

Harlequin

Ruby G

Don't speak to the patients.

Don't interact with the patients.

Don't interfere under any circumstances.

Observe and record, that is the job.

That's what they told me when I started my internship at *Hawks Home for Misfits* mental institution. I thought those would be easy rules to follow, I was only there for the college credit anyway. But then I met one specific patient at the institute, and I wanted to break every single one.

She walked into the room as she always did, head down, shoulders slumped, makeup compact in hand. She sat in the chair across from Dr. Porter without a word and only after a few agonizingly silent moments did she finally look up.

Dr. Porter gave her a kind smile. "Good afternoon Reina, how are you feeling today?"

Reina King was one of the most compliant patients at the institute. She never broke the rules, she was compassionate and caring. She tried to help other patients with their struggles in anyway she could. But she couldn't help herself.

"The same..." Reina said. "Can't look at myself in the mirror, still feel like everyone's always watching me. And it took every fiber of my being not to slather myself in makeup this morning."

"But you didn't, that's progress," Dr. Porter said.

Reina had Vitiligo. Light patches riddled her dark skin from her feet to her face. It was like the sun and the moon converged and shared the same exact space. Like drops of ink were splattered across a piece of paper. It was truly a beautiful sight to behold.

She didn't think so though. She saw herself as a monster, a freak. Someone whom no one would ever be able to truly stand to be around. She was not white, nor was she black. She couldn't even consider herself mixed, because the different pigments in her skin didn't blend together, they were separate entities sharing space on her skin.

She was belittled and ridiculed by her peers growing up for it. Over time she developed Body Dysmorphia, the obsessive belief that a part of one's physical being is flawed to the point that the victim will take excessive measures to hide or change that part of them. So I've learned.

The corner of Reina's mouth twitched slightly. "Whatever you say, Doc."

According to her file, Reina had covered all the mirrors in her home before admitting herself in the institution. When at a friend's house she would go to the bathroom with the lights off to keep from seeing her reflection. She also spent hundreds of dollars on foundation and powder in order to cover each one of her spots. Even with the spots concealed, she always wore long sleeves, pants, and closed-toed shoes wherever she went.

She ran her thumb over her makeup compact, a nervous tick she acquired a few months into being admitted. She carried the compact with her everywhere. It never seemed to leave her side. Wherever she went, whoever she was with, the compact was always gripped tightly in her left hand. It concerned some of the Orderlies, but I thought it was progress. To me, it seemed like the tick would occur when she seemed to be fighting the urge to use it. The more she rubbed the compact, the more will power she had in order to refrain from using it.

Most of the session went as it normally did, Porter asked questions, Reina answered them. Porter held up photos of others with and without Vitiligo and asked Reina what she thought. Reina said she thought they were all beautiful in their own right. It wasn't until the final exercise that things began to take a turn.

Reina kept her panicked gaze focused toward the ground as Porter held out a mirror to her. "Come now Reina, just a quick glance," he said.

Reina shook her head, her gaze never leaving the ground.

"You told me yourself that you thought the photos I showed you of other people with Vitiligo were beautiful. Some of them were models, people who are praised for their beauty. They all look like you."

He slowly lowered the mirror. "I will not force you to look into it, but if you do, you might see that you are just as beautiful as the others, as beautiful as everyone else."

Reina glanced over at Porter, her gaze flitted back and forth between him and the ground. A few moments passed, then Reina held out her hand.

Porter smiled and handed her the mirror. With a shaky hand, Reina held up the mirror and looked into it.

She tilted her head to the side as she stared at the reflection before her. Her frantic eyes softened, gaining a hint of wonder in them.

"There you go, Reina," Porter said. "There's nothing to be ashamed of."

She continued to stare. For a moment, it seemed as if she couldn't even recognize herself.

Then suddenly, she did.

Her chest began to rise and fall in rapid succession, her body shaking vigorously. She shook her head as tears fell from her eyes.

Porter's smile faded into a look of concern. "I think that's enough for one day. Let's..."

Reina's expression distorted into a look of anguish and anger. With a shout, she slammed her fist into the mirror, shattering it on impact.

"Miss King!" Porter yelled.

Shards of glass portuded from Reina's bloody knuckles. She raised her hand to strike again.

Despite the rules, I reached out and grabbed her arm to keep her from hurting herself and called for help. One of the Orderlies quickly came in and took over. They helped Reina slowly get to her feet.

"My...compact," she said.

Her compact lay on the ground, cracked. The Orderly picked up the broken compact and took her away.

I was scolded by Dr. Porter for restraining her. He told me it was not my place to do so. Maybe he was right. It wasn't my place, but I couldn't watch her hurt herself again. I just couldn't.

Reina was on constant watch by the Orderlies for the next few days. She was as quiet and complacent as always. If it wasn't for the bandage on her hand, it would be as if her outburst had never happened.

But it did happen, and everyone knew about it. The patients would look at her from a distance, trying to be subtle but failing miserably. Even some of the Orderlies would talk amongst themselves.

It pissed me off that the people who are supposed to be taking care of her are doing the exact thing that hurt her the most.

Reina knew this was happening, I'm sure of it, but she stayed quiet and let it all unfold.

She was sitting on the floor in the patients common room one morning with her back up against the wall. She was deep in thought while lightly rubbing her compact, careful not to cut herself on the jagged crack.

“Well look who it is.”

Reina's facial expression immediately dropped at the sound of her fellow patient's voice. She closed her eyes with a sigh. “What do you want Zeke?”

“No need for hostility, Chica,” Zeke said. “I just wanted to say hello, see how you were doing after your...incident.”

Reina pursed her lips as she glanced up at him. “I'm doing fine, thank you.”

“Well that's good. Y'know ReiRei...” Zeke crouched down next to her. “You're kinda cute for a Picasso painting.”

He poked her spotted cheek with his finger. Reina pulled away from him. Her jaw clenched to the point where a vein was visible in her temple. “You're high on drugs,” she said. “Leave me alone and I might not tell Porter you found a way into the medicine cabinet again.”

“Aw, don’t be like that babe, you keep this little secret between us and I might be able to help with your little problem. I’m sure I could knock off that extra pigment in your skin...” He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “If you know what I mean.”

Reina shoved him away just as the secretary’s voice came through the intercom.

*“All patients please head toward your group two therapy sessions.”*

Zeke seductively waved at Reina, blowing her a kiss before heading off to his session. Reina let out a slow exhale, her thumb vigorously rubbing her compact as she stood up and headed upstairs.

The chairs were set up in their usual circular formation. They were all empty at the time. Reina walked toward her chosen seat when another patient, Harlow Haynes, brushed passed her and sat down in it before she could.

Reina huffed. “What is this, musical chairs? There were five other seats to choose from.”

Harlow leaned back. She didn’t even bother making eye contact. “Quit your whining, and sit your zebra-stripped self somewhere else. Preferably far away from me.”

Reina’s eye twitched as she bowed her head. Biting her lip, she walked across the circle and over to the chair farthest from Harlow.

The rest of the patients began flowing into the room and taking their seats. Eventually, Dr. Gabriella Smith, the group therapist walked into the room and sat down.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “I got held up in a meeting.”

Her cheeks were flushed, and the blouse under her lab coat was buttoned incorrectly. That must have been some meeting she just came from.

“Let’s start by going around and speaking on the progress you all have made individually since we last met,” she said. “Miss Haynes, let’s start with you. How have you been feeling?”

Harlow gave Dr. Smith a smile.

“I’ve never felt better. Haven’t looked in a mirror all day.”

She looked over at Reina and raised an eyebrow. “Have you?” she asked.

Reina shifted her gaze to the wall. Her facial expression was somber.

“I haven’t seen any more broken glass anywhere so I guess not.” Harlow crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “You know, you’re lucky, Reina. You have the choice whether or not to look at your atrocious self, we don’t.”

“Miss Haynes,” Smith said. “One should not speak in such a way to others just to boost their self esteem. We’ve talked about this.”

Harlow shrugged. “It’s not to boost my ego, it’s the truth.”

Reina slumped in her chair as the session continued, her gaze downcast.

My heart ached as I saw her do something she hadn’t done in months: open her compact and smother her arms with foundation.

The weeks passed by quickly. Some days Reina would seem to get better, other days, she would get incredibly worse. I overheard some of the Orderlies talking about what needed to be done. Some said she needed to be transferred to a new institution, others said she was a lost cause and needed to just be let go, or given the option of euthanization as a final option.

I was sick to my stomach over-hearing these ‘possible solutions’. Whatever I had expected from these Orderlies and psychologists in the beginning, this was not it. Contemplating

Euthanization just because the patient is going through a rough patch is obscene and immoral. I've wanted to quit this internship so many times, college credit be damned. But I can't, not while Reina's like this. I can't just leave her behind.

One seemingly normal day, there was a call from the police department.

"He's back," the secretary said, the landline still on her ear.

Dr. Porter sighed. "Have them bring him in."

A few minutes later, a squadron of police officers walked in encircling an inmate. He had long, gnatted red hair. His skin was as pale as death, and his eyes as chaotic as a dictator's. He was bound in a straight jacket and shackles on his feet. For a split second, his eyes met mine and he smiled. The most hauntingly wicked smile I had ever received.

A chill ran down my spine so violently it felt as if I were going to break in half. I had never felt such fear as I did now.

Dr. Porter walked up to the inmate. His face was stoic but his eyes held a glint dread. "Mr. Chendriks, a pleasure to see you again."

"The pleasure is all mine," the inmate said. "And please, call me Carlyle. I do believe we're on a first name basis by now, don't you think Carson?"

Dr. Porter's eye twitched. He turned to the head guard. "His quarters is the same as always."

The head guard beckoned for the others to take Carlyle there.

Carlyle laughed hysterically. "I'm hooooooooome!" He shouted as they pulled him down the hallway.

The head guard looked at Dr. Porter. “Laws have been revised. Inmate 7597 is now required to have one hour of interaction with other patients a day.”

