Intoxicated

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Not Rated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
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<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, Gen</td>
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<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Batman (Movies - Nolan)</td>
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<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Jonathan Crane/Original Character(s)</td>
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<td>Character:</td>
<td>Scarecrow, Jonathan Crane, Original Female Character(s), Joan Leland</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
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<td>Words:</td>
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Intoxicated

by wouldyouliketoseemmask

Summary

Is she a pawn to him, or something more? Crane/OC, revision of "Intoxicating".

Notes

When I wrote this fic in 2011, I was still quite new to the world of fanfiction and did not have much writing experience or practice beyond school assignments. I recently re-read Intoxicating and immediately noticed many, many errors—clumsy sentences, repeated words, spelling errors, etc. To be completely honest, I was kinda embarrassed! Since Intoxicating is by far my most popular fic and is still being read (according to my profile's traffic stats), I have decided to go back and rewrite it—the plot and events will remain unchanged, but I will be making some much-needed improvements. I also received quite a bit of helpful and productive critique, which I will definitely be referring to as I write. I loved writing Intoxicating and creating my OC, and I'm having just as much fun rewriting it now. Thank you so much to everyone who has read and enjoyed this story. Your support means everything to me.
"Do you trust me?" Crane's voice is soft, his question dangerous.

He weaves his fingers in between the dark strands of her hair and gently lifts her head towards his own until she is gazing into the icy blue of his eyes and his breath is hot against her skin, his lips inches away from hers.

She looks up at him with eyes reddened from sobbing, her cheeks wet and stained with black trails of mascara-tainted tears, and smiles weakly.

He cradles her in his arms and brushes his fingers up and down her spine in slow, soothing strokes. He can feel her fear, her apprehension, and he savors it in exquisite sips like a fine wine.

He allows her a few moments of still silence before questioning her again.

"Do you trust me?"

Crane feels a surge of pride as he looks into eyes full of fear and love, and waits for her to speak the words that will ensure his triumph.

"Yes," she whispers, and as she wipes away fresh tears her smile never once falters from her lips. She extends her arm forward and with calm, quiet acceptance welcomes his next move.

Her eyes never leave his as the needle presses into her arm.

She leans against Crane when she begins to feel the toxin's effects, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as the chemical burns through her bloodstream. He buries his lips in her hair as she screams, her nails digging into his skin and dragging along the flesh of his back. Crane tangles his finger in her hair and pulls her head back to crush his lips against hers, the taste of her tears slick salt on his tongue as her chest heaves against his own and her screams fill his mouth.

He kisses her until her screaming has turned into faint whimpers and she collapses against him, her breathing ragged gasps and her clothing soaked with sweat.

"Shhhh," he says, stroking her face, soothing her. "It's all over now. You're with me. Shhhh." He smiles as he looks down at his victory, her own gaze full of infatuation and awe.

"I love you," she whispers before lacing her fingers through his and bringing his hand to her lips, planting a trail of kisses along his arm.

"I know," he says, smiling.

She is his experiment, his success, his prize.

She is his.
Introductions

A young woman wrung her hands nervously as she stood outside the entrance of Arkham Asylum, Gotham's cold wind biting at her face and bringing a pink blush to her pale cheeks. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight, high ponytail except for a few loose strands that gently swayed in the breeze against her face and clung to her glasses. Snow fell into tiny clumps on her gray coat and she brushed it away absentmindedly, more concerned with what lay ahead in the asylum than the weather. She took a deep, calming breath in a vain attempt to prepare herself, and stepped into Arkham's entrance and through the doorway that so many enter and so few ever leave.

Dr. Jonathan Crane sat at his desk, poring over his notes and tapping his fingernails angrily against the wooden surface in a frantic, irritated rhythm of frustration.

His last few experiments had been disappointments, if not complete failures; the patients had proven to be discouragingly repetitive test subjects, their reactions to the toxin now predictable and unremarkable. Even a slight alteration of the serum's formula failed to illicit any new affect beyond the usual cries of fear and sobbing pleads, and the end results were dull, tiresome sessions and an utter waste of time.

Frankly, he was starting to become bored.

Crane glanced at his watch. Eleven o'clock. Time for his meeting with Dr. Joan Leland.

As he walked down the hallway leading towards Leland's office, his mind wandered back to the notes locked away in his briefcase and the current stalling of his research. He had already exhausted the asylum's population, and the patients had far outlasted their use. He was in dire need of new test subjects; acquiring them, however, would create a plethora of new difficulties. It was simple enough to select an inmate from the dozens at his disposal and move them to Arkham's basement—the long-abandoned chamber has served him well as a home for his experiments—but smuggling a potential subject into the asylum would be next to impossible, no matter how effortlessly simple the night shift guards were to bribe with twenty-dollar bills and the offer of smoke breaks.

He paused when he reached Leland's office door and realized that he'd completely forgotten what the purpose of the meeting was. He considered his position at the asylum to be nothing more than an elaborate charade, his daily motions trivial but necessary to maintain a carefully-crafted facade of normalcy, and consequently he was often distracted while interacting with his colleagues. His real work took place during his nights in the basement, and everything else is simply routine deception—including pointless meetings with a fellow doctor that he found so irritating that he could barely even pretend to tolerate them.

He sighed with resolved aggravation before slowly raising a hand and rapping his knuckles sharply against the door.

"Come in," a woman said from behind the door, her voice warm and welcoming. Crane's features contorted into a grimace of disgust; the friendly tone that so many find to be gentle and kind struck him as sickly-sweet and patronizing.

Crane wiped the repulsed look from his face and turned the doorknob, opening the door just wide enough to stick his head into the office. "You wanted to see me, Dr. Le—I mean, Joan?"
Dr. Leland smiled. "Yes, Jonathan. Please, come in," she said, beckoning him towards an empty chair in front of her desk.

It took all of Crane's willpower not to let out another sigh of annoyance. He should have known that the meeting would be a tedious, long-winded affair; Leland thought of her coworkers as neighborly companions and often attempted to engage in lengthy conversations with them, interpreting Crane's obvious disinterest as a shy, quiet nature rather than irritability.

Upon stepping into the office Crane noticed a young dark-haired woman sitting across from Leland, her slender shoulders hunched forward and her lips pressed tightly together in an expression of timid anxiety. Crane quickly averted his eyes and took the seat next to her, doing his best not to look in her direction.

"Dr. Crane, this is Teagan James," Leland said, beaming at the apprehensive girl. "She is very excited to begin her internship with you." She smiled, clearly expecting both to be enthused by the introduction.

For once Crane did not attempt to hide his true emotions. His eyes darted back and forth between the two women in stunned confusion and disbelief as he tried to piece together what he had just heard.

"I...an internship?"

Teagan cast her eyes towards the floor as if embarrassed by her own presence, causing her glasses to slide awkwardly down the bridge of her nose.

Leland looked puzzled. "Yes, Jonathan, your intern," she replied slowly, clearly taken aback by his reaction. "You'll recall that we discussed the matter two weeks ago, when I first informed you that this year was your turn to take part in our program with Gotham University."

Oh. That.

He vaguely remembered Leland mentioning Arkham's annual apprenticeship program, a six-week curriculum where an honors student from Gotham University's psychiatric department interned under one of the asylum's doctors; the student's training was meant to include instructions over diagnostic protocols, medical dosages, and therapy session guidelines, but most of the doctors took advantage of the opportunity to have their office cleaned and coffee fetched. Crane cursed Leland inwardly—if she wasn't prattling on about the most asinine, mind-numbingly dull subjects under the guise of "friendly conversation" so often then perhaps he would have paid better attention the one time that she actually said something that held any importance.

Crane shifted in his chair, clearing his throat. "Of course," he said noncommittally, "I remember."

Leland's insufferably cheerful smile returned. "Teagan is top of her class at GU. She's set to graduate later this year with a bachelor's degree in psychology."

The girl continued to stare at the floor as a blush began to creep across her cheeks in heated red splotches, visibly uncomfortable with being the focus of their conversation. On second glance Crane could see that Teagan was an attractive girl, albeit a diminutive one; black hair framed a heart-shaped face, her skin a creamy pale save for the light pink flesh of what appeared to be rather soft lips. She looked like a little porcelain doll, doe-eyed and out of place in the cold, sterile environment of the asylum.

But the charm of pretty girls was lost on Crane, and he turned a blind eye to the opposite sex's allure in favor of his devotion to his toxin.
“That's great,” Crane said flatly.

"Why don't you show Teagan around?" Leland suggested. “I'm sure she'd love that. So far she hasn't seen anything beyond the entrance lobby or this office.”

Crane forced himself to grin tightly at what was sure to the first of six weeks worth of inconveniences.

“Certainly.”

“Excellent. Welcome to Arkham Asylum, Teagan” Leland said, smiling brightly as she extended a hand towards the girl. “I have no doubt that this will be an educational experience for you.”

Teagan gave Leland's hand flimsy shake before quickly returning her own hand to her lap, never once looking the other woman in the eye.

"You can start by organizing those." Crane gestured absentmindedly towards the row of filing cabinets lining an office wall. “That should keep you busy.”

“Um.” Teagan nervously shifted her feet, unsure of what to do. ”Alphabetically or..."

"Just use your best judgment," Crane replied sharply. "I have a lot of work to do."

She flinched at his tone before crossing the room to the cabinets, and for the next hour the room was silent except for the frequent rustling of paper and the occasional creak of metal drawers being opened for the first time in years.

"I'm sorry," Teagan said suddenly, and the sound of her voice almost caused Crane to jump. He had forgotten she was there.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and Crane detected genuine regret and a weary sadness in her tone. "For bothering you. I'll try to stay out of your way."

She gave him a brief, apologetic look before hastily returning to her work.

Crane watched as she neatly filed papers into dog-eared folders, her small form slumped over a large pile of patient forms and her glasses askew on her face, attempting to be as quiet and as innocuous as possible.

For a moment, Crane saw himself.
Despite her best efforts, Crane still considered his intern to be little more than an inconvenient burden.

While Teagan had taken great care not to disturb Crane over the past week, dutifully organizing his files with silent efficiency and speaking only when spoken to, he wanted her gone nonetheless; Crane had always preferred solitude to the company of others, and the girl's presence in his office was a constant, stifling annoyance. She was a tiny, timid girl who never once questioned or protested his lack of expected scholarly guidance, instead choosing to accept his inattention with shy, timid passivity. But rather than appreciate her quiet compliance, he found it offensive—her meek awkwardness reminded Crane of his own private insecurities, and he resented her for it.

Crane did not look up from his paperwork when he heard the office door open, and his gaze never wavered from his desktop even as he listened to the sound of Teagan's worn leather heels click-clacking in a rhythmic pattern against the tile floor and signaling her arrival.

"Miss James." His greeting was a curt, impersonal courtesy and nothing more than ingrained politeness; had he been in a less charitable mood, he would not have bothered to greet her at all.

"Hello, Dr. Crane," she replied quietly. By now Teagan had come to expect his cool indifference, and knew better than to attempt any further conversation.

The room fell silent again as Teagan began to organize his files for the fifth time, and neither spoke to the other until five o'clock, when Crane bade her a hurried goodbye before handing Tegan her coat and promptly shutting the office door behind her.

Crane gazed on with bored detachment as a patient writhed and twisted on a rotting bed in the basement's abandoned cell blocks, his screams intermittently fading into choked gargles as he struggled against his restraints in a weary, vain attempt to escape from his living nightmare.

"Help me! For the love of God, someone, anyone, help me! HELP ME!"

The patient's pleads took on a primal, jagged edge, and after several minutes of tiresome screeching Crane sighed and injected the inmate with a dose of his antitoxin; within seconds the patient's movements and cries had given way to lethargic protests, and moments later he finally closed his eyes as his chest began to rise and fall with peaceful slumber.

Crane sighed again and unfastened his burlap mask; the thick material was confining and hot, and when he slid off the mask the basement's damp air was cool relief against his sweaty face. He smoothed his damp, disheveled hair with the palm of his hand before putting on his glasses and adjusting his tie and collar, and in a few simple gestures Scarecrow had returned to the unassuming role of Dr. Jonathan Crane.

His fear toxin had been a success, albeit a now dull and stale one. After months of experiencing its effects first-hand, Crane had begun to pluck test subjects from the inmate population; the frequent experiments provided him with enough data to develop a gas form of his toxin to serve as a companion to his original serum, and he began to use both during his sessions. He had fashioned a gas mask into the burlap to avoid accidental exposure to the toxin, allowing him to safely watch his
patients first startle with surprise as a burst of gas hit their face and filled their lungs before devolving into cries of horror. The mask was more than just a safety precaution—it completely concealed Crane's face and gave the patients a frightening, intimate glimpse of Scarecrow as they helplessly plunged into their own personal Hell. Every scream and shed tear brought Scarecrow to life and nourished Crane until he was drunk with exhilarating triumph; the toxin granted him the only true happiness he had ever known along with an enlightened, masterful control of fear in all of its terrible glory.

But that would all end soon.

Crane had exhausted the potential of the inmates. While their reactions were powerful testaments to the effectiveness of his toxin, they were now also repetitive and worthless. He could not incur the risks of further experiments if they no longer benefited him—he had been able to remain undetected thus far by employing a great deal of caution, and he had achieved far too much to lose his prized research to carelessness and useless gambles.

Crane had made his decision. Until new test subjects were available, there would be no more fear toxin experiments.

The thought filled him with a rare fit of melancholy, and when he looked down at the mask clasped tightly in his hands he felt the bitterness of failure.

Crane did not greet Teagan when she arrived the next day, and upon observing his sour mood she resumed her filing without speaking a word, not wishing to draw attention towards herself and receive a sharp remark or icy glare. After several moments he looked up from his notes to see her sitting on the floor with several folders stacked in small piles before her; one lay open in her lap and she appeared to be engrossed in its contents, her brow furrowed in concentration as she read with her glasses perched crookedly on the brim of her nose.

