



Nightwing #4
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Published: 2006

Categorie(s): Fiction, Fan Fiction

Tag(s): "Grace Choi" "Clark Kent" Comics DC2 Nightwing

Nightwing

Issue 4: "The Great Unknown, Part 4: Beyond the Shadows"

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*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"

Beyond the Shadows

*When... every lesson learned
Every corner turned
Ends up as a winding road
Don't be afraid*

*Sometimes you've got to talk into the dark
To find your way beyond the shadows*

Jo Dee Messina "Keep the Faith"

(Then)

*I don't know what wakes me up: the cold, the hard surface on which I'm lying,
or some sort of background noise. One thing I do know, however, is that I'm not*

in my bedroom, anymore.

“Bruce?”

...

“Bruce?”

...

“This is all some sort of training exercise, isn’t it?”

...

“Bruce?” Maybe it isn’t. Maybe I’ve been kidnapped. Maybe it’s by someone counting on me to spill who He really is. In which case, I’d better stop using that name. “Batman?”

Silence. I look around. That’s pretty pointless. I’m lying on something hard. I can hear scrabbling noises overhead, like something’s scuttling around above me. There’s water flowing somewhere. Maybe not too far... it smells damp in here, and it’s definitely chilly. Scratch that. It’s cold. I move my hands over my chest and touch flannel. Ditto for the legs. I’m still in my pyjamas. My feet are freezing. No wonder. I’m barefoot and the floor is ice-cold. It seems to be stone, uneven and pretty sandy—which means it’s probably natural rock and not cement. I can’t see a thing, though. I put my hand to my eyes. No blindfold. And my arms and legs are free. I wave my hand. I can feel the faint breeze it makes... but I can’t see a thing.

I sit up. “Anyone there?”

There is no light whatsoever in here. Without it, even though from the way my voice was echoing, this place is probably huge, the darkness feels oppressive. It’s hovering over me like a blanket, so close I could reach out and nearly touch it...and it’s waiting to drop down...

Get a grip, Grayson! You’re practically thirteen, already. Stop acting like a baby. Ooh! The dark is gonna fall and get me. Help. Sheesh!

I lean slightly to my left and feel a wall. Like the floor, it seems to be natural

rock. I AM in a cave. Can't assume that it's THE cave, but the scrabbling sound is probably bats. And there IS a stream on the manor grounds. I don't know whether it goes through the cave—Bruce made me swear, on pain of getting fired, not to go exploring without him—but it wouldn't surprise me.

I rise to my feet, half expecting to bang my head on the ceiling. Stupid. From the way sound carries, I know intellectually that there's got to be a good eight feet or more between my skull and the roof. It's still a relief when I don't knock against anything. I keep one hand on the wall, the other outstretched before me. Cautiously, I move forward, almost shuffling. No way to know how safe it is to step down. I close my eyes. Weird. Somehow, even though vision-wise, it makes no difference whether they're open or shut, it's easier to move with my eyelids down. I wonder why.

It takes forever to navigate my way through. I lose all sense of direction, just sticking to 'my' wall, but it doesn't let me down. Eventually, I feel cold wind brush past me. I open my eyes. Light filters faintly through to me about four feet above my head. The rock wall is easy to climb. Galvanized, I scramble up, wriggle through the hole, into a tunnel and toward the night beyond. As my head and shoulders clear the opening, strong hands grip me under my armpits and pull me the rest of the way through.

"Twenty-one minutes, thirty-seven seconds," Batman says. "Acceptable."

Acceptable. That's more praise than I usually get. "You..." I start to say, then stop. What good is it going to do to yell at him? Sure, he could have warned me, but that would have defeated the purpose of the exercise, wouldn't it have? Still, I wouldn't mind a LITTLE more information...

"Why?" I demand.

He looks at me quizzically. If he were Mr. Spock, this would be the perfect time for him to raise an eyebrow. For all I know, he is. The cowl hides a few things. "You tell me."

Right. If I don't understand the lesson, then I obviously missed the point. I struggle to control my temper. Nobody really likes going to sleep in a nice warm bed and waking up on a cold stone floor—I've got every right to be angry. But for all I know, this is also supposed to be a test of my self-control. I draw a deep breath. "You wanted to know how I'd handle it if I found myself in... in..." how

do I phrase it? "In an unknown situation, with very little means to assess where I was or how to get out of it."

Batman starts to nod, then stiffens. He's about to say something when he notices that I'm shivering. No wonder. It may be unseasonably mild for the time of year, but it's still February in the Northeastern United States, and I'm still only in my PJs—barefoot.

