Phantasmagoria

by GavotteAndGigue

Summary

Jason's latest safe house is haunted. He thinks he can handle it… because he doesn't have much of a choice. After a pit-crazed breakdown where he woke up amidst a room full of bodies, Jason isolates himself from the other bats until he can get the pit-madness reigned in. However, the spirit activity keeps increasing, pushing at the edges of his sanity and driving him further and further out of control. Will he succumb to the darkness before he can make it out of his own safe house alive?
Happy Halloween! I am kicking off the spooky season with this piece :) Many thanks (again!) to @stevieraebarnes for the pre-read and feedback!

Warnings: See tags. This is meant to be mostly psychological horror, but there are mentions and depictions of violence and blood, including people getting shot. There may be references to demonic names. If any of this makes you uncomfortable, please be warned.

Jason coughed and heaved, blinking the pelting rain out of his eyes as he crawled out of Gotham River and up the embankment. His arms shook with strain as he leveraged himself up, grabbing onto the roadside railing in an attempt to get his feet under him.

He slipped more than once, a sharp pain tearing through his left thigh as soon as he put pressure on it. A few moments of binding pain, several deep breaths to regain control, and eventually he managed to heft himself over the railing. He dragged himself across the road and toward the cover of darkened buildings. He ducked into an alley, flattened himself against the brick wall to get his bearings before he slid down to the ground, unable to hold himself upright any longer.

He curled into himself as he struggled to reign in his spiraling panic, measuring out his breaths to calm his rapidly beating heart. He had to figure out where he was. He had to figure out where to go before they found him.

He pulled himself together enough to inspect his surroundings, noting the mid-rise industrial mixed-use buildings along the street. He was in the old Gotham Fashion District, but that hardly made sense -- the last thing he remembered was taking a dive into the river near Burnley. Between then and now, he had somehow swum several miles into one of the narrow channels while injured and incapacitated.

Jason remembered none of it. Didn’t know how he had managed to navigate upstream in the darkness… had no idea how he had managed to maneuver around the barges and container ships and boat docks to get to the secluded corner of Gotham where he now was.

His mind was drawing a blank, but even so, he had to get sheltered. The rainstorm had only come down harder in the last several minutes, escalating into a deluge that seemed to weigh down what was left of his already soaked clothing. His helmet and jacket were missing, and his armor and gear were torn in several places. He felt cold, shivers wracking his form as he struggled to stand again. He wouldn't last long like this. He had to find somewhere to hole up before he was overcome by hypothermia, and there was only one place that was close enough to get to in his current state.

It wasn't very well secured and didn't have much in the way of supplies, but it had the bare minimum to suffice. It was an old burned out tenement he had bought through one of Talia's holding companies when he first returned to Gotham. The building was over a hundred years old and had suffered considerable damage during a fire some years back. He had managed to wire the building up with a few closed circuit cameras and basic alarm, and then made sure every window was
boarded up and the entrances barricaded. It was one of the few places Jason had available that hadn't been rooted out at some point by the Bats. Probably because technically Talia still owned it, and even Bruce had never been able to successfully ferret out all her various nests. It was one place in Gotham where no one knew to come looking for him.

It was several blocks away though, and getting there as he was -- wounded and on the verge of falling apart -- it felt too daunting, but....

… he didn't have any other options at the moment. Dick would be looking for him. Bruce too, but after what happened he couldn't let them find him. He couldn't face that look on Dick's face again. Couldn't bare the thought of Bruce's disappointment and disapproval. He needed to be alone. He needed to be unseen, unheard, and undisturbed until he could get himself under control....

He must have blanked out again, because the next thing Jason knew, he was stumbling through the roof access of the abandoned tenement that was his safe house, tripping down the stairs and into the first empty flat he found.

He collapsed onto the floor, only to scramble up again when something flitted past the corner of his eye. He crab walked backward until his back hit the wall, hand moving to his holster, eyes darting back and forth trying to track in the whatever it was he saw....

There seemed to be too much movement in the shadows suddenly, too much interplay between dark and dim, startling him into drawing his gun. It was empty. He could feel the weight of it, the cartridge had been spent, but he still kept it aimed at the murky shadows surrounding him. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears as he spun, whirling at everything and nothing in the pitch black corners of the room.

He closed his eyes, sucked in a few desperate lungfuls of air as he tried to temper down the surge of irrational fear. Safe, he tried to tell himself. Safe. He was someplace reasonably safe. Now, he had to assess his injuries.

He stripped out of dripping wet clothes and armor. Everything felt raw and hypersensitive, the scrape of sodden material against his skin made him itch and burn despite the cold. It made him want to claw at his skin… it made him think of the galvanic sting that was the touch of green waters. The acrid taste of copper seemed to flood under his tongue… sulfur and brimstone in his nostrils… a haze of rage threatened to monopolize his senses, and his mind flashed back to earlier in the night....

He became aware of a heavy pressure on his chest. Something forceful was on top of him, pushing hard and pinning him down. Jason heaved and shoved and twisted until he threw whatever it was off of him. He was vaguely aware of someone shouting his name. It sounded like Dick… but he couldn't see. There was something in his eyes. He wiped at his face, and then looked down at his hands. They were covered in gore, and then....

He snapped awake. Suddenly Jason was back in the present, and he jerked at the jarring shift in consciousness with such force he fell backward, almost as if he'd been pushed. He curled into himself as a stabbing pain shot through his leg. He focused on it. Concentrated on the throbbing as it slowly subsided, breathing long, deep breaths and using it to ground himself in the present.

It was night, still storming outside, which meant he'd only lost himself for a moment. A few minutes at most.

He slowly sat up and took stock of himself again. He was still in the tenement safe house.
He forced himself to pay attention to the most immediate task -- what he was trying to do before he blacked out -- he needed to gauge the extent of his injuries. He groped through the darkness, feeling his way around until he found the room that held his stock of supplies -- flashlights, candles, first aid, a spare revolver. His clothes discarded, he inspected the wound in his leg. There was a bullet gone clean through his thigh, several ribs cracked, and too many bruises and cuts all over his body to count. He patched himself up with swathes of gauze -- hands trembling too much to attempt stitches -- swallowed year-old expired antibiotics, and then laid down on a makeshift pallet of loose blankets on the floor.

Jason drifted in and out, fever wracking his body from the onset of infection. His physical injuries were painful, but he would deal with it. He had done it before, suffered through more serious injuries and sprung right back. Even sprung out of the dirt from his coffin once, alive and kicking… but it was the haze of green clouding his vision that had him fearful. The encroaching rage that threatened to overtake him, clawing at his perception and twisting everything toxic. He couldn't hide from the images that flashed across his memory. He couldn't help the scenes that once again flashed through his head.

“Jason, wait! Stop! Jason… Jason, no!”

Dick’s voice echoed in his thoughts, and Jason put his hands over his ears and screwed his eyes tight. He tried to distract himself by focusing on the pain of the bullet wound in his thigh as he brought his knees closer to his chest.

A dismembered body… the dead blank eyes of a young girl. A bullet ripping apart a man’s skull from point blank range. The spatter of blood across his face, warm and wet as he blinked the results of his savagery from his eyes…. The look of abject horror on Dick’s masked face….

He was cold. He trembled as wind and rain seeped in through the seams of the boarded-up windows. Winter was setting in, and the temperature dropped further as the pitter of rain turned to the clatter of sleet.

There was a sudden flash of lightning that illuminated the frame of the window. For a brief moment, time stood still. The cacophony of sleet seemed to go silent. The howling wind hushed, and even the pulsing beat of his heart seemed to pause. He held his breath…

… and then thunder cracked, loud and forceful, a visceral rumble in the air around him. Jason jumped involuntarily at the sound, instinctively reaching for the revolver he’d tucked under the rags he used as a pillow.

Another bright flash of lightning again, this time it filled the entire room with blinding white… and then flashes of green began to fill his vision. His hand tightened on the trigger of the gun as his skin prickled with electricity, escalating until it felt like he was burning. He arched as the fire on his skin spread across his body, a bubbling anger and rage overtook his senses.

Another round of thunder began rumbling in the distance, coming closer until it felt as if it was reverberating within his skull. His body convulsed and he was shaking hard. He felt as if the entire building… the world… everything was shaking.

He opened his mouth to scream, and then he knew no more.

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Bang.
He came back to himself as he was pulling the trigger of his gun. The press of his finger. The taught double-action of the cock and release of the hammer.

_Bang._

The roll of recoil. Reposition. Squeeze the trigger. Fire.

_Bang._

Muscle memory ran him through the motions.


The cylinder was empty, his ears were ringing from the report, and he felt more then heard the continuing snap of the hammer and piston as he kept pulling the trigger.

_Click. Click. Click... Click... Click..._  

He stopped, his eyes coming into focus on his target. It was what was left of a large floor mirror that had been leaning against a wall. Jason could see his reflection in the triangular shards that still clung to the metal frame. The fracture lines cutting across the paleness of his face and the dark hollows of his eyes. There was a series of bullet holes dead center in the now exposed wall behind the broken frame. Shattered mirror glass littered the floor.

He lowered his shaking arm to his side, the revolver slipping from his hand to thud against the hardwood. He dropped to his knees as he stared at what he had just done… tried to put the pieces together of how he had ended up pulling a gun at his own reflection. The last thing he remembered was huddling in a pile of blankets as a thunderstorm raged outside. It had been the dark of night, but though the room he was standing in was dim, he could tell it was day by the faint streams of warm light from the windows.  

His body ached. His thigh in particular protested immensely, and Jason looked down to see blood had soaked through the thin sweats he was wearing. Slowly, he picked up the empty revolver and pushed himself up onto his bare feet, did a slow turn to inspect the room he was in…. He was still in the abandoned tenement safe house -- blackened ceiling, boarded up windows and sooty wood floors.  

He limped out of the room, his feet dragging trails in the dust until he made it out into the hall. The corridor was narrow, the surfaces all a monochromatic gradient of ash gray and scorched black. Decades ago, before Jason was even born, dozens of people were trapped here as the building was engulfed in flames. The out-of-code corridors and stairwells were too narrow and winding for the panicked residents to escape. The billowing smoke too suffocating, the painted-shut windows too secure in their jammed frames, the lack of fire escapes too impeding, and the brick and stone of the walls too effective at turning the structure into an appalling furnace as the flames blazed upward from the basement. 

The gruesome history was known to him even before he had initially secured it. It was a morbid tale told to children across all of Lower Gotham. He had counted on that local lore during his early days as the Red Hood. It guaranteed that there would be little interest in the safehouse from a multitude of fronts. No one wanted to invest in or redevelop a literal charnel house. Local gangs, street urchins, and the homeless alike avoided it like the plague due to its reputation. Occasional ghost hunters would attempt to breach the premises, but the place held enough lingering unease that eventually visits from thrill seekers dwindled to none.
The previous owner had initiated some renovations at one point, before being sued into insolvency, and Jason hadn't bothered to do much more. He had been busy at the time, so other than some minor security measures, he had merely cached the top floor with a few armaments and food supplies. He left the rest of the building mostly untouched.

Surprisingly, many of the doors lining the hall where he was standing were still intact. Jason realized he was somewhere on the middle floors where the fire hadn't fully reached. Most of the damage was from the suffocating smoke that had saturated the higher levels of the building. The indented air shaft of the tenement allowed for additional windows and ventilation, but during the fire it had essentially served like a flue, funneling the smoke of the flames upward like a giant chimney. It had filled every room with asphyxiant gases.

Entire families died here. Men. Women. Children. Trampling each other in the overcrowded halls as they gasped and grasped and crawled over each other, before succumbing to ash and heat. What survived was the bones of the old building, the interior structure surprisingly steadfast and sound.

Jason trudged toward the end of the hall toward the single narrow stairwell. He paused at the landing, looking up and then down at the column of steep switchback steps. It was really only wide enough for a single full grown person. Someone coming from the opposite direction would have to press against the wall for another to get by. Clearly not enough capacity to evacuate an entire building. Clearly not a good idea for an injured and disoriented person to stumble up or down.

He leaned against a wall, trying to weigh his options. He looked back at the stairwell, which remained stubbornly shadowed. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he regretted boarding the windows up. He took a step forward onto the staircase, and then hesitated. He could barely make out more than a few steps in front of him, and the climb upward seemed incredibly daunting. His leg and every cut and bruise seemed to throb and ache. Tremors ran through his body, both from lingering fever and from… from his most recent episode.

He pushed himself forward, away from the wall, leaning in to take another pained step, when suddenly from behind him he heard a low keening sound.

Creee….eee… eak….

Jason whirled to see a door down the hall was slowly swinging shut of its own accord. He heard the click of the latch as it settled into the frame, and something cold ran through him. His hackles raised as a tinge of green crept into the corners of his vision.

No. No.

It was just the wind. Just the wind funneling through the cracks of the boarded up windows. Just the force of pressure as the air circulated through. It was just the wind. Just the wind….

Jason repeated it to himself as he pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and tried to will away the sickly cloud of citron-haze engulfing his vision. It had never been quite this bad before. At least not with the blackouts, and not since he'd left Talia and her tutors to plot his confrontation with Bruce. There had been brief lapses where he would vacillate between burning rage and stone cold callousness, but this was… this was… he didn't know what this was.