He watched her for a few moments before loudly clearing his throat. She jumped and let out a small gasp of surprise before quickly straightening her back and regaining her composure, clearly embarrassed by her reaction.

"What are you doing?" Crane asked.

"Oh! Um..." Teagan shifted nervously, worried that Crane's question was the prerequisite to a stern reprimand. "Well, you told me to use my best judgment and I noticed some consistencies among several of your case files, so I was just...kind of grouping them together, I guess." She winced, half-expecting to be rebuked for unnecessarily complicating what should have been a simple organizational task with her amateurish, unwanted theories.

Crane stared at her with an expression that she could not decipher, and after a moment of heavy silence passed she was sure that her initiative had been a mistake.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I'll refile them alphabetically."

"Consistencies, you said?" His voice was as calm and collected as ever, but Teagan found his lack of identifiable emotion to be more disquieting than comforting—despite knowing Crane for only a week, it was apparent to her that he was a man with little patience for foolishness or errors, and she felt dangerously close to being deemed guilty of both.

"It was stupid of me. I'll put them back. I really shouldn't have-"
"Let me see."

Teagan's eyes widened with surprise. "You...you want to look at them?"

"Please," he replied tersely. "Is that a problem?"

She hesitated before rising from the floor and crossing the office to warily hand him the file. Her stomach twisted into knots of anxiety as she watched him turn page after page, and when he finally closed the folder and set it onto his desk she felt as if she might be sick from anticipation.

"Very interesting."

She blinked, taken aback by the compliment. "Interesting?"

"Yes. I'm impressed. I can see why you were chosen for the program."

"Oh. I...um..." She stammered, overcome with relief and shock, and for the first time since her internship began the corners of her lips turned upwards into a faint smile.

For a fleeting moment, Crane found her to be rather adorable.

"May I ask how old are you, Miss James?"

"I'm twenty-two, sir."

"Dr. Leland said that you're the top of your class. Is that true?"

She glanced at the floor, embarrassed by the question. "Yes, sir."

Crane nods. "Impressive. Keep up the good work, then."

He returned to his paperwork, effectively ending their conversation. Teagan hesitated for a self-conscious moment, debating whether or not she should thank him before ultimately deciding to silently return to her filing instead while he was still in a generous mood.

"Miss James."

Teagan stopped mid-stride and turned to face Crane. "Yes, Dr. Crane?"

"I want to apologize to you for not providing the direction that you may have expected to receive when you applied for this internship," Crane said, adjusting his glasses as he spoke "I have been tremendously preoccupied with other duties, and as a result I have neglected my obligations to you."

"Oh." Teagan bit her lower lip, clearly uncomfortable with the subject—exactly as Crane suspected she would be. "I understand, Dr. Crane. You have more important things to do."

"Well, be that as it may," Crane replied, doing his best to sound remorseful, "I hope that you will give me the opportunity to make it up to you. Would you by any chance be free for lunch tomorrow?"

She blushed a crimson red, and Crane fought the urge to smirk at her naïve predictability.

"It will give us a chance to discuss any questions that you may have outside of this...shall we say, dreary environment. But if you have other plans..." Crane's voice tapered off into just the right amount of disappointment, as if her refusing his invitation would truly pain him.
"Oh, no! Not at all," she said hastily. "I would really like that, Dr. Crane."

"Excellent."

Crane smiled.

Perhaps finding a new test subject was going to be easier than he thought.
Although Crane was far from extravagant (a childhood spent in the throes of poverty had instilled in him a strong sense of frugality and an even stronger disgust towards ostentatious displays of wealth) he had purposefully chosen an upscale restaurant for his lunch appointment with Teagan. The girl's appearance indicated the all-too-familiar signs of a modest bank account—she had worn the same neat but clearly inexpensive outfit three times in the past week, lacked even the most basic of jewelry, and her handbag and shoes bore the inevitable blemishes from even the most gently-maintained years of use. Crane had suspected that an affluent setting would likely impress—and most importantly, intimidate—her, and his suspicions were confirmed when he observed her reading a menu with a slightly panicked expression.

"Have you been here before?" Crane asked conversationally, as if he were truly curious of her answer.

Teagan attempted to disguise her embarrassment with a sheepish half-smile. "No," she admitted. 

Well, at least she was honest, Crane thought to himself before giving her his best imitation of a sincere grin. "Then perhaps I should order for both of us. My treat, of course. Is that alright with you?"

“Oh, Dr. Crane, that's far too kind of you—“

“Nonsense. I was the one who invited you. Besides...” Crane mustered up every bit of his carefully-rehearsed charm as he leaned forward and contorted his lips into a sly, playful smirk. “Lovely women should never have to pay for their own lunch.”

Blech. The syrupy words tasted bitter on his tongue, and Crane could not blame her if she was equally disgusted.

But rather than be repulsed by his pathetic display of sugary-sweet chivalry, Teagan burned a vibrant shade of red to rival the roses adorning the table's centerpiece and quickly ducked behind her menu.

“T-thank you, Dr. Crane,” she stammered. “Nobody's ever called me...”

Her voice trailed off, and when she reemerged from behind the menu her face held the trace of a sad smile.

It was painfully obvious to Crane that Teagan felt out of place in the swanky environment—even if her clothes hadn't hinted towards a meager lifestyle, her glaring insecurity alone would have been sufficient evidence—and judging by her shyness, overall social ineptitude, and response to his nauseatingly-clumsy flattery, he doubted that the introverted and blushing girl seated across the table from him went on many dates.

Not that she was unattractive, of course. Quite the opposite.

Teagan sat quietly as he ordered their lunch, occasionally sipping her water and surveying the restaurant’s elegant décor with unabashed curiosity, as humbly fascinated by her surroundings as she was terrified.

A few silent moments passed before Crane cleared his throat and began to speak.

"As I told you yesterday, Miss James," he said, "I want to apologize for my distant approach to your
internship. I know you are eager to learn, and I have been nothing less than an inadequate instructor...if not a completely distracted one."

"Oh." Teagan shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "That's okay, Dr. Crane. I realize that you're busy. I don't expect you to change your routine just for me."

Crane struggled not to scowl. As easily as she was playing into his deceitful attempt to redeem himself, he still found her timidness and desire to please irksome—but if he was careful and played his cards right, that same irritating eagerness could prove to be a useful tool.

"I have something that I want to show you," Crane said, opening his briefcase to retrieve a slender file. "I've been working on a project for quite some time, and I was wondering if you would be so kind as to give me your thoughts on it—that is, if you're interested."

He extended his arm towards her, file in hand. When she reached across the table, their fingers touch for a brief second; her skin was soft and warm, like silk against the lithe digits of his hand, and when he quickly jerked away his tongue felt thick in his mouth.

Crane was setting a trap that required precise and flawless construction and absolute discipline—every action, every word, every breath had to be executed perfectly, or the trap would malfunction and he would become the vulnerable prey rather than the hunter. If he were to lose control then everything he had worked so hard for would be destroyed, and he would not allow that to happen.

No emotion. No weakness. Only restraint.

But Teagan was far too immersed in the file's contents to notice Crane's quiet lapse of composure. He watched as her eyes traveled across the pages in a steady pace before gaining a frantic, hungry edge, as if she had begun to devour the words rather than read them; when she finally tore away from the file to look at him, her eyes were wide with stunned fascination behind the askew frames of her glasses.

"This is incredible, Dr. Crane. I...I've never read anything like this before."

"Thank you," Crane replied politely, bemused by her reaction. He'd given her a condensed, watered-down version of his research, removing any mention of test subjects, toxin, and any other potentially damning documentation—what she had read was only snippets pertaining to fear's role in the human psyche, minus the more colorful data. If she'd been captivated by such a paltry example, he could only imagine how she would react to a demonstration of his actual power.

"I mean, fear is such a primitive, basic emotion, yet psychiatry as a whole has so much more to learn about its relation to our psyche. But this—this is remarkable."

Crane had never seen her so animated before. Rather than cast her eyes towards the floor and mumble quietly, she'd become so enthused over his work that it was as if she had forgotten to be nervous.

"What did Dr. Leland think of it?"

Questions! The tiny, timid girl who would rather organize his files repeatedly than mutter a single word was asking him questions!

"I'm afraid she was quite unimpressed," Crane lied smoothly.

"Oh," Teagan scoffed. "Well, that's not surprising."
Almost immediately she brought a hand to her lips, as if just realizing what she had said. “I'm sorry, Dr. Crane. That was extremely inappropriate of me.”

Crane struggled not to laugh, both surprised and delighted by her spiteful assessment of Leland. “That's quite alright. What exactly did you mean?”

"Well..." Teagan hesitated. "She's just... not like you. She's more interested in being sympathetic and gentle and, well, coddling, whereas you...”

Her voice trailed off again into uncertain silence.

“Whereas I what?”

Teagan took a deep breath. "You seem to be more interested in studying the mind rather than placating inmates,” she finished quickly.

There was a heavy pause, and just as Teagan was about to apologize Crane opened his mouth to speak.

“Thank you, Miss James,” Crane said, and for the first time during the afternoon he spoke with sincerity. “I take that as a compliment.”

A genuinely happy smile spread across Teagan's lips and brought a sparkling warmth to her dark eyes, and Crane almost felt bad for what he was going to do to her. Almost.

They sat quietly after the waiter arrived with their plates, the table silent save for the murmurs of neighboring conversations and the light clanking of silverware. Teagan chewed slowly and kept her gaze on the floor, inwardly debating whether or not her earlier outburst had been an amateurish mistake until Crane suddenly interrupted the silence with a question.

"Do you have any family, Miss James?"

She looked up at him in surprise. "What? Oh! I mean, no, sir."

"None whatsoever?"

She shook her head. "My father left our family when I was kid, and my mother died during my sophomore year of college."

That would explain her financial state, Crane thought. No family means no money from mommy or daddy.

"I'm very sorry to hear that. You don't have any brothers or sisters?"

Teagan paused.

“No,” she said finally. “It's just me.”

Ah-ha. Now we're getting somewhere.

"I see." Crane straightened his glasses. "If you'll forgive the somewhat delicate question, Miss James: do you suffer from any sort of serious medical ailment? For example, a heart condition or any form of epilepsy?"
Teagan furrowed her brow in confusion. “Um, no, sir,” she replied, clearly taken aback by his question. “May I ask why you—”

"Miss James, would you be interested in assisting me with my research?"

She blinked. “Me?”

Crane leaned forward and met her gaze.

“‘Yes,’ Crane said, his eyes never wavering from hers. “You’ve shown an appreciation and clear understanding of the notes I presented you with this afternoon, and your work in my office indicates exactly the sort of dedication and initiative that this project requires.”

“You really think I would be of any use to you, Dr. Crane?” Teagan asked bashfully, biting her lower lip. Despite her penchant for shyness and susceptible blushing she continued to hold his gaze, looking into the icy blue of his eyes with what Crane suspected to be the beginning stages of fondness.

*Oh, this was going to be fun.*

Crane smiled.

“Miss James, you greatly underestimate how much of a valuable asset you would be to the advancement of my research.”

The trap had been carefully set, its snare primed and ready to spring—now all that was left was to coax her into it.

*Almost...*

Teagan smiled brightly and gave Crane an eager nod.

“I would be honored to be your assistant, Dr. Crane.”

...*there.*

“Excellent.” Crane lifted his glass. “To new partnerships.”

She raised her own glass to his, and as their glasses clinked together in a celebratory toast Teagan unknowingly sealed her fate.
Into the Basement

The sound of footsteps joined the far-away echo of leaky pipes and scuttling rodents reverberating throughout Arkham's basement as Teagan followed Crane down the asylum's abandoned halls, the girl struggling to keep up with his quick, determined pace while still maintaining her balance on the slick surface of the damp stone floor. The only source of light in the otherwise murky darkness was the solitary glow emitting from Crane's flashlight; occasionally the light would dart away from their path to land on a mattress rotting with mildew or a tray full of medicinal instruments stained from rust and blood, and she would bring a hand to her mouth to suppress a repulsed gag, her stomach already nauseated by the thick scent of mold and decay in the basement's stale air.

For nearly three decades, the vacant cell blocks in Arkham Asylum's basement had served only as an abandoned reminder of its founder's Draconian approach towards “curing” his patients. Methods of treatment that had long-ago been declared inhumane and subsequently criminalized were fully embraced by Amadeus Arkham and practiced within his asylum walls, with the institution's basement operating as both housing quarters for inmates who were deemed to be “difficult” and as a secret medical center where bizarre and tortuous procedures were carried out by Amadeus' cruel hands. After Amadeus' excursions into the basement were discovered, he became yet another prisoner in his own asylum and forcibly relinquished of his position as Arkham's administrator. Embarrassed by their employer's actions, the staff unanimously voted to have the basement sealed off in an attempt to conceal the asylum's shameful legacy; the heavy iron door was locked shut, the key stowed away in a hidden location and eventually—and perhaps mercifully—lost, and over the course of almost thirty years not a single soul stepped foot into Amadeus Arkham's former torture chamber.

The basement would perhaps have never again received a visitor were it not for a bored Jonathan Crane opening a dust-coated book he had found in a neglected section of Arkham's library during one dull afternoon to discover a small key pressed between its yellowed pages, the name A. Arkham engraved onto its side in a neat, elegant scrawl. It had been as if the asylum were presenting him with a gift, sentient and aware of the potential he held within his mind and and keen to provide him with the necessary tools to bring his dreams to fruition.

Were Crane a more superstitious man, he would have thought of it as fate.

