



Nightwing #28
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Twisted Logic, Bleeding Hearts

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I have to keep remembering that I asked for this. This was my idea, every step of the way. Nobody forced me to trespass on Bruce's property. Nobody dared me to go exploring and stumble on the cave. In fact, Alfred and Bruce did everything they could to get rid of me...

"Concentrate," Dick ordered, breaking into Tim's reverie. Tim blinked, then quickly raised his bo staff to block Dick's escrima thrust. The wood was slippery in his hands. He managed the block—barely—but the blow jarred him enough to knock him out of his combat stance. He tried to recover in time to counter the next blow, but the fire-hardened rattan stick slipped through his guard to clip his rib cage. He winced. Balancing the staff properly was a lot harder than it looked from watching martial arts movies or mytube video clips.

Dick stepped back and relaxed his grip on the sticks. "You okay?"

Tim rubbed his side gingerly. "I'm fine."

"Sure?"

He nodded quickly. "Yeah. Sure, I'm sure."

Dick tossed both escrima into the air, crossed his arms, and caught them easily. He uncrossed his arms again and slipped back into a fighting posture. "Again," he snapped.

Bruce didn't want me doing this. Sure, Alfred started teaching me the basics behind his back, but I knew better. I could've quit anytime. Instead, I jumped at the chance.

This time, the block felt like it should have. The escrima glanced off of the staff. Dick had been following a pattern with the thrusts: high, middle, low, middle, high, middle, low... which meant, Tim thought to himself, that as soon as the older youth judged that Tim had moved from comfort to complacency, he was sure to change the routine. Probably... now! Tim raised the staff to counter the high block he knew was coming and...

"Aaaagh!" The stick caught him a few inches below his left knee—exactly where Tim would have blocked it if he'd stuck to the drill. He fell to the mat, clutching his shin.

"Tim!" Dick was bending over him an instant later. "Are you alright? I thought for sure you'd stop that one."

Tim took a deep breath. "I'm fine. I thought you..." he shook his head. "Nothing."

Dick wasn't stupid. "This is a standard practice drill," he said quietly. "I'm trying to teach you how to do this, not trip you up." He held out a hand to help the youth to his feet. Tim got up, but his leg buckled as soon as he tried to put weight on it.

"I'm okay," Tim repeated as Dick started probing the injury. He tried not to flinch. *This would have to happen right after we'd exchanged the foam-padded weapons for standard ones. At least Dick wasn't using his ironwood sticks like he does on patrol!*

A moment later, the elder youth nodded. "You're going to have a bruise, and you'll probably be sore for a few days, but it's not serious." He shook his head and strode over to the medical bay. A moment later, he was peering into the small freezer with a frown. *Where IS it? It's supposed to be—hold on... I remember... I used it the other night. I took it upstairs and... and it's probably lying on my desk—at room temperature. Blast!*

"Alfred," he spoke into the intercom, "could you bring down a cold

compress, please?"

As Alfred acknowledged the request, Dick turned back to Tim. "Looks like combat practice is over for now. Let's go over some of Bruce's case notes. What can you tell me about Mad Hatter's standard MO?"

I have to keep remembering that I asked for this, Tim thought glumly. ALL of it.

"How does the training progress?" Alfred asked, as he placed a steaming mug of Bavarian chocolate coffee down in front of Dick.

Dick's eyebrows shot up. Alfred had always fixed him a hot chocolate when he was feeling down. This was the adult version. He rested his hand on the side of the mug, enjoying the warmth. He shook his head with a sad smile.

"I know I'm trying to fill Batman's shoes," he said softly, "but I didn't think I'd have to turn into Bruce to do it."

"Master Dick?"

After the first few days, Dick had given up on getting Alfred to drop the formal address. He sighed audibly. "He's just a kid, Alfred. The potential is there, but he's got a long way to go. And we should have stuck to padded weapons for another couple of weeks at least! I'm driving him a lot harder than I have to. Like..."

"Like Master Bruce did with you."

Dick took a sip of the coffee. His eyes widened as the hot liquid hit his taste buds. He swallowed appreciatively. "I'm pushing him past his limits."

"As Master Bruce did with you." Alfred smiled sadly. "I remember those years well, sir. Many were the nights that, once you were safely out of earshot, I would take him to task for pushing you toward unrealistic goals. I believe I referred to them as 'impossible' goals on more than one

occasion. However, Master Dick, you not only achieved those goals. You surpassed them.”

