



Nightwing #9
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Nightwing
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*All I want is some healing talk
Let some kindness rebuild our lives
Honesty between you and me
Is not about wrong or right
You take what I say as something to defend
I'm just trying to end the fight*

*Paper covers rock, rock breaks the scissors
Cuts the paper it just goes around and round
Twist the words, deny 'em, point the finger
Kill the fire, leave the pieces on the ground
Paper, rock, scissors
Baby lay your weapons down.*

—Lisa Brokop, Kim McLean: "Paper, Rock, Scissors"

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Rebuild

It was over. Earth had beaten Darkseid. Its heroes had banded together to defeat the forces of Apokolips. They had won. Of course, from Nightwing's vantage point—the roof of the tower that housed the Gotham

Central Broadcasting Corporation, seventy-five stories above street level—evidence of said victory was difficult to spot.

The city had taken a pounding during the parademons' initial salvos—the GCBC building was one of the few skyscrapers that had been spared in the attacks. Virtually everything south of Robinson Park, however, had been levelled. Steppenwolf's reaction to the message of hope that Batman had sent on the eve of Gotham's surrender had been brutal.

On the plus side, the tenements of the Upper West Side were gone. They should have been condemned decades ago. Dick frowned. There had been a playhouse on Cameron Street, he remembered. In his teens, he had gone with his high school once a year to see a show—usually Shakespeare. Dick raised a pair of binoculars, trying to find the structure, hoping that it had somehow survived. His face fell. Cameron Street, from the docks to Schnapp Avenue, was gone; firebombed out of existence. Kyoto tower, once a fixture of the Chinatown skyline, was no more. And the theatre and financial districts were rubble and slag. He sighed. It would be a long time before the city would be restored to any semblance of normality again.

A hand dropped lightly to his shoulder, startling him. He spun about, falling automatically to a defensive posture before he realized who had joined him on the rooftop.

"You're about the only one who ever could sneak up on me like that, Batman," he said as he relaxed.

Batman frowned. "If you hadn't been daydreaming, I wouldn't have. There's trouble in the park. Come on."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, the Dark Knight fired off a grapnel. Nightwing fought down a momentary surge of resentment. As he sent his own cable arcing toward a flying buttress atop the roof of a nearby church, he wasn't sure whether he was more upset that Batman seemed to be expecting him to follow blindly, or whether he was more irritated that his mentor was right. He *had* been daydreaming.

It wasn't much of a skirmish. Hungry, desperate, newly homeless people attacking long-time street people, battling for a spot to sleep-nobody really had the strength to fight long, or the morale to do so, once faced with two costumed vigilantes. As the two groups fell back, exhausted, Nightwing frowned. There were no easy solutions. 80 per cent of the city was currently uninhabitable. State and Federal funds had been allocated, but considering the devastation suffered across the country and around the world, it was taking time. And private donations were fewer and less generous than might have otherwise been expected. Most people took care of their own, first. All of that meant that many people were sleeping out of doors, in tents if they were lucky, with blankets and bedrolls, if they weren't. And if they were really unfortunate, they stretched out on whatever bit of ground they could claim with no bedding material to speak of.

Under those conditions, Dick realized, it was small wonder that people jealously guarded the little they had. The Wayne foundation was putting up temporary housing and prefab homes as quickly as it could, but that wouldn't help people tonight. On the other hand...

He turned to Batman. "How many tents do we have at the manor?"

Batman froze. "Four. It wouldn't be enough." He paused, thinking. "On the other hand, the barn might hold forty. The stables would fit another twenty... some of these people already have tents. And the caretaker's cottage, the poolhouse..."

"If nothing else," Nightwing added, excitement growing, "they'd have more room to spread out. And even if we don't have a lot of tents, with fifteen bedrooms at the main house, there've got to be pillows and blankets."

"Alfred will figure something out," Batman nodded, smiling slightly. "But getting them there..." He frowned. "Even if we had the transportation, with the roads-"

"*What* roads?"

"Exactly."

The boat that they'd taken to get into the city was currently tied at Miller Pier. In a pinch, it could take two more passengers.

"Subway-" Dick started to say.

Batman interrupted. "Not up and running yet."

"-Tunnels," Dick finished. "It'll take a couple of hours to walk it, but there's a terminus at the railway yards in Burnley. I know there's a bit of track that runs just behind the manor grounds-"

"Old commuter train route," Batman was nodding, thinking out loud. "The Gotham Historical Society has kept the track from falling into disrepair. It's a good idea. It should work." A brief smile flickered, and then vanished.

