



Nightwing #27
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"Historic Continuity"

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"Historic continuity with the past is not a duty, it is only a necessity." (Oliver Wendell Holmes)

Dick Grayson was whistling as he left Tiffany's office. He had a stack of subpoenas tucked under one arm and the keys to his motorcycle in his other hand. It had taken weeks of scut detail, but he was finally getting assigned some 'real' investigative work. Granted, serving papers was a far cry from analyzing plant fibers under a microscope in the Batcave, or tailing a numbers runner in hope of tracking down a bigger fish in the process. Still, this was a step in the right direction.

He stopped short when his cell phone began to vibrate. His *other* cell phone—the one that was never out of reach—the one whose number was known to perhaps a dozen people in the world, most of whom wore costumes. He deposited his keys into his pocket and drew out the phone. "Yes?" He listened for a moment. "Alfred? What's up?" Now, he was really getting worried. Alfred would never call this line if it weren't an emergency.

"Master Dick?" He repeated. "Are you..." He took a deep breath. "Yes, of course you're there. My apologies."

"Alfred?" His concern shifted abruptly to alarm. "What's happened?"

There was a long pause. "Master Bruce is..." Alfred broke off uncharacteristically. He started again. "I... I fear he..."

In all the time that he had known him, Dick had never known Alfred to

falter so. Not even that time when Bruce had lain comatose for over forty-eight hours after the Batmobile swerved full-force into a guard rail, broke through it and rolled down a ravine. Bruce had bailed in time, though not without injury.

“What happened?” He repeated. Suddenly, he felt like he was back at the circus, nine years old, and screaming for answers from the animal trainers and clowns who had sprung up to block his view, shielding him from the sight of his... his... “Alfred? Bruce isn’t...?”

He almost dropped the receiver in horror when he heard the raw sob on the other end. “Y-you must come home, sir. At once.” The call terminated abruptly.

Dick stared dumbly at the phone. Only then did he realize that his hand was shaking, that the tips of the fingers that were tightly gripping the unit had gone red. “I’m on my way,” he whispered.

“Dick?” He spun to see Tiffany standing behind him. “Is everything okay?”

He shook his head. “No.” The subpoenas slid out of his grasp. He barely registered it.

“Here.” She bent down to retrieve them. “You dropped...” She broke off when she realized that he wasn’t making a move to help her. In fact, he was already sprinting for the door at the end of the hallway. She called after him, but he didn’t turn. And then he was through the door.

By the time she had gathered up the papers and dashed to the elevators, he was gone.

Most of the time, riding his motorcycle was relaxing. Dick could lose himself on the open road and let his thoughts wander freely. Oddly enough, instead becoming distracted by these musings, he found that he had more clarity on the bike. Although he’d often watched Bruce sitting cross-legged and absolutely motionless as he meditated in the cave, Dick himself had never felt comfortable staying in one place for so long.

Sometimes, when he was in the middle of an acrobatic routine, he could get into that mindset. Usually though, he was at his most serene when he was cruising down the highway, at one with the bike. When he felt wholly in tune with his surroundings, and yet detached from them. That was when his thoughts zoomed into sharp focus. This wasn't 'most of the time'.

At this moment, Dick's mind wouldn't stop jumping. Something had happened to Bruce. Something serious. Something he wouldn't let himself think about—except he *was* thinking about it. No matter how badly Bruce was hurt, Alfred would have said *something* over the telephone, unless... He wasn't going to think that way. Bruce was fine. Joker probably had him tied up somewhere and was threatening to unmask him unless the GCPD gave him five million dollars worth of Three Stooges memorabilia in unMarxed crates. (*'UnMarxed.'* Get it?) Oh, G-d, this wasn't funny. And if it were true, then could Dick really state that Bruce was 'fine'? Yeah. Yeah, he could. Because deep down he knew that the only way that Alfred would come so close to breaking down on the phone was...

...Was if Bruce were dead.

Damn! He *knew* that riding the 'cycle would help him organize his thoughts. For one irrational moment, he wished that he'd taken the train.

Alfred was waiting for him as he pulled into the cave. Dick took a few steps forward, then stopped. Yes, he knew that Alfred was probably in his late sixties, but this was the first time that he'd actually *looked* it. When had his hair gone so gray? The lines of his face were deeper—and were those *age spots* on the hand that stretched out to greet him? Dick bit down on his lip. Overnight, it seemed that Alfred had become an old man.

He ignored the hand, choosing instead to place his own two gently on Alfred's shoulders and pull him into an embrace. He wasn't sure which of them needed the hug more. They held on to each other, each one drawing and imparting strength for what felt like an eternity. They pulled apart reluctantly.