“Yeah, but Tim isn’t me.”

“Indeed, sir. But, as you yourself stated a moment ago, the potential is there.” He paused. “If I may venture a theory, sir, you are currently finding yourself torn between two desires: your desire to have a partner in your night time activities, and your desire to protect the lad until such time as you deem him ready to participate fully in the aforementioned activities. It’s hardly surprising that inasmuch as you desire to restrict the boy to the sidelines for now, you simultaneously anticipate the day that he attains the requisite skills for this crusade that you have inherited.”

Dick nodded slowly. “So, what do I do?” He asked. “How will I know whether he’s really ready, or whether I just can’t wait any longer?”

Alfred sighed. “You won’t, Master Dick. Until you decide that the time has come, and you see how he acts in the field, you won’t *know*. However, I suspect that as Master Tim’s training proceeds, you will recognize for yourself the most auspicious time to test him.”

Dick smiled. He bolted down the rest of the coffee, placed the mug noisily down on the table and got up. “I’d better get ready to patrol,” he said. “But thanks for the pep talk, Alfred.”

Alfred picked up the mug and carried it over to the sink. “Not at all, sir,” he replied to Dick’s retreating form. “Not at all.”

The two shabbily dressed thugs stalked into the alley toward a prone form. “Rent’s due!” one crowed. “No sleeping in our alley for free, now, Pops. Now pay up or...” He thwacked a baseball bat menacingly against the palm of his hand. His companion followed suit with a doubled-over length of chain.

The figure on the ground didn’t stir.

The men advanced. "Ground's sticky," the second thug remarked. "Hey, Pops, what'd'ja do? Drop a whole bottle of booze?"

The first shook his head. "It don't smell like booze, here," he said, as he wrinkled his nose.

The smell hit the second man an instant later. He retched. "Well it stinks of something else, then! Like Pops here couldn't make it to the bathroom," he gasped. He turned to his companion. "I'm not getting any closer. Let's just leave him for now."

In answer, the other man adjusted his grip on the baseball bat. "When he pays the rent, we leave him. Just hold your nose and come on!"

"But..."

"Now!"

They walked another few steps. The figure on the ground remained motionless.

"Um... Mal," the thug with the chain said, "he's dead."

Mal hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged. "So, we roll him over and see if he's got anything he don't need no more." He beckoned to his companion. "C'mon, help me." He put his hand down on the man's chest.

It sank several inches without meeting resistance. Cold moisture seeped upwards through the fabric. "What the f—?" He looked down with mounting horror at the depression around his hand, and the pooling liquid. Then he screamed.

"CHRIS! GET OUT OF HERE! NOW! RUN!"

The two men lurched madly out of the alley, rubber-soled shoes squelching through congealed blood and other malodorous material they did their best not to analyze.

Once out on the street, they looked at each other. "He... had no... his

heart was... my hand was where it... but it wasn't there..." Mal stuttered. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Chris doubled over and promptly was.

The cowled figure four stories above waited several moments until he was sure that the thugs were gone for good. Then Batman stepped casually off the roof, and used his voluminous cape to slow his descent. When he was less than a story high, he turned a triple somersault to land on his feet in the alley below.

The stench hit him almost at once. He quickly fished a breathing filter out of a compartment on his utility belt and held it to his nose and mouth. Then he knelt to examine the corpse.

Going by the level of rigor mortis, the congealed state of the blood, and the body temperature, Dick didn't believe that the man had been dead for more than a few hours. Without a forensic examination, he couldn't be more precise than that. Dick had a feeling that Gordon would fill him in on the gory details the next time the signal went up, though. *Gory. Great turn of phrase, there, Grayson.* Gingerly, he pulled the coat open and gasped at the gaping hole in the corpse's chest. The victim's heart had been neatly removed, but the lungs, and—from what he could recall from his high school biology classes—the other organs had been left untouched.

Batman's eyes narrowed. Why take the heart? Was it a message? Or some sort of grisly trophy... or... or... *oh no...*

A memory flashed into his mind. He'd been all of twelve years old, and furious that Bruce had ordered him to sit out patrol that night. He'd argued, he'd raged, he'd demanded—until finally, Bruce had sat him down in front of the computer, called up a file and ordered him to read it.

The contents had been enough to give him nightmares for a week.

He swallowed. It was the same MO. Cornelius Stirk was back in town.

He came home to find that Tim had moved one of the ergonomic arm-chairs away from its normal spot at the computer console and into the middle of the training region. He was sitting there, maneuvering his bo staff through the upper body motions of a pattern dance.

Dick's eyes flickered over to the target range. A dozen R-shaped throwing knives were clustered at the center of the target. Seven had landed in the white zone, while the remaining five were in the black. He forced a smile. "You've been busy."

Tim grinned wearily. "I was doing the regular drill until my leg started hurting again. I thought maybe it wouldn't feel as bad if I got my arms aching to keep it company," he said. "I think it worked. At least the pain's gone."

"Good," Dick said. "Keep alternating hot and cold compresses for the next day or so."

He turned to the computer and called up the necessary file. "By the way," he added, "it *is* easier in the suit. Especially with that particular cape. I think most of the underworld is convinced I'm Bruce back from the dead." *If only...* He'd insisted that Alfred only stitch up the deeper rents for ballast, while leaving the edges slashed and frayed. It added to the myths.

"How about the commissioner?"

Dick chuckled. "You wouldn't believe how relieved he was when Batman turned up! I just told him that I appreciated his sending the cape back with Nightwing." His expression turned thoughtful. "He didn't *seem* suspicious about it, from what I could see."

Tim brightened at that. "Cool. So, when do you think I can try going out again?" He asked. "This weekend?"

Dick was only half-listening. "Probably not," he said. "You've still got a ways to go."

"All the more reason I need the experience," Tim said. "I did okay the other night, didn't I?"

"That's not the point." The file was open now and just as horrific as Dick remembered. He'd hoped that in the intervening years, the words would have lost their power to shock him. They hadn't. *What kind of sick son of a...* He hesitated. Bruce had tried to shield him from this at first. It was only when Dick had insisted, that his mentor had shown him the file. Except that, instead of discussing the matter with him, Bruce had simply told him to read it and left to patrol. Dick had absorbed the file's contents on his own.

He paused, torn between the desire to protect his new partner from certain harsh realities, and the realization that Tim would discover these things for himself sooner rather than later. "It's too dangerous, right now," he said finally. "Put the staff down and come here. I need you to read this over."

Tim obeyed curiously. "Cornelius Stirk?" He asked. "Never heard of him."

"Yeah, he's a few years before your time," Dick nodded. "Keep reading."

"Okay," Tim complied. "Hmmm... so he's a metahuman. Low-level empathy," he said thoughtfully. "He can't actually *make* you feel something but he can *encourage* you to. It sounds a lot like hypnosis. Ok, that can be a disadvantage for us... but it doesn't explain why Bruce has him lumped in with the most dangerous-oh... my... G—"As Tim read the words on the monitor his expression shifted from concern to disgust to raw horror. "He..." Tim spoke finally. "He scares his victims to death, carves out their hearts and... and *eats* them?"

"Now you know why I want you to sit this one out," Dick said quietly. "You're not ready to face him yet. And Stirk has to be stopped fast." He sighed. "So it looks like I'm handling this one solo."

Tim gave a slight nod. He turned back to the dossier. His jaw dropped. "He scares them to death because he thinks that stress hormones... make the hearts *taste* better? I think I want to puke."

“So did the punks who found one of his victims tonight.” Dick’s voice was grim. “Read over the file. Learn it. Because I might need your help behind the scenes before all this is done. And I haven’t faced Stirk before,” he admitted. “That could cost me when I finally do meet up with him.” He forced a smile. “You said you wanted to watch my back. Do it. But do it from the cave.”

Tim allowed himself a brief answering smile, but it was obvious that his thoughts were still on the dossier.

“We got an ID on the victim,” Gordon told him the next night. “Matthew Stoa, aged 38, vanished from a group home upstate about six months ago. Appears he’d been living on the streets since then. We’ve booked him for disturbing the peace a few times but he was harmless. M.E. said he’d been dead about six hours when you found him.”

He snorted. “Now as for those two toughs who stumbled on the body first, they’ve already confessed to a spate of burglaries that took place in that area over the last couple of weeks. Seems they didn’t stop running until they met up with a couple of my people.”

Batman grunted. “Good.”

“Uh huh. Now,” his tone grew serious, “as for the sicko responsible for—”

“Stirk,” Batman interrupted.

