



Nightwing #29
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"Heart of a Hero"

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He felt like he was drowning. His lungs screamed for air as his limbs spasmed. Drowning? No... he could smell something burning from afar. Chemicals in the air... this wasn't a kitchen fire nor a barbecue. But...

"Batman? Nightwing? Dick? You awake?"

He stirred sluggishly.

"Sorry about the restraints." Kid Flash was looking down at him. "You woke up a few times. It... you weren't... it was pretty bad."

That was when Dick realized that he was strapped into the bed. "What happened?" He asked.

Wally bit his lip. "You don't remember."

"No," Dick said. "The last thing I remember, I was in Gotham. What..."

He gasped as Wally moved away from the open window. The view from his bed looked out on New York's East River, and would have encompassed Titans Tower—except that the tower was a smoldering ruin. It looked, Dick reflected, the way Gotham had right after Steppenwolf's attack. He turned to Wally, stricken. "How?"

"Gordanians," Wally said bleakly. "Almost two weeks ago. They took us completely by surprise—grabbed Kory before we knew what was happening. I took off to Gotham to look for you so I don't know all of what happened next, but when we came back it was..." He turned away abruptly.

Dick did a double take. Was Wally... crying?

When the other Titan spoke again, his voice was steady. "I couldn't find you right away. Donna called on Roy for help. He came. I looked for you for two days before I found you in some condemned dump in East Gotham. You were in pretty bad shape. I thought maybe you should sit this one out, but you insist..." He broke off. "Anyway when we got back, it was all over. Apparently, a bunch of folks blamed the Titans for the alien invasion and figured, if they took us down, the ship might leave without blasting the rest of the city."

Wally let out a shuddering breath. "We saw Dagon pinned to a wall with a stake through his heart. Terra tried to hold off the mob by pulling up the earth under the Tower to keep them back, but they kept coming from all sides and they launched choppers. She... the strain... she couldn't take it." He shook his head. "We found her buried in the rubble. As for Raven..." Wally broke off for a moment, as though fumbling for words.

"You and I were so... when we saw Dagon and Terra... what happened to them... we were in shock. We never looked up or saw the ship firing on us. I remember, Raven grabbed us and teleported. Something went wrong when we were on the Astral plane. I heard—no—I *felt* her shriek. And there was this... pull... like something else had latched onto us. Suddenly, everything went ice-cold—and slow. As fast as I can move, it felt like that thing was pulling us back in the opposite direction. It was like trying to run through glue or chewing gum. And then... there was this shove... and you and I were back here... but Raven wasn't. And she hasn't been seen since.

Dick's heart began to pound. "Vic? Donna? Gar?"

He looked away. "Vic took a direct hit from the alien ship. His metal skin... melted but he didn't die." Wally's voice grew hoarse. "He was begging us to help him or put him out of his misery, he didn't care which. I brought what was left of him to his father. Dr. Stone thinks he can fix him."

"But Dr. Stone..." Dick let his voice trail off. After what he'd tried to do to Vic, Wally had taken him there?

“It was the only thing I could think of, damn it! You were losing it. After you found out they’d taken Gar and Donna too, I mean.”

Dick’s heart began to pound. “Wh-what?”

Wally nodded. “Roy sent them to rescue Kory. Donna wanted to wait for you to get back, because you’re usually good at coming up with a plan; but Roy said there was no time—that the ship might leave Earth’s orbit any second. So... they went. And the ship left with them onboard.” Wally closed his eyes. “If they’re alive, they’re probably being auctioned off somewhere on the other side of the galaxy.”

“Wally...” Dick cast about trying to find something to say.

“Well that’s what the Gordanians are, aren’t they? Slavers?” Wally was nearly shouting. “Damn it, Dick! We were depending on you! We needed you! We trusted you to get us out of this! My G-d, I ran back to Gotham with Kory’s screams echoing in my ears. She was calling for you! I...” He turned away. “Damn. Sorry, it’s just... we’re the only ones left.”

Dick inhaled slowly. “What happened to Roy?”

Wally drew a deep shuddering breath, walked over to the curtained screen that separated Dick’s bed from the rest of the room and jerked it back. Roy lay in the bed next to his, hooked up to so many machines and wires he seemed to be almost as much a construct as Vic.