All he knew was that it wasn't good. He needed to figure out what was happening to him before he killed someone he didn't mean to kill. Before he hurt someone he didn't want to hurt….

There was a hand reaching for him in the darkness. A firm grip on his arm that made him cringe. He grabbed and twisted, heard something snap and a yelp of pain as he threw the assailant over his
shoulder.

Bang! There was a ringing in his ears, and then coughing. Sputtering.

Belatedly, he realized he should have recognized the blue finger stripes.

“Nightwing!” A deep, gruff voice.

“I'm fine. Just a graze. I shouldn't have touched him. There's something wrong. This isn’t right....”

He blinked, but all Jason could see were the outlines of crumpled forms lying amidst the shadows. The sprawled lifeless limbs. The splotches of red. Through the green haze he could see Dick kneeling on the floor, blood smeared on his face, his arm cradled at his side. Batman, crouching beside him, hands open and held low. Wary. Ready to spring.

“Jason… can you hear me? Jason?” Dick was calling to him. “Jason, it's me. Put it down.”

Put it down? He blinked again… trying to clear the cottony green blur out of his eyes to see Dick's expression. He looked stricken, looking past something dull and metallic pointed at him, and Jason realized it was a gun. Jason was pointing a gun at Dick.

Shit. He’d shot Dick. Jason's heart jackhammered in his chest. He took a step back.

“Jason, wait!”

He turned and ran.

Jason jolted upright. Had he fallen asleep? His chest felt tight and his breathing was labored, but the vestiges of the memory was rapidly fading.

Dick… he would be fine, Jason told himself. Especially with Bruce there. He had missed, and Jason had vague memories of the two of them giving chase afterwards.

Dick was fine.

Jason was not.

He was still in the hallway, seated at the stairwell landing. Everything was still dark. Even darker than before -- the faint streams of yellow light that filtered through the cracks were gone, replaced by a cold blue cast of dim moonlight.

Had hours past? Had he blacked out again for that long? Jason pushed himself up, leaning on the wall for purchase as his wounded leg continued to throb, trying to clear his head and figure out what the hell he was going to do.

What could he do? If this was something pit-related, there weren't many left that he could turn to. His mentors in the All-Caste were dead. Talia was… an option of last resort. Dick and Bruce -- he didn’t want to face them. Didn't think he could even if he wanted to. Not without the risk of putting a bullet through one of them for real next time. He didn't want that. Not anymore.

That left figuring whatever this was out on his own. Maybe he just needed to hole up for a few more days? Keep himself calm and get himself centered… maybe it would go away, just like it had in the past when he'd been afflicted with bouts of pit-rage.

But first, he had to get out of the damn hallway. Another glance up at the depthless black of the staircase had him deciding to go down. It would mean he would have more ‘up’ to traverse at some
point in the future since his supplies were upstairs, but he could think about that later. Right now, he
didn’t have enough reserve in him to do any more. Plus if he could make it to the basement, he could
reach the circuit breaker and switch on the electricity. Maybe then he would at least be able to see
something in the dank darkness of this safehouse.

Jason descended the stairs slowly, fumbling a shaky grasp of the handrail as he eased his weight
down one step at a time. It was more like a controlled falling rather than any semblance graceful
motion. He could barely see, but he made it down one flight, then two. Another floor and then he
would be at the ground level where he could access the basement.

That's when he noticed it -- the inky black shadow.

It moved. It followed.

He could only see it out of the corner of his eye, a lumpy shape somehow impossibly darker than the
surrounding shadows. When he looked right at it, it would disappear. When he turned away, it was
back. It was only a few feet tall, but it was wide, almost as if it was someone squatting. Or crawling.

Goosebumps pimpled his skin as he moved down a few steps and waited, keeping it in the periphery
of his vision. The shape remained deathly still as Jason took in a few steadying breaths. A few
moments later, it lurched forward. A dark limb stretched out. And then another. The mass of shadow
silently moving down an equivalent number of steps, pausing just a few feet away, and then it was
suddenly gone.

He wasn’t afraid. Not exactly. A walking dead man like himself straddled the line with ghosts more
than he would ever admit, and the All-Caste had trained him against wandering revenants. He could
assess a threat, even if it was incorporeal. Besides the chill up his spine, he didn’t sense any
malevolent power through the All-Blades embedded in his soul. There was no reason to be afraid.
There was no reason for his palms to feel clammy and slippery against the railing. There was no
reason for the shallow misting breaths that he could barely see puffed out in furls in the cold air. No
reason for the rapid beat of his heart. It was probably just the effects of the pit…. It was probably
playing tricks on his mind… warping his perception.

Whatever it was, it was gone now. Jason continued downward.

At the base of the stairs on the ground floor, Jason felt around until he found a toolbox he had
stashed back when he had first set up the building. It contained a flashlight, and the brightness of the
LED was temporarily blinding as it cut a circle of light into the pitch black. He waited until his eyes
adjusted, and then shuffled around the bend of the stairwell to open the door into the basement.

The stairs here had been one of the first things to be rebuilt before the insurance payments to the
previous investors had dried up. Even though they were relatively knew, the wood of the step still
groaned with each placement of his bare feet. Even with his training, it would be hard to get down
here unannounced. Not that anyone was listening….

He reached the bottom, feeling the smooth concrete of the floor against his soles, careful to ease each
stride so as not to stumble his already injured body against any construction debris. He groped along
the half done walls, following the bare pipes and exposed wiring along the studs until he found the
circuit breaker. He was just about to flip open the latch door to the fuse box, when he heard
something behind him.

Scritch. Scritch. There was a scraping sound coming from the far side of the room. Jason spun,
casting the spotlight back and forth until he landed on the source. There was something dark in the
corner, peeking out behind a pile of discarded two-by-fours. Something hunched, and black, and
moving. It seemed to uncurl itself, growing taller and larger and more humanoid by the second. At the same time, the flashlight flickered, and Jason shook it, trying desperately not to lose his only source of light. It was to no avail. The light petered out.

Now, in the darkness, where the figure had been huddled in the far corner, there was a strange green glow coming from the ground. Some kind of pattern of dull light. Some kind of a symbol. A circle.

The dark figure remained still and featureless -- that same darker than black specter he had seen before on the stairwell. It was now large and unmistakably standing before him. It leaned forward… taking a long stride toward him… quickening its pace.

Jason reached behind him, quickly fumbling the latch of the breaker box open to flip the fuse.

In the next split second, the lights flickered on -- a stuttering burst of fluorescence from the overhead tubes alternating the basement between a quick staccato of dark and light.

It was probably only a couple seconds at most, but at last the lights stabilized, filling every inch of the previously pitch black basement with a continuous harsh glow.

The figure he had seen was gone. The basement was empty, save for himself.

Had he imagined it? Was it another trick of the mind caused by the pit? Or had it been real?

He wasn’t sure. And sticking around here probably wasn’t going to help him find out. He turned back to the breaker to flip the rest of the fuses, only to have his hand pass through something cold. It felt like ice, wrapping around his wrist and hand. He whipped his head around, only to stare into the depthlessness of the black figure that was now behind him.

His eyes widened in horror. He opened his mouth to curse, but the ice cold suddenly ripped through him. It almost felt hot as it filled his mouth and nose, burning into his lungs. It felt like he was drowning. Flashes of the green waters invaded his mind before the darkness enveloped him.

Everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

- I know what you’re thinking -- Jason, have you NEVER seen ANY horror movie EVER? Why the hell would you go into the BASEMENT??? Because, yes.
- This is a WIP, and is more "in progress" than what I've posted before, but my plan is to have this finished by the end of the year… so I’m gonna go ahead and say feel free to bug me or ask me questions if you want to see more! It will be motivation for me :)
- As always, leave a kudo if you enjoyed this, and I love love love comments!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this took a little longer to get out, but here it is. There is more spook (I hope) along the lines of the first chapter and a JayDick scene, but not graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He woke up in the shower. Literally in the shower, standing under a battering hot spray that had him flinching backwards in surprise. His foot slipped against the smooth enamel, sending him flailing and tumbling onto the tub floor. His elbow caught against the rim, his leg cramping in sharp stabbing pain as he levered himself into a sitting position.

Jason looked down at himself. He was nude, and there was blood running down the drain from the bullet wound in his thigh. The entry point was puckered and swollen, ugly red streaks of infection reaching outward and up.

Shit. That was bad.

He moved to shut off the water and pull back the shower curtain. Jason was in what he vaguely recognized as the only working bathroom in the tenement, located on the first residential floor where the renovations had stopped. He couldn’t remember how he had gotten here. The last thing he remembered was being in the basement, where something had attacked him…. The next thing he knew, he was here.

The lights were on, and at some point during his missing time, someone had lit the pilot light to the boiler if there was hot water. Was there someone else here? Or was this another trick of the pit?

He remained wary as he retrieved his soiled sweats from the floor, slipping them on over his shower-wet skin. The air was cold once he stepped out of the bathroom, causing him to shiver and tense as he quietly moved out of the empty apartment and down the hall. The memory of black figure was still fresh in his mind’s eye as he followed his own bloody footprints, hugging the corners, listening and watching for any signs of intruders. There were none.

He tracked the bloody trail until he reached the basement door and paused. He didn’t want to go down there again. Not when he was disoriented and unarmed. Instead he turned back down the corridor toward another door with a keypad. If the lights were on, that meant the interior security cameras should be up and running too.

He punched in the code, slipped into the small monitor room and pulled up the footage. The cameras had only been running a couple hours and he quickly scrubbed to the beginning of the footage, watching the image of himself flicker onto the screen of the basement monitor.

The screen showed he was alone. No sign of any mysterious black figure. No sign that he was any more injured than he had been when he went down there. He was merely crouching on the floor for a long time, hands clutched around his leg as if in pain. Jason fast-forwarded the video, and then watched as the recording showed him slowly get up to light the boiler, then slowly proceed up the basement steps.
Jason switched to the first floor monitor, and watched the video of himself painstakingly limp up the steps from the ground floor toward the apartment with the bathroom, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind him.

Fast forward. An hour later, the image of himself emerging from the apartment. He watched as the recording showed him creeping along the hallway. He observed himself confusedly studying his own trail, retracing his steps until he redirected into the monitor room he was now standing in.

There had been no black figure. There was no one else in the tenement.

It had all been in his head.


The climb back up the stairs was brutal. Every step sent searing pain up his leg and lower back. The infection was spreading, which was all the more reason he had to get back to the top floor. Upstairs was where he stashed the med kit. Upstairs was where he kept the antibiotics. Upstairs was where he had spare clothes and blankets to ward off the chill of winter. The heat of the shower had quickly evaporated from his skin, and the thin pair of sweats he had on did little to retain what warmth he had left. He was trembling so badly his teeth were chattering. His shakey breathes pained with each rattle of his cracked ribs.

It was cold. Really. Fucking. Cold. It was freezing. And it was dark. Despite the power being on, Jason kept the lights off, using only the salvaged flashlight in his hand. Much as he’d done with the cameras, he had limited the electrical wiring to the major hallways and staircase, using low wattage bulbs to minimize the light. Any faint glow through the cracks in the window boards would tip off a vigilant outsider to the building’s occupancy.

Jason only needed enough light to get upstairs, but in his current state, six residential floors felt nigh impossible. He cursed himself for every stupid choice he made that led to him being stuck here. The tenement was intended only for intermediate storage, where he could restock and re-arm quickly. He had never finished setting it up because he never planned to be here more than a few hours at a time, and certainly not like this…. Not while so incapacitated. He had other places set aside for situations as such, with contacts and favors lined up to be called in if necessary, but his hasty flight and panicked state of mind the previous night hadn't left him many options. The burned out tenement was a bolt-hole of last resort only if the situation demanded, which it did, but now he was fucked.

If he didn't get his ass upstairs and swallow some damn cephalosporin pills, he was going to die from septic shock before anyone found him.

One step at a time. One seemingly leaden foot up and over each dust-covered stair, pushing himself upward. At one point he pitched forward, crashed onto his elbows and knees. He breathed through the lancing pain up and down his body as he used his forearms to drag himself another few steps.

He felt simultaneously hot and cold. He was drenched in sweat, heat radiating from his brow. He wouldn’t make it up the stairs like this. Coming here had been a mistake. Everything he’d done, starting from that first knock on his door, had been a mistake…

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Three solid raps on his door. Jason immediately stilled, turned silently and wiped his hands. He’d been in the middle of making himself a sandwich, getting ready to eat before going out for his nightly
activities as the Red Hood. He wasn’t expecting any visitors, and as with anything unexpected, he was immediately wary. It could be someone gunning to kill him, or it could be a Bat.

Jason eased the gun out of of his holster as he tiptoed to the security monitor. The screen blinked on. It was a Bat.

More specifically, it was Dick, dressed casually in a jacket and jeans, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he glanced up and down the hallway of the apartment building. He waited another few moments for Jason to respond. Jason didn’t. He watched as Dick raised his hand to rap again on the door.


In hindsight, maybe it had been a mistake to let Dick in that day, but there was something that had Jason pausing as soon as he opened the door. There was something in the seriousness of Dick’s mien -- something a little too put on about the smile he wore in greeting that had Jason swallowing the caustic retort on the tip of his tongue.

Jason stepped aside to let Dick enter, and then proceeded back to the kitchen to finish preparing his dinner. Dick followed, and when he didn't immediately offer an explanation for his presence, Jason prompted, “I take it this isn't a social call?”

