feared. But, should it sever the left vertebral artery, her brain would be starved for oxygen for quite a while as we patched it up. Permanent damage to her head was not an impossibility in such a case. "Dr. Chen, I need you to have sutures ready for me if this goes wrong. I'll also need a cauterizer." While my colleague prepared his tools I redirected the light to point at the woman's neck. Grabbing the shrapnel, I imagined its trajectory. If it were to be hitting the artery, it would be best not to point toward it. Shifting the shard of metal so that it dug into the lateral part of my patient, I delicately removed it a few centimeters before yanking it free completely. I ensured that I did not shift the item at all, leaving a single gaping hole with no other tears along the way. "Cauterizer." I took the item from Dr. Chen before looking into my patient's exposed and damaged trachea. "Her esophagus was also punctured on one side, but the metal was nowhere deep enough to graze the left vertebral
artery.” Using the electrically heated tool, I stopped some of the bleeding on my patient by melting the ends of the blood vessels. "Now just some stitches and we'll be all set.”

Looping thread around her esophagus was easy; the puncture required no more than five stitches. It was her trachea that was difficult. With two holes on either side with a more substantial diameter, it took much longer closing the gap. Around eighteen stitches were used on either side of her trachea before I was sure the wound would heal properly. Closing the rest of the muscle and skin was child's play. After cutting off the thread I turned around to see Dr. Young, five interns, two members of security, four psychiatrists, and one amused Dr. Crane applauding me from behind the observational pane of glass. I nodded my head in recognition before removing my gloves.

"Dr. Chen, keep her on an IV drip and remove the tracheostomy tube before she wakes up, we don't want to frighten Mademoiselle Quinzel too badly. Alert me when she is awake.” I stretched and looked at the clock; eleven in the morning, not a bad start to a day.

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"That was impressive Dr. Milenkovic.” I happily took the compliment from Dr. Young.

"Thank you, but it wasn't very skill based. Dr. Chen was right; luck and speed were the deciding factors." I continued walking with her toward the Joker's room. I needed to sanitize his wound and she needed to conduct an interview. Since the stabbing incident, I had been placed on Joker duty to ensure the vengeful employee didn't strike again. This didn't mean I was sleeping, eating, and living in the same room as it, it simply meant that I had one of the few cardkeys to unlock his door. I'd been placed in charge on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. The remaining days belonged to Dr. Jessop and security guard Aaron Cash was always with a cardkey if something happened.

I would be seeing Monsieur J multiple times today to watch as the orderlies took care of their day to day tasks. Already he had missed breakfast. Reaching the door, I slid my cardkey and punched in a fourteen digit code, ensuring Dr. Young had turned away before I entered it. The door opened and I saw my patient begin to fidget with excitement. "Ooh la la, two female doctors here for my sponge bath!” I felt the need to apologize for my patient, but when I turned to look at Dr. Young, she was rapidly jotting things down on her clipboard already.

"Um, Dr. Young?” I was going to ask what was so interesting about his statement, but she waved me off to perform my usual duties. "Okay then, good morning Monsieur J. I apologize for my tardiness but I had an emergency to tend to." Opening the new mini fridge in the room I saw the remains of some Jell-O I prepared Monday alongside various sandwich ingredients. Beside the fridge was a box of pop tarts. The Joker was not allowed regular asylum food as my coworkers feared it would be poisoned; as such we individually made his meals by hand. "I'll make you a big lunch since I neglected to feed you breakfast."

"How could you Doc, that's the most important meal of the day. You want me to grow up big and strong don't you?” The Joker sounded somewhat menacing as he whined like a common child.

"I do want you to heal faster, but if you understood why I was missing this morning, I'm sure you would appreciate my absence.” I slathered one side of bread with mayonnaise before laying on some cold bacon, tomatoes, lettuce, and cheese. Placing it on a plate, I poured some BBQ chips alongside the sandwich and retrieved a juice box from the fridge.

"Ooh, do tell. Why would the Joker be grateful to a doctor for forgetting to feed him? I'm drawing a
blank, whaddaya think Dr. Young?" He turned his deep green eyes to the psychologist.

"You call Doctor Milenkovic Doc, but myself doctor." She mumbled, Looking back to her patient after jotting the words down she asked. "Why is that?"

"Eh? I'm asking the questions here." Monsieur J then turned to watch as I brought his meal over. I had to cut the sandwich into small cubes, like those you would see at a child's tea party, each with a toothpick in it. After he attempted to bite my fingers on Monday, I was taking precautions when it came to feeding the Joker. "What! That's no fun at all. We were having so much fun last time playing 'Killer Croc and Aaron Cash!'"

"You were." I grabbed one of the extra-long toothpicks before sitting on his bed. Turning my torso, I offered him the food. Leaning up slightly, the Joker consumed the sandwich bit by bit. "Anything else you want me to bring for meals?" I asked after he finished half the sandwich and requested some chips.

"A box of animal crackers, a three layer cake, and some homemade macadamia nut cookies would be nice." Monsieur J liked giving me impossible ideas alongside his usual requests, curious how I would react to them.

I took a mental note of the list before nodding. "I will see what can be done." Returning to feeding the Joker, I fell into a rhythm. With his head only reaching so far, it wasn't hard to keep at a constant flow of feeding him from a safe distance. I even moved the food somewhat closer at times, knowing he could not elongate his jaw. What I didn't expect was for him to use his tongue to lap at my hand when I got somewhat close. Dropping the food and toothpick in shock, he took the wood piece and craned his neck to look at Dr. Young. Using my moment of shock and her focus on the notebook to his advantage, he used his breath to fire the pick.

Thankfully, the wood hit her cheek rather than what I can assume to be his target, her eye. Putting the dish aside I hurriedly yanked the doctor's hands away, the bit of wood had barely penetrated the skin. Pulling it out, I watched as a single pinprick of blood slowly oozed from the wound. "How did he--"

"My fault." I interrupted my colleague.Grabbing some antiseptic, I sanitized the wound before placing a small round bandage over it. "Sorry about that Dr. Young."

"It's okay, I've had worse." She reached up to touch her cheek. "The Band-Aid is overkill though." Dr. Young smiled at my fussing and returned to her clipboard, now recounting those events in her document.

"You can forget about that cake Monsieur J." I took away his half eaten meal and instead prepared an IV drip. "No solid food for two days, I'll notify Dr. Jessop of this as well." I grabbed the water bag and put it up alongside the drip.

"It was just a little joke Doc, honest I meant no harm. Just a ruptured cornea." He giggled to himself as I injected his arm with the food alternative.

"Either way, misconduct is not something to encourage." I tossed the remainder of his food in the garbage bin, deciding to use this gap of time in our schedule to sanitize his latest scar. "Once again, I apologize for my patient Dr. Young."

"Don't be silly, it was very educational in its own right. May I visit him again later when you refill
his IV?" The psychologist asked me, already setting an alarm on her watch for six thirty.

"Sure, but go ahead and conduct your session now, I'll just tune it out." Retrieving an MP3 player from my bag I showed her that the volume was set to max, hit play, and locked the device before plugging my ears with the headphones. Sitting back in my swivel chair, I watched the reflection of the discussion in a nearby mirror. I needed to keep an eye on them for safety's sake, but from this distance I could still read their lips, a skill I had picked up when Pierre and I wanted to communicate after he had taken his vow of silence.

'What do you think of Dr. Milenkovic?' Dr. Young asked.

'She's fun.' The Joker replied with a grin that was nowhere near playful and eyes that appeared laced with danger.

Closing my eyelids, I blocked out the rest of the conversation. I had to put my trust in Dr. Young this time; hopefully she wouldn't attempt to hurt the Joker. Instead, I listened to my French pop music and jumped a bit each time it would be interjected by a certain laughing clown.

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Miss Quinzel regained consciousness at around four pm. From what I heard over my office phone, she was discombobulated. Grabbing my bag off of the hook beside the door, I started my walk over to her. Although I was going to be taking care of her today, Harley Quinn's medical attention was to be given to her by my colleague Dr. Chen.

Once I reached Harley Quinn's room, I saw a small cluster of medical staff trying to calm her down as she came to grips with her situation, screaming in anger one second and recoiling the next from the painful vibrations working along her throat. Ushering away the clump of people I approached her and put my finger over my lips, telling her to be quiet. "Hello Mademoiselle Quinzel, my name is Dr. Milenkovic. I operated on you earlier today. Now, I understand you are in quite a state of shock and find it painful to talk right now. But don't worry; I am rather skilled at reading lips so if you have anything to say, I'm more than willing to pay attention." Pulling down the collar of her shirt, I saw that Dr. Chen had indeed removed the breathing device from my current patient's throat.

'What's goin' on here?' Harley mouthed quickly, 'Why can't I talk!' She added to the question.

"During your attempt to release the Joker, a bit of shrapnel was lodged in your throat. It was safely removed; however it will take a while to heal properly." I checked the water on her IV drip before returning to the concerned patient. "I can give you ice chips if you want, but for a few weeks you are going to be relying on these IV drips for sustenance. You're very lucky Mademoiselle Quinzel, one inch higher and it would be the larynx, one lower and we have the thyroid gland, a bit deeper and the left vertebral artery would be involved."

'It was worth it, my Mistah J got away! And he'll come back ta rescue me!' Miss Quinzel mouthed this with a smile on her lips, proud of her sacrifice for the Joker. I was unsure if I should tell Harley, in fear of her love for the Joker leading to another escape attempt. I didn't have the chance to weigh my options, someone beat me to it.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the Joker has been recently relocated and is safely locked away. The cell you broke down this morning was empty." Dr. Martell informed the girl. I sighed in relief before telling him to be quiet and leave the room. At least he didn't disclose the Joker's location or the reason behind his transferal.
"Whe--" Harley cringed after the brief utterance. 'Where is he?' she asked, brow furrowed and eyes alight with anger.

"Monsieur J is somewhere safe." I informed the woman before checking her does of antibiotics. Finding them to be at a normal range, I put down the clipboard and smiled. "As are you. So please spend this time recuperating rather than plotting a scheme to escape. When it comes to internal stitches, and trust me I placed the ones in your throat, it's best not to aggravate them. Now, Dr. Chen is your main physician, but if you ever wish to speak to me I'm sure he can put us in touch."

Taking a syringe of pain medication off of the nearby counter, I injected its contents into the IV tube leading to her arm. As Harleen's eyes fluttered shut, I saw her mouth one more thing. 'Mistah J, I'll save ya.'

I stood beside her for a while, pretending to check the IV, examining her file, and looking at her healing bruises. By the time I left the room, a majority of the interns had vacated the no longer enticing scene. Walking over to my office, I thought about what I had seen today in Harley Quinn. A majority of the doctor's called her relationship with the Joker an obsession, something entirely unhealthy and ridiculous in the extreme. He had obviously changed over time, going from a smooth talking patient to an abusive boyfriend in only a few years. But she stuck with the guy. Perhaps the gradual shift made it easy to adjust to the situation, or she felt she was too far down the rabbit hole to stop when he got aggressive.

I think I would react differently in her situation. After losing a loved one, I never wished to instill that same crippling despair in another person, especially by the means of supporting a master criminal and their chaotic and homicidal desires.

I preferred my current boyfriend, and aiding his novice experiments.

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"Our consultations have proven to be highly lucrative so far Mireille." I spoke to my girlfriend as I set up her latest hindrance hurdle. "You've already progressed to step three in a mere two and a half weeks, although you did have some difficulties conquering the steering wheel." Pushing a burned DVD into the player, I turned back to my girlfriend. It had taken five sessions for her to grown numb to the authentic article, but she stuck to my program all the same. Now it was time for her next stimulant.

Looking at the monitor, I saw her heart rate beginning to rise in anticipation. It was now a conscious effort to remain professional in these meetings. As much as I cared about Mireille getting over her fears, when I saw her pupils dilate and her hands begin to shake, I couldn't help but see her as adorable. Like most men I had a guilty pleasure, I enjoyed inciting my girlfriend's fears. It wasn't her terror I was out for like most of my other victims, instead I reveled in her reaction after the fact; how she would sometimes latch onto me for support or how her heart rate would drop with only a few of my encouraging words.

"What is it this time?" Mireille looked to me for knowledge, a tender smile still on her lips as she sat up on the couch.

"You'll see." I needed the element of surprise, well I wanted it. As soon as I sat down on the opposing chair I primed my composition book and pen, ready to observe. Pressing play, I watched as Mireille instantly jumped, recoiling in her seat as a compilation of automobile collisions played on the
screen. Her pulse changed as well, 94, 100, 112, 126 and stabilizing; up 32 beats per minute in less than twenty seconds. Pupils beginning to dilate and toes curling in her socks were observations I jotted down in my field notes nearing our second minute into the video. Turning my head, I saw that the bloodiest of accidents was coming up. Cue the zoom in on the broken windshield and splattered brain matter, and there goes Mireille. Checking my watch I noted the time, five minutes and forty-six seconds. It was a start. Reaching for the remote, Mireille called back to me.

"Give me a minute," her voice was somewhat hoarse as she pushed her head up against the wall, probably in attempts to calm a headache. Pausing the video I continued my remarks, 'persistent', 'resilient', 'need for approval?'. Mireille was a formidable woman, I watched as her pulse slowly decelerate all of her own volition, I felt proud of my girlfriend as she sat back down. Nodding to tell me she was ready, I hit play.

I placed one of the more gory clips in the beginning to allow Mireille to get the brunt of it early on, with the worst out of the way she would now be given a chance to adjust to the film. Mireille's predicament flummoxed me, a woman who was involved in a traumatizing and bloody accident when she was only eight years old, watched her fiancé die in front of her when she was eighteen, and yet she was never deterred from her dream of being a doctor. Her dedication was something I wanted to question her on one day. But for now, I will simply watch and encourage my girlfriend in her endeavor to conquer her fears.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment!!!
Chapter 12: A Truly Eventful Month pt. 1

Chapter Notes

A/N: A lot of time skipping in this one. Also, don't worry, I never plan on abandoning this fic I'm just in college now. You may be here a while, but I won't give up midway through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12: A Truly Eventful Month pt. 1

* December 5 *

I had gone to Jonathan's office in the guise of retrieving and discussing several tests taken on some of my patients. Naturally, that was a boldfaced lie. We had discussed these results over in the breakroom. Instead, the secretary was holding Dr. Crane's calls while we canoodled in his office. Placing a delicate kiss atop my boyfriend's forehead, I relaxed in his slender arms after our most recent make out session. "Can I run something by you Jonathan?" I shifted my weight on his lap, moving closer to his chest and allowing my fingertips to play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"Anything, Mireille." Jonathan's hands lowered a bit, taking in the curves of my waist and thighs as our tame conversation continued. Moving my skirt up a tad, the psychologist placed his right hand on my leg, running his warm palms up and down my thigh. Enjoying the gentle ministrations, I felt my nerves unwind with the aid of his tender caress.

"My parents have asked me to celebrate Christmas with them in Paris, for the fifth year in a row. I typically deny this annual request without a second thought, but now I feel it may be time for me to face reality and move on with my life." I placed my own hand over Jonathan's now immobile one. Taking in a deep breath I continued. "Pierre's grave deserves a visit, and his old apartment isn't going to clean itself out. It will be hard to go through everything and sort the important from the negligible, but I've put this off long enough." Squeezing Jonathan's hand, I saw him piece the words together in his head before making a calculated response.

"Why this year? What has caused such a significant shift in attitude?" I had to agree, a five year habit would be easier to continue than to cancel, but rather than insist upon an increasing feeling of guilt for neglecting my late fiancée I answered honestly.

"With your help, I've been able to shed demons I felt would cling to me for the duration of my existence, but now I know I needn't live with those burdens. Your regimen has begun to weaken my phobia and now I feel compelled to make the next step on my own by letting go of my old heartache." Looking at my boyfriend's glimmering blue eyes through his impeccable spectacles I gave him a huge grin. "You're an amazing individual, you know that Jonathan? Taking a cracked person like me and mending them without a single motive, besides a few kisses here and there."

"You're strong on your own, Mireille. You would conquer these fears one day or another. As for your query, I think visiting Paris is a wonderful way to help in the healing process." Jonathan gave me a smile as he praised me, stoking the flames of my confidence only further, but I needed to tell him how much he was cherished before I embarked on my journey.
Taking his right hand, I placed it on the center of my chest. "You know, despite what all those ludicrous movies and misleading books say, a broken heart never heals. You make room in it for someone, someone precious to you, and when they die, that place they occupied still exists. That part of you doesn't simply disappear or mend itself. It festers, aches, and slowly rots away. But it never leaves completely; an echo of your agony is left in its wake to cry out in that empty chasm and beg to be rejuvenated." I gazed upon him with rosy red cheeks and eyes glimmering with adoration. "And when I'm with you Jonathan, just a pinch of that pain seems to vanish."

He sat there in silence for a few dozen seconds, clearly unsure what should be said. Kissing the tip of my boyfriend's nose I got up to leave. "The plane we’re taking departs on the twenty first, I'll be gone for a whole week and then come back before my parents, so we can spend New Years together." Stretching my arms above my head, I grinned in excitement for the upcoming month. It would be truly eventful. "In preparation for the trip, I suppose I will need to brush up on my French." Putting my arms down, I decided to return to my still quite flustered boyfriend for a goodbye kiss. "A Bientot mon amour," I purred in his ear before departing.

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* Later That Day *

"I need to see him" I demanded.

"I already told you Dr. Milenkovic, he’s in isolation, which means no interactions." Monsieur Bolton stated once again.

"I'm his doctor." My nails drummed on the clipboard I held in my hands.

"It isn't up to me." He had a smug grin on his face now, clearly pleased that I was aggravated.

"I'll speak to your superiors." I threatened him.

"Go ahead." He called my bluff.

I huffed in disdain at Monsieur Bolton's blatant indifference, scowling at him from behind the ballistic glass which separated myself and all the doctors from his security booth. Rather than leave gracefully, I decided to make a jab at him. What was he to do? The man was hired muscle, dispensable to our cause and easy to replace on short notice. "Very well, I shall return to my job. Where I deal with patients on a first hand basis rather than click through video feeds from behind the safety of a bullet proof cocoon." Sneering at the man, I turned on my heel and walked away, proud of the verbal attack.

I suppose it wasn't Monsieur Bolton's fault in the long run, but the guard wasn't exactly helpful in discovering the reason I couldn't see my patient. Killer Croc's rowdy behavior as well as gruesome threats would be reason enough for him to be tossed in solitary; however the fact he held valuable information concerning Jonathan and myself made me eager to confirm his silence on the matter. Nevertheless, that would be an item on my agenda for another day.

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* December 10 *

"I won!" I giggled in glee, hopping up and down on the rubber pavement.

"Indeed, but only by five strokes." Jonathan wrote the final scores down before placing the paper card in his pocket. "And besides, that was not the point of this outing." Taking the putter from me, he
walked over to the stand at the front of the course to turn in the equipment. "We came here to for the next step in our regimen to overtake your fear of driving. Now, seeing as you were able to conquer racing computer games in two sessions, the next feasible step is placing you in an arcade racing game with an actual steering wheel and a somewhat authentic car seat. Now this is your fifth step in our eight step program so I feel the need to say that I do expect these final stages to take longer. I don't want you to feel rushed in any way."

Placing a hand on the small of my back, my therapist walked me under the neon 'Arcade' sign and into the dimly lit, but brightly colored hall as if he were about to instruct me to lay on a chaise lounge rather than sit on an old plastic chair fabricated to look like leather. After getting a few stares from various teenagers as I wrapped the heart rate monitor around my wrist, Dr. Crane sat in the identical chair beside my own; presumably it was used to compete in head to head races with a friend rather than simply face the program alone. Although somewhat loud in the arcade, I was still able to pull his words out of the crowd.

"Play as long as you think you can handle. If you need to take a break we can always walk a lap around the building or stop for the night. This is an active exercise like before, not something you can sit through in hope of it somehow helping you out through osmosis." Placing a bag of tokens on the dash, he gestured to me with open palms, telling me to start when I was ready.

"Okay." it was more than a little intimidating, and now we had the gazes of strangers to add to the anxiety of the situation. With a lungful of stale, pizza scented air, I put two quarters into the machine and was promptly taken to a catalogue of vehicles available for me to race in. Turning the wheel to pick one at random without analyzing specs, I honked to confirm my choice. Next I needed to pick a track, deciding to go for something easy I chose a beginners level race in China. Immediately after pressing start, I was transported to the starting line where a scantily clad digital woman held a green flag while numbers counting backwards flashed atop the screen.

When the countdown reached zero and the flag was waved, I watched as the programmed cars raced ahead before ordering my foot to lower itself and press on the gas. However, it took a while for this suggestion to make its way from my head to the selected muscle, and when it finally did, I found myself gripping the steering wheel with enough force to shatter a walnut. I moved with a pace similar to that of a snail, but despite this each turn was jerkily made as my car was not suited for maneuverability. Halfway through the course, a car lapped me, and soon after that a second car came by. It was the third that crashed into my vehicle and sent me spinning off the beaten path. Evidently the arcade had chosen to invest in marginally immersive games, as my chair rumbled upon impact. Even though I observed the race from a third person point of view and the chair jittered with the intensity of a vibrating cell phone, I promptly felt my already pale skin lose all of its color as I emitted a small scream prior to silencing myself by slamming sweaty palms over my mouth. Letting tears drip down my face, I shut my eyes as tight as possible. Memories began to flood to the surface that had haunted me for over fifteen years.

XXXXX Mireille: 8 years old XXXXX

My mère and I were returning home from my grand-mère's house. Father hadn't joined us on the outing so that he could finish up some of his work, leaving me and my mother to drive between my grandmother's rural home in the country and Paris all alone. We left around nine at night, when mother realized that dark clouds had blotted out the skies and the heavy rain showed no signs of letting up. We weren't in a rush to get home, the route was long, scenic, and lonely; we only spotted a car every forty minutes or so. When the first column of lightning struck, my mère wasn't fazed at all, but as a small child I was frightened beyond belief. She kept her left hand on the steering wheel and reached back with her right to offer a lifeline of support, quickly I reached forward so that she could grasp my hand in hers. After receiving a smile from her in the rearview window, I became at
"Nothing is going to hurt you, alright dearest child?" My mother drew back her hand and returned her attention to driving. The fields were level around us, the highest structures aside from our car being the occasional tree. I watched each of them as they zoomed by, giving names to the trees and wondering what creatures used the leafy structure as a home.

Then it happened.

Lightning had struck nearby. Not deathly close, but within two hundred feet. It singled out the newly named tree: ‘Grahm’, causing him to burst into flames and light up the dark, stormy night. I had watched the flames for a short while, silently grieving my new friend, when my mère screamed, "watch out!" and leant on the horn.

All I remember are the blaring headlights as they collided with the left side of the car; the same side as my mère. I was snug in the middle seat so I could get a good view over the dashboard on the ride home and in retrospect, that probably saved my life. It wasn't a perfect T-Bone accident; the car came at us angled thirty degrees to our left, but as soon as my mère realized its inevitability, she reacted. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she nimbly leapt to the passenger's seat, saving her legs from being crushed. She didn't realize the impact would cause us to roll.

While I was attached to the car with the seatbelt, my head spinning as we flipped, I saw my mère being tossed around by momentum, her head colliding with every other object in the car until we stopped and the various forces of physics acting upon my mother carried her out the window and onto the cold, wet asphalt. Our car landed upside down, just on the edge of the road. I debated for less than a millisecond whether or not to get out; the conflict had been pushed aside when I saw my mère motionless on the asphalt in a small pool of blood.

Fueled by adrenaline, I untethered myself from the seat and plopped onto the ceiling of the car. The window had broken open when the car was crushed, but not heeding the warning of the jagged glass; I pushed my body through the dangerous opening, ripping my abdomen open with the protrusions. Crawling over to my unconscious mère, I began crying for help. Looking around for someone, I saw the red tail lights of our assailant vanish in the distance. We were abandoned in the rain, Grahm was burning, and I could barely hear myself think over the thunder.

It was a hit and run, we weren't sure if the driver wanted to catch a glance at the tree and temporarily ignored the road, had grown blind in the rain, or if he was drunk.

But I do believe it was him who called the ambulance that saved us.

I never wanted to do that, cause the misery he had created. I didn't want to drive, I was too afraid that I too would severely wound someone, create a widow or orphan, or simply remove a precious life from the world. Since then I had lived in fear of driving.

*December 21*

When the morning of the trip came, Jonathan helped out by driving my parents as well as myself to the airport. What I figured would be an awkward situation for him, turned into a pleasant conversation. My father and Jonathan found common ground in the sciences. Even though their branches were fairly distanced with Jonathan being enamored with chemistry and my father working in biotechnology, they talked about new discoveries in the community and idea-stealing peers as if they worked in the same laboratory. There were even brief instances of the duo chuckling.
When it came to my mother however, he used his charms. Firstly by complimenting her appearance and further by asking for, then praising, her taste in music. After this, he didn't get to say much besides the answers to my fast talking mother's endless questions. Things as simple ‘what's your favorite color?’ and others delving deep with, ‘do you find your occupation mentally rewarding because it challenging you, or do you enjoy the job because you know you are making a difference in the community.’

After all the pestering, once we arrived I expected my boyfriend to throw our luggage on the sidewalk and floor it, but he once again surprised me. Jonathan wheeled around the heavier of my suitcases whilst I walked around the airport with a light carry on. Accompanying me throughout the process, he spoke to my parents when they instigated a conversation and held my hand while we waited through the long lines. Despite this, Jonathan didn't talk to me very much; he simply pointed out where an open employee was or commented on people adjusting the contents of their luggage to prevent an overweight fee. I was unsure if this was due to social awkwardness or if he didn't know what to say under these circumstances. We hadn't been apart often since we started dating. The longest we'd gone without seeing one another face to face was probably a four day span when I caught the flu. Now we were going to be on opposite sides of an ocean for a whole week.

Jonathan saw me off at security, the farthest he could go without special permission from the airline. With only a few people in front of me, I decided to say my goodbyes. "I'll miss you Jonathan." Standing up on my toes, I kissed his cheek for more than a few seconds before pulling away. "Promise to take care of yourself while I'm gone?" I held onto his wrists, swinging his arms lightly from side to side as I gazed into his blue eyes. Jonathan had just gotten to a somewhat healthy weight and his anemia was all but gone at this point, it would be rather upsetting if I came back to find him reverted back to normal.

"I've made it this far in life, haven't I?" Jonathan joked with a sly smirk upon his lips.

"That's up for debate." I quipped back, kicking off my shoes in preparation for the screening process, subtracting another inch of height. "I'll see if I can find some arcades in France so all of our progress on my phobia doesn't go to waste. Any souvenirs you want?" I was already set to buy some macarons for Teresa and a desk statue of the Eiffel tower for Dr. Bartholomew. Each time I asked Jonathan however, he always said he was fine without a memento.

"I just want my girlfriend to enjoy her trip without becoming some young Parisian man's object of affection." Jonathan's request sounded serious. Deciding now was not the time for jokes, I comforted him.

"Don't worry Jonathan. I'll be too busy thinking of you to notice even the most extravagant attempts at courting." Letting go of his wrists I placed my bag and shoes in their designated trays. Turning back I saw Jonathan with a frail smile on his lips.

"I will miss you Mireille." Leaning down, Jonathan kissed me square on the lips, a mere three feet from my parents. "Take care, my little pumpkin." Resting his lips upon my forehead for a few brief seconds, he stepped back to shake my parent's hands before walking off. Once I was on the opposite side of the metal detector, I looked back to see him forty feet away, lightly waving at me before continuing his retreat.

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* Later That Week *

"Yes, a girl… What do you mean there are people ahead of me? Look I can't wait much longer… Fine, that time frame seems suitable… My name? Dr. Jonathan Crane… Of course I would want to
meet her beforehand!...Way out there? Very well... Yes, I can send you the money... Good day to you as well.” I snapped my cell phone shut and pocketed it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What's going on with Jonathan? Also, did you enjoy Mireille's flashback, understand her feelings toward driving now? Everyone still remember Mireille is pronounced mee-RAY? Please leave a review and let me know what you think. Have a lovely day~!
Chapter 12: A Truly Eventful Month pt. 2

A/N: So, sorry for the long wait. This chapter is also a tad dry, but necessary. Things will begin to pick up in the next chapter and will continue to do so. Think of this installment as the 'calm before the storm'. I'm in college now, so my spare time is fluctuating between nonexistent and widely available. Chapters will probably be released pretty sporadically. I want to thank everyone for the continued support. And no, I have not/ will not give up on this story. There is still much more to be told. Also, italics mean that the dialogue is French or over the phone.

The room was filled with ghosts. Ghosts of the past as well as a stolen future, ripped away from two men in the prime of their lives. A majority of the furniture in the small dwelling was covered by pristine white sheets, an effort made on behalf of my mother who sought to preserve the room as best she could for when I eventually returned to the memory filled apartment. Setting foot inside, my heart clenched with each step I advanced in the room. It had been six months since mother last cleaned the apartment, as evident by the miniscule clouds of dust which fluttered around my feet as I made my way deeper into the living room. Gripped firmly in my hand was a bag which would help me survive these next eight hours until I returned to my parent's summer home. Inside the tote were garbage bags, a notepad, pen, and some freshly baked croissants.

"Start someplace with little meaning, then work your way out." I recited my mother's advice on how to empty the apartment. Dropping the tote on the ground, I retrieved two white garbage bags, scrawling 'donate' with jittery hands on one of them and 'trash' on the other. There was, of course, the option to keep what I desired, but I had to limit myself on what I hoarded. It was unsettling, my former fiancé's possessions would now be weighted out by my own memories, my own version of importance as I decided what was useless to others and deserved to be tossed in a landfill and what could be salvaged only to meet that same fate at a later point in time. 'Is he watching?' I wondered. Was Pierre looking down at me from heaven and praying I keep certain items or toss others? Could it be he was simply happy to have me in his abode once again, even if it was after a long absence on my part. Carrying the two garbage bags to the bathroom, I began the sorting process.

Blow-dryer: donate, old pills: trash, Q-tips: trash. It was monotonous work as I cleared out the room. In roughly forty five minutes, the tiny bathroom was emptied. All that was kept in the room were bottles of soap and rolls of toilet paper, items which still retained their usefulness after years of storage. Cleaning was saved for another day, perhaps with the helping hand of my mother. For now, trudging down memory lane was enough.

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Sorting in the kitchen was also much easier than expected. The food it previously housed had already
been removed, so I simply had to make the call on what appliances, tableware, and utensils to keep or discard. Old plates were retrieved from the cupboard one at a time as I paused to admire the light scratches they had gained over the years, mementoes left behind of the happy family's meals. Deciding they had yet to finish their work, the worn, white ceramic was fixed to be donated and used by another family. Moving along, I also chose to donate the glasses, utensils, bowls, and various servingware the Lepretre family had collected over their years. However, there was one set of items I was unable to part with.

Sticking with me for the foreseeable future were a set of ceramic mugs painted robin's egg blue. The reason behind keeping the items was now flashing before my eyes as I caressed the smooth ceramic. My first cup of coffee was drunk from one of these mugs after an exhausting sleepover with Pierre. Even now, I could picture Monsieur Lepretre's shoulders bouncing in silent laughter as he heard us simultaneously make sounds of disgust after our first gulp of the drink. Closing my eyes, I let the memory wash over me as I replaced the set of five mugs in the cabinet.

After the kitchen sorting was complete, I had to move to one of the tougher rooms. The options were: Monsieur Lepretre's room, my betrothed's room, and the living room. Taking a deep breath, I decided upon Monsieur Lepretre's bedroom, as Pierre had already sorted it once before. Opening my seventh donation bag and third trash bag, I moved to the bedroom. Sheets: gone, pillows: gone, slippers: gone. With his room, it wasn't a random pick and choose process, I had to work my way from one area to another and be thorough with my search. Already, a few spare francs from before the country's transition to the euro had turned up. However, I didn't fear throwing away money, I was afraid of disposing of precious family heirlooms or hidden letters. After I'd finished sorting clothing, I realized there was an astonishing lack of personal belongings in the room. Perhaps Pierre had already located and moved them; it seemed likely as he had lived in the apartment for a few years following his father's death.

Then, I found a trunk under the bed and realized: Pierre may not have disposed of much, but what was precious to him that related to his father was stored in this one case. Placing it atop the to-be-donated mattress, I opened the leather bound container. Inside were pictures of Pierre as he grew across the years, ticket stubs from various features the duo saw, dream journals, and an old photo of who I guessed to be Pierre's mother. Monsieur Lepretre never did tell his son about the woman, whether she deserted the two, died, or even if it was her who chose Pierre's name. I looked at the old striped shirts inside the trunk, half full containers of grease paint, and childhood drawings created by the man's son.

Monsieur Travis Lepretre's entire life, all of his precious possessions, were now crammed into a trunk I would struggle to sit inside. It was scary to think that it could all be stored in such a tight space. I shuddered as the thought ran through my head: would I also have my life's story restricted by a box one day? Out of convenience for my children or grandchildren? And what about this man's box? He had no relatives to live on and remember him; I could only take his memory so far. How would I convince my children to look upon the deceased Monsieur Lepretre with fondness? He would not be their grandfather, nor would Pierre be their father. I trembled in fear. I too would be forgotten in a few generations, simply something to spur my decedents to do great things because they were related to 'a woman who became a surgeon at the age of twenty three'. "I won't forget you though." Tears fell onto the mattress as I snapped the case shut.

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It was roughly noon when I decided to take a break. Opening a sliding glass door which led to the balcony, I took a step outside to clear my mind as I ate a croissant. The hum of life was all around me, loud conversations from the neighboring apartments leaking through open windows, the honking of horns and blaring street music drifting up from down below, and the gentle whisper of the breeze
ticking my ear. It had been too long. Not yet trusting the old railing, I latched onto the door handle I'd just used before reaching forward with my opposing hand to push at the metal barrier between myself and a seven story drop. Sturdy. Tentatively, I leaned against the balcony railing and took a bite of my lunch. 'Two rooms left, I may need to wait for another day,' I thought. Looking up at the sun's current resting place I lowered my head, 'nope, not even fooling yourself. It's too early to give in. Buck up, finish eating, and get back to work'.

After consuming the meal, I wiped away the crumbs lingering around the edges of my mouth and made my way back inside the warm apartment. "Jonathan is a dead man if he dangles me over that balcony, the ocean is one thing, hard concrete is another."

Now for the living room, home to a majority of the apartment's white sheets. Rather than yank the covers off, I folded them slowly to prevent the thick layer dust which coated them from dispersing throughout the room. As I unveiled the first misshapen ghost, I recognized the familiar olive green tartan couch with twin round pillows, heavily dented from so many naps. After the sheet was carefully set down, I sat on the couch. It had been years since I was last here. I recalled my six year old self, back when I was small enough that the couch seemed to swallow me up when I sat down, and how Pierre and I would jump on it as soon as his father left the apartment to pick up groceries. The countless late night movies, snacks, secret meetings, study sessions. This couch had been the single set required in the play of our childhood, a true centerpiece for the abode.

However, moving around in the seat destroyed my idealistic view of the item as I discovered that the cushions had become flattened from overuse. Only two inches separated me from the wooden frame, my right thigh being poked at by, most likely, a loose spring. Now I leaned against the equally firm back and thought to myself. 'Reupholstery is expensive, but not unreasonable in this case. A similar fabric would not be impossible to uncover.' I stood up and looked at the old friend. Yes, it would be saved. Not eager to lose track of my current activity, I checked the cracks of the couch as well as beneath it. All that the sofa hid were fifty euro cents and an old paintbrush. Putting the change in my pocket and the paintbrush in a donate pile, I resumed my work. Against the opposite wall were ten smaller sheets covering the same number of rectangles. There was no doubt in my mind that beneath them were canvases used by my late fiancé. 'Last', I decided. Better to save the waterworks for the end of my trip. As it was, I was already getting rather emotional knowing I would soon be rooting through Pierre's room.

After sticking a post-it on the television with the word 'donate' on it, I checked the DVD and VCR machine for old videos before putting matching post-its on the old electronics as well. Opening the cabinet beneath the television, I saw a few films and TV series in either format. Being sure not to miss a thing, I opened the boxes and looked behind the DVD, in the side flap, and even underneath the sheet of paper which depicted the films title. One at a time I put them in a donate bag until all that remained were home films. Deciding to keep the mementos, I stacked the fourteen VHSs and three DVDs before writing on the notepad to transfer them all to a DVD and digital format lest they decay over time.

Now that the mugs and home tapes were marked as 'keep', I placed them in a nearly empty kitchen cupboard, the newly designated area for articles I refused to let go of. Residing alongside those items were a worn cookbook, rolodex of family recipes, electric crepe maker, pie dish, memory laced throw blanket, and a novelty soap dish shaped like a bath tub.

I knelt by the coffee table and removed its sheet carefully. Sure enough, beneath the fabric was an unsent letter written either the day of or before Pierre's death. Taking a deep breath, I began to read the brief letter.
Dear Mademoiselle Mireille, hopefully my fiancé if things go as planned,

I am writing this letter to you despite your proximity to me, in fact you are on an approaching plane most likely as anxious greet me as I am you. However, I guarantee that our anxiety exists for entirely separate reasons. I admit to being a coward for writing to you like this in attempts to ease my nerves about the upcoming proposal. It's bizarre for me to feel so out of tune and unsure of your response, we've known each other for more than a dozen years but still you manage to intrigue and surprise me at every turn. I simply cannot wait for you to keep astounding me on a daily basis.

How shall I propose though? Perhaps I should ask you in the park we first met? Or should I kneel down while we wait for your luggage to appear at the baggage carousel? Although I credit myself as a romantic, I am far too eager to know your response than to patiently wait for an opportune moment this time around.

I miss you my beloved Mireille, how I long to kiss your soft lips and spin you around in joy at our long overdue reunion. I plan on swiftly following you back to America, so never again will we have to endure the turmoil of each other's absences.

Mireille, I intend on posting this letter a week before you head home so it will hopefully meet you there just before my own arrival. I promise I will make you the happiest woman in the world, future Madame Mireille Lucia Lepretre

Love,

Your Future Husband,

Monsieur Pierre Travis Lepretre

I put the letter down before it would become stained by tears. Slowly sitting down on the couch behind me, I allowed the tears to begin streaming down my face as I lay down and curled up, deeply inhaling the faint remains of my former betrothed scent on a couch which had yet to be used in half a decade. My shoulders began to tremble as I sobbed for what felt like hours, coming to terms with the future that was dashed away from both Pierre and I, a future I'd held close to my heart for so long.

Now arose old memories of Pierre, how he would squeal in delight as a child when he got a new set of water colors, or his insistence that he hold the door open for me even when he was going through his 'cooties' phase. We would build blanket forts in the summer to mimic a tent in the desert, alternate reading pages of library books when his father was working, and create masterpieces out of dry macaroni. Then when I was older and he was unable to take me to school dances due to our distance from one another, he would sneak us into ballroom events during the summer to make up for it. He even bought a corsage for the occasion.

No, Not yet.

I couldn't let go yet.

Sniffling a bit, I shakily stood up and retrieved Monsieur Lepretre's box. Dragging it over to Pierre's room, I opened the door. I kept my eyes on the ground and placed the box in a safe corner before stacking the paintings from the living room beside it. Closing the door behind me, I had yet to even get a good glimpse at the chamber.

Grabbing the set of keys on the kitchen table, I found the one leading to Pierre's room and locked it.
Another day.

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* Later that Day *

I was now sitting in a cozy chair with a blanket atop my lap while my mother was seated on a couch just to my left. "Really Mireille, a remodel is no trouble, especially since your father and I plan to stay in Paris until mid-January. With proper negotiations I can get a deal on flooring and paint at the least, we don't need to start on furniture yet." She attempted once more to persuade me to remodel the apartment I'd inherited from my deceased fiancé.

"I already told you mother, I don't have the money for that right now. Currently I have an apartment I need to take care of, plus student loans, and I should set aside money for savings in case of an emergency. A remodel is expensive, no matter what angle you look at it." I leaned forward to pick up another apple wedge from the plate before me. "Besides, I have so much work to do right now, when would I find the time, let alone money, to come to Paris?" I munched on the snack as my father walked in with a bag of groceries and a cup of coffee.

"Two beautiful women before me, both fluent in French, and yet I was sent to pick up ingredients for dinner. I think I nearly bought pig brains at the deli!" Although the tone of his complaint was light hearted, he still seemed somewhat aggravated by the ordeal. "And what are you two doing?" My father called out to us after putting away the groceries.

"Discussing the remodel dearest." My mother turned her blonde head to address my father more effectively as he was now almost directly behind her. "Mireille is still hesitant about following through."

"Mother, it would not be a wise investment at this point in time. You want me to put all of my funds into what basically adds up to a vacation home when I cannot even afford the vacation itself." I then retrieved a book from my purse, using it to silence my mother by feigning the need to catch up on my reading.

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* December 24 *

"Teresa, you sound just like my mother." I plopped down on the queen guest bed my parents ushered me to occupy during the trip. Thankfully I didn't share a wall with my parents’ room, or mother would overhear us and be ecstatic at gaining another person on her 'pro remodel' side.

"Look, Mimi, it boils down to this. You said you wanted to honeymoon in Paris right? Be it next month or in ten years?" My face turned bright red before I grumbled a confirmation. "Well, what do you think sounds more romantic? Sharing a hotel or motel with more than a hundred tourists as well as bedbugs, or a nice, clean, fully functioning apartment? If I were you, I would at least finish up the floor and paint just as your mother suggested. See if she is willing to do the decor choices for you, the woman has quite an eye." I considered her points.