“He couldn’t take it,” Wally said softly. “When the ship left, he... I found him in an alley in Greenwich Village. The docs think... he’s been clean for so long, the amount of smack he used to take was too strong for him to handle, at this point.”

He wasn’t hearing this. “Roy... OD’d?”

“They don’t know if he’ll ever wake up. They’ve been trying to reach Green Arrow for the last few days, but no dice.”

“I should have been here,” Dick said. “It might have made a difference.”

"It WOULD have made a difference," Wally snapped.

Dick's eyes narrowed. "Maybe," he said slowly. "If it had actually happened."

"What?"

"Wally... what hospital is this?"

"What?"

"Answer the question, Wally. Where am I?"

Silence.

Dick nodded. "That's what I thought." With grim determination, he rolled over, oblivious to the restraints on the bed as he passed through them. "I'm still in your basement, aren't I?" He demanded. "You're trying dig up my worst fears, Stirk... and you're not doing a bad job. Of course I'm afraid that some disaster is going to strike the people I care about the most when I'm not around to help fight. But you goofed." He laughed. "You're working blind, Cornelius. You don't know exactly what you're making me hallucinate; you're just trying to lock onto an emotional state and get me to fill in the blanks." *But there isn't a single hospital in New York that looks out on Titans' Tower. Once I realized that, I knew this couldn't be real.*

Kid Flash smiled an ear-splitting smile. He began to laugh, even as his physique dwindled, his hairline receded, and he reverted once more to a spindly caricature. He rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Excellent!" Stirk exclaimed. "I'd been hoping for a bit of resistance." He placed his index and middle fingers against Dick's carotid artery and nodded blissfully. "The longer the dish marinates, the sweeter the end result." He snapped his fingers. "Have to keep things moving properly, though, I think, yes."

He picked up a scalpel and sliced deftly through Batman's Kevlar sleeve, leaving one arm bare from shoulder to elbow. Still smiling and nodding,

Stirk leaped up and capered over to a kitchen cabinet, from which he extracted a long flat box.

Dick's eyes widened as he saw Stirk open the box and remove a wicked-looking syringe.

"Drugs?" He spat out in disgust.

Stirk made a rude noise. "Don't be silly," he scoffed. "They're far too crude, and most would only make you taste sour. No, my good sir," he said as he located a vein on Dick's arm and swabbed the area with an alcohol pad. He brought the syringe closer. "This is *tenderizer*."

Dick began to strain frantically at his bonds as Stirk watched approvingly. "Now, that's more like it," he said as he administered the injection. With almost clinical detachment, he checked Dick's pulse again, then ran his fingertips gently along the major artery. "Yes, you're coming along very nicely, indeed."

Robin stepped up on the curb and sighed. The muddy footprints and wheel treads continued for another few feet before the trail ended. He wouldn't be able to follow it on cement—although it was a safe bet that, if he was following Stirk, the man would be sticking to the side streets, away from the high-traffic areas. That was a plus—it meant that he still had a chance at tracking him. He turned his attention to the other prints—the ones that were leading away from the sidewalk and out to the shoreline. If Stirk's current hideout was anywhere other than the riverbank... then the soil from wherever he was based might be different from what was around here. Thoughtfully, Robin reached into his utility belt for his scanner. Peering through it, he was disappointed, but not altogether surprised when he failed to detect anything unusual on the infrared setting. When he switched to ultraviolet, however, things changed dramatically. The tracks were *glowing*.

Heart pounding, Tim used a set of tweezers to pick up a small sample of the soil. It was a good thing that WayneTech was on the cutting edge of miniaturization tools. The analyzer fit comfortably in the palm of his hand. It wasn't much bigger than a cell phone. He smiled. Sand, silt, and

organic material were to be expected in many soil extractions... but the mica was an added bonus. It showed up with dramatic effect under ultraviolet light.

When he looked at the rest of the muddy expanse that he'd just crossed, he saw a few glints here and there, but the mineral concentration seemed to be considerably less. *So the soil I'm analyzing isn't something he picked up along the shore—it's something he tracked here. And mica is commonly found in two places*, he realized with growing excitement. *Mines... and the places that process the ores!* He raised his eyes westward. The EPA had finally shut down the original Gotham Coal Works building almost a year ago, but the plant, just over the municipal boundary that separated Robbinsville from Cape Carmine, was still standing empty and abandoned. *Maybe it wasn't so empty after all*, Tim thought, as he headed off to follow up the only decent lead he had.

