



The Bet

Batman - All Media Types · Not Rated · 2589 words

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Fandom: Batman - All Media Types Rating: Not Rated Category: Gen

Warnings: Creator chose not to add warnings

Relationships: Jonathan Crane & Joker (DCU), Joker (DCU) & Rogues Gallery (Batman), Rogues Gallery & Rogues Gallery (Batman)

Characters: Jonathan Crane, Joker (DCU), Jervis Tetch, Edward Nygma, Pamela Isley, Victor Fries, Harleen Quinzel, Temple Fugate

Tags: Tags Are Hard, Arkham Asylum (DCU), The Rogues Gallery (Batman), The Rogues Gallery as Family (Batman), Mentioned Bruce Wayne, Manipulation, Manipulative Jonathan Crane, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Friendship, Mental Health Issues, Bets & Wagers, Joker (DCU) Has Issues, Joker (DCU) Being Joker (DCU), Jonathan Crane Being a Jerk, Jonathan Crane is Bad at Feelings, Southern Jonathan Crane, Soft Jonathan Crane, Therapy, Arkham asylum is actually not that bad, Arkham renames Batman Derrick to force inmates to confront the idea that he's a person, rather than some abstract nigh-godly being they rebel against, Clock King and Mad Hatter were very loyal brothers in one comic, so now they forever are in every single fic I write about them

Words: 2589 Chapters: 1 chapter Status: Complete Published: 2026-01-19

Joker comes to Jonathan with an unusual request. But is all really what it seems?

Plot twist, bitches 🤪

Jonathan Crane was in his cell, stealing a quiet moment to read. Jervis was planning some sort of surprise for him, which was sure to cause untold chaos eventually, but for now it meant that he had some time alone.

Or he did until he heard a quiet knock on his cell door. Honestly, this new 'daytime roaming hours' policy at Arkham was a truly terrible idea, for reasons that did not end at Jonathan's desire for privacy but did start with them.

Jonathan looked up, ready to snap at whoever had dared encroach on his personal space — he knew that it wasn't his cellmate, because whenever Jervis bothered knocking it was much louder and immediately followed by talking, while this intruder had thus far remained silent — but paused when he actually saw them.

Jonathan did not yell at the newcomer. Instead, he blinked, wondering why *The Joker* of all people was standing just outside his cell, his posture uncharacteristically... Well, *crumpled* was the only word Jonathan could find to ascribe to it. What was worse was that the clown had a very small, almost gentle-looking frown, completely unlike his usual too-sharp expressions.

"J," Jonathan found himself saying, tone a bit less annoyed than he wanted it to be. They had been recently forbidden from using their villainous codenames inside the asylum walls, and the single letter designation was the best anyone could come up with for Joker. "What do you want?"

"Heya, Spooky," Joker said softly. If Jonathan didn't know better, he'd say he sounded like he was about to cry. Or, even more unbelievably, had *already* been crying. "Ya... ya like fear, right?"

"At the risk of sounding too much like Edward," Jonathan replied, sneering, "I feel I must point out that anyone with so much as half a brain knows that. Please tell me you aren't taking up my limited freetime for something as inane as asking me if I like *fear*?"

"No, no." Joker shook his head slowly, not meeting Jonathan's eye. "Dat's not it..."

"Then what is 'it'?" Jonathan asked. Against his better judgement, he found himself growing concerned. Joker was, if he had to put it plainly, energy incarnate — he was always moving, laughing, talking. Even when he was staying still and/or silent, he gave the *impression* that he was doing anything but, or at the very least was a second away from exploding.

The clown in front of him currently gave off the impression of a rain-soaked paper bag: miserable, stationary, and a moment away from being torn apart. He was the complete opposite of energy, its lack and antithesis.

And he wasn't answering Jonathan's question.

"If you aren't going to talk, then leave," Jonathan demanded. When Joker just continued staring into the non-existent distance, without a single sign he'd heard him, Jonathan decided to take a risk and snapped, "Joker!"

Joker flinched, gaze finally darting to him before looking away again, the sound of his real name — as much as he had one — pulling him back from whatever mental road he'd found himself trapped on. He spoke, and Jonathan couldn't delude himself into thinking he didn't hear actual *nervousness* in his voice. "If I vent t'ya, let ya know my fears an' all dat, will ya promise not ta tell anyone else?"

Jonathan blinked. That was... not what he was expecting to hear. He wasn't entirely sure what he expected to hear, if anything, but it *definitely* wasn't that.