"You know there are older people in that crowd... and children. And everyone's been on short rations for days. I don't know... "

Dick sighed. "We can't force anyone. But if it's a choice between fighting for a few square feet of turf here, or getting yards of it up in Bristol... Batman, even if thirty people come with us, that's thirty fewer who'll need a spot in the park."

Batman nodded again. "I'll lead them through the tunnels. You take the boat back and be ready at the rail yards. And tell Alfred to expect company."

Dick clapped him on the shoulder, and turned to go.

"Nightwing? Make sure that Alfred camouflages the *cave* access to the tunnels. With a crowd this size, I might not notice if someone leaves the group to go exploring."

It took over four hours, with frequent rest stops along the way, for three hundred eighty-two tired and hungry people to reach Wayne Manor. Few, if any, of the new arrivals were the same people who had left

Robinson Park. The underground subway platforms were currently serving as temporary shelters, with the overflow sleeping in the tunnels themselves. However, upon seeing ranks of newcomers, squatters at each station rose to offer their allotted space to those who needed it more, and joined the many who followed Batman northward.

By the time they emerged from the subway tunnel at Burnley Station, Batman noted with astonishment that the group behind him mostly ranged in age from mid-teens to mid-forties. Here and there, he could see a younger face, or a shock of grey hair, but these were the exception.

Darkseid saw us as slaves, scarcely better than animals. Did we need that, to remember our human decency? He allowed himself another smile—a rarity when he was in costume. A common threat seemed to have brought out the best in people—even jaded Gothamites.

"Pile in, people!" A merry voice called out. "For tonight only, the Bludhaven-Hampton Express is back in service. Now I have to warn you folks with tickets to Somerset, Villarubia, Niles, or Hampton, that this train will be short-turning at Wayne Manor, so please retain your stubs and we'll..."

Batman started to scowl at his partner, but a wave of laughter from those assembled checked him. It wasn't much of a joke, but the crowd seemed appreciative. He grimaced. He'd put everything he had into one morale-boosting speech weeks ago. He didn't have another one in him. Staying in the shadows generally freed him from the need to speak publicly without the aid of a teleprompter. And when it came to improvisation, it was far easier for him to do so physically than verbally.

"You heard him," he rumbled.

Nightwing shook his head in mock-disappointment. "It wouldn't have killed you to say 'all aboard', you know," he said. "Tell me you didn't want to."

Batman looked him in the eyelets. "I didn't want to."

"Right," Nightwing grinned and mounted the steps to the engine car. "I forgot. That would have meant you were having fun. Oh, well."

He turned back to the assembly. "Board! Alllllllll
ABOOOOOOOOARRRRRRRD!"

They complied readily.

"See?" Nightwing said. "Would that really have been so hard?"

Batman was silent.

The younger man shrugged. "Fine. Be that way. Just... "

"Yes?" His tone was dangerously calm.

"Well, when you're helping Alfred ladle out breakfast in about an hour, could you at least *pretend* to be in a good mood? You're scary when you frown." He took a good look at his mentor. "Hey, Batman? You okay?" He asked, suddenly concerned. "You look a bit pale."

Bruce didn't answer. It had just hit him: he was about to bring almost four hundred people to the Manor on extremely short notice. He had just taken it for granted that Alfred would be able to handle them. Under his cowl, he felt cold perspiration on his forehead. Alfred was going to kill him.

Hoping against hope, Batman raised his eyes skyward.

Dick frowned worriedly. "Looking for something?"

A stray Apokoliptian dreadnought would be nice. Aloud, he said "No."

As the train ground to a halt before a set of gates in the fence that marked the northern boundary of the Wayne estate, Batman's jaw dropped. The meadow had been sectioned off. Gore-Tex canopies mounted on iron poles protected rubber ground sheets. Bedding seemed to be whatever had been on hand, as some of these awnings hung over air mattresses, others sleeping bags, quilts, or even, Bruce noted, an inflatable life-raft, its bright orange fabric illuminated by the light of a

strategically placed lantern. The canopies were arranged in neat rows, with wide grassy aisles between them. As the train's passengers stepped warily through the gate, Alfred was on-hand, calmly assigning sleeping space.

