



**Nightwing #2**  
Ellen Fleischer

**Published:** 2006

**Categorie(s):** Fiction, Fan Fiction

**Tag(s):** "Teen Titans" "Kid Flash" "Wonder Girl" Speedy Comics DC2  
Nightwing Starfire Breathtaker Raven

*Nightwing*

Issue 2: "The Great Unknown, Part Two: More to Me"

Written by Ellen Fleischer

Cover by Michelle Bridges

Edited by Ellen Fleischer

*Suddenly you're in this fight alone  
Steppin' out into the great unknown  
And the night's the hardest time  
When the doubts run through your mind  
'Cause suddenly you find yourself alone*

Desmund Child and Andreas Carlsson, "Suddenly"

*I'm shifting my life into drive  
I'm getting out kicking the past goodbye  
Like Toby said "How do you like me now?"  
This conversation has run dry  
And I keep telling myself*

*Oooh, Oooh, Oooh  
There's more to me than you  
Oooh, Oooh, Don't underestimate what I can do...*

Jessica Andrews, Marcel Chagnon, James T. Slater, "There's More to Me  
Than You"

**More To Me**

*Once upon a time, there was a little boy who could fly. Well, not really. He just*

*made it look that way. Swinging on the trapeze, somersaulting so smoothly it probably looked like he was floating to the sawdust below...*

*...I know that's what it felt like anyway. I used to be that boy.*

*For me, when I'd let go of the bar and go into my quad, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Dad used to tell me to block everything out but the routine, but I wanted to take it all in. I guess he was afraid that the sounds and smells would distract me, but instead they spurred me on. So I never really paid attention when Dad would tell me to forget the crowds, forget the calliope music and the drum rolls, the way the aroma of hot buttered popcorn rose up to meet me, and how it mingled with the odor of cigarette smoke. Smoking inside the tents wasn't allowed, but between the acts people would run outside for a tobacco fix. Over the years, the wind ground that smell into the canvas so tightly there was no way to wash it out. And, circus tents being rolled like they are when the show moves on, the stench permeated the fabric from top to bottom. Dad hated it. He was always after Pop Haley to get new tents, but the circus was barely breaking even, and the budget wasn't there.*

*Me? It was familiar, even homey. I guess I accepted tobacco-infused big tops the same way I accepted that the chore rotation schedule would sometimes stick me walking—and cleaning up after—Madame Pierrette's Performing Poodle act. Some parts of life just weren't as much fun as others.*

*Now 'fun', was when it was my turn to scrub down Elinore the elephant. Fun was riding on her back in the howdah when the circus passed through the small towns. Fun was watching Mom and Dad go through their act on the trapeze. Rehearsal or performance, it never made a difference. Sure, when it was my turn, I did a lot of the same stunts, but I didn't know what I looked like up there. I knew what they looked like, though. Air-dancers. High-flyers. Gravity had no hold on them.*

*Dad always insisted I perform with a safety net. I was better than good, but I was still a child. And, in Dad's opinion, no matter how spectacular I was, I needed that extra protection. But the audience wanted to see 'death-defying' stunts. So, once my part of the act was finished, the roustabouts would take away the net, and the crowds would start cheering so loud I think the echoes carried as far south as Mexico City—when we were in Bridgeport, Connecticut.*

*Pop Haley used to beg my father to keep the net up, but Dad would always point*

*out that the Flying Graysons were one of the main attractions, and part of what made them so attractive was the absence of the net for the second half of the act. And Pop would shake his head, but he always gave in. Each night, they took away the net, and I'd stand at the edge of the ring and watch my parents soar. And I'd dream of the night when I'd get to fly without a net, too.*

*...Until that night when a hoodlum named Zucco poured acid on the swing ropes. Not a lot, mind you. Just enough to eat part of the way through the cords. Just enough so that the ropes would break if forced to carry the weight of two adults. Just enough.*

*That was the night that I learned why safety nets were important. It didn't matter whether you literally meant a woven nylon mesh, or whether you were referring to the constant drilling and review of technique that Bruce enforced. Nets were there to save you, not trap you. They provided a buffer, a breathing space. And refusing to make use of them could kill you.*