The police commissioner picked up on the second ring. "Gordon speaking," he said. As he heard the voice on the other end, he leaned forward unconsciously. "*Who is this?*"

Robin forced himself to sound more confident than he felt. "I think you heard me, Commissioner. I know where Cornelius Stirk is, and I think Batman's in trouble." He swallowed. Calling in the GCPD was a risk, but he thought it was better than contacting the Teen Titans. If they came in, and Dick didn't need help, it would be embarrassing. If the police showed up and Batman had the situation under control, Robin could always play it as though he'd wanted the cops on hand to take Stirk into custody post-haste.

"I, I think they're both at the old Coal Works. Could you send units out there right away?" To his horror, his voice shifted in the middle of his speech, causing the question to come out in a pre-teen squeak. *Well, THAT was sure to win Gordon's confidence...*

As though the commissioner had read his mind, the voice on the other end grew hard with suspicion. "Listen, 'Robin', *if that's who you are—at this moment*, there are five other known Arkham inmates currently at large. There's a four-car collision on the Aparo, a riot in Otisburg, and

some idiot in a dynamite vest standing in the middle of Monolith Square! I can't pull men away on a thousand-to-one shot. Meanwhile, if you *are* who you claim to be, then don't worry. I'm sure Batman will be fine."

There was a click as a receiver returned to its cradle, followed by a dial tone. Robin stared at the receiver in his own hand for a moment, and then replaced it on the hook and exited the phone booth. It looked like it really *was* up to him after all.

Dick kept his eyes closed tightly and fought to stay calm. *Whatever I see and hear, if it's not Stirk's lair, I'm hallucinating. None of this is real. I'm tied up in a basement in Gotham somewhere. I'm not in New York. I'm not watching Joker beat up Batgirl. I'm not dying of coral snake venom. This is all an illusion. I'm...*

"...A disgrace!" The voice startled him, shattered his concentration. His eyes snapped open. Batman was standing before him, looking down in disgust. "Look at yourself. You let yourself get blindsided like some amateur, got yourself captured, and you *still* haven't been able to work yourself loose." The cowed figure shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"Nice to see you, too." Dick grinned. "I knew you'd..."

"I trusted you to carry on for me after I was gone," Batman continued. "What was I thinking? I should have called in Barbara... I should have called in *Jason* before you!"

"Bruce!" He felt himself start to sweat. He knew he'd messed up royally in letting Stirk get the drop on him, but hearing the words tumbling from his mentor's lips shocked him.

"You actually believed that you could fill *my* shoes?" Batman scoffed. "It'll be a miracle if there's anything left of the city by year's end. You should just hand the keys over to the Joker, right now."

"No!" He protested. "I've been trying so hard, doing the best I can..."

“And it’s not good enough!”

“What more do you want from me?”

“More.”

The harsh words rained down upon him with near-physical force, giving full voice to the fears he’d been suppressing for weeks. *The fears he’d been...*

Under the cowl, his eyebrows drew together. “I *never* believed that I could fill your shoes,” he gritted. “Until you convinced me.” He smiled. Stirk was upping the ante, trying to dig deeper, find darker fears. But interwoven with his fear of failure was his determination to overcome that fear.

He smiled. “Sorry, Stirk. Nice try.”

The illusion fell away, as it had each previous time. Dick clenched his teeth as Stirk stooped forward again to check his pulse.

The little man patted his shoulder, and grinned with satisfaction as Dick tried to shift away. “It’s getting faster,” he teased. “Little by little, drib by drab, slowly but surely, your flavor is improving.” He placed his other hand over Dick’s heart and clucked approvingly. “How fortunate that nobody knows where you are,” he continued. “The longer the meat marinates, the sweeter the final result, after all.” His eyes opened very wide. “Why, we could be at this for days!”

Despite the chill air, under the cowl, Dick felt cold perspiration beading his forehead. There had to be a way out of this mess, but damned if he could see it.

The old Gotham Coal Works was farther away than Tim had thought. The general topography and East Gotham skyline contributed to the illusion that the building was only a block or so away. Tim figured two to three miles was more accurate. It would’ve taken him close to forty-five minutes on foot, he judged, as he fired off his grapnel. Luckily, he had

other means at his disposal. With the de-cel cables, he was clearing half a block with every swing.