Batman disembarked and waited until all the other Gothamites had done the same, before he approached the entrance to the meadow. He passed through the gate in time to hear Alfred say "Three of you, then? Very good, Sir. The canopy designated as '4A' to your left, fourth row over. Depending on available space you may be called upon to take on one additional person. A light repast will be provided shortly," he glanced up to see Batman standing before him, "and Master Bruce and I will do our best to see that you are all served as efficiently as possible." His lips twitched.

"Master Batman, do you also require accommodation this... well it *is* morning, is it not?" It was true. The time was now two fifteen in the a.m.

Batman coloured slightly. "No, I have arrangements," he managed. "You've... " he shook his head, "outdone yourself."

"I shall certainly relay your compliments to the master," Alfred said mildly, maintaining the charade for the small group remaining, who had not yet received their shelter allocations. "If you'll excuse me one moment, Sir?"

Alfred smiled at the quartet at the head of the line. "Four of you? Canopy 9B, to your right and 9 rows over."

In a lower tone of voice, he added, "I would presume that Master Nightwing will be returning that set of railway cars?"

"Naturally."

Alfred finished the canopy assignments as though his duties routinely included finding temporary sleeping accommodations for hundreds of people in the wee hours of the morning. He then turned back to Batman.

"I believe that were you to return to the train, you might request of Master Nightwing to drive you so far as the next set of gates over.

Although you may find it a bit of a tight squeeze, I trust that you recall a spot from which it would be possible to access the cave?"

How could he possibly forget? Alfred was referring to a small opening perhaps three feet wide, through which a twelve-year-old boy had exited the subterranean lair more than once during Bruce's impromptu training exercises. An adult could pass through with slightly more difficulty. He nodded as he drew Alfred toward the train, away from the crowd.

Nightwing disembarked and waved as he sprinted toward the other end of the train, where an engine facing in the opposite direction awaited.

"Don't drive off, yet," Batman warned.

The younger man made a circle of thumb and forefinger as he dashed past.

"I," Bruce cleared his throat. "I didn't mean to put all of this on your-"

"Sir!" Alfred's tone was severe. "Not another word."

Batman swallowed.

"After all the demands that have been placed upon you and upon me in the defence of this city in recent weeks, for you to go this far," uncharacteristically, he placed a hand on his surrogate son's shoulder, "may well be your single most heroic deed to date." He smiled at the taller man's stunned expression.

"Truthfully, Sir," he added, "I can only recall one man who behaved in a similar fashion." At Batman's inquiring glance, the older man's eyes softened. "It's hardly surprising that you be unfamiliar with the events, Sir. They transpired some years before your birth. Following the earthquake of 1966, a significant portion of Gotham proper was left without shelter. Those fortunate enough to retain roofs over their heads were almost universally bereft of water or power. People with the means to do so left the city until basic services could be restored. The suburbs, fortunately, suffered fewer privations. Many households in Bristol and Somerset opened their doors to take in one or two families apiece. One man," he continued seriously, "accommodated no fewer than three

hundred people on his land for a period of ten days." He paused a beat. "Your father, Sir."

"My-"

"I daresay that he too would have approved of your actions, this day. Now then, Sir. Do not keep Master Nightwing waiting any longer. I shall be expecting you upstairs to assist me with breakfast once you've freshened up. Both of you," he added firmly, but with a twinkle in his eye.

By the time the dinner had been consumed—heartily porridge liberally flavoured with brown sugar, maple syrup, and fresh fruit, the trash collected, and the cooking and serving utensils scoured clean, more than half the morning had gone.

Dick rubbed his eyes. "I don't know about you, Bruce, but I think I could sleep for a week."

"Agreed." For once, Batman didn't feel like pretending he didn't need rest to function. Or to put it another way, he didn't believe that he *could* keep up the pretence.

"I'll head upstairs in a minute. I just need to sit here a little longer." Dick closed his eyes and leaned back in the cushioned kitchen chair.

A moment later, a faint snore reached Bruce's ears. Bruce had fallen asleep in enough chairs himself to know that, left as he was, Dick would be extremely sore when he awoke. Couldn't have that. He sighed. It looked like he was going to have to carry his erstwhile partner upstairs. And, he would. In just a minute or two...

The smell of simmering stew woke Dick first. He groaned as he stretched the kinks out of his muscles.

Immediately, Alfred placed a bowl down in front of him. "My apologies,

Master Dick. I fear I'm no longer as spry as I once was, else you should have awakened in more comfortable surroundings. Eat up, Sir."

Dick raised his spoon obediently. "You need me to help you with lunch?" He asked, as he plunged the utensil into the bowl.