"So, you want me to use the apartment of my dead fiancé and his father as a--" The complaint was quickly cut off.

"Are you going to rent the place? No. Sell it? Not for a long time if ever. So you think it's best to take the gift of those two men and thumb your nose at it by letting the place gather even more dust? So long as you stay in that apartment, they will know that you still care about them and appreciate
what they left to you. Plus if you are in Paris, you'll remember to visit their grave sites won't you? Besides I'm sure plenty of people have used that apartment for similar activities prior to the Lepretre's moving in. "Teresa spoke reasonably, eager for me to move on and be gracious for what I was bequeathed.

"Very well." I sighed and turned over on my stomach. "My mother is probably already looking at swatches anyway, she just got a look at the almost empty apartment today, I still have Pierre's room left."

"You can always deal with that later Mimi. And now that that argument is over with, we can get down to brass tacks." I stayed silent while the pediatrician started chattering. "How dating the boss going over? Do anything naughty in one of the cells yet?"

"Teresa, you're terrible." I buried my face in the pillow and mumbled to the girl on the other line. "He's not my boss any more, and we only kiss in closets. Nothing too risque to satisfy your illicit fantasies."

"Not yet Mimi." She spoke in a teasing tone.

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* December 25 *

"Merry Christmas Jonathan!" I almost sang into the receiver. I love Christmas, but it was upsetting we weren't able to spend even a pinch of it together. "How are things over on your end? Sorry I haven't been able to call you for a while, but I've been cleaning up Pierre's apartment and preparing for a remodel."

"A remodel? What do you mean?" Jonathan inquired over the phone line. "I was under the impression you merely wanted to clean the place up to help you get rid of old ghosts." Although he didn't seem upset by the development, he did sound rather curious as to how these events came to pass.

"Yes, well it is hard to determine what will happen in reality even when you plan it so perfectly in your head. I did not intend to fix up the place for a while, but here I am deciding which color to paint the kitchen. My mother favors a light green but I think yellow will do splendidly." Despite being hesitant before, I was elated now.

"I'm glad to hear everything is going well over there, you do still expect to be back by the twenty eighth though, correct?" Jonathan questioned me over the phone. "Time may slip away from you when working on that large of a project."

"I'll be back before you know it Jonathan. Oh, and I have fantastic news to tell you. I finally finished a race on one of those horrid contraptions. I was in second to last place, but I finished nonetheless." I was eager to relay the news back to my therapist. "It's been so overwhelming over here with everything going according to plan if not better. How are you?"

"Same as usual, I've done some reading and worked on my pet project for a bit. Now I plan on going to sleep as it is nearly one in the morning over here." Jonathan chuckled over the phone upon hearing me smack myself in forgetfulness.

"Sorry about that, I'll let you go now. Merry Christmas Jonathan!" I repeated the earlier sentiment with a softer tone this time.

"Merry Christmas to you as well Mireille." Jonathan repeated back before hanging up.
* December 28- January 1 *

I met up with my girlfriend at the airport after she’d endured a long, nine hour flight. Still groggy, Mireille merely walked up to me before wrapping her arms around my torso. "Missed you," she mumbled into my shirt before leaning up to kiss me. Holding her head in place, I returned the sentiment before letting her lean on me while we walked to the car.

A few days later, we were enjoying Saturday night at her apartment, on the couch, and under a fluffy, warm blanket. As the apartment was closer to the city than my house, we could watch through an open window as people wandered the streets looking for an open bar or someone to ring in the new year with.

With only a few minutes to spare, Mireille retrieved the bottle of champagne beside her and two flutes. Popping the cork with a giggle, she filled my glass as well as her own. Clinking our glasses together, we trusted in both the city's chanted count down and the clock running on the television as we timed our New Year's kiss.

With ten seconds to spare, I put our drinks down. Pushing Mireille to lay on the couch, I caressed her cheek bone with my thumb before running it down to her lips. Her eyes twinkled in the light and just as the clock struck zero, I lowered myself and pressed our lips to one another, my hand holding the back of her neck as fireworks went off all around us. After it was evident we were more than a dozen seconds into the new year, I pulled away and looked at her bright, energetic eyes.

"This is going to be one hell of a year, isn't it Mireille?" I looked down at her with concern as well as affection. I would be talking to her honestly this year, confessing my secret. Would she still be this fresh faced after learning about me, so cordial toward my advances?

"Yes," Mireille pushed herself up a bit to peck my lips. "And it started off great."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hopefully you all understand the need for this chapter as Mireille discards her former self to start anew just as the new year is rung in, as well as how it symbolizes the beginning of what could be "one hell of a year". Now, if I can make a request of you, please leave a comment/review.
Chapter 13: Patience and Patients

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the long wait, my summer has not been my own and I'm very, very frustrated by that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter 13: Patience and Patients**

* January 9th *

"Doctor Crane." The lackluster, nasally voice of the psychology department's secretary buzzed through the worn out office phone. Reluctantly, I pressed the 'accept call' button after a brief pause and her repeating my name with an equal amount of vigor.

"Yes, Mrs. Litvak." Putting down my file on the recently returned Mr. Nygma, I addressed the phone as if it were the nosy, short, fifty year old secretary herself. I lifted my lenses a tad and rubbed the pinched area of my nose where the rectangular frames had been resting for more than five hours.

The woman replied over the speaker, her voice filling the otherwise empty office. "Your bank called, said that they found a rather large sum withdrawn from your account. They need your confirmation before proceeding with the transaction." The movements of my fingers paused and I sat up straighter, giving the phone my complete attention as I pushed the lenses back in place.

"Did they say who tried to make the withdrawal?" I removed the phone from its hook, effectively taking it off of speaker mode lest passersby hear us through the heavy wood door. Holding the device between my head and shoulder, I rooted through my trusty suitcase. Most of the illegal chemical purchases I made were with cash only, who would have--

"Judy, they only gave me her first name for confidentiality purposes. Sound familiar? A lover or relative perhaps?" A flurry of snide laughs made it over the phone, evidently the other four secretaries were all ears to get some gossip on the typically reserved psychiatrist. Annoyed, but relieved, I put down the case. Good, it wasn't one of my suppliers.

"That is not of your concern. I will handle this matter myself." Hanging up before getting a response, I proceeded to dial the bank’s number before stopping myself. Judy promised not to cash that check until delivery in May or June. Tapping the switch hook, I waited for the dialed number to clear and started punching in a new set of digits. Good thing the landline could handle long distance calls.

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"This is the second time you've worn pants to work." The Joker commented as I heated him up some tomato basil soup. I'd been caring for him for more than a month and it was disturbing how quickly he picked up on minor differences in my behavior. He could spot smudged lipstick a mile away and enjoyed linking my tone of voice to a probable mood. "You usually never wear pants." He added.

"It's cold out," I shrugged, barely turning toward him so I could focus on safely moving the full bowl of soup onto a bed tray. In actuality, I had taken to wearing pants for Jonathan's latest endurance
training on getting me over my phobia. In almost two months and twenty-two intense sessions, we had moved all the way up to bumper cars. And as fun as it is to go to the pier every other day, sit in sticky plastic seats, and scream every time an eight year old crashes into you, I had grown tired of tearing nylons on the loose screws holding the toy vehicles together.

"You wore skirts in December." The Joker retorted, hoping to pressure me into an answer.

"Grilled cheese or just toast." I asked, setting the half prepared bed tray atop his heavily bound legs in hope of avoiding the question with another.

"Make it extra gooey today!" He perked up a bit in his seated position, but his green eyes were still filled with the same menace they always carried.

This routine had been in place for quite a while and there was still no sign of the person who initially injured the Joker and caused him to be put on such high security. I felt sorry for his inability to socialize with people other than his assigned doctors, but I also disliked having to stay at work each Saturday rather than spend that time with Jonathan. Sure, I asked him once or twice to accompany me, but he told me each time that he had his own pet project to work on and that we could have dinner together afterwards. So each Saturday I would spend the hours between meal times sitting around my office with a book, walking in the botanical gardens, conversing with Aaron Cash, or, on more than a few occasions, reading a few chapters of my novel aloud to the Joker. He wasn't a half bad conversationalist when in a good mood, and he had also taken to learning the basics of French during these weekend visits.

"It's weird eating with your date, doctor, waiter, and chef at the same time." He joked as I walked over with the cut up grilled cheese and a few toothpicks.

I giggled a bit, "seems convenient to me. There's not enough time for things to get awkward since the date is always occupied, and then you're busy eating when they're ready to converse. So you always have an excuse for avoiding conversation." I explained, having had my fair share of uncomfortable dates.

"Yes, but that only applies if you aren't interested in the person." He emphasized the 'aren't' and waggled his eyebrows before I prodded his lips with a bit of sandwich and rolled my eyes.

"Someone doesn't look happy to see me?" The Riddler commented, his face badly bruised from a confrontation with the Batman less than two days ago and voice raspy from what looked like the aftereffects of strangulation. I could still clearly see my girlfriend's handiwork from the patch job. The villain's arm was casted carefully and a sling was holding it properly in place while the radius healed from it's recent fracture. Aside from the shell of plaster, clean bindings covered significantly sized gashes and fresh stitches.

I could tell it was Mireille's work because only she spent extra money on colored casting materials rather than settle on the typical, off-white bindings provided by the asylum. 'Imagine looking at boring white all the time Jonathan. Personally, if I had to have my arm wrapped up for a week or two, I would prefer it be a color I like. Purple or pink for example. Then I wouldn't be so eager for it to come off, and I'd have given myself more time to heal because of that.' was her excuse after she handed over her own fifty dollars to the supply manager. The Riddler was currently sporting a green cast which he asked Mireille to decorate with question marks by using a gold marker. At first she agreed, but then had to stop when the psychiatrist on staff at the time said it would be unhealthy to support his persona. Thus, she turned the first question mark into a gold flower with a slightly curved stem.
"You're looking awfully hard at my cast, but even an idiot would know who wrapped it and they're eyes needn't linger. Riddle me this, why is the good doctor thinking about his girlfriend when in such a professional setting? Ooh this is a good one." I clicked open a pen and readied my pad of paper. Even if this was a personal riddle, Edward was very verbal about his process of thought. And that was information I could take down. "Typically you're very professional, so I doubt it is for any typical reason like you'd just kissed or she recently professed her love for you. No, those reactions are more physical than emotional. So you may have red ears, but your mind stays focused. And it has to have been recent, since you are still thinking about it. No offense, but matters with Mireille don't seem to disturb you for long at work. Perhaps at home, but here you are very committed to your 'projects'." The innuendo embedded within his last word made me flinch. Yes, I knew the Riddler had grown wise to my agenda, but the pokes and prods were still annoying. Thankfully, as evident by my still working at the asylum, the rogue hadn't squealed to the bat. His knowledge on the matter was just another piece of private trivia for his collection. Strange, but not something I was going to irritate in case it caused the Riddler to divulge the sensitive intel later. " Recent, but you haven't seen Mireille since this morning. She has to spend lunch with our favorite clown since it's a Monday after all. Hmm, and I doubt she would call you from there, she wants to keep your relationship secret, even if it is just from a drugged up, homicidal, comedian. Wait a second." The typical glimmer of superiority returning to his eyes full force. " This wouldn't have anything to do with those phone calls you've been making to Montana would it? I've already done the research on who it is based off of your phone records, didn't take much work since they have an online profile and everything."

"How did you get my phone records?" I kept my cool externally, but my mind was seething was anger. Was nothing private anymore?

"Same way I got Mireille's credit card records." He smirked, all the cards falling into place now that I'd interrupted his rant. "By the way, did you know your girlfriend purchased some birth control pills? I doubt she started taking them yet though. She hasn't repurchased in two months. They keep for a while, but hopefully she'll check the expiration date beforehand. I doubt you want a baby anytime soon. But you do want one thing based on those phone calls to, Judy was it?" The Riddler stopped talking when he noticed my mind was elsewhere.

I put down my pen for a minute, taking advantage of Edward's provided pause as I went through the tidbit of information. The criminal clearly wanted avid attention for his next portion and merely watched in interest as I began my calculations.

It was still early January, placing her purchase around late October to early November. That was right around the time of Nygma's escape, when Mireille had slept over at my house after hours of working nonstop to fix the Riddler's misdeeds. Oh, that's right. She'd slept on the pillow I usually hid a condom under in case things between us moved much faster than expected. So, she'd seen it, and her response was to support said proactive thinking? My churchgoing, Catholic, virgin girlfriend hadn't been angered that despite her claim to not have sex until married, I'd prepared for such an instance. Maybe it was because she had started to doubt her own ability to restrain herself, unless Mireille thought I would take advantage of her one day. I grimaced at the thought, she had to have more faith in me than that. But still, the thought of those pills lingered in my mind. Had she started taking them now? Were they even for her, or just a purchase for a friend who couldn't get to the store before it closed? Perhaps Nygma was pulling my leg all together. Regardless, this could wait for another time. Looking back at Edward, I saw the criminal's eyes brighten again with the attention put back on himself.

"Two minutes and six seconds. Either you don't mind that purchase or you've decided to shelve it for a later date. Anyway, that business is more of Mireille's than your own. Now, let us return to the original, attention hogging problem. Judy, aged fifty three last month, living in Montana. Now, if I'm not mistaken, you still consider yourself lucky to have landed Mireille somehow and aren't chasing
after a married woman. That means either you contacted her occasionally over the last month for a
friendly reason, or one of business. And I doubt you're a member of her knitting club. So, that leaves
behind her lucrative business venture, breeding St. Bernard puppies. Very sweet of you, I take it you
already know about Mireille's deceased Maltese. Probably from her telling you about the dog and not
from searching through her credit card history and finding out about a veterinary hospital that
stopped taking annual checkup payments three years ago. 'Anani', according to their well kept
records. But you didn't go out and get her a cute, small, lapdog now did you? No, you chose to place
an order for one of the largest recognized dog breeds. Now we get to the fun part, the analysis. Why
you made that purchase. Although you can tell me for yourself, let me explain it to you." I opened
my mouth to interject, but the Riddler was already beginning his interpretation.

"Everything you do is out of strategy, and I can respect that in a man. So, when I saw that you were
considering a transaction with this breeder, it got me thinking. Where is your skin in the game? But,
it didn't take me long to connect the dots. Mireille lives in a nice, small apartment. Perhaps room for
her and one other person, but it'd be a tight fit. By giving her a little puppy, she would be
comfortable for a while, her home now inhabited by a little beast to keep her company on those
lonely nights. For a puppy, the apartment will be enough, but by the time it's a year old the dog won't
have the proper amount open space. Now she needs to find a new place to live because of this
burden you've placed on her shoulders, but oh, where can she stay? She can't afford a huge
apartment, let alone a house. Oh wait, there is someone she can room with. Her boyfriend. Hell, I
think he would even install a doggie door. Then Mireille is spending her final month in the apartment
slowly transitioning to your house, increasing the amount of time you spend together, further
developing your relationship, and ultimately pulling you closer to your final goal." Edward examined
my rigid position. He'd hit the nail on the head.

"It's hardly diabolical. Just a push in the right direction." I defended my plot. I'd done far worse in
my life, and had plans for more horrid deeds in the future. "A means to an end, as it were."

"But why is it on your mind today." Edward leaned back in his heavily restrained chair, as if he were
the one conducting a session.

I considered my options: playing along, lying, diverting the question, and even giving him a good
sized dose. But ultimately, I decided that the Riddler wasn't someone I wanted as an enemy since the
man's intellect rivaled my own. "I was scheduled to get a puppy from the litter in May or June,
however the breeder found herself with an extra after someone's check didn't clear. She offered the
newborn to me so I needn't wait another four or five months since I initially told her I was in a rush."I paused briefly. "I accepted the offer and the puppy should be ready for transport in early February."

"So that's it." He murmured. "Things are moving even too fast for you now."

"No, It's nothing I can't handle." Looking down at my notes, I elaborated on certain sections during
this brief pause. "I still know where the chips will fall and how our relationship will progress. This is
more of a head start than a hurdle."

"Yes, pure strategy and a cool head, I wouldn't have expected less of you. But at this point, I don't
know who I should be rooting for. Clearly you deserve to win this game, but Mireille doesn't even
know that she's playing it." The Riddler looked to his lovingly wrapped arm as he spoke.

"It should stay that way" I closed the pad of paper, recognizing not much more progress would be
made that day.

"For now?" Edward asked.

"Forever." I declared. "I would prefer her to believe that I was some good-natured boyfriend who
suddenly turned wicked rather a manipulative bastard who duped her"

"But aren't you? Wasn't this the plan all along? The perfect duo, a master of the body and a genius of the human brain. A new and improved Becky." The tables had turned as Edward now prodded me with harsh questions.

"Mireille is not like Becky, I never even intended her to be a replacement." I sighed, pocketing my pen.

"Then how did she make it this far? Dr. Milenkovic doesn't meet a lot of your typical standards, so how did you let it come to this?" My peer pressed further.

"Somehow she won me over, I want things to work out between us. I've been altering her slightly to better suit my needs, but I'm not sure if it will work out in the end. She's strong." I admitted.

"Religious, innocent, kind, respectful, stubborn, not very good traits for the type of companion you'll need"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"What type of companion do you think I'm looking for?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the phone call from the ending of chapter 12 (part 1) now makes sense~. What's your favorite breed of dog? Or do you prefer/own another type of animal? Also, what are your thoughts on the credit card transaction? Real or fake?

I do plan on another chapter soon, this one just tied up so neatly and I didn't want to jam something half finished at the end of it. However, this would be the ideal time to place in the Amusement Park one-shot if you guys are up for it. So, in the comments/reviews, let me know if you want a chapter next (plotly) or a one-shot (fluffy). As a sidenote, the one-shot would probably take far less time to write up.

And finally, who in this chapter is the title referencing? Who is 'Patience'?
A/N: Please ignore the incredibly inaccurate climate given the time of year. This segment just fits in so well after our latest chapter. Now, this is the first installment I've given that will become out of order. So, we will step back a week in our next chapter of the actual fic. For now, enjoy the fluffy, fun, oneshot.

OneShot #2: Amusement Park

* January 22 *

A day at the amusement park.

This of course was not Jonathan's suggestion for our Sunday outing, the idea was all mine and I didn't plan on regretting it any time soon. As we walked through the turnstile, I graciously accepted a free map from one of the enthusiastic park greeters and examined today's stomping ground. "You don't have motion sickness do you?" I turned around to ask my date, the concept slipping my mind until I saw the various 'intensity levels' of the rides.

"Unless you plan on throwing us in a high speed blender, I think I'll be alright." Jonathan looked over my shoulder at the park map. The place was separated into two lopsided halves, one pertaining to run of the mill amusement rides and the other half containing a pool, some water slides, a river for inner tubes, and a log flume. "I think we should stick to the dry rides first, it's still pretty cool out."

"My thoughts exactly." I grinned and closed the brochure. "But first things first, sunscreen." Rooting through my purse, I procured a can of SPF 100 and presented it to Jonathan. "Hold onto that for a second while I take off my purse, I don't want it to get dirty." Placing the bag on the ground, I wrapped its shoulder strap around my ankle to insure it wouldn't be stolen while I applied the sun guard. Today I was wearing a mint green spaghetti strap top and some denim shorts. I also wore comfortable sneakers, which in my eyes easily outranked flashy flip-flops considering the amount of walking we'd be doing. My date, on the other hand, wore full length jeans and a deep blue T-Shirt. Although less prepared for the heat, I couldn't wait to see him dealing with the jeans after all the water rides drenched his legs. "Let me deal with my arms and legs, then you can do my back, okay?" I took back the spray and doused my appendages before rubbing the coating in to ensure I was fully covered. Lifting up my loose pony tail, I handed over the can and shivered as an unexpected flash of cool mist coated my back. Replicating my procedure, Jonathan also rubbed it in. I shut my eyes to enjoy the impromptu massage until it ended all too quickly.

"Now I suppose I should take care of myself." As my boyfriend covered his arms and neck with the sunscreen he mumbled to himself about growing up on a farm in Georgia and his tolerance to the 'scorching' heat of Gotham.

"Ears." I said when he attempted to hand back the can.

"Fine, Fine." He rubbed the front and back of his ears after liberally applying some more spray to his fingers. Once Jonathan finished the task, I accepted the aerosol can and returned it to my purse.
"Perfect, now we just have to repeat that every two hours." I giggled upon hearing his light scoff.

"This is what I get for dating a medical doctor."

"Yes, well I'm dating a psychologist who claims to not understand the purpose of screaming on roller coasters."

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Mireille was smiling widely now, her finger pointing out images of our seats at the picture kiosk for the poorly named ‘Spine Snapper’. In the car were the two of us alongside a pair of strangers, and whereas Mireille had her hands flung in the air, giggling as she got whiplash, I sat beside her looking at the rest of the park while we were coming out of our third upside down loop. Clearly my frameless eyes and flat lined mouth were unusual and caused my girlfriend much amusement.

"Okay, so clearly roller coasters aren't your thing." She pulled out the map after settling down. "What exactly do you look for in a ride?" Mireille offered the piece of paper, allowing me to pick our next destination.

"Well, I suppose I dislike coasters because they are stagnant. You have the same experience each time you go on these sort of rides and they don't vary for each customer. The ideal ride would be something that allows variation to occur. People scream on these rides because they fear for their life, but injuries rarely occur on such coasters unless you go to a rickety carnival or unfasten your seat belt. Something without tracks is more spontaneous. Bumper cars and a majority of water flumes are a good example. Passengers on various cars prevent predictability for the bumper cars and differences in weight and positioning change a lot of things on water based rides. This can include the amount of water splashed after a plummet and how rapidly you spin in the case of inner tube rides. You understand?" I finished my spiel while Mireille walked us to a nearby cotton candy stand.

"Yep," She nodded and exchanged some bills for neon blue spun sugar. "But no bumper cars today. This is a fun outing and I don't want it to become stressful." She tore off a piece of the new treat and offered it to me. I accepted the food and Mireille kissed me afterward when she spotted a few flecks of the substance stuck to my lips. "So, do you want to calm down and go on the Ferris wheel or merry go round?" She popped some of the treat in her own mouth. "Or would you prefer another coaster, it's still a bit too cold for water rides."

"I suppose a Ferris wheel would be okay, they at least don't have massive lines like the coasters." I looked toward the enormous wheel and watched as it slowly rotated.

"That's true, and we'll have a chance to enjoy the cotton candy." She shook the confection lightly and linked her arm in mine before we started to walk.

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The line was longer than either of us expected, but at that point we figured we may as well wait rather than backtrack. The cloud of candy I held in my hand grew smaller and smaller until all I was left with was a sticky cone. Tossing the paper into a recycle bin when we reached the front of the line, Jonathan and I climbed a small set of stairs into a metal cocoon with plush seats and simple seat belts. Although the chamber had room for two more people, we were allowed to stay by ourselves. The middle aged man who shut the door instructed us halfheartedly to stay seated and keep our arms and legs inside the ride before leaving to tell the other two, freshly loaded cars.

After a minute, the ride started to move and Jonathan turned his head to survey the park as it grew smaller. I had seen movies with Ferris wheel scenes and felt my heart quicken at the thought of
kissing my boyfriend in these marginally similar circumstances. However, when I turned to look at him I discovered he was more interested in the park's layout than a spontaneous moment of passion. But rather than sit back and let this moment slip away, I said his name lightly. He turned to give me his attention and I placed my hand on his cheek to hold him there, leaning forward to kiss his cotton candy flavored lips. I pulled back for a moment and commented with a small smile, "You taste sweet."

To which my boyfriend smirked, and simply responded "Likewise."

Jonathan resumed kissing me when the wheel halted for more people to get on. Turning his body, he got annoyed at the odd angle and urged me to sit on his lap so he needn't crane his neck downward and to the side. Once seated, he placed one of his hands on my lower back to hold me in place and the other caressed my cheek as he slowly made out with me. My own hands rested on his shoulders. I hummed lightly after he'd pulled back to look at me. "What're you thinking?" I dared to ask him during the pause, the ride now rotating again and the sky and clouds replacing the park which previously framed his head.

"I'm trying to figure out." The hand on my back lowered so it came to rest on my behind. "How I got so lucky." He truly seemed perplexed, his nose scrunching up a bit as he analyzed my face as if looking for some sort of clue.

"Simple." I leaned down to kiss his cheek, trailing the gentle pecks down his throat and coming to resting my head in the crook between his shoulder and neck. I took a wiff of the chemical scented sunscreen and watched the passing scenery as I explained. "You make me feel safe, you're patient with me, and I find you physically attractive." At that last comment he snorted.

Jonathan's hand drifted up and under my shirt to stroke my back, his fingers tracing my spine as he asked, "I make you feel safe?" The same hand now drifting to the scar he'd memorized the position of.

I took in a sharp breath at his hands new position before stating, "yes. I've dated other men before. And most times when I tell them 'no' after they ask for physical intimacy beyond what I desire, they scoff or get irritated. Believe me Jonathan, I felt uneasy each time I got in a car with those guys after a date went sour." I pulled back a bit to look at his clear blue eyes. "But never with you. You've never hurt me or urged me to go beyond what's comfortable. Well, except when you torment me with those stimuli during therapy sessions." I added with a smirk and kissed him again, "But even then, you give me time to collect myself after a bad response or let me stop early when my heart rate refuses to slow." I felt his hand return to my cheek and leaned against it as he seemed to examine me once more for what I can only assume to be deceit. "God, I love you." I mumbled under my breath, my heart already fluttering like bird at his affectionate caress.

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We had taken advantage of all the brief pauses in our first rotation around the wheel, but Jonathan and I were asked to return to our seats when we reached the bottom of the cycle and one of the attendants caught us canoodling. A bit flustered, I even went so far as to sit in the seat opposite Jonathan's to prove we weren't doing anything illicit during the remainder of the ride. Still, my cheeks were dusted pink from the encounter, and Jonathan perpetuated the flushed expression by holding my sugar sticky hand until we got off the ride and were able to wash off the blue residue.

By then, it was hot enough for water rides.

"Hurry Jonathan, that stall is open." I implored him to speed up so we could reach the free changing room before others did. It was a busy day and people were already swarming over to the area, so an
open stall was going to be a thing of the past in a minute or two. After we reached the changing rooms, I discovered just why this particular room was available. The lock was busted. "Can you hold it shut for me Jonathan? I'll just be a minute." he looked at the door and noticed it opened inward.

"It would be easier to hold it closed from the inside. If some oaf knocks into me out here, it'd surely open." Jonathan explained as we stood outside the door, showing me the hinges as he spoke in an indifferent manner.

I bit my lip and agreed. "Okay." A bit shocked by my compliance, I once again had to tug him inside. Opening my bag I located the white and purple polka dotted tankini and its matching bikini bottom. I had chosen to wear a midriff covering bikini top ever since making the mistake of wearing a regular one when I went to a beach a long while back and more than a few people stopped to ask me about the striking white scar I possessed. There were still parts of me that wanted to tattoo over the thing in hopes that would deter such questions. Looking up, I saw my boyfriend with his back toward me, both hands holding the door shut.

It was weird. As I took off my clothes, I observed his fingers drum against the wood, speeding up their dance a bit as he heard the cloth hit the ground. It felt like I was performing a strip show for a patron who was too proud to spare a glance. I even paused after each article was removed to think of what would happen if he turned around at that moment. Finally kicking off my sneakers and socks, I took in a deep breath. He was there, three feet away from me, and I was entirely naked. The possible scenarios of turning him around or pressing my body against his made me flush. That promise I made to Pierre was becoming harder to keep by the day. "Done yet?" He asked after a moment, not hearing any more rustling.

"A-another minute." I said back, hurriedly putting on my bikini bottom and tugging the top over my head. Once everything was situated, I asked him, "can you tie this for me?" He turned to see me holding the chest piece to my body, the thick ribbon meant to go behind my neck still dangling. He slowly walked away from his post and tied the knot three times over, finishing off the fastened strands by arranging them into a sloppy bow. "Thanks," I mumbled, heading to the door myself to keep it shut for him.

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I was a bit surprised to see that Jonathan had decided to don a shirt alongside his swim trunks. It was completely allowed by the park though, as it was a solid white T-Shirt, albeit a thick one. Perhaps he was still too cold or didn't want to apply sunscreen to the area. Regardless, it was time for another coat. After we stuffed our belongings in an overpriced locker, I propped the small metal door open with one of my shoes so I could return my sunblock as soon as we were done using it. I sprayed my arms and legs before once again handing the can to Jonathan so he could spray it on my back. Offering to do the same for his thinly veiled back, I was perplexed when he replied with a stern, "no," and instead blindly and begrudgingly sprayed the stuff beneath the front and back of his shirt himself to satisfy me.

Things seemed to mellow out from there, and his pleasant mood returned.

"Please make your way to the boat and watch your step." The ride operator gestured to an empty, narrow, log shaped boat across from the large, rotating platform we stood on.

Making our way over, Jonathan held my hand to give me more stability as I stepped into the inch high water that rested at the bottom of our vessel. After I was seated on the drenched plush beam, my boyfriend sat just behind me. Our positioning was a bit foreign, but when we started the upward climb and gravity squashed me to Jonathan's chest I felt the tension dissipate as he place his hands on my waist and kissed the back of my neck. The loud clicking of hard working gears covered my
giggles as he slid his hands under the swim top to rub my abdomen and that dreadful scar he was so fascinated with.

We'd just dropped off to the peak height of the ride, our boat jerking this way and that as it mindlessly followed the man made channel to elongate the ride's duration until we plummeted down an impossibly steep slope with no more than slippery metal bars to hold on to. "Do you like it that much?" I asked him, speaking up a bit with the rushing water combating my voice. "The scar." I elaborated.

"I suppose." I felt him shrug. "It doesn't disgust me, and it is rather nice to the touch." He resumed rubbing it with his index. It felt like a half hearted reason given how many times he stroked the thick tissue.

"I've thought of covering it before, getting a flower vine tattoo or something, but I couldn't settle on a design that would stick with me for life." I shifted my hand to rest atop the one Jonathan had placed on the discussed bit of skin.

"I wouldn't." He said after a while. "I am in no position to tell you what to do, but as soon as we conquer that fear of yours all that scar will be is a reminder of what you've overcome and where you are now." I thought it over for a second and nodded. He was right, I had started tackling my demons in a slow but stable manner ever since Jonathan and I began our relationship. Covering up the mark was akin to saying I didn't need his help or had decided to push away my troubles rather than deal with them. Besides, I felt his fingers run across the raised skin, I doubted he would stop doing that even after it was inked over. Turning a bit to kiss him, I didn't realize we had rounded our final corner and were about to start our descent until it was too late. I felt sorry for my boyfriend when I basically screamed in his ear and clung to his wrist during the unexpected fall. He did little more than offer a dazed and slightly annoyed look while he tugged on the partially deaf ear as we made our way back to the loading station.

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"No shirts on the water slide sir, you have to remove it or choose not to ride." A park employee informed us just as we started to climb the concrete steps leading to our next ride of choice. At first, I was prepared to combat his authority by questioning the reason of his rules, but Jonathan had already descended a few steps.

"You can go on if you want Mireille, I'll wait at the bottom." Not desiring to go on any ride without my date, I also stepped down to join Jonathan.

"You sure you don't want to remove the shirt?" I asked out of curiosity rather than annoyance.

"Certain." He muttered quickly, looking around for something else. "There," He pointed at a lazy river, where a few little boys and some men had on similar shirts as they floated in the bright yellow tubes. "I think that ride will accommodate my choice of swimwear." I nodded, not wanting to argue with him.

I stepped into the cold water, shuddering a bit as I waited for an available tube to float by. Finding a set of them, I waded over to the pair and passed one to Jonathan, ducking my head under the water and emerging inside the second. I cleared the drenched strands of brown hair from my vision and turned to see Jonathan lifting the inner tube and dropping it around himself. "The point of the ride is to get wet." I reminded him, leaning forward on the tube to chastise his still dry upper body.

"I don't want to lose my glasses, I am our only ride home if you remember correctly." He retorted.
"Fine." I accepted his excuse. "But you can still do this." I placed both my arms on either side of the plump, plastic tube. With the aid of the water, I extended my arms and maneuvered both my legs through the small opening of the tube to drape them over the edge. Seating myself in the divot of the doughnut shaped pool accessory, I lounged back and relaxed. Seeking to copy me just so he could prove he could, I watched as Jonathan mimicked my actions only for his tube to get nudged into by some teenagers having a race, causing him to capsize at a moment when he wasn't so stable. I immediately ditched the tube in case Jonathan needed help, but then I saw something I would not soon forget. My boyfriend had fallen backward in the mess and his loose shirt was pulled up and snagged on the back of his glasses strap as he scrambled to ensure the frames didn't slip from his eyes. I only had a few moments to look, but what I saw deeply concerned me.

Old scars decorated his back, a lot of them. Most were small, but some were a few inches in length. They looked like a combination of scratches and something else I couldn't place the identity of. None of them looked minor though, and I was sure more would become visible if I got a closer look. Snapping my head around to look at the teens as if I'd been sneering at them the whole time, I watched in my peripheral as Jonathan fixed the wardrobe malfunction with the false notion that I hadn't seen his old injuries. He rejoined me after a moment, glasses specked with water and his hands on the rim of the tube, not wanting to give sitting on it another attempt. "I didn't yell at them." I informed him. "But I got their faces, so if they come around again, I'll demand an apology."

"Don't worry about it Mireille." He commented, combing fingers through his drenched hair. "They're not worth the time."

I smiled softly. Even immediately following a spill, he was quick to ridicule others for their idiocy. If anything was to be said about Jonathan, it was his resilience. And after seeing those wounds, I wondered what else he had put up with early in life.

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"You didn't have to tie it so many times." I giggled, the thick knot at the base of my neck too tight for my marginally pruned fingers and flexible nails to deal with.

"I didn't want it to slip, and can't you just pull the top over your head and deal with it later?" Jonathan asked from his adjacent changing room.

"It's your mess though." I said childishly. "If you mixed up some chemicals and it started a fire, would you hand the fire extinguisher to a colleague and just walk away?"

"These are entirely different circumstances, Mireille." He scoffed at the analogy.

"I don't care, it's the principle." I yanked the top off and wrung it dry, offering it to him after we exited the changing rooms. "So fix it." He fiddled with the knot with a stern expression on his face for three minutes before he managed to get it untangled.

"Happy?" He asked, handing the drenched clothing back.

"Yes." I tucked it away in the same bag my bikini bottom was in.

"That makes one of us." Jonathan said snidely, taking my hand in his regardless.

"And what would make you happy?" I asked, hugging his arm and drifting closer.

"Right now, a hot drink." I nodded in agreement, a cup of cocoa sounded nice. The chilly afternoon air was only making the water in my drenched hair colder as it dripped down my back. Neither of us had brought bulky towels and instead had let the sun dry us for the past hour as we lay on some of
the park's plastic lounge chairs and talked. "There's an eatery over there." Jonathan pointed at one of the many pit stops inside the park. The place would probably be crowded and expensive, but I was desperate for something warm. "Want me to order while you find a seat." He asked.

"Sure." I looked around, seating wasn't much of a problem as most patrons were still waiting in line. "Can you get me a hot chocolate with marshmallows?" I asked. He simply nodded and walked off. As I looked for optimal seating, something caught my eye and I couldn't resist.

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I had to wait in a fifteen minute long line and an additional twelve minutes for our coffee and cocoa. I also had the pleasure of standing beside some other vultures at the pick up window who were just as fed up with the subpar service as myself. When I got the beverages in hand, I doubted anything they had managed to fling together would make up for the wait. Regardless, I walked out of the garlic scented abode to look for my date. A little ways away I saw Mireille sitting with her right side facing toward me.

As I approached the table I felt the need to explain. "There are idiots all over the park. Coffee should be ready in less than a minute and the buffoons need only stir the milk and powd--" I was paused by my own perplexity when I sat down, eyeing a half visible orange and black splotch on Mireille's arm. "What is that?" I pointed at the mark after she grabbed her cocoa with an unmarked right arm.

"I thought you might like it." She smiled a bit, rotating in her seat to show me a small pumpkin painted on her upper bicep. "The woman did a great job, doesn't it look nice?" She pointed at the design. At first I wanted to point out how seasonally incorrect such a mark was, but at the same time I was proud of the painted tattoo. It was by my own doing that Mireille had herself decorated with such a symbol. That nickname I had used for her in one of my sessions with Edward had gone from a mere word to something she held near and dear because of how it bound her to me. And that got me to smirk and to a further extent caused me to lean forward and kiss her lips.

"It looks good on you." I told Mireille, making her beam even more. We then sipped our drinks in silence, listening to the far off screams of park patrons as the beverages helped warm us up.

When I was finished with my drink and Mireille had shifted her attention to the map, I looked around for a ride. Then I spotted something I'd been eager to see my date respond to. "How about that one?" I pointed to the giant pillar jutting from the earth just as some of the ride's attachments plummeted vertically. She looked at the attraction with trepidation, but nodded after a while.

"Those ones always lull me into a false sense of security. Like you said when we got here, I know drop towers are safe and hundreds of people ride them a day without harm." Mireille sighed as she watched the same set of victims rise for another decent. "But then I'm twenty five stories high, my feet are dangling, and all of the sudden thousands of years of instinct kick in and tell me to be afraid, that death is a real possibility in such a precarious situation. I can't help but feel terrified and scream as I fall." Despite her minor monologue, my girlfriend still looked at me with a grin and stood up so we could hurry over to the attraction. "But maybe, I'll finally get to hear you scream too." She reasoned.

I snorted in response. "Not going to happen, and if you were to hear me shriek, it wouldn't be caused by a cheap thrill ride."

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After a twenty minute wait, Mireille was double checking the safety harness, her face carrying a wary smile. It was somewhat cute, seeing her panic over nothing. Then we began our ascent and she
alternated between enjoying the view and savoring it as if it were her last. I myself was more interested in her own expressions than the audible click the ride made mere moments before our car was hurled down. As the force of the fall lifted my body and stomach upward, I watched Mireille raise in her seat as well, her brow scrunched up slightly as she yelped in a jerk response to the sudden change. The cry didn't carry the same intensity as when she screamed in the elevator three months ago, so when we slowed our descent and prepared for the second drop, I offered her my hand for comfort. Besides, her screams on these next two drops would either be nonexistent or joyous, nothing monumental. But then I saw her lean forward to look at me around the thick safety harness as we ascended again. Mireille's eyes were still marginally dilated as she smiled at me. With the racket of the ride and other passengers, she mouthed her 'thank you' before leaning back in her seat and squeezing my hand, enjoying her second and third plummet on the ride. When we got off, she proceeded to kiss me briefly before slipping on her sneakers and donning the purse she'd rested on the concrete.

"You didn't scream." Mireille said this in a calm voice after we walked out through the short gate.

"Nope." I replied, curious if this would be our topic of conversation for the foreseeable future.

"But you did hold my hand." Mireille said with a smile. Before I had the opportunity to respond to the quip, she moved that accused hand around her back and set it on her left hip so she could stand closer to me as we walked. "Thank's for not being so intent on keeping cool you wouldn't even do that."

"Of course not." I muttered, absorbing her thank you as she rested her head on my chest.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: You know what's on his back, don't you? If not I recommend reading 'Year One: Batman/ Scarecrow'. They're on his back because I imagine him curling up to prevent his entire body from getting badly injured. Now you know the true origins of 'Pumpkin'~ It wasn't just something Riddler made up on the fly! They went on more rides than those described, I just skipped around a bit to show you the more interesting parts. Please remember to leave a review~
Chapter 14: Hot Cocoa and Marshmallows

Chapter Notes

A/N: References all the way back to Chapter 3: Keeping My Nose Clean as well as Chapter 11: Mad Love (also Chapter 13: Patience and Patients, but that wasn't too long ago). This one's a bit chaotic, but bear with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Hot Cocoa and Marshmallows

*January 17*

"Good afternoon Edward, I hope you've been crossing your fingers while waiting." I said nonchalantly while walking into the exam room. His healthy hand was currently fastened to a belt restraint while the other was in a cast too thick for typical handcuffs. Instead, his injured arm was in a sling with enough latches, even he would have trouble maneuvering out of it. "If that radius of yours is still in place, we won't have to perform an invasive surgery to secure the bone with plates and screws." I informed him. Sliding the monochrome, translucent, X-Ray sheet under a light board, I scrutinized the image. After a short while, I turned back to my patient with a smile. "Nope, you are still going to be fine with just a cast." Sitting on a round, backless, wheeled chair, I started an equally exciting conversation. "Any intense or unusual pain in the arm? Or elsewhere in your body?" I prepped a pencil and pad. Usually, the Riddler was cooperative when it came to his own well being, so I wasn't expecting any riddles or quips just yet.

"Nothing I haven't experienced before." His voice sounded a lot clearer now that his throat wasn't swollen. That was good. "But, I am parched." He added when I finished writing. Ah yes, it had been a while since we'd seen one another, aside from when I bandaged him up.

"I think they're," I stood up to root through my drawers and found a half finished box of assorted cocoa. "Here we go." I recalled the old tradition the criminal mastermind and I had. But now that I'd experienced his abilities firsthand, I wondered if I should continue this routine out of nostalgia, a willingness to show forgiveness, or to simply stay on his good side. I bit my lip for a second and he noted my hesitation.

"Mireille," He called me by my first name. "You can do this out of camaraderie or for your own benefit. I don't mind either. So, would you get me some plain water or a mug of hot chocolate, the beverages they hand out at meal time are barely potable."