Earlier in the evening, Crane had asked Teagan if she would be willing to stay past her usual hours and assist him with the first stage of the project they had discussed during their previous lunch appointment. She had been all too eager to accept his offer, and in her enthusiasm had become so distracted that she never bothered to question Crane as to what exactly she would be helping him with.

Crane smiled wryly as he recalled the puzzled look on her face when he had led her to the basement door and retrieved the key from his pocket, and the way her confusion had shifted to blatant wariness when the door opened to reveal a set of stairs descending into precarious darkness.

“You're not afraid of the dark, are you?” Crane had asked, his voice light with mock-playfulness.

Her eyes widened and she shook her head quickly, worried that her hesitancy had somehow displeased—or even worse, disappointed—her superior.

“No, sir! I'm just—”

“Afraid that you'll see something scary?”
Teagan blushed and cast her eyes towards the floor, visibly embarrassed.

Crane swallowed his annoyance—it seemed as if the silly girl was always either in a constant state of flushed embarrassment or meekly staring at the ground, both habits that he found to be equally irksome—and put on his best attempt of a reassuring smile before extending a hand towards her.

“Come on. I'll lead the way.”

Teagan paused before slowly reaching forward and slipping her hand into his own. Crane gave her a final smile as he interlaced his fingers with hers, a gesture that made her heart jolt as if his touch had been electric, and his grip on her hand remained firm as he guided her through their descent into the basement until they had safely reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped onto the cellar's stone floor.

Crane allowed her increasingly-tight grasp on his hand to linger for a few moments longer than necessary before finally releasing her and breaking their hold, and when he saw her lips turn downwards into a slight frown of disappointment he struggled to keep from laughing at her gullibility.

As irritating as her timidness and naivety were, Crane could not deny that they were also highly convenient.

Teagan had proven herself to be even easier prey than he had initially suspected. She was almost childishly innocent despite her intelligence, and foolishly influenced by even the slightest compliment or act of kindness that Crane granted her. Empty praise crouched in words like “valuable” and “dedicated” and “potential” had convinced her that she would carry out an important role in his research as a much-needed assistant, and—most importantly—convinced her that she was special.

Out of an asylum full of white coats and PhD’s, only she could comprehend the innovative nature of his research, only she could truly appreciate his work, and only she could be the one to help him.

To an extent, she was correct about one thing: the purpose she would serve was a rather unique position, and one he could not share with any of his colleagues. Tonight would be her first glimpse into the true nature of her involvement, albeit also a great risk on his part; still, he was confident that his plan would unfold to his liking—after all, she had seamlessly entangled herself in his deception thus far, and with great enthusiasm to boot.

And if tonight didn’t go as planned—well, that was remedied easily enough.

“Here we are.”

Crane stopped abruptly in his tracks, nearly causing Teagan to topple over her own feet as she came to an unexpected halt behind him, and shone the flashlight into a nearby cell.

“After you, Miss James.”

“Dr. Crane, I don't understand—”

“You will. Inside, please.” Although Crane continued to smile, his tone bore the terse edge that had set her stomach into nervous knots at the beginning of her internship and sent her walking into the cell without any further questions.

The cell was dark and cramped, its furnishings limited to a toilet, sink, and small bed, all of which were coated in a generous layer of dust and grime. A pair of cuff and shackle restraints rested atop the mattress, the leather cracked and faded from years of frequent use before being abandoned and relegated to a forgotten relic from Arkham's morbid history.
“Back when mental illness was thought of as an affliction rather than a legitimate health disorder, doctors practiced a variety of what we would now consider to be ‘inhumane’ treatments in order to ‘cure’ their patients,” Crane said, removing his glasses and tucking them into his shirt pocket as he spoke. “Patients would be restrained and forced to view a succession of violent and disturbing images beamed from a projector in a constant stream, often for days at a time without any food or water. Attempting to close their eyes resulted in severe punishment, and only when the doctors were satisfied with their patient's state of sleep deprivation and starvation were they released from their binds. You see, they thought that by breaking the mind and body, it could be rebuilt into something sane and healthy—so long as the patient actually survived, that is.”

“Oh my,” Teagan whispered, her voice horrified and barely audible.

“Indeed.”

“I can barely imagine—“

“Which is exactly why we're here. Miss James, would you be so kind as the lie down on the mattress?”

She blinked. “W-what was that, sir?”

“I asked you to please lie down,” Crane said pleasantly, as if they were discussing a friendly, trivial matter. “I can not properly restrain you if you aren't lying on the cell bed.”

Teagan stared at him in stunned disbelief, her eyes darting back and forth between Crane and the filthy mattress.

“You...you want me to tie me to that?”

“Yes.” Crane frowned. “Is that a problem?”

“It's just—“

“When you accepted my offer, Miss James, I was under the impression that you were agreeing to help me with my project.” Crane continued to smile politely at her, but his tone was beginning to take on a stern, curt edge. “In order for you to be able to truly understand the concept of fear, it is necessary to place yourself in the position of someone who has experienced a great deal of it. That includes allowing yourself to physically imitate their ordeal. However, if you are not comfortable...”

He sighed dramatically with feigned disappointment. “I suppose this means that you don't trust me.”

The words had barely left Crane's lips before Teagan began to shake her head frantically.

“No, sir! That's not what I meant at all!”

“It's quite alright, Miss James,” Crane said, his voice heavy with wounded dejection. “I have no one but myself to blame. Had I been a more capable instructor, perhaps you would have been able to establish a more trusting relationship with me.” He sighed again, this time with an additional measure of weariness. “However, these things cannot be forced, even if it is a waste of great potential. Best to just forget the whole thing.”

He felt a surge of pride when he saw her eyes begin to glisten in the dim glow of his flashlight, and even before she spoke Crane knew that he had won.

“I'm sorry, Dr. Crane,” Teagan whispered, and before Crane had a chance to respond she had
crossed the cell and promptly sat on the bed. A cloud of dust burst through the air the instant her body made contact with the mattress, speckles of white dancing in the glow of Crane's flashlight before landing in the dark strands of her hair; already her clothing bore stains from the layer of grime blanketing the cell, and as she stretched across the mattress her skirt accidentally slid above her thighs to expose the lace trimmings of her stockings.

He quickly averted his glance, uncomfortable with the sudden lump in his throat and hot flush creeping across his cheeks, and he suddenly found himself quite irritated with her.

Crane began to fasten her restraints without bothering to ask Teagan if she was ready, ignoring her slight wince of pain as he tightened the cuffs on her wrist. The fidgety sensation in his throat returned to travel to his fingertips when he strapped her ankles and felt the smooth texture of her hosiery beneath his hands, and for a fleeting, restless moment Crane imagined himself sliding a hand upwards to touch the lace.

*Enough.*

Crane recoiled, disgusted by his inner lapse of composure.

“Dr. Crane?”

He swallowed and wiped any trace of emotion from his expression before lifting his head to look at her.

“Yes?”

“My glasses...could you adjust them for me, please?”

He rose from his position at Teagan's feet and reached forward to gently lift her glasses from her face, folding and placing them beside his own in his breast pocket.

Teagan furrowed her brow in confusion. “Sir, I meant...“

Her voice trailed off as Crane turned away from her and switched off his flashlight, effectively submerging the cell and its occupants into complete darkness.

“Dr. Crane?”

The only response was the scuffling of footsteps next to the bed.

“...Dr. Crane?”

A thousand terrible possibilities swam through Teagan's mind as panic took hold of her imagination, and when another silent moment passed with no reply from Crane she began a vain struggle to slip free from her restraints, twisting and contorting against the binds until her wrists were raw from the friction and cramped jolts of pain shot through her legs.

After what felt like an eternity, the flashlight beam reappeared to cast a circular glow onto the cell floor.

“C-can you hear me? Please, I just want—AHHH!“

Teagan let out a terrified scream when the flashlight flipped upwards to illuminate Scarecrow's snarling, stitched face.

“DR. CRANE DR. CRANE DR. CRANE HELP HELP HELP—“
In desperation she attempted to swipe at the face, to claw at the holes where eyes should be and drag her nails across its burlap skin, but her cuffs merely tightened against her wrists and rendered her unable to lift her arms more than a few inches as she frantically kicked and fought a useless battle against both her restraints and her attacker. Smoke seeped from beneath the mask to burn her eyes and throat, her stomach heaving as she inhaled the fumes in sobbing gasps. Her lungs were on fire, her tongue suffocating and thick in her mouth, and when the visions began she let out a final cry of defeat before collapsing against the mattress and surrendering to her horror.

The last thing Teagan saw before slipping into merciful unconsciousness was a single blue eye twinkling from behind the burlap.
The throbbing pain in her temples welcomed Teagan back to consciousness, her vision blurred and swimming in darkness between half-opened eyelids. She could not recall ever having experienced such a horrific dream before, and hoped to never have another like it again; its vibrancy had been terrible and all too real. She had felt every excruciating sensation the nightmare had inflicted onto her, from the screams of unbridled horror tearing from between her lips to the overwhelming suffocation as a haze of smoke filled her lungs and choked her throat.

And that face. That awful, impossibly-loathsome face that seemed to both slither and burn as it tore at her mind with its teeth and its nails, biting and clawing until there was nothing left but exposed nerves and raw fear.

A nervous giggle bubbled in her mouth, startled and relieved, and yet she was still too uneasy from the dream's events to dare let it spill from the brim of her lips. In the safety of hindsight, it was unsurprising that a nightmare had brewed within her subconscious—after all, hadn't she spent tedious semester after tedious semester examining the relationship between psychology and dreams? The usual stresses of college combined with her internship and nights spent drifting off the sleep with photocopies of Crane's research scattered across her lap had culminated into bizarre, overpowering dream that plucked the insecurities from her reality to warp into a psychological weapon.

And as embarrassing as it was to admit—even inwardly—it wasn't the first time that Crane had made an appearance in her dreams.

She sighed before immediately wincing as a fresh wave of pain rattled behind her eyes and throughout her forehead. Ugh. Clearly the headache wasn't going away by itself and would require that she get out of her tiny, cold bed and cross her tiny, cold room to reach her even-tinier, cold bathroom and retrieve a bottle of aspirin from the medicine cabinet.

Ah, well. She probably wouldn't have been able to fall back asleep anyway.

Teagan fully opened her eyes and with horrified realization stared into the mold-covered ceiling of Arkham's basement cells.

No! No no no no no no no

A hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her screams and pinning her back onto the cell's mattress.

“Don't scream.”

In the darkness Crane's voice spoke directly into her ear, so close that Teagan could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. She nodded, her eyes wide.

“If I move my hand, are you going to scream?” His voice was strangely—perhaps dangerously, she feared—calm.

Teagan shook her head quickly, her heart racing as frightened tears began to prick at the corners of her eyes.

“Good.” Crane removed his hand from her mouth and fixed her with a small, good-natured smile. “Why don't you try sitting up? I've removed your restraints.”

An ascertaining downwards glance at her body revealed that Crane had been truthful; the leather
straps were gone, replaced with the red sting of raw chafe marks and a faint throbbing in her wrists and ankles.

The part of her that operated on rationality demanded that she scream as loud as she could, to push past Crane and run into the damp, suffocating darkness and up the slippery stone stairs until she had flung open the heavy basement door with all her might and stepped into the brightly-lit clinical safety of Arkham's ground floor.

It was the other part of her—the part that favored curiosity over survival, the part that felt a hot rush of a sensation that she could not name when Crane was near and brought a blush to her cheeks, the part of her that had a jolt of silent excitement in her stomach while walking through the hallway leading towards Crane's office and holding his notes close to her chest as if they were prized treasure—it was that part of Teagan that led her to weakly lift herself with still-trembling arms until she sat opposite of Crane, her body poised on the edge of the cell mattress and her feet dangling inches above the grime-coated floor, and gazed upwards meet the cold blue of his gaze.

Crane reached down, a crisp white handkerchief clutched in his hand, and began to gently wipe away the streaks of her dried mascara and tears; his fingers were light and soothing, more stroke than touch, and when he returned her glasses by carefully placing them on her face and brushing an errant strand of hair behind her ears Teagan felt her breath catch in her throat for reasons unrelated to fear.

“‘There. Isn't that better?’”

“What..what happened?” Teagan whispered, struggling to keep her voice from shaking.

Crane smiled again. “Enlightenment,” he replied simply, rising from his hunched position to stand above her. “Beautiful, agonizing enlightenment.”

She stared at him blankly.

“I...I don’t...“

“Come now, Miss James,.Even an inexperienced student like yourself should realize that most people spend their entire lifetime avoiding fear.”

Crane began to pace the cell as he spoke, his voice rising from polite and conversational to a tone that bordered on excited reverence.

“They allow their fears to control them, to limit them, to crush them, simply because they're too scared to confront that which frightens them. They work at jobs they hate because they fear poverty, marry spouses that they don't love because they fear loneliness, swallow handfuls of vitamin pills and jog through Gotham Park and paint their graying hair with dye because they fear growing old—those same fears that they try oh-so-very hard to avoid are a constant in their every action. They surrender to fear and allow it to guide them through the dull intricacies of their lives because it's safe, because it's easy, and because they're too distracted and numb to ever truly notice just exactly how frightened they are.”

Crane stopped in his tracks and turned to face her.

“I gave you fear in its purest form. I allowed you to experience it, to breathe it, to be consumed by it, and now there is nothing left to control you. You are enlightened. You are limitless. You are free.”

Teagan looked into his eyes and remembered how they glimmered beneath the burlap face of her tormentor, blue and hungry and cruel, and shook her head sadly.
“I...I don't know what to do with this, Dr. Crane,” Teagan said, her voice on the verge of cracking, “I can't...I don't know how—”

“Had I thought you not capable, Miss James, our present exchange would never have taken place.”