"Actually, Sir, that won't be necessary. Collins Catering has arrived on the premises and set up operations in the caretakers' cottage. Following today's lunch, which I have prepared, but which they will serve, they shall be attending to the cooking for our new guests."

"That should be a break for you," Dick grinned as Bruce began to stir.

"Indeed, Sir." Alfred headed back to the range to ladle another serving of stew into a bowl.

"How long are you planning to stay, Dick?"

They were sitting on the couch in the den, armed with large earthenware mugs of Columbian coffee. A plate of oatmeal cookies lay on the coffee table before them.

"A few more days, I guess. Unless I'm wearing out my welcome, here."

Bruce's eyes narrowed. Despite the lightness of the younger man's tone, he realized that his partner was only half-joking. "Never that," he said.

"But school. With everything that's happened, are you going to be able to complete your courses?"

Dick sighed. "I dropped three out of five this semester. I'd just mailed in my last exam when the dreadnoughts showed up. My luck, they vaporized the mailbox." He chuckled. "Bet that'll be a new excuse for the professors: the parademons atomised my essay."

Bruce didn't laugh. "I'm sure that other students are in your situation, and that the school has a workaround."

"It's no big deal."

"It is a big deal. You're in college, Dick. The marks you get now will determine whether you get in to the graduate program of your choice. You can't afford to shrug off something like this."

Dick drew a deep breath. "Yes. I can. I'm not going to graduate school."

"What?"

You've faced Brother Blood. You've faced Deathstroke. You can do this. He met Bruce's glower head-on. "I'm not going to graduate school. Not for a good long time, if ever." He hesitated for a moment before barreling onward.

"I've been doing some thinking, Bruce. I'm back to the way things were in senior year. I'm juggling classes, study time, Titans business, downtime... I can't keep going like this. Something has to give. If it's my downtime, I'll go crazy-"

"Titans." It was almost a growl.

"Somehow, I knew you were going to say that." He didn't quite keep the irritation out of his voice. If there was only some way to make him see! "It's not going to be the Titans," he stated. "Or if it is, it'll only be because I'm doing more crimefighting as a solo act."

"School is more important."

"If you really thought that way, you wouldn't have dropped out in your sophomore year to go looking for some *sensei* in Japan to teach you *kosho ryu kempo*." He froze. He couldn't believe he'd just said that.

Bruce reddened. "That is NOT the issue!"

"Isn't it? On the one hand, you tell me that school's the priority. On the other hand, everything you've done since before I ever met you tells me a different story. You want me to follow in your footsteps at Wayne Enterprises. Does that mean you want me to sneak out of board meetings if the signal goes up? Should I turn over the day-to-day workings of the

company to my vice president so I can run back to the cave to finish analyzing the evidence I picked up from a crime scene the night before? I mean, if school and work are more important than what gets done in costume, then technically, *you* should be running the company, not Lucius. So where's *your* MBA, Bruce?" His tone hardened. "Better yet, where's your BBA?"

Bruce's jaw worked furiously, but no sound came out.

Dick waited, his face expressionless. Finally, he went on. "The truth is, Bruce, you don't need the piece of paper. If running the company were your top priority, you'd be running it. You do plenty of detective work without a degree in criminal justice or a PI license. And you taught me more on the job than I could ever get in the classroom. So, explain to me why I should spend the next four years in a classroom to get a piece of sheepskin that attests to the fact that I know how to do the things I knew how to do when I was fifteen? And if you can find a good reason; then tell me why you haven't bothered, in your own case."

"How do you intend to live?" Bruce asked. "You've made it clear that you don't want my financial support-I'm guessing that the large credit card balances you ran up in your first semester owed more to an attempt to attract my attention than to any misplaced desire for luxury?"

Dick looked away, flushing. "Basically." It hadn't worked, of course.

"So. If you're dropping school, don't want to come into the business, and don't want me to help you out financially, just how do you intend to get by?"

He swallowed. "I was going to look for work as a private investigator, actually."

"A private-" Bruce repeated in disbelief.

Dick nodded. "I can set my own hours, use what I already know, the pay's not too bad."

"You have to be at least twenty-five."

"For a license," Dick agreed. "But if I'm working under the direct supervision of an attorney, then I don't need to have a license."

Bruce frowned. "You're nineteen years old, Dick. Barely. How many law firms are going to see past that to give you the opportunity to prove yourself?"

"It only takes one." He was annoyed to find himself on the defensive. "If I have to offer to work for free on the first case, I will. If I have to go to every lawyer at every law firm in New York City until I find that one, I will."