I nodded my head, still thinking. I typically liked working with the patients at Arkham, but it was hard to see them as what they were. Reading about the number of deaths in a paper after one of Joker's schemes didn't feel as real as when I had to personally deal with the Riddler's handiwork a few months ago. It always felt as if I were working with doubles of the actual murderers and not them in person. Still, I reached for a striped mug the man favored, it wasn't my job to criticize what they did or how ill their intent was toward me. I held the container up to the hot water tap and let it dispense. My purpose was to fix their injuries and offer a place of security with no cameras or tape recorders. Rooting through the box of powdered cocoa packets, I found one of each remaining flavor and spread them like a hand of cards. "Which do you want? I think I may also have some marshmallows over in Monsieur J's room if you want me to get them?" I offered him the choice with
a tender smile. I didn't want to hate him after all, not when I could still be his friend.

"Hazelnut." He said with a smirk. "And marshmallows sound great." Nodding my head, I set aside the packet and placed another mug atop the water filled one to keep the half made drink warm.

"I'll be back in a minute or so." I told my patient, not disclosing how far away the Joker was in case he mentally plotted out his location for future use. Jonathan had warned me to keep precious intel away from the self proclaimed and widely recognized genius.

"Tell him I said 'hi'." He further instructed me. I gave a nod and closed the door, my patient still secured to the exam chair by steel leg cuffs.

I looked around, a bit embarrassed at what I did next. Leaning against the opposite wall, I took off my heels and held them in my hand so the Riddler couldn't hear the clicks of the shoes and discern what direction I walked. As much as I wanted to like Edward, Joker was basically a sitting duck right now with his room sealed airtight and restraints holding him as still as a board. Monsieur J was dependent on me, and if he were murdered because of a minor slip, I wouldn't forgive myself. So, I walked across the hall, up the stairs, and through a small maze of recovery rooms in stocking clad feet. Arriving at a nondescript door with a pricy lock installed beside it, I punched in this week's fourteen digit code and I slipped on my shoes before entering.

"Hello Monsi-" I stopped cold. My patient was sitting upright in his bed, an open bag of chips at his side and files spread out across the crumpled sheets. He wasn't bound, and his body was free of the tubes that typically provided him hourly sedatives and medication. The Joker simply looked at me, giggled for a moment, and returned to his papers.

"Funny, I expressly told that riddle crazed fool to keep you occupied." He flipped through some pages, snorting at what I can only assume to be the words written on them. "You must've given him the good stuff for him to blather about what I'm doing."

"I came here for some marshmallows." I shut the door, discretely pressing the panic button on the wall beside it. But apparently, I was unable to escape his notice.

"Doesn't work." He said in a sing song voice. "I had him deactivate it in case Dr. Jessop or Aaron Cash walked in without notice. Then while they waited for someone to pop in, I'd pop them." The sudden low tone of voice caused me to turn around slowly only to see him holding up an extended index finger and an upright thumb. Letting out a breath, I held my chest. "Gotcha didn't I?" He let out a high pitched laugh.

"Yes, you certainly did." I took a step inward, somewhat shaken. "Now, would you please stay calm while I administer a light sedative." I sidestepped over to a drawer and was about to open it when he stopped me.

"I wouldn't." Was all he said, flipping another page and consuming one more chip. Not sure if the threat was about the drawer or me attempting to sedate him, I stopped all together.

"What would you have me do then?" I asked, not sure how to proceed. If I left the room to get help, he may wind up killing the guards or using their own stun guns to make an escape. Reasoning sounded best right now, and he was behaving well.

"Answer some questions, and be a doll and get me a can of soda." He placed some papers down and picked up new ones.

"But, there aren't any in here." I furrowed my brow. Dr. Jessop and I had decided to restrict him to
orange juice, milk, and water since they were healthier than the sugary drinks.

"Check." He bit a chip in half.

Nodding my head in compliance, I opened the mini-fridge and saw a variety of sodas as well as a few beers on the shelves alongside some small cakes from expensive bakeries. Probably given to him by the same person who brought the chips. "Any particular flavor?" I asked.

"Root beer." He requested. "And open it for me, my hands are all greasy." He wiggled them in the air like worms before opening a new folder. I picked up the selected chilled can, tucked my nail under the tab, and tugged. But rather than hear the fizz of carbonation, I felt a cool splash of it when the soda sprayed up and into my face. Shocked, I dropped the can and started rubbing my eyes. The blouse I was wearing offered little protection as the cold beverage seeped through to my skin and down to the hem of my black pants. As I tried to get over the burning sensation in my eyes and cool, sticky feeling elsewhere, I heard my patient laugh like a hyena and the papers crinkle as he rolled on the bed. "I popped ya alright." He got out between laughs.

"That's not funny." I snapped, not even thinking over the words before they came out.

Instantly, the Joker stopped laughing. "What did you say?" He dared me to repeat myself.

"I said that it wasn't funny." I needed to stand by what I said, backtracking might have upset the Joker more. "It was childish and rude." I took a paper towel and blotted the area around my eyes with my back to him.

"Yes, it was." He started to debate with me. "I was able to jerry rig a seltzer bottle on the fly, coerce you into opening it, and deliver the perfect punch line. All without missing a beat."

I threw away the paper towel and turned to look at him. "I prefer comedians who don't depend on the embarrassment or pain of others to get a laugh." I said this with a hint of annoyance, my eyes still pink from irritation.

"And what comics are those?" He questioned me. Opening my mouth to express an admiration for mimes, I stopped myself. I didn't want him knowing too much about me. So I shut my mouth, not providing an answer. "Ah, don't want to out the person by name. Scared I'll hurt them?" He pressed me further, standing up from the bed in his white patient gown. The red lips and green hair starkly contrasted his pale skin and ensemble. "Is it a lover of yours? A relative?" He almost demanded I answer.

"No, I'm just not well versed in the world of comedy. My tastes probably aren't as refined as your own." I backed against the counter as he neared me. He was almost Jonathan's height, but the way he held himself was different. My boyfriend was calm, collected, and moved with precision. The Joker was more daunting in his approach and his steps seemed to carry more weight to them.

He was inches from me, and I stopped breathing, as if an intake of air alone would spur him. However, he merely examined my face thoroughly before his eyes drifted down to my drenched top and the cross pendant atop it. Annoyed at his staring, I shut the unbuttoned lab coat over my chest and took in a jagged breath. "You said you had questions." I offered a topic of conversation, needing to stall until I found an opening to sedate or restrain the madman.

"A few." He went back to his bed and pulled out some papers before handing them over. I felt my heart miss a beat when I saw what was printed on them. It was my credit card history for the past several months, neatly stapled together with bright yellow highlighting certain instances. "Like why you spend over fifty dollars every other weekend at various food restaurants. Or why you bought
"A friend of mine had to work late, so she asked me to pick some up for her before the store closed." I explained the last one first. "The cufflinks were a Christmas present for my father, and the weekly dinners are spent with a friend from med school. We alternate paying the bill." I only fumbled a few times, but the Joker's smile didn't lessen in intensity, it actually grew.

"Interesting. And is it this same friend you call on a near daily basis." He handed over my phone history, with Jonathan's nameless number being the most present, waiting for my response. When I nodded he chuckled lowly. "Then why don't you call her up. I'd like to speak to the lady."

I patted my pockets only to sigh softly in relief. "It's in my bag downstairs."

His smile dropped and the pale hands reached for my shoulders, shaking them harshly. "No it's not, you're lying." I was startled and yelped a bit as he groped my hips to check for himself. He stopped after confirming I had told the truth. "Tell me his name." The Joker looked me dead in the eye, his face getting so close to mine I could see the thin lines of various scars and flecks of salt clinging to his bright red lips.

"I'm not saying her name." I said in a stern voice. "You'll hurt her." I defended my silence.

His grin returned and he let go of me. "That's the problem with you intellects. You're always so narrow minded." The Joker turned, and I thought he was going to give me a chance at escape when he whipped around and smacked me across the face with an open palm. I fell down to the ground and my eyes reflexively filled with tears. I reached for the injured cheek and hissed after touching the burning skin. "Give me a name!" He drew back his foot, prepared to kick me.

"No!" I screamed shrilly at him, curling up to protect my organs. "I won't let you take him away from me! I won't go through that again! Hurt me all you want, I'm not talking!" There was a beat, and I paused to look up at the Joker, seeing he had a knowing smile on his face.

"That's all I needed to hear." His grin widened and he took a few steps back. Slowly, I got to my feet when I felt he was no longer a threat. "Now, could you hand me one of those cakes from the fridge. I went to a lot of trouble to have them secured since you never actually got me one." I opened the metal door and grabbed a box at random, handing it over to the Joker. He accepted the cake and opened the container without trouble. Looking between the confection and myself he questioned, "hows about a fork?" I nodded, opening the utensil drawer with my body as far from it as possible in case he had any more 'jokes'. After I retrieved the harmless, plastic instrument, I turned around to hand it over when the german chocolate cake the Joker was holding smashed into my face and was held there for a moment.

He finally let go of the cake board once his laughter grew so intense his arm shook. I had never taken a pie or cake to the face before this moment, but I imagine german chocolate would have to be one of the worst. The coconut-pecan frosting was sticky, goopy, and smelt strong as opposed to most buttercreams which I imagine would come off with ease. Thoroughly annoyed, I took another cake from the fridge at random while the Joker's eyes were shut in laughter and slammed it in his own face. Only after starting the process of doing so did I notice the cake in question was a Swedish princess cake, and the whipped cream hidden inside the light green mound not only covered my patient but splattered all over the floor as well.

"Oh no," I let go of the cake, upset at my moment of unprofessionalism. Looking at the Joker's face as he guffawed like a man possessed, I spotted flecks of red and feared I'd somehow drawn blood. Dragging my finger through the crimson liquid, I sighed after rubbing my fingers together. It was just
the strawberry jam.

Taking my wrist in his hand, I flinched a bit in fear of him snapping it. However, he held it gently in place before twirling me around. "Mireille." I furrowed my brow at him calling me by my first name and was further surprised when he guided me into an impromptu waltz. "I know you had cold feet this morning, but thanks for showing up. I'm also aware it didn't really help that we got mixed up and I wound up wearing a white gown and you got stuck in the monkey suit." I laughed briefly, his interpretation of recent events somehow managing to tickle me despite the pulsing pain in my cheek. "But after we smashed each other in the face with cake," I rolled my eyes as he referenced the wedding tradition, "I realized there was no other way I'd have this happen." He faked choking up. "Yes, yes." I looked around as he turned me, finally spotting the handcuffs he usually wore. Slowly, I took over the waltz and shifted our trajectory so we would start heading closer to the restraints. "You promised not to cry Monsieur J." I pulled his head down a tad to let him 'weep' on my shoulder. While he took the opportunity and ran with it, going so far as to blow his nose in my lab coat, I took the restraints off the table and closed one around the closest wrists before snapping the second around his other while he was still in character.

"Aww, you promised we would work our way up to freaky stuff." He sounded a bit annoyed at the development.

"Yes, that's why I'm tying you up." I smirked. "Imagine what would happen if you weren't restrained."

He paused for a moment before laughing hysterically. "You're too good doc." He brought his hands to his face to wipe away the whipped cream and marzipan, flicking it at me as I went to the drawer he'd previously told me not to open. Standing back like earlier, I opened it slowly to find that it hadn't been tampered with. Pulling out a syringe and bottle, I retrieved the proper dose of sedative, flicked the needle, and let some of the drug spill from the tip to ensure there were no air bubbles.

Turning to observe my laughing patient, I saw that he still looked very docile if just a bit jittery. "I'm just going to give you some medicine to help you relax alright?"

"But I didn't get to eat any cake yet." He whined.

I lowered my needle and sighed, I didn't want to ruin his good mood. "Very well, I think there was one more." I pulled the final box from the fridge, set it on the counter, and opened the container to find a tuxedo cake. "Don't smash~" I turned around to deliver the instructions only for the Joker to take my lapse in attention as an opportunity to kiss me. His lips were chapped, warm, and sticky with the tepid whipped cream. Rather than push him away instantly though, I took advantage of the proximity and jabbed my syringe in his arm and pushed the plunger down slowly. My eyes were open during the forced event, and I watched as his shoulders slumped and his legs started to weaken.

However, the man still managed to pull back after the glass chamber was emptied, lick his lips, and remark, "yummy," before proceeding to take a few shaky steps backward and collapse on the ground.

I waited for a few moments, stabilizing myself with the aid of the countertop so I wouldn't follow suit. I was relieved the ordeal was over and pleased I'd only suffered a minor injury. However, it needed to be reported immediately. After searching through some drawers, I found a second pair of restraints and cuffed the Joker to one of the bars of his bedframe. Looking back at the man to ensure he wasn't going anywhere, I punched in the exit code and left the room.

Needless to say, when I ran into Dr. Chen just down the hall, he was more than accommodating
when I told him that the Joker had gotten loose for a brief while in his room. The kind old man offered me a shoulder to lean on while he contacted Aaron Cash. Once the security guard and Dr. Young arrived, I was offered a towel to clean up with and asked to relay the events word for word. As I trusted both of these individuals, I did just that.

Dr. Young probed me for details at times, and I answered to the best of my abilities. By the time I was finished, she was both confused and disturbed by the events. "You are aware that he's done this before." She asked me. "With Harleen." The doctor elaborated.

"Dr. Young, I'm not interested in the slightest. I'm currently seeing someone and I'd like to say it's serious." I shrugged my shoulders. "All the Joker is to me is a patient in need of treatment who can tell a funny joke on occasion." My peer looked a bit hesitant. "But, after what happened today, I would be perfectly fine swapping duties with another medical doctor."

"That sounds good." She took the towel and helped wipe away a glob of icing in my hair. Meanwhile, the bulletproof vested Monsieur Cash punched in the code himself and walked inside to look at the carnage. "The distance may do good for the Joker as well. He can get obsessive, and when you're his fascination, it's not good for either party. Just ask Charlie Collins."

"Drs. Young and Milenkovic." The security guard called from the room. "You might want to come see this." We looked at each other before hurrying inside the chamber, shocked by what Monsieur Cash had dangling from his hooked hand. "I don't think he planned to 'pop' Dr. Jessop and me the same way he did you." He lifted his arm to show us a simple handgun with a silencer attached to it. "Found this under his pillow." He explained. "And the Joker had more than just your credit card and phone history Dr. Milenkovic. There are essays you wrote in middle school, passport information, tax records, addresses, even your social security number is in the bunch." He elaborated after handing over the pile of personal documents. I stumbled a bit in my heels and Dr. Young held onto my arm to keep me steady. "I was about to recommend we finally put him back in his regular cell, but now, I'd like to keep him here for another reason altogether. At least until you can change your phone number and social. But, he's gotten it once."

"Who's to say he won't again." I mumbled. "Can you two please give me a few minutes. I have an appointment in need of wrapping up. After that, I'll come back here and help clean." Dr. Young nodded for the both of them while Monsieur Cash called for some orderlies to help restrict the Joker properly.

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"Did you say 'hi' for me?" The Riddler asked when I reentered the exam room.

"Forgot, I was too busy." I removed the mug which had attempted in vain to keep his water hot during my trip to the Joker's room and poured the now lukewarm liquid into the sink. I paused to look at the clock, it was hard to believe that had all happened in a little over an hour, including my talk with Dr. Young and Aaron Cash. I held the upturned mug over the sink for a moment longer, paused, and dispensed hot water into it again. "I forgot the marshmallows too." I added, my voice sounding a bit frenzied. Tearing open the packet of hazelnut hot chocolate he'd selected a while ago, I poured it into the steaming mug. Stirring the mixture with a spoon, I commented over my shoulder. "He said you were supposed to keep me busy."

"I was." He said in a smug voice, taking the beverage when I offered it.

XXXXX

Stepping out into the hall with my phone while Edward was occupied, I dialed a number I'd come to
memorize. Locating an empty exam room, I walked inside and flicked on the light switch, waiting for the call recipient to pick up.

The call-progress tone stopped after a few seconds. "This is Dr. Crane. May I ask who's calling?" He said in a bored tone.

"Jonathan." I said in a marginally shaky voice. "It's Mireille. I- I need you to change your phone number. And when you do so, be sure to tell the cell phone company not to disclose your new one."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" He asked over the line, his voice carrying concern.

"I'll tell you more about it later, but there was an incident today and a lot of my personal records were dug up. Now your phone number is compromised and I just need you to change it, please. Call the company for a new number as soon as I hang up, they might close soon."

"Mireille, this is very inconvenient. Are you sure it's entirely necessary?" He sounded annoyed.

"Please Jonathan, just do it." I spoke harshly into the phone, tears starting to fall and my voice wavering as I spoke.

"Very well, but I'd better get a good explanation for this later." He sighed before adding, "An explanation for why you're crying too." I agreed, hanging up.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Shoutout to that bag of chips! You get the reference… right? Along with all the other ones? Also, why would Riddler send her out for marshmallows if he knew Joker was up there? And please remember to leave a comment/review. Writing takes days, reviewing takes minutes.
Chapter 15: Perspective

A/N: Wow, this is the fourth chapter in the past two months.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 15: Perspective

*January 17*

Jonathan asked that we meet up less than two hours after the incident. All my boyfriend heard through workplace chatter was that the Joker had been free for a brief while and that I was attacked by the loose patient. However, the best piece of office gossip going around was that I single handedly detained the madman armed only with a syringe and my wits. Which sounded a lot better than the uncut version involving a small cake fight, some screaming, and a brief kiss.

That was what annoyed my boyfriend the most. Well, actually every part of my interaction with the Joker upset him once I explained it in detail. When he saw me in person though, he only focused on the injury. My cheek had puffed up a bit, and was redder than the other half of my face. Not to mention, impressions of fingers could be seen on the flesh, hitting home further that it wasn't the result of clumsiness.

He approached me slowly at first, gently pinching my chin to tilt my head this way and that as if he were the medical doctor in our relationship. "Don't get so close, I stink of coconuts, chocolate, and cola." I commented when he brought his face near mine to get a better look.

"I prefer that to blood." Jonathan retorted. "And you aren't seeing him again?" He asked, finally backing away and offering me a seat in a chair across from his desk.

I shook my head, sitting down in the plush seat. "Dr. Chen is taking over for me, and Joker is being put back in his usual cell as soon as this whole mess is straightened out. Messieurs Bolton and Cash haven't been able to locate the individual who injured the Joker all those months ago, so rather than keep this up indefinitely, they're letting him go back to his cell. If it happens again, hopefully there will be more evidence, otherwise he'll just go back and forth between the top security room and his cell each time he gets injured."

"How should we proceed then?" He asked, looking down at me from where he stood. "Clearly the Joker has some interest in our ties to one another. Would you like to cease cellular communications?" Jonathan offered a suggestion.

"No, but I can make them near impossible to track." I noticed his curious expression and explained. "You've got a new number, so he can't just call you up anymore. But, if I called you on my phone, he'd barely need to do any research to figure out what you changed it to. So, I'm going to get a second, pay-as-you-go phone just for contacting you." My boyfriend looked impressed by the idea and nodded his head in recognition.

XXXXX
Mireille left the room after a while to do some bookwork before the day ended. I didn't kiss her goodbye, I couldn't with the image in my mind of the homicidal clown pressed against her lips mere hours ago. It enraged me, knowing that the Joker was probably trying to manipulate her in a half-assed manner. Not that I was one to talk.

I sat at my desk, grabbed the dense, hemispherical paperweight atop it, and flung the object at a metal file cabinet resting in the corner of the room. Normally I wasn't one for physical violence, but my flask of scotch had gone dry yesterday, and I'd forgotten to refill it this morning after a late night of work. The loud thud of metal was good consolation.

Placing my elbows on the wood slab, I removed the square lenses pinching my nose and weaved fingers through my hair, resting the palms of my hands on my brow.

It was unbearable, seeing Mireille walk in here decorated with a bruise I'd seen dozens of times on Harley Quinn, listening to how she laughed at the clown's jokes despite their setting. I took a deep breath and exhaled. It was the adrenaline, a need to comply rather than resist. Self preservation was why she danced with him, cake smashed on her face all the while, it was why she didn't immediately push him away after he'd kissed her. I slammed my fist on the desk, not caring about the pain it caused.

Mireille had been one of four of Joker's regular visitors since late November, it was only natural he'd get attached to one of the people tending to his care. I stood up, walked over to the discarded paper weight, and was prepared to set it back on my desk. But still, something like this wouldn't just vanish. A few weeks without seeing Mireille wouldn't stop him. Although the Joker wasn't like Zsasz, who had to kill each of his chosen victims, he also didn't give up easily.

Turning to look at the small dent in the file cabinet, I tightened my grip on the paperweight. And if he wouldn't let her go on his own, I would make him. I bashed the weight into the cabinet again, smirking when the indent quadrupled in size.

"Thanks for driving me home again Jonathan." I walked into the living room where he was seated on the couch reading a thin book. My hair was still damp from a recent shower and I was wearing a fresh, comfortable set of clothes. I requested him to come in with me since I was still shaken up from this afternoon's events. Unsure what the Joker had done with his knowledge of where I lived, other than absorb it, I asked my boyfriend to do a quick look around the apartment with me, just to be confirm everything was okay. Thankfully, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. "Would you like to have dinner here before we head over to the pier for bumper cars?" I knew he wouldn't cancel a therapy session for anything short of a major crisis, so I figured we may as well eat together beforehand.

"Yes, that sounds nice." He spoke indifferently, nose still snug in the book. I smiled, walked behind the couch, and draped my arms around his shoulders in a loose hug before leaning down to kiss his cheek. Jonathan accepted the tender motion, but when a drop of water fell from my hair to his precious pages, he shooed me off.

"How about carbonara and garlic bread?" I proposed to him, walking over to the fridge to check if I had the proper ingredients. "It'll only take a half hour or so to make. Then you'll have more time with that novel of yours." I poked at his intense interest in the publication.

"It's not a novel, it's a text on chemical bonds. I am already well versed in the subject, but working in the scientific field always comes with homework. Mine happens to involve keeping up to date on scientific journals, even if they are horribly translated," He lowered his glasses to rub the bridge of
his nose where the lenses always seemed to harshly pinch him.

"What's the language?" I inquired, both curious and eager to help.

He sighed, placing a digit in the crease of the journal to turn and look at me. "It is in French, but translating all fifty pages properly would take a while. And I'm not even sure this author's work is worth the trouble."

"How about." I paused to carry a large pot over to my sink. Once water started to flow from the faucet and into the container, I resumed. "You find certain parts that are roughly translated or those that interest you, and I can elaborate on what they say. "I shut off the spigot and lugged the water filled pot to the stovetop. "I want to help Jonathan, and this is clearly important to you."

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*January 19*

The legibility of scribbles diminishes with time, so after a day of therapy sessions and rushed notes I need to rewrite what I jotted down in a cleaner format for filing. Since I was unable to perform this daily task yesterday due to the incident, I had to catch up on yesterday's notes between patients.

A loud knock resonated from the door of my office while I was working, followed by it immediately swinging open. The complaint I had prepared for the rude guest was quickly stored away though. It was my boss.

"Warden Sharp." I stood up, pushing the glasses precariously located on the tip of my nose up to their proper position. "To what do I owe this visit?" I walked around the desk and shook his hand out of principle before offering him a seat in one of the two chairs across from me.

He thanked me quietly and took a seat. When I was back in my own chair behind the desk, he started talking. "Well Dr. Crane, it isn't good news I'm afraid. "He took off his own glasses and polished them on a handkerchief from his pocket. "I heard some disturbing gossip the other day. Apparently, dear Dr. Milenkovic has taken a fancy to one of our most dangerous patients."

"That doesn't sound very accurate." I countered his statement. "Dr. Milenkovic detained the Joker after he got loose, she relayed this to me herself." I was compelled to defend my girlfriend's reputation and possibly her job.

"Once she was finished fooling around with him no doubt." He said with the tone of a disappointed parent, putting his glasses back on as he spoke. "Just this Monday I saw Dr. Milenkovic in the morning, wearing her usual set of nylons. But by the end of the day she was walking around without them." He shook his head as he spoke, as if even the words didn't suit his liking. "The harlot probably ripped them while playing around with that menace in his special room. It's suspicious that she and Dr. Jessop, alongside Aaron Cash are the only beings allowed in the room without company. Dr. Milenkovic must have spent those Saturdays she was assigned doing more than reading books."

He spat out the words, eager to rid them from his mouth.

I was appalled. Not only by his wild fantasies about my girlfriend, but for actually treating this as if she were going against him in more than a professional sense. My fists were clenched below the desk, an outlet for my anger until he left the room. "And you're here to spread this gossip?" I asked, wanting to get to the root of why he had decided to intrude upon my work.

"No, I need you to do me a favor." He looked less upset now that we were talking business. "Talk to her, over lunch or something, and report back to me with how she's doing mentally. I highly trust
your opinion, and if you tell me she's one punchline away from being the newest Harley Quinn, I'll have her fired and detained here in Arkham until she's healed."

I pondered it for less than a minute, if I didn't do this, odds were high that he'd get another psychiatrist to talk to her. And they might come to the same idiotic decision. "I'll do it." I spoke curtly. I would get back to the warden with a good review of her psyche, and this would all be over and he needn't spread gossip.

"You're the one who keeps ripping my pantyhose." Mireille accused me. Wearing a set under her skirt at the moment, she pinched the translucent fabric to further address the article in question. "Either with your fingernails or when you hoist me on a desk before checking for wood splinters." My girlfriend's cheeks grew a bit rosy, as we were in one of those compromising positions now. She was seated on my desk, just in front of where I was standing, her legs on either side of my waist.

"Are you trying to say that you've never snagged a pair?" My hands glided over the fabric covering her calf as I spoke, but the sensation was nothing compared to the feel of her bare skin.

She shook her head before I even finished the statement. "I've rippled a few, but not at the rate you manage." Mireille sounded a bit annoyed, but still wrapped her arms around my neck when I brought my face near hers.

"You could stop wearing them. It would save you another expense, and I'd certainly enjoy it." I mumbled, looking into her grey eyes before kissing her, a hand place on my girlfriend's back pulling her torso against mine.

After a series of slow, relaxing kisses, Mireille pulled away to reply. "It feels weird walking around without them though. I could switch to stockings I guess, then you could roll them down before accidentally tearing them." She mumbled a possible solution to a much more trivial problem than that of her mental health being under scrutiny.

"It would certainly be appreciated." I smirked at the thought of her wearing a garter to keep the thigh high stockings in place.

She noticed the lecherous smile. "Now I just want to go bare legged." Mireille mumbled, slightly annoyed at my positive spin on what amounted to a common inconvenience for her.

"Well whatever you do, stick to it. I don't want the warden coming to me again with another ludicrous story and threat." My girlfriend nodded, and we resumed our 'meeting'.

*January 23*

"Where are we going now Jonathan?" I asked when he came to collect me Monday night. "You said on Saturday that we were finished with bumper cars."

My boyfriend nodded his head as we descended from my tenth floor apartment to the ground level. "Yes, now what do you think is the next plausible step Mireille?" He pressed me to theorize, walking out of the elevator with my hand in his.

"Well, I went from holding a toy steering wheel to a real one, then I was forced to watch brutal accidents, next you had me play computer and arcade racing games." I recounted the months of torment I had endured. "And we just finished bumper cars, so that means," I took a step out of the
building and stopped cold. "No."

Jonathan smirked. "So, you figured it out already?" He dangled his car keys in front of my eyes.

"I can't drive Jonathan." I hissed in a whisper as people walked by, as if I was trying to keep this a secret. The thought that he was expecting so much now made me feel a bit queasy. It was all fun and games when we were working our way up, but now he wanted to actually put me in charge of a vehicle.

"Mireille." Jonathan put an arm around my shoulders, gently and slowly guiding me forward. He was so patient with me. "We haven't made any absurd leaps yet, have we? Everything progressed smoothly. Think of our work like ascending a flight of stairs. Look how far you've come from where you started. All I need you to do now is take some big steps." My therapist walked me into the parking structure across the street he usually used. He took my hand in his and snapped on the heart rate tracker, the monitor for the device in his hands.

I was reluctant. I wanted to leave, but at the same time we had come so far. Before I knew it we'd reached the car and Dr. Crane clicked the keys. I jumped as the vehicle disarmed and unlocked itself. Walking toward the driver's door behind my therapist, I watched him open it wide and offer me a hand getting in. I shook my head, but then he extended his arm further, insisting I get in and at the same time letting me know he was there to help.

Slowly, I walked closer and was helped into the driver's seat. I looked at my boyfriend's face for comfort when he shut the door, sealing me inside the vehicular tomb. It felt like he was gone for so long while he circumnavigated the car to sit in the passenger's seat. My legs came to my chest of their own volition, and I felt my breathing quicken instantly. I wanted to get out. He opened the passenger door, saw me in this state, and sat in the plush seat. "Don't worry, you're just going to be sitting here today. We'll move to driving after you get your learner's permit and have adapted to this new sensation." He started writing down things in his lab book, looking up at me on occasion and glancing at the monitor to dictate my heart rate. "Relax Mireille. The only thing you can accidentally do right now is turn on the headlights. Go ahead and place your hand on the steering wheel and put your feet down. You are psyching yourself up." He explained, talking to me as if he'd grown bored with my situation.

I was opposed to following the instructions, but didn't want to disappoint him. So I unhinged my left leg and let it touch the floor of the car, listening to a pen scrawl across the page as I did so. Putting the second one down next, my arms remained clamped over my unprotected belly. I felt close to tears as my legs shook in the stationary car. All this from a chair. I lowered my head in shame, tapping the horn lightly in the process. Screaming shrilly, I scampered to the backseat as violent images flashed through my mind.

The disappointment was audible in the strokes of Dr. Crane's pen as it ran across the page of a lab book. Sure enough, after less than a minute of trying to regain a stable breathing pattern, he commented, "Mireille, please sit back down." I nodded, climbing back into the driver's seat, ashamed of my own inadequacy. "Now shut your eyes, and breath." He said in a less monotone voice.

I did as instructed, shaky breaths flowing in and out of my mouth. "Now, buckle the belt." He directed me again. "And place your hands on the steering wheel." I did as he said, listening to him pause as he scribbled something down. "Now your foot on a pedal." It moved without me registering it. "Tell me what you see, what you feel. What scares you." There was an audible click of a tape recorder.

XXXXX
"I'll be away tomorrow and most of Sunday, Mireille." Jonathan told me after finishing our third session in the car. I was surprised at my own progress, as was my boyfriend. "I should still be able to make it back in time for a Sunday night session, but I'm not sure if you'll need it." He leaned over to kiss my cheek. "You did amazing today, now study up for the learner's permit test tomorrow and we can move to something much more monumental. Teresa can take you there right?" He asked, dotting the i's and crossing the t's in his lab book.

"Or I can take the bus." I offered, stretching in the driver's seat. Jonathan smirked, jotting down an extra note before slamming the book shut. "Where are you going anyway?" I asked, watching my boyfriend slip the field journal of our progress inside his bag.

He took his bag in hand and replied. "Georgia. Since my Great-grandmother's death several years ago, the family has been renting portions of the land she owned to farmers as an extra source of income. Occasionally, I need to drop down to collect the cash when they forget to wire me my portion of the money. I may not get a large percentage, but what I do get helps to rent the house I live in." Jonathan explained. "It's a thirteen hour drive there and back, and I'm not even going to offer for you to join me on such a dreadful excursion."

"But it would be nice to see where you grew up." I perked up, stepping out of the car to switch seats so he could drive us to dinner. "I hear that there is a lot of kudzu in Georgia, it's such an eerie plant, covering entire houses, cars, and trees without issue. I'm sure it's even more breathtaking in person."

"It's winter Mireille." He said knowingly, backing up the car to drive us away. "If you really want to see kudzu, the proper season is summer. And it's an invasive and annoying vine, nothing mystical at all." Jonathan commented. "You can visit my home town one day, but not when the objective is to see family. I don't like dealing with them, and I certainly don't want you to."

XXXXX

*January 28*

I stretched, my neck sore after sleeping on a flight for the past four hours in an uncomfortable position. It was nearly ten in the morning and my girlfriend probably thought I was driving through Baltimore right now. Instead, I was landing in scenic Montana, current temperature twenty degrees fahrenheit. I didn't even consider walking to a rental car place, instead giving a taxi driver the instructions to drive me to said destination.

I took in the freezing, wet sensation my shoes and socks provided for twenty minutes after I'd barely plodded in the snow to reach the bright yellow vehicle, thoroughly regretting not having brought a second pair of shoes that better suited the environment. When I reached the car rental facility, I paid the driver and stepped out of the taxi.

"Excuse me, do you know where the nearest pet store is?" I asked the woman at the desk as she handed me the keys for an SUV already wearing tire chains. Reaching over the counter, the blonde retrieved a map and circled a shopping area in red as well as our own location before connecting the dots with the fastest route. She then proceeded to fix me a complimentary coffee in a styrofoam cup, apparently I looked far too cold even with my thickest jacket for protection against the freezing gusts.

After picking up a small bag of food, travel bowls, water, a rope toy, a simple leash, a collar, and a small, airline approved kennel, I'd basically paid the store what it would cost for me to take a taxi all the way to Judy's distant cottage.
Putting the stuff in the car seat beside me, I took in a deep breath. "A means to an end." I told myself. "And Mireille will certainly like this." I smirked, shifting the car's gears and driving toward the house.

XXXXX

Judy was a nice, plump, older woman. She showed me each of the puppies in turn before grabbing one of the girls at the water bowl. "And this is your little gal, we call her Ann. Have to call 'em something after all." She lifted the pup in her arms and I watched the St. Bernard yawn before licking her lips. "They're all two months old as of last week, so it's okay to separate them from momma over there." Judy nodded her head toward one of the adult St. Bernards and my eyes widen a bit.

"They grow to be that big?" I was shocked, the dog could easily put her front paws on my shoulders while I was standing upright.

The breeder laughed. "Well, she certainly isn't pretending to be that big, are you Missy?" Judy patted a thigh and the big dog stood up, walking over so I could get a better look. "You're still good with taking Ann home then?"

I examined the mother for a brief while, she did seem rather sweet and gentle. "Yes, and I'm sure my girlfriend will treat her very well." Judy offered me a smile and handed over the puppy. Almost instantly, the dog licked my face with her drenched tongue.

XXXXX

*January 29*

It was early Sunday, and I was laying out puppy pads in the corner of the dining room at the house I rented. The Shuus were fine with pets, but did request that any damages to the house caused by animals be fixed with my own money. After trapping the pup into the corner with a set of plastic bars, I looked over the general area and ensured Ann wouldn't cause any trouble by roaming freely. Looking at the soft, brown eyes, I watched as the pup pawed at the bars while whining. I sighed and opened them so she could scamper about. "Don't get used to this." I told the animal. "You are living with me for a little over two weeks, then you're moving in with Mireille." I turned to see the puppy happily strutting around the room, a rope toy in her maw. "In Georgia, dogs live outside." I reminded Ann she should feel lucky before sitting on the floor beside her, stroking the fluffy fur she recently groomed. "And this is only to create a bond between you and humans. Don't think of this as praise for lying about."

XXXXX

"I got the learner's permit." Mireille exclaimed when I came over to pick her up for another lesson. "How was Georgia?" She asked, kissing my cheek.

"Cold." I said curtly. "And uneventful. Did you get the new social security number yet?" I tried to change subjects.

"They're still processing my request, it could be a while. In the meantime, I do need to start looking for a new apartment. My landlord offered me a different room in the same complex, it's up a few flights of stairs and on the opposite end of the building. It'll have basically the same layout and I wouldn't need to cancel my lease or rent a truck. But at the same time, it would be pretty easy for the Joker to locate me." Mireille shrugged her shoulders, silently asking for my opinion.
"If the Joker's obsession with you has faded before he eventually breaks out again, you should be fine. But if he actually bothers doing the research to locate you, I doubt even fleeing to that apartment in Paris would stop him." My girlfriend flinched a bit, appearing to be hurt by the cruel honesty. "Don't worry, I'll talk to Dr. Young back at Arkham every now and then to find out how he's getting along without you."

"Thanks." Mireille mumbled.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So this chapter was a nice blend of fluffy and serious. Which half did you like more though? And how about everyone's different views on the events? Please take a minute or two of your time to leave a review, they are very much appreciated~
One Shot #3: Strings

Chapter Notes

A/N: Tis the season! This installment is short, and we'll be back on track in a little bit, but please enjoy this cute one-shot. This took place a LONG while ago, sorry if the dramatic backwards steps in their relationship is jarring. We step into a time only three days after Riddler's attack and two days after Jonathan and Mireille became boyfriend and girlfriend (Just after ch. 8). I don't plan on rearranging the chapters though, I prefer them to be in the order of release.

Additional A/N: To future readers, this is so very out of order because right now, it is October 16th, 2016

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Shot #3: Strings

* October 28 *

"Mireille, this is the second time you've declined my invitation to dinner." I was thoroughly perplexed and marginally annoyed. Mere days ago we started an exclusive relationship with one another, and Mireille seemed pleased with the development. But now, she was behaving strangely. My new girlfriend picked up her messenger bag while explaining. "I told you Jonathan, I'm busy right now." She closed the bag’s flap and rested the strap on her shoulder, the scarecrow charm she cherished jingling softly.

"Busy with what?" I prodded her, tired of the vague excuses.

Mireille's mouth opened, most likely a lie about to be uttered from her glossy, pink lips. But she stopped, took a breath, and exhaled. "I'm helping Teresa prepare for a performance."

"You're helping a ballerina? Mireille, you are a medical doctor." I furrowed my brow, trying to discern whether this too was an excuse, but her tone was genuine.

"Hey, I helped her get a leading role a few years ago." She pointed a finger at me, her voice stern. "I'm just giving Teresa a refresher on what I taught her before." The doctor huffed and left the room, leaving me to close the door.

Once I shut the door to the office, I walked briskly down the hall after her. "What's the name of the ballet?" I questioned Mireille, stepping into the elevator with her.

"This time we aren't practicing for an actual recital." My girlfriend said slowly, her voice a bit wary. "It's more of a performance." She mumbled the last word, clearly it replaced a more descriptive one for the sake of discretion.

"Mireille," I addressed her directly. "I'm your boyfriend now, you don't need to keep secrets from me." My words were hypocritical, but she didn't need to know that.

She complied immediately. "You're right. But it is kind of embarrassing." My silence spurred her to
"Well," Mireille took a moment to put her thoughts in order. "Since Teresa and I met in college, we would spend Halloween together. It started out with us going to parties, but they got boring after our second year. So together, we decided to volunteer at the local haunted house." Her bright red nails fiddled with the lapel of her lab coat as she spoke.

"There's nothing wrong with that." I told Mireille as she walked between the sliding metal doors and onto her desired floor.

"It's childish." My girlfriend mumbled, thoroughly embarrassed. "Something highschoolers do for community service hours."

"No." I defended the both of us. "It's something you enjoy, don't worry about what others may say. The only opinion you should care about is your own."

She was startled by the firmness of my voice, but nodded in agreement. "That's true." My girlfriend turned to deliver a timid smile. "Thank you."

However, my interest was piqued, I was even more curious now that I knew what her weekend plans entailed. "Do you dress as something frightening, creepy, or pleasant." I uttered the last word with an air of annoyance. People who took the opportunity of Halloween to dress as cartoon characters or sultry caricatures irritated me. Hopefully my girlfriend's tastes did not mirror this demographic.

"Nowadays, creepy." She shrugged her shoulders. "As a child I ranged from macabre ghosts to dressing as a princess." There was a pause before she returned the question. "And yourself?"

I contemplated the merit of lying. Finding none for this occasion, I divulged a small part of the truth. "I wasn't allowed to dress up as a child. Though, I did sneak out in my teen years. I had to make due with scraps though, since buying my own costume was out of the question."

"What were you able to fashion?" Mireille asked, bypassing the more probing questions for the sake of my comfort.

I gave her another honest answer. "I was able to craft a decent scarecrow costume."

XXXXX

* October 29 *

Mireille's compact schedule was actually nice in a way. Because she was busy all weekend, I was free to work. However, I wasn't tinkering with my formula right now, I was setting up the house for Halloween.

This year I had to make due with props I crafted a while ago, not solely because my formula was becoming more time consuming, but also due to Mireille occupying a lot of my free time as well as the recent anniversary gift I bought her. A glass syringe and nice dinner were by no means as costly as a gemstone ring, but seven hundred dollars didn't leave my wallet without notice. So, I wasn't able to afford the time or money for a whole new assortment of decorations this year, but I was able to repurpose gravestones I made a while ago.

Hammering the final grave marker into my front lawn, I took a step back to observe the overall set. Two large tombstones on either side of the walkway would help block foggers from the direct line of sight of trick-or-treaters and well placed lights would allow the children to only look at what I wanted them to. With these two features combined, it would be a breeze to dart between the gravemarkers and jump out when the trick-or-treaters were at their most vulnerable.
Originally, these markers had been used to set the scene for a murderous gravedigger's abode. However, after a few blood stains and well placed limbs, I had the perfect environment for a newly risen army of corpses which would pop out from below the fogline based on motion sensors.

Needless to say, I took Halloween very seriously.

"Oh, Dr. Crane." Ah, another neighbor had emerged from the woodwork to comment on my work. Turning around I saw Mr. Daniels, a middle-aged balding man with a pot belly, out walking his golden retriever. "I see you're setting up for another Halloween. Cutting it a bit close this year, aren't you?"

Whereas my decorations were homemade or alterations of store bought ones, Mr Daniels redecorated his lawn each year with the latest and most expensive products available. His finished arrangement was typically tasteless and a jumble of different themes; despite this children still flocked to and complimented his yard simply because he handed out king sized candy bars. But unlike him, I wasn't out for the admiration of the latest generation of Gothamites. "Yes, some of us lead busy lives." I remarked, turning back around to adjust some of the realistically painted limbs.