"Why in tarnation would you actually *offer* something like that?" Jonathan asked, bewildered and a little bit suspicious. For reasons he decided not to analyze, he felt the

need to warn the other with, "Do you know what I can do with that sort of information? What I *have* done with that sort of information, many *many* times in the past?"

"Yeah, but ya won't dis time, Spooky," Joker said with that unusual confidence of his, the one that didn't make him seem incredibly sure of himself so much as it made it seem like whatever he said was an undeniable fact. As if someone had just questioned the idea that water is wet or the sky is above the ground. For just a second, Jonathan could hear Joker's regular self again, if calmer than usual.

"And why is that?" Jonathan inquired slowly, warily, wondering what sort of protection Joker thought he had. This wasn't some roundabout way to reveal that he had blackmail on Jonathan, was it?

"'Cause if ya do, I won't come back an' tell ya more!" Joker explained, walking just a little further into Jonathan's cell. Some of his old energy seemed to be back, his arms spreading out and his eyes managing to mostly stay on Jonathan. But he still had that too-soft frown and too-quiet voice. "My mind's a real dark place, Spooks — jus' think of all dat might be in dere! People in white coats have been tryin' ta peek in fer years, an' now I'm offerin' ya front-row seats ta my deepest, darkest fears. All ya hafta do is keep it ta yerself."

"You'd run out of fears eventually," Jonathan reasoned. A part of him wanted to jump on such a rare opportunity, but he was a more pragmatic and cautious person than that. Most of the time. "What's stopping me from orchestrating your own personal Hell then?"

"Eh, dat's future me's problem," Joker dismissed. "I've got enough fears ta keep ya entertained fer years."

"Really?" Jonathan asked, somewhat amused and somewhat disbelieving that this was really happening. "You? You have so many fears, you think it's enough to buy not only my silence but my inaction? For years?"

"Yeah, me," Joker confirmed with a nod, looking and sounding entirely serious for once. "So what d'ya say, Spooks? Can I... Can I vent?"

Realizing that maybe this wasn't a joke (or was one of the most elaborate and pointless jokes that Joker had pulled in quite a long time), Jonathan sobered up and straightened his back. He studied Joker with a careful eye, looking over him with his professional mindset in place.

Ignoring the fact that this was *The Joker*, Jonathan drew a conclusion on the man's psyche the same way he would do so with anyone else. And what he saw was someone who was on the edge of a mental break. Someone upset, and desperate, and throwing themselves quite willingly to the wolf (Jonathan) because at least then they wouldn't be all alone in the dark forest they'd found themselves in anymore.

Jonathan looked at Joker and saw something he never thought he would where the clown was concerned: *prey*.

A small part of Jonathan — a part that enjoyed tea and chess and ridiculous group therapy sessions — did not want to use nor reveal a single fear Joker might tell him. This was not at all how Joker normally behaved, and Jonathan didn't have the slightest idea what triggered it, and he was admittedly rather concerned.

Jonathan found himself faced with a choice. Send the clown away and pretend this never happened, tell someone with more legally valid credentials that something was wrong with him, or hear Joker out?

And then what? Would he refrain from torturing the other? Did he want to? Was he even capable of not doing so, if Joker's fears really were as numerous as he claimed?

Deciding that he had some time to come to a final decision, and that it might be the best way to find out the cause of Joker's behavior, Jonathan scooted over on his bed — Jervis had eroded most of his sense of true personal space by that point, so he thought nothing of it — and nodded at Joker. "Alright, I'll listen to you. This time."

Joker smiled, small and broken in a whole different way than his smiles normally were, before frowning too softly again. He perched on the edge of Jonathan's bed and began to talk.

By the time he left, Jonathan was more confused than when he first came.

It wasn't until their third 'session' — Joker seemed to have an uncanny ability to find Jonathan when he both had a free moment to spare and wasn't in a bad enough mood to spray Fear Toxin at anyone that dared talked to him — that he developed a suspicion.

By the fifth, Jonathan was convinced.

Batman and general Rogue life related fears aside, the things Joker talked about were achingly *normal*.

He didn't like the mash potatoes served in the cafeteria on Fridays. He was worried Harley wouldn't spend as much time with him now that she had a girlfriend. He wished it wasn't so cloudy all the time, weren't they due for a sunny day soon? Fries' rant at someone that insinuated that his quest to save his wife was pointless nearly made Joker cry. He actually liked the newest additions to art therapy, but he was thinking of breaking out soon because he missed his pets.

Do Bud and Lou think he's abandoning them whenever he gets arrested? He's scared they think that it's their fault, that they made him upset, but doesn't know how you assure hyenas that you still love them.