Dick took a deep breath, straightened his stance, and bowed his head. "How?"

Alfred must have been expecting the question, for his words came out evenly and without inflection, as though he had been rehearsing the best way to deliver them. "There was an altercation," he said quietly. "Master Bruce was engaging Ra's al Ghul over the reservoir dam. From the details that I've been able to glean, it would appear that al Ghul lost his footing and plunged over the side. Naturally, Master Bruce attempted to intercept him with a grappling line. But the top of the dam was slippery, and gravity can exert a strong force." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "They both landed in the river below, beneath the torrents spilling over the dam."

Dick brightened. "So, there's no body?"

Alfred's tired eyes seemed to bore into him. "Between the force of the waterfall and the turbines at the bottom, Master Dick, it is highly unlikely that either body will ever be recovered." In a voice so low that Dick could barely hear it, he added, "or that there would be any way to conclusively establish the identity of the remains, if we did."

Dick blanched. "But there's still a cha..."

"No." Alfred's voice was emphatic. "Master Dick, we both know who Master Bruce... *was*, and what his capabilities ar—*were*. Had there been any way that he had survived, he would have returned here."

"Unless he were injured, unconscious..."

Alfred shook his head. "No. Forgive me, Master Dick. I have been over the events many times in these last few hours. With myself, with young Master Timothy, and now with you." He forced the words out. "Master Bruce fell into the Gotham River. Whether it was from the fall, from the waters cascading from above, or from the currents or turbines below, he will not be returning. That is the reality of the situation, and it is something to which we must both... to which we must *all* become accustomed." A hint of steel crept into his eyes and his voice as he continued. "We must accept this, my boy. Because to do otherwise would be to embrace a fantasy."

Dick shook his head, but he could feel one of the foundation stones of his world crumbling beneath his feet. "Not Bruce, Alfred," he whispered. "Not Bruce."

Suddenly, he couldn't remain in the cave for another moment. This was Bruce's world, and to be down here without him was an invasion of privacy. He headed toward the steps that led up to the manor, quickening his pace with each step until he was running up and out of the cave, barely registering the slight figure on the stairs as he raced past.

Alfred regarded Tim sympathetically.

Tim shook his head. "I know," he said before Alfred could utter a word. "Time."

Dick's old bedroom remained unchanged. The same circus posters were on the wall, the same high school textbooks and memorabilia on the shelves, and the same black, midnight-blue, and yellow Gotham Knights pennant over his bed. He pulled out one of the drawers under his captain's bed. He found the same trashy MAD magazine paperbacks, Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues and R.L. Stine novels he'd sneaked into the manor when he was in junior high. Everything was as it had been—except for the most important thing.

Bruce was gone.

In the privacy of his room, Dick sat down on the edge of the bed, balled his hands into fists, and soundlessly began to cry. Bruce was gone. Bruce was gone, Bruce was gone, Bruce was...

He closed his eyes. This wasn't happening—couldn't be happening—except...

Alfred was suffering. That brought it all home for him. Dick remembered reading a line in some novel about how parents weren't supposed to bury their children. This had to be eating at him. And the kid that he'd brushed past—Tim—Dick remembered. That was his name. Bruce had

mentioned that the boy had recently become an orphan. And now, just when he would have thought there was some stability... Yes, this had to be a million times harder for Tim. Dick hadn't lived at the manor for well over a year, now. He hadn't seen Bruce every day. He had his own life, at this point. But Tim... Was Alfred up to raising another teen? Or would Tim end up in foster care?

More thoughts leaped into his mind. How long could Bruce's disappearance be kept secret from the board of Wayne Enterprises? And would anybody connect Batman's death with Bruce's absence?

Dick took a deep breath. *Take your time, he told himself. Cry. Rage. Throw things. Get everything out of your system now. Because once you wash your face and open that door again, you won't have that luxury. You've got to be there for the others. You've got to make sure that all of the necessary arrangements are made, and you can't do that if you're wallowing in grief. So do whatever you need to do, here and now to prepare yourself. Then, go downstairs, and go on.*

As he heard the words in his mind, he felt himself nodding. Unconsciously, he straightened his shoulders in mental preparation for the load that was about to descend upon them.

He went back down to the cave. "I'm coming back," he said shortly, as he crossed the ground to where he'd parked the 'cycle. "There's just something I need to see for myself first."

Alfred nodded slowly, resigned. "I suppose that might be for the best."

"Do you want some company?" Tim asked.

Dick shook his head. "No. I think I need to be alone, this time." He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'll talk when I get back." He paused. "I mean... if you want to."

A brief smile touched Tim's lips. "Sure."