Dr. Porter’s eyes lit up in shock. “No! This is a mass murderer we are talking about here! I will not allow him to mingle with my patients!”

“It’s the law Doctor. You obey or we shut this organization down.”

The rest of the guards returned from locking up Carlyle then went on their way.

I had a strange feeling this was not going to be a fun week.

For the first few days of Carlyle’s interaction period, He either paced the room or sat on a chair and watched the others. He seemed to be analyzing them. It gave me an uneasy feeling, and I could tell the patients were just as uncomfortable. On the third day, he looked only at Reina as she sat in the corner of the patient’s common room as she always did. His face was unreadable, I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but nevertheless, his eyes never left her. It concerned me, made me incredibly tense.

Reina seemed to feel the same way.

“Are you done?” Reina asked him impatiently as his gaze still lay on her.

Carlyle said nothing. Just continued to stare.

“I get gawked at all the time, but this is ridiculous. You haven't even blinked once. Close your eyes or something before they fall out of your head.”

Silent staring.

After a half hour of this, Reina furrowed her eyebrows, stood up and walked toward him. She raised her arms out to the side, presenting herself to him. “You want a better look? Well here

you go! Take a good look at my face, my arms, my feet. Whatever the hell you were trying to get a better look at. Here I am! Showcasing my full on ugl-

“Beauty,” Carlyle said.

Reina stiffened, her eyes going wide. “What?”

*What?*

“I have never seen anyone with such a beauty as you.” He put his tied-up arms on the back of the couch and tilted his head. Seemingly enthralled. “A masterpiece.”

Reina was speechless. She stood there, unsure of what to do, as the bell sounded the end of Carlyle’s playtime for the day.

He stood up as the Orderlies came toward him, making sure his restraints were secure. He took one last look at her before turning away and was dragged back to his room.

The next day, Reina sat in her usual corner by the wall, her thumb slowly rubbing her compact as she stared off into space. After a few moments, Carlyle walked toward her.

“May I join you?” he asked.

Reina stared up at him for a few moments, before nodding her head toward the space next to her.

He sat down where she had indicated, they sat in silence for a very long time. He said nothing, did nothing, just sat there calmly.

“So what’re you in for?” Reina asked, breaking the silence.

Carlyle turned his head toward her. “You’re going to have to be more specific. I am in a lot of places nowadays.”

“Why are you in the institution?” Reina clarified.

“Antisocial Personality disorder, Dissociative Identity disorder, and psychopathy.”

“Wow,” Reina said. “Got a full load don’t you?”

“So they say.” Carlyle leaned his head back against the wall. “I personally think that they’re the ones not willing to see reality.”

“We all struggle with reality in some way, shape, or form.”

Carlyle smiled. “That you are right. May ask the same question of you?”

Reina huffed. “I would have thought it was obvious.” She looked down at her compact. “Body Dysmorphia. Can’t even look at myself in a mirror without freaking out.”

“Is that what that is? In your hand?”

Reina shook her head. “It’s a makeup compact, with no mirror. It’s for emergencies, if I’m having a really bad day, I’ll put the makeup on my arms and face to look normal even if for just a few fleeting moments.”

Carlyle was silent as his gaze trailed intently on her just as it was the day before.

Reina huffed. “Y’know, just because I’m not looking at you doesn’t mean I don’t know you’re staring again.”

“I meant what I said yesterday,” Carlyle said. “I truly have never seen anyone with such beauty as you.”

Reina turned her head toward him, giving him an unconvinced look before snorting.

“Yeah yeah, flattery will get you nowhere.”

“I’m not trying to get anywhere. All I’m trying to do is tell you the truth.”

Reina looked down at the ground, her thumb running quickly across her compact. "...I'm a monster."

"You're a masterpiece."

"A Picasso painting."

"A Harlequin."

Reina looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Did you just call me Joker's side-chick?"

Carlyle laughed. "Not Harley Quinn, Harlequin. Variegated, exhibiting different colors. And those colors always come together to create something beautiful, as it has with you."

Reina gazed thoughtfully at him, he gazed back.

"You see yourself as a monstrosity, because you are different. And most see different as bad. However, I'd argue that normalcy is what's actually bad. If there was nothing unique in the world, there would be no beauty." He tilted his head up sensibly. "Wouldn't you agree?"

For the rest of his time at Hawkes home for misfits, Carlyle spent every moment he was allotted by Reina's side, and Reina didn't mind at all. In fact, she welcomed it. Throughout the next few days, Reina seemed to become a whole new person. She was still herself, but happier, more open, and more accepting of the way she was. Drastic progress was made in Reina's self confidence. It was almost miraculous.

A few weeks later after Carlyle was sent back to prison, Reina received a package. It came with a letter.

*With nothing unique, there can be no beauty.*

*-Carlyle*

Reina opened the package. Inside was a new compact, sleek, black with white spirals.

Reina opened it, instead of makeup, it was a mirror. Engraved on the glass was the word:

*Harlequin.*

Reina stared at the inside of the compact, at her reflection just above the engraving and in that moment. I could have sworn I saw her smile.