He tried not to think about what would happen if he lost his grip. The rooftops here weren't really that high—two, three stories maximum—but they were high enough. He glanced down without thinking, and gulped as he clutched the line more tightly.

He took a deep breath and jumped off the next rooftop. Momentum carried him forward, until his feet landed surely on a second-story ledge. He breathed his relief. The cave wasn't the best place to practice this sort of skill, although he and Dick had been practicing on the trapeze. Unlike combat training, the art of swinging from rooftop to rooftop was truly best learned *by* swinging from rooftop to rooftop.

He took another breath, retracted his jumpline, and fired it off again. He gave it an experimental tug to make sure that it was secure, then leaped once more—this time keeping his eye on his destination, rather than the pavement.

This was it. He was standing on the south side of Sable Street, directly across from the Coal Works. He lowered himself carefully to the pavement, and crossed over. He was now in Cape Carmine. This was the place. He was almost one hundred per cent sure. There was just one more test to run.

He took out the tweezers again, stooped to the base of the chain-link fence and picked up a soil sample. When he compared the analysis report to the one he'd taken at the docks, he found a correlation of ninety-nine-point-one per cent. Tim closed his eyes. He'd been right.

Robin squared his shoulders and set about finding a way onto the grounds. The fence was topped by barbed wire. He could probably still get over it if he had to, but there had to be an easier path. He doubted that Stirk was doing much climbing. Sure enough, on the far side of the lot, away from the eyes of most passers-by, someone had taken wire-cutters to the fence and removed an expanse several feet wide. The ground was broken up by footprints and wheel treads. That clinched it. Stirk was here... and Batman was in trouble... and Robin was out of his league. It was time to bring in the cavalry.

He pulled out his communicator to signal the Titans.

Static.

Disbelieving, he tried the frequency again.

Static.

He tried the manor.

Static.

Either he was in a dead zone, or his battery needed a recharge, but it looked like he *was* the cavalry.

Yep. Batman was really in trouble now.

"But Dad, I heard them say..."

"Dickie, I checked the ropes before the show started. They're fine."

"No. You gotta check 'em again!"

"Dick. Relax. You've been doing this act for months, there's no reason to be nervous."

The adult Dick Grayson shuddered. "This is an illusion," he said aloud. "It isn't real. It happened years ago and I don't need to watch it again."

Despite himself, he cringed as he felt the dry, papery fingertips at his throat once more.

"You *fear* to watch it again," Stirk chuckled. "You fear that this will be the moment when your resistance crumbles, when you can no longer control your panic, when your heart will soften and sweeten in its own juices! Eh? Eh?" He poked Dick just below his ribcage, smiling congenially all the time. "It's a rational fear, yes it is," he nodded, as he patted

Dick's throat possessively. "Those nearly always prove the most effective. Given their plausibility, there's no need for me to expend any great effort to induce them. I merely encourage you to dwell upon them."

Stirk squatted down and locked eyes with Batman again. "You do realize that it's only a matter of time before you succumb," he said.

His voice was soothingly hypnotic. Dick shook his head vigorously, as though he could stop the words from taking hold.

"I'm not a cruel man," he remonstrated. "Simply a determined one. It genuinely pains me to see you struggle so hard, knowing the futility of it. I could almost forgo the proper flavoring and put you out of your misery." He rose up and brushed himself off. "Almost." He smiled. "Your reaction to the tenderizer was better than I'd hoped," he said. "And since you may reach your peak seasoning before too long, I think I'd best administer a second dose now—before it's too late."

So saying, he skipped over to the counter to pick up another needle. He walked back toward the mattress, waving the instrument mockingly before his captive.

A golden blur flew by, embedding itself in the syringe's plastic tube with a loud pop. Stirk stared stupidly at the R-shaped shuriken that now protruded from the needle. The force of the impact had half-shorn away the upper third of the syringe's hollow tube.

Batman groaned as his heart began to pound faster. What was Tim doing here? How had he found the place? He'd told the boy that Stirk wasn't in his league—why...? This *had* to be another illusion... He hoped.

Tim didn't have a real plan of action beyond keeping the needle away from Batman's arm, any way he could. Before he'd even registered that his first knife had accomplished that, Robin had flung another five blades and was fumbling for more.