"And if, in the interim, you can't pay your rent and you're out on the street?"

"I won't come crawling back here, if that's what you're worried about, Bruce. Roy's still got a penthouse. I can crash there if I have to."

Bruce shook his head. "You'd accept help from anybody except me, is that it?"

The words hit home. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Then, how *did* you mean it?"

Good question. He had an answer for it; he knew he did. It just didn't seem to be forthcoming at the moment. He turned away, frustrated. "Forget it."

"It seems you've been considering this for awhile." Bruce sounded thoughtful. Dick blinked. Slowly he turned back. Bruce continued. "You've made some valid points." Abruptly he reached for the telephone.

"Rachel Green, please. Yes, I'll hold."

"What are you... ?"

"Rachel?" Bruce held up a hand, waving Dick to silence. "Bruce Wayne, here. Umm... "

Dick rolled his eyes as Bruce slipped easily into 'clueless socialite mode'.

"Rachel, I was um... wondering. Does your firm ever use um... private investigators for... stuff? Really? That's great. I know a young man who's very interested in a career in that field-"

Dick started up angrily. "Will you stop trying to control... "

Bruce froze him with a look.

"He's um... been into this for awhile. Nineteen. Yes, I know that's young, but he's... his name? Dick Gr-well, yes he *is* my ward-"

"**NO!**"

The word exploded simultaneously both from the receiver and from Dick's lips.

"Look, I don't care if you're my firm's biggest client... "

"You have NO faith in me whatsoever!"

"I'm not going to just hand your kid a job!"

"You don't think I can do this on my own?"

*"I have a file drawer FULL of resumes belonging to people with **qualifications**. They are older. They are experienced. They have university degrees, for crying out loud!"*

"Look, Bruce. I'm not a baby and I don't need you to hold my hand."

Bruce frowned as he tried to listen to both tirades simultaneously. "Rachel. Listen, he's right here. Just talk to him. What do you have to lose? A half-hour? An hour, tops? If it doesn't work out, fine."

Dick had stopped shouting abruptly.

"You have my word, Rachel." Although he was addressing the woman on the other end of the line, Bruce's gaze was fixed on his surrogate son.

As Dick met his eyes, the older man nodded. "The only favor I'm asking is that you meet with him. What happens after that depends on how that meeting goes. Shall I put him on the line?"

A moment later, he handed the receiver to Dick. "I'll be downstairs," he said, nodding toward the cave.

The section of the cave that served as a gymnasium had been the first area that Bruce had restored following his battle with Kanto. The computers would be back up and running by the end of the week.

When Dick descended into the cave a few minutes later, he found Bruce, already in exercise gear, executing a *Gojushiho* kata. He watched for a few moments as his surrogate father worked through the motions of the karate pattern dance, increasing both the speed and the complexity of the moves. Bruce's eyes were shut in concentration. He seemed oblivious to the younger man's presence.

Dick waited for an opportunity, and when one presented itself, he somersaulted lightly onto the mat. He pulled up into a handstand, meaning to use his legs to sweep Bruce's out from under him.

Without pause, as though he and Dick had rehearsed the motions beforehand, Bruce leapt back to avoid the manoeuvre, and then surged forward to seize hold of Dick's ankle.

Grinning, Dick kicked out with his other foot, knocking away Bruce's hand before it could close on the appendage. He flipped back onto his feet and settled into a combat stance.

From that point onward, the elegant choreography of the kata rapidly degenerated into a freestyle sparring match.

"You've," Bruce grunted as he landed on his back on the mat, "picked up a few new techniques."

Dick saw the blow coming an instant before it would have connected, dodged, and feinted for Bruce's eyes. Bruce wasn't fooled. He blocked

the high kick that followed, twisted, and flipped the younger man over his shoulder.

Dick slapped the ground as he landed, and then sprang up in a single, fluid motion. "Donna's taught me some things."

"Apparently."

Dick grinned. "Since you're pretending not to want to know, I've got an interview set up in a little over five months. Ms. Green figures it'll be about that long until things settle down enough for them to look at hiring new people. By the way, I take back what I said before about you helping me. The impression I got from the conversation was that if she hires me, it'll be *in spite* of my relationship with you. Did you do something to make her hate you?"

Bruce dodged, so that the next blow glanced off of his shoulder. "I met her."

Dick laughed. "Excuse me?"