"Well, some of us can at least keep up with the trends. Isn't that stuff old hat." My neighbor spoke in a passive aggressive manner, his words mocking and tone friendly.

I assumed he was gesturing to the gravestones and responded snidely. "There's a reason these have been popular props for more than half a century. Regardless of what era we live in, death and objects surrounding it have always made others uneasy." I craned my head to see what was on his lawn and scoffed. "A large jack-in-the-box and an assortment of animatronic clowns will only frighten a select few."

"Are you kidding?" My neighbor had the gall to contradict me. "The Joker may be in the Asylum for now, but anything resembling the clown causes children to run for the hills. If anything, I have the benefit of being modern."

"The Joker is a phase. Another, more fearsome individual will surely rise and replace him." I waved my hand over a sensor, causing one of the mannequins resembling a zombie to rise up in less than a second and a low growl to play on the speaker beside her. My annoying neighbor jumped and his dog started barking at the well decorated humanoid. "Whoops, forgot the power was on." I feigned an apology before resuming my work.

*October 30*

The haunted house Mireille volunteered at was running from Friday to Monday and operated between the hours of five in the afternoon and eleven at night. Her and Teresa had three hour shifts from eight at night to eleven, which was when the Haunted house shifted from children friendly, to frightening. Despite the sign outside recommending patrons be over the age of fourteen, adults still toted around their colorfully dressed children as if they could handle the amateur horrors the attraction offered.

Like many haunted houses, there were two types of 'monsters' residing inside. Those in scenes visible through plastic or barred barriers, and others who would jump out and attempt to scare visitors from around corners. Mireille was a part of the former.

Over the years, my girlfriend had dressed as a beheaded Victorian lady enjoying a tea party, a vampire sinking fanged teeth into the corpse of a deer, and one of many teens in torn, store bought...
costumes fleeing a murderous homeowner who was victim to vandalism. Needless to say, the house was rather extreme compared to others. Especially when the 'teens' were struck with a bloody axe and collapsed to the floor, screaming.

Despite telling me all this, Mireille refused to divulge what they were dressed as this year. So I came to the Sunday night haunted house tour alongside more than fifty other people, and waited my turn in line. Guests were being let in in groups of eight to ten, so I only needed to wait twenty minutes or so before being ushered inside alongside a family of four, two teenagers, and a little boy who demanded to go without his mother's company.

Two people attempted to scare our group right off the bat, one dressed as a werewolf and the other a stitched up mish mash of body parts. I turned my head to appreciate the use of mannequin arms on such an ensemble until hearing the screams of an older girl. Snapping my head back around in interest, I saw a haunted house staple. A raving man was behind a set of bars, growling and shrieking in an unrecognizable voice. Although his hand reached through the bars, causing others to step back, he didn't extend his arm fully, as touching was forbidden for both visitors and employees.

There were several rooms after that, one holding a deranged doctor slowly gutting a realistic doll, another with crash dummies chasing each other while carrying melee weapons. I figured I had bypassed Mireille or she had missed her shift, but then I came to the final scene.

The setting was a child's room in ruin, lighting helping to accentuate the torn, striped wallpaper and stained, pink carpet. What was once a colorful room now looked eerie and the inhabitants matched their setting.

Costume versions of Raggedy Ann and Andy were chasing one another and occasionally one of the dolls would pin the other down to rip red stained stuffing out of their chest. The trapped one always managed to squirm away however, so they could resume the ruthless game of tag. Their running was unnatural, with the pair's legs leading and torsos leant abnormally far back. Most likely this was to mimic the plush's lack of a spinal column or any sort of frame to keep them upright.

Off to the corner was a porcelain doll, sipping imaginary tea through pink lips. Her impossibly white skin was cracked at the cheek and what was once a perfect set of blond curls was hacked short on one side. Despite the imperfections, she appeared to act normally until flinging her plastic cup at the screen between us and the room.

At the center of this scene was what I imagined to be a twisted take of Coppélia, a main character of the ballet which shared her name. The life size dancing doll was in disrepair, her tutu torn, face paint worn away in areas, bun frayed, and one eyelid half closed over bright blue eyes. The dancing was surprisingly mechanic, with her arms moving in jerky motions and back staying firm as if it were carved from a single piece of wood. Coppélia's smile also didn't waver, nor did her eyes wander.

Then I saw her. Mireille's cheeks, nose and lips were painted rosy red, with chips in the paint depicting wear and tear. Her brown hair was down, but looked ratted, like an old doll's. She also had donned a short, puffy, black dress with several buttons missing and sections of the skirt ripped to reveal the white tulle underneath. But her limbs were what captivated me. The joints had been painted expertly, so it looked as if they were merely complex hinges on yet another doll. And she used this to her advantage. Although people could tell from Teresa's performance as a rusty Coppélia that she was indeed a human in costume, for no animatronic could perform ballet, they had trouble with Mireille.

"Don't you see the strings connecting her to that cross above the ceiling? She has to be an actual doll." One of the teens pointed out to the other. And indeed, there were taut strings tying the life sized marionette to several tilting wooden boards that moved as she walked. But it wasn't the strings
that had them perplexed, it was what lie at the end of them. Mireille's movements were over exaggerated and jerky, just as those controlled in a puppet show. She rose her leading leg up high and bent, extended it, and took a wide step forward before continuing with the next. There were even faster, choppy steps to break the monotony, arms swinging at her side in a precise manner. The dilapidated marionette slowly turned to face the audience, but look beyond them with wide, vacant eyes, and waved. Then the cross holding the doll up 'broke' partially and her arms collapsed to her side, barely swinging from the momentum, before the entire set of beams disconnected from the ceiling and she crumbled to the ground, her face pressed to the carpeted room, neck in an uncomfortably bent position, and the same smile and wide eyes etched onto her face.

Some screamed at the sudden collapse of her body, but I merely smirked. It was a good performance. Certainly something the ex-fiancée of a mime and pupil of his highly esteemed father should be pleased with.

Mireille's eyes were still locked in place, and her chest didn't even appear to shift with her breathing as she lay broken on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I did way too much research on Coppélia considering how brief the reference is. I do recommend others at least read the plot of the ballet, it's rather interesting. What did you guys think of the chapter? We got to see Mireille put her many years of lessons with Mr. Lepetre in practice and learned about Jonathan's own overkill traditions. Do you even think he gives out candy or just scares kids off? Happy Halloween!
Chapter 16: Florence

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the wait, this took a while compared to how fast the last couple chapters came out. Finals are going on right now, but hopefully I can get a few more segments out during Winter break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 16: Florence

*January 31*

Jonathan had driven us to a high school parking lot to commence the final stage of my therapy. Students who attended the public school had been released hours ago, but a few stray vehicles still littered the area. Regardless, Jonathan figured it was safe enough for me to start learning to drive here. Facing the car down a gap between two columns of white painted lines, he turned off the ignition, removed the key, and stepped out of the vehicle.

My heart was already speeding up and my head started to ache. Although I had grown numb to the sensations of the driver's seat, piloting was another matter entirely. When Jonathan opened the door for me though, I knew he wouldn't accept these, or any, excuses. So I took a shaky step out of the car and retrieved the keys from his hand. After taking a deep breath, I started walking around the back of the car, keeping a hand on the cool metal for stability.

Opening the driver's side door, I seated myself in the plush chair, my mind already used to this sensation as well as that of the heart rate monitor being wrapped around my wrist.

I was hesitant to have my therapist instruct me on driving, not because I doubted his ability, but simply because he always seemed more interested on my own behavior or his notebook than what was around us. Then his first line of instructions broke through my tumult of thoughts.

"Put the key in the ignition." Dr. Crane enunciated, I probably hadn't heard him the first few times he said this, thus the underlying annoyance. Embarrassed, I did as instructed. Pushing the key into the slot, I turned the metal before registering what I was doing. Then the engine sputtered to life and my hands drew away from the dashboard as if it were a roaring furnace. My therapist simply jotted down another line of text and spoke to me in his typical, cool manner. "Put your hand on the wheel, and slow your breathing."

I heard his voice though a thick fog that muddled my mind and obeyed it, albeit in a slow manner. The wheel was vibrating minutely, and was still warm where Dr. Crane previously grasped it. I immediately swapped my hand's placement to cover and maintain the diminishing warmth. It was oddly comforting.

"Good." He muttered, pleased with my actions.

I absorbed his praise and exhaled slowly, like he always recommended when I was overwhelmed. It took a few minutes to calm my nerves, and I shut my eyes at one point to let the familiar scratching of pen on paper serve as an anchor for my attention. But when Dr. Crane noticed this, he stopped
"You won't be able to quell your discomfort by closing your eyes when driving Mireille, so please open them and try to adjust to this new perspective." I nodded and opened my eyes, looking over the dashboard and at the parking lot before me. There were five cars in my line of sight. Three to the right of me, two to the left. Two were red, one was white, one black, and there was a green car as well. Then I scrutinized their level of cleanliness, eyed one broken lamppost, and spotted a bulletin board advertising an upcoming dance. "Now look at the dashboard, the position of your mirrors, the shape of the wheel. Things you can't see well from the passenger's seat."

"Okay." I agreed, looking at the leather covered wheel my hands were practically strangling and the various switches and buttons at my fingertips. Gauges told me the tank was half full, that we were going zero miles per hour, and the temperature of the water was in a safe range.

"You read the driver's manual for this car over the weekend, correct?" Dr. Crane asked. Not waiting for an answer, he started to quiz me. "This is?"

"The hazard light button." I replied. He pointed out a few more areas and I answered in turn. "Windshield wiper controls, accelerator, brake pedal, gear shift, emergency brake."

"Correct." He returned to the lab book and wrote down yet another line of text. "Shift the car into drive, but keep your foot on the brakes for now."

He tapped the gear shift with the back of his pen when I didn't move after a while and finally turned to look at me when I still didn't reach for the stick. It was always upsetting when my body betrayed my mind. I wanted to reach for it, finish this assigned task, and receive the accolades of my instructor before we called it quits for the day. But all my body did was undo my controlled breathing exercises, make my legs quiver, and give me the desire to fling myself from the vehicle like I did over fifteen years ago.

Then I felt his warm hand over my own trembling one, and watched in my peripheral as he guided it to the gearshift himself. Tightening his grip on my hand, he manipulated it into putting the car in gear before returning it to the original position. Repeating this several times, he let go and directed me to do it for myself. In a far less smooth manner, I replicated the motion three times and stopped when directed. The car was in drive now.

"Take your foot off the brake, but don't press on the accelerator." He told me what to do before explaining the effects. "You'll move forward at a crawl and can press down on the brake at any time. Furthermore, you will need to keep your hands on the wheel to ensure we don't swerve into anything." The blur that was previously Dr. Crane's head rotated to look at me after a few seconds, but all I managed to do was shake my head as tears overflowed my eyes. My throat was seizing repeatedly, but I tried to retain my composure. However with each shake I felt new tears fall as the tremors of my sobs grow stronger.

"C-c-can't." I stuttered through trembling lips, my voice awkward and raspy as I struggled over the simple word.

"You handled bumper cars just fine Mireille. What is so different about those vehicles and this one." His voice was surprisingly level, not containing a trace of malice.

I took a deep breath, taking my hands off the wheel and bringing them to my eyes to wipe away the blurriness. "T-this is a w-w-weapon, it kills a-and injures without remorse." I explained, coughs interrupting my words on occasion. "I've s-seen what they can do. I don't w-want to cause it."
"A scalpel can kill. But it doesn't need to, you use it to help people. The issue is, you've classified cars as something you can only weird as a weapon." Dr. Crane spoke calmly. "But how did you learn to use scalpels with precision? Practice. Just as you mastered the use of surgical tools, you also need to familiarize yourself with piloting a vehicle. I won't say that you'll never get into an accident. But it will most likely result in a dent or a few bruises, even the accident you were involved in wasn't fatal."

"What if I do cause a f-fatal accident?" I asked, looking at the wide array of buttons and levers within my reach. It was all so overwhelming.

"Then let it be just that, an accident, not incompetence. Train yourself to minimize those odds and overcome the fear which plagues you."

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* February 8 *

I was driving on a high speed freeway, the needle on the speedometer slowly rotating to the right while I weaved through the traffic around me.

The car was going above ninety in a sixty five zone. "Jonathan, I'm scared." I confessed to him, the vehicle still accelerating as I changed lanes. My whole body was trembling as rain slipped through the car’s open windows, soaking my dress with icy cold water.

Turning, I saw that Dr. Crane was still wearing his lab coat and gripping that composition book as he wrote in it. Surprisingly, despite having an open window beside him as well, he was completely dry.

“Why?” My therapist asked nonchalantly as I neared a hundred and forty. “I trust your capabilities, see.” He snapped open his seatbelt.

“Don't do that!” I screamed, a flash of lightning drawing my attention back to the road where an eighteen wheeler was heading right for me. Trying to turn the wheel, I found it impossible and before I could jump out, Dr. Crane held me in place.

“No, you experience what you've caused.” We were going over a hundred and sixty now.

The collision was abrupt and I could only watch as Jonathan was ripped past the windshield horizontally, the glass ripping open his sides before his spine snapped on the grill of the truck we’d collided with. “Jonathan!” I screamed, the thunder drowning out my cries and the water I was soaked with became blood.

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There was a lot of squeaking, and then a distinct crack. I sighed. “Result number four, again.” Writing this down in my lab book, I was drawn away from the dull experiment when I heard my phone ring. Funny, I wasn't expecting a call. Let alone one at, I checked the clock, three eighteen in the morning.

Picking up the phone, I heard some labored breathing, followed by, “J-Jonathan, are you there? I'm so sorry for calling this late.” Mireille started, followed by more apologies about how this was a foolish and selfish call.

Deciding to reduce my girlfriend’s feeling of guilt, I told her, “I was awake of my own volition Mireille, I often have difficulties sleeping late at night. Call it insomnia.” It actually wasn't a lie. The only reason I did experiments at night was to occupy the otherwise wasted time. “I was just drinking
some chamomile and reading a book. So please, tell me what is the matter. Are you alright?”

“I'm fine, I just. ” There was a pause. “I had a lucid nightmare, and I didn't want to be alone. Even if my company is just over the phone.”

I sat down at my desk. “Sure, would you like to discuss the dream, or something else?”

“The nightmare did have to do with driving.” She disclosed the information.

“One moment, I'll get the composition book.” I stood up to retrieve the item and collect the precious data when she stopped me.

“Can't we just talk about it? As boyfriend and girlfriend?” Mireille spoke a bit timidly.

“Certainly.” I opened my drawer and found a tape recorder. Pressing the record button, I raised the call volume and allowed it to document our dialogue. “Tell me all about it.”

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*February 14*

Since Valentine's day fell on a Tuesday this year, Mireille and I couldn't spend the whole day together. However, I had more planned for the evening than the little Italian restaurant we just finished eating at.

I pulled my car up to the house I had been renting for the better part of five years and stepped out of the vehicle. Walking around, I opened the passenger side door and offered a hand to my date. Mireille giggled, still tickled by the glasses of wine she drank tonight, and took my hand.

My girlfriend was wearing a maroon, off the shoulder dress she received for Christmas. The short dress flared below the waist, granting her a range of motion skin-tight dresses denied their wearers. As such, there had been a few minutes of dancing in the parking lot after dinner as well as some twirls that lead the brunette to stumble for stability due to her slightly inebriated state.

Locking the car, Mireille questioned my movements as I guided her to the side gate of the house rather than the front door. "Where are we going Jonathan?" She clutched onto my forearm, both in fear of falling in her unstable heels and due to an inability to see very well in the shroud of night.

"The backyard." I answered curtly, wanting to retain an air of mystery.

"For what?” Mireille giggled again, she was a bit tipsy, but most certainly not drunk.

Rather than answer, I opened the back gate to let her see for herself. Out on the grass just before an illuminating patio light was a simple picnic blanket next to a bucket full of ice water, a fresh bottle of wine peeking out of the top. "I figured we could do some stargazing. It's a pretty clear night, and I'd like to talk with you more.” Mireille smiled and wrapped her arms around my neck to deliver a brief, but passionate, kiss.

"That's so romantic Jonathan.” My girlfriend praised me, walking us toward the seating arrangements herself now that she could see better.

"I thought you would like it." I smirked, watching Mireille sit down on the fabric. "How about you get comfortable, I'll go get us some glasses.” I gestured to the sliding glass door leading into the house. She nodded, leaning down to remove her shoes while I went inside.
All was still going according to plan. Slipping into my room, I spotted Ann sitting atop her plush bed, a rope toy pinned down by one paw as she chewed on it. I was marginally relieved at the sight, she hadn't escaped her penned off area or fallen asleep for the night. "Now, remember your cue." I picked up a red squeaky ball the puppy favored and the young St. Bernard ran around in her pen, eager to play. "Good." I muttered, reaching into the enclosed area to grab her. Taking the ridiculously large red ribbon off my bed, I tied it loosely around the puppy's neck.

Peeking into the living room, I saw Mireille outside, laying on the blanket and staring up at the stars. Perfect. Setting Ann down on the wood flooring, I showed her the red ball and rolled it across the room, through the open sliding door, and watched as it swiftly collided with Mireille's waist.

My girlfriend turned to look at what nudged her, only to shriek in surprise when the little puppy started dashing to her side, having chased the ball to her new owner. Mireille looked between the dog and me, a wide grin splitting her face as Ann chewed on the ball and obnoxious squeaking disrupted the previously quiet night.

"Jonathan," she accused me as I walked over the threshold, "you got me a puppy." Her tone was full of bewilderment and joy, laughter interrupting the statement when Ann started to lick Mireille's neck after climbing atop her pristine dress.

"You said a while back that you wanted to get a puppy but were waiting for the right time. I saw this as my own opportunity." Even though the way I phrased it sounded selfish and logical, my girlfriend still beamed at me before standing upright. With the dog in her arms, she gave me a gentle peck on the lips and wandered inside to ensure her new companion didn't get cold despite its thick fur and mountain dwelling heritage. Mireille then took up residence on my couch and started to fawn over every aspect of the puppy.

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Jonathan sat beside me on the couch and placed a blanket atop our legs for warmth as well as to ensure the puppy didn't tear my dress with her nails. "The breeder gave her the name Ann, but you should be able to train her to recognize another name." He told me this as I started scratching the area behind my new dog's ears.

"There are a lot of possibilities." I mumbled, thinking of what names would be suitable for the puppy. My last dog was a Maltese and named Anani after her cloudlike appearance, but I wasn't sure how to go about naming my new puppy.

"Such as?" Jonathan pressed me, curious what had come to my mind.

After contemplating the dozen or so names that popped up in my head, I answered. "Well, I'm currently drawn between the names Florence and Jolie." I shrugged my shoulders.

"The city in Italy or the historical figure?" He asked an important clarifying question.

"The latter. She had very good morals that lead to her success and fame." I explained, admiring the soft pads of the puppy's feet.

"Why would you want to name a dog after the mother of modern nursing?" Jonathan questioned me before turning his gaze to the puppy, as if looking for some hidden potential in the St. Bernard.

I hummed and mulled it over. "Perhaps you're right, Florence is too heavy a name for a dog to bear. I'll save it for something special. So then," I locked eyes with the adorable puppy, "Jolie it is." The newly named Jolie licked my neck again.
"And what does Jolie mean?" He asked as I giggled.

"It means 'pretty'." I cupped the fluffy face in both hands and remarked. "Which she certainly is." Jolie licked her lips and my grin widened.

After a few moments, Jonathan backtracked the conversation. "What do you mean you're saving the name? Mireille, you don't mean to say you plan on naming a daughter Florence, do you?" My boyfriend seemed amused by the idea.

"Oui, Florence Lucia." I said it with ease. The name did sound elegant.

"But your middle name is Lucia?" He countered, a tad confused.

"It's a tradition on my mother's side. Her middle name, my grandmother's, as well as all six of my great-aunts have Lucia as their middle name. Even all my mother's female cousins bear the name." I explained this to Jonathan before adding. "It's always interesting when I meet someone in France who shares my middle name. Makes me wonder if we're related and, if so, how distantly."

"What started it?" He seemed perplexed by the odd and rigidly obeyed convention.

"I'm not sure. But I like the tradition, so I'm sticking to it. It's not a horrid name after all." I remarked, stroking Jolie's back as she shifted to lay down on my lap.

"But Florence." Jonathan started, as if about to say a snide remark.

"It's a pretty name Jonathan." I cut my boyfriend off before giving him a smirk. "Besides, why do you care about the name of a daughter I may or may not have?"

"I don't." He looked away from me. "I merely wanted to offer my own opinion." There was a brief pause in our conversation and I couldn't help but smile. Then Jonathan turned back to me and I glanced down at my new puppy, pretending the serene expression were due to her presence. "And if you have a son." He started. "Is there a traditional name in that case?"

"Nope."

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It took a few trips to Jonathan's car and then a few rides up the elevator and into my apartment, but finally Jolie was moved in. I gave my boyfriend one more parting kiss and thanked him again for the enchanting evening and marvelous gift before closing the front door.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to see my new roommate frolicking around and learning the layout of her new abode. I watched the puppy closely for a while before sitting on my couch and listening to her jingling collar and occasional barks as she traveled between rooms over and over. "He didn't know." I mumbled to myself. "Well, it's not like I told him." I explained his actions further.

Jolie bounded over to me again, this time dragging around her rope toy. "Jolie, you're not even three months old and already a wanted criminal." I scratched her chin as I explained. "This complex doesn't allow pets."

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I hope you enjoyed the chapter. It started off serious, but ended sweet. Also, Jolie is pronounced zhoh-LEE, just so you guys know. Please leave a comment/review, perhaps with your thoughts on the name Florence, Jonathan's response to this name choice, or the finishing dialogue.
Chapter 17: Alibi

Chapter Notes

A/N: So this chapter was actually completed almost a month ago, but rather than post it then, I took some time to edit old chapters and bring them up to snuff with my current standards. Hopefully I won’t need to do this again for a while. The main changes I made were transferring 3rd person sections to 1st person and fixing blatant errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17: Alibi

*February 17*

I opened the door of the apartment to see my boyfriend and capable therapist. "You're usually never late." I kissed Jonathan's lips, walking out of the apartment with my purse in hand. "Therapy was supposed to start a half an hour ago." I reminded him as I locked the door. Tonight would be another driving session on the city outskirts. It was quite an ordeal, learning how to drive while fearing every jarring movement. But things were improving at an astounding rate, or so Dr. Crane said.

"Yes, well, something came up at the house." Jonathan said vaguely before elaborating. "The kitchen faucet refused to stop running water and by the time I utilized the shut off valve, the whole floor was flooded. It took a while to clean up." He explained while walking with me to the elevator.

"Did you schedule repairs?" I asked. "Or is it something you can handle?"

"No, I'm not much of a handyman." He admitted. "Sunday evening is the earliest they have and I took them up on the offer. I have to be at home between the hours of twelve and five."

"So I can still expect you for a movie that night?" I slipped the invitation into our conversation.

He nodded his head. "I should be able to squeeze a movie in after our Sunday session. As long as your choice in movie is acceptable." Jonathan said with a smile.

"Yes, I was recommended a horror film by a coworker who shall remain nameless along with the title of the feature." I wanted to keep the selection a secret from my boyfriend.

"Now my mind will be thoroughly occupied all weekend." He joked.

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*February 19*

At around one o'clock, I left the house. I had stayed the first hour to be sure Mireille didn't stop by to keep me company during the appointment window. After all, it would be hard to explain my absence once I had fabricating the convincing lie about my sink being in need of repair. If she showed up between now and five, I had the excuse that the repairman came early and had finished the job, so I had gone grocery shopping.

Now that the alibi was taken care of, it was time to get to work.
It was expected when I filed for the Joker to be placed in solitary confinement mere days after he'd been returned to a standard cell. If anything, the orderlies in charge of transferring the clown were puzzled at how it had taken the lunatic so long to get penalized with a visit to one of those cold, desolate chambers.

Two weeks in solitary was all I was given with the psychopath, but I had to be patient. I obviously could not confront the man the instant he was moved, even the maniac would suspect something if he were assaulted so soon after injuring an employee. No, this couldn't look like the sweet vengeance it actually was. It needed to appear like run of the mill torturing brought on by the so called 'nightmare incarnate' that roamed solitary.

Needless to say, no two nightmarish experiences were alike in those halls, and this was not solely because the inmates each had their own fears. Rather than give the whole cell block similar features to describe to their respective psychologists after their stay, I switched between over twenty vastly different masks. Most were made of burlap and similar fabrics, others were carved from wood, and I even had a few store bought ones to round out the bunch. There was nothing to tie back to a common tormentor, everyone just suffered from their own delusions. The Joker would be no different.

Finally, on the clown's last day in isolation, I would confront him during the mid-afternoon lull. This was when most guards were eating lunches of their own and patients waited inside their cells for an hour until meeting in the recreational room with their fellow inmates.

I'd slowly been working my way over to the Clown Prince of Crime during the past week, letting him hear the faint cries of his neighboring cell mates through the open food slot in his door as I edged nearer to his own chamber day after day. Most of the time, I would clock out with my card before doubling back to make my way to solitary or take advantages of these weekend lulls to perform my experiments. Mireille had gone home by herself or spent those nights alone without asking questions. Since my girlfriend started taking care of Jolie, I'd received a lot of leeway with skipping out on time together after work. So, while Mireille pampered and trained the new puppy, I dealt with more complex animals.

Using gardening gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, I tugged the ghoulish mask over my head and set down my briefcase. After a short costume change, there was no remaining feature tying my appearance in solitary back to the law abiding Dr. Jonathan Crane. With that knowledge in mind, I made my way over to the Joker's cell, scraping a three pronged hand rake along the metal doors as I went. The resulting high pitched sound may have caused other's bodies to cringe, but I'd grown numb to the noise.

Although the soundproof cells took care of voices from traveling, it did little for the vibrations transferred through the metal. Therefore after I'd scraped over the solid doors, the cell's inhabitants replied by pounding on them like wild gorillas. That is, until I reached his cell. From the clown, there was no response.

Undoing the many locks on his high security cell door, I dug the metal prongs of my tool into the small gap and pried his door open slowly, to make a more dramatic entrance. Once it was ajar enough to cast a sliver of light on the previously pitch black cell, I saw the Joker lying on the cot, his heavily dilated eyes darting over what he could see of me as they contracted into pinpricks.

"I've heard of you." He remarked in his manic voice. "Well, your work anyway." The madman laughed, his feet kicking in an outward expression his amusement. "Hard to ignore all that screaming at nighttime or the gossip in the regular cells." The Joker leaned forward with little aid from his bound hands. "An inmate who got loose or an employee trying to join us'. That's the current debate.
Though there are others who swear otherwise, 'a demon', they say." The Joker let out a chuckle. "But they're wrong, aren't they?"

"You'll just have to see for yourself." I approached him, a high dose of my toxin resting inside the syringe I had hidden behind my back.

"Are we going to have fun then?" Joker sat up, anticipating a beating or some sort of physical torture.

"I am, you aren't." With that I lunged forward and injected the toxin into his forearm before backing off. I paused for a moment, watching him touch the injection site with his pale fingertips. "What do you see?" I asked once his gaze returned to me.

"A garden decoration who's missing from his post. What's wrong? Forget where the corn field is?" He laughed, at his joke and my own supposed incompetence. It didn't make sense though, the toxin should have worked. I'd even tested the same batch on a rodent before coming here. "Heh, you sure leave a guy hanging, what'd I get a placebo or something? How's about you go to the wizard, get some brains, and then come back with an actual drug." The Joker lounged on the cot, as if there was no imminent threat. "I guess we all can't be skilled chemists capable of concocting an effective drug. Go home and study valence electrons and chemical bonds, idiot."

It was one thing to mock my appearance, but an attack on my intellect would not be overlooked. Besides, I still needed revenge.

XXXXX

*Later that night*

After our regularly scheduled therapy session, Jonathan drove me back home and pulled a box of popcorn packets out of his trunk. "After the repairs were made, I did some shopping. I figured you might have run out of popcorn by now, we've seen movies here often enough."

I accepted the gift, but Jonathan was chivalrous enough to insist upon carrying it up to the apartment for me.

Once we were settled on the couch with a bowl of freshly made popcorn, myself seated between Jonathan and Jolie, I pressed play on tonight's movie. When the title flashed on screen, I heard a brief chuckle from Jonathan, but assumed it was for the name of the feature, not its contents.

Things started off well enough: a creepy figure looming in the mist, a few grisly murders discovered the next day. But then things got weird. Not in the sense that suddenly everything was bright, shiny, and all was right with the world. But due to the couple now on screen doing more than just kiss in the moonlit forest.

My eyes switched between looking at the film and Jonathan, who was sitting there with a smug smile as he watched my reactions. This was what normally happened just before a gorey or shock inducing scene, my boyfriend would look at me for genuine reactions. But now, now the two were panting and moaning as they undressed each other. I was waiting for the gun to fire, a chainsaw to cut one of their legs off, but it didn't arrive, and well positioned cameras started alluding to something more happening between the couple.

In a frenzy, the hands I had previously laced over my eyes darted for the eject button on the remote. The screen turned blue while my face burned red and the disc tray opened up.

"You lasted longer than I thought." Jonathan clapped momentarily. "That movie has quite a few
similar scenes that ultimately end poorly for the pair involved. A lot of slashers actually do. It helps make up for their lack of story." He stood up to retrieve the disc, placing it back in it's case under the assumption the film had been shelved for the night. My boyfriend turned around and I looked toward Jolie instead, taking comfort in petting the puppy's soft fur. "Is this embarrassment because of me, or the movie? For example, would you have watched the scene if I weren't here?" Dr. Crane attempted to analyze me for the second time this evening.

"Probably not." I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't watch that kind of stuff. There's always, erm, books, but I don't delve into the video version. It's so dirty and lacks an air of romance." I didn't look toward him, self-conscious about what I'd admitted to.

He sat down beside me. "That's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'd be more concerned for the both of us if you were completely ignorant on the subject." Jonathan wrapped an arm around my shoulder and kissed my forehead when I still refused to look his way. "Can I get a few titles?" My boyfriend asked, amused by the prospect of me reading trashy romance novels in my spare time.

"They're in French. That way, if anyone asks, I can say I'm reading a science fiction or fantasy novel." I told him the trick to my discretion. "And no, I will not give you any recommendations."

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*February 20*

Joker was released from isolation this morning, however he didn't return in a better condition than that he left in. The man was decorated with injuries as minimal as a split lip and as severe as a gashed torso. I saw him wheeled into the medical facility and immediately tagged onto the team of medical doctors already working on him. We set up a blood transfusion to make up for the loss and started cleaning wounds he couldn't tend to properly in his bound state.

His own form of medial attention was crude, but effective. Using the plastic covered pillow in the cell to his advantage, the Joker lay on his stomach with the cushion pressed against the bloody wound to both apply pressure and halt the bleeding. In a similar manner, he pressed the palm of his hand to the underside of the pillow and used his good one to hold the back of it to prevent his gaping wounds from gushing too badly. However, there was still a lot of blood on his sheets and pillow. The once white gown was torn and drenched with the vital fluid. By the time he made it to our operating table, the Joker was unconscious from blood loss and had a fever. After removing the gown, the other doctors and I gasped at three parallel gouges running from his chest to his abdomen. Thankfully nothing was punctured, however his costal cartilage was scraped from the ordeal. It looked like a giant set of talons mauled him, but we all knew that was very unlikely. Checking the wound for fragments, we then set out on sanitizing the area and stitching it shut. "He's not safe in solitary or his cell, what are we going to do?" I asked Drs. Chen and Jessop.

"Putting him back in isolated care is hardly an option, the Joker needs to interact with others, especially after being apart from his fellow inmates for so long." Dr. Jessop spoke as she pulled a loop of thread taut. "Besides, I don't feel like spending any more of my weekends here, even it is considered overtime."

"I know."

"Putting him back in isolated care is hardly an option, the Joker needs to interact with others, especially after being apart from his fellow inmates for so long." Dr. Jessop spoke as she pulled a loop of thread taut. "Besides, I don't feel like spending any more of my weekends here, even it is considered overtime."

"I know." I sighed, "But to be singled out and assaulted like this, it's hard to overlook."

"We'll review the records of those who have clearance to access solitary. If anyone has been there within the past few weeks we will know." Dr. Chen assured me as he analyzed the Joker's contusions.
"It's a good step forward." I mumbled. "Hopefully they'll catch the maniac."

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It was over. Thankfully there didn't appear to be any infections, but the two circular stab wounds on his hand were cause for concern. The punctures went through to the other side, but delved between his metacarpals rather than destructively traverse through them. I spent a long time reconnecting muscles and nerves in his hand while my peers focused on stitching the gashes. By the time I was done, they'd both gone to work on other patients.

I was alone in the room with him. It was weird, seeing the Joker defenseless, drained, the previously porcelain skin now deathly white. "You're smart, half a day's worth of bleeding and you managed to think of a way to survive." I spoke to my presumably unconscious patient. "You could be dead."

"And miss seeing your lovely face again?" Joker grumbled. "Like hell." He opened his eyes to look at me, delivering a smirk. "Haven't seen you in more than a month. Did I bore you? Never had that issue with a gal."

"Too much excitement actually. But you're in good hands." I told him, wrapping up the wounded hand as I spoke. "And your's should be fine in a few weeks. Try not to strain it." I stood up, ready to leave.

"And what about the French lessons teach? I can't homeschool myself." He referred to our weekend activity before I stopped seeing him.

"There are plenty of books in the library, you only need to ask and someone will retrieve a French language one for you." I checked the restraints one last time and eyed the blood bag before deciding I should delegate monitoring the Joker to another doctor.

"Mademoiselle, s'il vous plaît donnez-moi le livre." Joker uttered the simple phrase with little difficulty, his accent not bad for a beginner.

I smiled at my former student, simply responding. "D'accord, Monsieur J."

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*February 27*

I was on my lunch break in the botanical gardens. The place was usually quiet this time of day with a majority of the inmates also dining on their scheduled meal. However, this was also when more renowned patients visited the gardens. Warden Sharp arranged things this way to ensure those 'untreatable' didn't mingle with patients who had a shot at recovery.

I was sitting down on a wood bench, listening to the crackly, looped, nature ambiance being pumped through rock shaped speakers as I enjoyed my sandwich and a good book. Then, I heard the shuffling of shackles accompanied by the stomping of two guards approach me. Looking up, I saw one of my patients.

"Edward, good afternoon." I greeted him, gesturing to the place beside me. "There's an open seat if you would care to join me."

"That sounds lovely." He remarked. The guards looked at each other before nodding their heads and roughly pushing him toward the bench. I held out a hand in case he fell, but the Riddler managed to maintain his stability. Using the five inches of give between his chained ankles, Edward took a dozen more steps forward and sat in the proffered seat. "What brings you here?" He asked, it had been the
first time we'd met under these circumstances.

"Lunch, I typically have it in the aviary, but my usual bench was broken in a skirmish last week so I'm attempting to locate a replacement. This one seems fine but it is terribly close to those speakers." I tilted my head toward the hole riddled rock beside us. "How are you," I asked. "It must be nice to have the cast off, but at the same time a bit weird. I hope the orderlies aren't being too rough with the skin on your arm, it can be very sensitive after remaining trapped under a cast for so long."

"My arm is fine." He replied, "Just a little weak, but the physical therapy you scheduled should fix that up."

I nodded in agreement. "Well, if you feel something is off, be sure to let me know."

"Riddle me this-" The security guards raised their nightsticks in preparation for a psychotic fit. "- what is a device that nearly everyone has, that can freeze anyone it sees?" The pair lowered the weapons and rolled their eyes, diverting their attentions to converse with one another.

It took a moment before I scrounged up the answer. "A camera."

Edward nodded his head, gesturing toward the upper left corner of the room. "Indeed." I looked up where he directed and saw a rotating security camera. The new piece of tech was still shining, not yet covered by even a thin layer of dust.

"When did-" I was cut off.

"What do people make that nobody can ever see?" He said this riddle quickly, as if time was of the essence.

I was about to say 'noise' when I got the hint, the cameras had audio recording capabilities. Mouthing the word instead, to let Edward know I understood, I sat up straighter in the bench, suddenly much more aware of my presence in the room. "Well, I'll see you at our next appointment."

"See you then." Edward stood up, tilted his head in a small bow, and shuffled away with the guards in tow.

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I don't suspect Jonathan was given the same warning as myself, as his typical advances toward me were by no means dampened by the weekend installation of those hundreds of cameras. However, I also decided to give him the benefit of the doubt by assuming he hadn't noticed them due to another restless night of sleep, something I thought he had worked past. Back to back appointments were to blame for my own ignorance on the matter.

I felt guilty for not being able to contact Jonathan throughout the day to inform him why I was behaving so coldly. However, since there was a camera in my office, a phone tap was not unbelievable.

A few hours after lunch, we crossed paths for the first time in the hall. In his usual manner, Jonathan tugged lightly on the wrist of my lab coat as he passed by, nodding toward a vacant room we could canoodle in. But, when I shook my head slightly, he made a very blatant U-Turn in the otherwise empty hall.

"Mireille." He addressed me.

"Dr. Crane, how are you doing." I snapped around, as if prepared for idle chitchat. "Have you heard
about the skirmish that occurred in the extreme patients corridor this weekend? Zsasz attempted to kill another inmate with a ceramic tile shard and wound up cutting his hand in two places because of the jagged edges. They're both alive and received medical attention, but Zsasz currently has two victims to make up for and is in a horrible state. He tried to attack poor Dr. Chen when he was being bandaged up, must be the reason they installed those new cameras, pretty nifty right?" The whole spiel was fast paced and some words slurred together, but with the way Jonathan started to reach toward me, as if to touch me in comfort, I needed to get it all out. His arm froze and he drew his hand back slowly.

"Must be." He looked up and saw the two cameras currently surveying the location. "I haven't heard the local gossip yet. Not being able to get to bed until late last night caused me to tune out the daily drivel between my other coworkers."

"Yeah, well they really went all out. The cameras even have built in microphones." I said with a smile. "I feel much safer now, there's even one in my office. This will certainly help the place though breakouts if they occur again."

He noted my sarcastic tone, we both knew what criminals could do if they tapped into this level of surveillance. "I can attest to that, I've been here a few more years than you. Things can get pretty hectic."

"Well, I'll speak to you some other time then." I gave another phoney smile.

"Yes, do take care." He lifted his hand in a lazy goodbye and we both turned to go our separate ways.

XXXXX

My mind was reeling. Although I hadn't done anything compromising since the installation of the cameras, I would eventually need to return to my work in solitary. That would mean either finding a way to bypass them or confronting Warden Sharp about their impromptu installation. Both would be risky, but one a bit easier.

I found my boss roaming the halls with the disposition of a farmer scrutinizing a scrawny crop."Warden." The disgusted expression on his face left and he turned toward me.

"Dr. Crane." He addressed me, adjusting his glasses so they were higher up on his nose. "Yes, I've been meaning to chat with you. You're under investigation."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Not a coincidence that Joker's right hand was injured.
Chapter 18: Denial

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, I never wanted to be that person, but I am now. I retroactively added a ~500 word excerpt to chapter 16 (it's too short for a one shot). It takes place on February 8th for those who want to go back and read it. Sorry again, here's a chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 18: Denial

*February 27*

"You've all been gathered here because you have one thing in common. Access to solitary confinement." Warden Sharp addressed the small room housing five employees beside myself. He paced at the front of the chamber, looking at us in a condescending manner one at a time. Two were orderlies in charge of distributing meals, two more were security guards who patrolled the area, and the last individual was a janitor who cleaned the halls and empty cells. "Now, I am no expert at deducing who could be to blame for the recent mauling of the Joker, but I know someone who is willing to lend a hand. After a call was placed to the GCPD by Dr. Young once she learned what had happened to her patient, Detective Montoya was brought down here to investigate."

The cop stepped to the front of the small room. "As this is a serious case of workplace violence and we do not have a culprit, I am here to determine if any of you are at fault. I will be speaking to each of you individually in a little bit, for now please remain seated while I go over the evidence with Mr. Cash." Motoya then went into the room with one of Arkham's top security guards.

It was a while before they emerged. Detective Montoya was holding quite a pile of paperwork and six files, most likely these held details about our work at the asylum. "We'll do this alphabetically. Dr. Crane, you're first."

I stood up and walked through the door she was holding open. We were in a secluded room typically used for evaluations of new patients. To that effect, I was familiar with the layout and recognized there could be a small group of officers, a camera, or even just a tape recorder on the other side of the large one-way mirror beside us.

The official pulled out my folder and perused its contents for a moment. When she'd had her fill, the woman addressed me. "Good afternoon Dr. Crane. My name is Detective Montoya. I have a few questions for you." She crossed her arms on the desk. "Have you ever been assigned to the Joker as his psychologist?"

Ah, so first she would try to tie me to the victim. "I've seen him pass through the halls, but I have never been his psychologist. Dr. Young is assigned to his case." She cross referenced my file and nodded in agreement. Good, her first impression of me was that I was honest.

"What is the purpose behind your trips to solitary, and how often do you visit it's inmates?" The detective questioned my activity around the crime scene.

"I go there a few days out of the week during my lunch hour. I do this to determine whether the
inmates there are mentally fit to stay secluded or should be brought back to the standard cells in extreme cases of social degradation." The job was a bit odd, but after a patient had checked himself in years ago and was forgotten in those halls for months, the man was permanently changed by the ordeal. After all, if a person was screaming 'I'm not supposed to be here' from within a solitary cell at an insane asylum, most wouldn't take him seriously.

"Why during your lunch hour? Can't you set aside a time during your regular work hours to visit them?" She tilted her head a bit, confused by the chosen hour.

