

## The Harlequin

By Jacob Duarte Spiel

*[talking on the phone]* Yeah, yeah, yeah, well just get me the due diligence by the end of the day.

*[talking to the listener]* Sorry 'bout that. This promotion's been good for my bank account, but it's basically killed lunch breaks. Call after call after call ya know. They say it's investment banking, but it feels like I'm really a juggler.

So, what? You're new at the bank, yeah? It's good to meet you. Here, I ordered a drink for you. It's 5pm somewhere, right?

Cheers *[glasses clinking]*

I appreciate you reaching out. Hope your golf game is as bad as mine ha ha ha! Hey, but listen, don't take anything I say too close to heart.

This business isn't about making friends. It's about making enemies and then crushing them. Oh, and cashing *huge* cheques ha ha!

And hey, it's normal to feel guilty about the money. At first. But then you gotta remember: this is the most important business in the world. The. Most. Important. The way we manage assets is what turns the wheels of the global economy, which turns the wheels of politics, culture, manufacturing, housing, and everything else worth a shit. We work our asses off because we hold together the fabric of society. Without us, everything falls apart. That's *really* why we get paid.

So you gotta reject that guilt. Send it back like a subpar entree.

You're probably looking for a mentor, someone to show you the ropes. I won't be that guy. I don't have anything to teach. The way I climbed the ladder was... too unorthodox.

But I get needing a guiding light, I really do. You need someone to push you, even if they aren't really, well, real. I had that. My dad was in finance at this same bank 40... *jesus*, yeah, it's been 40 years now. Back then the banks hadn't gotten quite so big, there were laws trying to reign in guys like us, the future masters of the universe. Nice try, right?

But my dad? He still worked his heart out. You know, I barely remember seeing him as a kid. He was working so hard that he didn't sleep in on weekends, he slept *through* them.

Once he was in management they started letting him leave around 8pm and around that same time my bedtime started creeping closer to 10pm. That's when I first really got to know this mythical, raccoon-eyed man that my mother had fallen in love with.

We had some late-night dinners and conversations. Him in his suit, me in my PJs. Finally felt like I met the guy, y'know? He'd ruffle my hair, talk to me about earnings reports, new acquisitions, balance sheets. I'd soak it up. It felt like when a desert cactus gets watered for the first time in 20 years and - pow! - suddenly blooms.

And there were a few years of that before...

Ha ha, well, that's not lunch conversation...

*[silence]*

Yeah. Massive stroke at his desk. Messed up thing is his office had a huge glass wall. Everyone in the office could see him. Hell, paramedics could've revived him had they gotten there sooner, but nobody thought to call for help. They were so used to him sleeping at his desk that when he put his head down... well... Later on my mom told me it was the cocaine, amphetamines, and booze. He'd been taking them all at once for a while.

I, uh, remember the suit I wore to his funeral. I remembered being upset that it wasn't Armani because my old man loved those suits. The food was terrible. My dad only ate the best of the best, when he had time to eat anyway. \$400 sushi tasting menus, thousand dollar slices of jamon iberico, black truffles shaved onto ora king salmon. So... Tiny triangular tuna sandwiches weren't his style, even with the crusts cut off.

My mom got through it okay. We didn't talk much those months, she had her own interests to lean on. Grief pushes some people together and some people apart I guess. I was 13, old enough to handle it on my own.

Of course, by then I already knew I was going into finance. Honoring my father by doing the work that actually matters. Slaying his dragons for him, scurrying around in the pits made by his giant footsteps.

With one exception: Clean. I would do it clean. I wouldn't put my mother through another early funeral.

I didn't climb the ladder as fast as I thought I would. Finance is the harshest mistress there is and the other young analysts were the toughest, most cut-throat assholes I'd ever met. Freaks of nature who could withstand 120 hour work weeks, no food, no breaks.

One had been in the Marines, could walk 40km in freezing rain, and still be up at 4am the next morning.

Another was eidetic, that means photographic memory. He was a vicious little shit, but if you showed him too many graphs all at once he would get a nosebleed as his brain tried to memorize everything at once. I did that a lot until he tried to stab me in the parking lot.

One of them had a benign tumour pressing against her pituitary gland. It slowed the release of some hormone and gave her chronic insomnia. She bragged she only needed one hour of sleep a night. She laughed in our faces while we picked our thinning hair out of our cold coffees.

So everyone had their own advantages except for me. And on top of that, of course, there were the drugs.