Jonathan soon realized that Joker did not have an unusually high number of worries, fears, and general frustrations — he simply almost never let himself think about or show all of his regular ones.

Which was not to say that Joker was putting on some kind of act all of the time. He genuinely was a very happy, energetic, and fun-loving person. He just had another side to him, a perfectly normal side that he kept under lock and key because he for some reason assumed that it would cancel the first half out.

Joker had taken everything that did not match up to his persona as the Clown Prince Of Crime and stuffed it as deep inside himself as he could, because he thought of it as an either/or scenario: he could be the Joker or he could be a guy who worried what his pets thought of him, and he would rather be Joker.

And then the Codename Ban had been put in place. Suddenly, he wasn't Joker. He couldn't even share the position as the guy obsessed with the Bat with Riddler, because the Ban meant that Batman had been renamed 'Derrick' inside Asylum walls.

(Jonathan had to admit, it was kind of brilliant. Saying that Derrick ruined your life and must pay and blah-blah-blah simply did not have the same flair as vowing eternal vengeance against the Batman did, and thus forced one to actually consider the words they were saying and think about their enemy as a person rather than a nigh-godly being)

Joker had been stuck with his *normal* thoughts and feelings for a bit too long, and he simply couldn't handle them anymore. He needed to vent if he wanted to keep from exploding and losing whatever shred of sanity he still had. But a lot of his inner thoughts and struggles applied to Harley as well — the Bud and Lou worries alone would most likely make her cry and put him in the position of comforter rather than comfortee — so he found himself without his usual outlet.

Fearing his reputation if he went to anyone else, Joker had turned to Jonathan. He thought that Jonathan was smart enough to not start underestimating him when he learned of how normal he could truly be. He thought that the temptation of hearing the clown's deepest insecurities would be enough to buy his silence for a while. In his deepest heart, if he had been even slightly honest with himself, he thought that Jonathan wouldn't care about such minor things.

Unfortunately for him, Jonathan had grown extremely bored of the other's simple fears after a short while, he had zero figs to give about silly notions like honoring his promises, and the Strawman had more of a heart than he let on.

Before long, half the asylum knew Joker's secret. They were also all in on a plan to teach Joker something very important that he apparently didn't know: no-one could commit to their gimmick 24/7 and double lives existed for a reason.

Most of the plan involved the rec room.

Jervis kindly volunteered to take his To Be Read pile out of their cell so that he could be seen enjoying books that weren't his beloved Alice. He'd also forced his brother to stage being late for group therapy, though it had taken quite a lot of begging and the power of Annoying Sibling Tactics to do so.

Edward entered one day with his shirt partway unbuttoned (Jonathan had the suspicion he would have forgone it completely had the guards not been scowling at him) and his hair uncombed. Jonathan held a rather loud conversation with him about books and movies he enjoyed that were outside the horror genre.

Isley gushed over a dress she wanted to buy and the brands of makeup she liked, and even managed to speak to three separate male inmates without rolling her eyes at them. Fries did his very best to recount happy memories from his childhood, and though it somehow managed to dovetail into a rather depressing monologue about Nora, they were all very proud of him for trying.

Jonathan figured that Joker would close off again if he tried to talk to him about it. So, they tried to set an example by doing. And it seemed to work!

Joker did not stop being a, well, clown. But he calmed down just a little bit. When he frowned, it wasn't always a too-wide performance. He told Harley how much he missed their hyenas and they decided to find a permanent sitter for when they were in Arkham or otherwise unavailable. When the others lamented the dreadful mashed potatoes, Joker joined in without mocking his fellow inmates.

None of them were entirely the same within Arkham as they were without, but they didn't have to be. It was a fact they had all accepted long ago, something they had even grown to appreciate.

And now, it seemed, The Joker did too.

Joker laid in his cell, far away from the others, and giggled quietly to himself.

In one fell swoop, he had accomplished two things:

1) he had found a way to loosen the reins on his clown act without the others taking any real note of it (it was their fault, after all, so why would they think too much about it?).

And 2) he had gotten video footage, via the rec room surveillance cameras, of all of his friends acting completely off-theme.

And it had taken him all of a few months. He was almost disappointed, actually — he hadn't expected his little plan to work quite *that* quickly.

But it had. And the best part was that they all thought it was their idea, that *he* had been the one manipulated.

Oh, he couldn't wait to see his Batsy's face when he told him how he won their little bet!

Hehehehehe ahHAHAHA!

— end of "The Bet" —