Gordon nodded grimly. “It looks like it. The last I heard, he was in Vegas.” He shook his head. “Stoa was actually the third victim to turn up. We’d managed to keep a lid on the others. Looks like Stirk’s waiting about three or four days between kills.” He lifted his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. “And, while he seems to be concentrating on Robbinsville and Cape Carmine, there’s no pattern to where he’s leaving the remains. So far, we’ve found one body at a burned out warehouse and a second floating in the Sprang. Now, Stoa’s turned up in an alley.” He sniffed. “What we haven’t found out yet is how long he keeps

them alive. He's going after vagrants, recluses... people who won't be missed for awhile. For all we know, he's got dozens locked away somewhere." He stifled a shudder. "This city is full of forgotten people. Most of them would probably have to be gone for months before anyone would start to worry." He sighed. "And of course, the pressure is on to divert manpower toward solving Bristol break-ins and downtown drive-bys. The homeless?" He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"If they're going to die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population?"

Gordon looked up sharply. "Somehow, I never figured on hearing *you* misquote Dickens." There was a warning note in his voice. "It seems a bit out of character."

Dick started. Had Gordon guessed after all?

When the commissioner spoke again, though, his tone was all business once more. "Unfortunately, that is the attitude I've been running into." He turned away. "All of which means that this is one crime I can't make a priority, even though it ought to be. Of course, if you..."

His voice trailed off as he pivoted back and discovered that he was alone on the rooftop. He sighed. The disappearing act was something that he found himself disliking more and more as time went on.

The next few weeks seemed to fly by. Dividing his time between New York and Gotham was taking its toll. Luckily, the Titans had become enough of a team by now that they had learned to anticipate one another's actions and react accordingly. Had they still been looking to Dick to guide their every move, things could have gone very wrong, very fast.

Six more bodies bearing the earmarks of Stirk's handiwork surfaced. Each one was another reminder that Batman had left behind large boots to fill. He *had* to stop the man somehow. And he would have to do so without Robin's backup.

“Okay, Tim. Your turn.” Dick readied his escrima as the youth charged toward him, his staff raised in position for an overhead strike.

Dick crossed his sticks and blocked high. One escrima shot out to strike Tim’s hand and knock it clear of the staff. The second landed first on Tim’s lower back and then to the back of his knee. Tim fell forward. “Damn!”

“Alright?”

Tim got up. “Yeah, just my dignity. I thought I’d have more of an advantage with a long weapon.”

“You do,” Dick said shortly. “But you’re—”

“Lacking in experience,” Tim cut him off. “*Tell* me about it.” He got back into position. “Let’s try this again.”

This time, he struck low. Dick blocked, but Tim managed to evade the escrima before Dick could use it to wrest his grip from the staff. A rapid exchange of blows and blocks followed before Dick rushed forward.

Now Tim was at a disadvantage—the staff was too long to properly maneuver in close quarters. Instinct told him that he needed to back up out of Dick’s range. Something in him rebelled at giving up ground, even temporarily. He fought it down and retreated a few paces. Dick followed, pressing his advantage.

It was hard to move fast going backwards. Tim stumbled and Dick was on him like a shot. The youth dropped to the ground and, as Dick leaned over him, kicked both feet into the older boy’s chest.

Dick fell back, gasping, as Tim regained his feet. He recovered quickly, blocked the next blow from the staff, and the sparring resumed.

It was almost another three minutes—an eternity in combat—before Tim’s staff spun out of his hand and the youth found himself massaging his sore knuckles.

Dick grinned. "*Much* better. Especially that kick."

Tim smiled back, guardedly. "Not exactly tournament regulations, though."

"One thing you'll notice once you hit the streets: there aren't too many referees making sure you're keeping to the rules." He clapped Tim warmly on the shoulder. "You did fine."

"How are things going with Stirk?" Tim was instantly sorry he'd asked.

Dick's features seemed to droop. "They found another body down at Miller Pier," he admitted. "Underage hooker. According to Gordon, she'd been high on cocaine a few times in the past when they arrested her. Except that her body turned up clean. No drugs in her whatsoever."

Tim blinked. "You think he...?"

"Kept her long enough to get the stuff out of her system before he killed her?" Dick's voice was bitter. "Oh yeah. It usually takes about two days for that to happen. Cops don't know how long she was missing since nobody actually filed a report." His lip curled sarcastically. "But, the last time anyone remembered seeing her was well over two weeks ago." He turned away abruptly. "I should have caught him by now. Bruce would have."