I was doing this clean, remember? I wasn't going to end up like my dad, so while everyone else was chewing adderall or snorting 1am lines off the breakroom table, I was running on coffee and energy drinks. Food too, when I could stomach it.

Thankfully I did have one trick up my sleeve.

My mom got me a therapist after my dad passed away. The therapist was a severe, sexless woman, well-kept. Her office was pristine and I remember I would always wash my hands before I went in. I couldn't even imagine getting grease on the glossy magazines in the waiting room, let alone smudging her perfectly placed glass coffee table.

She never worked with children, but made an exception for my father's son. She used big words and complicated concepts. Most of what she said passed through me like a cooling breeze, leaving nothing permanent but calming me. The mere idea that someone had analyzed my problems was soothing enough. I didn't need to know the details.

But one thing stuck with me.

She taught me that the key to managing my stress, anger, even my exhaustion, was to meditate. I took it very seriously. While everyone else in university was drinking and partying and meeting new people, I would be meditating, centering my mind before tackling my commerce or finance homework. Maybe that's why I graduated without ever having a girlfriend, ha!

I don't meditate anymore. Just can't do it. But for a while it was my bread and butter.

I'm serious! Eventually, it was as natural as breathing. Some people will tell you that meditation is a spiritual act, something religious or whatever. I looked it up once. It's supposed to provide a sense of oneness, a connection with your place in the universe and, with practice, a state of Nirvana, a realization of non-self, whatever that means.

*[to waiter]* Hey. Yeah, can I get a Laphroaig 40-year neat? Make it two, actually.

I mean, I've never spent time on philosophy or physics or theology but I know woo-woo bullshit when I hear it. "Realization of the non-self"? Suuuure.

Look, you wanna know the truth? Meditation is a tool, it can be used by anyone. People like us, we use whatever tools we have because that's how we succeed and that's how the bank succeeds and that's how the big wheels keep turning.

So that's why when all the other analysts were snorting rails, I would sit in the utility closet with the lights off and meditate.

I got very good at it. Extremely good. It's just like working out, ya know, the more you do it the easier it is and I was meditating 3 or 4 times a day.

And the better you get, the farther you go.

*[smacks lips]* Nothing like a couple of whiskeys with lunch.

Look, usually I keep this stuff to myself. I'm just having a good time right now. I don't want to hear any of this repeated in the office or I'll get your ass fired. Anyway, I'm not saying that meditation actually does anything real, but I've experienced some things that were, let's say, inexplicable. Some good and... some bad.

Once, I was meditating after a 15 hour day of analysis. My brain was pounding from a combination caffeine-slash-exhaustion migraine. Whole body felt like a pressure cooker. But as I began to fall into that familiar state of oneness or whatever, I had this weird feeling. My eyes were closed so I couldn't see, but I swear I could feel feathers falling around my head and shoulders. The pain and tension leached away from every spot they touched. Within a few minutes, I was completely relaxed and totally pain-free.

Worked 20 hours straight the next day with almost no side-effects. Set a department record for mortgage foreclosure filings.

Another time I was dealing with a particularly complex set of financial books. I took some time to meditate and, as I did, I felt the curious sensation of a sheet of paper being pressed into my hands. I opened my eyes, and even though the room was pitch black I could still read what was printed on the paper. It was a page and line number. But when I turned on the lights, my hand was empty. The page and line number led me to the essential piece of information I'd been missing.

It's not like I had these experiences all the time. In fact, it only ever happened one other time.

And, yeah, it put me off meditating for good. I'm not saying that it was... I mean... Okay I don't tell this story to just anyone, but you seem like a good kid and, I dunno, maybe I see a bit of myself in you.

*[ice clinks in a glass]* That's good fucking scotch.

Years ago, the bank was preparing to purchase a majority share in a particularly complicated pharma company with numerous subsidiaries. See, this was the early days of the opioid boom and someone in mergers and acquisitions realized how addictive these drugs could be. Obviously we had to get our foot in the door. Time was of the essence.

Anyway, The bank's very best analysts, myself included, poured over every little thing, reviewing capital expenditures, cash flow sources, even former class-action lawsuits from South America. No stone unturned. If all went well, the bank stood to make a mint and everyone involved would be fast-tracked for promotion. We hoped.

It was two months worth of work in two weeks.

Well I couldn't snort ritalin like everyone else so one day somewhere between hour 13 and 15 of work, I was feeling particularly hollowed out. I ignored the mockery of the other analysts and excused myself to the utility closet, turned off all the lights, and settled into a lotus pose.