Suddenly, there's a cape wrapped around me, and he's scooping me up. I start to protest that I'm not a baby, but if he puts me down... I look around to get my bearings and groan. The Wayne estate is huge. Where we are now has to be about a ten-minute walk from the manor. I try doing that without shoes and I'll probably have frostbite by the time I get there. Fine. He got me out here; it's only fair he get me back inside. But I don't have to like it.

Back at the manor, Alfred takes one look at us, pieces the situation together on the spot, and gives Bruce a hard stare. I glance up at Bruce's expression and try not to laugh. The last time I saw anything remotely similar on Batman's face, he'd staggered in from patrol after inhaling a concentrated burst of Scarecrow's fear gas—and, trust me, he was in much better shape after THAT incident. Then Alfred heads off to the kitchen muttering something about making a pot of cocoa.

Bruce sets me down. I'm still grinning. Forget Ghirardelli, this time—Alfred's probably going to break out a Toblerone bar, he's going to melt it down, and then, he's going to add marshmallows to it.

"You're alright?" He asks, softly.

I nod.

"I'm sorry," he says, sounding genuinely upset. "I can't believe I put you through that without giving you adequate protection from the elements."

I shrug. We're indoors, now. My memory of the cold is fading fast. His eyes narrow.

"You said you had 'little' means to assess your situation?"

Holy... did he underestimate me? Sounds like it. I tell him about the sounds and

the smells. He listens, and nods. I see the faintest hint of a smile.

"Well done."

Whoa. I can't remember the last time he's said that to me. Heck, in the nine months since I've come to the manor... in the six weeks since he's been letting me go out as Robin... I don't think he's EVER said that to me. I realize I'm still wearing the cape and slip it off and hand it back to him.

He hesitates. "You might want to keep it. It wouldn't surprise me if you were to wear it again some night down the road."

(Now)

Nightwing held himself motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. That trick King Snake had pulled with the lights had rattled him, but the game wasn't over yet.

He considered. His opponent knew how to fight blind, and how to maximize his advantages against a sighted opponent. Most other adversaries would be fumbling around about now. But most other adversaries hadn't been trained by Batman. That night he'd woken up in the cave had been but the first of many. Dick was out of practice, true, but some things were like riding a bike. He hoped.

Think! He ordered himself. *King Snake may believe he's got you at a disadvantage, but all he's really done is level the playing field. You know there's a lot more to fighting a man than being able to see him.*

His opponent was padding toward him softly, surely, *almost* inaudibly—but not quite. The man knew the layout of his apartment perfectly, Nightwing realized. Well, he could fix that...

Trusting to memory, Nightwing squeezed his eyes shut and flipped backwards to land noisily atop the wooden table he had noticed upon entering the room.

“You move swiftly, but clumsily, my friend,” King Snake remarked. “A pity you shan’t have the chance to improve.”

Nightwing bit back the automatic retort. Reaching directly before him, his fingers slid over the smooth wooden back of a dining room chair. He gripped it tightly, straightened, and hurled it in the general direction of his assailant. There was a satisfying thud as the chair landed sideways on the carpet. Without hesitation, Nightwing turned and groped for another chair. He threw it in the direction of a large earthenware urn he’d noted earlier, and was rewarded by a cracking sound as wood met clay. Two more chairs to go... now where— The next toss dislodged a marble statue from its pedestal—it crashed to the floor with a loud thud. The final chair, he heaved directly at the regular, even breathing that came from slightly to his left. Then, he leapt for the chandelier overhead, hoping that he had judged its distance accurately. And that it would take his weight.

King Snake leapt away from the airborne chair, pivoted, and stumbled as he fell heavily into the one lying on the carpet. The blind man swore furiously as he dropped to one knee. “You will regret that!” He snapped as he struggled to regain his footing.

Meanwhile, from his perch atop the chandelier Nightwing took stock of the situation. If he could buy himself a few more minutes, chances were his vision would return. *Then King Snake puts out the lights again and you’re back to square one*, he realized. He thought for a moment, and then pulled a roll of gauze out from his belt compartment. It was mesh, not solid, he reflected, but with several layers of thickness wrapped about his eyes, it would do. After he finished tying the bandage, Nightwing used his fingers to explore the crystal pieces of the chandelier. Thoughtfully, he detached several long rods that tapered to notched spear points. He tensed, listening for his adversary.