"I met her at a society event," Bruce elaborated. "I was... acting the way Bruce Wayne is expected to act at society events. She was less-than-impressed to find me three sheets to the wind."

"And she still gave me the interview?"

Bruce reached for a towel. "I'm done," he said, as he stepped away from the mat. "For what it's worth," he added, "I've done what I can to correct that initial impression, although my options have been... limited."

"Meaning you couldn't say 'I was acting like an ass so nobody would connect me with Batman, and pretending to be drunk was just part of the act', right?"

"In essence." Bruce shrugged. "You should do fine," he said lightly. "Just convince her you're nothing like me."

"That's not going to be easy," Dick admitted. "See, I'm nothing like that idiot you pretend to be, but," he felt his face grow hot, "well, let's just say

there's more of you in me than I ever realized. The real you, I mean. Enough that I didn't think there was much of *me* in me."

Bruce pursed his lips. "I... see."

"No offence, Bruce," he hastened to say. "I mean there's nothing wrong with being you, if you're you, but I'm not." Was he even making sense?

Oddly, Bruce seemed to understand. "Agreed." Without rancour. A moment's hesitation, and then, "You're... better than I am."

"Excuse me?"

Bruce was nodding. "When Darkseid attacked. You saw what was happening, just like I did; only you figured out how to stop it."

"Yeah. Too bad we didn't."

"You figured out the right way, though."

"Bruce." Dick held up a hand. "I hate to say this, but it doesn't take a genius to realize that a unified team stands a better chance than a bunch of individuals."

"Maybe not," Bruce said. "But *you* realized it. And wherever that particular thought originated, it didn't come from me."

Dick shook his head. "I realize it's not your standard MO, Bruce, but I think it would have hit you eventually."

"Under the circumstances, I'm not sure we *had* 'eventually'."

"Well, yeah. But still, I lead a team. It was just sort of natural to call them in when I realized that I couldn't do it alone."

"Exactly," Bruce agreed. "*You* realized."

Dick paused. "Can I ask you something?"

"About why, if I acknowledge the benefits of teamwork, I declined to join

the Justice League."

It wasn't a question. Dick nodded. "Pretty much, yeah."

"Teams are built on trust. I know Clark. As for the others... "

"So, get to know them." Dick shrugged. "You throw so many dinner parties for people you don't know or even like, in order to keep up appearances. Would it be so terrible to throw one and just be yourself?"

Bruce ignored the suggestion. "They don't need me in the League, at any rate. They're forming an alliance to combat otherworldly threats. Look at the membership roster, Dick. An alien who's nearly invulnerable to conventional weaponry, who can fire heat beams from his eyes, an immortal under Divine protection, a... space cowboy with a near-omnipotent ring, the king of an underwater nation, a speedster, a shape-shifter... Dick, these people can save the *world*. I... couldn't even save my city."

"Neither could Superman," Dick reminded him. "*Luthor* got Metropolis declared an 'open city'. Bet that stung. Anyway, you're missing the point: not one of them could save their own territories until they joined forces."

"Look me in the eye, Dick, and tell me that they couldn't have routed Darkseid without me."

"Not as quickly," Dick said flatly. "Sorry, but word gets around. Bruce—you're the one who cooked up the winning strategy. Look, *I* lead a team. Sometimes, we don't all have to be out there. Sometimes, Speedy and Starfire can handle things themselves. Sometimes, Raven and I do just fine. Sometimes, it's all of us, yes, but—"

"Has there ever been a time when *you* and you alone were able to do something that the others could not?"

Dick thought for a moment. "Not really," he said, feigning dejection. "Well, I mean, unless you count stalling some brainwashed team-mates until Raven could break through their programming—always tricky when one of them can fire off star-bolts, by the way." He turned around, not daring to see how his words were affecting Bruce. "Or," he continued, "performing rescue breathing on Speedy, seeing as nobody else on the

team knew how. Then, there was the time Deathstroke managed to nail everyone *but* me and I had to get the others out of danger."

He sighed. "Sometimes, I think the main problem that metahumans have-and it's not insurmountable by any stretch-is that they tend to rely on their abilities more than it's healthy for them to do. I mean, when it comes to run-of-the-mill criminals, Superman's biggest problem is figuring out which thug to take down first. I've seen those tendencies from Wally and the girls, too. Roy brazens it out, tries to pretend that he can scragg the hostiles without working up a sweat, but when he thinks no one's watching, he's practising his archery like a man possessed. See, he knows, just like I do, that if we're going to pull our respective weights on the team, then we *have* to be at the top of our form. It just," he colored slightly, remembering an altercation that had precipitated his taking a leave of absence from the team, "took me a while to catch on to the fact that any time he was pretending he didn't need to train... Well, the operative word was 'pretending'. He puts on a pretty good act is all." He grimaced. "You'd think I'd be used to that, wouldn't you? Considering."