"No, solitary is a soundproof environment. The cells are specially made so that when they are sealed and the food slot is closed, no voices can travel in or out. Aside from lunch hours, those two guards," I gestured to the door we came through, "talk non-stop about all sorts of mindless drivel and that echoes out all over the halls. That's perfectly fine alone, but when I open the food slots to check how close these patients are to breaking, even talk about 'the game last night' can set back days of their own self contemplating. By coming during lunch, the guards are on their break and I can open the slots without exposing the inmates to the human contact they crave."

"I see. And you use your card for these occasions?" Montoya asked me to elaborate.

"Yes." I pulled out the ID card, its metallic strip well worn from being slid though so many electric locks. "If you slide that through the main security hub, you can view the timestamps of my regular visits to solitary down to the second."

She accepted the card. "I have the printout of those timestamps. I just need to cross reference the numbers on your ID," she waved the card, "to those on the paper." Montoya looked at the card and matched the numbers on the paper to it, circling them in turn. "So, Dr. Crane, how long have you been working here."

"Five years." I answered plainly, elaborating on something so simple would be suspicious.

"And before you worked here?" She leaned forward, curious if I got my start doing something more sinister.

"I taught psychology classes at Gotham University for two years." I said simply.

Deeming my background acceptable, she moved on to the more difficult subject. "And what were you doing Sunday?"

"In the morning I prepared some plain toast and orange juice for breakfast and read the Sunday paper. Once I finished that, I sat on the couch and resumed reading a novel I was recommended. I then spent three hours waiting for a handyman to show up at my house. The man repaired my broken sink and I went grocery shopping. After that, I spent an evening teaching my girlfriend how to drive," better not to say I was helping her through a phobia, "and later watched a movie with her."

"This girlfriend." Montoya started. "How long have you been dating?"

"I don't see how this is relevant," I muttered before responding. "We started seeing one another nine months ago, but decided upon an exclusive relationship in late October."

"Do you have her number? I would like to call her up to confirm your alibi." So she was compiling trivia then, nine months of dating meant she would expect Mireille to know a lot about me. Hopefully my girlfriend could confirm our relationship.

"Yes, but she may be a bit hesitant. We haven't told many people we're dating yet." I explained before handing over my phone, the number ready to be dialed.
"I understand." She pressed the call button and I could only listen to her dialogue as my alibi was put into play.

"Hello, this is Detective Montoya. Who am I speaking to?" There was a pause and the woman smiled. "He's fine doctor, I'm just investigating a few leads on the Joker case and need to confirm a few things." She jotted down my girlfriend's name and the word 'compliant'. "Firstly, what is his name?... Yes his full name." The officer was currently confirming she wasn't just a hired alibi and an actual girlfriend. "Tell me a physical characteristic about him you feel only a girlfriend would notice." She listened before speaking to me, the receiver resting on her shoulder. "Look that way" the officer pointed at the wall to my left. I did as she said. "Yes he does have a beauty mark on the right side of his neck. Anything else?... Ah. That is a fine detail." Putting the phone down again, she instructed. "Left hand on the table, palm down." Looking closely at my knuckles she nodded again. "Okay, that scar is certainly not something everyone would notice." Montoya went back to her other conversation. "Now when did you start dating?... I'd say from when you became boyfriend and girlfriend.... Okay." She seemed pleased by the response. "Birthday?" She referenced the file again. "Good," The detective remarked after finishing the trivia portion. "Now, where were you Sunday?... What church?" Her smile widened. "I usually go there for evening mass, with Father Robert." Then there was a lot of nodding. "Around what time did you start these lessons?" Thus the requested elaboration began. "Where did you drive?... And when you got back to your apartment?... What movie?... Brand of popcorn?" She tried to find a crack or hesitant pause in my girlfriend's recounting. "And he left your place at what time?" The detective smiled. "Thank you, that's all I needed to know. You have a good day too." She hung up the phone. "Nice girl, the lack of ID stamp on the database for that day also matches up." Montoya handed over my ID.

"So, may I return to work?" I asked, unsure if this was my cue to leave.

"One last question. Do you garden?" So they discerned the weapon. I suppose it wouldn't be too hard to do so.

"No, I mow the lawn once every two weeks. The house I rent doesn't have a garden." It was a pretty good defense. "May I ask how this is relevant?" I feigned ignorance.

"You're excused Dr. Crane." She sat back in her chair, flipping to the next file. "Tell Mr. Henderson to come in next." I nodded and walked out of the room a free man.

XXXXX

*Later that Day*

"It worked properly." The Riddler and I were in a secluded room reserved for therapy sessions. The only recording device in the area was the tape recorder I'd turned off for the duration of this brief conversation.

"Of course it did. The skeleton card I gave you scrambles the systems just long enough to unlock the door it's slid through." The criminal grinned. "Certainly worth the price, wasn't it? But you'd pay anything to get to your subjects wouldn't you? Probably more than you'd pay for Mireille."

I turned on the tape recorder to start the session.

XXXXX

*That Evening*

"So Jonathan, I received a call from Detective Montoya today. She was using your phone number." I
tried to instigate the conversation while my boyfriend drove us to the suburbs for my latest driving lesson.

"Yes, there was an investigation today to discern who caused the Joker's injuries. Since I go to solitary fairly often, I was listed as a suspect." He shrugged, not seeming annoyed by the event.

"Who did it?" I asked before tacking on, "did they hurt him last time too, or are we looking at two separate assailants?" It was annoying that the asylum was barely any safer than the streets; patients attacking each other in what was should have been a sanctuary and even some employees being brutal to the inmates. I was doing my best to help return the asylum to its noble roots, but corruption ran deep.

"I'm not sure, the investigation will probably take a few more days." He turned onto the desired street and shut off the ignition.

"Well if something is to come of those cameras, it'd better be that creep getting caught." I shuddered. "It's scary to think that I may even share a break room with the traitor."

"Indeed," Jonathan replied.

*March 4*

"Shhh, quiet Jolie." I pleaded with the puppy while she barked at the bird resting on our sill. The St. Bernard stopped to look at me before rushing over, hoping I would be able to provide entertainment instead. Sitting down, I let the dog crawl on my lap and held her close. "I know the bird is pretty, but you need to be quiet." I tried to reason with her.

Somehow I'd managed to keep Jolie for two and a half weeks without being ratted out by my neighbors, but by now it was obvious I wasn't just dog sitting for a friend. Since I had only known the inhabitants of this floor for a little over a month and they weren't fond of me yet, someone finally got fed up and made the call.

*DING DONG*

I turned my head to look at the wood barrier between the hallway and myself. At first I didn't move, but then, "Dr. Milenkovic, it's Dennis." Ushering Jolie off my lap, I stood up and answered the door.

"Good morning Dennis." I addressed my landlord. He was in his late fifties, the polo shirts and sweater vests he donned particularly tight around his large stomach. The man was balding, and affixed to his nose were small, round glasses he still needed to squint though in order to see properly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Best to be cordial.

"You have a dog." He said simply. "Need I show you the contract you signed, where you acknowledged you wouldn't house a large animal?"

"No, you don't need to show me the contract." I opened the door to let him in. It was his complex after all. Walking inside, he spotted the food bowls and pet bed right away. "Please, sit down." I gestured to the small table, "I can get you coffee, or tea if you prefer it."

"Coffee is fine." He replied, now staring at Jolie as she plodded after me.

Walking over to the kitchen, I spoke to him as I prepared the drinks. "She was a present; my boyfriend gave her to me for Valentine's Day. He didn't know about the complex's 'no pet' policy."
Returning with the coffee and a tray with sugar and milk, I set the items down on the table.

"Regardless, you are breaking the contract you signed." He added two sugars and stirred the beverage before taking a sip.

"I know," I sighed, looking down at my own drink.

"Dr. Milenkovic, how long have you been renting an apartment at my complex?" He asked, most likely already knowing the answer to his own question, but wanting me to confirm it for him.

"Almost three years." I'd relocated soon after getting the internship at Arkham, desiring independence from my parents.

"Yes, and you've been a good tenant. You pay your rent on time, don't complain when the electricity is down, and when Tony can't fix a clogged pipe, you don't scream at the man." He sighed, rubbing his face. "But still, I can't have a dog on the premise. They bark when their owners aren't home, sometimes even when they are, disrupting the peaceful environment I try to maintain. Animals also damage the property, and if the next person to rent this space is allergic, you'll bet I'd have to pay for the carpets and walls to be cleaned." He finished his rant and took a sip of coffee before continuing.

"You're a nice lady, I'll give you that. So if you can find another home for the dog, you can stay until your lease is up. Otherwise I'm going to have to evict you."

"I understand." I took a deep breath. The lease would expire in June, giving me a little less than three months to find a new place. Teresa wouldn't be able to take care of Jolie for so long, especially considering she was spending a lot of time at her lover's house recently. My mother was also off the table since she was allergic to dogs, thus my getting a hypoallergenic breed when I was little. With nobody else being close enough to me, I had to resort to saying, "my boyfriend can probably take care of her until I find a new place." It was a stretch, and a bit of a lie. Boarding the puppy would be very expensive, but not impossible in this case. Jonathan would be a last resort, I didn't want him to feel guilty.

"Okay, good luck." He took a long swig of coffee before letting himself out. "Try to have her out of here by Monday." Dennis tagged on before leaving.

XXXXX

*March 5*

"Well Mireille, you've improved dramatically since the start of these sessions." I remarked as she turned from the high traffic area to a parking complex near her apartment. While she hunted for a parking space, I commented. "You've been piloting this car for over a month now, and I'm going to show you something that may surprise you."

"One moment Jonathan, I need to park." Mireille's eyes wandered the aisles of cars. Finding a spot, she uttered "found one," and parked in the designated area. Placing the vehicle in park and applying the emergency brake, she turned to look at me. "What's up Jonathan?" My girlfriend asked, opening the door to critique her own park job.

"This is your heart rate from the first session you had driving." I showed her the graph I'd made using the data from the event. The highest her heart rate had gone was over a hundred and thirty eight and its average was around a hundred and twenty two. "And today the fastest it got was ninety three, and that was when someone honked at a taxi for cutting them off." I was thoroughly pleased.

"Mireille, that is practically a normal response. You haven't had an 'attack' for over a week and have clocked over fifty hours behind the wheel. It's been a long journey, but we're almost over." She took
the graph from me and stared at it intently.

"I'm cured?" She mumbled, barely above a whisper.

"As soon as you get your license, I'll consider this phobia completely dealt with." I handed over a sheet of paper detailing how the behind-the-wheel driving test would work. "Your test is scheduled for the eleventh." I informed her, tapping the date on the paper.

"When did you?" Mireille looked at the assigned time for her appointment and flipped the paper over, ensuring it's authenticity.

"I scheduled it two months ago." My girlfriend turned her surprised gaze to me. "I believed you could do it, and you didn't let me down."

I leaned over to deliver a congratulatory kiss, but she beat me to it. Her arms wound around my neck and she pulled me close before pressing our lips together. As she got up on her knees and shifted toward me herself, I pulled her closer until she straddled my legs. She hit her head on the ceiling at first, but simple giggled before settling down on my lap.

Cupping my face in her warm hands, she kissed my lips before slipping her tongue past them. My hands came to settle on her hips and I slowly untucked her shirt, stroking my thumb along her scar. She didn't shudder, squirm, or pull back. Instead Mireille pushed herself closer, a cute mewl escaping her lips.

"What does it make you think of now?" I asked, the response she gave clearly not one of terror or anxiety.

I traced the mark over repeatedly, freezing momentarily when my girlfriend mumbled, "you," against my lips. Her eyes were dilated, love. Those large pupils drifted between my eyes and lips before she descended on me again, biting on my lower lip while she placed her hand over my own. "How amazing you are. For fixing me. Believing in me when I thought myself a lost cause. Making me whole again." She added, moving to nibble on my ear. "I love you Jonathan." Mireille said it barely above a whisper, but my face flushed regardless. Then she kissed me again, this time slowly, her fingertips gently running over my throat, admiring every breath I took.

After months of torment, cruel trials, and immersing herself in my field of study, she still accepted me, her tormenter. Mireille still loved me, still wished to be with me, still praised me. Then I felt a pang in my chest that hit me like a cargo train and caused me to push her away. It was a sensation I'd heard about countless times but had yet to experience myself.

My girlfriend's head hit the ceiling of the car with a minimal amount of force. Still concerned about my own well being and not annoyed by the rude gesture, she asked, "what's wrong?" before rubbing the section of her head that had collided with the plush ceiling.

"Nothing." I brushed off my own impulsive action. "It's just getting a bit hot in here. Let's go to your apartment, okay?" I diverted the question with another.

"Sure," Mireille accepted the excuse.

As my girlfriend leant down to give me a small peck, I felt the odd sensation once more, although at a more tolerable level.

Mireille then pulled back and giggled at my flushed cheeks. Nimbly, she climbed off my lap and exited the car.
I stayed seated for a few moments, pondering over her confession. What it meant. Whether it had the ability to evolve.

Could she honestly come to accept me entirely? Scarecrow included?

I wanted her to.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Here's a question: Was Riddler right? Also, I do have chapter 19 on standby, would you prefer I post it soon or wait a while for the sake of pacing?
Chapter 19: Confrontations

Chapter Notes

A/N: A lot goes on in this chapter

Chapter 19: Confrontations

*March 9*

As per my new routine, I picked Jolie up at the pet hotel she'd been staying at for four days. Although the bill was high, she seemed happy with the arrangement since it allowed her to interact with other dogs. Now we were going to enjoy a nice, long walk before I returned her to the facility just before they closed for the night.

This was the second time in less than a week I had to turn down Jonathan's invitation for a date. Although we both got off at a reasonable hour, I knew it wouldn't be right to spend time with him rather than take care of my dog. A long term solution for my problem had yet to be discovered, but I planned on contacting Teresa over the weekend to ask whether or not she could think of a better idea.

I was walking past the numerous bars and restaurants that lined the street level of Gotham when I heard someone call out my name. Turning around, I saw Dr. Martel waving to me from the front of a bar beside another man. Curious, I walked over.

"Good evening Dr. Martel." I addressed him.

"Please Dr. Milenkovic, you can call me Devon outside of work." He smiled. It was strange seeing him in something other than a lab coat, he cleaned up well. The man beside Devon nudge him. "Oh, and this is Simon," the newly named individual offered his hand. After taking it, I was given a firm shake. "He was in the same graduating class as me and plans to be a radiologist."

"Sounds interesting." I commented, "But what are you two doing outside of a bar on a Thursday night?" Dr. Martel never struck me as much of a drinker.

"Simon here came up with the brilliant idea of celebrating St. Patrick's day tonight rather than wait for next week and deal with whatever Calendar Man cooks up for the city." It sounded like he was mocking his colleague more than anything, but in a playful manner.

"It just makes sense to avoid the mess and still have some fun. The bars are pretty lively Thursday nights, but not so much that it's smothering. Also, we can stay up late tonight since Devon and I have the night shift tomorrow. Furthermore, by celebrating now, we can avoid the horrible crowds that'll undoubtedly start up next week." He explained his reasoning.

"Seems like you've got this all figured out." I joked. "Have you also planned out the order in which you plan to consume your drinks tonight?"

"Not entirely, we do like to leave some things open for alternations. For example, would you care to join us?" Simon asked smoothly.
"Oh." I looked down at Jolie. "I have a dog to walk and I do have a normal shift tomorrow."

Simon countered my argument. "Well, at least have one Irish Car Bomb before you go."

"A what?" I asked, thoroughly confused by the request.

Now Dr. Martel was amused. "Have you never celebrated St. Patrick's Day?" Turning to his friend, he nodded for him to order the drinks.

"Devon, I'm not one for going out with the sole goal of getting drunk." I defended my lack of experience around alcohol. "Typically I just have some wine with dinner."

"Well, you are about to experience something entirely different Dr. Milenkovic." He ushered me into the bar.

"You can call me Mireille if you like," it felt weird to be addressed formally while I called him by his first name.

He nodded his head and smiled. "Very well Mireille. Do you like milkshakes?" Devon asked me.

"I suppose." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, this drink," he turned to accept three shot glasses and a partially full pint of beer from Simon before the man doubled back for the rest of the order, "tastes like a chocolate milkshake." Taking one shot glass, he held it above the pint of beer and explained it further. "You drop a shot glass filled with half Bailey's and half Jameson into half a pint of Guinness and then chug the beverage. You may be inclined to sip it, but if you do, the Bailey's starts to curdle and the drink loses its flavor."

Simon was back with the other two pints, handing one to me. "Should we chug them all at once?" He turned to Devon, a large grin on his face.

"Sure. Mireille, do you need me to explain it again?" He gave me an opportunity to delay the event.

"I think I've got it." I picked up a shot glass and held it to the rim of my drink, ready to drop it in.

"Three, two, one." Simon called out. Alongside the other doctors, I dropped the shot glass and began to drink the tasty beverage. Sooner than I expected, the glass was empty. It certainly did taste like a chocolate milkshake.

"What did you think?" Devon asked, clearly having enjoyed the alcoholic beverage himself.

"It was good." I grinned. Then came the moment when I had to decide what to say next. Choosing to have a bit of fun, I added, "but perhaps another would help solidify my opinion."

Simon grinned and nodded, heading back to the bar for another round.

XXXXX

I followed Mireille. How could I not? First she and I shared a more than tender moment in the car where she smothered me in kisses and praised my genius, and now my girlfriend was avoiding seeing me outside of work. Due to the cameras being utilized in the Asylum and the recent investigation, I was unable to perform my usual experiments until either Edward or I discovered a glitch in the high tech system.

Now I had the time to focus on Mireille.
We weren't able to talk much in the asylum with all the video and audio equipment, which meant we would have to meet up after work. At first everything was fine, but since Saturday it felt as if she was avoiding me. Mireille still managed to attend our driving sessions, but would often 'accidentally' drive close to her apartment and ask to be let off early because she had work in the morning. I offered to go with her inside the place, but she would turn me down and say that her abode was in need of cleaning.

So, I followed her at a distance. Not so close that she could turn and recognize me, but not so far that I couldn't hear Jolie's occasional barks.

I lost track of Mireille for a moment, but then I saw her through the window of a bar. She was with Dr. Martel. Instantly I tried to rationalize the situation. Perhaps my girlfriend had just gone in to say 'hello', but then a second man appeared with alcohol in his grip and I watched the trio chug their drinks. Mireille wasn't much for social drinking, after three glasses of wine she was tipsy and giggly. So, after watching her down a second Irish Car Bomb in less than ten minutes, I had to intervene.

The unknown man was offering to get her a 'Grasshopper' when I stepped in. "Dr. Milenkovic, Dr. Martel, strange seeing you here." I shoehorned my way into the conversation.

"Dr. Crane?" Dr. Martel was surprised. "I never thought of you as one to visit a bar. But I didn't think the same of Mireille at first." He nodded his head to my girlfriend. "Despite that, she's fitting in rather nicely."

"Mireille?" I turned to look at her, surprised by the informality she had with the coworker.

"Good evening Dr. Crane." She was clearly a tad shocked.

"Tell me something Dr. Milenkovic. Have you had anything to eat recently?" I asked the important question.

"Not for a while, I plan to make something when I get home." The doctor answered my question simply. "I was just taking a walk with Jolie when I ran into Simon and Devon." Mireille nodded toward her drinking buddies.

I closed my eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of my nose beneath where my glasses rested. "And did it occur to you how dangerous it is to drink on an empty stomach?"

"She's in safe hands." The man named Simon felt the need to combat where my claims seemed to be leading.

I was irritated. "You got her two drinks to slam back before offering her something she could actually sip. To top it off, I doubt you even bothered to ask if she's eaten recently."

Mireille piped in. "I wanted to try it."

"I'm getting you a cab home before the alcohol kicks in." I offered her a hand. "Dr. Martel, you're a medical doctor. Next time you take a woman off the streets and pressure her into drinking, at least ask her if she has a full stomach and allow her to pace herself."

We were only five feet out of the restaurant when she asked, "how did you know I was there?"

"Coincidence." I said simply.

"I'm not drunk." Mireille rolled her eyes. "The odds of you randomly coming across me are-"
"Slim, but possible." I finished for her. "And we will discuss this another day. For now, I need to drop you off at your apartment."

"No." Mireille wrenched her arm away from mine. She held tightly to the dog's leash. "I need to finish walking Jolie." My girlfriend referenced the dog happily standing beside her, ignorant to what had transpired.

"You need to eat Mireille, not exercise." I was getting annoyed with her now.

She stood her ground. "I'm not going to my apartment."

It seemed a foolish argument, as there were no statements supporting it. "Well, you aren't going to be walking up and down busy streets, waiting for the alcohol to muddle your mind and with only a puppy to defend yourself." I sighed, as she still didn't waver. "Fine, come home with me for the night. We can talk more after you've gotten some food in your stomach."

She seemed hesitant, but nodded.

XXXXX

I rode in the backseat of Jonathan's car to keep Jolie company. As we went past streets of bars where coworkers, friends, and strangers drank together, I realized that I felt guilty when I really shouldn't. So what if I had a few drinks? Dr. Martel was my colleague and we weren't doing anything inappropriate. There wasn't any need for Jonathan to yank me out of there.

"I want to go back." I mumbled, catching Jonathan's attention.

"Why?" He sounded annoyed. "Did the alcohol finally kick in?"

"It wasn't your call to make, pulling me away from the gathering." I tried to debate with him. "So what if I wanted to drink with them, it's my Thursday night."

"Mireille, try not to vex me while I drive." His grip on the steering wheel became scarily tight. "We can discuss this at the house." Jonathan then added in a lower tone, "I thought you were an affectionate drunk, not a rude one."

"Well I wasn't given the chance to get fully drunk, you stopped that from happening when you ripped me away from the party." I countered.

"Mireille, you're five foot three and a hundred and fifteen pounds. One more beverage and you'd need an actual friend there to keep track of you." He snapped. "And I'm not about to let my girlfriend stumble around Gotham with some intern and his friend."

"His name is Simon and he's in residency to become a radiologist." I defended the man.

"Mireille, what did I say about vexing me?" My boyfriend sounded thoroughly exasperated now.

"By what, saying that just because Simon is a stranger doesn't mean he isn't a nice guy?" I put my hand in the lion's cage.

Jonathan pulled over harshly. We were still blocks from his house, but I think he did so to ensure we didn't crash as he said these next words. "So you'll defend a complete stranger for trying to get you wasted, but when I come in to ensure you aren't the recipient of unwanted affections or your body damaged by all that harsh alcohol, you make me into the villain. Well, I'm sorry I wish to protect you from instances like that, but what I did was right. Drinking is perfectly fine so long as you go with
someone who is familiar with your limits. If Teresa were there, what would she think?"

"She'd tell me to pace myself and eat some food from the bar." I mumbled, my feeling of guilt now back and not diminishing. "Sorry Jonathan." I apologized.

XXXXXXXX

Mireille was asleep on my couch, Jolie cuddled close to her.

Now that my girlfriend was passed out and enjoying her REM sleep, I could do some investigating. Locating her purse, I opened the bag and began to analyze its contents. Perhaps it could explain her distance from me.

Inside of the first pocket, I found a travel sized toothpaste and toothbrush, probably procured in case of another all nighter like the one so many months ago. There were also granola bars, a phone charger, bandages, and cough drops. Moving to the next section, I saw her wallet and coin purse. Deciding to see if there were important papers or cards, I searched them as well. All I found out was her blood type from a donor card, A+, and the name of a bike store she had a rewards membership for. Continuing my search, I found a small, fabric, zipper bag that I opened to find a memento from more than four months ago: the scarecrow charm. Lifting it up, I saw that the doll had broken off of its keychain. So that was why it hadn't been attached to her purse in a while. Relieved she hadn't discarded the memory infused trinket, I zipped up the pouch and put it back. I ignored her house key, MP3 player, and array of makeup to look at the small pile of receipts at the bottom of her bag. There were receipts for groceries, dog treats, and some sort of hotel. At first I tried to stay calm, but then I found three identical receipts.

Was that it then? I cure her of her fear and now she's meeting up with another man in hotel rooms on a daily basis? There had to be a rational explanation. Perhaps her apartment was undergoing repairs or she was suspicious of my 'innocence' in the investigation and didn't want to be anywhere I could easily find her.

Deciding to give the place a call, I found the number on the receipt and dialed it before leaving the room.

"Hello, you've reached the Shepherd Hotel." A high spirited woman answered my call.

"Yes hello. I'm calling to ask about one of your guests, Dr. Mireille Milenkovic." I kept my voice monotone to avoid sounding suspicious.

"Oh, you mean Jolie? We've been waiting for her to check in. Dr. Milenkovic usually returns her in time for dinner." I was flummoxed now.

"You've been waiting for Jolie, not Dr. Milenkovic." Clarification was necessary.

"Of course, this is a doggy hotel. That little puppy is a dream, she's so friendly toward the other guests." The woman praised the St. Bernard.

"Oh." I wasn't sure how to sort this information. "Well, she won't be 'checking in' tonight. Dr. Milenkovic and Jolie are staying with me."

"Well, we'll miss her." The receptionist replied.

"Yes, goodnight." I ended the strange conversation.

"Goodnight." The woman slipped in before I hung up.
I was more confused now. Why would Jolie be in a high class kennel? Mireille and her got along very well. I walked back into the living room and saw that the duo were still snuggled close.

Returning to the purse, I replaced the receipts and felt the sides of the purse. Tugging open a zipper, I found a feminine pad and was about to zip the compartment closed again when my fingers brushed against something hard. Locating the object, I pulled out a round, flat, container and stared at it for a few long moments.

She was on the pill.

I didn't know how to react. Currently, Mireille was twelve pills into her pack. I wasn't sure what instigated her taking them, but I did know that it meant that she was debating heavily with that promise she made. Which meant she was taking this relationship very seriously. Putting away the pills as well as returning the contents of Mireille's purse to what they were roughly at before, I went to grab an extra blanket. After draping it over her and Jolie, I paused to stare at my girlfriend for a few moments.

Were they actually her pills from October? Or was this a new set? How long had she been on the medication, and why did she start? The person who could answer all these questions was less than a foot from me. But if I asked, she would know I had rifled through her purse.

Choosing to wait until Mireille brought up the dog hotel and her birth control prescription on her own, I retired to my room for the night. There was plenty of time to contemplate how I could coax the truth from her.

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*March 10*

I woke up in Jonathan's house, Jolie still curled up beside me. Looking at the clock, I saw that it was very early in the morning. Apparently my mind decided that staying on schedule was more important than sleeping off a headache. After standing up, I located my purse. Retrieving my travel toothbrush, I proceeded to the bathroom.

Once my teeth were brushed and hair fixed, I found a sheet of paper and began to compile a note. I needed to leave with Jolie before Jonathan could drive me back to my apartment. If I didn't, either he would discover that a majority of my puppy's stuff was put away or I would risk getting evicted for ignoring Dennis' warning. Otherwise, I would need to drop her off at the dog hotel, which would be terribly difficult to explain as a detour. Halfway though my third written sentence, a voice coming from behind me caused me to jump.

"'Dear Jonathan, I didn't want to wake you up, so I'm leaving this note to let you know I took a cab home. It's the only way I'll be able to change and shower before work this morning and arrive on time. Thanks for-"' Jonathan stopped where the letter did. " Oh do continue, I'm curious what you're thankful for. Is it my ability to ignore the fact you've been avoided me all week and are continuing to do so now? Or perhaps you're gracious I didn't allow Simon," he said the name with an air of disgust, "to pressure you into a drunken coma."

I finished the sentence. 'the blanket.' He scoffed behind me. 'See you at work. Love, Mireille.' Folding up the letter, I set it down on the table. "Jolie." I called the puppy. She hustled over from where she was sniffing my purse. "We're leaving." I attempted to sidestep away from Jonathan, but he wouldn't let me.

Grabbing my wrist, he demanded answers. "What's going on Mireille? Why won't you talk to me?" He asked. I refused to look him in the eye, instead I stared at the floor.
"You read the letter. I have to get back to the apartment to get ready and you can't take time from your own morning schedule to drop me off." I tried once more to retrieve my hand.

"Says who? I can easily drive you over right now." Even though it was a kind offer, he offered it with malice.

"No you can't." I rebutted. "You'll wind up late for work."

"I'll say my car wouldn't start." He replied.

"I'm not going to let you become a liar just so I get a nice ride home." My boyfriend finally let go of my wrist.

As I retrieved my belongings, he commented. "Just as you invest yourself in me, I also put a lot into our relationship. Do you know the last time I had a something last this long? Never. The only other girl I dated, and I use that word loosely, was a fellow psychology major I met in college. We saw each other for less than two months before she went back to her old boyfriend. Now, I may not be familiar with the basic ideas behind a relationship, but at this stage you should discuss your issues with me rather than pretend they don't exist. So please, give me the dignity of knowing what idiotic thing I did that deserves this level of avoidance." It was brutal, having less than a week's worth of aloof behavior twisted around until it felt like I was completely to blame. But I wasn't.

"You didn't think." I responded. "You got me a dog with the sole thought that I would simply be elated by the puppy and you'd receive bonus points for utilizing the 'opportunity' that was my wanting a dog." He was shocked by my hostile tone. "Well Jonathan, although I care for Jolie very much, I don't have the time in my schedule to properly train her, tend to her needs, and keep up with the attention you require. Especially considering she isn't allowed under my roof any more." Now his sneer faded. "That's right, my complex is animal free. Which means I was confronted by my landlord and forced to either cancel my lease and pay a hefty fine, let Jolie live there and get evicted, or find some way to house her. For now, Jolie is spending her precious time as a puppy cooped up in a dog hotel with other canines while I try to find another apartment that will suit my needs." I took the leash off the table. "So, I'm leaving, and we can talk about this after work. I believe we have our last driving session tonight and I could do with some help preparing for the exam."

Attaching Jolie to her leash, I was walking past Jonathan when he stopped me. "She can stay here." He offered. "Until you find an acceptable apartment." I looked him in the eye now. "I was unaware getting you Jolie would place you in an uncomfortable position. Please, allow me to fix my mistake by offering her a place to stay." He gestured to the living space. "She's familiar with the area, there's a large lawn in back, and the fences are sturdy if you're afraid she'll escape."

I paused, considering the idea. "It wouldn't be right, she's my dog. I need to be able to care for her." I attempted once more to exit the room.

I was nearly at the door when Jonathan called out to me. "Then move in." Frozen in my tracks, I turned around, unsure if I heard him properly. However, he'd already gone on to boast the property. "There's a spare room I've been using to store Halloween decorations, but I have enough space in the garage to occupy them. Moving in would also make your commute far less expensive since I could drive you and you won't have to obsess over bus schedules. We could spend more time together, you wouldn't need to worry whether I'm eating enough," he had a smug smile now as he delivered the pitch. "Jolie would have plenty of space and you needn't choose between us who to spend time with since we would all be under one roof. Just think about it."

It would be nice, not having to travel across the city every night in all that traffic just to spend some time with Jonathan. And Jolie would certainly be happy with all that space to run. I looked at my
boyfriend. It seemed like a lot of commitment from a man who had yet to say 'I love you'. "Are you
sure?" I asked. "You've thought this over?"

"I've considered it for a while," he admitted after a few seconds. "It sounds nice."

I smiled. "I think so too."
Chapter 20: Cohabitation

Chapter Notes

A/N: I made a layout for Jonathan's house and posted it on my deviantart page: "forget - me - notfanfics . deviantart . com" (remove the spaces) for those who want to have a visual representation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter 20: Cohabitation**

*March 9*

I watched Mireille stroll to the front door and came to terms with the fact that losing my girlfriend was now a real possibility. There were no more illicit meetings at Arkham due to the increased security measures, our frequent therapy sessions were at a close, and she was clearly upset by my abrasive behaviour.

Although I knew she could be over the spat in less than a day, I didn't wish to risk her leaving me over something so trivial.

I merely offered what I would have eventually.

Despite this I sat awake most of the night, contemplating what would come next. It wasn't supposed to happen this fast and I certainly shouldn't feel so attached to her.

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*March 11*

I left my therapist of four months in the DMV waiting area while I took the behind-the-wheel exam. When I returned with a passing grade and the knowledge my drivers license would arrive in the mail within two weeks, the person sitting in the same chair was simply my boyfriend.

"I passed." I showed Jonathan the papers which documented this. It still amazed me that it was all over.

He merely smirked. "I knew you could." My boyfriend stood up and opened his palm so I could return the car keys.

As opposed to his calm demeanor, I was anything but tranquil. Wrapping my arms around Jonathan's torso, I embraced him in a hug that made the man stumble back. "Thank you." I shut my eyes and listened to his heartbeat accelerate, smiling when he returned the embrace. "For everything." I elaborated.

"You're welcome." He said slowly, unsure if this was an appropriate reply. I felt his grip on me tighten.

XXXXXX
"I suppose a tour is in order." I stated when Mireille walked inside of the house after her appointment. "Although I'm fairly certain you're familiar with the place." Turning to my left, I opened the door just beside the entryway. "This is a closet. I primarily use it to house outerwear and my umbrella, but there is plenty of room if you wish to store additional items." Walking across the hall, I gestured to the kitchen just before us. "That's the kitchen. Everything works, but I don't have many culinary tools. The dishwasher also functions, but I don't make many dirty dishes so I typically hand wash them. However, seeing as you'll be moving in, I'll pick up some dishwasher tablets to make things easier." It sounded rude, but I wasn't sure how else to phrase it.

Turning to see my girlfriend's reaction, I watched her move past me so she could poke around the cabinets. "What tools do you have?" Apparently she'd never noticed how barren the kitchen was during her stays here.

"Knives, pots, pans, a spatula. Basic things." I listed them off while Mireille started snooping through the fridge. "I'm not much of a cook." I explained when she pulled out three microwave meals, a look of disbelief on her face.

"You also have rolling pins and pie weights. What kind of person has pie weights, but no waffle iron or panini press?" My girlfriend commented, locating said items in a lower cabinet after kneeling on the floor. "Oh, you also have a rice cooker." This pleased her.

"Rice was a staple in college." I explained the machine's lame history.

"Well at the very least I'll bring my crepe maker, panini press, food processor, and standing mixer over." My girlfriend stood up. "I doubt you're in dire need of a blender just yet. That's more of a summer staple."

"And you think I'll use those tools?" I asked, unsure why she would bring them to the house.

Mireille giggled. "No, I'll cook for you. You said I'll start by spending weekends here and work my way toward full weeks, right?" I nodded. "Did you think we'd go out for every meal? That's far too pricy. I'm a decent cook and if you have any requests, just give me fair warning."

I hadn't thought of that level of cohabitation. In college, for those few years I had to dorm with others, my roommates would fend for themselves and bark about every missing ounce of milk. "That sounds good." I commented, not certain what was appropriate to say to such an offer.

My girlfriend was at my side again and I resumed the tour. Turning to the right, I gestured to a wall with three doors. "The first is the bathroom, the second leads to the basement, and the third is for an office." I walked forward and opened the door to a large office which possessed two large windows, one facing the backyard and the second viewing the front yard. "Originally there was no door or wall here and this area was the dining room. However Mr. Shuu, my," I paused and corrected myself, "our landlord, repurposed it into a bedroom he rented out prior to moving to Florida. Now I use it as an office."

Mireille stepped inside to admire the large collection of books I had on display. They ranged from classics to college textbooks that still had relevance in my life. The wall sized bookcase was fairly full, but last night I was sure to move more compromising texts to a secure location. This meant there were a few spare shelves. "There's space for your own reading if you wish to use it. I understand if you'd rather utilize your own room for them though. I mainly keep my own books here to reduce temptation. I already have trouble getting to sleep and some of these novels would only coerce me to stay awake and read them."

I heard a muffled 'cute' slip past my girlfriend's covered mouth as her eyes raked over the volumes.
"I'm sorry?" I prompted her to expand on what she uttered.

I expected my new roommate to rush for a lie or say a quick 'nothing'. However, she did the opposite. "It's cute that your vice is reading late into the night." Mireille looked at me with a smile. "My mother often sits at her easel so long she forgets to eat and my father enjoys whiskey to an unhealthy extent. Even Pierre had trouble quitting smoking and would often fall back into the habit." She then gestured to me. "But you're a bookworm."

Her ignorance to my true guilty pleasure was relaxing, but then she made a smart comment. "Where about your chemistry books?" She asked, noticing the absence of those texts. Originally they were stored here, but the many notes and formulas I'd written in the margins were incriminating. "All I see are psychology books and a few on biology and engineering." Her brow furrowed.

"In the process of moving to Gotham, I lost a few of my possessions in the mail. Amongst them were my chemistry books." I lied with ease. "I never saw the need in replacing them. I practice psychology, so spending hundreds on new books would be ridiculous. Especially considering I primarily perform simple tests at the lab in Arkham."

"Then what about your side project?" She asked. "Don't you need research books?"

"I use the library Arkham offers." It was half true, they did have some decent books, but most were outdated. "Otherwise I rely on the Internet." Deciding to explain further rather than be questioned on it, I added more detail. "The benzyl chloride you gave me is still safe in my drawer at Arkham." and not over half gone and well hidden. Mireille referred back to the shelves and before she said more, I sidetracked her with a question of my own. "What's your vice? Those trashy novels?" I offered the humorous suggestion.

She froze for a second before turning to face me, her eyes not quite locked onto mine. "I spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about what could have been as opposed to what is." Mireille shrugged before looking at me directly. "I'm working on it though." She offered a small smile.

I nodded, letting her know I understood. The paths you come across in life are numerous and once you choose to walk down one, it's easier to focus on how different things would have been if you had chosen another route than face the road you've condemned yourself to. She moved toward me, ready for the tour to continue. When Mireille was beside me, I tilted her head up and kissed her. "If it's any consolation. I'm very happy you're with me today."

She blushed for a moment and grinned. "Me too." Mireille took my hand in hers and squeezed it.

"Now then," I turned back to the house. "The living and dining room are squished into this area. However with the table pressed against the window and the couch acting as a barrier between the two rooms, it isn't too tight of a fit. The dining room belongs to the landlord, but he isn't attached to it. So if Jolie decides to teethe on it, I doubt he'll do more than ask for us to replace it. You're familiar with the living room area and I'm sure you know how to work a television."

"What about the basement?" My girlfriend asked, looking at the visibly locked door I hadn't elaborated on. "Is there anything in there?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Shuu store their own belongings there. I don't have a key." I told Mireille before gently tugging her forward. "We do have a back porch though. It's the second renovation Mr. Shuu made."

"How many did he make?" Mireille asked, her attention back on the tour.
"Three in total." I answered the query as I opened the door to a small, elevated, wood porch only two steps above the backyard. "I varnished it a month ago as part of the necessary upkeep for the house. The wood is sturdy and there aren't any loose nails to worry about. I've also tested the railing and it's able to carry the weight if you choose to sit on it." I pushed against the wood to show this. "It's fairly small, Mrs. Shuu mainly wanted it so she could sip lemonade outdoors during the summer and hook up that swing." I pointed out the dusty, plush piece of furniture. "The rest of the outdoor furniture went with them, but I'm sure we could find some at a hardware store."

Mireille looked out and over the large backyard. It was completely lawn, which made maintenance easy. "Do you like to read outdoors?" She asked.

"It does help keep track of time and the fresh air is nice, but sitting near an open window achieves the same result. Besides, the neighborhood does have children." I admitted, waving my hand over the three adjacent fences surrounding the house.

"So?" Mireille didn't make the connection right away, which surprised me.

"Children are loud and obnoxious. Not to mention they will ring the doorbell at any hour of day to retrieve something they've lost over the fence." Noticing a stray Frisbee, I went to pick up the toy. Recognizing the initials written in marker, I dropped it over the next door neighbor's fence. "If it has the initials D.I. it belongs to that household." I jerked my thumb toward the light blue abode.

She merely nodded after taking a moment to absorb the information. Perhaps that portion of the tour should've been saved for later. Regardless, we pressed on.

Returning to the house, I took Mireille to the hallway left of the kitchen. Pointing at door nearest us, I told her, "that is the laundry room which connects to the garage. I would prefer it if you stored your bicycle in one of those two areas as opposed to out front to prevent it from being stolen." Further down the hall were the two final doors. "The one on the right, as you know, is my bedroom and the one on the left is yours."

She walked forward to see it for herself, and screamed after opening the door. That would be the zombie mannequins from Halloween. "Jonathan!" She looked both annoyed and betrayed, her hand resting atop her chest in an effort to calm her heart.

"I told you I was storing Halloween items in there. I'll move them to the garage today while you pick up Jolie's belongings." I walked toward the door myself and opened it further. "As you can see, it's fairly big. The third renovation the Shuus made was to combine the two bedrooms they had into one larger one. They did this to appease the one son they had who was tired of going between the playroom and his bedroom." Working my way through the clutter, I found what I was looking for. "There's a set of drawers but not much else." I paused, purchasing a mattress and bed frame would be an ordeal by itself. Not to mention pricey. Until she was fully moved in and could bring her own bed, there was an alternative. "When I go to the hardware store to pick up a dog door, I'll retrieve a queen air mattress. That way you can bring over your own sheets and blankets."

"That sounds good." Mireille commented from the door frame. Making my way back, I handed her the keys to the car.

"I'll also get you a house key. Would you like a certain color or design?" I asked.

"Just plain silver is fine." She took the car keys and kissed me once more before leaving to retrieve Jolie and her belongings.

It wasn't horrible, being kissed goodbye, knowing Mireille would return in an hour or so and
possibly spend the night. With that in mind, I didn't get too upset after dropping a heavy tombstone on my toe.