This time, the motorcycle ride did nothing to quiet his thoughts. Dick drove grimly, relentlessly, southwards toward the Gotham City dam.

If his thoughts weren't quiet, they were calmer than they had been. He understood the situation now, and as agonizing as it was, he was preparing to deal with what lay ahead. He checked the horizon and estimated the time to be between noon and one o'clock. Incredible. Less than four hours ago, he'd been starting another day at Green and Loring, and hoping to finally start doing something interesting. And now...

He chewed on his lower lip. He'd rather have boring. No. He'd rather have Bruce. He gripped the handlebars more tightly. He couldn't take too long to do what needed to be done. Certain things needed to be set into motion, and quickly. But this couldn't wait.

He parked the 'cycle on a grassy incline a few yards from the reservoir. It was a good thing he usually wore the Nightwing suit under his street clothes. He'd never have had the presence of mind to grab it before leaving New York. And, his past as a circus performer notwithstanding, there was no good reason for Dick Grayson to go walking atop the dam. *Nightwing*, on the other hand, had every reason. He hesitated only a moment before he vaulted over the safety barrier to land on the muddy slope next to the embankment.

"I was wondering whether you'd show up." The voice behind him was low-pitched, so as not to startle the young man who stood precariously on the narrow strip of concrete that was the top of the Gotham City dam.

Nightwing turned to face the speaker. "Commissioner," he said flatly. He'd known that he was taking a chance, coming here in broad daylight. Much as he would have preferred some privacy, he'd wanted to survey the site thoroughly. For that, he'd needed to come before dark.

"I didn't mean to intrude," Gordon said sadly. "But I'm glad to find you here."

Nightwing hesitated for a moment. Then he stepped off of the top of the

dam and back onto terra firma, waving away the hand that the older man extended to him. "I'm okay."

Steel-gray eyes bored into his. "Are you?"

In its own way, the commissioner's steady stare was as penetrating as the Bat-glare. Actually, its effect was worse—the glare usually placed him on the defensive. This gaze, on the other hand, coupled with Gordon's question, accomplished the polar opposite.

Nightwing shook his head. "Not really."

"But you'll go on."

"I have to."

"I understand." And he did—in a way that he never would have, before he'd lost his wife and son. It was a different sort of loss, true, but the wound was still raw. He watched as the younger man looked down to the swirling waters rushing toward the turbines at the bottom of the dam.

"We... we've been searching along the river," Gordon said. He reached into a knapsack and pulled out a large clear plastic garment bag. It was actually more like a see-through envelope, sealed by a series of snaps. "We found this floating about a half-mile from here." He passed the bag to Nightwing.

Dick felt his hands begin to sweat. "His cape?"

"The cowl's attached. I think he'd have wanted you to have it. I... imagine you'll know best what to do with it?"

Nightwing looked up wordlessly, touched by the gesture. Before he could frame his thanks, however, the commissioner was turning around.

"Take care of yourself, son. And," he pressed on awkwardly, "if you get some pressing urge to share something, my window's usually open."

Dick watched him go. He took one last look at the swirling waters,

knowing that it was futile. The only thing that he could have gleaned from them was already in his hands, in a plastic garment bag. It was enough.

He tucked the bag under his arm and trudged back to the motorcycle.

The cave was deserted when Nightwing returned. He quickly changed back into street clothes and headed upstairs. He found Alfred and Tim in the kitchen. They looked up at his approach.

Dick took a deep breath. "We need to work fast," he said. "We've got to find an explanation for what happened to Bruce."

Tim blinked. "The dam... the currents..."

"No!" Dick exclaimed. "That's what happened to *Batman!* But Bruce is missing, too. How long can we keep *that* quiet?"

Alfred nodded slowly. "Indeed, sir. We can bandy it about that he's abroad, but sooner or later his disappearance will be remarked upon."

"We could say he was skiing in the Alps and got buried in an avalanche," Tim ventured.

Dick considered the idea. "That would be believable for *me*," he said finally. "I used to be a professional daredevil. I could probably get away with doing a lot of stupid stunts. But Bruce wouldn't go off skiing by himself. He's never been that reckless in public. And to go alone down a trail when there's a risk of avalanche... no. He wouldn't. Same thing with skydiving."

"Not to mention that they'd want to question the pilot," Tim nodded. He blinked. "What about a plane crash? We could remote control a private plane... have it go down, say Bruce was on it..."

Dick considered. "We'd have to make sure that it would be completely totaled. So that there wouldn't be a body, not even one 'mangled beyond recognition'. And we'd have to make sure that it wouldn't look like foul

play, unless you want a lot of cops coming around here asking questions." He turned abruptly. "First thing they'd do in a situation like this is ask 'who benefits'. And, seeing as I'm Bruce's heir, well..." He paused. "It's not a bad idea, though."