"You don't know that for sure," Tim said. "You'll get him. I mean, he's bound to slip up soon, right?"

Dick shook his head. "Yeah. It'd just be nice if *I* could catch him because I was doing something right instead of waiting for *him* to do something wrong." He sighed. "I'm going to grab a quick shower and suit up. It'll be dark in an hour."

Two nights later, Tim was sitting in his room and trying to come up with a mnemonic to help him memorize the symptoms of Spanish fly poisoning. *Vomiting, collapse, skin irritations... hmmm... 'very clever... um... sparrows? Nah. Very clever scholars infer... Okay, that's actually not so bad.*

What's the next symptom? He looked at the text again and groaned. *How am I supposed to work in 'blister formation on the mucous membranes'?* Argh! *And ewww!*

Dick strode into the room without knocking. "Get dressed," he ordered as he tossed the Kevlar-Nomex suit and tights at Tim.

Tim caught them one-handed without thinking about it. He then lifted his other hand to pluck the mask and gloves out of mid-air.

Dick set the boots down just inside the room.

"You mean it?" Tim asked excitedly.

"Stirk's not the only problem in Gotham right now," Dick said tersely. "Word on the street is that a smuggling ring is trying to move a shipment of exotic animal parts into the country and using Gotham as their main port of entry. If my source is good, the *Zhen Heu* will be making a clandestine arrival at the Dixon Docks. I want you to intercept it and make sure the cargo gets turned over to the authorities."

Tim's eyes lit up. "Well, alright!"

"Don't get too carried away," Dick warned. "And remember, you're not out there alone." He handed Tim a small radio. "Keep that in your belt. The first frequency is me. The second is the manor. Alfred's usually listening. The third is the Teen Titans. You shouldn't need to contact them, but if it's an emergency do it. The fourth is police band. It's 'ears only' unless I say otherwise." He took a deep breath. "The fifth frequency will get you through to the Justice League. Don't use it." At Tim's double-take, Dick clarified. "If it's big enough for them to get involved, they'll be in Gotham before you know they need to be."

Tim nodded his comprehension. "What about you?"

"Robbinsville. Stirk's about due to dump another body."

But Dixon Docks was in the southwest corner of the city. And Robbinsville was nearly forty-five minutes northeast of it. "Shouldn't I be backing you..."

“Too dangerous. Show me how well you handle the smugglers, and I’ll think about it for next time.” He closed the door before Tim could protest further. He had enough doubts plaguing him already without the boy adding more fuel to the fire.

Batman saw the rapidly-spreading pool of dark liquid emerging from under the pile of fertilizer bags on the loading dock next to the warehouse. *The bags weren’t light*, he thought to himself. *Now how would Stirk have...?* As he drew closer, things became clearer. The sacks had been lying on an outdoor shelf some five feet over the dock. Someone had yanked free its supports, causing its cargo to slide off.

He clenched his teeth in fury. If the blood was still pooling, the body hadn’t been here long. Stirk might still be nearby. He was about to start searching when a thought hit him. *What if it isn’t Stirk, this time? What if this is something totally unrelated, and whoever’s under there is still alive and in need of medical help? Granted, the odds are slim... but I don’t exactly know where Stirk is right now. And if whoever is under here is still okay, they might not be by the time an ambulance gets here.* He fastened a breathing filter over his mouth and nose to protect him from the stench, raced up the loading ramp to the bags and started hefting them away.

Please be alive, whoever you are. It was both a plea and a prayer. He shoved away another sack, uncovering the victim’s torso. There was a gaping wound in the chest. Dick stifled a groan.

And then, he heard a heavy tread behind him, and his muscles seized up in a moment of blinding agony. He struggled to leap up, to twist away—anything! But his body wouldn’t obey. He slumped to the ground on jellied limbs, struggling to remain conscious as his thoughts seemed to freeze. It was like trying to think in fog... in syrup. He couldn’t move. He heard the footsteps again. Then he felt another jolt, and a third, and a fourth, and he couldn’t keep from moaning.

Someone took hold of his arms and crossed his wrists behind his back. He felt a quick pressure through his gloves as something encircled them once and was pulled tightly, securing him. He was rolled onto his side,

and a hand reached in front of his face and tore the breathing mask off.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time in these parts, Batman, yes, yes you have,” a voice chanted in a soft singsong. “I’d initially intended to stay concealed until you’d moved on, but it occurred to me that if you haven’t given up yet, you probably won’t, no, not you.”