One sliced Stirk's cheek as it skimmed past. The villain barely seemed aware of it. Three more slashed his loose-fitting clothing.

The fifth embedded itself in the mattress, barely an inch from where Batman lay. Robin flinched. That was a little too close. He had to move the action away from that part of the room, or Batman might be in as much danger from his junior partner as he was from Stirk.

Luckily, Stirk seemed only too happy to oblige. He darted toward a small cabinet set into the far wall and pulled out something that looked like a cross between a gun and a hair dryer. Electricity crackled across the muzzle.

Robin swallowed. The Kevlar wasn't going to afford much protection from that thing. He pulled out his collapsible bo staff and assumed the starting position.

He's not going to charge me. He doesn't have to. He just has to pull that trigger. Tim mentally reviewed what he knew about the weapon. It fired two darts into the skin and ran a current. A conductive suit could counter it—but, of course, he wasn't wearing one of those. Statistically speaking, an insulated suit was more useful to the crusade. *Crusade... mission... When did I start thinking about what I'm doing in those terms?* A bulletproof vest sometimes worked too, but they were stiff, cumbersome, and hard to maneuver with. It was for that reason that the costumes were made of a lighter, more flexible Kevlar weave. They worked almost as well as the heavier body armor, but the material had a few disadvantages—reduced invulnerability to tasers, darts, and other sharp projectiles being among them.

Stirk fired as Robin dove. The newest boy wonder felt a sharp sting as one dart pierced his arm. He sliced at the wire with the shuriken in his hand, before he processed that the other dart had missed its target. He rolled quickly to his feet and leaped up again.

Stirk fell back with a smile. "Winged you, did I, Little Bird?" he chanted. "Yes, I did."

Robin returned his staff to his belt and fumbled for more blades. Stirk *would* have to get his throwing arm. Terrific. *Don't look at him. Don't listen to him. Don't let him have access to a working taser. And above all, given who this is... DON'T PANIC.*

“Robin! Get out of here! Now!”

He didn't turn around. “Not alone,” he said. He'd lost too many people too recently to even consider it.

“That's an order!”

“Fine. You can fire me when we're out of this.”

A low laugh interrupted them. “What's this? Batman... do you *fear* what I might be planning for your young friend?” Stirk's eyes crinkled at the corners. “Yes... yes, you do. You're afraid that I might do to him... what I'm preparing to do to you. How... delicious.”

Robin flung another shuriken, but it fell short of its mark. He readied the staff again.

Stirk's irises seemed to expand as his pupils shrank to tiny points of black against the pale gray. “Come to me, boy,” he wheedled. “You want to keep me away from your partner, don't you? Come stop me.”

He raised the staff as though it could protect him from the gentle words. “No.”

“No? You don't want to stop me?”

Robin started to sweat. “Yes, I do.”

“Then come,” Stirk invited. “Try.”

He wanted to. He wanted to take the creep down fast and hard. Stirk wasn't much bigger than he was, and the man was built on the scrawny side. Physically, Tim knew he could take him. But his feet seemed to be rooted to the floor. *He eats people. He carves out their hearts and he eats them. What kind of sick monster...*

Stirk advanced a few steps. “I don't like people raising weapons to me in my own home. Very impolite. Why not drop the stick, and we can have... tea?”

"DON'T YOU DARE!"

He'd been about to relax his grip, but Batman's angry shout galvanized him. Robin planted the staff and leaped, vaulting high into the air, to land several feet away from Stirk.

"Nice trick," he snarled. "Let's try something else."

Stirk smiled. "As you like." To Robin's surprise, he lunged forward. "Won't you walk into my parlor?" He asked as he flung a handful of powder in the youth's face.

Robin doubled over, wheezing and coughing.

Stirk quickly wrested the staff away from him, then pressed a ready cloth over the boy's nose and mouth.

Robin struggled for a moment, and then went limp.