“But why? Why me?”

Crane struggled to keep from smirking. “Why, I thought that was obvious, Miss James. It's because you're extraordinary.”

*Extraordinary.* It was a clumsy, silly word, a term better reserved for works of fine art than a timid girl and one that he loathed to use even with insincerity, and yet the way he spoke made it sound like the highest of praise.

“No, I'm not.” Teagan's voice was rushed, the sob she had been choking back now threatening to burst. “I'm a boring, unremarkable person who only got this internship in the first place because I spend all my time studying and never with family or friends, because I don't have any family or friends. I'm awkward, and I'm shy, and I...

She paused and took a shaky breath.

“Sometimes I'm too afraid to ever take my eyes off the floor and look up because I don't want to see the expression of pity on everyone's face when they look at me. There's nothing extraordinary about me, Dr. Crane. Absolutely nothing.”

She paused and took a shaky breath.

“Sometimes I'm too afraid to ever take my eyes off the floor and look up because I don't want to see the expression of pity on everyone's face when they look at me. There's nothing extraordinary about me, Dr. Crane. Absolutely nothing.”

She blurted out her final admittance with palatable shame and sadness, and as he watched her cry Crane felt the same bitter resentment that stirred within him whenever she reminded him of his own buried insecurities and self-reflective disappointments.

Why did she have to be so...so resigned? So feeble? So maddeningly pathetic?

She sickened him, and yet annoyance was not the only emotion she inspired; there was another feeling that he did not wish to identify, an inconvenient sort of warmth that made him uncomfortable and nervous and far too embarrassed to ever speak of or admit to possessing.

He resented her for that too.

Crane reached forward to cup a hand delicately beneath her chin, bending at the waist until his face was inches away from hers; Teagan blinked with surprise and confusion, taken aback by the gesture, yet made no attempt to move away from his grasp.

“You're extraordinary, Miss James, because you're like me,” Crane whispered, and pressed his lips to hers.

Her body was stiff and anxious even as she returned his kiss, her own mouth clumsy and as inexperienced as he had expected, but when Crane slid his hand into her hair to gently tilt her head back and trail his lips down her neck he heard a quiet gasp and felt her soften beneath him. He allowed her a moment of gratification, smirking as she sighed and gripped tight handfuls of the filthy mattress, and when Crane pulled away he found her breathless and flushed pink.

Crane beamed with victorious pride, a smile Teagan mistook for affection, and looked into her awe-stricken eyes.

“Nobody will ever understand us, Miss James. We'll have to make them understand.”
“Yes, sir,” she whispered, and when he kissed her again Teagan James was lost forever.
A Willing Participant

The morning after her encounter with Crane in Arkham Asylum's basement, Teagan awoke to the shrill blare of her alarm clock, stared blankly at its digital numbers glowing in the early darkness of her apartment, and decided to not attend class for the first time in her entire academic career.

It was an uncharacteristic act of irresponsibility, and one she would have normally regarded as borderline outrageous; her education was of such great importance to her that she had never before been so much as a single minute late to a lecture, even when faced with the challenges of navigating the city's seemingly-endless flow of sidewalk traffic and adhering to Gotham City Rail's rigid, unforgiving schedule.

Instead, she spent the morning hours poring over the previous night's events until each exquisite, agonizing moment ran through her memory on an endless loop. The nightmarish face with eyes that shone blue, the hideous sense of fear burning through her mind, the feeling of Crane's lips pressed against her own—

_But why? Why me?_ 

The restraints had left behind bruises on her wrists and ankles, and Teagan felt strangely validated as she examined her reflection in the bathroom mirror; last night had not just been a wistful dream, and the evidence lay vibrant in shades of violet and blue across her pale flesh. The words Crane had spoken to her, the hot sensation of his mouth against her throat, the small amused smile on his lips after the kisses had ended and she gazed at him with cheeks flushed pink and disheveled hair—it had all been _real._

She knew, of course, that the sane and logical approach involved picking up the phone to dial the Gotham City Police Department, her college adviser, and Dr. Leland in whatever order her brain could muster and alert them to a psychiatrist practicing at Arkham Asylum forcing bizarre experimentation onto unwitting interns. Both Crane and the monstrous terror he had inflicted upon her would be locked away forever, deep in the bowels of the asylum, where neither he nor it could never haunt her again.

It was the _right_ thing to do. It was what she _should_ do.

But as she sat at the edge of her bed and stared down into the black screen of her cellphone, Teagan realized that the only thing that frightened her more than another possible encounter with the loathsome face was the thought of never seeing Crane again.

Indecisive, still moments passed, and eventually she placed her phone aside and began to dress for work.

Crane said nothing beyond his usual formal greeting when Teagan arrived at his office that afternoon, and although she waited with bated breath the day continued to drag on in silence. As hours passed without so much as a single word from Crane, Teagan began to wonder if _she_ should be the one to initiate the discussion she so desperately wanted.

_What if this is another test? What if he's expecting me to talk and I'm failing miserably?_ 

But the courage to speak never came, and instead she continued to quietly file papers and prayed that
Crane would say something, anything, to indicate that last night had not entirely faded from his memory.

Or—even worse—what if Crane did remember, but no longer cared?

Perhaps he had awoken that morning and realized the awful, crushing truth: that Teagan was nothing more than one intern among many, a temporary specter in his workplace who's name would likely be forgotten the very instant she walked out of his office for the final time, and someone far too insignificant to be included in anything as momentous as groundbreaking psychological research. She could not blame him for recognizing how unremarkable she truly was, nor would she argue if Crane were to admit that last night had been nothing more than an egregious lapse in his judgment—indeed, the only thing about herself that she believed to be “extraordinary” was how mistaken Crane had been to think of her as anything but painfully, pitiably dull.

At least I meant something for one night, she thought to herself, and blinked back tears.

“Miss James?”

The sound of Crane's quiet murmur sent a jolt of surprise through her body and nearly caused her to spill the stack of freshly-printed patient admittance forms cradled in the nook of her arm. She forced her expression into a calm, casual smile—or at least her best impression of one—before turning to face Crane's desk, her heart racing.

“Yes, Dr. Crane?”

He was not so easily fooled. Teagan's elation over finally hearing him speak—and her fear of what he might say—was as apparent to Crane as the quick glances she had shot him over the past few hours when she thought he was studying his paperwork (he had, in truth, been studying her).

But he'd play along.

“Are you free this evening?”

Her eyes lit up with excitement.

“Oh, I—“

“I do apologize for asking at such terribly short notice. I'll understand, of course, if you already have plans...”

“No, not at all, Dr. Crane! I—what I mean to say is yes, I'm available for, um, whatever you—“

“Excellent.”

He gave her a small fleeting smile before returning to his work, and when her back was turned to him Crane could not help but smirk.

(break)

“Are you comfortable, Miss James?”

Even as foreboding gnawed at her, Teagan felt her pulse quicken with dizzying excitement when Crane rolled up her blouse sleeve and gently pressed his fingers against the bare flesh of her arm. Her stomach turned as she breathed in the basement's damp air, stale and reeking of mildew, and tried not to think of what was going to happen next.
She nodded, forcing herself to smile.

“Good,” Crane said, and rewarded her with a small smile of his own. “You don’t by any chance have a fear of needles, do you?”

Teagan shook her head. “No, sir, actually the only thing that really scares me is—“

“We’ll find that out soon enough, Miss James.”

The thought filled her with renewed dread, and she felt her heart race as she watched Crane prepare a syringe with delicate expertise.

“I’ll offer you one final opportunity to excuse yourself from this experiment, Miss James: are you sure you want to proceed?”

Her every instinct screamed at her to run, to leave the basement and never return to Arkham Asylum, to forget the name Dr. Jonathan Crane and his toxin and his kisses and all his pretty words and just *run run run*...

Instead Teagan pushed all rationality aside, gripped the dusty cell mattress with blanched knuckles, and nodded.

“Yes, Dr. Crane,” she whispered. “I’m ready.”

Teagan closed her eyes, and seconds later she felt the needle pierce her skin.
Drowning in Fear

It had been years since Teagan had last been to the river, and yet it had faithfully remained exactly as she remembered; the trees in the surrounding forest swaying gently as the wind drifted through its limbs to carry the scent of pine and wet soil, the ambient sound of falling rain pelting the river's surface, the almost-ethereal mist floating through the grounds below a gray sky. Through the fog she could see the wooden dock where she had spent much of her childhood summers, either sitting at its edge with her feet dangling inches above the water and her nose buried in the pages of a book, or running along its planks before letting out a triumphant cry of glee and jumping into a cannon-ball dive.

She had been happy then, a bright, doe-eyed girl with a propensity to drift off into daydreams, as sunny and cheerful as she was blissfully naïve.

But as she walked along the river's edge, the heels of her pumps sinking into wet grass and soft mud with every step, Teagan felt a growing sense of dread. The place that had long ago brought her comfort and days full of joy now felt strange and unwelcoming and wrong; there was a coldness in the air beyond any she had ever felt before, a biting chill that lingered even as she pulled her drenched coat tightly around her and rubbed her hands together in a vain attempt to create warmth, and the river's usual signs of life—the croaking chorus of frogs, the incessant chirping of birds—had been replaced by a disquieting stillness.

She felt as if she were forgetting something, a vague memory scratching at the surface of her clouded, hazy subconscious, something horrible and frightening and something that she was not entirely sure she wanted to remember—

"Teeeeeaaaaaa...

The sound of a child's sing-song voice wailed through the trees, and instantly Teagan froze.

She remembered.

She remembered her sorrow, her guilt, her mother's endless sobbing and the late-night arguments where she lied awake in bed to hear her father spit out her name as if it disgusted him. She remembered looking up from her dinner plate to see her father glaring at her from across the table, every line of his grief-worn face etched with silent anger. She remembered coming home from school to find her mother sitting alone on the couch, stiff and emotionless, her eyes red from hours worth of tears and several framed photographs missing from the apartment walls. She remembered the sadness she felt when months passed with no word from him, and it was only after spending her birthday sitting beside the phone, waiting for a call that never came, that Teagan finally realized the painful, crushing truth: she was never going to see her father again.

"Tea! Bet you can't catch me, Teeeeeaaaaa..."

Most vividly of all, Teagan remembered her young introduction to one of life's greatest cruelties: loneliness.

"P...Paul?"

No. No! That wasn't possible. It had been over ten years since—

From the corner of her eye she saw a blur move across the river's edge, small and impossibly fast.
“Paul! Wait! I'm over here!”

She began to run towards the dock, calling his name over and over again in the desperate hope that he would hear her.

*It would be different this time. She was older now, stronger and faster than before. She would reach him in time and everything was going to be just fine. Dad wouldn't leave and Mom wouldn't cry and Paul wouldn't be—*

“AHHH!”

Teagan cried out in pain as her foot connected with the edge of a sharp rock, followed a split-second later by the gruesome sound of her ankle snapping. Agonizing pain pulsed through her leg as it buckled beneath her and sent her crumpling onto the river's wet shore. As she lay in the mud and stared up into the gray sky, her mind racing from shock and pain, she realized the weather had begun to change; what was once a light breeze was now violent gusts that whipped through her hair and stung her eyes, and cold rain fell with renewed, biting intensity.

“Tea! Over here!”

Slick with mud and rain, Teagan summoned every ounce of her strength to roll over onto her stomach, raising herself onto her elbows to stare through the now-parted fog.

A small boy walked towards her atop the river water as smoothly as if it were land beneath his feet, his every step sending ripples across its surface. His eyes and wet hair were the same dark shade as her own, his skin blanched a sickly pale and his lips blue from cold, and his water-soaked clothing clung to his tiny frame.

*Paul.*

Teagan closed her eyes and began to weep, and when she opened them again he was standing before her.

“I'm so sorry, Paul. I didn't mean for any of this to happen,” she sobbed. “I tried. I really, really tried.”

He crossed his small arms across his chest in an exaggerated gesture of childish displeasure, his bottom lip jutted outwards into a sulking pout.

“We weren't supposed to go to the river by ourselves, remember? It was dark outside and the woods were scary, and I wanted to go home but you said it would be okay. You said nothing bad would happen. You lied.”

Angry tears began to spill from the corners of his wide, cherubic eyes and he balled his hands into tiny fists.

“No!” Teagan shook her head frantically. “I didn't know this would—I didn't mean—“

“Why didn't you help me, Tea?” Paul cried, his tiny voice now a high-pitched whimper. “Why did you run away?”
“But Paul, I tried. I ran to go get Mom and Dad. But I couldn't see in the dark, and I got lost and by the time I found my way back home they'd already realized we were gone, and the sun was rising...”

Her voice trailed off and she collapsed into fresh sobs.

“You forgot about me,” Paul whined, wiping his nose with the back of a chubby hand. “You grew up and moved away and now you don't ever wanna play with me anymore.”

Teagan shook her head sadly.

“I could never forget about you, Paul. I miss you every single day and I'll always blame myself for—Paul, NO!”

Teagan flung herself forward in frantic attempt to stop the boy, but it was too late; he was fast—so impossibly fast—and beyond her reach that her fingers helplessly grazing the hem of his shirt before she slipped on the dock's wet surface to land with a hard, painful thud. She watched in horror as Paul jumped off the pier's edge into the river with a loud splash, his small body quickly swept away by the current's overpowering waves before disappearing entirely beneath is murky surface.

Just like before.

She jumped in after him without hesitation, gasping in shock as her body connected with the ice-cold water.

This time would be different. Everything was going to be just fine.

The water that had been so refreshingly cool all those summers ago now chilled her to the bone and set her teeth chattering. Wave after wave crashed over her head, filling her nose and leaving her lungs aching for air, and she kicked her feet frantically to stay afloat, intense pain shooting through her leg with every movement.