"What if it was?" Dick teased, his face brightening a little as he scooted a chair out to sit at the small kitchen table.

“I'd say bullshit,” Jason replied, but his curiosity was piqued. Dick didn’t normally drop in on him like this. They'd worked together on various family and not-family missions over the last year, but it was usually preceded with a text or a buzz in his comm. They usually met in costume at some predetermined location and time, not at each other's safehouses in their civvies. Dick clearly wanted something showing up unannounced like this, but what?

Jason eyed him out of the corner of his eye. Dick seemed a little off. It wasn't so much that Dick looked particularly out of sorts, he just seemed… tired. Exhausted. The first boy wonder was normally full of disgustingly upbeat energy, but today he was a little more subdued. Not enough to set off alarm bells, but enough for Jason to notice.

Jason sliced upon a ciabatta roll and popped it in the toaster oven, taking the opportunity to look more directly at Dick as he turned back toward the counter. He looked oddly comfortable sitting in Jason's kitchen chair. He definitely looked a bit haggard though, judging by the dark circles under his eyes. It was the only thing marring his too-perfect features, and even then it didn't detract much from his overall appearance. Dick was still irritingly attractive. He still possessed that infuriatingly nonpareil grace and elegance that always made Jason feel like a schlub.

Dick's tired eyes flitted over the spread of sandwich fixings laid out on the counter. He also looked hungry. Jason sighed and took out another roll of ciabatta bread.

“Come on, out with it,” Jason sliced the cheese with a little more rigor than was really needed. “I haven’t killed anyone in recent memory, so if you’re here to bust my chops about something let's get it over with.”

“What? No.” Dick looked taken aback, and Jason felt a little guilty. He hadn't intentionally meant to be antagonistic, but he had gotten used to circling the Bats with teeth bared. He didn't really know how else to interact.
“I need some intel,” Dick refocused and continued, “and I was hoping I could get your help. I’m working a case.” He pulled a small tablet from inside his jacket and handed it over.

Jason took it, thumbing through the case photos. A young woman, brutally murdered, dismembered and discarded in a dumpster. Jason stared at her cold dead eyes, a feeling of anger and rage boiling up inside him.

“Maria Lee,” Dick’s voice broke into Jason's train of escalating emotion. “She was the first of five victims found so far across Blüdhaven over the last six months.”

A serial killer then. Jason flipped through several more photos, several more bodies, scanning Dick's notes and the toxicology results. The pattern, methods, location and timing certainly supported the M.O. of some deranged character, but something wasn’t quite right. Dick didn't need anyone's help to handle a regular investigation. On the surface it looked to be a series of grisly murders perpetrated by one sick individual, but there had to be more to it than that. There must have been something specific that drove Dick to show up at Jason's door.

“The precision cuts, the anesthesia,” Jason let his stream of thought flow aloud as he re-examined the case reports. “The perp has medical training. A surgeon. Blood type matches across the victims, genetic markers, and the organs that have been removed… this isn't just a serial killer.”

“Right,” Dick nodded. “I suspect it's a cover for an organ trafficking operation. Hacked medical records for each victim. These people, and maybe more, were targeted for harvest based on their genetic makeup.”

Jason put the tablet down, held his curled fists against his sides. “Who?” It came out almost like a growl.

“I don't know yet,” Dick took the tablet back and tapped a few commands, bringing up a mugshot of a rough looking man with a black eye and a split lip. “Found this guy trying to pawn a piece of jewelry that belonged to Maria. After a little persuasion, he confessed that he'd been hired to dump her body after the Red Hood flushed out his employer's operations from Gotham.”

Ah. There it was. That's why Dick needed him. Someone Jason had shut down had packed up and moved a little down the road to Blüdhaven. The list of possible suspects that fit the timeframe ranged from various local cartels and mafias to international syndicates and middle men, but it was still a shorter list to start with than if Dick had attempted it from scratch. If medical records were being hacked to target specific individuals, it suggested that this was more than a lone actor. This was a sophisticated operation.

“Send me the data,” Jason made to reach again for the tablet. “I'll find them. I'll bring them down.”

“No,” Dick held the tablet out of reach. “We both share what we've got. We need to do this together. We can cover more ground and find them faster.”

Jason's first instinct was to argue -- to fight for ownership of the case. His actions had set the ball rolling into Dick's turf, so it was Jason’s responsibility to fix it… but this wasn't about him. Lives were at stake, and Dick was right -- they could solve this faster if they teamed up, and Jason wasn't going to let another person die just because he couldn't swallow his pride.

At the same time, Jason didn’t have to do it without putting up a fuss, because Dick was giving him that look. Like he had known all along how Jason would react, but was countering it with that expression that said he was expecting better from Jason. Because Dick always did. Just like Bruce. Even if Jason had already done his best… it just never seemed good enough….
“Fine.” Jason used the blunt side of his bread knife to stuff a layer of salami and calabrese into the ciabatta roll. Of course he would help. The fact that Dick thought he wouldn’t was irksome, but then he looked up at Dick and saw those dark circles again, this time also noticing a slight gauntness to his cheeks. This case was really wearing on him for some reason.

Jason layered a bit more salami onto the roll, then spread the top slice with mustard and tapenade before pressing it back together. He mentally rearranged his earlier plans for the night as he put the sandwich on a plate, holding it in one hand as he held out his other for the tablet.

A pleased grin broke across Dick’s face as he handed the tablet over, and Jason gave him the sandwich in trade. Some of the tension seemed to ease out from Dick then. He was smiling again, more like his normal self as he took a bite.

“Wow, this is great Jay!” He was talking with his mouth full, and Jason felt something warm knot inside his chest. He scowled and pretended to be annoyed, because he did not think Dick was adorable in that moment. Not at all. It was a relief to see Dick perk up though. He wasn’t sure why, but Jason hadn’t liked seeing Dick looking run down. It sparked a niggle of worry. Dick was usually Mr. Perfect. The fact that this case was getting under his skin was unusual.

All of the Bats took their work seriously. They all felt the rage and anger at the injustice of the crimes, but at some point you had to to draw a line of mental and emotional separation. A case was a case. You had to stay impartial as much as possible and not let yourself get personally invested every time. If you did, the darkness would suck you dry. It was harder perhaps, for someone like Dick who often wore his heart on his sleeve, but they all learned to this lesson pretty quickly. There were always cases where it was harder to draw that line though, and for Dick this looked to be one of them. Jason wondered again as to why, but Dick didn’t immediately volunteer, and Jason didn’t want to pry.

Jason finished preparing his own dinner and sat down across from Dick at the table, transferring the data from the tablet onto his own laptop. He compiled a list of leads, catalogued the sites that he hadn’t personally burnt to the ground, and then split the list between him and Dick to scout for clues. The sites were mostly vacated at this point, but if they could confirm which organization had been the perpetrators, they could follow the trail into Blüdhaven.

The first night was a bust, and so was the second. The various properties and hideouts of the multiple suspects were numerous and spread across the entirety of Gotham, and even with the two of them hitting a couple sites at a time they didn’t make any immediate headway other than crossing a few organizations off the list.


Dick showed up at Jason’s door each night to coordinate their investigation even though they could have done it over their comms, but Jason didn’t complain even as he felt a twinge of something each time he opened the door to Dick’s sullen smile. Felt that twinge again every time Jason set a plate in from him. Felt something that was uncomfortably akin to worry when Dick was looking more and more exhausted as each night went on.

At the end of the third night, Dick followed him home and flopped into the kitchen chair as Jason pulled out his laptop. Dick peeled off his mask, the hollows of his eyes even darker and more prominent than they were a few days ago.

“What the hell, Dick?” The outburst seemed to surprise the both of them, but Jason didn’t bother to hide the flood of concern.
Dick looked back at him quizzically, “What?”

“You haven't been sleeping.” Jason surprised himself a second time with his own tone. It came out sounding a lot like Bruce. “Why is this case so personal?”

“It's not,” Dick shook his head, but Jason wasn’t convinced.

“Maria. The first victim. You knew her,” Jason probed. “Was she… were you seeing her?”

“What? No!” Dick looked genuinely shocked at the conjecture. “Nothing like that. Nothing like that at all. But…” Dick covered his face with his hands and sighed, before bringing them back down to look Jason in the eye. “I did know her. A little. She was my neighbor. She lived with her family. Sometimes I’d see them in the hall. Sometimes they’d bring me food. They were nice to me, and they’re good people. And then one day, Maria didn’t come home from school.”

He paused and looked away before he continued, “I can hear them crying. Every day. Every single day and every single night. Her mom. Her dad. Her sister. They’re always crying, and when they’re not, they’re fighting. Constantly screaming at each other. I can hear it -- everything -- through the walls. Maria's death… they blame each other. It's torn them completely apart.”

Oh. Shit. It was no wonder why Dick couldn’t sleep. How could you sleep when you were constantly hearing someone else’s pain? For someone as empathetic as Dick, that was a certain kind of torture. It was no wonder he wasn't taking care of himself. He was being haunted by the living -- their grief a constant reminder of his own loss as a child, and Dick was most certainly blaming himself for not being able to stop it. The weight of the guilt was probably the reason why he hadn’t simply decided to sleep elsewhere - it was a murder that happened right under his nose.

“Why don’t you crash here,” Jason found himself saying. “Get some rest. I'll do a little more work to refine the parameters, but you won’t do any good if you’re dead on your feet. Go lie down.”

The fact that Dick didn’t protest was testament to his level of exhaustion. He gave a small nod and got up from the table. Jason spent another hour or so tweaking his search, narrowing down the list of possible suspects. It was sunrise as Jason got up from the table to head to his bedroom, but he was surprised to find that Dick hadn't crashed on the couch like Jason had expected him to. Nope, of course he didn't. Instead of the couch, Dick had stripped out of his gear and curled up in Jason’s bed.

Jason stood and stared, feeling a little incensed at being put out, and then sympathetic because Dick probably hadn’t had any decent rest for as long as this case was going on. He turned to quietly exit the bedroom, to find his own respite casted out onto his own couch, when he heard Dick rustle behind him.

“Jay, come on, there's plenty of room.” As if he weren't inviting Jason back into his own bed. Dick was like that. He’d slot into your life, like a puzzle piece you didn’t even know was missing, and before you knew it he’d taken over. He had you dropping all your own plans to follow him on some other adventure… because after just a few days, Jason had done nothing but focus on solving this case, simply because Dick had asked him to.

Maybe it had been a mistake to strip down to his undershirt and boxers and climb into the bed. Maybe it had been a mistake when after lying down with his back toward Dick, Jason turned over to find Dick rustle behind him.

Dick looked… lonely. Needy. Like he wanted Jason to touch him, and before he knew what he was doing, Jason was reaching out to stroke his hand through Dick’s hair. The next thing he knew he
was tasting Dick's mouth. Dick was rolling into him, and then on top of him as he pulled Jason's shirt over his head. Dick ran his hands in his hair as Jason pulled him close. Closer. Somewhere along the way, Dick had lost whatever underclothes he was wearing. Jason could feel the bare skin of his thighs against his own.

Dick was probably just using him as a warm body, Jason thought, to stave off the painful reminder of what it felt like to lose someone. A warm body to remind him that he wasn’t alone. A warm body to warn off the grief and misery of guilt and failure. Jason knew those feelings all too well. He could be a warm body if it meant bearing some of that weight for Dick, because Dick didn’t deserve to feel that way. Dick deserved so much better....

Maybe it had been a mistake to let Dick in, but now that he had, Jason was never going to get Dick out. It had been a mistake to open the door when Dick had first knocked, but in that moment, Jason couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Knock. Knock. Knock....

Jason lifted his head slowly at the sound. Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was more insistent this time. More hurried. Jason pushed himself up with his arms. His body felt like lead and the world was spinning as he tried to look around.

Was he still in the tenement? It was dark, but there was a window board hanging loose at the edge of the stairs where Jason was sprawled. The gap was enough to allow faint streams of moonlight to illuminate the relief of closed doors along the hall. It was definitely the tenement safehouse.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Was someone pounding on a door? Jason couldn't remember what he was doing here as he struggled into a sitting position.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

A door swung open to his left. Jason stared at it, waiting to see if anyone came out. No one did, but he heard the soft pad of footsteps from behind the walls. He started to hear low murmurs and muffled voices.

Jason fumbled against the wall, trying to find some purchase to help him stand, straining to figure out where the voices were coming from and what they were saying. He managed to get himself onto his knees, but the floors seemed to be tilting beneath him.

A cacophony of shouts. Words he couldn’t make out, and the pounding of heavier footsteps. Something rushed by him and knocked him onto his back. He still couldn’t see anything in the darkness, but something had definitely been there. He felt it. Someone had been running down the hall.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpthumpthumpthump....

More pounding, and now there was screaming coming from all around. The doors all along the hall opened. And... shit. Shit shit shit. Now he could see vague shapes. White misty shapes. They looked humanoid. They looked like people.

Jason gasped, but the air was suddenly filled with smoke. It burned as he tried to breathe. He gagged
as he tried to flip himself over to crawl back toward the stairs, but now it was aglow with flickering orange light. The floor below was on fire!

He turned toward the window, but was bowled over again by something crashing into him. It was one of the mist-shaped people. They were running up and down the hall, scrambling to find an escape. The window boards shook, as if someone was trying to rattle them loose.

Another whoosh of white mist-bodies blew past him. Through him. It felt like a kick in the ribs and Jason wheezed at the blow. The white figures were scrambling up the stairwell. He heard screams. He heard crying.

Jason moved to follow, because he didn’t know what else to do, when he felt something. It made the hairs rise on the back of his neck. It tickled at his senses, and he felt an itch under his skin that signaled the call of the All-Blades. Jason stumbled as he honed in on the feeling, turning back to face the stairs.

There was a figure approaching from the floor below, a looming dark silhouette against the glow of flames in the background. Some kind of swirling black phantasm. Jason summoned the All-blades, feeling the fire of them tear out from deep inside him.

And then he blacked out.

He was on the floor again, but this time he felt warm and comfortable and drowsy. Through the slits of his eyes, he could see a bundled figured hunched by an old-fashioned stovepipe furnace in the corner of the room. The room flickered dimly with orange fire glow. Jason blinked a few more times before it clicked -- he was in a different place than he last remembered, and he wasn’t alone. There was a stranger in the room.

Jason was up on his feet in a flash, instinct taking over before he could even process where the gun in his hand had come from. He was aiming at the stranger, tense and fight-ready.

“Who are you!” Jason rasped, his throat dry and hoarse, as if he’d been yelling. Or screaming.

The figure in the corner merely turned and looked at him. It was an old man -- hoary head of hair with a long grizzled beard. He was wrapped in some sort of dark cloth… like a blanket or cloak.

The man arched a thick brow as he spoke, “That is a strange way to say ‘thank you’ for saving your life.” He punctuated with a small chortle.

“Ha! I repeat -- I saved your life -- found you bleeding and wailing like a baby on the stairs.” His words seemed in jest, but his voice was low and rumbling. He spoke clearly, but he had some kind of indiscernible accent. Jason couldn’t quite place it, but the man's consonants were hard, and his vowels round and lilting.

“Go back to sleep, boy,” the man said. “Long is the night to him who is awake.” He let out a wheezing snicker to himself, as if he'd made some kind of joke.

The man didn't seem immediately threatening, so Jason took a moment to scan his surroundings. They weren't in a room he immediately recognized, but he remembered that some of the upper floors
of the tenement had antique furnaces like the old man was huddled beside. The man had turned away
to poke into the firebox with something thin and metallic. At first, Jason thought he was stoking the
flames with a normal fire iron, but then he saw the flat of the metal. It was some sort of blade.

“Put it down!” Jason kept the gun raised.

“Or what?” The man shrugged, clearly unconcerned. “You will shoot me with your empty gun?”

The man was right. The gun wasn't loaded. Jason knew the moment he raised it, but he had woken
up with it in his hand. Jason lowered the gun -- it was pointless with his bluff called -- and knelt to
pick up the blanket at his feet instead, wrapping it around his shoulders to keep warm. He kept a
wary eye on the old man, unsure of how to react. If the man had wanted to kill him, he could have
done so while Jason was unconscious. If the man was telling the truth about saving his life though,
he had probably patched Jason up and nursed him through his fever. That meant Jason was probably
meeting the definition of ungrateful ass.

“Come,” the old man beckoned, “you are undoing all my hard work by standing in the cold.” When
Jason still hesitated, the man lowered his blade to the floor and slid it a few feet out of reach. “Sit by
the hearth and warm yourself.”

Jason approached, his bare feet dragging through something grainy as he took a step forward. There
was a line of some white particle encircling where he had been lying onto the floor.

“Salt,” the man stroked his grizzled beard and smiled. His teeth glinted in the darkness, his face half
in shadow. “A ward against hungry ghosts, as you know.”

Salt? Ghosts? Jason vaguely remembered that Ducra had once taught him it could be used for
protection. What did the old man know of ghosts? Did he somehow know about the fire? The mist-
people trying to escape? The dark phantasm? Had it all been real after all, or had it merely been a
fever-induced delirium?

Curiosity overrode his caution and Jason found himself moving closer. The bullet wound in his leg
no longer felt excruciating, all he felt was a mild ache. He felt lucid, his mind clear and un-fevered
for the first time in what felt like ages. He stepped forward until he could slowly reach down to pick
up the man's blade. He spared it a glance and noted it had markings engraved on it, and then tucked
it against his side under the blanket. He then moved to sit as close as he could by the furnace while
still out of arm's reach.

It was warm. The stove was burning hot, and it felt good to be so close to the furnace, but then the
thought struck that smoke would give away Jason's location.

“We have to put it out.” Jason turned toward the old man, “I don’t want anyone seeing smoke
coming from here. People are looking for me.”

The old man scoffed. “Heh. I've been making fire since before you were born. Charcoal. Look. No
smoke.”

Jason looked. Sure enough, he could see the hot briquettes of the charcoal within the furnace. He
remembered having to scrounge for fuel when he was on the streets, and if he got his hands on
charcoal, it would smolder hot for hours and hours.

“Oh,” nodded, somewhat puzzled. Where the hell had the man come from, and how had he gotten
charcoal in the safehouse? And enough salt to form a protective ring for that matter? And the
comment about ghosts? Jason had so many questions, but for some reason he was struggling to
figure out what to say to the strange old man. Seeing him earlier from the other side of the room, Jason had thought perhaps he was a one of Gotham's aging homeless, who had somehow stumbled into Jason's safehouse to find shelter from the winter storms. He expected someone who was old, decrepit or infirm with failing health, but up close he was anything but.

The man was indeed old, crows feet fanning around his eyes and mouth, streaks of white and gray spread over his long hair and beard, but his eyes were sharp and alert. He had an air of poise about him. Even sitting huddled on the floor, he seemed dignified. Maybe even a little too refined, and he had spoken forthright and keenly to Jason's train of thought. Far too keenly for an ailing and aged itinerant. He didn't seem like some downtrodden vagabond. He didn't seem needy. He seemed like he knew something.

“Trust me. I am an old man.” A flash of teeth in the darkness again. Up close, Jason could see a hint of sharp canines as the man gave him a fox-like grin. “I have been doing this since long before you were born.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Teaching.”

“What are you talking about?” Jason asked in confusion. Maybe he had been mistaken and the man was mentally unstable. Maybe the man was crazier than he looked. “Who are you?”

The man gave Jason a cold look, and then huffed and turned away to stare into the smoldering embers in the furnace. “I am the man who dragged you up the stairs, sewed close the hole in your leg, and then put the pills down your throat to kill infection. Perhaps your life is a trifle to you, but if it is not, I have not yet heard those two certain words of ‘thank you.’”

“But… you... ,” Jason quelled the swirl of questions on his tongue. His rescuer was turning out to be a crotchety old man who was possibly a little senile or insane, but that didn't mean Jason shouldn't express his gratitude. “Um, sorry. Thank you for helping me.”

“You're welcome.” The reflection of the glowing briquettes looked like sparks in the man's eyes. He seemed satisfied with Jason's indebtedness, and proceeded with, “Now child, what is it you are hiding from? Why are you afraid?”

“I'm not afraid.” The denial was automatic, though Jason didn't think he was fooling anyone. Especially himself.

“Then why run from your demons into a house full of ghosts?” The man chuckled snidely.

“I'm not running.”

“Of course not,” the man humored. “Running from your demons is a fruitless endeavor. One can't escape the darkness of his own soul.”

“What do you know? You still haven't told me who you are.”

“Heh,” the man grunted. “It is more interesting to know who you are. Indulge an old man. Let me see you palm.”

“Why?” Jason eyed the man's outstretched hand suspiciously. The man had turned over his blade, but that didn't mean he couldn't still be a threat. “You're being cryptic. And creepy. Why should I trust you?”
“I’ll tell you what you want to know, but fortune first. Come now, what have you got to lose,” the man wheedled, “other than the life I already saved?”

True. Jason had been at the man's mercy in his vulnerable state, but he knew better than anyone there was plenty more to lose besides one's life. And yet… what harm was a stupid palm reading? The man didn't seem to want to answer any questions unless Jason played along.

Against his better judgement, Jason extended his hand. The man took it, shifting closer, pressing his thumb against Jason's palm so that his hand was slightly curled. It had the effect of making the lines more prominent -- small shadowed furrows in the dimly lit room.

“How. Strong lines, but all broken. Scarred. This is not an easy life.”

“I didn't need a palm reading to tell me my life is shit.” This was stupid, Jason thought. Why the hell had he agreed to let the man do this?

“There is no shame in earning your scars.” The man traced the lines of his palm with his fingers. “You have a strange fortune. Two lines of life. One short, and one long. The line of fate is complicated -- forks extending to the Saturn, but here, the line of the heart interferes.”

“What… what does that mean?” Jason asked, his curiosity now somewhat piqued, though he wasn't sure why he asked the question, because he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

“See here,” the man jabbed at a spot between his thumb and forefinger, “The heart ends in yet another fork. It curves down. You sacrifice too much. For love. For a fool.”

Jason retracted his palm, suddenly on edge. “That's enough.”

The man didn’t reach for him again, but he didn’t move away either. He was smiling, but he didn't look at all friendly anymore. Jason couldn't help but think he had been lured into something… he wasn't sure what, but he knew it wasn't good. This was no simple curmudgeon. The reading was no harmless parlour game.

“There is no place you can hide where your demons can't find you,” the man laughed darkly, his voice so impossibly low it came out like a growl.

“Did you see that on my palm too?” Jason backed away, gripping the confiscated blade at his side beneath the blanket.

“No. I see it in the fear in your eyes. In your cowardice.” The old man rose to his feet, large and tall, appearing much stronger than Jason expected. The man’s eyes glinted a strange glowing green in the firelight. His lips were curled into a cruel sneer. “What are demons but a reflection of the darkness within one's self?”

“Who are you?” Jason demanded, but the words came out weak. He tried to stand, but his limbs suddenly felt leaden. His head spun, he felt drowsy, his eyelids drooped as he tried to keep them open.

“It is alright, boy,” the man crooned in mock comfort as he advanced. “Go to sleep, you need to rest.”

“Who…?” Jason strained once more to push himself up, but the sopor was coming on quickly. He managed to drag himself backwards a few feet before the man was upon him. The air began to reek of sulfur as a thick green smoke surrounded them. It choked him, filling his mouth with that familiar copper tang. The man brought both hands to grip on either side of Jason’s face.
“Hell is empty and all the devils are here,” the man snarled into his ear, “but do not worry child. Rest. I will do what needs to be done.”

Smoke stung Jason's eyes as the dark phantasm of the old man seemed to grow, expanding to obscure his entire field of vision. The last thing Jason saw were the two pools of glowing green that were the man’s eyes, floating like lanterns in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

- Two quotes used in this chapter:
  “Long is the night to him who is awake; long is a mile to him who is tired; long is life to the foolish who do not know the true law.”
  - Siddhārtha Gautama

  “Hell is empty and all the devils are here.” from The Tempest, Shakespeare

- I don’t actually know anything about palm reading… so if you do, and I got a ton of things wrong, sorry! Just suspend your disbelief!
- I’m sorry if this chapter was a bit disjointed, but it will hopefully make sense eventually!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

- Warnings time! Same as I tagged in the beginning but just note there are depictions of violence in this chapter. It's not particularly long or drawn out, but there is description of blood and gore… so please take note if this bothers you.
- Also note the warnings from the first chapter about references to demonology. More details in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dick looked peaceful, sleeping soundly in god knew how long. Jason watched the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he breathed deeply. He hadn't stirred when Jason pulled himself free from Dick's tangle of limbs to sit at the edge of the bed, and Jason was oddly surprised at himself for immediately missing the intimacy.

It was just a stupid fuck, right? A one night stand because Dick needed to console himself. Dick just needed a warm body and Jason just happened to be the most convenient person at his disposal. Jason tried to keep telling himself that in his head, because there was no way Dick would have slept with him if he'd been taking better care of himself. If he hadn't been feeling vulnerable and dejected. No way at all, because Jason wasn't the kind of person who normally offered comfort, let alone be the kind of person who could ever make someone like Dick happy.

And yet… something inside him ached at that thought. He looked back at Dick -- at his face half nuzzled into the pillow, at the dark fan of his hair grown a little too long, at the way even wholly asleep he had started to inch into the spot Jason had just vacated, as if he were looking for someone to hold onto….

That someone shouldn't be Jason. No, he shook his head at himself. This had been a mistake.

Behind him, Dick mumbled something into the pillow that sounded too much like Jason's name. That sent some kind of fluttery feeling through him that had his chest tightening.

He scooted away, trying to put more distance between himself and Dick. He needed to get up and away, because if he didn't, he would be tempted to crawl back into bed with him and pull him close.

Jason stood, slowly so as not to wake the self-invited guest in his bed, and got dressed. They were still working this case, and Dick still needed to get all the rest he could get before they headed out again tonight. It was well past noon as he left Dick dozing away. The light of day illuminated the edges of his blackout curtains as Jason made to exit the room.

He needed to make preparations for the evening's activities. He needed to get ready and check his supplies -- something he had neglected doing over the past several days because he had been too busy working the case.

Jason made his way to his supply room, pushed aside the box with armor piercing rounds to dig out the rubber bullets. He needed to switch out his pistol magazines -- now that he was working a case with Dick, he needed to re-arm with less lethal ammunition. He always kept a few on hand, but given that he couldn't count on anyone not to simply get back up after getting hit, he figured he
probably needed a few more.