*Maybe flying with a net wasn't fun or spectacular. And maybe it cramped your style. But it was important. It kept you alive.*

*That was probably why, when I was a kid, it never bothered me when Bruce put me through the same drills and katas over and over again, or why he'd make me perform an exercise so many times I felt I could do it in my sleep. Actually, I remember this one time I bought some over-the-counter cold medicine and didn't check if it was a non-drowsy formula. And when Bruce woke me up at five-thirty as usual and we went down for our morning workout, I still managed to get all the moves right, groggy though I was.*

*But, after awhile, I got cocky. I felt like I knew it all already. My body could go through the motions automatically. Forget 'second nature'. With the amount of coaching I went through, let's just say it was also nature's three through seven. So I started working on newer, more sensational techniques and gave short shrift to the drills. Bruce kept reminding me I wasn't performing for the crowds now, and that I shouldn't be grandstanding. I let it go in one ear and out the other.*

*And then, early last summer, I faced down some mook who grazed me with a 9-milimetre. A few weeks later, it was the Joker. And both times, my mind knew what to do, but my reflexes weren't sure. The purpose of the drills was supposed to be to let my body react before my conscious mind could assess the situation. I*

*lost that and it cost me. It cost me a bunch of bruises and a few broken bones. It cost me the woman I loved. It cost me a job I'd held since I was twelve years old .*

*It cost my surrogate father the woman he loved. And in many ways, it cost me Bruce, too. After I left for college, he didn't call me, and didn't return my calls for months. Finally, right before Christmas, he invited me home for a visit. I went... but it was strained. I know he's still hurting, but I don't know what to do to make things right, or if I even can. We never really talked things out—that's the problem. Now, I don't think either of us knows exactly how to start. And neither of us has the guts to try winging it.*

*I have to face facts. I messed up because I wasn't prepared. And the price I had to pay was higher than I'd bargained for. What really worries me though? Not too long ago, my friends and I went up against a threat that we weren't ready for—and we almost lost. At least we learned one thing: brains, agility, weaponry, meta talents—it doesn't make any difference. Without the proper training, the next time we go up against something unexpected, if the Cult of Blood was any indicator, we're liable to get our backsides handed to us. Unless we drill, unless we practice, unless we're standing ready to catch each other when one of us is about to fall, unless we give ourselves that safety net, this team is doomed from the start.*

"Speedy!" Nightwing snapped as Donna swerved at the last second to avoid colliding with the young archer. "Your timing's off. You have to get out of Wonder Girl's way the instant after you take that shot." He turned to Donna. "And you've got to be more on the ball, too. You should have anticipated the possibility that he wouldn't move fast enough and compensated sooner."

Roy Harper's fists clenched at his sides. "You saying you build your strategy around expecting me to mess up, Wing?"

"I have to," Dick said. "It's called trying to prepare for all likely outcomes."

The room suddenly grew very still as Dick realized how that last bit had sounded. "Roy," he began, "I-I didn't mean..."

The other youth shook his head as he tried to mask the deep hurt in his eyes. "So that's the way it is," he said bitterly. "Good to know." His shoulders slumped as he made his way toward the door to the shower facilities of the Themiscyran consulate, where the Titans were holding their daily practice session. As he passed Nightwing, he plowed his elbow into his teammate's abdomen. Caught totally off guard, Dick doubled over. Roy followed with a fist to the chin, which snapped the other teen's head back. Dick fell heavily to the floor.

"Did you plan on that one, Victorio?" He asked. Without waiting for an answer, he walked on. "Jerk," he muttered as he left the gym.

"You okay, Dick?" Wally asked as he extended a hand to his fallen friend. Donna took hold of his other arm to help him to his feet.

Dick winced. "Fine. I mean 'fine', aside from this shoe-leather taste in my mouth," he added ruefully.

Wally grinned. "Well you were a bit harsh," he said. Dick didn't miss the serious undercurrent to Kid Flash's bantering tone.