“Paul! W-w-where are you? Paul!”

Silence.

I'm too late. Again. I failed—

She jolted in surprise and pain at the sensation of something unseen brushing against her injured ankle.

“P-paul? I th-that you?”

A cold grip encircled her ankle, and before Teagan had the chance to scream she was pulled under.

Everything was a panicked blur—the copper taste of the water as it flooded her mouth and choked her throat, her frenzied, blind kicks of desperation, her frantic struggling as she attempted to free herself and swim away.

No! I don't want to die!

Her vision grew dim and fuzzy as she sank into the river's abyss, her lungs threatening to burst inside her chest; the grasp on her ankle felt like a heavy weight, a chain dragging her closer and closer to her grave at the bottom of the river. After what felt like an agonizing eternity her struggling had slowed to weak, flimsy protests before ceasing all together into a resigned, sinking stillness.

I'm sorry, Paul.
For everything.

She closed her eyes, knowing that she would never open them again.

“It's alright, Miss James. You're safe now.”

Teagan became dimly aware of a hand brushing lightly across her forehead in slow, gentle strokes, and a voice whispering soothingly into her ear. Her eyelids fluttered open, and for the second time in as many days she found herself staring up at the asylum's mold-entrenched basement ceiling.

“What...what's going on?” The groginess in her own voice took her by surprise—had she been asleep?

“Shh, lie still. You've just been through quite the ordeal, I'm sure.”

She turned her head to see Crane standing beside the cell bed, a syringe in his hand and a small, reassuring smile on his lips.

“Ordeal? Dr. Crane, I don't understand—"

“I believe you said something about a...what was it, a river?”

Crane watched as Teagan's confusion dawned to horrified realization, his own expression betraying nothing of the private, silent satisfaction he felt at her reaction.

Oh, this was going to be good.

“Please, Miss James,” he protested when the girl began to excitedly rise from her prone position, “I must insist that you remain calm. Whatever you saw was just an illusion, a product of the hallucinogen I injected you with. Remember?”

She froze in place, visibly taken aback by Crane's words. Her brow furrowed as she wracked her memory for something, anything that would make sense of her current—

“The toxin,” she whispered. “It was all from the toxin.”

Crane nodded. “Yes.”

“Then he wasn't really...I didn't...”

Teagan sank back onto the mattress, burying her face in her hands as she burst into sudden, mournful sobs.

Again Crane felt the familiar irritation she was beginning to inspire in him with increasingly-uncomfortable ease, this time joined by a heavy, equally-unwanted feeling that made his chest feel slightly tight—whatever it was, he did not care to find the name for it.

Focus.

“Miss James?”

Teagan moved her hands and looked up at Crane to reveal an expression etched with raw, pained grief. He retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and set about gently dabbing away her tears, from
the wet corners of her eyes to the trails of ruined mascara sliding down her cheeks, until her face was dry and clean behind her glasses.

“There, isn’t that better? Now take a deep breath and tell me what happened.” He took her hand in his own and gave it what he hoped was a slight, reassuring squeeze, like he’d seen so many of his colleagues do to their patients. “Take your time.”

Crane listened intently as Teagan told him about her nightmare—how the river hard turned from a warm happy memory to a cold, frightening place, her guilt over her brother's death and her attempt to save what was only a specter, the slow agony of her life ebbing away as she drowned in the endless water—and maintained both his calm, concerned facade and the grip on her hand even as he hungrily devoured every detail.

Excellent. It had gone even better than he had expected.

When she was done Teagan surprised him by suddenly leaning forward and burying her face in his chest. Even as he felt a hot rush of anger at her brazenness and fought his instinctive urge to recoil from her touch, Crane recognized the embrace as progress; she was letting her guard down, allowing him get closer to both her and his eventual victory.

He hesitated before gingerly wrapping his arms around her shoulders, feeling her sigh against him as her shoulders began to tremble from a fresh wave of sobs. He looked down to see her clinging to his jacket, her eyes closed and her face pressed against his chest as if even his heartbeat was providing her comfort, and felt a surge of pride.

Close. So close.

Crane planted a light kiss on her head, breathing in the scent of her hair, and smiled into the darkness.
Due to an error on my part, I neglected to add a few chapters in correct order. This has now been corrected and I'm very sorry for any confusion that I may have caused!

"Do you trust me?"

Teagan felt Crane's breath against the nape of her neck as his silky voice murmured into her ear, sending goosebumps pricking across her flesh. Her previous trepidation over their first two nights together had been replaced by a restless, compelling sense of curiosity that dominated her concentration during classes at Gotham University and swam through her thoughts at night as she lay awake and pensive in her bed. She yearned to explore the side of herself that she had not known existed prior to her enlightenment, even if she found the prospect of this strange self-discovery to be as frightening as it was exciting, and tonight she was ready to begin.

As she observed the patient lying strapped to the cell bed before her, assessing his appearance with the analytical decorum of a psychiatric textbook—oily hair knotted into clumped tangles from weeks worth of neglected hygiene, eyes glazed over in a vacant stare boring into the ceiling, no visible recognition to indicate awareness of their nearby presence, near-catatonic state save for intermittent blinking—Teagan could not help but wonder if she had looked nearly half as wretched when it had been her beneath the restraints.

"I trust you, Dr. Crane," she whispered, and her gaze never wavered from the patient even as she felt the cool glass of a syringe pressed against her open palm.

"Then do it."

With a seamless, practiced finesse that surprised even herself, Teagan carefully inserted the syringe needle into the patient's veins, pressed down on the plunger, and proceeded to inject him with a large dosage of Crane's toxin. Only when his blank expression contorted into a terrified grimace and the first panicked cry of horror burst from patient's lips did Teagan's hands begin to tremble—not out of regret or alarm, but with awe.

She turned to face Crane, wide-eyed and breathless.

"This is incredible, Dr. Crane," Teagan said with hushed reverence, casting another glance at the formerly-motionless man now violently struggling against his blinds as he continued to let out raw, guttural screams.

"So do you consider this—" Crane gestured towards the writhing inmate. "—to be an acceptable usage of psycho-pharmacology?"

"Yes, sir." As her doe eyes twinkled behind the thick frames of her glasses and a pink flush of excitement blossomed on her cheeks, it occurred to Crane that for the first time he found her to be truly beautiful.

"I see," Crane replied, his tone betraying nothing of his inner thoughts. "I'm sure you realize that this
particular method of treatment would likely be regarded as...perhaps *unconventional* throughout the psychiatric community if I ever chose to publish my research, and yet you still approve of it. Why?"

"Well..."

Teagan hesitated.

"Go on. Please."

She took a deep breath. "Moments ago this man was bordering on the edge of catatonia. His file indicates that he's spent years in the asylum with little-to-no sign of improvement despite receiving around-the-clock care along with a daily cocktail medication and the occasional intravenous nourishment, but within seconds of the serum being introduced to his system you gave him something that no one else in Arkham has been able to provide despite therapy session after therapy session and pill after pill. You liberated him from his own mind, Dr. Crane. You *freed* him."

For a moment the cell block was silent save for the patient's tortured screams, and when Crane spoke again his voice took on a low, thick tone that Teagan had never heard him use before.

"Miss James, do you truly consider they symptoms our patient is currently exhibiting to me "freedom"?"

She paused.

"I...yes, Dr. Crane. I do. Before he could feel no emotion, and now you've made him experience the most primal, powerful emotion of all. And if you've taught me anything, Dr. Crane, it's that even the most prolonged of suffering the body endures is temporary. But the mind...the power of the mind lasts *forever.*"

"Dr. Crane, he was just—just *wasting* away in this asylum. He was a victim of his own mind, rotting in his cell day after day with no real chance of ever improving, no matter how many times nurses spooned food into his mouth or wiped the drool from his chin or shoved pill after pill down his throat. He may as well have been dead, and *everyone* knew it even if they didn't have the nerve to say it out loud. But now—*now*—"

Before Teagan even realized what was happening Crane had her pinned against the grimy cell wall, his lips crushing hers with an intensity that sent her head spinning and her heart racing even more than during the tender, careful kisses they'd shared before.

Crane felt her respond beneath him as she leaned in to return his kiss with a soft, hungry fervor of her own, and when he finally pulled away Crane was amused to hear her sigh in ecstasy.

Flagrant displays of lust were normally of no interest to Crane—he found it primitive at best, and vulgar at its worst—and he generally abhorred physical contact outside of his own initiative. But even he could appreciate the machinations of sex and its many uses; indeed, under the right circumstances Crane had found that he could actually *enjoy* the act, even if the number of disappointing encounters in his past far outnumbered the more fulfilling occasions.

Tonight, Crane suspected, would fall into the latter category, and before Teagan had even replied to his next question Crane already knew her answer.

"Will you come home with me?"

There was much Crane loathed about Teagan, from the many irksome mannerisms she possessed to the unwanted, hidden emotions she inspired within him that threatened his prized self-control in ways
he had never before thought possible. Most maddeningly of all, Crane hated the way her awkward, meek presence reminded him of his own private self-doubts and brought the bitter taste of resentment to his tongue.

But as disquieting as it was to admit to himself, Crane had taken a great deal of pleasure in her transformation. She had allowed Crane to to break apart her psyche piece by piece and stitch it back together into something new and frightening, something that was everything he had ever wanted and everything he thought he could never have. Although Teagan's journey began out of academic curiosity, she had ultimately become an active and willful participant in her own unraveling—and she had done it all for him.

And now she stood before him, dark hair tousled and teeth digging into the pink flesh of her bottom lip, and whispered her answer to the invitation Crane had never before extended to another person.

"Yes," Teagan replied, and as the patient beside them lapsed into merciful unconsciousness she surrendered herself to Crane once again.

9.
10.
11.

Glowing red numbers counted to twelve before the elevator doors opened to reveal a long, brightly-lit hallway, the walls a shade of creamy yellow and its carpet plush beneath her feet. As she followed Crane out of the elevator and down the hall Teagan felt overwhelmingly self-conscious; she imagined tenants lurking behind every door with their eyes glued to the peephole and their brow furrowed with disapproval, unseen scandalized neighbors whispering among themselves, and the thought made her face burn red with embarrassment.

Inexperience had led Teagan to find the prospect of spending the night with Crane to be as daunting as it was exciting. A thousand scenarios raced through her mind, ranging from arousing to mortifying, and when Crane finally came to a halt before a door numbered "941" to retrieve a set of keys from his pocket Teagan felt almost dizzy with anticipation. A turn of the key, a click of the lock, and before she had a chance to peer through the open doorway Crane had pulled her into the shadows of his apartment and shut the door behind her. A sliver of moonlight peered through curtains to illuminate the apartment just enough for her to recognize a few distinct shapes—a bookshelf packed with rows of leather-bound volumes, a dining table with its surface buried beneath thick stacks of papers, a small kitchen devoid of any appliances save for a coffee maker and the boxy outline of a microwave—before Crane's lithe fingers encircled her wrist to guide her through the darkness.

"Um, Dr. Crane, is it okay if we turn on a—oh!"

The warm glow of a lamp's fluorescent light-bulb lit up the room before Teagan could finish her sentence, and as she surveyed her surroundings—a dark gray quilt with matching pillows, a closet door left ajar to reveal a modest collection of suits, a pair of thick curtains drawn tightly shut to conceal Gotham City's nighttime menageries of neon signs—Teagan realized she was standing in Crane's bedroom.

"May I?" Crane's voice rang from behind her, followed by the sensation of her coat sliding from her shoulders.
Crane had been with women in the past, both out of a need to smother a peculiar urge that arose every once in a while and to maintain a facade of normalcy by engaging in distant, stilted relationships for the sake of appearances. He had not disliked any of his partners, but he did not care for them either; they were a means to an end, nothing more and nothing less, and when they were gone he did not miss them. But things with Teagan were different—he wanted her, even if the attraction sickened him. He wanted her in the same way he coveted power and fear: as instruments to play until he had mastered them to perfection.

He removed his suit jacket before sitting on the edge of his bed, loosening his tie with one hand and beckoning her forward with the other. Teagan took his hand and he pulled her toward him, and as Crane began to unzip the back of her dress she had to grip his shoulders to keep herself from swaying.

"Dr. Crane..."

"Hmm?"

"I haven't really done...well, you know, this...very many times." She cast her eyes to the floor, embarrassed by her admission.

"That's alright," Crane replied, slipping her dress from her shoulders and down her hips to expose bare skin and the black lace of her undergarments, "I have."

She was soft beneath his lips and his touch, smooth and pale like porcelain, and as his hands began to explore flesh and nylon and silk Crane could feel her grasp loosen from his shoulders and drift upwards to run her fingers through his hair. He looked up from his seated position to see her head gently tilted back so that her long hair brushed against her spine, her lips parted in silent bliss and her eyes closed behind the black frames of her glasses. He thought of their first clumsy meeting in Joan Leland's office; she had appeared to be a hopelessly bashful waif of a girl, unassuming and nervous and frankly pathetic, and Crane had taken an instant dislike to her. But she was different now, even if Crane continued to find her exasperating, and the comparison of the timid girl who quietly filed his paperwork on a daily basis to the girl who currently stood half-naked before him amused Crane so much that he was unable to keep himself from smirking with triumphant glee.

You've come a long way, baby.

He pulled her onto the bed and positioned himself on top of her, planting a kiss on her lips before turning his attention to the rest of her body.

"I think I love you, Dr. Crane," Teagan whispered breathlessly, her eyes sparkling with a combination of devotion and awe.

Crane smiled, wetting his lips to savor the taste of her lipstick and skin.