He began slotting the cartridges into an empty magazine, pressing them in with his thumb one by one. He'd done this thousands of times over the course of the last few years, plugging shells into a magazine was a bit mind numbing, and he found his thoughts wandering back to Dick. At the way he'd felt so warm and vibrant underneath him. How he'd felt simultaneously both hard and soft -- the muscles of his obliques tense and firm as Jason held his hips with his hands, his lips tender and pliant as Jason kissed him. He caught himself wetting his lips at the memory, and then flushed in embarrassment. He never realized how much he had wanted Dick like this. He was being foolish -- one stupid fuck and he was head over heels. Pathetic.

He had to draw the line before he got in too deep. He'd make it clear to Dick that this was a mistake that wouldn't happen again. Later. He'd do it later. Right now he needed to finish preparing for the night, and refocused on loading the magazine, slotting in another cartridge...

... when he felt his thumb catch slightly on the edge of the tip. But that wasn't right... these were rubber bullets, they shouldn't have any sharp edges. He looked down. Instead of the rubber bullets he was expecting, he found that he had been loading hollow points.

He dropped the magazine, knocking over a box as he recoiled. Bullets spilled off the table he was sitting at, clattering loudly as they rolled onto the floor in every direction. Off to his side, a large gun case was suddenly shoved off a crate by unseen hands. The case popped open as it hit the ground, various small firearms jostling out of position in the interior foam. Jason shot up from his chair, heart pounding as he whirled around, trying to make sense of what was happening.

He wasn't in his regular apartment. It was too dark and dimly lit -- he was in the tenement safehouse, where thin rays of golden yellow light speared through the narrow slats of the boarded windows. He was in the interior room where he had left a stockpile of emergency arms, but how did he get here? The last thing he remembered was struggling against the phantasm of the old man, but it felt almost like a distant memory. Like a dream. Had it all been a horrific nightmare, conjured up somehow by his fracturing mind?

The other possibility was that it had all been real, which was equally terrifying. Had the phantasm let him escape? Or had it done something more sinister... was it somehow responsible for the blackouts? But if so, it had started before he came here, and it didn't explain why he was conscious now.

Jason spared but another half second to mull it over. One thing was clear: he had to get out of here. Whatever was happening to him, this place was likely making it worse. The room was freezing, and he couldn't account for how, but this time he was fully dressed -- shoes, jacket and everything. There was still a mild throb in his injured leg, but it was good enough for the moment. Time to go.

He turned toward the door, stepping around the array of fallen bullets, when he heard a soft metallic clink and whirring sound behind him. He looked back to see the magazine he had been loading was spinning on it's side on the table, moving of its own accord.

"Take the gun." A whisper directly into his ear had Jason whipping his head around, but no one was there.

"Take it... take the gun... take it with you." More whispers, a multitude of voices layering into a soft ambient hiss all around him. "Take it and go... you have to go."

Jason hesitated, because listening to disembodied voices in his head was pretty much the definition of insanity. Was he really that far gone?
“Before he wakes... take the gun... the gun.”

Nevertheless, it made sense to be armed in case whatever had attacked him came back. Jason reached down toward the open case that had fallen, aiming to take a set of 9mm pistols, when suddenly, another case fell forward. It popped open, revealing a riot shotgun.

“That one... this one... the shotgun. Take the shotgun. Before he wakes,” the voices urged in hushed and hurried tones.

Jason didn’t question it this time. He grabbed the shotgun, slung a bandolier that was also in the case over his shoulder and exited the room. He was on the top floor of the tenement, and he knew the roof access was somewhere on the other side of the hall. He hugged the walls as he moved, footsteps as quiet and quick as he could manage, turning the corner to where the access should be, only to find the doorframe had been completely boarded up.

Jason stared at it, dumbfounded. Hadn’t he stumbled through it just a couple days ago? Had the old man hammered it shut while he was out of it?

“Use the gun... the shotgun,” the whispers pushed again. “Blow it open... use the shotgun... break it down.”

Jason backed up a few paces, braced the shotgun stock to his side and hip-fired.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Pump and fire. Pump and fire. In the enclosed space of the hall the sound was deafening. Jason's watched, his ears muted in tinnitus, as the buckshot splintered the wood.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

A few more shots and the wood was sufficiently damaged to break down with a kick. He forced apart the slats until there was a large enough gap, and jangled open the ruins of the door behind it.

He crawled through, ready to scramble up the short stairwell to the roof…

… only to come out of the basement onto the ground floor of the tenement.

“What the fuck?” Jason said aloud. How the hell had he gotten from the top floor to the bottom? He spun around to face the black rectangular void of the open basement door. A chill ran up his spine as he looked down into the open maw. He quickly pushed the door shut. Locked it. He didn’t know how he had gotten down there or what he was doing, but there was no way in hell he was going back into the basement.

He did a quick check of himself and realized he was no longer holding the shotgun and the bandolier was gone. In fact, he was wearing a completely different set of clothing -- no jacket, just a hoodie and sweats, socks on his feet. Had he blacked out and changed? Why?

His thoughts were suddenly disrupted by the sound of a door creaking down the hall, and then familiar whispers floating in the air like static --

“… he won’t let him go....”

“… trapped... the door is closed to him....”

“Trapped, like us....”
Jason forced himself to ignore the voices, focusing instead on the creaking sound. It sounded close… it sounded like someone was here. The phantasm? Someone else?

He glanced around. The entryway to the building was a few feet away, but he had solidly boarded it shut a while ago along with the windows. He wouldn’t be able to open it with his bare hands… he had to find some other way out, and if someone was here, he needed to investigate first. He needed to check that creaking door. Jason flattened himself against the wall, felt around the floor in the dark hallway for a weapon of some kind and found a length of copper pipe. It would have to do.

He slunk toward where he had heard the sound and found the door to the security monitor room was open. He froze, held his breath and listened for signs of activity. The only thing he could hear was the sound of his own rapidly thumping heart in his ears.

He took a steadying breath and rounded into the room. It was clear. The monitors were there, but all but one of them had been shot through, bullet holes riddling the darkened screens. The last screen at the far corner of the room was on, and as Jason approached, he could see it was running old footage. He leaned in to examine it closer -- it was a recording of himself, in a hallway, holding something in his hand as he stood facing a closed door. It was a knife, and he was carving something into the wood. Jason watched, a knot forming in his throat, as his recorded self etched an inexplicable symbol -- a trifurcated rectangle, a triangle below it, all of it encircled. When he finished, the image of himself turned slowly until he was looking directly into the camera -- he smiled.

Jason backed away, his mind reeling as he tried to make sense of what he had just seen, but then another door somewhere slammed. There was movement out in the hall, and this time when Jason turned he saw people. Regular people -- a heavy set middle-aged man in a t-shirt and shorts, an asian woman in pajamas, a gray-haired older woman in a nightgown, a little girl with dark hair, and perhaps a half dozen others crowded behind them -- standing close together outside the doorway.

Jason just stared, mouth agape, too shocked to even attempt a reaction. They stared back silently, their faces solemn, their eyes blank and hollow.

“Who…” Jason started and then stopped. Something was wrong. A crowd of people didn't just appear out of nowhere, and he had been in the hallway barely a minute ago.

The man in front -- the heavy set man with dark hair and eyes, hair and clothes tussled as if he had dressed quickly -- raised his hand slowly, index finger extended as he brought it to his lips in a shushing sign before moving his hand away. And then their lips began to move --

“...by the coming of our Lord for judgment… tell me by some sign your name…”

“Tell him… his name…”

“… the name…”

The whispers were both soft and loud at the same time. Their voices nothing but breathy hisses, but somehow they reverberated in Jason's head.

“Tell him… the name…”

“... his name….”

“…by the coming of our Lord for judgment… tell him … the name…”

Something inside Jason lurched as the whispers continued. He felt his head spin. He felt sick. Was this some kind of attack?
Whatever it was, he needed them to stop. He flicked his gaze down to look at his hands, but there was no malevolence that could bring out the All-Blades. There was no evil, just an overwhelming feeling of emptiness. He brought his hands up to cover his ears, trying to block out the chorus of sibilation that now sounded more like the crashing of waves. It was so loud, it hurt.

“No!” He managed to ground out. “Stop it!”

The whispers immediately ceased. When he looked back up, the crowd of people were gone. It took him a moment to process their disappearance -- they had looked so solid and real, their hushed voices so visceral and forceful it had made him feel pain.

There was no time to further ruminate on what that meant, because footsteps started pounding -- loud and numerous and hurried, like the crowd of people were moving outward from the hallway and up. They were running upstairs. Jason followed, confused and terrified, but desperate for some explanation of what the hell was going on.

He followed the trampling footfalls up the stairs, as a whoosh of icy wind seemed to push at his back. He reached the landing and watched as a door opened, another rush of icy air pushing him forward toward it. He followed, allowing himself to be led into the apartment with the working bathroom. The light was on, illuminating the frame of the closed door. He could tell the shower was on, judging by the low hum of flowing water through pipes and the pitter of a spraying water in the stall.

Jason opened the bathroom door to a fog of heat and steam, the moisture so thick in the air the glass of the mirror looked opaque. The curtain of the shower was pulled back, revealing an empty stall. He was alone, except for the whispering voices --

“The name…”

“... his name….”

“... by the coming of our Lord for judgment... tell him ... his name....”

There was a squeaking stick-slip sound of a finger on glass and Jason turned to see something had been written on the fogged-over mirror.

F-U-R-C-A-S.

The glass where the letters had been written was filling in with condensation again, blending into his blurred reflection in the fogged mirror.

“Furcas?” He tested the word on his tongue as he stepped closer to examine the letters, only to notice the clouded visage of himself in the mirror had changed -- there was now a looming darkness that took up nearly the entire frame. It was the phantasm.

Two green glowing eyes appeared, hovering in the dark silhouette. Jason jumped backwards, heart racing in terror as the glass cracked, fracturing in the center like something had impacted it. The cracks grew, spreading out from the center like a spider's web until it shattered in a spray of glass.

Jason scrambled away and made for the door, only to have it slam itself shut in his face. He rattled the knob, but it wouldn't turn. He slammed his shoulder against it, desperately trying to break it down, but it was unnaturally solid. Not even the door jamb shook from the blows.

Then the bathroom light exploded and the room went dark.
Jason found the site -- an old meat market used as a front by the Ghost Dragon gang for their designer drug operations, until the Red Hood had run them out. At the time he hadn't expected they had also used the facilities for organ trafficking, but it was obvious now that he was looking -- the refrigerators, the aging room for cold storage, the meat processing area that could be used as a makeshift operating room. There was no longer any medical equipment, but discarded surgical packs confirmed it -- this was where innocent victims had been butchered apart, and sold piece by piece on the black market.

The old meat market was also the last place where Dick had searched that night. He was supposed to have checked in an hour ago. He didn't. Now Jason was here, looking for him.

Jason edged over to the walk-in refrigerators, scanning for any signs that Dick had been there. His helmet picked up residual heat signatures -- five of them, lined up alongside where manacles had been bolted into wall. It was clear that people had been held captive here, and some of the manacles were cut with precision. Probably with a laser. Probably by Dick.

Why the Ghost Dragons had decided to return to the meat market, Jason didn't know, but Dick had found the hostages. And then the Ghost Dragons had found him.

Fuck.

Jason kneeled to examine the floor. There was smoke residue. Dick must have been caught trying to free the hostages and tried to escape with a smoke pellet. The Ghost Dragons may have used a hostage to force Dick into surrender.

Jason opened the faceplate of his helmet to test the air -- he could still smell the phosphor, that meant Dick had been taken very recently, probably within the hour. He had no time to lose.

Jason closed his helmet and tapped his comms, “Penny-One, come in.”

“Jason,” came the response, except it wasn't Alfred. It was Bruce, his voice gruff as usual, saying everything and nothing at the same time: Acknowledgement, with an undercurrent of disapproval. Trust, tempered with caution. Concern, with a hint of accusation. Bruce's voice triggered a multitude of warring emotions in Jason with just the statement of his name.

Jason almost hung up the line, but instead he took a deep breath in an attempt to squash his pique. Dick was in trouble, and getting into a fight with Bruce wasn't going to help.

“It's Nightwing. Activate his trackers,” Jason decided it was best to go straight to the point. “He got captured and we need to find him fast.”

Silence save for a few taps of computer keys, and then Bruce was back on the line, “Otisburg on East 5th. Sending coordinates now. Your ETA is twenty-five minutes. I’ll be there in seventeen.”

Jason stifled another surge of irritation. Bruce had pinpointed his location, probably running a trace on his comms. And now he was also going to beat him to Dick's location, and for some reason that rankled. Not so much because he thought he wouldn't need to get there as quickly as possible to get Dick and the hostages out safely, but because he had an irrational want to keep this between Dick and himself. This was their case. They had worked it together, and Jason had wanted to solve it together, just the two of them. But rescuing Dick and the hostages was more important than some out-of-nowhere streak of possessiveness.

He focused on giving Bruce the necessary details of the case as he sped his way through the surface
streets on his motorcycle.

“He shouldn’t have engaged them alone,” Bruce stated, and Jason could hear all the things he didn't say: You should have been there. You should have backed him up. You shouldn’t have let this happen. Because it was Dick, the golden child, and of course Bruce would intervene should anything bad ever happen to him.

“Yeah well, we can't all be perfect all the time,” Jason answered into the comm. He kept his tone nonchalant, though inside he was a bundle of nerves. All of the bats got caught at one point or another, and they had all been trained to get out of sticky situations, but it was never without risk. Jason’s death was proof of that. Plus Dick had not been at the top of his game as of late, not with the lack of sleep and his extended exhaustion. That was probably the reason why he got caught in the first place -- one little slip up in vigilance often made all the difference. Jason should have anticipated it. He should have known, and never let the two of them split up.

“He'll be fine,” Jason added after a pause. “Dick is good even on his worst days. He'll stay alive, even if it's just to protect the hostages. He won't fuck up. He won't get himself killed. Not like I did.”

Jason had meant it as a reassurance, mostly for himself than for Bruce, but for some reason his words seemed to make Bruce upset.

“I didn't say that,” Bruce growled into the comm.

“I didn't say you did,” Jason shot back, reflexively meeting Bruce's anger with his own.

They drifted into awkward silence after that as Jason continued to speed towards Dick's location. If it were years ago, when Jason was still Robin, he would have cracked a joke to lighten the mood. Maybe he would have even eased into some sort of apology, even if he didn't know what he did wrong. However, things were different now. Robin was meant to be a symbol of light in the darkness, but Jason didn’t carry that within himself anymore. In so many ways, he was the opposite -- the epitome of the things Batman was unwilling to do. The very darkness that Bruce fought within himself….

The comm crackled back on as Bruce arrived on the scene, “confirming live hostages, northeast room.” He sent over a set of schematics that Jason overlayed into his helmet visor as he switched to autopilot. It was a large car garage with a set of offices lining one side of the building. That was where they had stashed the hostages.

“Nightwing?” Jason asked.

“Confirmed alive, with the hostages.”

Jason breathed a sigh of relief as Bruce proceeded to update on the situation. “Scans show twenty armed individuals. More arriving. There's going to be an exchange. I'm going in.”

Bruce signed off, and Jason gunned the engine of his cycle, pushing hard to get there as fast as he could. With enough planning, Bruce could easily handle twenty armed adversaries, but hostages always made the situation more complicated. He would do better with backup, especially if Dick was incapacitated.

Jason arrived at the small garage to the sound of gunshots. He slipped in through a gap at the bottom of the roll-up garage doors as he switched on his night vision. Unsurprisingly, Bruce had cut the lights, and the Ghost Dragons and their buyers were now scrambling with just a few flashlights, erratically casting beams in the darkness.
Bruce was methodically taking them down, springing out from the shadows to lasso around one of the gangster's torsos, disabling another with a blow to the back of the neck, an upper-cut into the solar plexus of yet another, dropping them one-by-one. Bruce was corralling the south entrance as Jason threw himself into the fray, firing off rounds of rubber bullets to incapacitate the thugs as he made his way toward the northeast office where Dick and the hostages were. With the both him and Bruce working opposite ends of the room, the garage would be contained quickly. At least that's what Jason thought until he saw that in their panic, some of the Ghost Dragons had cracked into additional merchandise -- crates of weaponry.

Black market military-grade firearms were quickly unpacked, and suddenly rather than facing a small cadre of two-bit thugs with hand guns, they were facing an arsenal of high caliber firearms in the hands of poorly trained idiots. A dangerous combination for sure.

It was then that Jason also spotted Nightwing. As Jason had expected, Dick had gotten free, and was trying to usher the hostages through the chaos. He was trying to protect them, fending off attackers at the same time he tried to keep them under cover from the spray of bullets. Jason bulldozed through two bruisers trying to load a Barrett M82, popping a few rubber slugs into non-vital kneecaps (and maybe a finger or two) as he made his way to Dick's aid.

“Never took you for a damsel in distress, Big Bird,” Jason joked as he fired a round of cover fire, but there was no mirth in his tone. A cursory glance at Dick showed he was bleeding from a gash in his ribs.

“Never… ngh… took you for my knight in shining armour,” Dick gasped out as he supported the weight of one of the hostages, a young man clutching at his abdomen. Blood flowed through his fingers.

Crap. They needed to get the hostages out fast. There was too much gunfire and too little cover, especially with the Ghost Dragons using firepower that could punch through walls. Jason herded them toward the back exit, busted down the door with a well placed kick, and the four other hostages made a run for it. The last hostage, the one Dick had been supporting, stumbled as he tried to run, the blood loss likely causing the onset of shock. Dick knelt and pulled him up, ushering him toward the door, when Jason saw not more than twenty feet away, one of the Ghost Dragon thugs had loaded the discarded Barrett M82. He was now taking aim right at Dick.

At such a close range, the .50 caliber round would blow anything it hit to pieces. The cartridges were designed to take down aircraft, and if used at close distance, even just a graze would obliterate a person with 13,000 pounds of force.

Jason was already half turned, Dick and the hostage behind him, and he did the only thing he could think of in the split second before the thug pulled the trigger -- he continued the momentum of his turn and kicked Dick and the hostage through the door and out of the way.

Jason heard the crack of the rifle, and then suddenly he was spinning through the air. Time slowed down. He knew he had been hit -- the kick he had aimed at Dick had put him directly in the line of fire -- and as he spun with the impact, he found himself wondering at how odd it was that the spray of his own blood glowed with a tinge of green….

He wasn't sure what happened after that.

There was a swirling haze of red and green….

A flashing image of his own fist gripped around a man's throat, and then tearing. Ripping. Holding the gore of the man's trachea in his hand….
The crunch of bone under his boot heel….

Holding a man's head up by his hair as he pressed a gun between his eyes….

And then… both his hands squeezing around a throat…

“Batman!” a voice yelled. “Oh god… there's something wrong… what's wrong with him?”

He remembered tightening his grip, pressing his thumbs down… thick black leather… a cowl and the whites of eye lenses… before something yanked him backwards from behind. A heavy weight on top of him before Jason threw it off… and then the look of horror on Dick's face.

Jason gasped. The memory coming on like a physical stab through his heart.

Holy fuck. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. What the hell was that? Was that a memory of what happened before he came here? Had he done that? Had he ripped the Ghost Dragons apart with his bare hands? Had he tried to strangle Bruce?

Jason's heart was hammering erratically in his chest. He couldn't breathe. His throat felt tight, and he gasped and choked, falling to his knees as his vision blurred with tears.

“The phone…. Call him. Callhimcallhimcallcallcall.....” The whispers were back, cutting through his panic and straight into his head. There was a rattling from somewhere behind him, and Jason twisted around to see he was in the room with his stockpile of arms again. Another case fell forward, clattering open to reveal a large rifle. A Barret M82. The same model of gun that had been fired at him back in the garage.

Jason recoiled. The very sight of the gun somehow triggering an instinctive fear.

“Get it. Pick it up. The phone....”

The phone? There was a phone? Jason dragged himself forward, his arms and legs trembling, pulling the case fully open and looking inside. Tucked into a slit in the foam was a burner phone. Jason must have stashed it in the case when he had first brought the stockpile here.

“Call him....”

Jason grabbed the phone, nearly dropping it because of how badly his hands were shaking. He fumbled it on, silently thankful that the battery had lasted, and dialed the first number that came to mind -- he called Dick.

Brrrrrp. Brrrrrp. Brrrrrp. The call tone rang and rang… and then, “Who is this?”

Dick's crisp tenor sounded wary through the line. He probably didn't answer many calls from unknown numbers, but just hearing his voice seemed to break something inside Jason. Suddenly he couldn't hold back the panic and fear that was overwhelming him.

“D-- Dick?” His voice cracked as he choked back a sob.

“Jason! Where are you? We've been looking for you everywhere!” Dick’s inflection immediately changed to that of concern, but then Jason remembered the last time he had seen Dick. He remembered how he had nearly broken his arm, how he had aimed a gun at him and shot him. He remembered how Dick had looked at Jason like he was some kind of monster....
“I didn't mean to do it. I don't know what happened,” Jason blurted out. “I can't remember. Fuck! Dick, I'm so fucked up!”

“Shhh. It's okay, Jay. We can figure out what happened to you. Stay on the line,” Dick tried to soothe. “I'm tracing the call. I'm coming to get you.”

“I need to get out of here,” Jason looked around, at the various open gun cases, at the cartridges littering the floor. He remembered the shotgun and the boarded up roof access. He remembered the dark silhouette with the glowing green eyes in the mirror. “I don't think he'll let me leave.”

“Who?” Dick asked. “Who won't let you leave?”

“The old man,” Jason started, and then stopped. He heard the whispers again --

“Run run runrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrun….” The voices were rising in volume, gradually growing out of the hushed whispers into full tones, insistent, almost screaming in his ear -- “RUN!”

“They're telling me to run.” Jason sucked in a breath and spun around, making for the door into the hall.

“Who are ‘they’?” He heard Dick say, but Jason didn’t have time to respond. He dropped the phone to his side as he grabbed the stairwell railing with one hand. He was about to take the first step down when he heard a high pitched scream from behind him.

No. Not just one scream. Multiple screams. A cacophony of agonized voices, yelling and wailing as if at the top of their lungs. The sound seemed to stab at him like knives, piercing right down into the pit of his stomach and paralyzing him with terror. Jason covered his ears, trying to block it out. Trying to steady himself so that he could move, but the sounds of pure horror kept an uncanny hold over him. Jason doubled over in pain, falling to his knees to huddle on the stairwell landing. Out of the corner of his eye, a darkness coalesced -- a thick black swirl of something that seemed to exude pure malevolence.

The phantasm. The old man.

The figure moved slowly. Deliberately. Until he was standing over Jason's buckled form.

“You! It's you!” Jason tried to steady himself. He pulled himself upright and tried to focus his damn head and control his spiraling terror enough to call the All-Blades. That's when Jason realized his mistake. He was standing, unsteady on his feet, with his back facing the downward stairwell.

“Yes. You.” The old man's voice was deep and booming, reverberating like thunder.

He smiled, raised his hands, and then shoved Jason hard.

Jason's mind raced in between the nanoseconds to try and find a way to break the fall. He flailed. He tried to turn enough to catch the railing. He tried to extend a hand backwards to take the brunt of the impact, but it was too late.

His feet went out from under him. That dreadful sinking feeling in his stomach. The feeling of weightlessness before gravity pulled him down in full force.

His head cracked against the stair in an explosion of pain….

The world spun and turned and tumbled around him…. 
He was lying face down, something hot and coppery filling his throat….

The cold tingling of numbness before he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

- There's gonna be another chapter, I swear! And uh… Jason is still going to be in it. You just wait and see!
- I drew some influences for this story from the Goetia, derived from the Lesser Key of Solomon and famously edited by Aleister Crowley in the early 1900s. This is a work of fiction and is not a true representation of Thelemic practice.
- The name mentioned is from the Ars Goetia, which contains the names of spirits (demons) summoned by the biblical King Solomon in the Lesser Key. If you are a believer in these sorts of things, take caution with saying names aloud.
- A note on Furcas: he is the only demonic Knight depicted in the Goetia, and though he is of lesser rank technically than the other 71 Goetic spirits, it is said that he does his job so well there is no need of any other.
- Not to get too technical, but I just wanted to point out that I used the term bullet interchangeably with the words cartridge and shell, when in reality they don't actually refer to the same thing. The bullet is just the projectile that gets fired from the gun. The cartridge is the full component that gets loaded into the magazine.
- I adapted the lines the ghosts were chanting from the Catholic Rite of Exorcism: I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgment, that you tell me by some sign your name, and the day and hour of your departure.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Reminder to note the tags: Depictions of blood and violence along the same lines as the previous chapters. More possibly spoilery tag is listed in the end notes, but if you've made it this far... well, please keep going. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was daytime, and the stairwell was about as bright as Jason had ever seen it. The slats over the windows had shifted, and the gaps were wide enough that the sunlight diffused a faint but pervasive cold glow into the hall. It also illuminated what lay near the bottom of the stairs -- a body, limbs sprawled awkwardly across the breadth of steps.

Jason stared down at it. He watched the ooze of dark liquid that ran from the mess of matted hair, down into a widening pool of red on the landing. It was a surprising amount of blood, even spattering the walls of the staircase in a long curved arc from where his head must have cut against the edge of the railing. Flecks of it even hit the ceiling, flung upward as he had tumbled over and over down the narrow steps. The angle of the head and torso could only mean a broken neck. There was too much blood for it to be anything but fatal….

He was dead. Jason was dead, and he was somehow standing outside himself. Standing over his own lifeless body.

The truth of it should have been devastating. It should have had him reeling, but all Jason felt was an odd feeling of detachment.

There was a flicker of movement off to the side, and when Jason turned to look it was the crowd of people again -- the ghosts -- filling the far end of the narrow hall. They didn't come any closer. They didn't say anything. They just stared silently, their eyes wide, mouths slightly gaping in shock.

He stood still, mirroring their frozen stupor, feeling like he should say something, but no words came.

*Thump thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.*

Footsteps. From the sound of it, a single person, rushed and hurried, coming through the hall. The crowd of ghosts parted, flattening themselves against the walls and making room as a figure appeared around the corner. A flash of black and blue in the pale ambient sunlight. Dick.