XXXXX

*March 12*

I woke up to two completely foreign things. One of which was my girlfriend rushing around the house at six thirty in the morning, wearing long pajama bottoms and a tank top. The second was seeing her in a simple, modest dress less than thirty minutes later.

"Can I borrow the car?" She asked as I sipped my first cup of coffee. "I promise I'll figure out the bus schedule next week." Mireille figured she was placating me with the news.

"Where are you going?" I asked, still a bit groggy and irritated after the late night.

"Church." She rolled her eyes. "I'll find a more proximal one this week, hopefully someplace within biking distance."

So that was it. "Oh, go ahead." I handed over the keys and she kissed my stubbly cheek in exchange. Within a few minutes she was out the door, piloting a vehicle alone. I was proud of Mireille and also felt a sense of accomplishment for being able to cure her. Even if I did so using an ethical, well established method.

After hearing the car pull away, I went to see how the dog reacted to all the racket. To my surprise, Jolie was still slumbering in her bed, not minding the early morning hustle. Sooner or later, I'd get used to it as well.

XXXXX

*March 14*

"It's been two weeks and you have nothing?" I was infuriated with the self proclaimed genius.

The Riddler shrugged. "I can tell you how to fry the mainframe, feed looped video though the footage, and create a false alarm, but it would be futile. The fact of the matter is that the number of guards in solitary has quadrupled, and they even have lunch delivered there. The meatheads have also been instructed by Bolton to stand guard during breakouts and emergencies. The only way you'll be able to return to experimenting on those unlucky patients is if you suddenly gain the ability to turn turn invisible and walk through walls. Or-"

"Or what?" I needed to get back to testing my formula.

"You can show up at three in the morning to experiment. That's when the number of guards decreases to two. But that still means you'll have to get past over fifty different security cameras and sneak by the two guards that are on patrol. And the doors aren't very quiet." He gave me little hope.

"Any suggestions?" I removed my glasses and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Yes. Either wait for the number of guards to decrease naturally, or do so yourself." He smirked after insinuating I murder the employees. "However, if you wish to stay low key, you can always resort to replacing the drugs inside sedative syringes with your own. Those things pass through dozens of hands and areas. Some aren't even used for weeks if patients stay on their best behavior. It would be impossible to track down who swapped the contents." Clearly he'd been thinking this over for a while.
"How would I be able to observe their reactions? I doubt it would be considered normal for me to grill every witness for details." The main reason I did this was to document responses.

"If someone gets dosed, you can bet it'll be caught on film thanks to those countless cameras. I can get the tapes and the audio back to you." The Riddler responded with ease.

"And how will you do that?" The man was heavily restrained and rarely let outside of his cell.

"When I get out, I'll arrange everything." He leaned back in his chair. "So long as you're willing to pay the fee."

I nodded, needing to continue my work.

XXXXX

*March 26*

Saturdays, I soon discovered, were Mireille's lazy days. She would roll out of bed at around ten thirty and prepare brunch for us in the form of sweet or savory crepes. Typically this was done in her pajamas and she would feed Jolie extra bits of ham or cheese if the dog followed some basic commands.

After eating our food at the table, Mireille would get dressed in exercise clothes and take Jolie on a walk that lasted around a half hour. Once she came back with the panting puppy, my girlfriend would retrieve her bike and cycle around the general area for almost two hours.

Following the completion of the cardio workout, she places her bike back in the garage and takes a shower. Once Mireille's finished eating her light lunch, she blasts French pop music though her headphones, sits in a random spot around the house, and devours several chapters of a book.

Switching gears to something less beneficial to her well-being, Mireille then removes the previous week's lacquer from her nails before painting them a new color for the week. She does this outside and on the porch swing to avoid annoying Jolie or me with the chemical smell. After applying the final coat, she naps outside until the polish dries completely.

Next she works on training Jolie to perform various tricks and practices her pantomiming. She does the latter in the confines of her room, embarrassed after being caught performing in the living room when I emerged from my office earlier than normal on one occasion.

When I've finish my own reading, we go shopping together for groceries and converse about this week's meals before eating dinner at a restaurant.

The night is spent watching a movie or two before we retire to our respective rooms. I typically walk Mireille to her own door, give her a peck on the lips, and wish her a 'goodnight' before walking eight or so feet to my own bedroom.

In comparison, Sundays are vastly different. To ensure she gets on the scheduled bus, Mireille wakes up at six and takes a quick shower to wake herself up before blow drying her hair. After attending church, my girlfriend either makes pancakes or eggs and bacon depending on which ingredients are closer to expiring. Jolie is then taken on a walk around the neighborhood before scampering into the yard when Mireille switches on the vacuum to clean. We split the chores rather evenly. My girlfriend being in charge of her bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom, and dining room while I tended to my own bedroom, the master bathroom, office, living room, and hallways. I also did the dishes and she would sort and clean the laundry. Next I would mow the lawn while my girlfriend prepares lunch.
It was nice to watch Mireille cook. She would wear an apron for the occasion and her face was usually flushed from the heat of the tools she was using. I quickly became an expert at recognizing when she was pausing to let something simmer. Utilizing the instances in time for my own gain, I would either sneak up on her or announce my presence before instigating a quick make out session. I couldn't help but grin when I would taste our meal on her lips, recognizing she'd been snacking while cooking.

After lunch, Mireille and I would cuddle close to read. This usually happened on the couch or outside on the porch swing, a place I was growing accustomed to.

We were enjoying such coexistence when the doorbell started ringing repeatedly. "One moment." I stood up and looked around the yard, discovering a stray baseball in Jolie's mouth. Taking it from her maw, I started toward the front door when Mireille stopped me.

"I'll take care of it." She took the somewhat slimy object from my grip and dried it off with a paper towel before heading toward the front door, keeping the ball hidden behind her back. Opening the door, she saw a little boy of no more than five wearing a baseball hat that went past his ears.

"Tell her." The boy's father gently pushed his son forward. He was looking up to her at first, but then she crouched so they were level with one another. This eased the child a tad.

"I was throwing a baseball with my dad, and it went into your backyard. Can I get it back?" He asked before being nudged once more. "Please." The boy tacked on.

Mireille smiled. "Of course," She replied, bringing the ball out from behind her back and placing it in the child's hands. "You've got quite an arm, getting it over that high fence. Who would I be to keep you from practicing, clearly it's been paying off."

He grinned and nodded vigorously. "I'm gonna be a pro one day!"

"If you keep practicing, it's certainly a possibility." She encouraged him. Both the father and son thanked Mireille as she stood upright. After a quick wave goodbye, my girlfriend shut the door and turned to face me.

I decided to inform her about the child. "This is the third sporting good he's lost over the fence, the last two being a basketball and a soccer ball. I doubt he'll commit to this one."

She looked perturbed by the statements and as we walked back to the swing, Mireille asked me. "Jonathan, what do you think about children?"

"They are impossible to work with, have a skewed sense of morality, and possess an annoying level of ignorance." I told her before elaborating on the psychology of the small beasts once we'd sat down.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Subtle reference to the last part of chapter 1 slipped in there. Also, what do you think about Jonathan's response to her question?
April 1

Jonathan and I were ignoring tonight's movie choice entirely. Halfway into the opening scene for the classic, my boyfriend took my hand in his and used it to pull me closer until I was resting my head on his shoulder. Wrapping his arm around my waist, he proceeded to lift up my shirt slightly and stroke the scar underneath.

I shut my eyes, recalling the numerous situations when he would toy with the mended flesh. At that seaside restaurant, on the log ride, after Thanksgiving dinner. I blushed when I recalled the way he loomed over me during the lattermost event, intent on bruising my torso with love bites until we were rudely interrupted.

"Your face is getting pink." Jonathan made the observation. "And I doubt it's because we're watching a movie about twelve jurors." His fingers kept moving, the nails digging into my flesh slightly.

I wasn't sure whether to ask for it, but then my eyes locked with those of the man I'd been dating for a little more than ten months and I decided to go for it. "Can you do that again?" My boyfriend gave me a quizzical look and I realized I was being vague. "The thing where you bite me and draw blood. But not an immense amount." I felt that clarification was necessary.

He didn't say anything at first, but then Jonathan moved to press his lips against mine, teeth digging into the lower one moments later. "Do I have the same restrictions today?" My boyfriend asked after leaving behind indentations of his teeth on my lip, his hands slipping under my shirt to caress my waist.

Last time, I had Jonathan keep to my abdomen because my cousins and I were going swimming. But there was no need for him to keep the limitations. "No," I told him with a smile. "But please stick to places I can cover up."

Jonathan nodded before kissing me passionately, his hands slowly lifting up the shirt I'd donned. Pulling away, he yanked the article of clothing over my head and let his eyes rake over my upper body. He had seen me in similar states, but never groped my chest or removed my bra to ensure I wouldn't back out. Instead he admired what he could see.

My boyfriend then leant back down and nibbled on my neck until the gentle bites became harsh. Jonathan gnawed at the skin before sucking on the various nicks made by his incisors until the resulting bruise would be immense.

His lips were tinted red by some of the spilt blood and when he kissed me, I slipped my tongue past his lips to taste the irony substance with him.

The hands which previously caressed my body became a bit frantic, both darting toward the jeans I had donned. "I won't do anything." He attempted to persuade me. "I just want to mark your thigh." Jonathan confessed.

"S-sure." I mumbled, gasping slightly when he tugged the jeans down halfway. Lifting my legs up to help him, Jonathan threw the pants on the floor and took in the sight of me wearing only underwear.
Covering my chest with my hand, I looked away, embarrassed by the longing stares Jonathan gave me. "You're beautiful." He removed the limb from my chest and kissed my lips, then the freshly formed bruise. I realized my boyfriend was making a path when the next area he violently bit was the skin resting over my clavicle. It was oddly nice, and I was growing to like the way his warm hands slid up and down my thighs, squeezing the flesh on occasion. "I'll be gentle." I didn't make the connection of what Jonathan was saying to what he meant until I felt his lips on the upper portion of my left breast, the area not concealed by my blue bra.

He wasn't rough like earlier. These bites were hardly nibbles and he didn't even break the flesh. But then he looked toward my face for a reaction and I turned away, sheepish about how much I'd liked the way his lips felt on the sensitive flesh.

Next Jonathan raked his teeth over a patch of skin below the breast and atop my false ribs. He made a large cluster of marks here, and I bit my knuckle when he ripped open the skin a bit by dragging his nails through the patch of fresh hickeys.

Finally coming to the scar, I felt a tad nervous. However, my boyfriend simply kissed the length of raised skin, causing butterflies to erupt in my stomach. The tender action was sweet, but his grin was anything but.

"Mireille." Jonathan addressed me, his hand stroking my inner thigh as he pulled it away from the other. "Would you like to play a little game."

I was nervous, the feel of his hands on my flesh was soothing, but it was concerning that my legs were now being divided. "What game?" I asked, not willing to participate without first knowing the rules.

"I'll start here." My boyfriend lifted my left leg and gently bit the ankle. "And make my way closer. All you need to do is tell me to stop and I will."

I considered it. It would be interesting to know my own boundaries. "Okay." Jonathan looked at me expectantly for further confirmation. "Yes I would like to play." I gave the definite answer.

It was a strange game and I was beyond nervous, but then he delivered the initial bite and I yelped. Jonathan smirked, of course these bites wouldn't be tender. He probably wanted to leave behind a visual representation of how far he'd gotten. Both for my own contemplation and his gratification.

After five well spaced bites, he was at my knee and I hadn't relented yet. The next few were far closer together as he slowly inched his way up my thigh. It was a completely new sensation. Jonathan's hot breath warming the previously off-limits flesh before marking it while his opposite hand countered the rough treatment by soothingly stroking my right thigh. Although it was embarrassing and I didn't plan on letting him get too far, I also wanted to push myself. He was halfway there when the phone rang and he accidentally snapped his jaw down much harder than before. I screamed shrilly for half a second, the pain no longer pleasant, and pushed him away to look at the wound. It was bleeding a decent amount and would certainly form a very dark bruise. Jonathan quickly apologized before rushing to the phone.

"Hello, this is Dr. Crane." He greeted the caller with malice. "This had better be important." There was a long pause and Jonathan turned to look at me. He appeared concerned and I didn't think it was for my leg. "I see… I'm sure she's fine, have you tried her cell?" I stood up and walked toward him, not minding my state of dress. I just wanted to know what had transpired. "Well, give it a shot. I'm sure Dr. Milenkovic is safe." 'Why would I be in danger', I wanted to ask. "Goodnight." He hung up the phone.
"The Joker has escaped and according to Mr. Bolton, you're currently the only employee close to him who hasn't picked up their phone to receive the warning call." Jonathan nodded toward my purse. "Bolton will probably call you in a few moments. By then, you should formulate a reason for not answering your landline." I nodded and thought over a simple explanation. When my phone began ringing, I walked over to my purse, donning nothing more than underwear.

Even though the news Jonathan just delivered was terrifying, he still wrapped his arms around my middle from behind and bit the growing bruise on my neck while I answered the cellphone. "Hello?" I said when picking up the call.

"Dr. Milenkovic, I'm calling to let you know the Joker and Harley Quinn have escaped." Monsieur Bolton started.

Rather than respond, I gasped when Jonathan started pushing down on the wound at my inner thigh. Small beads of blood formed at the deep punctures before slipping down my leg.

"Is something the matter Dr. Milenkovic?" The head security guard asked, spurred by the noise.

"No, I'm just shocked." I swatted Jonathan's hand. "When did he escape?"

"Less than an hour ago. He left behind a bomb, but Batman recently determined it was a fake. The clown's April Fools joke." He explained.

"Are there any injured?" I asked shakily, Jonathan's nails raking across my abdomen slowly while he nibbled my ear, thin pink lines forming along the pale flesh as I spoke.

"None that we know of." Monsieur Bolton stated.

"Call me if you find anyone in need of treatment. Okay?" I asked.

"Sure, but why didn't you pick up the landline. I called it earlier." He grilled me.

"I'm staying at-" Jonathan kissed my jawbone "-my boyfriend's place tonight." I felt him grin. "Well stay safe." He instructed me before hanging up.

I shut my phone to address said boyfriend. "Do you think I can spend the week here?" I asked. "I'd feel a lot safer with you than alone in that apartment."

He smirked. "It would be my pleasure." His hand found my scar and began rubbing it once more. "May I ask why you wanted me to do this to you?" Jonathan pushed down on the developing mark between my legs, causing me to inhale sharply.

I turned around. "I like it when you kiss me and behave sweetly, but it feels filtered. This," I guided his hand up the trail of bruises he'd made on my chest until it was cupping my cheek "feels honest." I leaned into the warm palm.

"So you'd prefer I act the way I wish to, not modify my behavior for your sake?" He asked slowly, a look of befuddlement on his face.

"Yes." I kissed his red tinted lips with my own bruised ones. "A healthy relationship has honesty at its core. Don't you agree?"

"Yes. Absolutely." He said absently.

XXXXX
I had a small goal in need of fulfilling by the week's end: catching Mireille in the act of consuming her pill and confronting her about said medication. I would feign concern, ask if she's coming down with something, and throw the excuse back at her later on if I caught her once more. Naturally I would need to wait for an ideal opportunity, but then the occasion came to me.

It was ten fifteen in the morning and we were stuck in standstill traffic. Typically we would have reached work well over an hour ago. However, due to extensive damages to one of the main bridges caused by a turf war between the Penguin and Black Mask, a lot of people were taking same road we were forced to.

It started out small: Mireille looked at the car's clock several times within a minute. Next, my girlfriend began to tap her foot against the floor of the car and her hands clenched at the fabric of the bag she had on her lap. So then, she routinely took the medicine at ten in the morning.

At first I was pleased, knowing she would have to pull out the case and retrieve the pill mere inches from me. But then I thought about why Mireille was so intent to take the medication on time. Considering we hadn't had sex and it was off the table according to her, missing a few doses should be fine. However, that wouldn't be the case if she figured we could be engaging in intercourse any day now.

Is that what she assumed would come of us living together? That I would push her into having sex with me. Or was she unsure if she could control her own lust? Mireille did let me get exceptionally close to her Saturday night, perhaps she was willing to break her promise now that we'd progressed so far.

Five more minutes went by and my girlfriend finally reached into her bag. Waiting until she'd removed the pill, I glanced over. "What's that for?"

"Nothing." She closed her hand, not able to formulate a decent lie right away.

"Mireille, you've been anxious for a while now." I referred to her behavior. "Is something wrong?"

Acting concerned was good, Mireille didn't like making me worry. "I just have a headache, we've been in this car for so long." She got rid of the evidence by taking the medicine before I could get a good look at it.

"Next time let me know, I was getting worried." I falsely confessed.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

Thus the seed of guilt was planted in my girlfriend's head. A few more close calls like this and she would fold.

"Sorry our appointment is running late, traffic was horrible today and my typical thirty minute commute lasted well over two hours." I explained to my current patient. "Anyway, how are you today Monsieur Dent?"

He grumbled in response, leading me to believe I was dealing with his less stable half. And judging by the angry scowl, Two-Face wasn't up for talking today.

I shrugged and began to inspect the marred half of his face in search of infections. After determining
there were none, I kept looking for a while longer. His healthy teeth and gums were visible through the gap where his cheek had been burnt off. The cigarette smoking hadn't affected them yet, but if his habit persisted then his gums and teeth would certainly face the consequences along with the rest of his body. The remaining muscles on the left half of his face twitched when I gently dabbed his exposed mandible with antiseptic. It didn't feel like I was looking at a human, rather I felt as if I were gazing upon an anatomy mannequin back in school. A very realistic one.

The rectus muscles of left eye were also partially visible due to the severe burns and his subsequent loss of eyelids. Thankfully, the lacrimal gland wasn't damaged and kept the exposed eye from drying out. However the tear ducts were singed closed and the lack of a lower eyelid prevented the liquid from even being redirected in the first place. Because of this, you could see the sheen of excess tears on what remained of his left cheek.

"Stop gawking!" My patient demanded, his eye now clearly fixated on me and the pupil contracting slightly due to his distaste.

"Sorry." I had to tear my gaze away. "Your face is captivating, I didn't mean to stare." Bowing my head to examine his scarred arm, I faced the consequences of my poor vocabulary choice.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He growled.

I shrugged. "It means what I said. Your ability to persevere astounds me, and the fact that your eye is still functional and you can speak well is a miracle." I dared to gaze at the interwoven muscles. "Even the exposed flesh has started to toughen to the environment to help prevent further infections. It's amazing how adaptable the body is, even after all that trauma."

"You call this a miracle?" He scoffed.

"Yes." I nodded. "But it's also a tremendous show of determination on your part. Lesser men would be ashamed, but you retained your confidence and charisma."

"Why are you trying to flatter me Doc? You want me to put a hit on someone for you?" The man tried to discern my motive.

I shook my head wildly. "No, no, no. I was merely expressing admiration. When I fall down, sometimes it's hard to get back up. But you-"

"It doesn't do you any good to admire someone for what they've accomplished. You're the one who needs to pick yourself back up. You need to be sure of yourself. There is no room for self-doubt in Gotham. You want your hand held? This isn't the place." He looked away. "You can't always rely on heroes Doc, you have to depend on yourself."

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*April 5*

Holding a brown box, I approached my boyfriend to share with him the contents of parcel. "Do you want to see the best purchase I've ever made for Jolie?" I asked, deeming this important enough to interrupt his reading.

Jonathan held up a finger, most likely needing a moment to finish the paragraph he was on. After a brief passage of time, he pushed up his glasses and set down the book. "What did you buy for the puppy?" He asked, playing along.

"Jolie has been in need of a new collar for a while, so I went online to look for one and I found
"Opening the box in my hands, I pulled out a small, six inch long barrel hooked onto a leather collar. "A craftsman in Oregon makes them. He even etched her name into the wood." I showed my boyfriend the carved name on the stereotypical St. Bernard whiskey barrel. "Now, you may be thinking it'll be too heavy, but I don't intend to fill it with alcohol. However," I unscrewed one side of the barrel, "There is a compartment."

"Which you will use for?" Jonathan prompted me.

My smile grew a tad."Carrying messages." He rose an eyebrow. "What, you never passed notes in class?" I asked.

"Mireille, my classmates threw paper airplanes at my head, typically containing rude comments about our teacher. The instructor in question would then claim I was responsible for their manufacturing and punish me with detention or berate me in the middle of class." Jonathan explained.

"Oh." I murmured, suddenly far less eager to train the puppy to be our private messenger.

After realizing he'd dampened the mood, Jonathan spoke again. "However, I'm sure you don't intend to incriminate me with bits of paper as well."

I nodded and started to explain the training involved to bring such a plan to life.

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*April 6*

I left my bedroom at around eleven at night, certain my girlfriend was asleep and I could commence working. However, she must've thought the same of me.

"No, we haven't." My girlfriend's voice traveled from her bedroom. Curious, I walked closer. "Teresa, it is a house. I sleep in a separate room." So she was on the phone with her friend this late at night. Deciding eavesdropping may provide useful information, I waited for Mireille to speak again.

"I slept in the same bed as him in October and we were both too tired to do anything." There was a pause. "No." An unnaturally long lull followed. Either Teresa was giving a monologue or my girlfriend was thinking something over. "Maybe? I don't know." I desperately wanted context to accompany these snips, but admitted hearing one sided information was better than nothing.

"If you're going to manufacture a scenario, keep it realistic. There's no way I would stroll around the house in lingerie, let alone make crepes wearing those skimpy things." I paused to picture such an event and felt my face heat up. It wouldn't be an unwelcome sight. "I wear a shirt and long pajama pants." Mireille described her typical morning attire. Another brief pause. "I don't intend to look sexy, I prefer comfort and modesty." The follow-up question irritated my girlfriend. "Because, I can't satisfy him physically and teasing him by wearing sheer fabric and satin would be rude."

I then heard her sputter. "That is most certainly considered sex, it even has it in the name. Besides how would I even prompt that?" There was a long break in the conversation before my girlfriend hushed her friend. "Teresa, that is far too graphic for my taste." After a few moments she responded to her friend by saying, "ha ha, very funny."

There was a lot of silence before Mireille took a deep breath. "Because if anything does happen, I'll be able to enjoy the experience rather than worry about the condom breaking or finding the nearest convenience store to buy Plan B." I smiled, so her resolve was weakening. After a few moments she added. "No, I haven't told him." She admitted sheepishly. "Because," my girlfriend whispered something unintelligible before giggling. "Yeah." Mireille sounded completely at ease now. "Of
course." She laughed at what her friend said. "Another day Teresa, I'm getting tired."

Seconds later, she wished her caller goodnight and I heard the phone snap shut. Walking away, I attempted to piece things together in my head.
Chapter 22: Confession

Chapter Notes

A/N: A second chapter entirely from Jonathan's POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 22: Confession

*April 8*

I watched my girlfriend from afar, myself being seated in a dining room chair on the far side of the hallway while she sat in an identical chair by the sliding glass door leading to the backyard. We were currently training Jolie how to behave as a messenger and had been doing so for a half hour every evening for the past few days. It was mundane, and the end result wouldn't be overly spectacular, but my girlfriend was happy and Jolie certainly enjoyed the extra treats and praise.

The process itself was repetitive. Mireille would place a folded sheet of paper in the dog's collar, tell her 'Go to Jon', and point at me. We had to use a shorter version of my name to make training easier. The St. Bernard would then follow my girlfriend's pointed finger, connect these words to the desired action, and trot over to me. I then tell the dog 'sit', retrieve the paper from the barrel attached to her collar, and give her a treat, some praising words, and a brief scratch behind the ear.

Putting the same paper in her collar, I tell her 'Go to Mireille', and the training continues. Naturally, we slowly moved our chairs further apart as we went.

Tomorrow, I would be out of her line of sight and Mireille would stop pointing alongside the command. Teresa was also coming over Tuesday night so Jolie had the opportunity to learn that 'Jon' and 'Mireille' meant us as individuals and not just 'the other person in the house'. After a week of training, we plan to hide around the house for her to find as she acted as our intermediary. We would also be using different colored paper to ensure she hadn't come back to the same person on accident.

Then, the training would be complete.

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*April 9*

It was nearly noon on a Sunday and I was mowing the front lawn when I felt the pressure of a small object land on my back. At first, I figured it to be a fallen leaf and attempted to shrug it off as I made my way up and down the lawn. Despite this, the weight didn't leave and I absently reached my hand back to brush it away more directly. This resulted in a sharp sting that caused me to let go of the mower and direct my attention toward the miniscule assailant that had taken up residence on my back.

If it were a hornet or wasp I would be in some trouble, as the two had more than one chance to use their stingers. However, the needle-like object didn't retreat and the weight remained. Seeking to identify the insect, I reached back with much difficulty and managed to swat the fuzzy creature off my back in exchange for pushing the stinger in deeper. Turning to examine the insect where it lay on
the grass, I discovered my attacker was a dying bee. The creature had undoubtedly decided to rip apart its abdomen and effectively kill itself by stinging me, simply in reaction to the primal fear of being cornered. How idiotic.

I stepped on the bug with the heel of my shoe, allowing it to endure that terror once more before perishing. Twisting my ankle to ensure its demise, I started feeling for the stinger still embedded in my skin. Although it was certainly lodged in my back, I couldn't seem to reach it. Annoyed by the inconvenience and moderate pain it provided, I headed inside the house to find Mireille.

Locating said individual in the kitchen, stirring tomato soup and in the process of making grilled cheese sandwiches, I asked her plainly. "Can you spare a moment? A bee jammed it's stinger rather deeply in my back and I cannot seem to reach it."

Predictably, she sprung into action. "Are you okay?" My girlfriend turned off the burner and wiped her clean hands on the equally spotless apron. "Do you have an allergy toward them?" She further questioned, walking closer before spinning me around.

"No, I would have informed you of such an allergy soon after we started dating as well as the location of any sort of EpiPen in case of emergencies." I explained in a bored tone as she tried to locate the stinger.

"Well, you're always so secretive, how am I supposed to know whether you'd hide your allergies as well?" Relief came to me when the stinger was gently removed. "Ouch." Mireille mumbled, looking at the sharp object between her fingers. "You'll want to ice that before it swells and the pain worsens." She threw away the stinger and collected a plastic bag from one of the drawers. I attempted to stop her as she began filling it with ice.

"That won't be necessary." I stepped back. "The pain is tolerable and icing the area is an overreaction." I unintentionally insulted her typically caring nature. "I've been stung plenty of times in my youth, I'll be fine."

"Pain isn't meant to be tolerated, it needs to be addressed. At least let me cover the area with an anti-itch spray. It's made specifically for stings and bug bites. I picked some up a few weeks ago after Dr. Jessop told me she was stung three times while gardening." Mireille left to retrieve the over the counter medicine.

"That isn't necessary." I started making my way back to the front door, flinching a bit as the pain started to sink in.

"You're hurting. Just lift up your shirt-" My girlfriend started.

"I'm fine." I cut her off, opening the door to leave.

Then she presented an argument I wasn't expecting. "If you're refusing treatment because you don't want me to see your back, I already know about the scars." I didn't move, my mind busily trying to figure out how she could possibly know about them. However, she answered my internal question herself. "Back at the amusement park, when your shirt rode up on that water ride. I saw them, but I pretended not to. You don't have to tell me how you got them or why you're choosing to hide them. I trust you'll tell me in time, when you're ready. But please, don't endure more pain now just so I won't question you. I want to help, okay? I know it isn't much: a little spray, a bag of ice, but you don't deserve to just suffer in silence. Let me help. I can help." She pleaded with me on such a small conflict, but implied something on a far larger scale.

It took a minute, but I eventually shut the front door and sighed. "Fine." I turned around to face her.
"You can help."

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*April 11*

This would be the first time I'd formally meet Teresa. Aside from watching her perform as Coppélia in the haunted house last Halloween, I hadn't even seen her. Mireille would often meet up with her over weekends or be picked up by the pediatrician at the house, but she'd yet to come inside or otherwise properly introduced herself to me.

The doorbell rang and Mireille rushed to answer it. "I can't wait for you two to meet." She exclaimed for the third time today. "Hi Teresa!" Mireille hugged her friend as soon as she opened the door wide enough to do so.

I got my first look at Teresa's round face when her chin was rested over Mireille shoulder in the embrace. She was taller than my girlfriend by around three inches and had to stoop a bit to properly accept the hug.

As a college friend, it was only natural for Teresa to be older than my girlfriend, who started higher schooling at the age of fifteen. The pediatrician was slightly older than myself, but led a rather carefree life outside of work. Mireille informed me she used to drive them down to Florida for spring breaks in med school and booked a flight to Vegas for the both of them when she'd turned twenty-one. In addition, Teresa wasn't a fan of settling down and changed lovers at least every ten or eleven months. The part time ballet instructor was currently involved with the divorced father of one of her ballet students and had been with him for the past eight months.

The woman possessed chocolate brown eyes and had expertly applied makeup. Her dark brown hair was currently in a loose bun and strands that had broken free of the elastic showed the hair to be rather curly.

Her outfit was well put together as well and she had a cross around her neck identical to the one Mireille wore today. Most likely one had gifted the matching accessory to the other or they were part of a larger group of individuals with matching pendants.

However, it was their interactions which interested me. "Hey Mimi, how's it going?" Teresa asked the vague question.

"Everything's going great, how are you?" My girlfriend let go of her friend and awaited a response while they were still in close proximity and the door had yet to be shut.

"Could be better, could be worse. Daniel's been getting attached lately, wants us to pick out an animal from the pound together. I think he figures I'll grow attached to the creature and try to stick by him to stay close to it. I've known him for barely eight months and he thinks we're soulmates." Teresa rolled her eyes but smiled nonetheless.

"What do you think of him?" Mireille sounded genuinely curious when she asked this.

"Tolerable, but he likes bowling way too much. I had to buy my own shoes after slipping into those gross rentals one time too many times." Teresa stuck her tongue out briefly in disgust. "How about your guy?" She casually jerked her head toward me, not perturbed about gossiping when I was scarcely ten feet away.

"Jonathan's great," Mireille praised me in a nondescript manner, most likely wanting to avoid specifics in my presence lest I judge or question her about the features she highlights.
"You sure? He looks like a total nerd." Teresa's tone was playful, but then her demeanor changed and she grinned. Nudging Mireille, she started asking, "What about that muscular anat-"

My girlfriend slapped her hand over her friends mouth and uttered an annoyed, "Teresa, not the time." Her friend nodded and pulled the hand down and off her lips to inform Mireille she was done gossiping.

"Fine, your little secret is safe with me." She finally looked toward me completely. "We haven't been properly introduced yet. My name is Teresa." The pediatrician walked past Mireille and offered her hand in greeting.

Taking her manicured hand in my own, I shook it. "Jonathan." I dropped my title and surname as she hadn't provided her own. "I've heard plenty about you from Mireille."

"Likewise." She responded. "Don't worry, it's mostly good." My girlfriend playfully smacked her friend's shoulder again when she'd let go of my hand. "Mimi, there are some goodies in the car. Would you mind getting them, my wrist is a bit sore from bowling with Daniel."

"Sure." Mireille left the house to retrieve them. We both watched her depart and as soon as the door shut, Teresa's head snapped around and she began openly staring at me, attempting to analyze what she could of my visage.

"Looking for something in particular?" I asked as she eyed me up and down unabashed. Her demeanor had shifted from friendly to critical since Mireille left us alone, the well trimmed eyebrows slightly furrowed.

"Like I said, all of what Mimi told me didn't give you brownie points in my eyes." Teresa looked at my face for a shift in expression, not finding anything wrong with my physical appearance.

"And you figure looking at me is the key? That I'll have a defining label on myself that will trigger something in your head?" I all but scoffed at her attempt at dissecting me. If an asylum full of psychologists hadn't seen past my front, this amiture wouldn't stand a chance.

"No, I don't think you do, otherwise Mimi would've seen it." She talked with me plainly now, her gaze less demeaning as she brought up her friend. "But now she's too busy promoting the positives to search for negatives."

"So you intend to sabotage our relationship by finding out a flaw of mine and exploiting it?" I was marginally annoyed by this meddlesome behavior.

"No, I'm playing Devil's advocate. All Mimi's parents care about is whether or not she's happy. I'm here to figure out whether she should be. People suffer through abusive relationships but still go back to their partners at the end of the day. And although a few bites are fine, I saw what you did to her." Teresa lip curled up to form a sneer.

"She asked-" I started explaining before being cut off.

"I don't care. I want to like you Jonathan, I want this to be a healthy relationship that doesn't need intervening, but words won't persuade me." She crossed her arms.

"You aren't a psychologist. What grants you the authority to determine whether our relationship is healthy?" I asked in a calm manner, not wanting to give her ammunition by speaking rudely.

"I'm her friend." She replied sternly. "And my opinion matters greatly to Mimi, professional or not."
"Why now? We've been dating exclusively for almost half a year." She was only a confidant for Mireille until now, what would spur her to intervene like this.

"Because, Mimi said something recently that rose far more alarms than a little blood play. That's why I'm here." She explained ominously.

"What did she say?" I questioned her, knowing it probably had to do with our relationship.

"That's between me and Mimi." Teresa deadpanned, uncrossing her arms when she heard said person's approaching footsteps.

"Jonathan?" Mireille called after opening the front door. "Can you take a bag or two? These are ridiculously heavy."

"Sorry about that, I went overboard." Teresa turned to address her friend, the cold demeanor vanishing almost instantly.

"No problem." Mireille sighed when I took two large bags from her weakening grip. "But you'll have to help us eat all this. Stay for lunch, I'm sure I can whip something up with these ingredients." She played the role of a gracious hostess.

"I'd love to." Teresa grinned, eyes darting toward me as she accepted the invite. I wasn't concerned, maneuvering difficult scenarios and probing questions was easy for me.

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*April 12*

"Dr. Milenkovic." I walked toward my coworker in the Medical Facility's break room. I'd come to the wing in order to test a few blood samples, but used the early morning appointment time to see if I could catch Mireille ingesting another one of her pills. Sure enough, after walking into the room just as the clock struck ten, I saw her retrieving one from her purse. "Headache?" I asked, nodding to the pill she was blatantly holding in her hands. Picking a clean mug out of the nearby cupboard, I prepared some hot tea.

My girlfriend nodded quickly and took the pill. Good, she was so nervous about being caught twice within such a short period of time that she wasn't able to vocalize just yet. Parts of me were curious about her heartrate, but grasping a coworker's wrist would hardly be considered normal. "I had one too many cups of coffee this morning. The caffeine gave me a headache."

"Then that probably isn't a bright idea." I pointed at the mug in her hand, holding back a smirk.

"Y-yes I don't think it is." She looked between the mug and the sink, considering whether or not to commit to the lie by dumping the beverage. Her first step was hesitant, but she then was dedicated to the performance and poured the dark brown drink down the drain in a slow fashion. I saw her shoulders slump slightly, either upset at wasting the mug or realizing she would have to go without the additional caffeine today.

Either way, she'd been caught a second time, once more and I would have reason to confront her about these frequent 'headaches'.

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*Later That Day*
"Good evening Edward. It's been over three months since you've been placed back in our care. How are you feeling?" I asked the man, not really caring about his emotional state.

"That hardly sounded genuine Dr. Crane. In fact, you seem venomous about the duration of my stay. Why though? I'd hardly call myself a nuisance, especially compared to some of the other slackjawed idiots you treat." The criminal leaned back in his chair, smirking when I turned off the recording device.

"Why haven't you left yet, Riddler? We had an agreement." It had been roughly a month and a half since I was last able to test my formula on an inmate. Although I hadn't become desperate enough to resort to injecting random citizens, I was getting close. This latest rendition showed promise, and I needed human testing to confirm it.

"I have clients in need of certain information. Information that requires I stay in this hovel a while longer." He shrugged. "You aren't the only one who desires my help." He stressed 'need' and 'desires', pleased he was considered valuable by others.

"Would that information be of the physical kind? Because if a trip to the record room would speed this up, I'm willing to assist you." The files were safeguarded, but it wasn't unusual for personnel to sift through them either to find out about a specific inmate or to help with their own general research.

The Riddler started shaking his head halfway through my proposal. "Sorry Crane, not that kind of intel. If it were, I'd have had it weeks ago. Just focus on your own agenda and I'll be out of here before you know it."

"How can I continue my work without human testing?" I asked him plainly.

"Focus on your other project." He leant forwards. "How is your relationship these days? Still as lucrative as you wanted?"

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*That Night*

Mireille went to her own apartment after work on Monday. Including the weekends, she'd been at the house nine days in a row. So now when I went home, the silence I was greeted with was foreign. Going back to the routine of preparing my own meals and remembering to feed Jolie wasn't hard, but it also wasn't pleasant. I had gotten used to having Mireille around.

Since Friday, my girlfriend was determined to hear me scream after I had emerged from the theater unscathed by an intense horror movie that left her shaking. She spent the weekend trying to surprise me herself by sneaking into a room I occupied and yelling 'boo' or hiding in the hall closet until I crossed her path. Naturally these attempts were unsuccessful. However, I found myself sitting in opportune locations which would entice her to try again as well as walking to the front door to check for imaginary packages.

But she wasn't home.

I'd been without Mireille's company at the house for two days and I couldn't wait for the weekend. Although her being gone allowed me to work without worry of being caught, it was nice having someone care about what I did and act concerned when I was clearly displaying symptoms of sleep deprivation.

I reflexively smiled, recalling the events of several days ago when she was having a late night herself
and saw me on the way to the house's office. Mireille instantly stood up from the couch and asked if I thought warm milk with honey or something similar would help me sleep. My girlfriend had assumed that I was dealing with insomnia. Her theory was much better than reality.

Eventually she convinced me to sit beside her and watch some movie about a chauffeur's daughter attempting to figure out whether to date a playboy or his brainy older brother. "Aunt Violet named Linus after that character." Mireille pointed out with a smile when his character was introduced. "This is one of her favorite movies." We held brief conversations throughout the first half of the film until I felt my eyelids start to droop, the black and white movie melding into grey. Shortly thereafter, my glasses were removed and Mireille slowly lowered my head to her lap. Once there she toyed with my hair in a soothing manner as I drifted off.

I woke up with a thick blanket over my body and a pillow where Mireille's lap used to be. And, to my slight annoyance, my feet were being weighed down by a dog resting atop them. Still dealing with the grogginess that came with waking up, I didn't get up just yet and instead stared at the clock on the cable box as the minutes passed by. Hearing Mireille's footsteps a few minutes later, I shut my eyes to see if she would do anything whilst under the impression that I was asleep. Sure enough, my girlfriend approached me, adjusted the blanket a tad, toyed with my hair for a moment, and kissed my cheek before muttering something in French. All I knew was she started with the word 'why' and ended with the phrase 'my beloved'.

Closing the front door behind me now, I noticed another irregularity aside from the silence. Jolie hadn't rushed over to greet me in her typical, boisterous fashion. Curious for the reasoning behind this anomaly, I made my way over to her dog bed and saw that the St. Bernard was laying atop that same blanket Mireille had placed over me several days ago. Apparently, Jolie had seen fit to pull it off the couch and proceeded to drag the blanket to her bed and cover the fabric in her fur as she napped.

I said her name sternly at first and snapped my finger before pointing away in hopes she would get up. However, she merely lowered her head and kept her ground. Although the blanket wasn't damaged, I knew it would require cleaning. Grabbing a corner of fabric, I resorted to tugging the blanket off of the bed and onto the wood floor, bringing the puppy along for the ride. She didn't get up, determined not to let me take away the new toy. I then dragged her toward the laundry room atop my girlfriend's blanket.

Once there, I lifted two of the corners up until Jolie gently rolled off the fabric and onto the floor. Bunching up the blanket, I placed it in the washer.

I'd been away from Mireille since we got out of work mere hours ago. But still, I called her to relay these events.

She laughed upon hearing Jolie had misbehaved and cooed when she heard about how obstinate her puppy was about relinquishing the blanket.

I couldn't help but smile.

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*April 16*

"Mireille, that doesn't look like a container for pain relief capsules." I finally checkmated my girlfriend after finding her in the kitchen with the disc of pills in her hands.

"Erm." She looked cornered, unsure whether hiding said item would do any good. "I-" I walked
closer, one eyebrow cocked after getting a good look at the item in her hand. "I can explain?" It sounded more like a question.

"Those look like contraceptive pills Mireille." I let her come to terms with the knowledge that lying about their purpose wouldn't get her anywhere. That the ruse was up.

"T-they are." She said simply, still not meeting my gaze.

"And you're taking them?" I furthered our conversation by asking the simple question.

"Yes." She mumbled, popping the pill she had in her hand before downing it with a glass of water on the counter.

"How long?" This was the answer I was desperate to hear, had been eager for her to divulge.

Mireille took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, her shoulders and visage relaxing. Perhaps she wanted to come clean. "Since the end of January. I picked up my first container after getting my learner's permit from the DMV."

That would've been when I was over in Montana picking up Jolie from Judy. It seemed an odd date, but meant she'd been taking the contraceptives for over three months. "Why? You've disallowed anything that could lead to an unwanted pregnancy or even come close to such an event."

"Because." She took a moment to gather her thoughts. "Before meeting you, I was trapped in the same boring routine, content with my life and not prepared for change. My world was stagnant. I didn't date often, and rarely found interest in men I did attempt relationships with since I was always too busy mourning Pierre and the life we would have shared." A smile grew on her face as she continued. "Then you asked me on a date and I was captivated. From there out, I started moving on. I never tried to conquer my lifelong fear and allowed it to haunt me, you put a stop to that. I hadn't gone to France in years, but you gave me the courage to finally return. Jonathan, you helped me out of a swamp I didn't know I was trapped in and now I feel like so many of my burdens have been lifted. I don't want to live in the past any more, and by taking those pills, I'm telling myself that I may pursue a sexual relationship with you and I shouldn't feel awful for doing so. That promise is in the past, and." Mireille paused and I felt myself flush when she said, "I'd like you to be my future."