Dick gasped as the taser sent another fifty thousand volts into him.

“So sorry to have to keep doing that, sir, but we can’t have you recovering before you’re properly packaged for transport, now, no we mustn’t,” the voice continued.

A band passed once about his knees, and then constricted. Plastic tie, from the feel of it, Dick thought numbly. He felt another one loop around his ankles.

“Normally, I’d have simply waited you out,” the voice said soothingly, “but then, I realized that for you to come out here night after night, even knowing, yes knowing what I can do...”

A figure scuttled forward to kneel in front of him, skinny and bald with eyes like saucers. Those eyes held his gaze, mesmerized him, and stripped him of any desire or ability to turn away. They seemed to swallow him up and squelch any and all thoughts.

Still keeping his focus on the prone vigilante, Cornelius Stirk continued, “...requires a great heart indeed. Yes, it does.” Leisurely, he unscrewed a small vial and spilled its liquid contents onto a cloth handkerchief. Then Stirk slapped the cloth down firmly on Batman’s face, as he asked with perverse gentleness, “How can I possibly resist the temptation?”

As the drug took effect and his eyelids closed, Dick felt himself being dragged to the edge of the loading ramp and rolled unceremoniously off the concrete walkway, into a large cart. He could smell rubber—the cart was probably lined with it—and blood and...

A tarp covered him completely as his world went dark.

Stopping the shipment had been easier than Tim had thought. He'd barely had to show himself. The smugglers hadn't been expecting trouble. A few flash-bang grenades and throwing knives, and most had been relieved to surrender to the Gotham Harbor patrol vessel that had swung by to investigate the sound-and-light show. Their contacts at the dock had tried to run for it—until a few blows of a bo staff had changed their mind.

Afterwards, Tim checked his watch in disbelief. The entire incident—from the boat's arrival at the pier to the arrest of the last suspect—had taken a grand total of twenty-seven minutes. Not even a half-hour, Tim thought to himself. But it had been a *long* twenty-seven minutes.

"Mission accomplished, Batman," he said into the communicator. "How about you?"

There was no answer.

"Robin to Batman, come in Batman."

No answer.

Keep calm, Tim told himself. If he's in the middle of a fight, he's not exactly going to tell whoever he's fighting with to hang on a minute so he can respond. Or he could be underground or some other place where the signal can't get through. There's no reason to panic.

Dick was fine. He could handle himself. He was Batman, after all.

Bruce was Batman. Dad was with the DEO. They could handle themselves, too. Until the one time they couldn't.

He was letting his imagination run away from him. Dick was fine. He might be on the roof of GCPD, right now. Maybe he was in the middle of a car chase and didn't want to have a conversation—not even if the phone was on hands-free.

Maybe he's in trouble.

And maybe Tim was panicking because he'd already lost too many people in too short a time and didn't want to add another name to the list. He ducked into a secluded area of the port before he punched the frequency for the manor.

"Alfred, this is Robin. Has Batman checked in? Okay, thanks. Yeah, I'm okay. I just can't raise him. Look, if he calls in, tell him I stopped the shipment and I'll meet him at the north end of the Sprang Bridge—unless he tells me differently." The bridge spanned the Sprang River between Robbinsville and Coventry. It was far enough from Stirk's known dumping grounds that Dick shouldn't feel the need to warn him off, yet close enough that he might be of some use if Dick did need his help.

"Thanks," he said, in response both to Alfred's congratulations on taking down the smugglers, and to his promise to relay the message. He switched off the communicator.

Nearly an hour later, he was at the rendezvous point. There was no sign of Batman. Now, what was he supposed to do?

Calling the manor would only worry Alfred. If Dick had checked in, then he would have called Tim by now. And Tim didn't think it was time to call in the Teen Titans quite yet. Cautiously, he headed into Robbinsville, keeping an eye out for the Batmobile.

He found it soon enough. After ascertaining that Batman was nowhere in sight, he took to the rooftops to look for suspicious activity—heck, *any* activity.

"Batman?" He whispered into the communicator again. He didn't expect an answer, and didn't receive one.

He moved more carefully now. Stirk was around. Batman had warned

him not to come here. He couldn't afford any mistakes.

He found the body, still half-buried under fertilizer bags. Someone had been trying to shift them, it seemed. Why would they have stopped? At first, he tried not to look at the victim's torso. Then he took a deep breath. The stench made him recoil and he fumbled for his breathing filter. As he slipped it on, he noticed an identical one lying on the ground nearby.