He sighed. "Right. I learned my diplomacy from Batman, remember?" He drew a deep breath, then gasped and put a hand to his stomach.

Donna's grip on his arm tightened. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Don't mother-hen me, Donna. I'm fine."

"But, Dick," Wally said, concern making him forget to speak slowly, "whatifitsyourappendixyouknowthat's..."

"Wally," Dick started.

Kid Flash continued, oblivious.  
"...HowHoudinidiedsomeonepunchedhiminthestomachwhen..."

"Wally."

"...Hewasntreadyandhisappendixrupt... ."

“Wally!”

The red-haired youth stopped in mid-word.

Dick held his palms parallel to his chest, facing outward, and then lowered them quickly. “I had my appendix out when I was seven. Roy didn’t really hit me that hard. I’m okay. Honest.”

“How dared he?” An indignant voice spoke for the first time. “Challenging a leader in battle can cost lives. Even in combat rehearsal one does not tolerate such behaviour.” Princess Koriand’r, late of the warrior society of Tamaran appeared ready to charge after Roy and...

Dick’s lips twitched at the mental image of Kory hauling Roy out of the shower and...and giving him a dressing down while he was in a state of undress. He shook his head. Roy would never forgive him if he let that happen.

“Leave Speedy to me, Starfire,” he said quickly. “I owe him that much, at least.”

The alien girl’s green eyes widened. “Explain,” she demanded.

He sighed. “Roy and I go back a few years. I shouldn’t have said what I said, in the first place. But since I did, he proved one point loud and clear. I should have planned for him to react the way he did.” He closed his eyes. “Ever since we fought the Cult of Blood, we’ve been off our form. Like they rattled us and we’re worried the same thing might happen again.” He opened his eyes again and gazed intently into the eyes of each of his teammates in turn.

“That’s why,” he continued, “I’m pushing us all so hard. We have to function smoothly as a team. And we have to practice our maneuvers until they become reflex. We won’t always get the luxury of thinking up our attacks as we go along, so we’ve got to keep drilling until our bodies react before our conscious minds finish assessing the situation. That goes for all of us, me included. So.” He glanced around. “Let’s try a sparring session. Kory and I take on Wally and Donna... hey, where’s Raven?”

Donna put a hand on his shoulder. "She ran off when Roy hit you. I think the feelings in the room might have been a little intense for her."

"Great," Dick replied. "Alright. The teams are balanced this way. Leave it for now." As he sank into a fighting crouch, he wondered how he was going to clear the air with Roy. He couldn't quite believe he'd said those words in the first place.

*They sounded like something that Bruce would have said...*

*Days later...*

"We're outnumbered ten to one!" Speedy gasped. Starfire hovered above him, eyeing the armed men in ski masks, black turtlenecks and jackets, camouflage pants, and combat boots. Each jacket had two epaulets, to which were attached two blood-red oval stones about an inch in diameter. At the sight of the two Titans, the soldiers of the Carnelian Order raised their firearms menacingly. The Titans didn't know much about the organization. As rumor had it, the C.O. was a homegrown terrorist network dedicated to turning the United States into a military dictatorship—even if it had to force one to arise in response to its own activities.

The Tamaranian took the scene in at a glance. "Very well," she replied. "You take two. I'll deal with the other eighteen."

Speedy did a double take. Starfire smiled. "The others are moments behind us. We only need to hold them."

The young archer snickered. "I'll do better than that, Goldie," he replied, nocking a trick arrow to his bow. It sailed unerringly into the wall behind five of the terrorists.

"You missed," one started to jeer. He finished by hacking as a dense cloud of yellow-green vapor radiated forth from the arrow.

"Oh no, I didn't," Speedy rejoined. Four more members of the Order began to wheeze, as they tried to escape the knockout gas. He looked at

his teammate. Starfire was busily blasting her energy bolts to neutralize the soldiers' weaponry. Her aim and accuracy were almost on a par with his, he noted admiringly, as he realized that she was channeling her blasts to melt the guns, but regulating the size and intensity of the bolts so that they only impacted the guns. It wasn't fair, he mused. How could one girl command that much power and look so... incredibly hot, while doing so?

All at once, his chest constricted. His lungs fought for air, but suddenly there was none available. For a moment he thought that the gas cloud had somehow drifted over to him, but that would have made him nauseous. *This* was like trying to breathe in a vacuum. But how... ?

"The name's 'Breathtaker', a young girl's voice informed him with savage glee. Before him, Speedy saw a slight figure barely five-foot-two, clad in the same paramilitary gear as the others. The skin that showed through the eye holes of her ski mask was blue. From her build, and from the timbre of her voice, Speedy didn't think she was older than fourteen.

*Meta*, he realized, trying to slide away. Whatever she was doing to him, maybe it was only effective short-range. He staggered, and fell heavily to the floor. His head was pounding, as though someone had clamped a vise around it. He couldn't feel his fingers.

Breathtaker's laugh tinkled nastily. "I'm only giving you a dose of your own medicine, Rock ," she explained. "I control the air. And I just pulled it all away from you... including what you had in your lungs!"

It was true, Roy realized. He was starving for oxygen, he was gasping for it desperately, but there was none to be had. His vision was growing dark...

"X'hal! No!" Starfire, suddenly aware of her teammate's plight, stopped her attack. Flying to Speedy's side, she scooped him up all-but-oblivious to the young girl gloating over him, and flew out the door by which they had entered.

Several turns down the maze-like corridors, she nearly collided with the rest of the team. "They're behind us, and Speedy's hurt!" She declared, her warrior's upbringing leading her to announce the important facts as

quickly and succinctly as possible. They could hear shouts coming from behind her.

"Lay him down, Starfire," Nightwing ordered. "What happened?"

Kory relayed what she had overheard. "I can survive in space without oxygen for short periods of time. That protects me somewhat."

Nightwing looked down at his teammate with concern. He wasn't breathing. "Raven," he ordered, "give me your cloak. We've got to elevate his torso." The newest Titan complied instantly. Nightwing nodded approval as she quickly folded the garment into a neat oblong. "Who here knows emergency first aid?" He demanded, lifting Speedy halfway into a sitting position.

"For a Tamaranian, yes," Starfire replied, "but human physiology is alien to me."

Raven slid the cloak beneath her fallen teammate. "I am sorry, Nightwing. My healing talent works well on injured bones and tissues, but restoring his breathing is beyond me."

"Themiscyrans are immortal," Wonder Girl explained. "It's not something I've been taught."

Kid Flash shook his head.

Nightwing barely listened as he tilted Speedy's chin up. "Go back," he directed. "Starfire and Kid Flash first, Raven and Wonder Girl follow. Take 'em down fast and hard. I'll see to Roy. Be careful."

This was all his fault, he realized as he blew two long slow breaths into his teammate's mouth. Dick never should have listened to him when he'd volunteered to go first. Speedy couldn't fly, wasn't invulnerable, wasn't meta... *whoa, careful there, Dick. He's not the only one fitting that description.* But, that was all the more reason not to go charging in without assessing the situation first. He'd only agreed to send Speedy in the first place because of his superior stealth and tracking skills. While Starfire couldn't help but attract attention, Roy needed backup, and Dick had assumed that, coming from a military culture, the Tamaranian would have

some knowledge of covert operations. He'd miscalculated, he realized. Kory knew about facing an enemy head-on. Stealth and espionage, he realized, were often deemed dishonorable traits in warrior society. Had he ever bothered to find out Starfire's views on the matter? *What kind of leader am I?* He wondered miserably. *If Batman were here, he'd have things under control by now.* He blew another time into Roy's mouth and was rewarded almost immediately when his companion drew breath on his own.

His relief was quickly replaced by anger. How could Roy have been so reckless? Even had the metahuman not been there, what in the world made him think that he could take on a room full of hostiles with a bow and arrow? He'd almost gotten killed for his pains.

*He almost got killed after you green-lighted his plan.*

A blur seemed to glide toward them, slowing as it approached until its features solidified into the familiar form of Kid Flash. "HowIsHe?" Wally asked, nervousness warring with the effort to make himself understood.

"Breathing," Dick returned shortly. "You took care of them?"

Wally nodded. "A lot of them. Some got away... they had a trap door leading into the subway tunnels. Roy's the only one who might've been able to track them... "

"Only he couldn't," Dick countered. *Terrific.* "The one who did this to him?"

Wally shook his head. "She was one of the first ones who bolted. I was busy with the others. In the confusion... "

Dick frowned.

"I-I'm sorry. I should have been faster," Wally said.

Dick sighed. "Even if we had caught her, I don't know how we would have kept her from pulling that stunt on the rest of us." *But he should have had a plan for it. He was the leader. It was his job to prepare for all likely outcomes, wasn't it?* "Has anybody notified the authorities?"

"Wonder Girl."

That was something gone right, at least. He looked down at Speedy. "Can you stand?" He asked.

Roy nodded and rose to his feet.

"Kid Flash, go back and get the others. We're leaving."

It was a subdued group of teenagers who sat around the dining room table in Roy's penthouse amid snacks and soft drinks the following afternoon. Roy said the words on everyone's minds. "We got our butts handed to us, yesterday."

Wally forced himself to smile. "Hey. We got about twenty-five of them off the streets and Kory got most of their firepower. We didn't do *all* bad."

Donna smiled back approvingly. "Exactly, Wally. And next time we'll do better."

Dick looked up. "Darn straight we will," he agreed, feeling a surge of relief that the team seemed to be coping with their performance better than he'd anticipated. "Because now that we know what we're facing, we're going to modify our training accordingly. And we're going to drill until we could hold these guys off in our sleep."

Roy nodded. "Sounds good. We'll get started tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Dick blinked. "What's wrong with tonight?"

His teammate grinned. "I've got a date with Kalin, tonight."

"Kalin?"

"Yeah, she's in my ecology lab. I know this place down at the South

Street Seaport..."

Dick shook his head in disbelief. "Roy, you almost died yesterday, and today you're..."

"Hey, lighten up, Wingster," Roy laughed. "I'm still here, and tomorrow I'll be at practice as usual. But for tonight, I'm going to live it up a little. After all, all work and no play makes Harper a dull boy."

Dick refused to back down. "Don't you get it, Roy? You ran out there half-cocked and got taken out by one surprise too many. You didn't manage to reconnoiter without being seen, when you were seen you didn't hightail it back for reinforcements..."

"Dick," Kory interjected, "that... that was my doing. I knew I could take them. I forgot that Roy couldn't. It won't happen again."

"Hey, whoa! Wait one cotton-picking minute," Roy snapped. "Don't go trying to blame yourself for that one. I knew what I was doing."

"Really?" Dick countered. "Is that how you ended up breathing in a vacuum?"

Roy reddened. "I *know* I messed up, Mr. Perfect! I don't need you rubbing it in!"

That did it. All of the anger that Dick had been feeling since Bruce had dismissed him as Robin, the hurt at having his phone calls to the manor unreturned, every petty frustration, each small self-doubt, coalesced and magnified into a towering inferno of rage. How *dared* Roy be so cavalier about yesterday? Didn't he understand? *How dared Roy call him 'perfect'?*

Without warning, he leaned across the table and seized Roy by the front of his shirt. "Listen to me, Harper! This isn't just about you! This is about the team. You mess up, you don't just hurt *you*, you hurt *us*! Yesterday, when you got taken out, it meant Kory had to break off her attack to save your hide. It meant *I* couldn't help in the fighting because I was busy giving you mouth-to-mouth. It meant we didn't collar all of them and because you were injured, we had to give up because we couldn't track them."

Roy placed both his hands on Dick's upper chest and shoved. "What? You mean you didn't share your bat-tracers with anyone else? What a joke. This isn't a team. This is Batboy and his teen flunkies. Well excuse me if for one night, I decide not to jump through your blasted hoops. I'm going to go out, with Kalin. We're going to have a wonderful dinner down at the port. Then, maybe we'll catch a movie, maybe we'll just sit and talk, maybe we'll even come back here for a bit of dessert. Unlike you, I can have a good time without planning every minute of it, and fun isn't something I need to pencil into my day timer between 2:58 and 3:00 every second Monday. What is this? You changed the red, green and yellow for black, blue and gray and suddenly you're Mini-Bat? Well the hell with this," he said angrily. He slid his chair back, not caring that its legs created twin dark grooves in the carpet pile. "And the hell with you, too, Robbie."

"Get out, Roy," Dick said evenly. "Get. Out."

Roy met the steely blue gaze for a moment, and then glanced aside nervously. On the threshold of the room he paused. "This is *my* crib," he stated. Dick's stare grew positively dangerous. Roy turned hastily. "Just lock the door when you leave."

In the shocked silence that followed, the remaining Titans heard the front door open and click shut behind the departing Roy.

Dick held up a warning hand as Wally opened his mouth to speak. "Don't say it, West," he warned.

"I think you overreacted," Kory stated simply.

"Don't you start either," Dick said, remembering the earlier debriefing. "You take two, I'll take eighteen? What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that in the time it would take Speedy to deal with two, I'd have the rest taken care of," the Tamaranian said. "He actually subdued five within seconds. I was impressed."

"Impressed enough to overlook the fact that he'd stopped breathing? Look, Kory, maybe you don't need oxygen, but you have to keep in

mind that most of the other life forms on this planet do. And that takes priority over bashing a few heads, wouldn't you say?"

Koriand'r's green eyes flashed. She picked up her aluminum Zesti can, still more than three-quarters filled with cola. "I understand that you're upset, Dick," she said calmly, "but," she continued, squeezing the can seemingly without thought, "for six years as a slave, I endured words such as yours. Then I had no choice. No more. I will not be spoken to in such a manner by you or by anyone else, ever again." The rest of the Titans started at the loud popping sound. The Zesti can now had an hour-glass shape, and dark liquid streamed over the alien girl's hand. The bottom of the can had been shorn nearly completely off, and there was a new puddle on the wooden table.

A muffled sob came from Raven. "Please," the girl whimpered. "Stop. Your emotions are running too high. I-I can't block them. They..." She got up from her chair so quickly it overturned. "HURT!" she cried out as she ran from the room.

Dick opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. He looked around at the faces of his teammates. He saw apprehension, anger, and, more worrying, fear. As his ire began to fade, he heard the echoes of his earlier words in his head. *How could he have said...?* He knew how. Thanks to the introduction to psychology course that he'd taken the previous semester, he knew exactly how, and why he had said those things. He'd taken every self-doubt and inadequacy he felt, projected it onto his teammates, and taken them to task for it, particularly Roy. He closed his eyes.

"Sorry, gang," he said feebly. "I... I was out of line. I..." He shook his head. "Look, there's no excuse. Sorry." He headed for the front door and nobody tried to stop him.

*Two days later...*

"He *is* in there," Rachel said softly, the fourth time Dick failed to answer her knock.

Donna hesitated. "Are we pushing things? Should we come back later?"

Rachel closed her eyes. "He is no longer angry, but his inner turmoil is great. I am reading guilt... confusion... shame..." Abruptly she opened her eyes and shook herself as though the physical gesture would break her mental link. "This is wrong. Invading his privacy like this is..."

The door opened abruptly and Dick stood facing them, expression unreadable.

"May we come in?" Donna asked carefully.

Dick appeared to consider the matter. Finally he shrugged and stood aside. The two girls looked around in dismay. Roy had moved into the penthouse over the winter break, leaving Dick with the dorm room to himself. Once assured that no new roommate would arrive this semester, Dick had allowed his personal effects to creep over into the other half of the dorm room. Now, however, the shelves and tabletops were bare of any personal effects. Circus posters that had hung on the walls days earlier had been carefully removed. There was no trace of scotch tape or peeling paint left behind. It was as though the walls had always been bare.

"You're leaving?" Donna asked.

He hesitated. "For now," he admitted finally. "I have to."

"Whaaat?" Wally gasped from the doorway. "Wait. Wait right there. Don't move!" He sped off to return a moment later with Roy and Kory in tow.

"This better be good, Wing," Roy warned. "Fleet Feet over there almost pulled my arm out of its socket dragging me here. He said it was an emergency."

Wally looked away guiltily. "It felt like one," he muttered.

Dick sighed. "I guess it is. Since I don't know when I'll get the chance again, and since you're all here, look. I owe all of you an... an apology

for what happened the other day. There's been a lot going on lately, and..." His voice trailed off. "I was mad at myself for messing up, and I took it out on all of you. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

Kory took in the bare walls and packed duffle bags. "So you're just...leaving?"

Dick sighed. "Kory, Roy? Look, about what you said before? You had a point. Every time I haven't known what to do, I've been trying to picture how Batman would handle things. But if Batman were handling things," he grinned suddenly, "the first thing he would've done was told all of us that it was too dangerous and he'd charge in and take care of things himself."

Roy waved his hand frantically in the air. "Been there, tried that, met a psycho terrorist chick who literally knocked the air outta my sails. And if I hadn't had Bubble Bod, over there to pull me out..."

Dick had to smile at that one. Fortunately, Kory didn't seem offended at the nickname. "I know," he agreed. "I'm not saying Batman's right to be this way, it's more... look, I lived with him for six years. I know he's a long way from perfect. What I don't know is why I'm suddenly saying and doing everything to you guys that infuriated *me* when I was on the receiving end of it. Or maybe I do." He drew a deep breath. "Maybe it's just that I never learned to be anything different." He looked up.

"I've spent the last semester doing two things: trying to prove I'm not just Batman's former sidekick, and trying to prove I'm different from Batman, while," his voice dropped to a rueful murmur, "wearing his colors, second-guessing his strategies, and drilling you guys till you drop." One corner of his mouth curved upward. Around him, the other Titans grinned back.

"Hey!" Donna shot back. "Amazons do *not* drop."

"Neither do gorgeous archer-dudes!"

Koriand'r hesitated a moment before calling out "Tamaranians!"

"Speedsters!"

"But you still plan to leave," Raven interjected, bringing them all down to Earth again.

Dick sobered. "Yes." He waited for the chorus of "No! Dick, why? Still? You can't!" to fade before he continued. "I just think that before I start figuring out what direction to lead the team, I need to figure out exactly where *I'm* headed. I just need some away time."

He let his words sink in. One by one, his friends nodded, reluctance and understanding plain in their expressions.

"What about your classes?" Donna ventured.

"I saw the dean yesterday. We discussed things. Basically, I'm dropping three classes and taking the other two through distance education. I'll probably be able to make up at least one, maybe two or even all three over the summer, but for once I'm not planning that far ahead."

"Where will you go?" asked Rachel.

"To tell you the truth, Rae, I don't know," he admitted. "I have a friend in Metropolis who might have some good advice. There's somebody I really want to hook up with in Las Vegas. Part of me just wants to stand on the highway with my thumb out and go as far as my next lift takes me."

Roy beamed. "Now that's an idea. Why not?"

Dick sighed. "With my luck, the ride that stops for me will be a midnight-blue two-seater with turbo jet engines and a bat insignia on the hood. Trust me, Roy. It might be an *idea*, but it's not a bright one." He placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"As far as the team is concerned, Roy, I want you to lead in the field. Donna," he glanced at her, "strategy and planning are your area."

He looked away. "I think this goodbye's gone on long enough, now. Clear out of here, gang, and let me finish packing." Not hearing any movement behind him, he sighed again. "Please?"

The other Titans glanced at each other. Then Kory advanced a few steps toward him and draped a golden-tanned arm about his shoulders. "I am a stranger here," she said simply, when Dick turned to look at her. "You are about to become one elsewhere. You are about to learn that it can be a... hard thing sometimes. And dangerous. Please," she added, "be careful."

Dick nodded. "I-I will," he said with a peculiar catch in his voice.

As though he had uttered some prearranged signal, the other four teens clustered around him, exclaiming their well wishes until Donna herded them away. The last to leave the room, she turned on the threshold.

"Hermes guide you, my friend," she said, "on leave-taking and on your homecoming."

She closed the door softly behind her.

*Once upon a time, there was a little boy who could fly. And each night, when they took away the net, he'd stand at the edge of the ring and watch his parents soar. And he'd dream of the night when he'd get to fly without a net, too.*

*I've trained for this. I've prepared. I've checked and rechecked my equipment. I've tested and retested my skills. I'm about to give the same performance I've given night after night since I was twelve years old. But it's not the same act. For the first time in my life, I'm performing without a partner. I'm performing without a safety net, and praying that my training is strong enough to keep me airborne. And, frankly? I'll never let the crowd see it, but I'm scared.*

---

If you enjoyed this story, you can find more tales of your favorite DC heroes at DC2 Universe.

All characters are (c) DC Comics and no infringement upon their copyrights is intended. Support DC Comics by buying their monthly comics and graphic novels.

## From the same author on Feedbooks

Nightwing #1 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Pt. 1 (of 7): Breaking Down. Exploding from the pages of Detective Comics and Teen Titans! What caused Robin to leave Gotham and strike out on his own? Return to the night that shattered three lives, and spun them in directions they had never before considered.

Nightwing #6 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 6 (of 7): Rolling With the Punches.

Still reeling from the revelations last issue, Nightwing plans to continue on to Loma Linda. But leaving Las Vegas may not be as easy as he thinks!

Nightwing #3 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 3 (of 7): Decisions in the Dark.

Nightwing's on his own in Metropolis... and he's about to find out that when you wear a costume, even if you don't go looking for trouble, it has a way of finding you!

Nightwing #4 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 4 (of 7): Beyond the Shadows.

Nightwing must fight an enemy he can't see! While he and Grace battle King Snake and the Ghost Dragons, someone from Dick Grayson's past takes a new interest in his current activities!

Nightwing #5 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 5 (of 7): Little Acorns. What exactly is "Project Venom"? Dick's off to California to find out. And with Loma Linda only two hours away from Las Vegas, this might be the perfect time to hook up with a former teammate! Guest-starring the New Outsiders!

Nightwing #7 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 7 (of 7): One More Mile, One Step Back...

Nightwing has a plan to find the missing scientist. Unfortunately, he never counted on some old enemies penetrating his cover. Be here for the conclusion of the epic first arc!

Nightwing #8 (2006)

Nightwing: Giants at the Door.

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 6!

Entrusted with a mission from Batman, Nightwing flees Gulag Gotham with the one man Darkseid wants the most: Scott Free! But can the two refugees reach the open city of Metropolis before Deviance the Pursuer catches up to them? It's a pulse-pounding flight out of the frying pan--- and into the fire!

Nightwing #9 (2006)

Nightwing: Rebuild.

In the aftermath of Crisis, Nightwing and Batman are aiding Gotham in its recovery. It's a time for renewal, and reconciliation as two heroes ponder what the future might hold!

Justice League vs. America #2 (2007)

Justice League vs. America: Heroes or Traitors?

The Crisis heats up as the revelation of who or what is behind President Lord's actions comes to light. But an attempt to stop the villain's plan turns sour and the League is wanted more now than ever. And one member takes the ultimate stand for his actions, in the second chapter of this year's big event!

Nightwing #27 (2008)

EVERYTHING CHANGES WITH THIS ISSUE!

Nightwing: Historic Continuity.

A frantic call from Alfred sends Dick speeding back to Gotham to deal with the fallout from Batman's climactic battle with Ra's Al Ghul. The landscape has changed, and Dick will face more than one critical decision before the story's done!

Nightwing #28 (2008)

Nightwing: Twisted Logic, Bleeding Hearts.

There's a serial killer on the loose, and Batman won't rest until he's brought to justice. But will his determination prove his undoing?

Nightwing #29 (2008)

Nightwing: Heart of a Hero

Cornelius Stirk has Batman in his clutches! Robin's hot on the trail, but even if he gets there in time, can he prove a match for Stirk's metahuman powers? Tune in for the thrilling finale... and see!



**[www.feedbooks.com](http://www.feedbooks.com)**  
Food for the mind