Stirk smiled and turned his attention back to the mattress. "He's a feisty one, isn't he?" He asked conversationally. "I'll need to take more of the fight out of him, before I can properly prime him—but fortunately, I know just the place for that. So, if you'll excuse me for a moment or three, I'll be back in a jiffy to give you your injection." He patted Batman's cheek and nodded approvingly as the vigilante flinched. "That's right, let the panic rise slowly, steadily, that's the way to intensify your piquancy." The pat became a pinch. "It's always helpful when the meal is this cooperative, yes it is." He slapped Batman's shoulder jovially. "Now, I'm off to put this one on ice, and then we'll continue for a bit. I think, once the boy has been rendered properly tractable and appreciative of his circumstances, I'll bring him back here so that you can witness my preparations first hand, yes, I think I shall." He beamed and poked the vigilante in the ribs again. "And, of course, once he sees what I've done to you, his imagination will almost certainly improve his *own* flavor... yes, it will." The smile turned into a leer. "Why, I think you'll both season each other, won't you?"

Another poke, another pat, and Stirk ambled off to half-carry, half drag the unconscious teen out of the room.

Dick swallowed. Then he recommenced rubbing the plastic tie binding his hands against the razor-sharp shuriken that was still embedded in the mattress. He had to get free before Stirk came back.

The first thing Tim became aware of when he came to was a splitting headache. He leaned forward as best he could in his cramped condition and began to retch. Once his nausea passed, he opened his eyes to try to take in his surroundings. He was sitting in pitch-blackness.

His first coherent thought was that he might be blindfolded, however when he pressed his face to the wall several inches to his left, he discovered that he wasn't. His hands were tied behind his back, and his ankles similarly constrained.

"Hello?"

There was no echo. The space was too small for that. He leaned to his right and met wall almost immediately. He leaned forward again. His head tapped solid wood about eight inches later. Terrific. He slumped back down. He should've run, should've found a payphone and called Gordon again. Or just called 911 and said Stirk was at the coal works and hung up. The cops had to investigate all emergency calls, didn't they?

Instead, he was trapped in the dark somewhere, and Batman was at Stirk's mercy, and when Stirk was finished with Batman...

Tim swallowed. Stirk was going to come back for *him*. And, if he could take out Batman, Robin wasn't exactly going to be a challenge for the deranged cannibal. He began to sweat.

Stop right now. Keep thinking along those lines and you're doing Stirk's work for him! It's okay to be scared, but you can't let it paralyze you. Even if you're frightened, you can still act!

He had to get free. Sitting on the floor like this, he was bound to cramp up if he hadn't already, Tim realized. He struggled to rise to his feet by bracing his back against the wall and pushing himself up. Something

scraped painfully past his arm as he did. It wasn't sharp, but it was protruding from the wall slightly above waist-height. Doorknob, he realized. Stirk must have stuck him in a closet.

Tim thought for a moment. Then he slid back down to the floor and concentrated on maneuvering his bound hands so that they would be in front of him. Once he did that, he'd be able to access the shears in his utility belt. And, once his hands were free, and he could get the flashlight out, he'd be able to see whether his lock-picks would be of any use to him in here...

"You really are afraid for the child, aren't you?" Stirk called as he entered the room. "How... tenderhearted of you, Batman. And if such was the result of one injection..." He rubbed his hands gleefully together. "...I can't *wait* for the effects of the next one! I... eh?"

Stirk's eyes grew wide as they took in the empty mattress and snipped ties lying on the floor. "Gone?" He asked aloud. "Somehow, I don't believe you could have gotten far, no I don't." He frowned. "You're probably... HERE!" He said triumphantly, slamming the door against the wall. It encountered no resistance. "No? Well, you're not under the mattress... perhaps you're behind..." He dove toward the kitchen facilities. "...The counter!" The floor on the other side was bare. "Not there, either?" Stirk scratched his chin. "Well, I know you won't leave without the dessert course, so you must be here somewhere!" He yanked open a broom closet. "Not there, either. Hmm... well, perhaps you're..."

A muscular shoulder rammed full-force into his upper back, propelling him into the closet.

"Behind you," Batman snapped. Before Stirk could react, he had the door slammed shut and his full weight pressed against it. A few seconds later, he felt a pressure on the heavy piece of wood behind him. Stirk was trying to shove the door open.

"I don't think so, Cornelius," he snarled. Then, abruptly, he laughed. "You hit the nail on the head, finally," he admitted. "My biggest fear was that you were about to murder my partner, while all I could do was

watch. But, Stirk, if there was one thing that could force me to act, even through the fear and despair, and self-doubt, it was the knowledge that if I didn't, you were going to kill him." His own life, if push came to shove, was expendable—and he was ready, should the situation arise, to give it up for someone else. Faced with Stirk's constant barrage of emotional triggers, