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Do you see? Do you see? Do you see?

Since he was a young boy, these words would fester in the back of Bruce Wayne's mind playing over and over again like a cracked record stuck on the worst part of the song. His mother and father died when he was only eight years old; at that age he had to overcome his fears; at that age, he was plucked from his dreamlike life and forced to live in one long nightmare.

As he sat on his knees crouching over his dead parents, he felt their warmth seep from their bodies in puddles of red liquid. He wished the darkness would just go away. Everywhere he looked was black, whereas before the colorful city lights had illuminated his childhood. That moment he cried.

Alfred always thought that the night his parents were shot and killed was the night his innocence was pried away from him but it was not. No, he lost his innocence four days later. It was raining and people gathered in droves to see it, like it was the circus. He was a little boy clutching to Alfred's wrinkled hand trying not to cry, trying to look brave as he stared at the floor. Then it was his turn and he was forced to let go of Alfred's hand and walk to the center of the musky Gotham City Cathedral. He walked up with his head down slowly dragging his feet and dropped a single white rose into the casket. Each step he took killed a part of him, each one was closer and closer to realizing that his life would never be the same. The people whispered under their veils and behind their hands. Bruce looked around the packed room for someone he loved as much as his parents but found no

one. Alfred had been pulled away by a sea of people and on the alter they mutter those three words to him as he tries not to look up at the open coffin.

Did you see? Over and over. The truth was he didn't want to see.

So many people in the room, and not one would ever be as important to him as his parents. No one would ever hold him when he was scared again. At that moment, he realized that he was alone in the world. He knew that of the billions of people that walk the earth, the only two that ever mattered to him were gone.

His heart burns ferociously as he gasps for air. Each excruciating breath stabs his lungs as he counts the seconds until the Reaper will end his life with the pull of the trigger. One small extremity holds the difference between life and death. Suddenly, the Reaper's attention is diverted as footsteps echo from the stairwell. The Reaper's cloaked head snaps toward the direction of the noise. As his adversary's body leans to the right, Batman uses all the strength still stored in his legs to send The Reaper sailing off his feet and onto the gravelly floor of the police headquarters rooftop. The footsteps grow louder now and the Reaper takes the crescendo of stomping shoes as a cue to abandon the two injured crime fighters and pounces over the edge of the building. His long tattered black cape trails behind him. Batman shivers; he knows what he has to do. It's like the old days, the bad days, the all or nothing days. It's blood for blood and by the gallons.

The door bursts open and an overweight cop enters. He clutches his pounding heart. Batman rises to his feet slowly. As the cop takes in the ghastly sight, his eyes widen, his hand drops a chocolate frosted pastry, and he reaches for the cold steel of his gun at his waist.

The Batman snarls as the cop raises his weapon and he quickly dispatches it with a small black batarang. A loud clang rings through the night as the gun meets Batman's projectile and falls clumsily from the policemen's chubby hands. This is one of Gordon's men? This is a

member of Gotham's finest? Batman thinks as the heavysset officer drops to his knees to recover his fallen weapon. After tangling with the Reaper, Batman himself is a bloodied and battered mess. He squirms at the thought of this one cop getting any kind of drop on him.

As the comical scene plays out before him, Batman fretfully searches through his utility belt for an easy way out of his predicament. Once, he would have had two or three quick fixes, maybe he wouldn't have been in this position in the first place. No *bat-gadgets* to bail him out, this time, so he examines the situation again. One lost maniac, two cops, one passed out, more likely on the way. These scenarios usually play out as numbers games and in this case, they numbers aren't good. Somehow, the officer manages to locate his gun in the darkness and his joy is palpable as he holds the weapon in his hands again. He stands up, and whips it in the direction of the Batman, but to his surprise, he his firearm now points at a blank space on the floor. Nervously, he looks about for a sign of the dark vigilante. As

his head moves to the right, it connects painfully with a black gloved fist swinging to his left. One punch, one punch is all it takes. The pudgy officer's hat flies off and his body spins around before landing on the floor. The Reaper has escaped. That thought continually goes through his head. At first, he takes two running steps to the ledge to salvage the night and hunt down his assailant, but somewhere in the second step, his ribs send pain shooting throughout his body telling him to stop. He drops to his knees.

Batman drags himself across the police station roof. He is inches away from the ledge when he hears footsteps again growing louder. Less incompetent cops are sure to follow after Gordon's fallen rescuer. The door slams open

heralding a cop yelling orders. Suddenly, a bright yellow light blinds all the men on the rooftop. As though from out of thin air, a small black helicopter's lights slice the darkness. As the cops' eyes dilate to adjust to the brightness, a familiar wrinkled hand reaches out to the Batman's and he pulls with all his might. The Batman manages to find the strength to pull himself into the confines of the eerie flying device as the cops begin firing. As soon as he is inside, panels of black tinted bullet-proof glass slide down covering the open hole. The bullets ricochet wildly off the convex glass surface.

"The gyro?" Batman asks sliding into the seat behind his loyal butler Alfred. The small whirling machine floats to and fro silently, across Gotham's sky, above Gotham's Police Headquarters for several minutes before finally taking off.

"I always did like this more than your other flying machines, Master Bruce. And if I may sir... I believe it is called the *Batgyro*." He smirks as he pulls a lever. The gyro jerks forward and begins to accelerate.

Bruce takes off his mask and winces in pain as the hood pulls tightly against his thick dark hair, "You may not."

Gordon wakes up to the smell of ammonia fumes. A fat cop on night duty holds smelling salts to his nose. Gordon has seen his kind before. This is the type of cop that joins the force at a young age and slowly loses the

fantasy of police work when they have to sit for hours waiting and filling out paperwork, the kind of screw-up cop they put on Gordon's team everywhere he goes. This one goes by the name of Ray. "Yo chief," He screams in his thick Jersey accent, "Yo chief. I saw the whole thing!" Gasping for air and holding his side he continues, "The bat, he was insane! Total cheap shot: BAM! Right across the back of your head I was gonna stop him but he had a look in his eye, you know Gordy?"

Gordon squints his eyes at the fat officer above him and pushes the salts away. "Oh sorry about that Jimmy, I got caught up y'know? The Batman, he was like, possessed or somethin'. When I looked in his eyes it was like I was

staring into the devil himself. But then, you would know right? You have to keep the psycho in check all da' time and whatnot? Who do I think I'm talkin' to right?"

Gordon reaches in his coat for his glasses and before he can say anything, the cop goes on, "Oh, right I found these, they ain't cracked or nothin', I saw them over there by where da bat dropped you. I'm telling you Gordy, he had that LOOK!" Gordon grabs his glasses from the night officer's hand and wipes them off on his shirt before putting them on. Most of the smudges were from his "aide's" thick sweaty fingers.

Gordon lifts the glasses, and rubs the bridge of his nose, and is about to speak when the cop begins again.

"Yeah, he was nuts, I come out here to make sure youse was okay and I sees the bat choking you like this," he says gesturing an awkward bear hug with his thick arms, "and I says to him, I says, 'HEY, You there! Put 'im DOWN!' and I grab my gun, well I drop my Krispy Kreme and THEN grab my gun and I raised it, right? And he just up and disappears!"

Gordon shoves the officer aside and makes his way inside the stairwell.

The portly cop begins to speak again when Gordon cuts him off.

"Listen, I really don't give a damn what you saw! This is the last thing I need right now! If you saw the whole thing, why the hell didn't you stop it? Why didn't you waddle up here and point your little gun and wave your little badge sooner?" His partner, Raymond Halford tries to come up with an excuse, but Gordon waves him away. "You think I need to hear you blabbering right now? I got the commissioner breathing down the back of my neck about the Batman enough as it is! Now can we stop standing around up here, or are you enjoying the breeze?" Gordon walks past the officer, brushing against his shoulder as he makes his way inside.

Did he see? Did he see what happens when he does these things? I am trying to teach him a lesson. I want him to know that what he is doing is wrong. He has to know that no good will come from these things, I found out the hard way but I will spare him. I will give him what he needs.

The night is almost over and I peek in on my fairy pets dwelling in their frosty mason jars. So sweet, so calm. They all breathe their eternal breath and I feel a wave of death's chill as the refrigerator door opens up. The smell hits first as always. Just as I remembered, the sweet rotting of flesh is a required taste but its one that I cannot escape. They tried to rehabilitate me but they can never "cure" this lust. It is beyond them. Once one savors it, he can never forget. I pick my favorite today and remove my leather glove and my mask before I pick it up. Against my cheek I feel the power of death and I chill my warm flesh with its

morbid glory. Slowly I remove the lid and my pulsating veins speed up as the jar's contents slowly begin to spill out. I move it over my face and begin to digest. As it makes its way through my body I feel it empower me. I feel it coalesce with my blood and spread. As I drown in it, it overcomes me, it purifies me. My eyes roll back behind my head. The feeling is too much right now. I am not yet ready. He is still out there. He hasn't learned. He doesn't understand. They compare him to me but he hasn't learned. He doesn't understand. No more. No more comparison. No more misunderstanding. He will learn. He will feel it; it is the only way. Something has to change. He will see.

Batman paces back and forth across the steel platforms of the Batcave. The musky atmosphere of the cave is flooded with the sound of shrieking bats and flapping wings. Bruce Wayne presses a key on the massive console in front of him and speaks roughly, "Computer, Search: Caspian, Judson," prompting prompting text and graphics to scroll rapidly down the enormous screen — too fast for any human eye to read until it stops suddenly. Before him on the monitor, is the file on Judson Caspian, also known as The Reaper. Caspian was committed to Arkham about fifty years ago, and released into society twenty years later. After his alleged rehabilitation, he moved to Crime Alley and he just sort of disappeared, never to be heard from again. That in itself was not an uncommon occurrence for a denizen of Crime Alley. Tenants occupy buildings, customers frequent the stores, and the government distributes welfare checks, but they are all faceless masses of Gotham. They have no names and no voices. Somewhere in that mass is a dangerous killer, Batman just has to find him.

Bruce Wayne studies the mugshot. Caspian has a bald head with large ears that stick out. His nose stabs downward and comes to a distinct point, like the beak of a vulture. Wrinkles seem to grow like roots from his eyes and cheekbones and cover his entire face. His eyes are two nearly perfect circles bursting out of his skulls with icy blue pupils suffocated by red veins that completely cover any white that might have been there in the past. His expression is frightening in its lack of emotion as he stares blankly beyond the camera.

"Alfred..."

"Yes, Master Bruce?"

"Caspian should be dead. There is no way that the man whom I fought out there tonight was one hundred and three years old. I have probably faced stranger and definitely older, but if Caspian is not a meta, then there has to be another explanation." Batman rubs his chin and stares intently at glowing screen.

"Was there a question I was supposed to address, sir?"

"Hmm?" Bruce responds finally breaking his concentration from the file.

"Nothing, Master Bruce. Might I suggest a night's rest? Perhaps letting your wounds heal for longer than fifteen minutes before you go out and open them again..." Bruce looked up at Alfred again, silencing him with a single glance.

He looked down at the new bandages around his ribs.

"I just... He got away Alfred," Bruce says lowering his head in shame and falling into his chair. There are bats chittering loudly overhead and the constant buzzing from various machines around the cave, yet the moment of silence shared between Bruce and Alfred is the most deafening sound of all.

"I know Master Bruce." Alfred says consolingly. A bright light flashes on the giant screen informing the two that a group of drug dealers brought in the night before has been found murdered in their cell. Bruce lowers his cowl and pulls down his shirt. "Master Bruce..." Alfred begins, wanting to tell his employer to get some rest but stops short.

"Prepare the Batmobile." Bruce says raising his eyes to the notice flashing red on the screen.

"Very good, Sir." Alfred says as he returns to the computer and begins to type. "Please try to keep your wounds closed."

James Gordon buries his head into his hands and takes another sip of black coffee to try to stay awake. The commissioner is on him again to put Batman behind bars, and now this whole Reaper thing has come up for him to deal with. The situation with Batman is a real mess. So what if there is a witness who claims Batman led the attack? Gordon knows better. Batman would never do a thing like that. He stares at the cold coffee with the faded GCPD logo printed on the mug. He wants to know why things are suddenly going so very wrong. Barbara is on him about spending more time with James Junior — these days he rarely spends any. Babs is over in Vegas, at college, doing god-knows-what. Sometimes he wonders whether Batman was right to bring the kid with him; at least then he didn't have to worry about him being on drugs or with a gang, only about him getting himself shot by a homicidal maniac. A thick layer of paper work covers his desk and he knows it'll keep coming the more he avoids it. There is a knock on his door. Through the blurry glass, he can see the figure standing outside. Ray. Again? There should be a limit on how many times per day he has to deal with morons, now that he's gotten his promotion. Ray doesn't stop knocking until Jim waves him in. He enters, stumbling, bearing a paper and a stupid look on his face. "Yo, chief, I think there's is something you oughta check out, here." He passes over the paper in his hand and peeks over to see Gordon's reaction as he reads it. "It uh... looks like those guys that were sent in from Sully's last night got killed."

"So I read." Gordon says still scanning the paper. Apparently the drug dealers from the incident with Batman the night before got cut to ribbons tonight. Still fresh in the cell healing their wounds and someone snuck in and diced them up good. Gordon feels a headache coming on and downs a few aspirin before he puts his gun into its holster. "Where are they at?"

"Downtown, the morgue."

"What? They're already there? When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I thought it would upset you, chief."

"Well, that it did, but did you think telling me later was going to make me start belting out The Captain and Tenille?"

"So you goin' down there then, boss?"

"Yeah, it's my job. Do me a favor and get me my vest," Gordon says as he puts gun in his ankle holster and lights up a cigarette.

The morgue is silent and creepy. Gordon walks in cautiously with a flashlight and has the coroner show him to the bodies already laid out on the table.

"You here?" Gordon asks when the Coroner leaves the dark room. No reply comes back so he asks again, "You here?"

Batman steps out into the light. "I didn't attack you on the roof, Gordon."

"I know." The tension is thick between the two men. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Don't need it," Batman replies coldly in his scratchy, deep voice. "I would say he used a scythe but I already knew that, as did you." Batman runs his finger down an incision in the body, "He sliced down and seemingly randomly.

Several organs are missing. He let them bleed to death before he decapitated them. Wore gloves the entire time, so no prints. We can forget searching for bodily fluids. I checked one, and there's nothing. It's not his M.O."

"Good to know. I forgot the gloves."

"We should check the scene for other clues. I have a lead."

"Batman, they are going to come down on you if you keep this up. You weren't always like this. You seem... different, these days. Ever since Robin left-

"That has nothing to do with the case, Jim. If you want to wax sentimental, I'd suggest you find another ear."

"Just try to play it safe. I can't keep sticking up for you when you get into these moods of yours. Good lord, man... you nearly killed them yourself, last night; all Reaper did was finish the job. I can only keep the commissioner at bay for so long before he orders me to take you down. They are going to have me release a statement tomorrow, you know. How do you expect me to justify you attacking one of my people?" Gordon says, turning back to face Batman. He realizes that he is talking to himself... again.

Slowly the Reaper hooks his deadly scythe onto the edge of the wall and uses his momentum to swing himself into the small window on the edge of his building. He walks slowly into the kitchen, examining the contents of his apartment, sliding his hand along jars as he quickly moves his head around. He sees a tall one in the middle, most likely a pickle jar, and he pulls it out and inspects its contents more closely. Nothing. His eyes roll as he presses the jar against his face and crouches, curling into the fetal position, the better to bask in the glory of the new treasure he has just stuffed into the empty jar: a recently-removed gall bladder from a drug dealer in a county facility awaiting a transfer to a state prison.

Suddenly, a bat from Hell comes crashing into his jar, shattering it instantly. The green moldy liquid flows out onto Reaper and shards of glass impale his flesh. He rolls around and finally finds a small piece of sharp metal on the floor. It seems to be shaped ever so slightly like... he raises his head with a black toothed smile, and twists his neck back and forth maniacally calling out his name. He rises to his feet now, grabbing from behind him a shiny scythe. He turns, waiting for Batman to make his move.

Reaper whirls as another jar behind him breaks. Batman chooses that second to pounce. He launches himself upon the Reaper, but as they hit the floor, Reaper uses the Batmans' force against him, rolls out and finds his footing.

With his scythe, the Reaper regains the offensive and slashes across Batman's chest as he tries to rise.

Batman feels the blood soak his chest, but the adrenaline drives him to

fight through the pain and he rises up from the attack, to delivers a punch to the Reaper's jaw. It sends the crimson-clad psycho back onto the ground. On the floor, the Reaper waits for the Batman to leave himself open for another attack. As the caped crusader looms over him, the Reaper presses his knees to his chest and kicks out at Batman's chest using his momentum to roll back onto his knees. Batman flies backwards, cape trailing behind him.

A resounding "thud" fills the room and brings a smile to Reapers face. Again he grabs his scythe from the floor and stands tall, lifting his deadly blade to attack. He holds it above his head, intending to impale the wounded Batman. As he brings it down, Batman rolls out of the way, and the blade slashes his cape as it stabs into the rotten wooden floor.

Batman, barely on his feet again, lifts his fist and sends it crashing down on the Reaper's head. This time the punch stuns his enemy, and the Reaper's knees shake the under the impact of the blow. Batman raises his fist high again and delivers yet another punch to the Reaper who is still trying to pry out his scythe. To no avail. It remains tightly wedged in the floor. Another punch to the Reaper's head finally sends him crumpling to the floor.

The Reaper squirms on the floor. As Batman moves goes in for another hit, he catches an elbow in the nose. Blood begins to gush from Batman's nose. The Reaper quickly shoves him onto the floor and lifts his fist to attack. A

number of options run through head. Most include knocking him down. some involve some minor injuries like breaking his leg in to two pieces some involve major injuries like punching him in the throat and causing his trachea to collapse, but the only ones that he even slightly considers are the serious ones; the permanent ones. Batman dodges the punch easily enough, and as the Reaper is caught off balance from the force of his blow, Batman smashes his foot into his opponent's mid-section. The sickening sound of brittle bones breaking beneath his foot gives him satisfaction. Had he aimed a little to the right, he could have paralyzed him completely, but the Reaper was lucky; the kick narrowly avoided puncturing his lungs.

The Reaper's will seems to fade away at the cracking sound and he instantly falls to hits the floor. He screams, but the sound of his cries are

drowned out by the siren outside the window. Batman whips his head around as the wailing grows nearer. It's unusual to hear a cop in Crime Alley; the place is practically run by the underworld. He knows there is a reason that the cops chose to come here tonight. Odds are he found out the Reaper's location at the same time they did. He just got here faster. He looks down at the Reaper and pulls a pair of lightweight cuffs out of his utility belt. The drooling lunatic grabs onto his legs and he kicks the hand and bends over to cuff him. As he reaches for the Reaper, a set of teeth clamp around his wrist and strong jaws bite down. Apparently, the broken ribs weren't enough.

Batman quickly shakes off the bite and kicks the Reaper in the ribs again. The Reaper rolls back onto his back and Batman mounts him and cracks an arm to lower his opponent's defenses. The Reaper is like a deranged animal

trying to viciously kick the Batman off of him to free himself. His efforts are met with an elbow to the face. Batman then raises his fist and punches The Reaper's skull-masked face. Reaper's head bounces off the floorboards of

his apartment, and Batman punches again even harder. Now the Reaper's struggles diminish, and Batman punches harder, alternating between his left and right fist. He feels the skull mask begin to crack underneath his fists and finally it breaks into shards that jab into Reaper's face, mixing with blood and skin as the Batman continues his methodical medley of punches.

"Do you see!?!!" Batman screams in the Reapers exposed and bloody face, "Do you see?!? You may be death, you may be the big bad Reaper," the punches continue, "But I... I am the GODDAMN BATMAN!" The Reaper loses

consciousness and Batman stops the flurry of blows as he feels the struggles beneath him subside. He searches The Reaper and finds a holster on his torso. A gun is tucked away neatly and he pulls it out holding it up into

the light. He studies it and looks down at the Reaper's bloody face, now twisted into a sinister grin. He holds it out and stands up, backing away from the Reaper.

"FREEZE!" Gordon yells out entering the room. Gordon cocks his gun at the jagged black shadow that is the Batman. The seconds feel like hours,

and the only sound in the cramped apartment is that of a drippy faucet. Trying to inhale as little as possible to avoid the rotting stench of death, Gordon speaks. "Batman, don't do this..." Batman remains in the darkness while momentary flashes of light reflect off of the gun in his hand aimed at the bleeding pile of flesh on the floor. He should be in pain. Both of them should be. It is certain that at least four of the Reaper's ribs are shattered from his kick and the slash across his own chest is still seeping blood. "Please Batman, don't make this harder for us then it already is." Gordon says, still trying to convince Batman to drop the gun.

Batman remains silent and Gordon takes a step towards the Reaper to see the extent of the damage. He kneels over, still aiming his gun at Batman when suddenly, the Reaper begins to laugh and reaches for the piece strapped to Gordon's ankle. Somehow, the Reaper manages to stand again. He points the gun at Gordon, who still has his own revolver pointing at Batman... who has the Reaper's old pistol aimed at the Reaper himself. Gordon sweats as the tension builds. He prays that nobody decides to pull a trigger. The Reaper laughs harder, and begins to pull chunks of broken skull out of his face and the Batman's anger grows. Batman has cracked his ribs, destroyed his face, broken his arm, knocked him unconscious and he still stands before him with a gun aimed at to one of the few honest men left in Gotham. Batman sees himself in a broken mirror with a gun aimed at an enemy that should have taken him no time to dispatch, and thoughts that he should not be having run through his head.

Batman reaches into a pouch but there is nothing is there; he ran out of pills last night. The pills were only a temporary solution. Once the migraines started to fade away, he had planned on dropping them all together. At first it was easier, though. At first he would take one or two and the pain in his body would just seem to float away. It never affected his "mental state" as Alfred put it. Not once did it affect his emotions or his reasoning. But, according to everyone else around him, they changed him. If Clark were to get hurt, all he would have to do is sun bathe and he would be as good as new, but he is no Superman. No, the pills were effective and they did their job. That was the difference: every time he hits one of these villains, they come back. They escape from prisons and commit new crimes. It's a never-ending cycle. They break the law, he

hunts them down, they go away, and they come back. They always come back. He might as well have not even bothered. He needs a permanent solution. He needs a change.

Gordon begins tries to reason with him, ever the police officer. It is no wonder Barbara left him Batman thinks to himself. The Reaper will not shut up and Batman knows that one of their arms will get tired soon enough, but he decides to end the situation then and there. Something permanent needs to happen to end this. Batman considers the possible solutions. He thinks of the people he has already lost and the people he has yet to lose. He thinks of his parents, of Julie, of Dick, of Alfred... and he knows that something has to change. The three men stare at each other, waiting for someone to shoot or drop a weapon, when suddenly, shots ring out and the blasts temporarily light the room. Then everything fades to darkness...

To Be Concluded!

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