"You're *not* comparing me to... "

"Nope. You're a lot more stubborn. The annoying thing is, when people listen to you... things usually work out."

"I give orders," Bruce said flatly. "That doesn't make me a leader." In a rare display of affection, he squeezed Dick's shoulder. "I've *seen* leadership."

Dick warmed to the compliment, but he wasn't about to let himself get sidetracked. "Bruce? If you found out that there was some little-known fighting style that you hadn't learned, and you'd have to go to some ashram in Tibet to study it, would you?"

"That's different."

"Why? Because it's physical? OK, suppose Sherlock Holmes was real and alive today. Would you go to Baker Street to learn from him?" He glanced over his shoulder. "You know you would, Bruce. In a New York minute."

"Why is this so important to you?" Bruce demanded. "I'm not disputing that teamwork is one of your strengths, but it doesn't happen to be one of mine."

"Yeah? Well, when I started training, martial arts weren't exactly in my skill-set, the way I remember it. Neither were escrima-batons were something I used to keep my balance on the tightrope, not knock an opponent off his feet. And you weren't born with seventeen black belts and a cave filled with high-tech toys. If your main reason for not wanting to be part of a team is lack of experience, I'm not buying it. And if you're trying to tell me that you don't have anything to contribute, I need to know who you think you're kidding."

"You're avoiding the question."

"Fine. When was the last time you slept? And passing out over porridge a couple of hours ago doesn't count."

Silence.

"Every night since I've been back, you've sent me up to bed, and you've stayed down in the cave. Sometimes you're fixing things up, sometimes you're working on a laptop-say the word and I can get someone at S.T.A.R. Labs to replace the Crays, by the way."

"Not necessary. They're intact, it's just a question of clearing away the debris."

"No problem. I'll help you with that, later." He smiled, then sobered. "That's my point. You can handle the city under normal circumstances. But what happened recently was not normal. You're spreading yourself too thin, and it's starting to show."

"Is that why you're still here?"

Dick ignored the anger sparking in his mentor's voice. "Pretty much, yeah. And," as he saw Bruce open his mouth to interrupt, "no, let me finish. If there was a serial killer loose in Atlantis, and Aquaman's people were stumped, if he came to you, would you assume he couldn't manage *his* city? If Superman couldn't find a paper trail to link Lexcorp with

Intergang, and he asked you to take a look, would you just tell him to investigate as Clark Kent? I know you, Bruce. You might grumble about how you ought to be dealing with the Triads smuggling endangered species parts into the US and using Gotham Harbour as their gateway, but you'd do it. So why do you see asking them for backup as... as some sort of weakness?"

Silence

He rolled his eyes. "It's not like you'd think the less of anyone for asking you for help-sheesh! When I left New York, you were practically begging me to let you help. Seriously, what was that about-pay my hotel bill and give me a motorcycle?"

Bruce turned around. "For four days, I had no idea where you were. I was... concerned."

"Why?" Dick demanded. "You didn't think I could manage a few days out on my own?"

Bruce spun back to face him. "Hardly. You've been handling yourself in combat since you were twelve. You have more street smarts than I did at your age, and a collar-record to rival most seasoned cops. Don't you think I know that?"

"Then... ?"

"You were also eighteen years old in a strange city, and I had no way of knowing that you were safe."

The words hit him with a force that bordered on the physical. "Well, maybe if you hadn't pushed me away, I wouldn't have struck out on my own."

"Don't you think I know that, too?"

He advanced a step. "Bruce."

"I wanted you out of harm's way. That's why I retired Robin in the first place. Imagine my reaction, several weeks later, when I saw a WNYX

special report on New York's newest team of heroes. My first instinct was to go barrelling down to Hudson and-

"I would have fought you. The *team* would have fought you."

"I realize that. Also, I watched the full report." He smiled. "You were clearly in your element. And... apart from your comment to Bethany Snow-"

Dick flushed. "I'm sorry you saw that. I didn't think you would have."

"Don't apologize. I did do my utmost to... distance you," Bruce remarked. "Your reaction to Snow's attempt at an interview told me that I had succeeded. It was... less gratifying than I'd expected, I'll admit." He drew a deep breath, and continued.

"You handled yourself well on that footage. Better than you had on patrol with me in a long time. I... " he stopped. "The events of the past year... " His voice trailed off again.

Dick grinned. "They happened, okay? I'm not thrilled about them but it seems to me that, a long time ago, someone told me not to dwell on past mistakes. Can we just say I was an overconfident jerk and you were... " He broke off with a frown. It was one thing to insult someone in the heat of the moment...

Bruce shook his head. "You weren't." He sighed. "When you were growing up, I taught you time and again to analyse the situation, think for yourself, and arrive at your own conclusions." His lips twitched. "Imagine my... chagrin, when you did, in fact, analyse the situation, think for yourself, and arrive at your own conclusions-conclusions which differed sharply from my own."

A brief answering smile warmed the younger man's face. "So, you're really okay with my leaving school."

"I'd be lying if I told you that I was pleased about it, but if you're old enough to get a senator indicted *in absentia*, I suppose you might be old enough to choose your own career path."

"And if I told you I wanted to work as a croupier in 'Vegas?"

"Don't push it." It was a growl, but there was little heat behind it.

The smile widened. "Good to know you're not going to totally leave me to my own devices." He had to laugh at Bruce's expression. "I don't *mind* having a safety net," he explained. "I just want it far enough away that I can ignore it unless I need it." He clapped Bruce on the shoulder. "I'm gonna hit the showers. I'll see you upstairs."

Bruce nodded. "I'll call Clark tomorrow," he said. "I'll tell him I've reconsidered."

Dick's jaw seemed to have come unhinged. "Y-you will? I mean," he said with greater assurance, "you will."

Bruce met his gaze squarely. "It's no sign of weakness," he said softly, "to employ a safety net."

"Nope." Dick picked up his towel. As he sauntered off in the direction of the shower, he couldn't resist saying, "I guess you *can* teach an old dog new-"

Dick threw himself to one side, caught the medicine ball, spun, straightened, and whipped it back at Bruce. Bruce dodged the heavy leather sphere, and launched himself at the younger man. Dick grabbed his arm and flipped him neatly over one shoulder. Bruce pulled him down after him. For the first time in over a year, twin shouts of laughter rang out in the cave, echoing through the subterranean tunnels.

Epilogue

One month later

"I'm glad you decided to take another course this coming semester," Bruce said.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to narrow my options too much," Dick admitted. "In some states, I wouldn't qualify for a P.I. license without a degree in criminal justice or something related. As far as the rest of the year, I'll see how things go after I have the interview. If I get the job, then I might not have time for classes. And if I don't, I'm probably going to be too busy pounding the pavement and working odd jobs to pay the rent-I can't live in the dorms anymore, now that I'm not a full-time student."

He held up a warning hand. "Don't worry, Bruce. I'll manage."

Bruce reached into his desk drawer. "I know you will. But this might help."

Dick shook his head. "I don't need-"

"This is yours, Dick. Not a gift. It's... your parents started a trust fund in your name. Lucius has been managing it since you came to the manor, but it belongs to you. I had meant to give it to you last year before you left, but the circumstances were... "

"Yeah. Tell me about it." He tucked the envelope into his jacket pocket. "Thanks, Bruce. I'll look at it later." He extended a hand. Bruce clasped it. Then, unexpectedly, he pulled the younger man toward him and clapped him on the back. Dick returned the gesture. "Take care of yourself, Bruce."

"And you."

"You know it." A quick, emotional farewell to Alfred, and he was off. He walked slowly toward the garage, where his motorcycle awaited.

It was different, this time. When he had departed over a year ago, it had been as a boy, angry and confused. This time, he was leaving as a young man, confident, and comfortable with the road ahead-even though he wasn't entirely sure of what awaited him around the next bend.

*There's been a change in me
A kind of moving on*

*Though what I used to be
I still depend on
For now I realize
That good can come from bad
That may not make me wise
But oh it makes me glad*

*And I— I never thought I'd leave behind
My childhood dreams
But I don't mind
For now I love the world I see
No change of heart a change in me*

*For in my dark despair
I slowly understood
My perfect world out there
Had disappeared for good
But in it's place I feel
A truer life begin
And it's so good and real
It must come from within*

*And I— I never thought I'd leave behind
My childhood dreams but I don't mind
I'm where and who I want to be
No change of heart
A change in me*

*No change of heart
A change in me*

Tim Rice, "A Change In Me"

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