I don't know what it was about this particular day or that particular project, but I went farther and deeper into that state of oneness than ever before. When I came to my senses, my physical form had vanished. I was just a mere presence, floating in a black space.

My body was far behind me now, the light ache that usually buzzed along my thighs while in lotus pose was forgotten entirely. I barely remembered what "thighs" were.

The black space was all that there was, it stretched endlessly above me, below me, and to all horizons. I know it sounds scary, yet... it wasn't. Peace and calm seemed to blanket the entire plane. It was the first peace I'd felt in a long while.

But I wasn't alone.

In the distance, I could see something else present in the black space: someone. I use the term "someone" a little broadly. It was either a person, or something person-shaped.

I shifted, bringing myself closer and, as I did, I realize that they too were in the lotus pose, sitting in the empty blackness even though there were no surfaces to sit on. He, or It, was dressed in bizarre clothes. I did some research later. Turns out it was dressed as a harlequin, which is a character from old Italian theater, sort of like a fool. I'll try to describe.

The Harlequin, as I now call it, wore a loose-fitting black and red costume covered in diamond and triangle shapes. A two-pointed hat, like a jester's but without the bells, sat firmly on its head. Its face was concealed entirely by a black mask, portraying a face with a completely blank expression. The mask was so black it seemed to expand past its edges and meld into the void around us. The harlequin's closed eyelids were the only thing visible, resting behind the eye holes.

I tried to speak, but couldn't. Either I'd left my voice back in my body, or there was no sound in the black space. I willed myself forward to get a better look.

The harlequin was seated peacefully, its hands resting on its knees, unmoving. It was indeed the lotus pose: a clown pretending to be a sage. I shifted again, floating around the harlequin so I could study this weird, silent figure from all angles.

I'm not sure when I realized that something was wrong with it. All I know is that suddenly that wrongness was all I could see.

Maybe it was the costume. Upon a closer look, the cloth was encrusted with filth, stained with sickly shades of crimson and purple, and torn at the joints. Totally disgusting, like it had been buried in a junkyard, pissed on by dogs for years and then worn without washing. I recoiled slightly. I hate mess. I invest a lot in keeping clean.

Then... my eyes drifted to where the harlequin's hands rested on its knees. Those were not human hands. Not at all. Way too big. The fingers were wide as a gear shift and stretched almost to the middle of its shin. They had a seemingly random number of joints. One, four, even six knuckles adorned each massive, separate finger. Bizarre.

I swung around to the front of the harlequin. As I did, I realized that my meditative state was no longer a soothing experience.

No. From the moment I first saw The Harlequin, a strange, unfamiliar feeling had begun to build.

I couldn't shake it. I just floated, staring, as the feeling just kept building and building until, finally, I understood.

I knew then that it didn't matter that the black mask gave no indication, no inkling of any emotion or reaction. The Harlequin was aware of my presence and, in some way, its attention was entirely directed at me.

The thing was performing, but not for my... *entertainment*.

No. Definitely not. The feeling was clearer now. Some negative emotion was radiating off the Harlequin, something I was now certain was directed at me. I've had a lot of enemies, a lot, but this was different. It wasn't anger. Not jealousy either.

And just when that negative energy peaked, that's when the Harlequin opened one of its eyes and my mind was flooded with... understanding, I guess.

Immediately, I was thrown out of my meditative state and back into my body. I cracked my head against the utility closet's concrete floor as I flailed around, gasping for air. Head pounding, I stared at my hands in the dark, counting the joints on each finger over and over until I was sure it was the right number. I'm not sure how long I sat there before I came back to myself. At first I could barely remember anything about the harlequin, just a black void.

Then that void began to shrink and shrink in my memory until I realized that what I'd thought was a void was actually the eye of the harlequin. Pure blackness at the center of a veinless, porcelain white eye, black like an ocean at night.

I remembered then how the negative energy had coalesced when its eye finally opened. At that moment, I had been certain of one thing: that behind that emotionless black mask, the harlequin had been smiling. Smiling a hideous, gleeful smile of mockery.

It was no accident that I'd found the harlequin in lotus pose. It had been sitting there, waiting for me to find its exaggerated imitation of my meditation. In retrospect, it's so obvious. The cruel tilt to its head, the satirical bend at the elbows. I don't know how I didn't realize it immediately. It's honestly a bit embarrassing.

I returned to where the other analysts were still chipping away at the balance sheets. According to the clock on the wall, I had only been gone a few minutes, but that didn't stop them from venomously busting my balls about meditating on company time.