"I know," he replied, and leaned forward to turn off the lamp.
Crane watched as Teagan's chest rose and fell in gentle rhythm with every breath, her eyes closed in peaceful slumber and her dark hair spilling across his white sheets like ink. They had spent the night lying side-by-side in his bed, her soft skin pressed against his, until Crane was certain she had fallen asleep and carefully detached himself from their embrace before retreating to the opposite side of the bed. As his eyes adjusting to the darkness of his bedroom, Crane observed her sleeping form and noted with a vain smirk the faint smile of content on her pale-pink lips.

He had allowed himself to enjoy their encounter, his composure lapsing into gratification as she lay beneath him and sighed into his ear. But even as he reveled in the satisfaction of triumph, a sense of self-disgust accompanied the pleasurable feelings. By participating in intimacy—albeit carefully-orchestrated, purposeful intimacy—he had entertained the side of himself that experienced lust and other primitive cravings. He was annoyed with Teagan for inspiring such unwanted emotions within him just as much as he was annoyed with himself for feeling them, and as he watched her sleep, oblivious and serene, he felt a surge of resentment in the pit of his stomach.

But Crane could not deny that their night together had been an exciting one, and heanticipated that they would share another very soon: this time a vital night of reintroduction and transparency. Whether there would be any more afterward would be her choice entirely, but already Crane knew that anywhere he went she would follow—even if it frightened her.

He need only ask.

With silent, rehearsed motions Crane reached beneath his pillow and fumbled in the darkness until he felt his fingers graze across the rough texture of burlap.

"Dr. Crane? Dr. Crane, are you there?"

Teagan's only response was the sound of her own voice echoing through Arkham's basement halls. The faint circular glow of her flashlight began to flicker, and she smacked it against her palm in a vain attempt to reinvigorate its brightness, silently praying that the batteries would last just long enough for her to find Crane—*if* he was even there. The thought of indefinitely wandering aimlessly through the pitch-black cell blocks alone and without any source of light sent a chill down her spine, and with a shaky voice she called out for him again.

"Dr. Crane, *please,*" Teagan pleaded, her tone now laced with panic, "my flashlight is about to die. I...I don't want to get lost down here."

She reached into her pocket and retrieved a slip of paper, unfolding it with clumsy fingers beneath the flashlight's beam to reread Crane's sharp handwriting for what felt like the hundredth time.

_Tonight. The usual time and place. I'll be waiting._

Teagan had arrived at the asylum earlier in the day to find Crane's office empty, with the lights turned off and stack of files resting atop his otherwise meticulously-organized desk. Upon further inspection she discovered a carefully-concealed note, its white corners jutting out between light brown folders and the message written vaguely enough to be meaningless if read by anyone besides her. She spent the next several hours hiding in a corner of the office, poring over his note as sunlight faded into darkness and the familiar sounds signaling the end of a work day began to fill the outside hallway. She counted every open and shut of a door, every turn of a key, every chorus of footsteps
walking rhythmically past the office before dissipating into silence.

If she'd learned anything from Crane, it was that patience was crucial. Absolutely, irreparably, dangerously crucial.

After what felt like an eternity of still quietness, Teagan was finally certain that she was alone; with cautious, painstakingly-slow movements, she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Breath caught in her throat and her heart pounding in her ears, she began her journey towards the basement on stocking-clad feet—she didn't dare risk the sound of her heels against the tile floor alerting anyone to her presence—armed only with her pumps in her left hand and the flashlight she'd found in Crane's desk drawer gripped tightly in her right.

And now she stood in the abandoned cell block, the flashlight bulb threatening to fade out entirely at any second, and wondered if perhaps she had made a grave mistake. Her cellphone (an older model she'd carried around for years, sporadic and unreliable at best) was unable to get a proper signal thanks to the basement's enclosure, and multiple attempts produced little beyond intermittent static. Even worse, the battery was nearly drained—she always forgot to charge it, and this time she cursed herself for it.

Rapidly approaching the point of desperation, Teagan scrolled through her contacts and dialed Crane's office phone anyway; despite already knowing that the attempt would more than likely prove to be useless, she nonetheless felt defeated when several distant-sounding rings were followed by Crane's garbled answering machine message.

"Dr. Crane—pfffffff—isn't here right—pffff-if you'd—make an app—"

A pair of hands gripped Teagan by the shoulders, knocking her off balance and sending the cellphone and flashlight plummeting to the ground. She heard both shatter in the darkness as her feet slipped on the damp stone floor beneath her, and before she had a chance to regain her footing Teagan felt her back connect with the basement wall. She heard a sharp clicking sound followed by a blinding fluorescent brightness shining into her eyes, and she realized dimly that her assailant had a flashlight of their own.

"Shh," a raspy voice whispered into her ear, and Teagan immediately sighed with relief.

"Oh, it's you," she said, bringing a hand to her chest and letting out a quiet, nervous laugh. "Hah. You really scared me, Dr. Crane."

"No, not Crane. Not tonight. Not now."

The flashlight beam darted away from Teagan's eyes and towards the man standing before, illuminating his ragged face.

"Scarecrow."

Teagan screamed. A tumultuous sequence emotions washed over her—horror shock, confusion, and the awful realization that her greatest love and her greatest fear were one in the same. Her heart pounded in her chest and every instinct screamed at her to *run run run*, yet she remained frozen in place even as Scarecrow leaned forward to press his stitched mouth against hers.

She felt warm breath and burlap graze across her face, thick strands of thread digging into her lips as Scarecrow kissed her; gone was the cool reservation and restraint Crane exercised, replaced by unabashed intensity and a hungry fervor. He wanted to consume her—her body, her mind, her very soul—and even as she trembled with uncertainty he knew—they both knew—she would offer
herself to him with little hesitation.

He need only ask.

When he pulled away Teagan saw his eyes twinkle beneath the burlap, as icy and blue as ever despite the dimness of the basement. She looked into the face that she'd hoped to never see again—the loathsome visage that burned through her mind and tore at her psyche until she became entangled in the hellish, hideous nightmare it had created for her—and reached forward to lovingly caress it.
An End is A Beginning

_She doesn't know. She doesn't know. She doesn't know._

Those three words had echoed through Teagan's mind on a constant, unmerciful loop for hours that felt more like an eternity, and yet she was not entirely convinced that she believed them to actually be true. She cast another glance at the neatly-folded slip of paper she'd been handed by another intern upon her arrival at the asylum; although its contents were seared into her memory, word by nerve-wracking word, Teagan clung to the empty hope that she had somehow managed to misread it.

_Teagan,_

_Please meet me in my office at noon._

—Joan

It was exactly the same as before: simple, matter-of-fact, and highly alarming.

A number of startling questions occurred to Teagan as she stood before Leland's office door and tried to muster up the courage to knock. Had she done something wrong? She could not recall breaking any sort of office conduct, and had put a great deal of effort into being as unobtrusive and agreeable as possible. Had she not measured up to Leland's expectations? True, the course of her internship had been largely confined to Crane's office—by this point she'd organized a staggering amount of paperwork five times over—and involved little to no interaction with other members of the asylum's staff beyond polite nods of acknowledgment when crossing paths in the hallway. But given Crane's absolute dedication to avoiding even the most innocuous of scrutiny, any voiced displeasure with his teaching methods would have been noted and their routine immediately altered accordingly.

But if Leland didn't intend to reprimand or otherwise correct her, then what _did_ she want to discuss? They had already shared multiple conversations pertaining to her internship, with Teagan supplying all the right answers and lines as instructed by Crane.

"I've learned so much from Dr. Crane," she'd told Leland, no longer casting her eyes to the floor as she spoke. "Far more than I ever expected to."

Leland had smiled warmly. "We're so fortunate to have Jonathan on our team here at Arkham. He's far too modest to ever sing his own praise, but he's easily one of the most gifted psychopharmacologists in his field. The miracles I've seen him work..."

"I can only imagine," Teagan had replied, and gave Leland a smile of her own.

But any amount of lecturing and idle chatter was preferable to the most disturbing possibility: that Leland had become suspicious of her and Crane. Teagan was certain that Leland was completely unaware of their excursions into the asylum basement (as evidenced by the fact that neither she nor Crane were presently wearing handcuffs), but even so much as a hint of distrust was dangerous. Their situation was a precarious one, dependent on absolute secrecy and caution, and it would take only one slip-up—one misplaced syringe, one missing inmate, one eavesdropping coworker—to result in their discovery and downfall.

And they'd been so very, _very_ careful.

_She doesn't know. She doesn't know. She doesn't know._
Teagan forced herself to swallow the nausea that rippled through her stomach in lurching waves and threatened to spill from between her tightly-pursed lips, contorted her expression into a friendly smile of tranquility, and quickly rapped her knuckles against the door before she could change her mind.

"Come in," Leland's voice rang out in her usual pleasant tone, and upon entering the office Teagan was greeted by her signature grin.

"You wanted to see me, Dr. Leland?"

Leland gestured towards a chair across from her desk. "Please, sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

Teagan obliged. As she sat, legs crossed and hands clasped tightly in her lap, she thought back to her first day at Arkham Asylum; she'd been so overwhelmingly nervous, and Leland had been both welcoming and understanding. At the time Teagan found her to be reassuring, a God-sent source of comfort in the asylum's cold, intimidating environment, and was immeasurably grateful for her kindness and warm demeanor.

Now Leland just made her feel sick.

"Have you enjoyed your internship here, Teagan?" Leland asked, taking a sip from a coffee mug emblazoned with a large pink heart and the phrase WORLD'S BEST MOM printed in a decorative font. For reasons she was not entirely certain of, Teagan felt the sudden shameful urge to throw the cup onto the ground and crush it beneath her heel until it was nothing more than painted ceramic dust.

"Very much," she replied with forced cheer, straightening her glasses. "It's been a fantastic experience."

"Still learning a lot from Dr. Crane?"

"Absolutely."

"That's wonderful." Leland's sugary-sweet grin widened. "I'm sure studying alongside him has proven to be an invaluable asset to your curriculum at Gotham University."

"Oh yes, beyond measure," Teagan lied smoothly. In truth she had found herself so enamored with Crane and his toxin-induced worlds that her classes were becoming an exceedingly low priority, her attendance now sporadic at best. The years worth of work and sacrifice she had spent at college now seemed meaningless in comparison to her present occupation, and the lessons Crane taught her were more profound and awe-inspiring than anything she had ever learned within the walls of a classroom.

"That's wonderful to hear. You have a bright future ahead of you, Teagan. I've enjoyed your time with us at Arkham, and I have no doubt that you'll be successful at whatever you choose to do next."

She raised an eyebrow. "I don't understand what you mean, Dr. Leland."

"Well, with your internship ending tomorrow I assumed—"

Leland's voice suddenly sounded far away, drowned out by Teagan's panicked thoughts as she tried to process what she had just heard.

Now?! Already?!

Every glorious moment she'd spent with Crane had blurred together into a single daydream-like haze
until she had lost track of time entirely. She cared nothing for seconds or minutes or hours when she was with him, except to note that time never lasted long enough when they were together but far too long when they were apart. She thought even less about her internship and its longevity—her reason for entering the program had long been abandoned, the concept of class credits and course hours trivial in comparison to their actual work.

And now that was all going to end, and Crane would be lost to her forever.

The room began to spin and Teagan gripped the arms of the chair to keep from swaying.

"Teagan?" Leland's concerned voice called out to her. "Teagan, are you okay?"

"I'm sorry, I don't feel very well," she replied weakly, concentrating all her effort on remaining calm and expressionless. "Would you excuse me, please?"

Before Leland could reply Teagan had bolted from the room, and in the safety of the vacant hallway she allowed herself to weep.

There would be no more hours spent at Crane's side, either within his office walls or walking hand-in-hand down the smooth stone stairs. No more late-night research, no more experiments, no more secret sessions where his lips met hers as a toxin-poisoned inmate screamed a chorus of agony and terror.

No more. Nothing. The End.

Well, Teagan thought to herself wryly as she fumbled at the doorknob to Crane's office with shaking hands and vision obscured by tears, at least I meant something for a little while.

Crane sat on the edge of his bed, a thick folder near-bursting with dog-eared pages cradled in his hands. He flipped through each one, slowly digesting every crisp printed word and every handwritten scrawl, until he had reached the end: a single page, blank except for the word **AFTER** written at the top. Crane closed the file carefully and ran his thumb along the label, across the name spelled out in a thick black font against the folder's light cream color.

**JAMES, TEAGAN**

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue and let out a quiet, heavy sigh.

Crane owed his ability to create a sophisticated toxin under the noses of his colleagues while remaining undetected for years to one singular personality trait: his honed skill of observation. He absorbed every detail of his surroundings, from the glaringly obvious to the minute, and filed them all away in his memory to later be studied whenever they became of use to him. There were rare lapses—allowing himself to tune out Leland's voice during conversations had led to him being caught unaware and vulnerable at the beginning of Teagan's internship—but Crane was nothing if not adaptable, and he had managed to remain one step ahead of the asylum staff for almost the entire length of his employment.

As such, he'd been well aware of the internship program's impending conclusion. Rather than alert Teagan to it, he instead chose to remain silent—a decision that worked out nicely for him. She had run into his arms, shocked and devastated and confused, and Crane was able to play the hero once again by proposing a solution that made her so euphoric with happiness she'd nearly swooned on the spot. As she buried her face in his chest, beaming and flushed pink, Crane was torn between the desire to smile and the urge to be sick.
He did neither.

Teagan had become useful to him, a test subject as enthralling as she was maddening, and reacted to both him and his toxin in ways he had never before conceived or thought possible. She now welcomed the needle with a faint smile rather than a grimace, offering Crane her mind to transform however he pleased. He need only ask.