He looked up. "What if we inserted his name on the passenger list of a commercial plane that crashes? I mean, if there is a crash in the next few days?"

"If I may," Alfred said, "that would have been more plausible several years ago. However, in this era of increased security, there would be footage of the passengers embarking upon the plane. And Master Bruce would surely have been spotted by airport personnel."

Dick nodded. "Good point."

He blinked. It was as though a lightbulb had gone off in his mind. "Not a plane," he said slowly. "A boat." He snapped his fingers. "Bruce took the sailboat for a little cruise around the harbor. He somehow ended up drifting on the open sea, and fell overboard. Maybe he was drun—asleep at the controls..."

Alfred was nodding. "Drunk, indeed, Master Dick. It could work."

Dick was relieved to see that Alfred seemed to be coping better than he had been earlier.

"Except," Tim said, "wouldn't that be reckless for Bruce? Piloting the boat himself?"

"No," Alfred stated. "Given the events which led up to my telephone conversation with you earlier, it was necessary for Master Bruce to address the situation with al Ghul to the exclusion of all other activities. To this end, he allowed himself to appear under noticeable stress at the office. He then announced that he was taking several days off to 'unwind'. There were numerous witnesses to that statement. Under the circumstances, it would not be unheard of for Master Bruce to turn to boating as a means of relaxation." He leaned forward. "I... called you in a panic, because he had been missing for over forty-eight hours and I was beside myself."

Dick smiled. "Alfred, you're a genius!"

Alfred shook his head deprecatingly. "Not at all, sir. After all," he said quietly, "it was not *I* who discovered a plausible explanation in the event that Master Bruce's body should ever be recovered from the Gotham River."

Dick flinched. He hadn't considered that.

Shortly after eight PM that night, Alfred Pennyworth and Dick Grayson filed a missing persons report. Yes, Bruce had been missing for over forty-eight hours. No, they hadn't thought to involve the authorities sooner—Mr. Wayne liked his privacy and often took impromptu jaunts—but this was the first time that he'd failed to check in for more than a day. Also, his sailboat was no longer moored at its customary pier, and Mr. Wayne had never taken the boat out for more than a few hours at a stretch.

The officer took down the pertinent information, thanked them, and advised that they would be in touch.

At three twenty-seven AM, the telephone rang at the manor. Alfred picked it up. Dick watched him nod, heard him speak softly into the receiver. "I... see," he said finally. Dick noted the faint quaver in his voice, and fought down a smile. Before coming to Wayne Manor, Alfred had been an accomplished actor. "I thank you for your swift response. I suppose... is there anything that I can do to assist the searchers? Ah, yes, of course. Do keep us informed of further developments at your earliest convenience."

He hung up the phone, looked at Dick, and nodded. "They've discovered the boat."

Later on, Dick wondered how a day could simultaneously drag on forever and yet remain a blur in his memory. The police detective's

questions were quickly asked and answered, but they went on and on and *on*. Had he ever gotten into an argument with Bruce? What the hell? He'd spent most of his teenage years at the manor with Bruce as his surrogate father—how could they NOT have argued? Had anyone else ever gotten into an argument with him? How many people could answer a question like that in the negative without lying through their teeth? How long had Bruce had the sailboat? Did he know how to swim? Did he usually wear a life jacket? Dick got a strong vibe that while the cops didn't actually believe that the family had anything to do with Bruce's disappearance, they were being thorough. He could respect that, at least. The reporters were a different story. Dick tried to be polite on the telephone, but his patience quickly began to wear thin. What did they want from him? *A story that'll sell papers—what do you think?*

As morning gave way to afternoon, Dick found himself toying with the idea of telling the reporters that Bruce had been Batman. Maybe that would be enough of a story to get them to ease off, he thought, as he hung up the receiver for the umpteenth time. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Alfred's habitual serenity—already more an act than usual—was beginning to give into the strain as well.

The telephone rang again.

"I'll get it," Tim said abruptly. Dick was grateful for the reprieve. Still, this time, the call might be from one of the Titans, or even from Babs. He'd have left the phone off the hook hours ago, were it not for the hope that they might try to reach him. He mumbled an excuse, and headed in to the den to listen on the extension.

He froze when he heard the question posed by the other party on the line.

"So, Timothy. To lose your legal guardian so shortly after losing your father must be devastating. Has it sunk in yet?"

Dick heard Tim's sharp intake of breath. This was going too far. Wait a minute... His eyes narrowed. Was that... giggling in the background?

"Peter, don't..."