His heart began to pound as he stooped to pick it up. In the light of the nearby street lamp, he could see the faint outline of a bat insignia etched into the fabric. He examined the ground carefully.

He was kneeling down, and then something happened. He fell? No. There were signs of a struggle—he recognized them, now that he knew what to look for. Dick had to have been taken by surprise. Taken... where?

He dashed to the loading ramp. On the ground below, he could see wheel treads, but not from a car or a bike. It looked like a cart of some sort. There was a puddle on the ground that looked like blood. And going by the imprint of the wheels, the cart hadn't gone away empty. *Unless I'm misreading and the lighter trail is the fresher one. Maybe somebody was delivering something here.* He looked back at the corpse. *Or delivering someone!*

Great. So either someone had come with an empty cart and left with a full one, come with the body and left with Batman, or dropped off the body and gone. If he was reading the signs right, that somebody was Stirk. And he might have Dick. Was it time to call the Titans, now?

Tim considered the idea, then rejected it. Dick was Batman. He was probably freeing himself this very second. He'd be fine.

But Tim was going to follow the tire tracks, anyway. Just in case.

Consciousness returned to him slowly. The air was chill and damp, with a dankness to it that told Dick that he was probably underground. He

seemed to be lying on his back on something softer than the floor, but lumpy. He couldn't move. It wasn't just that he was stiff and sore and ached all over. He couldn't move his arms or legs. He tried again. This time, he succeeded in drawing his knees toward him, but he couldn't feel his arms at all. *Because you've been lying on them so long they've gone numb*, he realized. His legs were still bound together at knee and ankle. *Still? When did that happen? The last thing I remember was...*

“Bat, Bat, welcome to my flat
I'll give you a slice of bacon
And when I bake
Your heart I shall take
If I am not mistaken.”

Stirk repeated the rhyme several times as he busied himself at a decrepit-looking stove, chuckling all the while. He dipped a ladle into a large stockpot, blew on it, and took a sip of the liquid. He closed his eyes as a beatific smile spread across his face. “Excellent,” he whispered. “Simply excellent.”

He glanced at the mattress. “Just woke up, did you? Yes, you did.” He danced merrily over to his captive. “You must be cramping up like that,” he sighed. “Well, a bit of comfort won't affect the dish's seasonings, I don't think.”

Dick blinked. “Wh-what?” His voice was nearly a croak.

Stirk was already rolling him onto his side. “Better?” He asked, patting the vigilante's shoulder. “Oh, wait! Wait, I have the very thing, yes I do-oo!” He raced somewhere outside Dick's field of vision and returned a moment later with a battered cushion. He placed it gently under Dick's head. “Now how's that, mmm?”

When Batman didn't respond, his captor frowned. “Oh, don't get all huffy about this. It's not as though I like being this way, you understand. No I don't,” he snapped.

“Really?” Batman's frank disbelief spoke volumes.

“Yes. Really! If it weren’t for this... disease I suffer from, I’d *never* choose such a miserable diet. Who would? Do you think I don’t realize that it makes me an outcast from civil society? Oh yes, it does!” Stirk was angry now, and his words fell rapidly from his lips. “But the only treatment that alleviates my... condition... my... madness, yes, madness, *is* this diet.” His expression turned pleading. “I have no choice, Batman. I don’t enjoy my insanity, no I don’t. And to stave it off, I must keep to this... controversial fare.”

Wholly twisted reasoning, Dick thought. And yet, it actually made a perverse amount of sense, when filtered through the worldview of a madman. “And the way you torture your victims before you kill them?” He asked.

“Do you really think I *enjoy* the taste?” Stirk demanded. “At least this way, the meat is palatable.”

“Ever heard of ketchup?”

Stirk began to laugh softly. “Ketchup. How... refreshing. Oh, I could enjoy having you around,” he said, “yes I could.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I’m told that large rodents can make fine pets,” he said. “Rabbits, for example. And then one day, when they’ve been fed enough... well, they have another purpose, as you know.” His expression hardened. “But bats don’t stay long in captivity, no they don’t. They tend to escape, given half the chance. And,” his voice grew menacing, “we... *mustn’t*... have... THAT!”

He stooped down, brought his hands to Dick’s cheeks, and forced the vigilante’s eyes to meet his own.

“I think it’s time to start the seasoning process.”

To be continued!

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