He seemed completely unaware of the throng of spirits surrounding him, but he immediately saw the body in the stairwell.

“Jason!” He exclaimed, pausing a fraction of a second as he took in the horrific scene, and then hurried over to the body. Dick stepped through the pool of blood, knelt on the first step and reached out a hand to test for a pulse. “Oh god. Jay… no.”

Dick tapped his comm, swallowing before he spoke, “B, it's me. I was too late. Jason, he…,” Dick's voice broke with sobs, “He’s here, but he's gone. I couldn't … I didn't make it in time.”
Jason watched as Dick peeled off his mask to wipe at his eyes, as he gingerly stroked the blood-matted hair, and then down to the body’s face to close its eyes. Dick kept his gaze downward, his fists retracted now and clenched in his lap. His shoulders were tense, jerking slightly… was he crying? “I’m sorry, Jay. I’m so sorry.”

The grief was palpable in Dick’s voice. He sounded defeated. Broken. Like something had just torn his heart out. “Jay….” His shoulders seemed to tremble as he whispered the name.

“No! This isn’t your fault,” Jason shouted at him. This was wrong in so many ways. Dick shouldn’t have been so stricken. There was no great loss to the world. Jason was not that important, and Dick had no reason to take the weight of this on his already burdened shoulders.

“Don’t you dare blame yourself! This is my own damn fault!” He reached down and tried to grab Dick's shoulders to try and shake some sense into him.

For a moment it seemed to work. There was some kind of resistance as he pushed his hands forward, but then the hall was suddenly engulfed in a familiar sickly green. There was a crashing sound, and the next thing Jason saw, Dick was being throttled, held up against the wall by a dark figure. Its shape was a mass of amorphous black, but Jason knew it was the old man -- the demon the ghosts had called Furcas.

“No!” Jason screamed and lunged at him, half in utter desperation and half hoping that someway, somehow he had enough substance in him to dislodge the demon's hold.

Jason wasn’t sure what happened next but it felt like hitting water from a great height - a jarring impact, a feeling of sinking into something thick and viscous, and then the demon was gone and Jason was clutching his side in pain. There was fresh blood seeping out from under his hands, but how could that be? He could feel the strain of every push and pull of his diaphragm as he inhaled and exhaled. Pain. Blood. He didn't know how, but that could only mean he was alive!

“Jason?” Dick was hovering a few feet away, his eyes wide in astonishment.

“Dick,” Jason managed to call out as he fell to his knees.

Dick rushed to his side and wrapped an arm around him. “Jason! How--,” he started, but then abruptly redirected and tapped his comm. “B, what's your ETA? I need you here ASAP. Jason is alive. I repeat, Jason is alive!”

Jason couldn’t hear if there was a response. Dick proceeded to gently lean him backwards, laying him flat on his back on the floor. “Don't move. I need to assess your injuries.”

Dick put a hand on his brow, holding him still as he shined a light to check Jason’s pupils. Jason instinctively squinted and closed his eyes. He turned, lifting a hand to push Dick away, only to realize he could hear whispering….

“I adjure you, ancient serpent, by the judge of the living and the dead, by your Creator, by the Creator of the whole universe….”

Jason opened his eyes and turned his head toward the voices. He could see that the crowd of ghosts still lining the far end of the hall. There was a single spirit close to the front, the heavy set man with dark hair he had seen before, reciting some kind of prayer. The others soon joined in, “... by Him who has the power to consign you to hell, to depart forthwith in fear, along with your savage minions….”

Something inside Jason tightened, like a reflexive recoil that caused a flaring agony to radiate from
his bones. “Nnngh…,” he couldn’t suppress the grunt of pain as he attempted to roll onto his side and curl into himself. “Stop that. It hurts!”

“What? What hurts?” Dick tried to stay his movements, applying a gentle pressure to Jason’s shoulders to keep him down, but Jason pushed him away as the voices rose in volume.

“Depart, seducer, full of lies and cunning, foe of virtue, persecutor of the innocent. Give place, abominable creature, give way, you monster, give way….”

It felt like something inside him was churning hot, like the blood and marrow inside him was searing him from the inside out.

“Tell them to stop,” Jason cried. “They’re making it worse!”


“The people!”

“What people? There's no one here.”

Jason didn’t answer. His lungs felt like they were scorched by fire. He felt like he was burning. He couldn’t breathe as he writhed on the floor. He clawed at his skin, tore at his clothes to try and find relief but it was to no avail. The whispers continued, “It is He who casts you out, from whose sight nothing is hidden. It is He who repels you, to whose might all things are subject.”

Dick was frantically grasping at Jason’s hands, holding him down as he tried to calm him. “Jason! You’re going to be okay, just keep still! There’s no one else here. You’re safe. Batman will be here any minute,” Dick coaxed, but Jason shook his head. He pushed himself forward, ignoring the burn of pain to grab Dick’s face, looking him straight in the eyes.

“Listen!” Jason implored. “Just listen!”

Dick stared back in confusion, his vivid blue eyes searching. He looked skeptical. Disbelieving. Like he thought Jason was crazy. It was clear that he couldn’t hear the voices.

“Listen!” Jason gave him a sharp shake. “Dick, just listen!”

Dick only looked vexed. He calmly moved to pull Jason’s hands away from his face, trying to ease Jason back to lay down, but then something changed in his expression. His eyes widened, reflecting some of the same fear that Jason was trying to impart.

“I can hear them,” Dick snapped his head up and looked down at the end of the hall. “Jay, I can hear them!” He took another second to listen, cocking his head as he furrowed his brow, and then he was moving to pull Jason up. “I don’t understand what they’re saying, but we need to get you out of here.”

Dick dragged him forward, slinging his arm under Jason’s shoulders as they staggered away in the opposite direction, away from the ghosts and back toward the stairwell.

“It is He who expels you,” the chanting continued. “He who has prepared everlasting hellfire for you and your angels, from whose mouth shall come a sharp sword, who is coming to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire.”

“Fire….” Yet another disembodied voice suddenly thundered around them. It was only a single voice, but it cut through the cantillation with a deafening roar, so loud it rattled the doors along the
hall. Jason recognized that impossibly low growl. It was the old man, Furcas. His gratingly throaty laughter followed, the reverberation rumbling like an earthquake. “Heheheh…. You want fire? I will give you fire.”

The hall burst into flames. The entire building shook. Screams filled Jason’s ears at the same time the painful burn inside him immediately ceased. When he looked behind them, the figures of the ghosts were now engulfed in flames, collapsed and convulsing on the floor as they shrieked agony.

The ghosts… it was horrific. Jason watched as they choked and gagged, as their clothes and skin blackened in the flames, as the smell of burning flesh permeated the smoke-filled air.

“We need to help them!” Jason pulled Dick back toward the spirits. They weren’t alive, but they were in pain and they were being tormented in the same way they had died. He had to save them somehow.

“Jason, what--?” Dick didn’t finish the question, because he was interrupted by a loud groaning sound. The entire building shifted, the floorboards began to separate beneath them, and suddenly they were falling. The hardwood underneath them caved in, and they were now crashing through the floors. Dick grabbed a hold of Jason, shot out a grapple line and tried to swing them to the side, but there was too much burning rubble. Something large and heavy collided into them, knocking Jason into freefall.

Jason twisted mid-air, managing to turn over just in time to see the entire center of the building had caved in. The fast approaching floor below was aglow with some kind of symbol: a trifurcated rectangle, a triangle below it, all encased in a circle.

It registered as something he’d seen before. It was from the surveillance video he’d watched earlier -- the one where he had watched himself carve that exact same symbol into a door.

And then he hit the ground.

*Thud.*

....

*Thud.*

Something large and heavy hit the ground beside him. Whatever it was, it was still burning even after it landed.

*Thud. Another impacted, and then another. Thud.*

Jason looked closer and saw blackened limbs, a charred skull. They were bodies.

Burning bodies were falling from the floors above, but where had they come from? And to that end, hadn't Jason himself hit the ground too? Then, in a flash of panic as his memory caught up, where was Dick?

The answer to the latter was quickly answered as a familiar voice shouted nearby, “Jason!” Dick landed neatly on the basement floor, but instead of running to where Jason was standing amidst the rubble, he ran toward the glowing sigil that decorated the center of the concrete. It was glowing an eerie green, and there was something in the middle of it. A lone, dark figure, positioned dead center amidst the glow.

The figure turned as Dick approached, and Dick immediately froze several feet away. The figure… it
was Jason. Or rather, his body. He was somehow separate, and his consciousness wasn’t standing amidst the rubble, he was standing partially inside it. Pieces of broken floorboards jutted out from his left hip, mangled rebar sprouted through his torso. When he moved, the rubble remained stationary, he simply phased through it like… like a ghost.

Oh. Shit. His spirit was somehow outside of himself again, just like he had been earlier when he’d stood over his own lifeless body in the stairwell.

This time, instead of looking at a corpse, Jason watched as his own body -- still standing in the center of the glowing sigil -- slowly turned his gaze away from Dick to look directly at Jason. He was smiling, his lips pulled back into something cruel and sinister. It was him, the old man. The demon, Furcas, was inside his body.

Dick, to his credit, was immediately wary. “You're not Jason,” he stated.

“Don't be so sure,” the demon returned. He raised his hands and fired a blast of green flame.

Dick ducked out of the way, rolling behind a pile of burning refuse. The demon sent another fiery blast that obliterated everything in its path. Dick leapt for cover again, but he wasn't quite fast enough. A lick of flame glanced off his thigh, and Dick hit the floor in a cry of pain. The demon advanced, the green flames flared brightly as they spread outwards from the sigil and toward Dick. Jason could see what Furcas aimed to do, he was going to burn Dick alive.

Even without a physical body, Jason moved on instinct to intercept. However, something caught a hold of him as he stepped forward -- it was one of the burning bodies that had fallen from the upper floors. It was crawling, reaching a blackened hand out to grip his ankle, whispering, "He who has prepared everlasting hellfire..., from whose mouth shall come a sharp sword...." The burning ghost shuddered and sobbed. “Use your blades. Cut him down with your soul.”

Blades. His soul. That could only mean the All-Blades. Jason was incorporeal -- likely even dead again -- but the All-Blades were fueled by the core of his spirit. He could use them even as he was now, a ghost. He launched himself forward, the blades bursting forth in fiery red arcs as he slammed them into the demon possessing his form, piercing both of the flame swords through the heart of his own body.

Jason continued to drive the demon backwards, pushing until his body was collapsed in the center of the sigil. He channeled every ounce of his essence into the blades, shoving downward until they were thrust to the hilt and cutting into the ground.

There was a wild howling, a violent crack, and the floor beneath the sigil concaved. It crumbled away, and below him there was nothing but a vast abyss. Jason was falling again. Falling down and down and down and away from the tenement basement… away from Dick… until he slammed hard into some kind of floor.

He looked up to find himself in a strange barren space. There were no walls, just an endless expanse of dusky dark and gray. A bright rectangle of white light opened up before him, and Jason recognized it. He had always denied any memories about his death, but that wasn't completely true -- he did remember this part. He remembered passing through a doorway of light. He remembered the instinctual yearning to go through -- a lure of warmth at the same time he felt a heartbreaking sorrow….

There were other souls rushing forward from behind him -- the people from the tenement fire. Jason saw the man with dark hair who had led the others in reciting the exorcism. He was running toward the door, and he ran straight through Jason in his desperation to reach it. Jason felt the chill of him as
their souls collided. He felt the cold of the man's terror and the agony of his pain and fear ripping into him. It felt like it was ripping him apart as the other souls, dozens of them passed through him likewise.

Jason tried to gather himself to crawl forward toward the door, but as the last of the tenement souls slipped through, there was a cracking sound. The doorway slammed shut, and for a moment, all Jason could see was his own disheveled reflection on what appeared to be the mirrored surface of the door.

And then it shattered.

The doorway had broken, leaving him in the abyss, with nothing but splintered mirror glass on the floor.

“No…,” Jason crawled forward, skimming his hands over the shards. “No!” It was as if something within him had broken too. He grasped at the shards, the edges cutting into his hands, the pain sharp and biting, except he realized it couldn't have been real. He was just a spirit… and yet here he was, bleeding onto the floor of god-knows-where, alone, in some kind of endless twilight.

Except he wasn't alone. A solid mass of shadow lurched into Jason's view. The demon was trapped in the abyss with him.

“What is the matter, child?” He leaned toward Jason, hands on his knees as he hovered in mock concern, “afraid of the dark are we?”

“Shut up.” Jason continued to stare at the broken shards before him. He felt numb. He felt beyond drained, like the parts of him he had channeled into the blades were now gone forever. He didn't want to fight anymore. He didn't even have the strength to turn and face the demon, because facing it might mean facing some kind of truth he didn't want to acknowledge -- that with the shattering of the door, Jason may have lost his last chance at redemption.

“Foolish boy,” Furcas said knowingly. “Did you think, that after everything you've done, that you'd be allowed to pass into the light a second time?”

Jason didn't want to think about what that meant, so instead he said, “I stabbed you through the heart. Take a hint and fuck off.”

The demon shrugged. “No. And to be clear, you stabbed yourself through the heart.”

It was almost funny, and Jason would have let out a huff of laughter if he hadn't choked back a sob.

“What do you want? Why are you still here?”