Then a muffled “shut up, Ives! He’ll hear!”

Kids. Prank-calling kids. Dick fought down the fury rising in his gorge. “Tim, hang up,” he said, deadly calm. “I’ll deal with this. As for you,” he added, addressing ‘Peter’, “contrary to popular belief, phone tracing is almost instantaneous today. Furthermore, you may not be aware of this, but Gotham’s local 911 center happens to be in the lucky fifteen percent with the equipment to track cellphone calls. If you phone here a—”

The line went dead abruptly. Dick left the phone off the hook. If anyone wanted to reach him, they could try his cell or call later.

He marched back into the living room. “This has gone on long enough,” he said quietly. His eyes sought those of the officer in charge. “I... we... want Bruce to be back here, safe and sound, and if there’s anything we can do to help, then of course we will. But I’m asking you whether we can’t pick this up at a later date.” He let a hint of his sorrow break through the polite façade he was projecting. “I honestly don’t think I can handle any more of this right now.”

The officer hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. “I think we have everything we need for the moment, Mr. Grayson. We’ll be in touch.”

Dick breathed his relief. He glanced over his shoulder. “Alfred, show...” he stopped. He *couldn’t* snap an order out at the older man, even if Alfred wouldn’t think anything of it. “Would you please show these folks to the door? They’re finished here.”

As Alfred stepped past Dick to usher the officers out, Dick caught a slight nod of approval. It was about the only thing that had come close to making the younger man smile since the GCPD’s arrival.

As the mob enforcers leveled their guns in near-unison, Nightwing had ample time to wonder whether this had really been such a grand idea. He’d been looking for a way to relieve some tension after the day he’d had, and he’d thought that maybe bringing in a few lowlifes might make him feel better.

As rumors about Batman's death rippled through the cesspool that was Gotham's underworld, the bolder criminals were starting to emerge from under their rocks. Looters were already rampaging through the downtown core.

Earlier, Dick had watched in disbelief as a man nonchalantly tied a grappling line to the bumper of his car, embedded the hook in the iron security grate that stretched across an electronics shop's storefront, and slid the car into gear. On the street, some people walked on, their faces studiously blank. Others cheered. Nightwing had severed the cable with a well-thrown nightarang. The car sped off, faster than he could follow from the rooftops.

As for these three clowns? He'd been trying to bring himself up to speed on the current power distribution between Thorne, Maroni, and Black Mask. Bruce hadn't logged a report in more than a week. The status quo changed a lot faster than that in Gotham.

Unfortunately, he'd been spotted. Maybe he'd gotten careless. Maybe they'd gotten lucky. There'd be time to review the situation later—hopefully. But for now, he was standing on a wharf with the Sprang River behind him and three hulking gunmen in front. He eyed the guns and set his jaw grimly. Kevlar suit or no Kevlar suit, if those .357 magnums were packing copper jackets, the force of the bullets would propel him off the wharf and into the drink.

Well, then... his best strategy was obviously not to get shot. Nightwing crouched low, and extracted a small capsule from a compartment in his boot. As the gunmen shifted their aim to his new position, the young vigilante leapt into the air like a coiled spring suddenly freed, tossing the capsule before him as he did. As the smoke began to billow forth from the tiny sphere, Nightwing slapped on a breathing mask. He closed his eyes against the stinging vapors and slipped easily into the acrid cloud. He had the disoriented gunmen unarmed and cuffed in less than thirty seconds.

They were still coughing when the police arrived to take them into custody.

"You can't stop all of us," one wheezed, as he stumbled to the waiting squad car. "Even the Bat died trying. Second stringer like you? I got a cousin sells burial plots. I can probably get you a deal."

Nightwing smiled. "So you two are partners then? I mean, your cousin sells the land... but you're the one who keeps a-coughin'." The smile died. "I stopped *you*." A familiar if uncharacteristic coldness crept into his voice. "Spread the word. Gotham is *not* defenseless. And anyone who thinks differently will soon find out their mistake."

He had the satisfaction of seeing the man flinch.

After the prisoners were safely ensconced in the rear of the patrol cars, one of the officers turned to him angrily. "What the hell do you think you're doing, kid?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. What the flaming freak are you doing here? Want to get yourself killed?" He waved a finger in Nightwing's face. "Listen up. The Bat did his thing for years, but someone finally took him out. How long do you think it'll be for you, tough guy? Six months? Eight?" The officer sniffed in disgust. "Better run back to New York and your teeny-tiny titans. Gotham's pro football—and high school varsity *ain't* gonna cut it." He advanced a step. "I was *at* the dam the other day. Think I want to watch another hero take a dive over the falls?" He spun on his heel. "Get out of this town, kid, before it kills you, too."

Nightwing bit his lip as he watched the cars drive off. He hadn't been expecting that reaction—and especially not from a cop.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. By daybreak, Nightwing estimated that there were another dozen or so gang members and mobsters in custody. To be honest, he'd lost count. Still, it should have been easier. He started his motorcycle with a mental sigh. It wasn't just that the criminals weren't as fearful. Despite his recent visits to the city, he still wasn't fully comfortable with the lay of post-Invasion Gotham. Of the landmarks he'd grown up with, some were gone, others had been

remodeled. And of course, there were new edifices as well. It was going to take time to learn the new map.

Dick frowned. Had he decided to stay, then? He needed to, for a little while, at least. It would take time to set Bruce's affairs in order, and he couldn't leave everything to Alfred. Besides, he might not have a job waiting for him in New York, running out of Green and Loring the way he'd done. He should call Rae tomorrow and see.

As for the Teen Titans (Dick smiled at the thought of how Kory would react to the police officer's slur earlier), that was another story. Gotham was less than an hour from Manhattan, traffic permitting. And if traffic didn't permit, there was always the bat-copter. Titans Tower had a heliport on the roof. Better yet, Wally could speed him there and back. He had a responsibility to the team. He couldn't—he wouldn't—leave them hanging. He'd check in with them tomorrow, too. Admittedly, he needed a few days to himself, but he had to let them know that he'd be back shortly.

With these thoughts uppermost in his mind, he returned to the cave.

Tim was on the uneven parallel bars, attempting to cast to a handstand. Dick watched for a few moments. The boy was overbalancing, but he knew enough to perform a half-twist to compensate. After a few moments, Tim dismounted, and turned a somersault as he hit the mat.

"Not bad," Dick said.

"For a beginner," Tim replied with a grimace. "I'll get it."

"If you're a beginner, I take it back. That was... decent." It was, too. It wasn't spectacular, but the kid had potential.

Dick forced a smile. "I guess we haven't been formally introduced yet. Hi. I'm Dick Grayson."

"Tim Drake."

Dick nodded. "I've heard about how you ended up here. I was meaning to come back sooner, but..."

"My dad used to say," Tim ventured, "you really only get to see all your relatives at weddings and funerals." He colored slightly. "Not that we're really related, I mean."

Silence.

Finally Dick said, "When I was a kid, I always wanted a younger brother." He placed a hand on Tim's shoulder. "I'm not trying to rush anything. I'm still trying to get a handle on what's going on, and the next little while isn't going to be easy for either of us. Just... if you need to talk, I'll make the time."

Tim didn't answer at first. Then, quietly, "Thanks."

He headed for the shower facilities at a brisk trot. Dick watched him go. Then he sat down at the computer to log a report. He needed a shower too, but he suspected that Tim needed his privacy more at the moment.

"I don't know, Kory," Tim overheard Dick say the following afternoon. "Everything's up in the air, now. The Coast Guard is going to scale down the scope of the search in another few hours. They're saying that at this point, they've about given up on the possibility of finding survivors."

Tim marveled at how he could sound so calm about it—until he drew closer and saw that Dick was fiercely gripping the back of the wooden desk chair.

"Well, Green and Loring is keeping my position open indefinitely—so that's one thing. I'm going to take a few days here to try to take care of things, and then I'll be back. No... here too. Kory, it's less than an hour away." He sighed. "Gotham's in bad shape, right now. I can't just turn my back."

He forced a smile. "I can handle it. I always do. Look, I'll see you next week, gorgeous, okay? Love you."

He hung up the phone.

“You’re going back to New York?” Tim asked, trying to sound neutral about it.

Dick shook his head. “Only part-time. I’ve got a responsibility to the team, but...” he hesitated. “Where’s Alfred?”

“He went down to the beach to watch the search efforts,” Tim reported.

Appearances had to be kept up, after all. Dick nodded. “Good. Because he’d probably get insulted if he overheard this, but I don’t think he’ll be able to manage if I go back now. He’s putting on an act for both of us—and it’s a great one—but he can’t keep it up forever.” He bit his lip. “I don’t want him to be alone when it really sinks in.” More to the point, Dick realized, *he* didn’t want to be alone when it really sank in. Nor did he want to show weakness in front of the team—Kory’s exhortations regarding emotional honesty notwithstanding.

Tim nodded. “How did it go last night?”

“Could’ve been better, could’ve been worse. Hopefully, tonight will be even better, though.”

He caught Tim starting to say something, then stopping. “What?”

Tim hesitated. “Just wondering if... well... if you’re going to be going down anyway for a workout... do you think you could give me a few pointers? I’m still having problems with that handstand.”

Dick’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t mind being asked to coach—as a matter of fact, it seemed like a good way to connect with Tim. But if he thought that he was going out in costume... Dick suppressed the thought. If Tim asked, then he could shoot the idea down. For now, it was just a handstand, not advanced capoeira.

“Sure. I’ve got some time right now, if you want.”

After the search was scaled back, the barrage of calls from reporters lessened. While the police continued to phone every day, the questions that they asked ran along the lines of whether Bruce had made any sizeable withdrawals or cashed in any significant investments prior to his disappearance. How had he reached the sailboat? (Dick had smiled to himself after that phone call. It had been Tim who had thought to park the Bentley near the pier where the sailboat had been moored. Bruce's love of solitude had helped out there—his designated parking spot was away from the main lot and not visible from the road. At least, nobody had come forward to say that the car hadn't been there on the day that Bruce had supposedly gone out.) It was obvious that the GCPD was more concerned with making sure that Dick and Alfred knew that they were doing their jobs than trying to pin a murder rap on either of them. That was a relief. The one thing that had concerned Dick had been that somewhere along the way, something would tip the cops off that there was a cover up underway. And if they had reason to believe that—then blame would immediately fall on Alfred and himself. Dick began to relax.

It was the only opportunity he had. Eight days after Dick's abrupt return to Gotham, Nightwing appeared with the rest of the Teen Titans on the six o'clock news, after having foiled a Carnelian Order plot to firebomb the mayor's office. He smiled, gave Bethany Snow one quip about the idiocy of fighting City Hall that she and her network could use to round off the segment, and then he was off to take a fast shower before Wally ran him back to Gotham.

He ate the supper that Alfred had kept waiting for him as he reviewed his notes from last night's patrol. A few minutes later he was on his 'cycle again and speeding for the downtown core.

Things settled into a routine of sorts. He woke up at the manor around mid-morning, dressed, picked up the breakfast-to-go that Alfred left for him and waited for Wally to run him into New York. (One day he'd forgotten the effects of high velocities on the human digestive system, and had breakfast first. Never again.) He worked roughly eight hours with the Teen Titans before Wally raced him back to Gotham. Then he got in a

quick workout, and dinner—eaten more often than not in the cave—before running out again on patrol. Most nights, he managed to fit in a longer workout on his return before he finally stumbled off to bed to start the cycle over again. Sure it was a grueling pace, but he knew he'd get used to it.

Dick did get used to it. Things didn't become any easier, though. He started to nod off in Titans briefings. His reflexes and timing began to suffer.

Matters came to a head one night when he was demonstrating a Pak salto to Tim. It was a simple enough move for him—release the high bar, back flip, and catch the low. Except he came out of the back flip too late, missed the low bar and ate mat—hard.

"Dick!" Tim bolted forward. "You okay?"

Dick thought about it for a moment. Then, he accepted Tim's outstretched hand and rose shakily to his feet. "Apart from my pride," he admitted ruefully. "Damn. I can't believe that just happened." He shook his head. "I never missed that move before."

Tim looked at him for a moment. Then, he pulled on a pair of boxing gloves and started a shadowboxing routine which, Dick noted, incorporated more than a few savate kicks. Dick had seen this routine a few times now. The boy had been improving steadily. "How was the patrol tonight?" Tim asked, stopping a kick just short of the cave wall.

Dick rubbed his elbow absently. He'd banged it in his tumble. "The same," he admitted. "I don't know how Bruce kept at it, night after night, but he did. And he had... something. I don't know." He eyed the uneven bars with determination, advanced until he was standing a few feet away from the apparatus and took a running jump to catch the low bar with his hands. He swung the rest of his body underneath, bent in half and brought his feet to the bar. Then he used his straight arms to pull himself up.

"They aren't afraid anymore," he said finally. He did a tap swing to the upper bar. "Bruce knew how to work the darkness. He became the crooks' worst nightmare—figuratively and literally. What Ra's did... woke them up." He swung higher, circling the bar in a straight body

position—a giant, as the move was called. “It’s like they opened their eyes and realized that Batman wasn’t some scary creature of the night—he was a guy in a suit.” He cast to handstand and held position for a moment. “A dead guy in a suit.” He bit his lip. Then he released the high bar and nailed the Pak salto.

“I need to make them afraid again,” he said. “And I don’t know how.” He turned a somersault in his dismount and landed solidly on both feet. “I’m missing something somewhere.” He sighed. “I just don’t know... ”

Tim broke off from his routine. “I do,” he said finally. “Know what you’re missing, I mean.”

Dick smiled mirthlessly. “Oh yeah? What?” *Besides Bruce, of course.*

The boy took a deep breath. “Me.” It was a relief to get the syllable out. As Dick opened his mouth to protest, Tim soldiered on. “What’s going on in Gotham is too big for any one person to take on right now. You need backup.”

“Even if that were true,” Dick countered, “that in no way means that I’m prepared to take on a twelve-year-old boy as a partner.”

“Thirteen, and how old were *you* when you started?”

He wasn’t being snide, Dick had to admit. Still, “That was different,” he said flatly. “I’d been in training almost from the time I could walk. Bruce may have had to teach me how to fight, but I already knew how to move. You’re—no offense, Tim, but you’re less qualified for the costume now than I was when I first came to the manor—and Bruce *still* put me through months of training.” He turned away. “And even so it’s not enough. I... I’m barely keeping a lid on things and every night it’s a little bit harder.” All at once, he felt so bone-weary he could barely stand. “Lately, I don’t know how close I am to just packing it in and letting Gotham climb into its hand-basket and head off.” He bit his lip. “Except, I owe it to Bruce to keep going.”

Tim hesitated. Then, he ran to the costume vault. He returned a moment later with a familiar cape and cowl—one that was still frayed where the turbines had caught it. “You’d better wear this, then.”

Dick's pulse was roaring in his ears. How dare Tim suggest such a thing? "Put it back, Tim. NOW!"

Tim stood his ground. "D-Dick, it's hard for me to say this to you, but since Bruce died, you've been running yourself into the ground. You need someone out there with you to take up some of the slack and..." He looked away, embarrassed. "...And maybe get you to slow down a little. I mean, when was the last time you've given yourself a chance to breathe in the last few weeks?"

He wasn't hearing this. "So you think *that* justifies letting me thrust an inexperienced kid directly into a bullet's path?"

"No, that's not it!"

Dick took a deep breath. "Sorry, Tim. No. We're not discussing this. No. And put the cape away, too," he added.

"You need it," Tim said. His voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Think about it. You want the criminals out there to think they can get away with murder? Dick... you said it yourself: if they think they can kill off the Batman, who are they going to go after next?"

Dick froze.

Sensing his advantage, Tim pressed on. "Wear the costume and you become a symbol. Just like Superman is a symbol... or...or Nightwing. Or the police officer who carries a badge." He ran his index finger reverently along the hem of the cape. "And this," he continued, "is more than just a symbol. It represents justice. When an officer falls, other officers take his—or her—place, because justice goes on. Like... like you are. And," he took another deep breath. His heart was thudding so loudly in his chest that he wondered that Dick could hear him at all. "And Gotham *needs* a Batman." He colored and added at a rush, "and Batman needs a Robin."

Tim's words resonated. For a moment, Dick nearly gave in. Then he shook his head. "What I do is dangerous."

"I know. All the more reason for you to have someone watching your back." He forced himself to meet Dick's eyes. "I'm not naïve, and I'm not stupid. I know what the risks are, and I'm not going to take unnecessary chances. But I want to help and... and I think I can." He seemed to wilt slightly, then, "That's it," he whispered. "I'm done."

Dick whirled around, and leaned heavily against the cave wall, his forehead pressed to the cold rough stone. He didn't need to make a decision now. He was tired, he was upset, he would probably think better after a good night's sleep—only there was no telling when he was actually going to get one. And sometimes, when all was said and done, a person had to go with his gut instinct.

He turned back to Tim. "I'm not denying that what you're saying makes a lot of sense. But at the end of the day, Tim, you just don't have the training for it."

Tim nodded miserably. He'd said his piece, but he couldn't deny the truth of Dick's statement.

Dick watched the expression on the boy's face shift from hope to resignation. Perhaps it was that very acceptance—proof that as much as Tim might question an order, he would also follow it—which decided him. "So," he said quietly, "we need to work on getting you that training."

He smiled as Tim's eyes widened.

"Here's what we'll do," he said. "For now, I'll delay my patrols by one hour. I'm setting that hour aside for coaching you. And I expect you to spend a good part of your free time practicing. If you're still awake when I get in from patrol, we'll have another session then, assuming we're both up for it." His voice turned thoughtful. "At some point soon, I'd like to have you train with the Titans, too," he added. "You'll probably pick up a few things from them that I can't teach you."

Tim pumped his head up and down enthusiastically at the thought.

"And Tim," Dick added, "your health and your grades come first. If either one slips, you're out of the suit. No questions, no complaints."

“No arguments,” Tim said quickly.

Dick held out his hand. Tim took it. And for the first time in almost a month, Dick’s shoulders felt just a bit lighter.

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