She had even accepted Scarecrow. He thought back to her fingers caressing his burlap face—gentle, wary, cautious but affectionate—and how the moment she'd pressed her lips to his stitched mouth Crane had felt truly loved for the first time in his life. He realized then that she was devoted to everything about him, both human and monstrous, and would never turn away from either face that he wore. He need only ask.

The revelation had frightened Crane, and when she finally pulled away he'd dug his teeth into his bottom lip until the copper taste of blood danced on his tongue.

She had become something more than a test subject, something warm and soft that burrowed under his skin and made him feel strange, inconvenient emotions that he could not and would not name. He resented her for it, and yet he did not wish for things to change.

She was naïve—infuriatingly so—and the way she clung to him was far more irksome than it was endearing. But even if he loathed to admit it, Crane had grown fond of her, and for the first time in his life he had someone who was his; completely, irreversibly, devotedly his, now and forever.

*You've come a long way, baby.*

A sudden knock pulled Crane from his thoughts. He rose from the bed, cast a final glance at the file in his hands, and locked it away in a desk drawer before slipping the key into his pocket and walking across his apartment to answer the door.

He opened the door to find Teagan standing before him, a large canvas bag slung over her shoulder and a battered suitcase at her side.

"Hello, Miss James," Crane greeted her briskly. "Did you bring all of your things with you?"

She blushed. "I'm sorry, I hope it's not too much—"

"Not at all. Please, come in. That bag looks awful heavy, and I'm sure you'd like to unpack as soon as possible."

Teagan smiled timidly and stepped through the doorway, into Crane's apartment and into her new life.

Yes, she'd crawled under Crane's skin, and perhaps he was beginning to like it.
They were lying in bed—Crane wide awake and contemplatively staring upwards at the ceiling while Teagan rested her head against his shoulder, her long hair pooling across his chest and dark eyelashes fluttering on the cusp of slumber—when he spoke the irreversible words that would forever change the course of their relationship.

"I have something to show you, Miss James."

She lifted her head to look at him with bleary eyes. A sliver of neon light radiating from the signs perched throughout Gotham to advertise the city's nightlife (ICEBERG LOUNGE GRAND OPENING! BE AMONG GODS AT CLUB OLYMPUS! NOW PLAYING AT THE MONARCH THEATER!) peered through the curtains and illuminated her face with a cherry-red glow in the otherwise dark bedroom, and it occurred to Crane that she looked reminiscent of a rose petal—delicately beautiful, easily crushed, and ready to be plucked at his whim. The once-soothing sound of rain pelting the outside window suddenly seemed jarringly-loud and unpleasant to Crane, and he hated himself for feeling nervous.

"Oh?" Teagan stifled a yawn before fixing Crane with a tired-but-inquisitive smile. "What is it?"

Without saying a word Crane switched on his bedside lamp, opened his nightstand drawer to retrieve a slim folder, and tossed it into her sheet-covered lap.

She blinked, any trace of sleepiness now wiped from her face and replaced with curiosity. "What is this, Dr. Crane?"

"Read it," he said softly. "Read it and tell me what you think."

Puzzled but obedient, Teagan complied; she reached for her glasses, carefully opened the file with a flicker of uncertainty, and began to read. Crane watched as her smile faded with every turn of the page until her lips were parted in shock and she looked up at him with watery eyes full of hurt and confusion.

"I...I don't understand. So this—everything—was all just some experiment?"

"Well, not entirely," Crane replied evenly. "You're here now, aren't you?"

"But it could just as easily have been someone else, right?" Her voice was pained, shaking as if on the verge of collapse. "If you'd had another intern instead of me, then they would be the one who you..."

Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes, a single tear sliding down her cheek.

"I don't mean anything to you," Teagan whispered. "I'm just a means to an end, something for you to study and dispose of once you've gotten the results you wanted." She sighed, sad and weary. "I suppose I'm to blame as well. Stupid me, I should have known it was all too good to be true."

Crane thought back to her first week at Arkham Asylum, when she had been too timid to speak and couldn't so much as look at him without turning crimson with shyness—she'd even apologized for being assigned to him, as if the inconvenience was her fault alone. And now here she sat, blaming herself for Crane's behavior once again. Teagan was still the same girl who reminded Crane of the insecure, troubled side of himself that he'd spent years trying to smother and forget, only to feel a spark of self-reflection every time she inspired unwanted emotions within him.
Pathetic and weak, Crane thought angrily, unsure if he was referring to her or himself.

He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth and turned his lips upward into an expression more smirk than smile. "You do yourself a disservice, Miss James. I wouldn't have been able to continue my work if not for you."

"That's nice of you to say, Dr. Crane," she replied in a defeated, resigned voice, "but you don't need to lie. Like I told you before, there's nothing remarkable about me."

"Oh but you are, and for several reasons. I needed someone who I could trust, someone I could confide in and share my research with, someone who would view my work for what it truly is—enlightenment, not torture. I needed someone who was so dedicated, so absolutely devoted to what we were doing, that they would allow themselves to be repeatedly exposed to my toxin. I needed someone extraordinary, Miss James, and I thought that person didn't exist and my research would stagnate forever. But then you came along, and you were perfect—exactly what I wanted and exactly what I needed."

Teagan cast her eyes to the floor, visibly wounded by the night's revealed secrets. "Just like a lab rat," she muttered darkly.

"No, Miss James. A lab rat serves only one purpose. You aided my work instead of merely sustaining it. You see people for what they truly are—frightened and mindless and dull, confined to a numb existence they've tricked themselves into believing is fulfilling just to avoid their fears. I told you before: you aren't like them because you're just like me."

Crane cupped her chin with spindly fingers and leaned towards her until he could see his reflection in her wide, dewy eyes.

"Help me, Miss James," Crane whispered. "Help me enlighten Gotham. Help me rid it of its parasites and destroy their numb culture of meaningless distraction. Stand by my side, and watch as the city gorges itself on pure fear until it bursts and falls to its knees before our feet."

She gazed into the icy blue of his eyes. "Do you really mean that, Dr. Crane?"

"Every word," he replied solemnly, and turned off the lamp before climbing into bed beside her. Beneath the blankets he felt her move closer to him, her soft flesh pressing against his and her arms wrapped around him until their limbs were entwined in an embrace. The slice of neon had returned to cast bright red across their bodies, their skin the color of blood as kissed and caressed and sighed.

"Is this another test?" Teagan breathed into his ear.

"No. No more tests," Crane replied, and buried his lips in her hair to hide his smile.

Oh darling, he thought with amusement, if only you'd seen the entire file.
The Asylum Ball

Every year Arkham Asylum played host to Gotham's wealthy and elite during the asylum's annual Halloween charity ball, where socialites with far too much money and far too little sense of decency gathered on the expansive lobby floor to raise funds for Arkham's yearly expenses. Preparation for the ball was always a costly affair—were one cynical (or perceptive) enough, they would perhaps question if the funds raised during the event justified the exorbitant amount of pageantry spent organizing it. Heavy chandeliers with iron curves and lit candles hung elegantly from the ceiling alongside a canopy of dark gray curtains, blood-red roses adorned with strands of black pearls served as dining centerpieces, and delicately-carved Jack-o-lanterns grinned from the catering table where interns wearing masquerade masks served gourmet appetizers and wine more expensive than their monthly rent.

It made for an impressive scene, as spectacular as it was morally appalling.

The lore surrounding the asylum and its ill-fated founder made Arkham all the more macabre and grimly-alluring to its guests, who saw it as a haunting relic of Old Gotham and were blind—either by wealth-sheltered ignorance or a particular breed of apathy rampant among the privileged—to the true suffering of its inhabitants. To them a ball invitation may as well have been a ticket to a sideshow attraction in The Narrows, and their reasons for attending were more indulgent than altruistic; they enjoyed the thrill of being able to walk through the gates Amadeus Arkham had designed prior to becoming imprisoned inside his own asylum, of sipping champagne while knowing that infamous criminals ripped straight from *The Gotham Times* headlines resided in the same vicinity, of the embellished legends that they exchanged over a dinner that cost more than a week's worth of inmate meals. Most of all, they enjoyed the freedom of being able to bid Arkham goodbye after gorging on its morbidity and returning to a life of affluence while the asylum's patients drifted into sedated slumber inside their chilly cells and dreamed of a gulp of fresh air.

Privately Crane was repulsed by the blatant display of opulence and dreaded his mandatory attendance every year, staying no longer than it took to greet the right people and shake the right hands before hastily making his exit and retreating to the safety of his office until the final chauffeur-driven luxury car had departed through Arkham's gates. The ball was yet another pestilent aspect of working at the asylum, and an especially draining one at that: the only thing Crane hated more than pretending to be nice to his coworkers was pretending to be nice to the rich. Sure, they consistently donated a generous amount, but the money was anything but free; in return they expected the staff to cater to their whims, from forcibly laughing at their inappropriate jokes (*What kind of bird lives in a nuthouse? A loon!* ) to entertaining them with tales of day-to-day life in Arkham (*"So, what's the craziest thing you've ever seen?"*).

All in all, Halloween was a miserable night in Arkham Asylum.

But tonight would be different, because tonight Crane wasn't just merely attending the ball—for the first time, he would be actively partaking in its festivities. A great deal of effort had been put into his preparation for the evening, and he intended to make this year's Halloween a memorable celebration for both attendants and staff alike.

He'd even invited a guest of his own.

"You got an invitation, ma'am?"

The security guard eyed Teagan from the confines of his booth with visible skepticism, the sleeve of
his starch-stiffed uniform emblazoned with Arkham Asylum's double-A insignia and the paper stick of a lollipop jutting out from between plump lips. Behind his burly frame a grainy black-and-white horror flick played on a small television; a woman with pin-up styled hair and dark lipstick flailed helplessly as what appeared to be a rather poorly made-up zombie advanced towards her at a glacial speed, her dramatic screams interrupted by intermittent bursts of static.

"Certainly," Teagan replied, gently setting the large Jack-O-Lantern in her arms onto the ground and reaching inside the pouch of her costume to retrieve a folded slip of ivory paper; as she handed it to the guard, Teagan noted with a twinge of embarrassment that there were still tiny remnants of pumpkin innards and candle wax wedged beneath her fingernails.

The guard unfolded the invitation, scanning it with suspicious eyes before conceding its authenticity and handing it back to her.

"You one of the interns?"

"Well, um, I...I'm a former intern, actually. I offered to volunteer and assist with—"

He held up a beefy hand and Teagan fell silent. "I don't need your life story, ma'am." He leaned back in his chair, looking her up and down with an expression that hovered somewhere between lechery and ridicule. "So what exactly are you supposed to even be? The Wicked Witch of the West's sexy sister?"

Admittedly, little imagination had been put into her costume. A pointed witch's hat sat perched atop her head and she wore a generic black dress with sleeves that hung in lace tatters around her wrists and a hem equally mangled above knees clad in fishnet stockings. A pair of black boots were laced up to her calves and a belt hung loosely around her waist to hold a small, inconspicuous pouch. Her dark hair hung loosely over her shoulders, her eyes were accentuated by kohl liner and thick coats of mascara behind her glasses, and her lips were slick with a deep shade of wine-red lipstick.

An uncreative outfit, to be sure, but it was hardly a priority. If all went according to plan, then no one was likely to remember what she—or anyone else—was wearing on this Halloween night, because their memories would be clouded by something far more relevant and horrifying.

"No," Teagan said flatly, "I'm just a witch."

The guard scoffed.

"Yeah, you and every other broad in here." He jerked his thumb towards the door. "Entrance is that way. Take your pumpkin and get inside before one of the creeps sees ya."

With that the guard turned away from Teagan and returned to his film. The click-clack sound of her boot heels on the sidewalk as she walked away from his booth signaled that he was now free to enjoy the movie in peace, and as the guard watched with great amusement while hapless victim after hapless victim fell prey to a shoddy zombie horde he never even noticed the haze of toxin seeping in from beneath the booth door.

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On the last of October
When dusk is fallen
Children join hands
And circle round me
Singing ghost songs
And love to the harvest moon;

I am a jack-o'lantern
With terrible teeth

And the children know

I am fooling.

--Carl Sandburg, Theme in Yellow
Crane surveyed the ballroom with a gaze both analytical and full of cool disdain, his blue eyes narrowed behind thick goggles perched atop the curved beak of a plague doctor's mask. A silver-buttoned cloak hung loosely from his thin shoulders, crafted from rich black fabric and with a billowing hem that ended at his elbows; beneath it he wore a trim suit along with leather gloves (if one looked closely enough, they could spot the fine cracks cascading across the palms—some created through general wear from his experiments, some caused by the teeth of his patients in the throes of toxin-induced hysteria) and by his side he carried a slender cane.

"Love the costume, Jonathan," Leland said warmly, her smile as glaringly bright as the starch-white of her traditional nurse uniform contrasted against the gala's gloomy décor. "I barely recognized you."

Hah, Crane thought to himself with a wry smirk, if only you could see my other mask.

"Good evening, Dr. Leland," he greeted her cordially, his voice slightly muffled by the mask's beak.

"Thank you for joining us tonight." Leland instinctively reached forward to lightly place a reassuring hand on his arm (a friendly gesture she regularly employed during interactions among her fellow staff members, and one that never failed to make Crane inwardly recoil) before returning her hand to adjust the stethoscope cord encircling her neck. "I know you don't care much for social events."

Her words carried an edge of misguided sympathy. It was evident from her tone that Leland was under the mistaken notion that Crane's lack of enthusiasm over the annual fundraiser stemmed from social discomfort and shyness rather than his true feelings of contempt for every single aspect of the Halloween Ball, particularly the ghastly idea of hosting a Halloween celebration in a setting that was home for dozens of mentally-ill patients for no other reason than to provide exploitative entertainment to Gotham City's repuslively-rich. He felt patronized, like a child receiving an encouraging pat on the head as a reward for completing a mindlessly simple task, and behind his mask he clenched his jaw in heated annoyance.

"Well," Crane replied with as much forced good-nature as he could muster, "attendance is mandatory."

Leland smiled again, this time more softly. "I know it is, Jonathan. But we appreciate having you here all the same."

A silent pause followed, Crane unsure of what to say next and resentful of being dragged into yet another insipid conversation that he had no desire to participate in. His eyes traveled across the gala surrounding him, across the tables lined with guests tucking into gourmet dishes more decadent than anything that had ever graced the mouths of the majority of Arkham's woeful inhabitants, the sleek
heirs and executives laughing at vulgar jokes about mental health that were far more cruel than funny, the socialites swaddled in jewel-encrusted costumes and primped hair sipping champagne with glossy lips. The sight of it all made him sick to his stomach and Crane felt the carefully-hidden side of himself scratch the surface of his calm exterior with renewed intensity, years worth of disgust and anger and hatred accumulating into a sudden surge of absolute loathing.

He could end them all now, right now, if he chose to. He alone held the power to destroy every facet of their identity, ripping apart their sanity until their conceited, haughty pride was mutated into degraded screams of animalistic terror spilling from their frothing lips and Crane had made a mockery of the false sense of security their coveted wealth had granted them. No amount of money could provide an escape from the purity of fear, and as he watched the nauseating display of opulence unfolding before him Crane felt an overwhelming temptation to abandon his painstakingly-constructed plans in favor of recklessly plunging the gala into immediate, satisfying chaos.

"I know we don't have the opportunity to talk often, Jonathan," Leland said in a voice a thousand miles away, "but I just want to know that you're a valuable asset to this institution, and—"

"Hello, Dr. Leland."

Crane and Leland turned to see Teagan standing beside them, so still and quiet that had she not spoken the pair might have endured several more moments of unawareness before being alerted to her presence, with a pointed witch's hat perched askew on her head and a large carved pumpkin cradled in her arms.

"Teagan!" Leland exclaimed happily, maneuvering her arms around the Jack-O-Lantern to embrace the younger woman in an affectionate (albeit unwanted) hug. "It's so lovely to see you again! How have you been?"

"Fine. I've been doing fine."

"That's wonderful. Have you been able to apply what you learned during your internship here to your studies? Still at the top of your classes, I imagine." Leland ended the last sentence with a friendly wink.

"Mmhmm," Teagan replied noncommittally; in truth, she had stopped attending class entirely after moving into Crane's apartment. "Thank you for inviting me tonight."

"Actually, that was Dr. Crane's idea," Leland said, turning to smile at Crane before returning her gaze to Teagan. "He was so impressed with your participation in the internship program that when we began gathering our current team of interns to help prepare for the fundraiser he suggested contacting you as well. I thought that was a splendid idea and had my secretary contact you right away."

"Thank you, Dr. Crane," Teagan murmured, casting her eyes towards the floor in feigned shyness.

"You're welcome, Miss James," Crane replied with brisk disinterest before nodding towards a table adorned with a wide display of Halloween decorations, including several Jack-O-Lanterns of various sizes. "Perhaps you should find somewhere to set down that...ornament." He gestured towards the pumpkin in her arms with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Yes, sir." Teagan gave Leland a polite smile of parting before turning on her boot-clad heel and beginning her journey towards the decorated table.

"What a nice girl," Leland said pleasantly as she watched Teagan navigate her way through the
crowd of costumed attendees. "She's going to do some great things with her life."

"I suppose," Crane said mildly, and smiled behind his mask.

Teagan gently placed her Jack-O-Lantern on a black velvet tablecloth beside the other pumpkins, its jagged grin leering at the party guests from among a display of carved smiles. A cursory glance around the ballroom revealed that its occupants were preoccupied with personal distractions—the asylum doctors entertaining the wealthy with Arkham lore, the bored interns either gazing blankly ahead with dull expressions or typing away on their sneakily-concealed phones, the wait staff immersed in their serving work in hopes of receiving generous tips from rich attendees—and therefore far too busy to take note of her actions. Satisfied that she would remain undetected, Teagan reached into the pouch of her dress to retrieve a lighter and a small gas mask.

A portion of Crane's research had been dedicated to replicating his toxin in multiple forms, with varying levels of success; the serum and gas compounds had produced excellent results, while other experiments like skin-absorbent toxin were failures in great need of refinement. His newest creation, however, had been thoroughly and successfully tested to perfection, and after endless months of preparation it was now finally complete and ready to be unleashed onto the deserving subjects waltzing across Arkham Asylum's ballroom floor.

Encasing the capsule in wax had been meticulous, careful work that required her delicate fingers and his steady hands, and together they crafted a nefarious Jack-O-Lantern. When the candle placed inside the carved pumpkin was lit and the wax began to melt, it would create just enough heat to trigger the highly-sensitive capsule and release its fearsome contents through the air and into the lungs of its oblivious audience. Before anyone realized what was happening, it would be far too late—Crane had filled the capsule with enough toxin to plunge the entire gala into nightmare after nightmare and cloud their minds with a poisonous haze until their most vivid memory of Halloween night was their unforgettable terror.

Except for him and Teagan, that is. Their memories of the night would be far more sweet.

As she fastened the straps of her gas mask, Teagan looked up to see Crane watching her from across the expansive room; even from the distance she could feel his eyes boring into her, and her heart leapt at the thought. When Crane gave her a final nod of approval she flicked the lighter on with trembling fingers and guided its flame towards the carved pumpkin.

"I love you, Dr. Crane," Teagan whispered behind her mask, and lit the candle.
Hell and Devotion

And those that slept, they dreamed of ill

And dreadful things:

Of skies grown red with rending flames

And shuddering hills that cracked their frames;

Of twilights foul with wings;

--The Vampire, Conrad Aiken

The river was even more loathsome than before, and home to a menagerie of new nightmares. The scales of an obscured reptilian creature glided beneath the surface of murky water more akin to a swamp than a once-peaceful river, bubbles the color of tar erupted from the water to burst mid-air into foul-smelling splatters of clotted blood, clumps of floating moss crawled with grotesque beetles that filled Teagan’s ears with the sound of a thousand horrible buzzing wings, and gnarled tree branches jutted from the water’s surface to end in sharp, jagged splinters.

But the most dreadful of the river’s horrors was the hand grasping at her feet, shielded dutifully from sight beneath the filthy clouded water. She felt its terrible flesh clawing at her own, bloated from wet decay and clinging slippery to bone, with a touch so searingly cold that Teagan cried out in both fright and pain as gaunt fingers wrapped around her ankle. When she attempted to kick free a second hand dug the shattered remnants of what were once fingernails into the flesh of her calf to carve a hideous trail of torn skin and blood until Teagan screamed once more; wild panic overcame her when she realized the hands were dragging her downwards into an unseen abyss, and even as she flailed and fought and wept their grip remained strong and merciless. In desperation she reached for a branch, and when her fingers grazed across its bark Teagan felt the cruel, fleeting illusion of escape right before she was pulled beneath the water’s surface.

As she began her descent into the hateful river, her heart pounding from fear and a lack of oxygen, Teagan gazed up into the darkening view of the sky that had long-ago brought her joy and let out a final, defeated scream of terror.


A distorted voice called out her name with a mouth full of static, its echoing tone both fearsome and afraid, followed by a dim symphony of warped sounds: guttural sobbing, prayers spilled in a tortured frenzy from many lips, lamenting pleas for mercy and an endless wail of no no no no no—

“Teagan! Teagan, can you hear me?!?”

A hand coated with indistinguishable grime pressed against her forehead, and Teagan hesitantly opened her eyes.

Staring down at her was Leland, her eyes wide and bloodshot. The front of her white nurse costume was speckled with blood, her hair was wildly disheveled, and the wet trails of tears on her flushed cheeks indicated that she had been crying.
“Are you okay, Teagan?” Leland’s usual calm, warm demeanor was gone, now replaced with an expression of shock and panicked concern. “Are you hurt?”

Teagan blinked, her mind foggy with confusion. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she vaguely noticed the strong scent of pumpkin in the air and a stringy, pulpy substance covering the front of her dress and tights and matted to her hair; it was only when she lifted her hands to study the muck coating her fingers that realization dawned on her.

*The Jack-O-Lantern.*

“What happened? Teagan whispered. Her throat felt raw and dry; she wondered with analytic curiosity how long she had been screaming. She rose from the floor to her feet before vaguely noticing a sharp pain and looking down to see a badly-skinned knee exposed by her ripped fishnets, angry-red and raw, and watched as blood trickled slowly down her ruined tights to land at her boot.

Leland swallowed. “I don’t know,” she replied, and with a shaking hand pointed towards the ballroom floor.

The fluorescent lights had been switched on, revealing evidence of the pandemonium that had taken place throughout the lobby floor—what was once an elegant, candle-lit ballroom had devolved into bright chaos and destruction at the hands of its poisoned inhabitants. Shattered plates of gourmet food and broken champagne bottles littered the floor; near one pile of glass sat an abandoned pair of Italian designer shoes worth more than a month’s pay, along with a gruesome trail of bloody footprints. Most of the tables had been overturned, their centerpieces smashed into a mess of crushed petals and pearls, and guests and staff alike cowered in fright beneath the few that remained standing. Even the canopy did not escape the mayhem unscathed—the curtains had been ripped from the ceiling, lying torn and soiled in a crumpled heap on the floor.

But more intriguing was the sight of socialites and old money wandering dazed and trembling throughout the lobby, their brains still addled by the toxin’s effects. Fresh bruises and blood adorned their bodies, with some even exhibiting self-inflicted scratch marks from clawing at their own faces in horror; one weeping man in a jester costume sported a black eye that set his face swollen and deep purple, his bloody knuckles revealing himself to be his own assailant. Damp hair clung to sweat-drenched faces, fine gowns and suits were reduced to stained ruin, and each and every single one of their faces shared the same range of emotions—fright, confusion, vulnerability, pain, awe—for they had all finally encountered the great equalizer, the one thing no amount of wealth could ever truly protect them from for as long as they lived and breathed; pure and sudden fear.

It was an incredible vision to behold. Teagan’s fingers brushed across the pouch of her dress to linger where the gas mask had been, and for the first time in her life she felt pride.

“We need to call the police,” Leland said quickly. “Now.”

Teagan nodded and extended a hand to Leland, helping the still-shaken psychiatrist rise to her feet. “Do you have your phone on you? I accidentally left mine in—“

“The Joker Gang!”
Teagan froze and feigned an expression of surprise. “Wh...what did you say, Dr. Leland?”

“The Joker Gang,” Leland repeated, talking more to herself than to Teagan. “I saw them on GNN the other night—they did this, I know it. The news mentioned rumors that they were starting to use gas bombs...they must have heard about the fundraiser, saw it in the paper…”

Her voice trailed off and she brought a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide in horrified realization. Her reaction had been predicted earlier by Crane; a recent rash of crime at the hands of a new faction calling themselves “The Joker Gang” provided a convenient suspect and Leland, intelligent but ever predictable, would arrive at the conclusion of outside involvement at the hands of criminals before ever suspecting the true culprit working alongside her.

“You should call the police now, Dr. Leland,” Teagan said gently, and Leland nodded in distracted agreement before turning away and reaching into her pocket for her cellphone. Teagan watched carefully as Leland walked away to join a small group of asylum staff assisting injured guests, her phone pressed to her ear with a trembling hand and her voice on the verge of collapsing as she informed the GCPD of the horrors that had taken place within Arkham; when Teagan was sure Leland was out of sight, she lowered herself to the floor and sank her hands into the mess of destroyed Jack-O-Lanterns.

It was unpleasant work; her fingers dug through through moist globs of stringy pulp, thin seeds with pointed shells that stuck beneath her nails, limp skins smashed to resemble strips of orange leather, until she felt something waxy and slightly warm beneath her touch.

There.

From the grotesque pile Teagan retrieved what remained of Crane’s capsule and quickly placed it into the pouch of her dress, and in the lingering havoc no one noticed her bring a pumpkin-covered hand to her mouth to hide an amused giggle at the thought of how easy it had all been.

Crane watched with satisfaction as ball guests let out screams of raw horror before crumpling to the floor, wildly throwing their arms over their heads to shield themselves from monsters visible only to them. Some began to babble, their frantic tongues reciting prayers for protection and pleas for mercy, while others simply ran until they tripped over the hems of their costumes to land in an undignified, helpless heap of tangled limbs and fabric. The colleagues with whom he had so often shared forced lounge room conversations with over lukewarm coffee now tore at their hair in mad terror, their eyes darting about in their skulls as they took in fearsome visions beyond their comprehension—no amount of training or lectures or years spent doling out prescriptions could prepare them for fear in its full splendor, and even their stifled imaginations were capable of summoning nightmares that threatened their prized, useless rationality. Everyone in the ballroom was now equal, for fear cared nothing for money or class, nor appearance and education; their terror had reduced them to the same primal level, and they were all nothing more than frightened, cornered animals chemically ravaged by their own brains.

Everyone except for her.

She looked up at him with doe eyes full of love and worship behind her gas mask, and as he took her hand in his and pulled her close Crane marveled at what she had become. She had poisoned an entire room of people purely out of devotion to him, and without ever once asking why—he had wished for it to happen, and so it had, and in carrying out the act she had sealed herself to Crane for the rest of her life.

There was no turning back now, and that was how they both wanted it.
Crane cupped her face in his hands, gently caressing her cheeks with his thumbs before sliding his fingers to the back of her head. She took a deep breath and nodded, and her eyes remained focused on his even as Crane unfastened her gas mask and the toxin began to work its way through her system.

*She was his experiment, his success, his prize.*

*She was his.*

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