Recognizing it was a hefty confession to make, I didn't leave on the edge, wondering how I felt about it. Leaning down, I kissed my girlfriend, smiling when she wrapped her arms around my neck just to be closer to me. After the lazy, heartfelt kisses ceased, I told her. "I want you as my future as well." She turned a shade redder and I stared at her grey eyes for a few seconds. Taking this time to prepare myself, I further confessed, "I love you," at a low volume. By now I was certain of my affections, although I wasn't excited by them. Love was a weakness I never wanted to have, never figured I'd have. But alas, there was no denying how I felt about my girlfriend any longer.

Mireille was shocked at first, but then her lips split into a grin and she responded, "I love you too," before kissing me again. It was a singular, long kiss that came from craving contact rather than lust.

Mireille was a bit clingy that night, but didn't usher me to repeat what I'd said. Instead she held my arm close to her and kissed me on occasion while we read beside one another and stayed up late to watch a movie.

I didn't mind.

I would lean over to kiss her too.
A/N: After dating for nearly eleven months and having an exclusive relationship for over five. Finally, Mireille's feelings are verbally reciprocated. Also, if you aren't well versed on bees: When a bee stings someone, the stinger is locked in by the barbs on it and if the bee either pulls away/ is knocked off, the stinger, parts of the bees digestive tract, it's venom sac, some muscles and some nerves all stay behind and the bee inevitably dies shortly after.
"Hey, Edward?" The man seemed to be expecting my query after watching me swirl my cocoa for almost ten minutes. The once plump, cylindrical marshmallows were now small blobs of white goop resting atop my beverage.

"Yes?" He delivered a sly smirk, clearly pleased I had folded and openly sought his advice after so much contemplation.

"You're," the following words were important, even 'pretty smart' would sound like an insult to the man. After a moment, I found a better set of words. "Incredibly brilliant," I finished the sentence. The intellectual lowered his mug of cocoa after a self satisfied sip. "Thank you for noticing, but in the future I do prefer 'unmatched genius'."

"And you've also known Jonathan for-" he cut me off to finish the statement.

"Four years, eight months, and seventeen days." He said with a grin. "But, I've yet to convince him to go on a roller coaster with me, let alone spent the night at his place. So perhaps you're more of an expert on him."

I shrugged off his extensive knowledge of our relationship, perhaps Jonathan confided in the man as well. After all, he was a decent conversationalist. Although there were times he got a bit intense. "But you know a lot about his character," I explained.

"Sure," He tilted his head, trying to read me.

"We've been dating for nearly a year-" I started.

"We have?" Edward feigned shock. "Sorry I missed all those anniversary dinners. I'd have brought you a nice bouquet of roses and riddles for each one."

"Jonathan and I," I clarified my previous statement.

"Oh, yes, you two." He waved his hand for me to continue.

"We've been dating for nearly a year, and there are certain things I want to discuss with him, but I can't help but feel he is avoiding them." I held my mug close, taking a tentative sip.

"So, you've come to me?" He had that cocky grin again. Despite being restrained, he felt he had complete control in this conversation.

I sighed and explained. "Only to figure out why he's avoiding it."

"Do tell." He leaned forward, eager to hear what my trouble with Jonathan was.

It took a while before I mustered up the courage, "I've been wanting to ask Jonathan how he feels about children. You know, whether or not he wants any."

"Oh." Edward lowered his mug, realizing the seriousness of my concern. 
"The first time I brought it up, he just spent the next twenty minutes talking about how annoying kids were to work with, how ignorant they are, and what skewed morality they possess." I paused briefly. "Then the next time, he asked if I was referring to my little cousins, and tacked on that he had yet to really spend time with them and would give me his professional opinion of their mental well-being after doing so." I looked at Edward, hoping he understood my plight.

"I never thought of him as a dense individual." He appeared puzzled as well. "Perhaps he's never considered children beyond what it's like working with them? I recommend you try bringing it up in a blunt manner rather than tip-toeing around it. Less chance of misinterpretation that way." I nodded my head, absorbing the advice. "But, why are you so intent about discussing this with him?"

"Because," I wasn't sure how else to phrase it, so I just spoke my mind. "I want children, one day, and I'm not sure if Jonathan is up to that. If he is, then I feel our relationship can progress to something more permanent. But if not." I stopped myself. "I don't know." I shook my head, my cheeks suddenly turned red when I realized something. "I think I'd want to be with him regardless." I bit my knuckle, not believing my own words. "I had a bit of a moment. I thought of the man devouring every book he could on the subject of parenting.

Edward simply smiled, staring at me as I had a bit of a moment. "You've been thinking about marriage." He surmised. "And originally you were concerned about whether or not you had the same goals for what would happen afterward."

Nodding, I mumbled, "I was concerned," emphasizing 'was'.

"Dr. Mireille Crane." He said it with enthusiasm, but paused after uttering the combination of names. "Doesn't fit very well. Exchanged with your nickname it's Dr. Mimi Crane." His eyebrows furrowed. "That's worse."

"It grows on you." I shrugged before freezing in my seat.

"Huh, how long exactly has it been growing on you?" He had the most devious smile.

"A little while." I evaded an exact answer.

"And how long have you been thinking about having children with him?" Edward egged me on.

"Not too long." I said this with much more confidence. I'd only begun these contemplations recently.

"You know, if you ever want to have children but find yourself without a partner, I am always willing to donate to the cause." The inmate had a sly smirk.

"I will not be having children through in vitro fertilization with a sperm donor." I rolled my eyes.

"There is always the traditional manner then." He wiggled his brows."And they would be 'incredibly brilliant'. The sole caveat is to name the child after me if it's a boy."

"No," I smiled and shook my head. "That will not be happening either. Whatever traits or flaws my children have, I will love them regardless."

"Are you suggesting Jonathan's genes may not add up well with your own?" Edward asked, referencing my previous statement.
"Of course not. He's incredibly intelligent, analytical, tall, handsome, has gorgeous eyes, can be really tender when he wants to be." I caught myself ranting and stopped.

"Interesting." Edward mumbled, clearly tucking away the information I'd just sputtered.

There were a few moments where I tried to stabilize my thoughts."Let's talk about something else." I took his empty mug of cocoa and made him a fresh cup, choosing to fill my own mug with tea.

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*After the Appointment*

I was walking down the hall, mulling over my recent consultation with one of the asylum's more stable and less noteworthy patients when I saw three men walking in the opposite direction. Edward was restrained, as usual, but seemed to be in a good mood despite the oafish orderlies tugging him along.

"I know something you don't." Riddler sing-songed when he and his entourage passed by me in the hall. "And it costs fifty Riddler points!" He tacked on the steep value a bit aggressively, wanting me to be stunned by the unusual high price.

The Riddler was an information broker of sorts, when you could have an actual conversation with the man at least. The point system he used was mainly to keep tabs on how badly and often someone required his information. Naturally the man did expect to redeem those points at some point in time, either in the form of favors or money. Penguin actually owed him the most as Riddler was aware of the moles in his gang, where weapons were being shipped, and the proper time and place to snag said contraband. Two-Face used the criminal to uncover the routes of armored vehicles and tap into secure feed at some of the banks. Joker didn't owe him much, primarily because he didn't like planning and preferred spontaneity. And the list went on. Due to his intermingling with a majority of the rogues gallery, he often left the deals with even more dirt to pass around.

Right now, I was pleased with what little I owed him, eighty two points. A majority of my debt came from him crafting that skeleton key for me. But fifty, that was steep by my standards."Where are you transporting him from?" I asked the guard on his left.

"He demanded an appointment with Dr. Milenkovic, apparently his arm was hurting him." He rolled his eyes and the Riddler merely gave me a knowing grin. Evidently the duo had just enjoyed one of their biweekly information exchanges. Since my girlfriend offered more than she took by means of info, she'd yet to learn about 'Riddler points'.

"I see." I nodded. There was some time before my appointment with the Mad Hatter and Two-Face, so I decided to humor him. "Drop him off in his usual room for a consultation. He seems to be having a bit of an episode." I referred to his tone and the 'Riddler points' I claimed to know nothing about.

The guards looked between each other, not sure whether they could question my authority by stating Edward's meal hour was two minutes away. "Sure thing Dr. Crane," one of them finally spoke for the pair. Then the Riddler was being carted off, a smug smile on his face.

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We'd been sitting in the room for a few minutes, Riddler still refusing to drop his wicked grin. It had to be something good. "So, Edward, what is it this time? Did you finally find a lapse in our security system?" I goaded him to give me at least the category for the information he was eager to divulge.
"It's about Mireille." He elaborated so tactfully with three words.

"I think I know more about my own girlfriend-" I started to retort.

"And your relationship." Three more words and I was interested, but I couldn't show it.

"I think Mireille and I have a fairly open relationship where information concerning one another is distributed without scorn or mockery." I said with ease.

"No, she has an open relationship with you. You on the other hand." He left it at that, knowing very well that I wasn't up for chastisement about my research and the many other secrets I kept from Mireille.

"Then what information do you have if our relationship is so healthy?" I countered, hoping to get a bit more context out of the man.

"The information only a true broker can come across." Leaning back in his chair, he held his ground. "Fifty Riddler points."

"Thirty, you always overprice your info."

"Forty-five, it's not overpriced if someone's willing to pay it."

"Thirty-five, I doubt it's something she won't tell me eventually."

"Forty, but you need to know now. Don't you?"

"Fine, forty." I consented.

He nodded, mentally adding to my debt. "Do you want the cute part first or the more serious gossip? I recommend the adorable side note, it'll warm you up for the big news."

"Fine, what did Mireille say or do that you consider adorable?" It hardly sounded like such expensive news, and it was getting irksome hearing the Riddler call Mireille cute. Even if she was. Especially when her eyes were dilated with fear, or for other reasons.

"Dr. Mireille Crane." He said the words one at a time with pauses between them, surprising me with the last one. "I know, doesn't fit well. But regardless, it's grown on her."

"Grown on her." I mumbled, understanding the implications. "She's given it more than a passing thought."

"Indeed." He watched me take in the information.

"She's thinking about marriage." I mumbled. "Mireille wants to marry me." I needed to think about it, consider the possibilities, but all I could do was repeat the phrase over and over in my mind. 'Mireille wants to marry me'.

Riddler piped up. "Curious why she hasn't mentioned this to you?"

I redirected my attention. That was a good point, these are the kind of things couples discussed without having a criminal as a go-between. "Yes." I was annoyed now, having received this important relationship news from him of all people.

"It's because you were either evasive or just plain dense about a particular topic she tried bringing up on multiple occasions." Riddler started. "That being whether or not you would be up to giving her
children. Preferably ones with your 'gorgeous eyes'."

"She never mentioned children." I tried to focus on that alone, not the blatant implications about us being the parents of said offspring.

"Yes she did, and you responded by discussing the mental state of her cousins and listing the downsides and horrors of professionally dealing with children. Not encouraging for someone who wants to be a mother." He explained.

I recalled that earlier conversation and removed my glasses to pinch the bridge of my nose. "I thought she meant 'what do you think about children?' on a professional level."

"Seriously?" He scoffed.

"We're both people of science and coworkers." I defended the blunder. "I figured she disliked the prospect of performing surgery on adolescents because their organs are smaller, allergies to medicines have yet to be pinned down, and dosages are harder to calculate. And then she asked for my opinion." I replaced the lenses. "And what do you mean about my eyes?" I asked.

"Oh, she went on a tirade about your positive features and traits after I openly questioned her opinion on your genes." The Riddler droned though the sentence, already bored of that snip of data.

"She wants kids." I mumbled, fingers on my temples now. "As in plural?" I asked for elaboration.

"Mireille never did mention the singular, so you are looking at two or more." He recalled the conversation and nodded along with his words.

"Or more?" I locked onto those two words, having difficulty imagining two screaming infants taking up what little time I had to offer only to spit on me in their teenage years and disappoint me in adulthood.

"But the realization she came to after discussing this was what was so tantalizing." He waited for me to meet his gaze, eager to see my reaction. "She's willing to give up on the prospect of having children, one of her lifelong dreams, so long as she's still with you. Mireille loves you, a lot more than you think."

I took in a deep breath and lowered my head so it was between my knees, holding the nape of my neck as I did so. Ignoring Riddler's laugh, I weaved fingers through my hair and tugged on the roots.

This wasn't going according to plan any longer. She was supposed to be hesitant in accepting the proposal, which was originally meant to happen in a year or more. When she found out who I was, she would be heavily disappointed, not wholeheartedly crushed. And I was not supposed to be in love with her!

I took in some deep, slow breaths, trying to cope with the speed at which this had all happened.

I could picture her in white.
Chapter 24: Pressure

*April 21*

It was a Friday night and I was busily shuffling through papers on the dining room table as opposed to following my usual routine of either reading a research text or relaxing novel. The reason being that over three dozen new inmates had been admitted to the asylum today after their own clinic was heavily damaged by a stray bomb.

Warden Sharp delegated to me the task of assigning each of them a therapist. And while I was able to take that assignment home and work on it through the weekend, Mireille had spent a majority of her day treating the new patients that weren't in critical enough condition to require immediate care at nearby hospitals following the bomb's detonation. She treated first and second degree burns, stitched up minor gashes, and removed small bits of shrapnel from people near the blast site. Needless to say, she'd gone to rest in her room almost immediately after coming home and I didn't anticipate having her company tonight.

I put my head in my hands for a minute. Trying to squeeze thirty nine new patients into the packed schedules of our current psychologists was tough enough, but I also needed to take into account the listed issues of the new inmates to ensure they didn't have any problems when met with their new doctor and I would be forced to shuffle them around more.

All in all, I was stressed. But then Jolie pranced over and sat beside me, her head held high and the barrel case around her neck in prominent view. Curious, I opened the container and pulled out a paper airplane much like those thrown at me as a child. At first I was going to crumple it in annoyance, but lines of ink on the paper stopped me. Unfolding the plane, I saw the open question 'Dinner?' written down.

My scowl softened into a smile and I replied below the message. Folding the note in half, I slid it back inside the hollow barrel. "Go to Mireille." I prompted Jolie after giving her a treat from the cookie jar atop the dining room table. The dog eagerly chewed the treat before trotting off.

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*April 22*

"Hey, Jonathan." I approached my boyfriend where he sat in his office, a few texts piled on his desk and a notebook at his side. Pushing up his lenses to look at me directly, I saw his eyes open a bit wider and a small smile grew on my lips. "I'm going to be giving Jolie a bath, but just in case I slip in the bathroom or need help, I'm going to leave the door unlocked. Can I trust you to be able to hear me if I call for help? Or are those books too engrossing?" I poked fun at his studying.

"I should be able to hear you easily enough, but may I ask why you're dressed like that." He moved his hand up and down, gesturing to my whole appearance.

"Well, odds are Jolie will splash around or shake water onto me, so I'll probably get wet. I may even have to sit in the tub to clean her properly if she's not compliant. This way I won't be weighed down by excessive fabric if I do get soaked." I explained the reason behind my shorts and tank top combo. Neither were white of course, as their presence would be rendered useless if I were to get wet.
He nodded in understanding, his eyes traveling my body before they focused on my legs. "Those bites I gave you are gone," Jonathan remarked upon the trail of hickeys he'd left behind more than three weeks ago.

"Yeah, they faded a while ago," I pulled up a short leg to reveal where he'd chomped on my flesh rather viciously, "but the one you put here took the longest by far. It only went away a week ago."

"I could always replace the mark," he had a smug grin on his face, which grew slightly when I flushed.

"Maybe." I responded with a smile of my own, turning around shortly afterwards to tend to my dog.

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I gave up on staying dry after the first few minutes and merely perpetuated how drenched I was by sitting on the puddle riddled floor while drying off the St. Bernard. Being at eye level with Jolie, I received numerous kisses from her as she dried under the towel I was vigorously rubbing against her fur. From where I sat, I could see her wagging tail spray even more of the bathroom with water and I sighed as my workload increased. After rubbing each of Jolie's paws with the towel, I opened the door and let her out and back to the main house while I cleaned up the wet floor and got rid of the fur at the bottom of the shower before it clogged the drain. The process was long, and I wound up sanitizing the tub for good measure.

By now, the damp clothes I'd been wearing had left me cold. But rather than change in my room or go get a new towel to dry off, I decided to take a hot shower followed by a relaxing bath.

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When I finished a good portion of my reading for the day, I looked up at the clock and discovered that two hours had passed. However, Mireille had yet to inform me about her experience bathing the puppy. Finding this peculiar, I stood up from my desk and made my way to the bathroom. The door was unlocked, as she told me it would be, and I opened it. Behind the door was not a humorous scene involving an owner and her crazed puppy, instead I looked from afar at my girlfriend and where she rested in the bathtub, the only parts above the water line being her knees and head.

Mireille's eyes were shut, her arms resting across her stomach and knees bent so she could submerge herself almost entirely in the tub. Her hair was down and floating in the water around her upper torso, the brown tresses much darker than usual in their water logged state. I considered stepping closer to get a better view, but decided against it due to the risk of making noise while my presence was unannounced. "Erm. Mireille." I called out to her, making a point of staring up at the ceiling.

"Yeah?" She responded serenely, most likely still soothed by the warm water and presuming I was speaking to her past the door.

"You neglected to lock the door." At this I heard the sloshing of water, most likely my girlfriend was covering herself with her hands. "I figured it was best to tell you rather than simply leave, lest you come to think of me as a creep or pervert."

"I don't think of you like that." Mireille said firmly. "I doubt you came in here for a malicious reason." More sloshing either meant she was out of the tub or moving within it once more.

"No," I shut my eyes just in case. "I hadn't heard from you so I thought something may have happened."

"You were worried?" She sounded pleased by the concern I'd shown.
"You could phrase it that way." I shrugged, my neck twitching a bit when I heard a zipper being drawn up. "Mireille are you putting on your old clothes? That all but negates the use of bathing."

"My drying choices are limited to damp towels and sitting around and air drying. Neither of which I'm up for. I could also cover myself with a towel and scurry to my room, but as I said before, they are all damp and covered in dog fur. So I'll just stick to my old clothes for now until I get a clean towel." I heard the clasping of a bra and a shirt being tugged on before feeling hot, damp fingers guide my face down for a kiss. "And thanks for not looking Jonathan." Our lips pressed together and I felt a now familiar tug within my chest. Mireille attempted to pull away afterwards, but I grasped onto one of her wrists and opened my eyes to look at her.

Beads of water fell from her bangs, down her cheek, and over her neck before slipping between her cleavage. The wet shirt did little to hide the upper part of her glistening breasts, and her damp hair was weighed down, displaying how long and gorgeous it was. I let go of her wrist and twirled my finger through a lock of it, the warm water dripping onto my wrist and down the cuff of my sleeve. Weaving my fingers through the damp hair, I leaned forward to kiss Mireille myself. I was tender at first, the kisses sweet and brief. But then her arms wrapped around my neck and she stood on the tips of her toes to be nearer to me. Naturally, her wet feet were slippy on the tile floor and she nearly fell backward. Holding onto her to prevent such an outcome, I smirked when she exhaled a 'thank you' before squeaking when I lifted her up. Placing my girlfriend on the countertop of the sink, I spread her legs to stand between them.

I was expecting Mireille to push me away bashfully or flush in embarrassment. But instead, she leaned forward to kiss me with renewed vigor, her damp arms wrapping around my neck once more. Moving my hands down to rest on her waist, I felt the odd combination of her cool, damp clothes and warm, wet skin. Drawing the shirt up a tad, I let my palms lay flat on her sides. She hummed into my mouth, most likely enjoying the warmth.

"You know." I moved my hands upward, bringing the shirt up as well. "You could catch a cold in these wet clothes."

Mireille giggled. "You didn't seem so concerned before." She nuzzled my neck, her wet hair chilling my throat before she started nipping at it. "Why the sudden interest?"

"I merely want to help my girlfriend warm up." I said simply, "And if that means helping you strip down then I will most certainly help." I murmured the last bit close to her ear. And either out of embarrassment or retaliation, she bit down on my neck roughly. "Oh, is that your way of asking me to renew that mark on your thigh? Because I can certainly do that."

My girlfriend nodded slightly, her legs spreading just a tad more apart to give me room. I knelt down and curled up her pant leg enough to find the location of the mark I'd left behind before. Breathing against the flesh first, I smirked when Mireille's leg shook and she mumbled something about the heat of my breath. Then I nipped and sucked at the damp skin for a short while before biting down on it slowly, my tongue lapping at the flesh and making her squeak. Finally when I felt this bruise's color matched the previous one, I pulled away, only now realizing I'd placed Mireille's leg on my shoulder. Her face was flushed and she was biting on her knuckle, but her eyes stayed locked with mine.

"If you want," I pressed a kiss to her inner thigh again, "You can try to beat your old score. I pressed down on the new bruise with my thumb, making her jump. We only need to get you out of these ridiculously tiny shorts." I moved my hand toward the button, but she covered the brass circle. "Mireille, I've seen you in your underwear before." I smirked.
"I'm not wearing any." She mumbled, clearly embarrassed. "I figured I didn't need them to go across the hall and change." Her blush only darkened as my grin grew.

"Then," I stood upright, looming over her now, "we can most certainly best your high score."

"Erm." She looked away, clearly not comfortable with going so far.

I wanted to tease her now. "What's wrong Mireille?" I asked, kissing her throat. "Scared you'll like it? Or do you feel like you would owe me something in return?" My girlfriend jumped again when I scraped my teeth on her flesh. "Because hearing your cries and moans of pleasure would be payment enough for me."

She fumbled for words, mixtures of 'um's and 'uh's escaping her lips as she mumbled her way through an apology. Getting off the counter, she then rushed for her room and called out about being too cold.

I watched the door to her bedroom shut and thought to myself about the rather aggressive approach I'd just made and her response. If she were angered or grossed out, I'm certain she would have said something or slapped me. Which meant that her departure was an attempt to either keep herself pure, wait for a more romantic setting, or at least refrain from such acts until we had advanced once more in our relationship.

I thought back to when Mireille said she was willing to have sex with Pierre when they were engaged and considered how I'd recently learnt she was contemplating such a situation with me. Then would proposing finally let her feel more comfortable breaking her promise?

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I'd changed into dry clothes quickly, but stayed holed up inside my room for a while. It was scary in many ways, being tempted to break the promise entirely. I figured it would be tough for Jonathan to sway me even now that my resolve had wavered. I thought the shreds of my previous determination would be sufficient to wait until we were married or at least engaged. But now that the line was partially smeared away, I couldn't help wanting to cross over it.

I wanted to be with him, but also didn't want to want to be with him. I buried my head in the pillow on my bed. Less than a week had passed since I told him I was okay with breaking that promise, but I felt my eagerness already matched his.

The memory kept replaying in my mind, Jonathan hoisting my leg over his shoulder, his hot breath warming my skin before he bit down on it. But what made me squirm was how he kept his eyes locked on mine for a while, his gaze possessive but controlled. I liked it when he looked at me like that. I felt secure. He was always so calm and collected, recognizing when I was hesitant and giving me the proper amount of support when necessary. He probably learned how from all those therapy sessions and horror movies we'd watched together.

Ten or so minutes elapsed, and I left the room and found Jonathan in his office once more. His frustrated demeanor shifted to relaxed when he saw me. "Ah, Mireille, what is it?" How he managed to act so cordially after such an event amazed me. But I couldn't focus on that, I'd come here with a purpose.

"There's something I wanted to tell you about," I searched for the right words, "our impending intimacy." His eyebrows rose slightly, clearly not expecting the topic I'd chosen. "I-I don't want you setting up something big and marvelous in hopes of me rushing into your arms, I don't wish to feel pressured by such tactics. Can we just go about our usual business, and if the prompt arises, go with
He stared at me, clearly curious. "I don't want you to feel pressured at all. And if I do decide to do something nice for you in the form of a fancy dinner or an elegant event, remember that I'm not doing it in hopes to get lucky, I'm doing it because you're my girlfriend, and you are certainly worth a trip to such a place."

I looked away, embarrassed about even mentioning what I did. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound accusatory." Turning to leave, he stopped me.

"Mireille." I faced my boyfriend. "You know how I feel about you, about our relationship. I don't want your first time to be something you think of in a bad light, especially considering it will very likely be with me." I blushed a bit, but kept looking at him. "But if things ever seem to be heading in that direction and you feel even slightly unsure, please stop me. I don't want this to be something you regret. Okay?"

I nodded before saying it aloud. "Okay Jonathan." I smiled. "Thank you."

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*April 23*

It was a dismal day, but Mireille was still intent on spending the evening doing something nice. So, we decided to go to the cinema.

As per usual, I was placed in charge of buying snacks while my girlfriend secured us some decent seats. After walking past the main doors, Mireille kissed my cheek and we were about to part ways when I stopped her with a question.

"Mireille, may I borrow your phone?" I asked before she had a chance to take a step away.

Her hand slipped into her purse and she retrieved the device. "Sure, why?" She handed it over before I'd answered the question.

"Mine is out of batteries and I need to call the restaurant to confirm our reservations." I delivered the planned excuse. Mireille nodded, gave me a kiss on the lips this time, and flashed a smile before leaving. Opening the flip phone after she'd disappeared into the theater, I ignored a majority of the programmed numbers to find the one I was looking for.

Copying Teresa's number onto my own phone, I then called the restaurant on Mireille's in case she checked the call log. Then I had an entirely different conversation that night with her long time friend.

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"Who is this and why are you calling me at such an ungodly hour?" The pediatrician grumbled after I dialed her at eleven at night. I could have waited until another day, but didn't wish to.

"This is Jonathan, Mireille's boyfriend." I identified myself. "I wanted to know if you could answer some questions for me."

"What, you talk to me for two seconds and figure I'll spill all of Mimi's secrets? No dice idiot. Talk to her yourself." She sounded annoyed and I said something to prevent her from hanging up.

"I need to know her ring size." I spoke firmly.
The line was silent for a while and then Teresa spoke. "You're going to be good to her, right? Treat her well and all that?"

"I will do the best I can to make Mireille happy." I told her the truth. "And the first thing I need to do is ensure the ring fits on her finger."

Another long pause. "She wants an alexandrite ring on a white gold band. You get to choose whether or not it gets embellishments though. But don't be cheap and slip her a lab made one!" She demanded of me before giving the information I'd asked for. "Her ring finger is a size six."

"Thank you." I pinched the area under the nose pads of my glasses, trying to figure out whether this engagement ring would cost more than a car.

"If you want, I can take her to a few stores. I'm sure the jewelers can write down her preferences or I can go back with you to help you decide." Now she was being helpful.

I paused to consider it. "You can help me narrow it down, but I get to make the final decision." I decided.

"Wonderful. The next time she calls me, I'll demand we go shopping." Teresa sounded pleased.

"And you won't tell her?" I asked.

"Of course not, Mimi would be furious if I was the one to tell her she was getting hitched and not you." Teresa explained.

"Thank you." I told her.

"No problem, goodnight." She said happy.

"Goodnight." I replied.

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*April 25*

"Teresa, why on earth are we going into a jewelry store?" I asked my friend when she tugged my shopping bag burdened arms toward the expensive establishment. "Our trip downtown has made enough of a dent in my wallet."

"Because your one year anniversary with Jonathan is coming up. And you need to tell him whether you want earrings or a necklace." Her smile then grew into a large grin. "Or a ring." I rolled my eyes but walked in with her.

"He isn't going to get me jewelry." I explained to Teresa while she looked at the gems behind the glass.

"At least fantasize about it with me." She pointed toward some diamond earrings whose price tag was astronomical.

"Then let's fantasize somewhere realistic." I turned to look at the lab made gems and silver bracelets. Less than two minutes passed before the jeweler redirected me to look at some pricy, natural rings.

"You should be looking at these." He told me, gesturing to the pristine display. "If you would like, I can close the store so you can try them on."
"That's nice, but I don't have that kind of money. I'm here because she wants to be here." I nodded toward Teresa.

"Well, please let me know if you change your mind." He left me alone in front of the gems. I looked down, expecting to see a display full of diamonds, but was shocked to find he'd directed me toward shelves full of rubies, sapphires, topaz, emeralds, and all sorts of colorful gems. "I wonder." I mumbled to myself. Kneeling done, I looked past the spotless glass and over the wide display of rings before finding a small corner dedicated to my gem of choice. "Alexandrite." I focused on the color shifting gems and their lovely settings. Some were accompanied by diamonds and others stood alone.

Suddenly, the jeweler was back. "We typically group diamonds with alexandrite so that the sparkle from the diamond carries over to the alexandrite and accentuates the colors." I nodded to show I understood.

"You know, my late fiancé worked for quite a while to afford an engagement ring for me. It was a small, solitaire seafoam tourmaline set on a simple white gold band." I spotted a similar alexandrite ring on one of the displays. "He told me all about how gorgeous it was, the way it glimmered in the sun, how it was dainty like me, but I didn't really look at it much when he proposed. I was too busy saying yes and kissing him." My smile faltered. "Less than five hours later he was killed. Every time I look at that ring, I don't see a priceless gem, just a memory in solid form. Of one of the happiest and worst days of my life. Hopefully the next one only bears good memories." I pointed to the solitaire alexandrite in back. "Can I try that one on?"

"If I may ask, are you currently engaged?" One of the other jewelers locked the door so I couldn't run away with the ring.

"No, not yet. I hope to be, but my boyfriend likes to take things very slow, I daresay I've met my match." He handed me the ring and I held it up to the light. "But one day, it would be nice." I slipped the gem on my ring finger and smiled. "It fits."

"Are you sure she liked this one?" I held the 1.76 carat solitaire alexandrite ring in my hand and analyzed the gem for the umpteenth time. It was certainly lovely, and as the jeweler kept pointing out 'completely natural, mined in Brazil, has FL clarity, intense color strength, and comes with a certificate of authenticity to back it all up'. The man even made a show of locking the store down before handing it over for me to look at.

"She tried on others, even a few well sized emeralds, but couldn't stop looking at this one." Teresa said once again.

"Perhaps the price tag astonished her?" I offered an excuse to go for a cheaper ring.

"No." Teresa pointed toward the ring again. "I managed to pull her into two stores aside from this one and she tried on at least ten rings, but kept referring to this as the best of the bunch."

"There wasn't even a close second?" I asked, fiddling with the price tag.

"Do you want Mireille to settle for second best?" She asked a clearly loaded question.

"He may be having second thoughts." The man behind the counter attempted to spur me.
"I intend to marry Mireille, what is questionable is whether she needs this token." I lifted the ring slightly. "Or if she will be just as enthusiastic with something that doesn't cost five month's salary. For this price I could get her a new car, something far more useful in my opinion."

"And in ten years or so that car will be outdated and have diminished in value severely. This." She pointed at the ring. "Will never depreciate."

After a few more minutes of debate, I left the jewelers with the coveted ring and a very pleased Teresa. The conspiring pediatrician then offered to buy me dinner to help compensate for my sudden drop of funds.

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*April 28*

Claiming to be exhausted from having spent a majority of the evening moving more of Mireille's belonging into the house, I retired to my room early into tonight's feature. However the reason I gave was a lie, in actuality I needed time to think. Opening the top drawer of my bedside table, I lifted up the few files that were there and took the black velvet box hiding underneath them. Sitting down on the bed, I opened its hinged lid and stared at the ring pinched between the plush cushions. After staring at it for a few moments, I shut my eyes.

It wasn't meant to be like this. I should be pacing up and down corridors, finding reasons to be upset by my girlfriend or an excuse to leave and spend some time alone at a bookstore or bar. But I didn't feel that way. I wasn't pondering whether or not this was the right choice, dreading the thought of being with only one woman for the rest of my life, and putting off buying a ring to give myself time to think.

Instead I felt calm. A better woman than Mireille wouldn't come along, so why should I leave her? I certainly hadn't depended on sex before, so only being able to have it with one person from here on wasn't much of a deal breaker. Our living arrangements wouldn't need much altering, and we'd already grown comfortable with this much time spent together. All in all, it was merely a slight life alteration joined by a ring. The only things which would change being Mireille's surname and where she slept at night. I looked down and at my finger. Having never been one for jewelry, adjusting to a cool metallic band would probably be the most difficult task.

I'd never really thought of marriage until recently. My main goal growing up was to leave that horrid house and go to a decent school. Then it was to get a job and perform my research. I had my reasons for wanting to find a partner, but never planned for love to be a part of the equation. Even now I wasn't sure if it would be better this way, if emotional investment would be beneficial.

Opening my eyes and looking at the ring, I couldn't help but wonder if this was fair for either of us. Although I was certain Mireille was anticipating my proposal, she didn't know what horrors awaited her after our wedding night. Edward's words rang in my ear now 'I don't know who I should be rooting for.'
Chapter 25: Unforeseen Events

Chapter Notes

A/N: I was going to post this yesterday, but decided to publish it on my birthday instead (I'm 21 now!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 25: Unforeseen Events

*April 30*

It was a Sunday afternoon and Jonathan asked if Jolie and I wished to go out for coffee in the park. I took him up on the offer, as it granted the St. Bernard time to socialize with other dogs and us a chance to get out of the house.

The car ride to our destination was relaxing. Jonathan held my hand as we sat in traffic and Jolie alternated between the two windows she could stare out of from her place in the back seat. I watched her trot back and forth for a while before my eyes settled on Jonathan instead.

My boyfriend was wearing a nice button up and his face was smooth from his morning shave. The man's hair also looked a tad redder in the natural light and I fought the urge to touch it. Jonathan didn't appear bothered by the stares, or his mind was too occupied to notice them.

When we pulled into a parking space and Jonathan turned the key to shut off the engine, he opened the door and left the vehicle without sparing me a glance. Instead, he stared at the lush trees and healthy grass just beyond an open, Gothic style gate. "Ready?" My boyfriend kept his eyes on the park.

"Yes, are you okay?" I asked, marginally concerned by the odd behavior.

"Of course," Jonathan finally looked at me, offering a smile. "I'm just concerned we may run into coworkers and be questioned on our relationship." He explained.

"Then we tell them to mind their own business." I helped Jolie out of the car and attached her leash to ensure she didn't run off and pursue an animal or chase a car. "Because I'm not letting you go just to put their minds at ease about unprofessionalism in the workplace. We've gotten this far anyway, if it was an issue they would have noticed by now." I shrugged.

"You're right." My boyfriend locked the car as he walked around it to stand beside me. "We have gotten this far," he lent down to kiss my cheek. "And I'm not letting you go either, pumpkin." A grin spread on my face.

As soon as we located a suitable table to converse at while sipping our drinks, I left Jonathan and Jolie behind to get the caffeinated beverages myself.

Once I'd returned from purchasing Jonathan a cup of plain, light roast coffee and myself a sweetened cappuccino, Jolie began nudging my leg and showing off her collar. Recognizing the barrel likely contained a message, I smiled at my boyfriend's tentative expression and pushed past the eager dog to set our drinks down on the concrete park table.
"Alright Jolie, up here." I pointed at the bench attached to the table so I could avoid kneeling in my dress to collect the mysterious message. The ecstatic puppy jumped up and held her head high, tail wagging in anticipation of a treat. "Now what's so important?" I asked her, unscrewing the barrel. Finding a nicely folded sheet of tan parchment, I furrowed my brow and broke the wax seal holding it closed.

My heart started thumping and my eyes welled without permission as I read the single line of text.

'Will you marry me?' The paper read in elegant script.

Turning to look at Jonathan, I saw him knelt on the ground, a small smile on his face and a black velvet box in one hand. "M-Mireille." He cleared his throat and paused briefly. "I've never considered myself a romantic, let alone imagined a day I would become a husband. But ever since I met you, things have been different. I've made rational excuse after rational excuse for our being together. I figured it would be a healthy experience and beneficial cohabitation until I realized I no longer wanted to justify our relationship. Rather, I wanted to perpetuate it. I don't wish to wait any longer to convince you of my character and eliminate any chance of you saying no. I want to marry you Mireille, and it's worth the risk asking you now when the alternative is pining for you every night you spend away from me." Jonathan opened the box to reveal a stunning alexandrite ring I had been eyeing less than a week ago. "Please Mireille, will you marry me?"

He appeared distressed, as if the confession took every ounce of effort he had. And I knew it probably did. My face broke into a smile and I only nodded at first before stumbling through an acceptance. "Y-yes Jonathan. I will marry you." His muscles seemed to relax. "I want to marry you." I added. Ignoring the possibility of staining or creasing my new dress, I knelt on the ground with him, tears of happiness falling as he slipped on the the engagement ring. My fiancé kissed me, his warm hands caressing my tear streaked cheeks as he did so.

Resting one of my hands over his, I savored the proximity. He pulled away after a while to stare at me. Jonathan's gaze wasn't that of longing or joy, rather he looked upon me like a painting in need of interpretation. "I love you." He muttered with a slightly furrowed brow, as if in disbelief of his own words. I delivered my own passionate kiss in response.

"I'm glad." I echoed his old sentiment. "We are getting married after all." He nodded, holding me tightly against him.

I nuzzled against Jonathan's neck, not wanting him to ever let go.

XXXXX

*May 1*

I spent most of the day smiling. Some of my regulars commented on my mood, but I didn't say anything more than 'I had a pleasant weekend'. This was both because Jonathan requested we wait a tad longer before announcing our relationship and because even I didn't want the patients with that kind of intel.

I wore my ring in the break room however, unable to stop staring at it. Although the gem was gorgeous, I gazed at it for other reasons. I used it as a conduit to imagine our future, Jonathan standing across from me at the alter, Jolie playing with our crawling baby as the infant squealed, but most of all, I thought of simply being held by my future husband as we sat beside each other on the couch and how we would be able to kiss one another every morning.

"Dr. Milen-." Dr. Martel froze in the midst of his greeting, a more vital question pushing ahead of his
manners. "Are you engaged?"

I smiled softly and nodded. "Yeah, I am." Holding the ring close to my chest, I sighed. "I don't think I've ever been so tranquil. Or happy." I added in a daze.

"You must really love him." Dr. Martel sat across from me. "Finally going to tell me what he's like? Or who he even is?"

"He's my fiancé, and the man I love." I said simply, putting the ring back on my necklace before tucking it away in preparation for an upcoming appointment. "You'll find out more eventually."

XXXXX

*Later That Same Day*

The first patient to address my engagement was Edward. He did so when our paths crossed at the Botanical Gardens. I was eating my sandwich and admiring the lovely orchids when he called out "congratulations" while being pushed around by his personal guards. The men on either side of him looked confused, not sure what he was talking about.

I assumed he found out through some odd channel or Jonathan told him, so I responded with a simple "thank you" and a broad smile. He offered his own in return.

Little did I know he'd left the garden with more than a just that grin. Tapes would later reveal he had the rigid spine of a cactus hidden in his fist. The man used it to unlock his handcuffs and escape within an hour of crossing my path.

As soon as Monsieur Bolton discovered how the Riddler escaped, the enraged head of security stomped his way over to the Botanical Garden and uprooted the succulent section himself. I know this because I bandaged the many punctures and cuts that resulted from his anger fueled landscaping. That, and it was the talk of the facility after Ivy screamed from within her cell of his brutality and raved about getting revenge on him for murdering her 'babies'.

XXXXX

*May 2*

The Riddler contacted me in the morning with a cryptic phone call. "Everything is set to go." He hung up shortly after, not giving me a chance to respond. Pressing the 'redial' button on the phone, I discovered the number he used was untraceable. But I didn't mind, I heard what I needed to.

Using empty syringes I'd taken from a recent shipment to Arkham, I filled ten of them with a sizable dose of my latest toxin. After incorrectly labeling them as sedatives, I wiped the instruments clean of prints and jumbled them among the identical ones at the drug distribution area in Arkham. It was attached to the chemistry lab, so my presence wasn't noteworthy.

Now orderlies, doctors, and security alike would be using the drug randomly on those who misbehaved enough to garner an injection. My hands would be clean, I'd simply watch the outcomes through videos and take my notes from them.

When Mireille commented that I seemed happy on the ride home from Arkham, I labeled our engagement as the cause. However, it was resuming my true work that had me in a pleasant mood.

XXXXX
May 5

I was silent as my parents and Jonathan conversed, my mind still occupied with the events from earlier today. I wasn't there when it happened, but the harrowing tales from my co-workers stuck with me.

What should have acted as a sedative seemed to turn the injected inmate crazed to the point he was terrified of everything approaching him. One brave orderlies who attempted to calm him was harshly bitten in the forearm before security came to help pry the man off. Dr. Chen spoke of the gruesome injury in the break room and how he'd given the poor man over fifteen stitches.

I was unnerved. Dr. Crane and a few others in the chemistry department were trying to discern how the medication the patient was on reacted so strongly with the sedative, but to no avail. So while my parents congratulated us on our engagement with a nice dinner at their house, all I could do was hold onto Jonathan's arm as we sat together on the couch.

"So, when do you think the wedding will be?" My mother asked, adjusting her dress after crossing one leg over the other.

"We aren't quite sure yet, we've only just gotten engaged." Jonathan replied politely.

"Well, do you know what season? I could help with the decor if you give me a palate?" she offered.

"Sorry, we haven't spoken of anything just yet. Aside from Mireille moving in as soon as her lease is up." My fiancé told her what he knew.

"Oh really?" My father finally joined in on the conversation which previously just involved wedding locations and the proposal.

I jumped in to defend Jonathan from any accusations. "Yes, we've been dating for almost a year and with a wedding and honeymoon to plan, it would be best to save a bit of money by moving in together."