“I am here, because you are here,” the demon crooned.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Jason felt some of his will returning, and with it, his rage. He rounded enough of it up within himself to shoot a hateful glare at his tormentor.

Furcas was hardly affected. He even seemed pleased as he straightened up, smoothing a hand over his long hoary beard before he crossed his arms. His lips pulled back into a grin, revealing a glint of sharp canines as he spoke, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons. Corinthians chapter ten, verse twenty-one.”

“Bible quotes? Shouldn’t you be bursting into flames or something,” Jason said. Though he also remembered how the hall had suddenly been engulfed in fire, how the demon had wielded the green
flames while in Jason's body, and how the prayer the ghosts were chanting had only served to make him angry. If anything, it was Jason, not the demon, that the words had afflicted. That realization was disturbing.

“The crowd of spirits,” Jason puzzled, “They said your name was Furcas. When they were trying to banish you, it hurt.”

Furcas snorted, “a name provides a focus to will, which in turn gives power to ritual, but they were fools. They would never have had the power to do us true harm.”

“There's no ‘us,’” Jason retorted, “they were trying to exorcise you.”

“And you responded by collapsing half the building and plunging yourself into limbo, rather than let the spirits tear the demon out from inside you. What does that say about you?”

“It says I fucked myself over trying to get rid of you.”

“Ha! Even after all this, have you learned nothing?” Furcas reached a hand out and caught Jason's chin, tilting his head up as he inspected Jason with his eerie green eyes. “It is much easier and frequently less painful to find darkness outside of oneself, rather than within.”

“What are you saying?” Jason jerked his face from the demon's grip and retreated onto his haunches, his hands braced behind him as he pushed away. He didn't like what Furcas was hinting at. He didn't like how the demon hadn't moved to follow, but yet his presence seemed to have grown.

“It was Gautama Buddha who said, ‘it is a man's own mind, not his enemy or foe, that lures him to evil ways.’”

“I'm not having a philosophical discussion with you,” Jason snapped. He backed away further, turning again towards the shards of glass. Maybe there was a way to piece the door back together?

Furcas however, would not be ignored. “That doorway,” he waved at the shards, “was closed to you the second Talia al Ghul threw you in the pit, but not for the reason you may think. She dropped the shards of your shattered soul into the water, but the pit cannot heal flesh and soul with nothing to bind the pieces together. There is a cost to keeping your soul intact.”

He made a motion with his hand, and Jason watched as the shards of mirror levitated, and then rearranged until they hovered vertically in a rectangular plane. The old man had pieced together the mirrored door.

“There must be something to seal the cracks, to fill the void left by the splinters that could not be recovered,” he continued, and the spaces between the shards glowed a lurid green -- like the murky green waters of the Lazarus pits -- the same green glow of the demon's eyes.

And then it clicked. The reason all of this had happened in the first place. The pit had fixed Jason so many years ago, pulling together the fragments of his mind and patching the ailments of his body, but as the demon had suggested, something else from the waters was necessary to glue it all together.

And it followed that something from the pit continued to be required so that everything didn't fall apart….

Back at the warehouse, the hit from the .50 caliber round should have been fatal. It should have blown Jason to pieces. The shock of cold from diving into the river afterwards should have had hypothermia quickly setting in. He should have drowned. The fall down the stairs had cracked open his skull and broken his neck. He should have bled out.
“You've been keeping me alive,” Jason finally said. It came out a choked whisper.

“I have been keeping you whole.” It almost sounded tender.

“You also tried to kill me by pushing me down the stairs.”

“And I succeeded,” the old man replied smugly, “because it was time you saw the truth.”

The cracks in the mirror-door that had been glowing green now flickered and dimmed. When the light receded, the surface of the mirror had smoothed over, save for a single large shard in the center. Furcas held out his hand toward Jason, the last piece of the mirror glinting in his open palm.

Jason took it and stood to face the mirror. His haggard reflection stared back. His hair looked matted with dried blood, his face was purpled with bruises, his eyes looked bloodshot and the rusty brown stain of his own blood covered his clothes. He placed the last shard into the mirror -- into the gap right over his reflection's heart.

The edges flared brightly as he pressed it into the mirror. As it faded the entire surface became smooth again. Jason was now looking at a reflection not of himself, but at the grizzled image of the old man. He narrowed his vivid green eyes, but the edges of his lips curved upward. He was pleased. There was a heavy creaking of hinges, and the mirror-door swiveled a few inches forward, a slivered gap opening behind it.

A draft of air followed, carrying the sound of voices. Dick's warm tenor calling his name with open sincerity, “Jay, if you can hear me, I'm sorry. This is my fault, but I need you back here... come back to me.”

Then the deeper, gruff texture of Bruce's voice, “Jason... it's time... it's time to come back home. Come back to us...”

Jason hesitated to open the threshold any further. The passageway behind the door was obscured by darkness, though the voices coming through were clear. It was just a matter of stepping through, but the mirror-door was something the demon had repaired and conjured open. Going back meant Jason wasn't going alone.

Jason turned to look at the old man in the mirror. “You tried to burn Dick alive. You strangled him, and Bruce too.”

“It would be better to be rid of them, when all they do is hold you back, or hold you in front of a bullet meant instead for them.” Furcas growled, gnashing his teeth as he spat the words. “You sacrifice your principles, but your reward is disapproval. You suffer these fools for love, but the cost is your life.”

“If anyone has to die, it should be me.”

“The choice is not death. The choice is control.” The old man laughed, the sound low and grating. It reverberated through the barren twilight like a gunning engine. “If you don't walk through this door, I will.”

“Jay, can you hear me?” Dick was calling again.

Jason reached for the edge of the mirror-door, pulling it open wider. The draft of air was now a gusty wind. “This doesn't change anything,” he said to the demon. “You try to kill him, or any of them, I'll fight you.”
“Of course. After all, no one knows the monster within better than you.”

Jason turned back toward the passage. The air from inside was damp and cold. He looked back at the mirror one more time, then opened the door fully and walked through.

Jason tried to blink, reaching up his hands to rub the sleep out of his eyes, only to find that he couldn't raise them. His hands were bound at his sides. He struggled, testing the resistance, trying to curl his knees up only to find they were tied down too.

“He's awake!” Dick's startled voice came from somewhere off to his side. “Jay, can you hear me?”

“Dick,” Jason rasped. His tongue felt parched and his lips chapped.

“Be careful. We need to be sure he’s with us,” another voice said. This time it was Bruce. “Keep him in the restraints until we can verify he's cognizant.”

Jason pulled against his bindings, and blinked enough of the fog out of his eyes to see Dick and Bruce standing warily several feet away from the medical bed he was on.

“Jason,” Bruce focused the intensity of his glare at him, “I'm not letting you up until I know you're lucid. I need you to tell me you understand.”

Jason didn't understand. He had woken up fully restrained in a gurney, and a quick look around showed that he was in the batcave. Somewhere in the background there was a subtle beep of a heart monitor, however the shielded plexiglass and sparse interior indicated that instead of the medical bay, he was in a holding cell.

You sacrifice your principles, but your reward is disapproval….

“What the fuck, Bruce?” Jason revolted, struggling hard against the cuffs. “Why the hell am I in a holding cell?”

“Okay, lucidity confirmed.” Dick was moving closer, probably to head off the explosion of an argument. He placed himself between Jason and Bruce. “Take it easy, B. He just woke up.”

Bruce, for his part, looked oddly stiff. The muscles of his jaw clenched tightly as he spoke. “I'm not keeping you prisoner. That was never my intention. I wanted to keep you safe.”

“By tying me down like an Arkham inmate?” Jason fired back.

“Hey, it's okay. We're just trying to help. Calm down, Jay.” Dick had released one of the cuffs and was now rubbing soothing circles into his wrist and the palm of his hand. After a moment, when Jason had eased somewhat, Dick lifted his hand and offered a soft kiss against the back of his knuckles. “I'm glad you're back. I thought I lost you.”

You suffer these fools for love, but the cost is your life….

Jason tried to pull away, but Dick held on. He brought a hand up to cup Jason's face, and Jason tensed, but then leaned into it. Dick's eyes seemed oddly wet and red.

Bruce took notice of their interaction, and shot Dick some kind of indecipherable look. Dick ignored him. Bruce scowled, but didn't say anything more, and Jason suddenly felt too tired to care.

“What's the last thing you remember?” Dick was looking at him intently, still holding Jason's hand in
both his own.

Jason thought back. The last thing he remembered was walking into the dark passage behind the mirror-door, but that’s not what Dick meant. He wanted to know if Jason remembered what happened at the tenement. “We were in the basement,” Jason finally said. “He tried to kill you.”

“Who?” Bruce moved closer, standing over Jason beside the bed. He still looked wary, though he seemed to make an effort at relaxing his shoulders, making him seem less aggressive.

“The old man,” Jason tried to explain, “he was there the whole time.”

“Jay,” Dick said calmly, but he gripped Jason’s hand a little tighter, “I saw and heard things in that place that I can’t explain. We're calling in some help to investigate, but we found the security footage. There was no one in that building but you.”

“But–,” Jason started, and then clamped his mouth shut. It finally occurred to him how oddly far away Bruce and Dick had been when he had woken up. It was as if they had backed away to the edges of the cell as soon as they realized he was awake. Even now, he still had three limbs tied to the gurney, in a cell built to hold the most powerful of supervillains within the fortified defenses of the batcave. Bruce was on edge. Dick too, though he was better at hiding it. They didn't trust him not to fly into a pit-rage.

“Look, maybe I lost it for a few days,” Jason measured out his words and quieted his tone. “But I'm fine now. I just needed some space, so can you let me out of these cuffs now?”

“Jason,” for once something in Bruce’s mask of detachment seemed to slip. For a fraction of a second, he seemed stricken with anguish, before the emotional barricade was up again. His next words were uncharacteristically disturbed.

“I watched you get up after taking a bullet that should have killed you,” Bruce stated. “Dick found you in an abandoned building, unmoving and not breathing, lying in a pool of your own blood. We still don't know how you walked away from that. We're still trying to figure out what caused the building to collapse, and we're still trying to understand why your brain waves are abnormal. You weren't missing for a few days, Jason. It was nearly five weeks. Don't try to tell me you're fine!”

Bruce was fuming by the end of his tirade. The veins at his temple were bulging and his fists were clenched. He looked like he wanted to hit something, namely Jason, and Jason would have been gearing up to fight back if he hadn't been reeling from the fact that Bruce said he’d been gone for five weeks.

Holy shit. Jason could only remember brief, disjointed periods of lucidity, and those moments were riddled with his own confusion and desperation. Even so, it felt like it should have only been a few days.

“These… episodes you're having,” Dick was trying to keep him calm with a palm over his chest, shooting Bruce a warning look before he turned back to Jason. “We think it's a lingering effect of the pit that was triggered by you getting shot. We just need to do some tests, okay?”

The cost of keeping your soul….

“It's okay, Jay,” Dick squeezed his hand. “Whatever’s going on, I promise we'll get through it.”

Bruce was suddenly filling Jason’s view. He'd calmed down, and now he just looked... bleak. “I’ll fix this. Whatever it takes, I’ll figure out how to fix this,” he said. He put a hand on Jason's shoulder. A firm squeeze. It was meant to be reassuring. Comforting.
Jason just felt cold. There was nothing Dick or Bruce, or anyone could do. There would be no fixing, because he had already been fixed.

_The choice is not death. The choice is control._

“T’m fine,” Jason repeated his earlier sentiment. He shifted until Bruce let go. “I really am. No more tests. I’ve got it under control.”

Within the darkness of the batcave, the brightness of the overhead lights caused a mirror effect against the shielded plexiglass of the holding cell. Jason looked past Dick and Bruce, focusing on his own reflection. His face was pale, contrasting starkly against the black of his hair, but that wasn't what held his gaze. There was no old man. There was no demon. There were only two floating orbs of green light -- the lurid pit-glow of his reflection’s own eyes looking back at him.

“I’ve got it under control,” he said again, after all, no one knew the monster within better than Jason himself.

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**Chapter End Notes**

- WARNING TAG if you scrolled down from the top: At this point it is probably really obvious, but “temporary character death” described in this chapter.
- Also, bible quotes.
- The opening scene is gory, but was inspired by the true crime scene photos shown in the documentary miniseries _The Staircase_. The documentary follows the trial of Michael Peterson for the murder of his wife, Kathleen Peterson, who he allegedly pushed down the stairs. I remember thinking that it was a shocking amount of blood for just falling down the stairs. The defense’s argument was that it was from multiple cranial impacts against the walls as well as the stairs. If you are curious I would suggest watching the series, making sure to also watch the 2018 update. I found it incredibly fascinating
- By the end of this story, I realize I've kind of written a symbiote story. Though its more exactly what's going on with Jason Blood & Etrigan as opposed to Venom/Eddie Brock, because this is not a happy (or sexy) symbiosis.
- The title of this story was actually inspired by the 90s horror game of the same name. It was somewhat controversial for its time, but I think it really laid the groundwork for future horror genre games, like Silent Hill. I probably should not have been playing it as a kid, but it left quite an impression on me :)
- I would love it if you left a comment. This story was really difficult to write for me, for a lot of reasons, which is why it took so long.... So let me know what you thought! Was I successful (or not!) in making this a true horror fic? :)

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!