King Snake was moving again. If he didn’t already know where Nightwing had gotten to, he would shortly. Dick was gratified to note that the man was no longer walking stealthily. Now, unsure of his footing, he was fumbling his way about. *Let’s just see whether we can’t keep him disoriented*. He flung the crystals randomly with all his strength. He then reached down to remove a few more from beneath his perch, making sure to take equal amounts from all sides in order to maintain his

balance.

Some pieces landed intact on the plush carpeting. Others shattered against walls and pillars, tinkling merrily as they fell to the floor in shards.

He would have to be careful, from here on, Nightwing realized as he tossed his grapnel in the general direction of one of the support pillars and felt it take hold. Trashing the room could trip him up as easily as it could King Snake. He tugged on the filament to make sure it was securely anchored, then leapt, giving the chandelier a mighty kick as he did.

The chandelier swung crazily back and forth, as pendants and bobeches clinked noisily against each other. King Snake spun automatically toward the sound.

All right, Grayson. This is where it gets tricky. He's used to relying on his other senses. You can take that away from him, but not without it affecting your own skills. On the plus side, you're expecting it. You can take steps. And you'll probably recover first. On the minus side, at best, right now, you're evenly matched. At best. He's bigger than you. He's heavier than you. And from what Choi told you, he's a lot more ruthless than you. Oh, and you just made him mad. If you're going to put yourself at more of a disadvantage, you'd better make really sure it's worth it.

And that was the crux of it. Nightwing realized as he carefully slid down to the carpet. He could continue rearranging the furniture until one or the other tired. He might well win. As long as he could avoid direct hand-to-hand combat until he could see his opponent, he stood a chance. *But once Dorance gets his hands on me, I'm sunk. I can't fight a top-level martial artist if I can't read his body language, and I can't do that if I can't see. But if I have to go to plan B, let's hope I recover first...*

Something blunt and heavy slammed into his chest, the impact smashing him against the pillar. The dining room table. The man had just thrown the blasted table at him. Nightwing gasped as his ribs screamed in protest. The table rebounded—fortunately King Snake had hurled it, rather than swung it—and Nightwing dropped on all fours to the carpet. Stifling a groan he scuttled behind the pillar, keeping it between himself

and his assailant.

Plan B it is, he thought to himself, as he pulled a pair of earplugs out of one of his gauntlet compartments.

Thirty-five stories below, Grace Choi stalked down a sub-basement corridor, doing her best not to be heard. Her best wasn't quite good enough. If profanity could kill, the six youths in Ghost Dragon red and blue gang colours would be dead in their tracks. Instead, their leader, a youth who couldn't be more than sixteen, charged forward, a battle cry on his lips.

Choi sneered as she moved directly into the path of his attack. The boy hit hard, but she didn't stagger. He gasped in pain and surprise.

"Like hitting a frigging wall, isn't it?" She snapped as she seized hold of the youth, and hauled him up by the back of his jacket. Grabbing the waistband of his jeans with her other hand, she threw him in the direction of his companions. The boy screamed a warning to them as he flew. One took it, turned and tried to run. The others were too slow to react as he tumbled into them, sending them sprawling and sliding, burying the one who had tried to run in a tidal wave of humanity.

Choi picked her way among the groaning teens, paying little heed to whether she stepped over or on top of splayed limbs. Bending down, she slid her hands under the armpits of the boy who had attempted to flee, and held the dazed youth in front of her, his feet dangling a foot above the floor.

"You look like the smartest one of these freaks," she snarled. "Where's Dorance's lab?"

One of the nicest things about using flashbangs, Nightwing reflected, was that they didn't actually have to hit their targets—they just had to land nearby.

King Snake was trying to sneak up on him, but he kept banging into the disarranged furniture. His shoes crunched on the crystal shards. And, when he stumbled and fell to the floor, Nightwing heard his sharp intake of breath, as broken glass penetrated the larger man's skin and clothing.

For now, Nightwing had one thing going for him. As long as he held his position, he knew exactly where his opponent was-fumbling in the dark, looking for him. Once he started moving, however, King Snake would hear him. But staying put wasn't an option. Not indefinitely, anyway.

Nightwing primed the grenade, tossed it toward his adversary and turned away, averting his bound eyes. The M84 would produce a one-million Candela flash-lost on a blind man, but possibly powerful enough to penetrate even the young vigilante's gauze bandage. More importantly, though, it would emit a blast of over 170 decibels.

Despite wearing his earplugs, despite expecting the 'bang' part of the 'flashbang grenade', the noise startled him. But its effect on Nightwing was minimal compared to King Snake's reaction.