"The bride's family pays for the wedding, as per tradition. It is also traditional that the man ask the father's permission." He added sourly. Although my father was hardly angry, I assumed he wanted to play a bigger part in the whole thing than he had so far.

My mother supported both of us, "Theodore, this is a new generation before us. If they don't want to ask permission, that is fine. If they want to elope in Vegas, so be it. They need our support, not our scorn." She kissed his cheek. "Now don't be so grumpy, you'll be getting a son out of this." she smiled, gesturing to Jonathan.

He looked at my fiancé and the distaste seemed to go away. "How do you feel about whiskey Jonathan?" he asked.

"I'm more of a scotch man, but I can handle whiskey just fine." He replied.

"Well, I've got a good year in my office, and it isn't doing any good gathering dust. How'd you like to have some with me?" My father suggested.

"That sounds good." Jonathan stood and straightened his jacket. They went to the office together to share a few shots while my mother asked for more information about the wedding.

"Jonathan does love autumn, so perhaps next year around that time." I explained calmly once the men were out of earshot.
"Ah, then perhaps eggplant purple and gold. Purple is a royal color, and you do like it so." My mother's grin grew. "But of course you'll be wearing a stunning white dress with some gold accents or…" The artistic woman went off on a large tangent before mentioning something important. "Oh, is this an indoor or outdoor wedding? I assume you want it at a church, but what does Jonathan think?"

"He's an agnostic atheist, so I'm not sure how much he enjoys churches. Besides, a official Catholic wedding means he'll have to agree to raise our children Catholic or not hinder them being raised in such a manner." I had already done some research on the rules. "I'm not sure how he'd feel about that."

"So there will be children!" She clapped her hands together as she rejoiced in French. "I was so worried I'd be stuck as an aunt forever."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Even I don't know if Jonathan wants any. I'll wait until there's a good opportunity to ask." I explained in the same tongue. "Right now, things are hectic at work."

XXXXX

I'd gone from being a beaten farm hand to a college professor in under ten years. That I expected. Later I became a psychologist and worked my way to the head of the department as well as a trusted advisor to Warren Sharp. This was inevitable.

And now I was sharing a very expensive bottle of whiskey with my future father-in-law. As I ignored the burn in my throat from the drink, it occurred to me that I'd certainly climbed high up the social ladder and had the potential to go further. The man called me 'son' as we conversed, giving me praise on my current position and the healthy relationship I had with his daughter. He spoke about grilling on the fourth of July, Christmas evenings at their house, and bragging to his coworkers of my upstanding character.

After twenty minutes, Mireille came to collect us both for dinner and kissed me on the cheek before taking my hand and guiding me toward the dining room. As we walked, she joked with Theodore that he'd given me too much to drink.

I shared a meal with them alongside a well paired wine and more pleasant conversations ensued. They were kind people, asking if the food was to my liking and trying to understand my tastes for the next time I came over. Mireille discussed what she knew about my preferences to her mother and her father and I conferred about work.

They wished us both luck and a pleasant night, Jeannette hugging me and Theodore shaking my hand before we departed. Mireille had restrained from drinking too much alcohol and drove us both home.

When we arrived, Jolie placed her paws on my knees as her tail wagged. The puppy was eager for attention and glad we were home. Mireille and I then gave her the required amount of head scratches and belly rubs before heading off to our respective bedrooms after kissing goodnight.

"I love you." Mireille confessed to me with a tender smile. "See you in the morning, Jonathan." she shut the door softly.

I stared at the barrier separating us for a few moments before shutting my own bedroom door.

My current predicament was unforeseen.
A/N: Sorry for the delay, I had some difficult courses this quarter. Expect another chapter soon. But in the meantime, feel free to leave a review.
Chapter 26: Consequences

*May 7*

Mireille was doing the dishes and I was careful to take light steps as I advanced on her. I also utilized the sounds of running water and clattering dishes to conceal the marginal noise made by my shoes. "Boo." I barely said the word above a whisper after sneaking up on my fiancée, my lips just behind her neck as I spoke. I was proud of myself when she eeped and jumped, her body going still for a second out of shock.

At first I thought it was cute that she didn't move right away, but then the self-satisfied grin that adorned my face dampened when she said my name in a rather annoyed fashion. "Jonathan!" I was waiting for her to reprehend me or turn around, but instead she continued in a stern manner. "Get me a towel. Quickly." I furrowed my brow in confusion and saw a knife at the bottom of the sink, the water collected there a faint pink. Looking up, I saw Mireille clutching her left index finger with her opposite hand, beads of red leaking through. "Towel." She said firmly.

"Y-yeah." My smug attitude dissipated quickly and I rushed to grab a fresh towel from the cabinet. When I returned, I noticed she'd managed to turn off the faucet. "Is it bad?" I asked after handing over the towel, not sure what other question was appropriate.

"Let me check." She let her grip on the finger grow lax and analyzed the wound for a second before covering it with the cloth. "Yeah, it needs stitches." Mireille grumbled before taking a deep breath.

"Should we go to the hospital?" I asked, gesturing to the injury.

"Arkham would be quicker, there's no waiting room. I just need some lidocaine and I'll do it myself." She turned away from the sink and I eyed the line of blood which trickled down her wrist and wasn't washed away by the flowing water.

"I'm sorry." I offered the apology, certain she would turn her nose at it.

"Hey, I tried scaring you at least ten times within the past month, it's understandable you wanted to retaliate." Mireille lifted up her covered finger a tad with the next few words. "Observe the surroundings next time though."

"Certainly." I noticed her barren ring finger. "Where's the ring?" I asked, still wanting her to wear the object despite nobody knowing I was her betrothed.

"In the bowl by the sink, but leave it behind. I'll put it on when we get back." She was already walking to the door. "Besides, everyone at work already knows I'm engaged, I've bragged about you enough. But now I have something more than your height and intellect to tell them about, now you hurt me." She stuck her tongue out playfully. "Just don't make this a regular occurrence or I'll have to call you Monsieur J."

"Hey," I opened the door so we could leave. "Don't compare me to that psychopath."

My fiancée giggled. "Don't worry, you're nothing like him." Mireille kissed my cheek.

XXXXX
"Dr. Milenkovic?" Dr. Martel approached me after I'd injected my finger with the lidocaine. "What happened," he noticed the injury and his eyebrows rose.

"My fiancé startled me while I was cleaning some knives." I nodded toward the bad cut. "This is the outcome. Can you prepare a suture?" I asked, threading a needle a bit hard in my current state.

"Sure." He retrieved the supplies from their drawer and watched as I stitched my injury once the local anesthetic had taken effect. It was rather deep and would probably scar. "Want me to get you a bandage as well?" The intern offered kindly as I cut the thread after tying off the fifth loop.

"I can handle that now." I stood up and washed my hands again before gathering some gauze and medical tape. After wrapping the injured finger, I smiled and showed him the end result. "Look, even though we aren't married, I'm wearing a band-age." I joked.

"Dr. Milenkovic," he rolled his eyes, "go home."

"Dr. Martel, work on your bedside manner." I retorted with a grin.

XXXXX

*May 8*

Two more inmates had adverse reactions to the common sedative today and injured personnel were brought in for mending after enduring the effects. I helped sew the flesh of a thumb back in place after one guard had it nearly chopped off. Another individual suffered from a few cracked ribs due to an adrenaline fueled kick by a different patient who fought to get away from him. Both inmates were raving about vastly different subjects. The older man screamed that worm infested walls were closing in on him while the younger woman shrieked and claimed disembodied hands were coming at her from every angle.

Rumors of a fear laced monster from the depths of Arkham resurfaced and thrived in the unsettling atmosphere. Those who claimed to have seen it personally referred to the apparition as a sadistic 'god' and others who learned from word of mouth only made the ghoul more gruesome as they added to the story with each retelling.

The original image an inmate painted of a cruel, masked man had been twisted. Some said he was over nine feet tall and had the legs of a spider. Others insisted that the being's speech was like a rattling snake and he had the ability to change his face at will. Even the well tempered patients grew unnerved and requested the comfort of a shared room or that the lights stay on past curfew in hopes of warding off the monster.

Despite Arkham's newly installed and numerous cameras, Monsiur Bolton couldn't narrow down a suspect and nobody felt safe. The psychologists couldn't even contain the outbreak of speculation surrounding the mysterious bogeyman and the chemistry department failed to find anything out of the ordinary about the medicine which allegedly caused the sporadic incidents.

XXXXX

*May 9*

I ran as quickly as was acceptable in the workplace, my papers and clipboard having been abandoned where I last stood. The quick, loud tapping of my heels had the orderlies and accompanying patients press themselves to the walls as I hurried past them. Few blocked my path, but I rudely wormed past them, apologizing in French as my adrenaline pushed me to forge ahead.
Finally something good had happened in this recently haunted asylum. After making a sharp right
down a long corridor, I saw quite a few others crowded near the windowed door between me and
my destination. "Excuse me." I managed some thickly accented English and the gathering of interns
and orderlies stepped aside for me to walk into the wing they'd been ushered out of. I was out of
breath as I stared at her, my fellow doctors and a few of the patients in the ward also looking in on a
the minor miracle.

"I can't have been out that long." She shook her braided pigtails. "I only just passed out." Although
the girl was clearly afraid, it wasn't the kind I'd seen recently. Marcy wasn't without hope, her
humanity stripped away and nails carving grooves in her own flesh. This was the normal kind of
afraid, that a rubbed back or words of comfort could heal. Seeing the comatose teen finally awake
after months of silence filled me with hope.

Dorothy was out of Oz.

XXXXX

*May 10*

My head throbbed and my hands fidgeted. I alternated between looking out the windshield and
closing my eyes to block out the stimuli. Even closed though, the images appeared and memories
tormented me. I couldn't stop thinking about it, and each breath I took seemed to shake me up
further.

"Jonathan." I finally spoke to my fiancé when we were a couple miles away from Arkham. "Can I
spend the night? I don't want to be alone."

I knew my aloof behavior concerned him, but he didn't press me after I explicitly told him not to, that
this wasn't the time. "Sure, Jolie would like that too." He ignored the upcoming turn to my scarcely
furnished apartment and instead made his way toward the house.

I lowered the passenger-side visor to combat the evening sun we now faced. My eyes then focused
on the reflection of my face in the tiny mirror. The grey eyes I possessed were puffy, pinkish, and
sore while the mascara surrounding them had leaked down my face in a near cartoonish fashion. No
wonder everyone asked if I was okay throughout my walk out of the asylum and to the parking lot.
Even Jonathan almost dropped his briefcase when he saw me waiting by the car.

I tried to stop looking back on my day. Instead, I looked forward. Waiting for me at home were an
endless supply of puppy kisses and a glass of wine. Or more.

I just wanted to forget it all.

XXXXX

*May 11*

There was a close call just last night. Mireille got herself so drunk I could taste the wine on her breath
as she stumbled to sit beside me on the couch. Prior to that, she'd been drinking on the back porch
with the puppy by her side, something I had been unaware of after getting trapped in a new book.

Evidently, something traumatic had happened at work and rather than talk about it, she chose to
forget. Part of that process to forget was her flinging herself at me, kissing me in a very demanding
fashion, and asking if I would help take her mind off things. The implications were beyond blatant,
but I didn't wish to do anything sexual while she was so drunk she could hardly stand. A few
minutes later she passed out on my lap and I carried her limp body to bed.
My fiancée took the following day off, and it seemed none of her coworkers were surprised by it. A few even mentioned she should stay home on Friday too after 'what happened'.

It wasn't until lunch that the rumor mill finally reached me, and with it the answers to the nagging question of what had occurred. Yesterday, Mireille administered the fourth dose of fear toxin and was grilled for over two hours by Bolton, shown footage of the incident over and over, and finally let go when he went through every frame with her on the dozens of cameras she'd crossed that day. From her picking up the syringe, grabbing a mug of coffee, laughing with Dr. Chen, going into rooms for checkups, and finally sticking the out of control inmate. She was let go when he failed to find a single shot of her tampering with the needle, sedative, or something connecting her to the other three incidents.

After figuring this out, I checked my P.O. box on the way home and found another green USB stick containing footage of these events. As I stayed up late, taking notes on the inmate's response to the dose, I must've heard Mireille's recorded screams over a dozen times as she tried to evade his fearful swipes and snapping jaws. I muted the video, but still couldn't help but focus on the clear image of my fiancée's terror struck face. She must have felt completely responsible for the mentally unhinged inmate and beyond terrified of both him and the possibility of it being her fault.

At the end of the video, Riddler had edited in a simple line of green text on a black screen that stuck to me. 'If you're curious, Mireille was interrogated for well over two hours and left the room red eyed and trembling. She even used the wall for support at times as she walked down the halls.'

After the fourth time through, I started rewinding the tape before the text would appear. Still, it popped into mind each time I saw Cash reluctantly place her in handcuffs after whacking the inmate in the back of the head with his nightstick.

She looked so confused and afraid. So helpless. I did that to her.

I closed the laptop after an hour or so and took a long swig of scotch from the flask on my desk. Now I wanted to forget, and just let the data on the paper live on without the memory connected to it. Mireille had drunk herself into a stupor because of me. Now I would reciprocate.

My flask soon ran dry. I pulled out a bottle.

XXXXX

*May 12*

"Thanks for letting me hold this test run." Teresa nodded toward Jolie, who was currently tethered to a leash held in the pediatrician's hand. "I swear I'll only need a couple days now and again to see if getting a dog is something I can handle. And it gives you and Jonathan a break from barking and fur covered floors.

"I suppose." I knelt down and the dog approached me to lick my cheek and accept a hug. "But I'll miss her." I spoke primarily to Jolie.

"I'll bring her by on Sunday around noon. Who knows, maybe by then I'll decide to abandon the thought of getting an animal and you can take her back." She shrugged with a grin.

I scratched behind Jolie's ears. "That would be a tough call to make. This little girl is only a treat, I doubt anyone who interacts with her thinks 'I never want a dog'." I looked at her cute face. "No, they say 'awwww, isn't she the sweetest little thing. I should adopt my own'. Don't they Jolie?"
"She's hardly little any more." Teresa laughed lightly. "The puppy's head is at your hip when you stand and you struggle to pick her up."

I hushed her. "No, she's still a little angel." The dog licked my face once more and I giggled.

"Is she still refusing to believe her 'angel' is growing up?" Jonathan walked over to the front door before commenting on what he'd heard. "How long has this goodbye even lasted?"

"We're at over ten minutes now." Teresa snorted. "But most of it was chatting."

"Then come back inside until you're prepared to separate." My fiancé gestured to the wide open door. "Unless you want to let in bugs."

"No, we're almost done." I explained. Teresa didn't hide an eye roll, as she also didn't believe the statement. "See you later Jolie." I hugged her for the last time and stood up.

My friend finally walked to her car, which had already been packed with food and toys. "Just cuddle with Jonathan until Sunday, I doubt he'll mind." She joked after ushering Jolie into the back seat.

My fiancé smirked and held my hand, making my face flush.
Chapter Notes

Quick warning, there is risque content ahead

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 27: Facade

*May 13*

There was a full moon out. Perhaps that was the reason a good night kiss between Jonathan and me somehow transformed into an unquenchable thirst that demanded satiation. Or it could have just been the dam holding back our desires had finally reached its limit.

Either way, neither of us were opposed to what was happening now. Jonathan was slowly walking backwards and I kept close to him to ensure our lips stayed pressed together. Although it was a short walk down the hallway between my room and his, he quickly grew frustrated and simply took my hand before directing me to his bedroom.

The last time I had been there was October, nearly seven months ago. And back then I had only stayed in the room for the sake of recovering from an all-nighter. Now, Jonathan shut the door behind us and pushed me to lay on the bed for a far less innocent reason. I didn't mind.

When I fell back onto the plush comforter, my face only flushed in excitement as my fiancé crawled over my body before leaning down to kiss me again. He was addicting. I sucked on his lower lip and bit it gently while his hands ran down the curves of my waist.

I didn't want to close my eyes, to loose contact with his. Although I could count the times he said it on one hand, I'd known for a while that Jonathan had fallen in love with me. Not because he proclaimed it verbally, but due to the way he started looking at me. Like I was something he never wanted, but only recently discovered he couldn't live without.

Letting go of his lip, I kept kissing his jawline and worked my down to his Adam's apple, now marginally scratchy with facial hair. Then I paused, focusing my attention on unbuttoning his shirt as I regained my breath. I'd just undone the bottom button when he pressed his lips to mine in a sloppy kiss, removing the shirt on his own.

Wrapping my arms around his back, I felt the medley of subtle and prominent scars that he'd yet to explain. Some were long and thin, others short and deep. They read like a book, stories of abuse easily discernible from the flesh. I wanted to help him get rid of those memories, give him new ones to fill the voids they'd left behind. He had already managed to help heal all my old scars.

"You don't have to pretend to-" like them, care, however he planned to finish his sentence, I wouldn't know.

"I want to." I cut him off. "I want to do everything possible for you, with you." Sitting upright and having Jonathan do the same, I pinched the hem of my own top and pulled it over my head. He absorbed the confession, placing his hand on my scar. "It's my turn now." I whispered. Taking his
hand in my own, I kissed the faint scar on his knuckle. Then I took his other hand and guided the warm pair of palms to my upper back.

It took him a moment, but after I nodded, my fiancé undid the clasp and watched as the straps around my shoulders and chest went lax. Shrugging off the supportive bra, I crossed my arms under my newly exposed breasts, a bit embarrassed as he stared at them rather intently. Jonathan reached forward and caressed the flesh, barely pinching the nipple between the knuckles of his index and middle finger while his thumb traveled in languid circles. The way he did so was tender and sensual, especially when he squeezed the mound to test its firmness. I inhaled a sharp breath and Jonathan started to smirk. Pushing me back against the comforter, he uncrossed my arms. "You're beautiful." He remarked, trying to erase my embarrassment. I shut my eyes, but swiftly reopened them upon feeling a damp heat just above my nipple. Jonathan stared at me before his mouth descended on the rosy bud. I gasped when he gently bit down and moaned when he started to suck on the sensitive area, his other hand still fondling my right breast. I squeezed my thighs together, a craving for something more growing inside me.

Jonathan noticed this, his mouth drifting upward to kiss my throat and inhale my scent. Meanwhile his hands helped me out of the skirt before he removed his own trousers. Slipping off his socks, we were both left in our underwear.

"Tell me to stop." Jonathan requested, his fingers resting on the hem of my panties and playing with the lace trim. "Like you always do."

I thought over his request for a second before leaning up and kissing his bruised lips. "I don't want you to though." I mumbled, wrapping my arms around his back to pull him against my chest as I arched my lower half against his, smirking when I felt his growing erection against my pelvis. "And neither do you." I reasoned.

"You'll regret it. You won't forgive me." He mumbled, still tracing the area where my hip met the fabric.

"How could I?" I countered. "I love you, so much."

Jonathan exhaled slowly. "Now you do." I was a bit confused, it felt like he was referencing something else. Either way, I needed to obliterate that doubt.

"Forever." My eyelids drooped as I kissed him, arching once more into his body. That seemed to relax the tension in his shoulders. "Then we can stand to wait." Jonathan pecked my lips before moving to my throat. "But that doesn't mean we can't have some fun." His teeth sunk into my flesh and while one hand massaged my breast, the other dipped beneath my panties.

My legs twitched, as if to close, when Jonathan started stroking my center with his index and middle finger and I emitted a very undignified squeak. At first I focused on the weirdness of the sensation, but then his thumb started toying with the bud of nerves. "J-Jonathan." I remarked, curling closer to him so my face was buried in his neck.

"My my Mireille. And I thought you were the innocent one here." He teased, toying with the slick liquid that was readily available to his probing fingers.

"Stop teasing." I requested, squirming when he used that same lubricant over my pearl before pinching it gently. I gasped, my hips jutting into his hand on their own.

He hummed, moving lower to bite into the skin above my collarbone until it bled. "Consider this
retribution. For all the times you provoked me." He reasoned, his other thumb now rolling around my nipple.

"Then let me settle the score before you decide to torment me further." I pleaded, reaching below Jonathan's waistband to feel the erection he was now sporting. I turned a violent shade of red and he stopped toying with me for a brief moment. It was warm. After a tentative stroke the member twitched in my hand, and I could feel the underlying veins pulse with blood.

Taking a shaky breath, Jonathan remarked. "That's hardly evening the score." I blushed, nodded, and wrapped my fingers around it before resuming my amateur attempt at a handjob. My fiancé smirked and resumed marking my body with bloody bites.

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Mireille was content curled up beside me, her gray eyes glowing in adoration and lips split in a loving smile. We'd long since moved under the covers, and my fiancée had yet to put any of her clothes back on. Sliding an arm under her waist, I listened to the soft giggles she emitted as I pulled her over to straddle my legs once more. Running a hand up and down her back, I observed her as she never broke eye contact with me. I was waiting for her to get flustered and start stammering or turn away as she was overcome with regret for what we just did. But all Mireille did was caress my cheek as she leaned forward to kiss me for what might have been the hundredth time that night. "Love you." She mumbled against my lips, finally resting her weight on my body and letting me feel that delightful squish of her breasts against my chest. She was perfect.

I kissed her in return, the arms on her back now wrapping around to tug her closer. I didn't want to let her go, to break what we had created together. For a moment, I thought about Mireille's offer of going all the way. But then I stopped that train of thought, I didn't want to make love to her like this. Not when she was just in love with the facade. I needed her to acknowledge me fully before I would take her. I needed her to accept me. To truly love me.

"What's wrong?" Mireille mumbled, head resting on my chest as she stared at me. I could see her legs playfully kicking the air as she lounged atop my body. She was so calm, so at ease around me. "Am I uncomfortable?" She asked, shifting her weight slightly.

"No." I held her small chin in my hand and leant down. "You're perfect." I pecked her kiss swollen lips. "And I can't wait for you to be mine."

My fiancée giggled a bit, rubbing herself against me purposefully as she shifted forward. "You and me both." Mireille whispered in my ear before moving her hips backward again.

Damn, did I want her. "How about an Autumn wedding, this year?" I offered, moving a hand to rest on those unrelenting hips.

She laughed again. "Autumn? Jonathan that's less than five months away."

"You're lucky I'm willing to wait that long." I rolled my hips up and into hers, blood starting to return to the area.

"What church would take on such an out-of-the-blue request." Mireille placed her hands on either side of my chest before pushing herself up. The deep blue covers and white sheet previously draped over her back slipped down with the new, upright position. I admired her exposed chest and perked nipples as she rubbed herself against my body in the moonlit room. She was still decorated with a trail of hickeys and lightly bleeding wounds, her lovely scar truly completing the look. A strong pang
of lust struck me and one of my hands had to fist the sheets beneath me to try and divert my body's attempt at emitting a moan.

"I'll find one, even if we have to travel all the way to Russia for a damn opening at a Catholic church." I needed to marry her, to ensure she wouldn't flee the instant I revealed myself, as well as to satisfy my own craving. It was a cruel trap, using her own dislike of divorce against her, but at the same time. "You'd do it wouldn't you? Skip a grand wedding and reception just to be with me sooner?"

"Hmmm." Mireille hummed, eyeing me as if I were prime rib and not a scrawny chicken. "I'd still want a nice dress, and for my family to be there." She looked up at the ceiling to think, giving me a lovely view of her neck as she started rubbing herself a bit harder against my rousing flesh. "We can have the reception later I guess, with all of our work peers and extended family. That'll eliminate the need to schedule a caterer, hall, cake, coordinate songs, and the like. But you'd have to find a decent church and get authorized by the Catholic Church. And I want Father Gilbert to preside." She said nonchalantly while wiggling her hips a bit.

"Yes, I figured as much." My heart was picking up pace and the breaths I took were getting shorter. Finished with all this teasing, I placed my hand on her smooth stomach. At first she stopped, but when I rotated my wrist and slipped a few fingers beneath her panties, she jumped a bit. My index dove toward her pearl and I started rubbing it slowly. Mireille must have still been a bit tender, as she flinched for a second before humming. I had been rough earlier. Sitting up, I kissed the top of her breast before moving my tongue toward her perked nipple. She shuddered before resuming her slow rutting. I opened my lips and took the bud in my mouth to tease it with my teeth and lavish it with my tongue.

Mireille let out a cute gasp, one of her hands moving to hold my head in place as she made a dreadfully slow stroke along my half hard erection. I wanted her. Pushing her onto her back, I switched to the other breast, using the hand that wasn't teasing my fiancée to push the creamy legs apart. Once they'd been all too willingly spread, I removed my hand from the confines of her panties and stroked my concealed shaft along the clothed sex myself. She squirmed a bit before reaching to dig her nails into my already scarred back. I was concerned how she felt about the development, until I heard her moan, the slender legs coming to wrap around my waist. Letting go of the now shimmering nipple, I watched her expression shift from lust to love as she looked at me. Moving my torso up, I captured her lips again and the nails biting into my back let go and became flat palms pulling me closer. I felt the cool metal of her engagement ring as it ran over old scars, her right hand sliding between our bodies to play with herself. The entire time I heard her gasp and pant, watched her back arch, and squeezed her breasts in my hands, I thought about how my admission would change everything. How she would look at me in disgust for trapping her, how she would sob uncontrollably when she learned our children were meant to be my successors, how she would never speak words of love to me again.

Then, those thoughts ceased when I was dragged to the same lips for a passionate kiss. "If you're letting your mind wander now, that makes me wonder what will happen on our wedding night." She muttered though pants and soft cries.

I smirked, gazing into her dilated pupils. "Only thinking of what you'll wear on that day." The lie came to me with ease.

"Lingerie most likely." Mireille gasped again. "But when you're through, probably strips of nylon, a broken garter, and torn silk." She bit her lip and I felt her legs start to quiver, the hand on my back also shaking.
"You aren't wrong there." I mumbled. "I may have let an old promise come between us, but silk certainly won't."

She nodded her head before tilting it back to take in another lungful of air. After a shaky exhale, Mireille was squirming under me again, her cheeks flushed red out of embarrassment for her shaking. A smug smile spread across my face despite the throbbing need for release between my legs. "What is it now?" She stumbled over the words, a pant and groan following them as she rubbed herself.

"I love you, and I want us to be happy together." I said the rare phrase for a third time, kissing the flushed cheeks as they darkened further with the confession. I was terribly close, but needed to see to it she orgasmed first. So, placing much more pressure on the next few strokes, I accompanied the sensation by pinching one of her nipples and kissing her lips. Once she was almost spasming, I reached down with a spit soaked finger, pushed away her trembling hand, and rubbed the poor, abused bundle of nerves until she cried out my name, her hips lifting from the bed against her will. On accident, my hand slipped further down when she did this and I felt how wet she'd become, how hot her flesh was, how soft. I groaned inadvertently, I wanted to feel that heat elsewhere. Withdrawing the hand before she accused me of lingering, I slipped it swiftly beneath the hem of my boxers, using the small amount of lubricant I'd gathered on my fingers to make stroking the shaft easier. I didn't last long after that, especially with the sight of Mireille's flushed expression, spread legs, heavily marked body, and lustful gaze spurring me.

I was a bit drowsy now, and Mireille's eyes also looked a bit out of focus. Taking her hand, I pulled the woman to lay next to me in bed and replaced the blankets atop us both. She immediately curled up beside me, almost demanding we cuddle tonight. And who was I to argue. I draped my arm over her and was about to close my eyes when she mumbled, "Goodnight Jonathan."

I smiled, kissed one of the many hickey's on her neck, and replied. "Goodnight pumpkin." She giggled and drifted off to sleep with me following suit.

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It was insomnia that woke me up at three in the morning. At first I was confused by the warmth radiating before me and the feel of hair tickling my nose, but then the events of the night flooded back. I smirked as if Mireille and I hadn't just done stuff befitting an innocent high school romance and put the stray lock of hair back in place.

Then, I started to feel a little gross. My boxers were still slightly damp and certainly needed switching out. So, I slowly left the warm bed and touched my feet on the cool, wood floor. Even in May, nights in Gotham were chilly. It took me less than a minute to shimmy into a new pair of underwater and then I was left with a decision.

Typically, this is when my work started. The rodents needed feeding and the formula required tweaking. But then. I turned to look at her, pink lips partially open as she breathed in the night air, the heavy blanket showing me the curves of her body, and her delicate brow relaxed as she enjoyed a peaceful slumber. For a split moment, I considered returning to the bed. For tonight and many after, until the rodents had died and chemicals had lost their meaning in my eyes. I thought of fulfilling Mireille's boring dream of two and a half kids, a house, and a family pet. Normal didn't sound so bad with her.

But no, no I couldn't. My research needed to be completed. People at work were already asking too many questions about the patients that had been dosed. Marcy had also woken up and it took a lot of work to keep everyone thinking she was insane and her story of being tortured wasn't real. There was no turning back for me. That opportunity passed long ago. And even if it didn't, I couldn't give it up.
Then I felt a pair of arms snake around me and the pleasant pressure of breasts against my back. "Come back to bed." A tempting, soothing voice mumbled through a sleepy haze, hands admiring the marginally healthy weight my body had gained. "I'm cold." Mireille whined quietly from her knelt position on the bed.

"I have work to do." I said almost on reflex, my voice devoid of tone. I nearly kicked myself for the slip of words.

"At three in the morning?" Mireille dragged me down to sit on the bed in front of her, one of her arms draping over my shoulder while she rested her head on the other. "Nonsense." She giggled, kissing my cheek. I turned to look at her and she planted another kiss on my lips.

I felt a pang of what can only be described as guilt. I took her left hand and examined the alexandrite engagement ring on it, one of the two articles that she still donned. She adored the gem, how it shone one color in daylight and another in incandescent. But would she feel the same about me when I finally stepped into the light?

Which lead me to wonder, why was I prolonging the inevitable? Waiting for after our marriage to reveal who I was. Mireille wouldn't be standing beside me in adoration then, but out of principle. And why would I want a woman with me for life, when I was unsure if she even accepted me.

"Jonathan?" My fiancée looked at me with love and concern, her fingers tracing my furrowed brow.

All I was doing was putting the confrontation on hold. There would never come a time I could tell her who I was and she would accept me immediately. All this was, was delaying her impending pain in hopes a day would come where I could accept her rejection and be left unaffected.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Mireille looked far more awake now, examining my face as if she were looking for an injury on a new patient.

I didn't want lose her, but I knew putting off my confession would only make things worse. I turned around fully to kiss her, not wanting to forget the last day she looked at me like that, not ready to accept what came next. "Mireille, I need to work on my pet project. Would you like to accompany me?" I asked her, hoping in the back of my mind she would refuse.

Mireille was a bit puzzled by the question, but nodded after a moment. "Yes."

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It took a few minutes to locate and don all of my clothes. I was still rather sleepy, but at the same time eager to learn more about my betrothed. When we were both fully dressed, Jonathan tilted my head up and wrapped an arm around my waist as he kissed me in a slow, relaxing manner. I smiled after he pulled away, leaning my head against his chest.

We paused for a moment, Jonathan holding me tight in his arms. Then, like the flick of a switch, he let go. "Come along Mireille." He offered me a guiding hand. I took it.

My fiancé walked me into the hall, not bothering to turn on the lights in a home he'd come to memorize the layout of. Once we were at the basement door, I watched as he pulled out a key and unlocked it. Jonathan paused, and turned the knob. "Careful." He offered me his forearm as we walked blindly down the stairs, the sound of creaking emanating from the old boards and something else I couldn't name. Then, my foot hit concrete before I'd expected and I nearly fell when attempting to take another step down. Jonathan ensured I didn't though, crossing an arm over my chest to stop the impending colossian with the floor.
"Thanks." I gasped out after righting myself. He nodded and told me to stay still while he got the light. I felt the heat of his body leave. And for a moment, I was a bit scared.

Then the lights came on.

The brick walled cellar was dimly illuminated by a chain link light bulb hanging over us. At the center was Jonathan, watching me as I took in the surroundings. Just before me were countless books stacked on a set of shelves. Most looked like research, but the rest of the space was occupied by composition books with sticky notes tagging a majority of the pages. To the right of that was a long table holding the source of the squeaking noise. What could have easily been a hundred and fifty lab mice were packed in six large cages placed side to side with squeaky metal wheels inside for their entertainment and exercise. Although the cages looked clean, they were also sparse. Beneath the table was a box, mini fridge, and a variety of items. Against the wall past Jonathan, and to my right, I saw a large desk littered with papers, pens, and open books so used that their spines looked irreparable. And blatantly visible on the desk was an empty, small cage. Next to this structure were tubes, flasks, bottles, and other chemistry equipment on a well worn table with multiple stains. Then there was a cot against the wall behind me, with a thin blanket and a flat pillow atop it. Beneath the table was draped over by a curtain. But from what I could see through the holes in the fabric, it was an impromptu closet.

"Y-your project?" I asked him to explain. He watched carefully as I spoke.

"First I need to feed the subjects." He nodded his head toward the mice. Taking a bag of rodent food in hand, he carefully measured their meal and poured the allotted amount in the large dish at the center of their cages. The mice instantly rushed to the bowl and grabbed the big pellets, holding them in their hands as they nibbled the food. He repeated the task for the other five cages and I watched the little creatures enjoy their meal. "I separate them based on gender." He added, sealing the bag. "Procreation may make the project cheaper, but dealing with special diets of pregnant mice doesn't fit into my schedule." Jonathan reasoned, walking over to the shelf to pick out a specific composition book.

"What are they for?" I asked, looking between him and the furry creatures.

He folded open the book to an empty page, writing the date on the paper before putting the lab book on his desk. "You are aware that testing is a necessary part of discovery. That to make leaps and bounds in science, sacrifices must be made." He said this calmly, setting the empty cage on his desk more firmly against the surface.

"Yes." I said slowly, understanding where this was leading. "I've helped my professors with drug studies before. As an assistant, not a participant of course." I added, moving to stand beside him.

"Well, I am working on a drug." Pulling out the electronic scale, he put a ceramic bowl atop it and pressed the 'tare' button. He then scooped a brown mouse into his hands. "And these are my subjects." I watched him place the rodent in the bowl and write the weight in grams in his lab book. Moving closer I saw the number at the top of the page and almost stumbled. 'Subject No. 18,027' the comma let me know he was counting them in order, not choosing a set of five numbers randomly.

"What's the drug for?" I asked him, trying to keep calm. This couldn't have been a new development. He'd been doing this for years.

"It's a cure." He explained, using a syringe to draw some blood from the rodent. "For a disease most everyone carries."
"Shingles?" I asked, trying to come up with something reasonable to displace the sketchiness of this whole setup.

He scoffed, putting down his pen after a quick calculation. "No, something more primal." Jonathan took out a container of bright, yellowish-orange liquid and uncapped it. Placing an empty syringe in the liquid, he drew back the plunger and filled it with barely any of the chemical. Tilting it up, he did a common trick to remove air bubbles, something I would do often in the Medical Facility. He flicked the needle, let some liquid spill from the tip, and pushed excess amounts of the dose back into the container. When Jonathan had the same amount he calculated on the paper, he looked between me and the subject. "Fear." He said firmly, lifting the rodent up and injecting its thigh with the drug.

I was perplexed by his statement, but watched all the same as the animal squeaked in anguish as it ran around the cage. It hurt to see the creature so frightened, but when I looked up at Jonathan, his eyes were locked on my expression and not that of his experiment. "No!" I scowled at him. "Don't you dare look at me right now, watch that creature. Take notes. Don't make it's life a statistic you threw out because you were too busy observing your fiancée to watch him." He rose a brow, but looked at the rodent.

"I wasn't looking." He said in a dull voice. "Because I know what happens." And I watched as the rodent screamed, banging its head against the walls of the cage over and over in hopes of finding an escape only for one of the ill placed charges to snap its neck. My hands flew to my mouth, Jonathan merely wrote down as he spoke "Result number four out of six. Thirty three point four eight seconds." He looked at a stopwatch in his hands. "It's the most common of outcomes."

I looked over at him, trying to take this all in while he removed the corpse and put it in a baggie. "I'll examine her brain and blood later. I typically deal with five subjects a night. It's dull work, but necessary."

"One moment." I told Jonathan, sitting down on the cot as he wiped the cage free of blood. He stole glances at me as I sat there. It was all so much. "Why fear?" I asked him after a moment, watching as he put the recently deceased animal in the freezer.

"Because it is what drives the world. Every action you make, conscious or unconscious, it's done out of fear." He saw my confused look and elaborated. "Devout people retain their virginity because they fear the wrath of a god, people have children because they fear nothing of significance will be left behind after they die. Fear is what makes this world work." He seemed strangely excited by the topic, and I was getting concerned.

"And the sewing machine?" I asked him, pointing out the one thing that seemed out of place.

He paused, not sure how to handle that one. "I needed to ensure certain people couldn't identify me." He started, looking between the machine and his 'closet'. I stood up, walked over to the draped curtain, and pulled it it back. He didn't stop me, I think he wanted me to see.

There were costumes, at least fifteen different variations of burlap or old shirts combined into strange messes. But what piqued my interest were the masks. Taking one of them off the shelf, I looked at the maniacal face stitched onto old burlap before dropping it in realization. "Those patients at Arkham." I looked between him and the mask. "They weren't lying about what they saw in solitary. Those rumors are about you, you and that drug."

"Yes, well you saw my experiments. Nobody would fund me, let alone sign up for a trial. But the drug works much better on humans Mireille. The lab rats overreact to the smallest doses. But people." He paused to grin. "Have the most diverse responses. I was able to get away with a few of my students in college before the dean caught on and had me stop. But the research. It couldn't end
there." Jonathan started walking toward me until I was pressed to the wall. "You've felt the liberation
yourself haven't you? I cured your fear of driving and you wouldn't stop smiling. But what took
hundreds of hours and five months, could take three sessions when this drug is finished." He put his
hands on my shoulders before pausing. "Your eyes are dilated." He mumbled. "Not from love."
Jonathan touched my cheek as a tear ran down it. "This is fear." He said in a voice that carried
astonishment.

"J-Jonathan, you can't experiment on people." I told him firmly, shaking a bit where I stood.

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do Mireille." He took my chin in his hand, scrutinizing my
expressions as he spoke. "I've been doing this since before you came into my life, and you won't start
having an impact on me now." He snapped, clearly upset.

"When were you planning to tell me?" I asked him, my vision blurring with the moisture
accumulating on my eyes. He wasn't recognizable anymore, I blinked the water away to see it had
stayed that way.

Jonathan stared at me with those clear blue eyes and I saw pain flash in them for an instant. "After
we had married. And you wouldn't be able to leave me." He claimed.

I felt a pain in my chest like my heart had been stomped on and fed through a meat grinder. I pushed
him away with a palm. He complied with my request and backed up.

Jonathan's eyes were hard as he analyzed me. "That composition book of my progress." I had
difficulty speaking through the tears. "I was one of them." I mumbled. "Just another lab rat to toy
with."

"No." He started to explain. But I wouldn't hear it.

"You stare at me all the time like that!" I screamed at him. "Observing me like some sort of superior
being! In that elevator, at the drop tower, when you dangled me over that damn railing!" I felt tears
flood from my eyes. "I thought it was unintentional! But it wasn't, was it?" I crumpled a bit,
crouching against the wall. "I'm just a mouse in a big cage, and you're controlling what I see, just to
watch what I'll do."

I looked up after a few shaky breaths to see pity, of all things. Standing upright without his offered
hand, I looked him in the eye.

"This is for using me!" I reared back my arm and slapped him across the face with my palm. But
when I saw him standing there, hurt at what I did, but accepting it regardless, I also felt remorse.
Shaking my head, I drew back the same hand and backhand the opposite cheek. "And that was for
making me love you!" I screamed.

Jonathan stumbled back a bit, and I scurried up the stairs, grabbed my purse by the front door, and
ran off into the night.

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It took a few moments before time caught up to me. My face stung and my heart ached, but still.
"Mireille!" I yelled out her name as I ascended the creaky stairs. A board broke from under me and I
flopped forward, injuring my shin and forehead on the steps. Ignoring the pain, I wrenched my leg
up and climbed the stairs with a limp. "Mireille!"

The front door was ajar. I ran out of it and repeated her name. But she was gone. I stood in the empty
street for a while, as if she had a reason to come back to me.
I went indoors after a few minutes, taking a bottle of scotch from the kitchen and consuming a mouthful before I was back in the bedroom. The buzz helped ease all my aches.

As I walked toward the now empty bed, I looked at the clock. It was barely three thirty. A half hour had elapsed and I had gone from happily engaged to most certainly single. Mireille was probably calling the cops now, telling them where my research was located and how I needed to return to Arkham as an inmate. Thirty minutes was all it took for my life to be ruined.

I took a deep swig of the alcohol and laid back in the bed where we'd professed our love mere hours ago, letting the fuzz envelope me and impede my ability to process the dreadful scenario I'd gotten myself in.

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I ran. It was all I could think to do until I saw a taxi bringing home a drunk couple. As soon as they got out and stumbled to their doorstep, I went up to the driver and asked for a ride. She asked me about my tears, but I just gave my address and requested silence.

When I got home, I opened the front door and walked inside the near barren apartment. I locked the entrance behind me, took a few steps into the cold room, and cried profusely. My legs shook as I made my way to the sparse bedroom. And just when I was ready to jump onto the soft mattress and weep over these recent events, a damp cloth covered my mouth.

I struggled for less than a minute before falling unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

So, as you may have noticed, this is the final chapter of Facade. However, the story is not yet over. It will resume later this month in the second part, Masquerade (which will be published as a separate fic). I will most likely publish the first chapter of that on July 31st as that was the date Facade was first published on FFN exactly 4 years ago. So please, check back then if you want to bookmark/subscribe to/ read the second part. In the meantime, I'd like to hear from you what you thought of this chapter and/or Facade as a whole.

Thank you all so much for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!