I sat down shakily at the end of the table, across from an empty chair. It was hard to focus on the paperwork in front of me, but what else was there for me to do? The acquisition had to happen soon, it was my only focus in my life, it had to be if it was going to get it done right.

I pushed everything else out of my head and began mechanically tapping at my calculator, moving from line item to line item.

For a few minutes, the meditation seemed to have done its job. My mind was sharp and the work moved at a brisk pace. After a few pages I looked up to see how the other analysts were doing.

I had to choke back a scream.

When I wasn't looking, the empty chair across from me had been filled. Sitting there was The Harlequin, its gigantic, filthy hands resting on the table, its black mask totally devoid of emotion.

Beads of sweat bubbled on my forehead. The other analysts worked on without stopping, oblivious to the thing in the room.

I nudged The Marine, asked if he noticed anything funny about the chair across from me. He looked briefly to where I pointed and then stared at me with contempt. "Go fuck yourself," he said. "Stop trying to distract me with your bullshit."

*Okay, I figured. It's a hallucination.*

I attempted to ignore it. After all, it was obviously a figment brought on by the stress of the job. I tried to go back to work and push the image of the Harlequin out of my mind.

I took up my pen and opened the next file. As I did, the Harlequin imitated my movements exactly, a more perfect reflection than even a mirror. But no mirror has ever reflected such a cruel parody. Shame burned the back of my neck as I tried to focus, but the Harlequin was impossible not to watch. Worse yet, each time I looked up at it, its blank face would be staring right back at me.

After fifteen minutes I hadn't gotten any further. Work was impossible. I rose from my chair, gathered my things, and tried not to look at the clownish figure as I hurried from the room. The jeers and catcalls of the other analysts were cut off by the echoing click of the closing office door.

I strode to my car, looking over my shoulder every few seconds to see the Harlequin, matching my steps exactly and doing such a perfectly ugly pantomime of my posture and stride that I felt queasy even seeing it.

Even then I drove an expensive car: not something I could afford at the time, but I had to show off to everyone, you know? Leather interior, roaring leopard hood ornament, the works. Some part of my exhausted brain thought the extra safety features might help me, but The Harlequin simply passed through the door like it wasn't there, seating itself comfortably in the passenger seat, where I could see it just out of the corner of my eye. Each turn I took, every mirror I checked, it performed an exact, brutal imitation.

Home was a boxy apartment in a trendy neighbourhood that I now rent out for twice the mortgage on my house. I shuffled in, still squeezing shut and opening my eyes in the hopes it would make the hallucination disappear, and collapsed into my unmade bed. When I rolled over, I saw The Harlequin now stood at my feet. Perhaps sick of its game, it had stopped imitating entirely. Now, it merely watched.

Only then, staring into the blank mask, did I think to try interacting with it.

"Who are you?" I asked. I received no answer.



I reached out and shuddered as my fingers passed through its filthy costume, like we were both shadows on the sidewalk. I put my face right up to the mask, but no matter how I begged and pleaded for an explanation, it remained completely still.

Eventually, I gave up.

Sleep didn't come easily. I lay in bed for hours, squeezing my eyelids tight like a child, knowing full well that if I opened them I would see The Harlequin waiting at the foot of my bed, its arms hanging limply, its gnarled fingertips just barely brushing against my bedsheets.

Waiting, but waiting for what?

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I awoke at 5:30am, which meant I was already late. It's possible the Harlequin had moved in the night, but now it once again stood watch over my bed. I shuddered to see it leering down at me, but I didn't have time to think about it.

In a panic, I threw on my clothes but as I stumbled to the coatrack, my heel caught on my pants and I crashed to the floor, hard. I blushed a deep red as the Harlequin gleefully imitated me with its own cartoonish pratfall. Then I was racing out the door, The Harlequin keeping pace every step of the way.

Work was chaos. We were 3 days away from the end of the project but there was still at least a week of work remaining. The entire department was slammed, no help was coming. As motivation, the boss called a meeting with the analysts and announced that whoever cleared the most tasks in the next 3 days would present our report at the next board meeting about the acquisition.

Every eyebrow in the room raised, except the Harlequin's. This was a real opportunity to get noticed by the top of the pyramid, maybe get fast-tracked for a promotion. After all, it doesn't matter that this was a team effort, the person presenting is who gets the credit in the end.

Individually, we each decided that the opportunity was rightfully ours. I glanced over at the Harlequin. It glanced back.

Those last 3 days nobody left and nobody slept. In those 3 days I watched the Marine's hair turn white. I saw the photographic memory guy snuffle through a nosebleed that lasted 34 hours. The woman with the pituitary tumour developed a migraine that didn't fully go away until the following Spring.

And me? I lagged way behind, barely finishing half the work of my colleagues. It was a shameful performance, but what was I supposed to do? I could tolerate the hours, but this hallucination

was an added wrinkle. No matter what I did or where I went, The Harlequin was always there, its blank face tracking me like a cat watching a caged bird.

I couldn't even take meditation breaks. Something about being seated across from that freak, both of us in the lotus pose even with the lights off... The darkness was once peaceful and still, now it just felt malicious. Corrupted. And maybe it was just the stress, but I think I could smell the harlequin too. A musty, moldy hamburger stench.

So yeah. There was no chance for me to win quote-unquote "fairly".

*[a beat]*

Look, I'm not proud of this, but it worked. Sometimes in business you just have to do what works.

Just a little bit of ordinary powdered bleach. That's all it took. I bought it from a nearby laundromat and mixed in a pinch with each analyst's drug of choice, my eyes averted from the Harlequin's obscene imitation.

When the boss showed up I was the only one who hadn't been carted to the hospital. I got the presentation. After he left, I turned to the Harlequin and risked a smug smile of victory. Its mask just stared back, impassive.

But what did I care? All that mockery and for what? I still won.

The presentation should've been a cakewalk. I knew my part like it was my own shadow. In front of the board and the global management team I stepped forward and began to deliver the report. Of course, the Harlequin stood right by me, silently copying my every gesture.

I'd almost gotten used to it by then.

But then, as I spoke to all the most powerful people at the bank, I faltered. My eyes had been drawn to the back of the room, where three unfamiliar figures sat.

The words caught in my throat as I stared at them. Black emotionless masks stared back. Filthy costumes. Mangled hands. Not quite the same as The Harlequin, who stood nearby, imitating my disbelief, but they were similar enough that...

One had a green diamond pattern on its costume, one of its legs was half the length of the other. The second figure had a shit-stained costume with herringbone gold stripes and a second mask worn as a codpiece. Both wore the jester's caps while the third figure was-

Then someone cleared their throat, startling me back into the presentation. I apologized, found my place, and began speaking again, but as I did I watched in horror as these three new Harlequins rose from their seats and made their way up to the front of the room.

Sweat pooled at the elbows of my silk shirt as I tried to maintain focus as they approached. They stepped into the performance space. I looked away, up at the ceiling, and continued to present. The new Harlequins were circling me now, slow and effortless like vultures in an updraft. They looked me up and down with their dime-sized black pupils. As they circled, they too began to imitate me. A gesture here, a gesture there, as if trying them on for size. I continued, now keeping my eyes fixed straight ahead, pushing down fear and embarrassment as they evaluated me.

Then, all at once, they stopped circling and took up positions on all sides of me, staying just in my peripheral vision so there was no place I could look without seeing at least one of them. As I described the benefits of the opioid acquisition, they copied my moments with pure glee. Even collapsing into silent, shaking laughter as they brought each other to hysterics.

I finished the report and sat down. The Harlequins followed, but not before taking a long, satirical bow.

Afterwards, board members would tell me how pleased they were with my work. The CEO said he saw a bright future for me. This should have been my biggest moment, something to remember for the rest of my career.

But when I look back, all I can see are the four Harlequins.

Yes... That was the start of it.

Despite the setbacks, I was able to leverage my presentation into the promotion I'd so desired. The first thing I did was plant the seeds of doubt about my analyst colleagues. Within the year, they would be fired.

Now, I told you that I'd almost gotten used to the first Harlequin, but that was the easiest it would get. These three new ones were worse somehow. Even though all four imitated me in the exact same manner I could tell they had personalities of their own. They mocked me differently. They found different actions worthy of imitation. Sometimes all four would mimic me, sometimes just one, while the others bent double or rolled on the floor with silent laughter behind their blank masks.

Do you know what that kind of mockery can do to a person? How you begin to question your choices? I second, third, and fourth guessed every little thing I did, didn't matter if it was accepting a pay raise or brushing my teeth.

It was maddening to watch. If there had just been some explanation, if I'd known what was so... embarrassing... but they never spoke to me. Just watched and mocked and laughed.