The man shrieked, clapping his hands to his ears, and Nightwing felt the floor vibrate as his opponent, startled off-balance, fell into the nearly-forgotten dining room table and crashed heavily to the ground.

Nightwing cautiously lifted several layers of his blindfold. The lights were still on, and, from what he could tell, it was no brighter than a normal room should be. From what he could tell. He frowned. His sight was starting to come back, although right now, everything appeared to him as a collection of blurs. He didn't need full vision to know that the room was a shambles. Dick edged carefully toward the wall, sliding his hand along until it found a doorknob. He didn't like the idea of leaving his adversary groaning on the floor, but there was no way that he was going to go picking his way through that mess to try to cuff the man... not if that meant getting into King Snake's range. Cautiously, he eased the door open and took a careful step backwards.

"Bobbo!" King Snake roared. "Stop the intruder!"

Nightwing ran, hoping that his diminished eyesight would stand him in

good stead.

Feet pounded behind him. Something small flew past him. Then came a sharp stabbing sensation at the back of his neck. Nightwing slapped a hand to the spot and pulled away a slender dart. Still running, he examined it with his gloved fingers, as his horror mounted. Now why did he NOT think that he'd just been injected with a flu vaccine? As he rounded a corner and opened a door, he found himself in a stairwell. Quickly he examined his costume and noted a similar dart embedded in one of the pouches of his utility belt. He examined it carefully. It seemed to be intact. That was something... hopefully, it would be enough. Or else he was going to be in real trouble.

Something was off. Nightwing had told her that the lab was probably off-site. It would be unlikely to be within Dorance Tower for the simple reason that you could always tell a heroin-processing lab by its odor of vinegar. At best, he'd said, somewhere in the building, they might find some lead to point them toward the actual lab. Yet, the Ghost Dragon punk had directed her toward these doors. Choi sniffed the air. She caught a faint whiff of disinfectant, but nothing more. Curious, she swung open the double doors. She blinked. She was standing in a laboratory, but instead of drugs, there were computers. And instead of armed guards, there were men and women in lab coats. What was this place?

Heads turned, startled, at the sound.

"Who are you?" One man asked.

Choi thought quickly. "One of Dorance's boys told me to come down here," she snarled "What the f-I mean..." she curbed her speech with some effort. "What is this?"

A blond woman with an air of authority walked forward. "I don't believe it," she said smiling. "I just put in a request for additional security this afternoon. This response is most..." she eyed Grace appreciatively, "impressive."

She extended her hand. Choi hesitated a moment before she took it. "I'm Doctor Linda Fiitawa," she stated. "Welcome to Project Venom." She pointed to a computer table. Next to the console, she indicated a stack of diskettes. "We have a clean-desk policy, here. Any research notes or materials not in use must be kept locked up." Fiitawa handed her a key. "If you spot any left unattended, put them in there," she pointed toward a filing cabinet, "and report the matter to me." She gestured towards a large aquarium, where a red, yellow, and black mass of serpents coiled aimlessly about one another. "Those are deadly," she said. "Never pick one up without adequate protection."

Bobbo knocked on the door of the darkened room. "Lynx?"

A moment later, something crashed against the oak door. "Go away!"

"Child," the body-servant answered, "Ling. Did you not wish an opportunity to redeem yourself?"

There was no response.

"Grace Choi is in the building."

Bedsprings creaked. Slipped feet slapped a wooden floor. The door opened a crack.

"And, I believe that the youth whom you encountered this afternoon just had a run-in with Sir Edmund."

The door opened wider. "I'm..." her voice was bitter, "not in any condition to fight."

"The pain?" There was the barest hint of sympathy in the lieutenant's voice. "I had hoped the acetaminophens would work."

Ling flung the door open. "Pain is *not* the issue! How am I to fight him as I am?"

Bobbo held up a blowgun. “My dear Lynx,” he said, “Sir Edmund did teach you blind-fighting, after all. And I *have* taken steps to equalize matters. You should hurry, though. Before the gentleman in question is neutralized by other means.”

The girl took a step forward eagerly. “What did you—”

“Does it matter?”

Nightwing leaned against a wall, trying to steady himself. He wasn't sure what had been on the dart, but from the way the wound was smarting, and from the swelling at the back of his neck, it couldn't have been anything good. His heart was pounding, but he had no way of knowing whether it was from the... *just call it a toxin, for crying out loud! What else would it be?* He didn't know whether his increased heart rate was caused by the toxin, by adrenaline, or by a simple dose of good old-fashioned fear. That was the worst of it. He'd been temporarily blinded, although he seemed to be pretty much over that by now. He had just evaded an attacker, run down a hallway, gotten shot with a dart—under the circumstances, panting for breath and feeling your heart pound were perfectly normal physical responses—and they were also textbook examples of the initial symptoms of at least a half-dozen forms of poisoning. His mind was racing as fast as his pulse as he fumbled for the epi-pen. Pulling it out of his belt, he froze.

An epi-pen helps with respiratory distress, he remembered, but it also increases tachycardia. Which means that if it's the poison making my heart pound like this, the 'pen is going to make things worse. He drew a deep, calming breath.

Bruce, he was sure, wouldn't panic in a situation like this. Batman would calmly, cold-bloodedly assess the situation, determine the best course of action, and act accordingly.

Nightwing inhaled again. The air flowed easily into his lungs. He held his breath for a moment, and then released it. He thought. *Most poisoned darts kill or incapacitate quickly. Usually their effects occur in seconds, or at*

most, minutes—two to three minutes. It's already been at least ten. So. Perhaps whatever the dart had been coated with had been tampered with—altered in some way, to extend the time for the poison to take effect. Apart from the pain and swelling, he was experiencing no other symptoms—for the moment—but that could change. He examined the second dart, which had lodged harmlessly in the costume. It was coated with something, all right, but he didn't have the equipment on him to analyse it. He gnashed his teeth. In all likelihood, the antidote he needed was right there in the suit, but if he didn't know what the toxin was, then he didn't know what the antidote was either. Carefully, he scraped the residue into a specimen bottle, wiped the dart clean, and slipped it into one of his belt pouches. He didn't have anything handy to cover the tip, so he made sure that the other objects in the pouch were between the dart and the side of the pouch closest to his body. The toxin vial went into another pouch. He inhaled deeply again, then let the air out slowly.

Nightwing considered. If he was able to control his breathing, he didn't need the 'pen. What he needed to do was find Grace—he extracted a small hand-held electronic device from his belt and activated the homing signal in the tracker that he had slipped on his new partner earlier that evening—and get out of the building. He was going to have to move quickly and cautiously—but not too quickly—higher activity could hasten the spread of the poison. Normally, the smartest thing to do would be to stay still and wait for help to arrive. Of course, the first person to arrive on the scene would likely be the one responsible for his current condition. It occurred to him that the poison might well have its uses as an interrogation tool—inject the prisoner and promise him the antidote... if he gave up his information. *And if there IS an antidote.*

He shook his head. Bruce was supposed to be the negative one, not him. Well, if staying put meant waiting to be captured, then the smartest thing to do in this case was to keep moving. Choi was in the sub-basement, according to the readout. And most buildings had control grids that would indicate when an elevator was in use. Nightwing leaned over the banister, looking at the endless flights of stairs spiralling beneath him. *This was going to be SO much fun,* he thought as he anchored his monofilament line to the banister and swung himself over. *He could just tell.*

Grace Choi stationed herself near the door and tried to look like she belonged there. It wasn't hard. The doctor... scientist? Whatever. She seemed to accept her at face value. That was strange. Most security guards she knew wore uniforms. She looked down at her bare-midriff T-shirt and low-cut blue jeans. Then again, most legitimate operations didn't have teenaged gangs patrolling the corridors. Her eyes narrowed. She hadn't seen the inside of a schoolroom since fifth grade... but she was no idiot. This might not be the heroin-processing lab that she'd expected to find, but something about the place stank to high heaven. Unlike heroin, however, the odor had more in common with a pigsty than with vinegar...

Something was wrong. Dick knew it as he dashed down endless painted-brick hallways, boots falling heavily on cement floors. It wasn't the painful spot at the back of his neck, which his costume chafed mercilessly. He was suppressing that. And so far, he didn't *think* he was experiencing any further symptoms.

Nobody was chasing him. That was it. He'd just fought and humiliated King Snake, gotten shot by 'Bobbo', barely managed to make it to the stairwell... and then... nothing. He'd made it down to the sub-basement completely unmolested.

Was he so sure that was poison in his system? What if it was some sort of plague bacteria? What if he was carrying some infectious disease and they all had orders to steer clear of him? Reality reasserted itself. Anything that deadly wouldn't be administered via blowgun dart. Unless there was a ready antidote, that method of infection was just too risky for the shooter. Nightwing willed his doubts to subside. He couldn't go borrowing more trouble than he already had weighing him down.

Nightwing looked at the tracker again. Choi should be right around the next corner. Which meant, of course, that just about now...

... A slender form in a flowing green cloak stepped forward. The hood of

the cloak was pulled up, completely obscuring the upper portion of the wearer's face.

"Going somewhere?" A familiar voice asked.

Resigned, Nightwing shifted to a fighting stance. *It figured.*

In a lavish one-bedroom apartment in downtown Metropolis, a phone rang. The apartment's occupant stifled a sigh of frustration. His job, *both* his jobs, forced him to keep odd hours at times, and after spending thirty-one of those hours awake, he had been about to turn in.

"Hello," he said, keeping the irritation out of his voice. Whoever was on the other end didn't know how tired he was and didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of a temper outburst. Not even if it was a telemarketer.

"He's in Metropolis," a voice grated without preamble. "Find him."

"Wha-?" He banished his sleepiness. "Bruce is that y-"

"Find him, damn it!" The line went dead.

Clark Kent sighed. One day, he was going to shed the Midwestern farm-boy manners and give Bruce Wayne a piece of his mind. One day.

This probably wasn't a job for Superman, but he reached for a clean costume, just in case. If Bruce was demanding his help... *He must be worried sick about that boy*, he realized as he rummaged through his dresser for civilian attire.

At first, Nightwing thought that the fight might not go on for too long. Ling's lean, whip-like form flowed easily through the feints and lunges of an advanced training kata, and yet her movements seemed hesitant, as though she wasn't completely sure where to direct her blows.

He sank into a crouch, and then launched himself at her in a flying leap. Ling seemed to find her centre, then. She stepped out of his trajectory and countered with a painful kick to the kidney. Nightwing managed to recover enough to land on his feet. Instantly he sprang forward.

She caught hold of his arm, half-turned, and drew him smoothly over her hip. As his feet left the ground, he caught hold of her arm and pulled her down with him. The two grappled, each straining for an advantage.

The girl was faster, but Nightwing knew more tricks. He was stronger, but she knew how to use that strength against him. His current condition was a liability, but his opponent's own moves were also off.

As the fight progressed, however, Ling seemed to shrug off whatever had been hindering her. Despite his struggles, she slowly gained the upper hand. He was on his stomach, trying to throw her weight off his back as she straddled him, pinning him to the floor...

All at once the girl cried out. The pressure on his back eased. Without hesitation, he pushed her off. The girl scuttled away, no longer interested in him. She looked at her leg, and her hands began to tremble.

Nightwing saw it. There was a deep puncture wound in his opponent's calf. The pointed end of the dart he'd taken protruded from his belt pouch. In the scuffle, it must have worked its way through the fabric and dug into her leg.

"No," he heard her gasp.

Nightwing tried to catch his breath. The girl lurched to her feet and all but flew into the room behind her.

That room. Grace was in there. He rose to his feet and tried to take a deep breath. His heart was pounding more than it should have been from that level of exertion. But if the girl thought she'd been stuck with a—

Maybe she'd just wanted to get away from him, Nightwing thought. Or maybe...

It was almost a full three minutes before he felt capable of walking without staggering. He moved cautiously to the door and pulled it open.

Lynx entered the lab at a run. "I just took a dart," she barked. "Antidote. Now!" She gasped as Choi stole up behind her and enveloped her in a bear hug.

Doctor Fiitawa glanced up. "You can put her down, Grace," she said quietly. "Lynx is one of Sir Edmund's people." She frowned. "One of Sir Edmund's careless people. We have other uses for that serum." She strode irritably toward a storage room "*Important* uses." She opened the door and stepped inside, emerging a moment later with a syringe. "It is a commodity invaluable to what we are attempting to create. And it is most difficult to procure."

Ling took a good look at her attacker. "You!" she shouted. "That's an intruder, you fool!" She snapped at the doctor. She lunged at Fiitawa, but Choi had a firm hold on Lynx's cloak. As Lynx swivelled her head to face her captor, the hood dropped away. The girl shrieked and tried to lower her face, but it was too late.

After a moment of stunned silence, Grace threw back her head and started to laugh.

"I don't believe it!" She gasped. "I mean I know, over time, dogs come to resemble their masters, but I," she pointed derisively to Lynx's eye-patch, "never thought you'd take things this far!"

"Stop laughing at me!" Lynx shrieked, breaking free. Her hand flew self-consciously to the patch. "Stop laughing!" Antidote forgotten, she leaped up, hands extended toward Choi's throat. "*Say baht-poh!*" she screeched.

Choi seized her wrists, then doubled over as Lynx slammed both feet into the large woman's stomach."

There was no telling how far things might have gone had a startled cry

from Fiitawa not frozen the two women in place. Both turned to look at the doctor.

She was gaping slack-jawed at her hand, which no longer held the syringe. Slowly, her eyes slid over to where a black-and-blue (in more than one sense of the phrase) vigilante stood, grasping a sort of hybrid throwing knife and boomerang. He jerked his sleeve free of his gauntlet, rolled it up, pulled the syringe loose from the object and quickly injected the serum into his arm.

"Thanks, Doc," Nightwing grinned. "I needed that."

Fiitawa seemed to awaken to the situation. "Intruders!" She snapped. "Lockdown all systems! Destroy what notes you can. Lynx! If you're an enforcer, then enforce!"

Ling broke free of Choi's hold. "Give me the serum, *chun zi*, and I'll do what you ask."

Choi snorted. "There's that obedience training paying off again, Fifi."

Lynx vacillated, torn between her need for the serum and her urge to throttle Grace.

"Choi!" Nightwing called, "don't let them trash everything!"

That was when all the power in the room cut out. Instantly Nightwing realized: the lab was on its own power grid, and someone had turned off the electricity at its source. A moment later the lights came back on. The computer terminals remained dark.

Doctor Fiitawa cleared her throat. "You two are trespassing," she stated.

Nightwing raised an eyebrow. His gaze fell on the snake terrarium. "You're conducting clandestine research on the uses of coral snake venom."

"Where's your proof?" Fiitawa smirked.

It's in your reaction, Lady. Now if I can find something that'll stand up in

court... "I'd say working in a lab in a building owned by one of the leaders of the Metropolis underworld might qualify as suspicious."

The doctor raised a hand to her mouth in mock dismay. "You mean," she gasped, "Sir Edmund isn't just a humble businessman? Why ever did he not volunteer the information?" Her tone hardened. "You have no evidence. You have no warrant. Come back when you do or not at all. Now leave before I summon the police."

Nightwing loomed over the doctor. She stood her ground and looked calmly up at him.

He seethed inwardly. She was right on all counts. He had no proof that she was doing anything illegal. He and Grace *were* trespassing. And, unfortunately, one of the common side effects of the antivenin was extreme fatigue and he could only fight it off for so long. He took a step closer and was gratified when Fiitawa backed up.

"I'd find another line of work," he said softly. "Because one day, I *will* have the proof I need. And then," he added as he lobbed an incendiary at the ceiling, knowing that the intense heat would activate the sprinkler system, "I won't be anywhere near as polite as I'm being right now."

He eyed the computers, which were quickly becoming waterlogged. "Let's go, Choi. Oh... Ling?"

Her one eye turned balefully toward him.

"That dart was clean. You're not infected. C'mon Grace."

Once outside, Choi turned to him. "You just freaking let them get the bleep away with it?!"

"We had no evidence."

Choi grinned. "That's what you think." She held up a small box of computer disks.

Nightwing stared. "How did you?"

"Doc told me to lock up anything left out for safekeeping. I thought you'd probably keep it even safer. Freaking lab's an accident waiting to happen, you know. Bleeping ninja-girls bursting in, frelling sprinklers going on, blasted 'puters going off. They're better off with you."

Nightwing smiled. "You did good, Choi," he whispered.

"You okay?"

"Fine. Antivenin just needs time to work."

"Fewmets." She draped his arm over her shoulder. "You ought to be in a hospital."

"Can't," Nightwing shook his head. "Not... " he indicated his costume "like this."

"Freaking figures." Choi sighed. "OK. Where *do* I take you, then?"

It was an aching bleary-eyed Dick Grayson who found one of the Daily Planet's star reporters knocking on his hotel room door several hours later. "Mr. Kent," he said in disbelief. He motioned the journalist inside. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I'm an investigative reporter, Dick." He shook his head, frowning as Dick shut the door. "I should have found you under observation in a hospital, going by the inert coral snake venom in your system. You can suffer side effects for up to 24 days, did you know that?"

Dick cocked an eyebrow. "Your X-ray vision is *that* good?"

Clark looked at the floor with some embarrassment. "No. X-ray vision combined with microscopic vision combined with photographic memory for how different substances appear in the bloodstream... those three

elements together are that good." He glanced up again. "They achieve better results as a team, I guess," he finished lamely. "That tends to happen in other areas as well."

Oooh! Mr. Subtlety in the flesh. "Which is why you're going to take on a kid sidekick?" Dick countered.

"No," Clark said, flustered, "What I meant was... " He changed the subject. "There's a man in Gotham who's been extremely... concerned... over your whereabouts."

Dick snorted.

"It's true."

"Right. Then where the hell was he, last semester, each time I called the manor? When I suddenly started running up the credit cards he'd added me on to, *hoping* he'd get in touch with me to ask me what I was spending on? If he can make the time every year to lay two roses in Crime Alley at 10:43 p.m. on that night, why couldn't he make the time to just send an email? 'Hi Dick. Hope you're fine. Bruce.' Is that really-damn it!" He turned away with an exasperated sigh. "I'm sorry, Clark. Not your worry. Forget it. I'm sure you didn't come here because you thought Bruce might be worried about me—"

Clark cleared his throat. "Actually... I came because I *know* Bruce *is* worried about you. Apparently he's been ruining the day that he taught you how to obliterate any trace of your whereabouts."

Dick blinked. Clark continued.

"I got a call last night, from him, ordering me to find you."

"You've done that. Now what?" He raised an eyebrow. "Ordering?"

"As long as you called, he knew where you were and that you were alright. As long as he knew that, he didn't feel like he had to call you back. Think about it."

Dick did. He must have been hurt worse than he thought last night.

Clark actually seemed to be talking sense. "You know, things would be a lot simpler if he didn't go out of his way to complicate them."

"So you'll call him?"

Dick shook his head. "I... it's... " he grimaced. "Complicated."

"Try me."

Dick's eyebrows furrowed. "When he's around, I act like a kid. When he isn't... " he sighed. "When he isn't, I act like *him*. At least, when I'm with the Titans."

"Well," Superman ventured, "you always were mature for your years. I know some of your teammates. They tend to act their ages a bit more." He considered. "That's not always a bad thing."

"It is if it costs lives." He spread his hands. "I don't know who I am anymore, Clark. I'm not that cute little twelve-year-old who thought Bruce could do no wrong and wanted to be Batman when he grew up. And if I go back to Gotham now, Bruce is still going to see me as that same wide-eyed kid. And then something will happen, and he and I will be at each others throats inside of a week. And if I go back to the Titans... same thing in reverse. I'll 'bat-out' on them and the next thing you know... ", he sighed. "Teams come together for a common purpose. I'd rather the purpose wasn't to... "

"Attack you?" Clark sighed. "That still doesn't explain why you won't call Bruce."

"I just told you. I don't want to fight with him."

"And the reason you think he doesn't call you is-"

Dick's jaw dropped.

"He doesn't have a lot of people in his life. If you felt that... stifled last year, maybe he's afraid-"

"Yeah, right."

"Afraid of pushing you away altogether!"

"So he ignores me instead?"

"It kept you calling, didn't it?"

Dick dropped heavily to the desk chair. Clark sat on the corner of the bed. "Why does he always have to complicate things?" He demanded, not really expecting an answer. *And why was Clark still making sense?*

He sighed. "Look. Tell him you found me and I'm fine. I ran into a little trouble but..." he grinned. "Tell him his training paid off. He'll like that."

Clark opened his mouth to protest.

Dick held up a hand. "I'm not trying to back out or... or get you to do my dirty work. I'm just," he grimaced. "Is it okay to know you're being stupid and pigheaded sometimes, and decide that you want to keep right on being stupid and pigheaded?"

"You're how old?"

"Almost nineteen."

"Absolutely."

That prompted a chuckle. "Last night, in addition to getting myself poisoned, I... came into possession of some password-protected computer files. Considering where I found them, I *think* whatever's on them might be important. And if I talk to Bruce, I might mention it, and he might want to help, and he'll end up taking over. And I should be happy because it doesn't matter who solves it-

Clark shook his head. "Let me guess. He told you that? Ask him about the time Ralph figured out how the Dobson brothers were smuggling the masterpieces out of the Van Dyke Gallery before he did, and watch his reaction." He grinned at Dick's expression. His tone turned serious.

"Password-protected files," he repeated.

Dick nodded.

"Funny thing about being an investigative reporter," Clark mused. "You make all sorts of interesting contacts. Celebrities, small-time numbers-runners... a hacker or two."

Dick blinked at him. "If you're offering to... "

Clark shook his head. "It's your case. I'm just going to put in a good word for you with a friend of mine. Of course," his expression turned serious, "one thing you do find out in the real world is that there's no such thing as a free lunch. If I'm going to set you up with this person, I'd like something in return."

"Fine," Dick sighed. "I'll call him."

"That's great. But actually, I was," he looked away, reddening slightly, "hoping for an exclusive story once you crack this case."

To Be Continued!

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