I did my best to ignore them, focusing on my career. The 16 hour analyst days were behind me. Now I had the 18 hour senior analyst schedule. No time for hobbies, no time for books, definitely no time for dating. Thankfully, the work was distracting enough to keep me from paying too-close attention to those black masks and gigantic, twisted hands.

A few months later a staffing shake-up led to my next promotion. I received it in the luxurious corner office of the VP, surrounded by all five Harlequins who all breathlessly accepted the honor in sync with me. And yes, I said **five**. At some point in the haze of work and sleep I had picked up another shadow, this one with a bruise-coloured hat and two hands at the end of each arm.

A year or so later I got the call up to be a junior executive. I'd kissed enough rings and ass to get the position. The office was a nice bonus, but it got a lot less luxurious with two dozen filthy Harlequins standing there, staring at me, waiting for just the right moment to cavort and collapse and bring each other to hysterics. Fucking philistines.

*[to waiter]* More whiskey. Now.

Kid. Do you know what it's like performing for an audience every single second of every day? An audience that hates you, despises you, but won't tell you why? It's hell. It's torture. Sleep was no longer an option, which meant that of course I had to break my promise.

I mean, look, I'm not like my dad, okay? He was an addict. I was just dealing with stress. *Real* stress. All the same, I'm glad my mother died before I started, even if the Harlequins turned her funeral into a playground.

But, yeah. Drugs. Ritalin in the mornings at first, then cocaine. Booze, of course, to take the edge off later.

It was almost funny watching fifty Harlequins do a rail with me, but like any joke it stops being funny the 400th time you see it.

So I took matters into my own hands. I had doctor's appointments at the Mayo Clinic and Sloan-Kettering. I booked tickets to every major spiritual landmark in the world: Hagia Sophia, Machu Picchu, Jerusalem, Borobudur. I signed up for a three-day meditation retreat in Cambodia where I sat on a concrete slab surrounded by my retinue of laughing, silent clowns. I tore my throat at an intensive primal scream session in Bhutan. Oh man did the Harlequins love that.

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I suppose you're wondering: how did I finally get rid of them? What was the ultimate solution?

Well, there wasn't one.

Yeah. That's right. I never lost a single Harlequin.

They're all here right now. When I sip my drink, they sip. When I call over the waiter, so do they. A perfect, twisted mirror. An entire fucking fun house.

Look at them. They snigger and chuckle and roll on the floor. Why? That one over there in the purple hat, pointing at me as I point at him. What makes him so great? What's he ever done with his life?

Or those three. The Triplets I call them, lounging on the ceiling with their dangling, blood-stained bells. What right do they have to judge me?

Even on my flights to LA, Hong Kong, Berlin, they're there. Lining the aisles. Sitting on the wings, kicking up their belled heels into space, grazing the clouds, looking at me with their blank masks, but I can tell - YOU can tell - that they're grinning, grinning, grinning.

I walk down the street and they follow along, prancing in lockstep behind me, like my army of fools. I ride the small glass elevator to my empty penthouse, but they just crowd in beside me, or sit on the walls, the ceiling, sideways, upside-down or just float along outside, but always there, always mirroring every movement they deem worthy of derision. In the evenings I often stand at my window, swirling a glass of scotch, seeing all the Harlequins that line the rooftops and ledges of the neighbouring buildings. All those blank masks, watching the show.

You'd think the shame would disappear after a while, but no. The sting is just as venomous as it was that very first day, with my very first Harlequin.

So I failed, but not entirely. I've always been good at leveraging a bad situation to my advantage.

You know how I got to where I am today? By finding the right motivators. The only thing that keeps me sane, that distracts me from the Harlequins, is my work. 20 hour days of perfect focus and some drugs. That's my treatment, that's my cure, and it works.

Sure, sometimes I'm forced to take a day off, but I just work from home. The CEO loves it, says I'm a team player, but it's not about the team. My house is so quiet. No wife, no kids, no pets, no friends, and definitely no roommates. I can really drill down into the numbers, really pay attention to what matters: managing assets, turning the wheels of the global economy, being a master of the universe.

And it keeps me from thinking too hard about... about... I don't know what. It's been floating through my mind since the moment the first Harlequin arrived. Slithering and creeping behind the veil of my thoughts, behind the Harlequins. A shadow. A mirror. A mockery.

I guess... I just wish I knew what was so entertaining, what's so funny. It makes no sense to me. Maybe it never will.

Damn. Look at the time. You shoulda warned me, kid! I was supposed to have those foreclosure reports finished this morning.

Alright, everybody up. Let's go. Lotta money to be made.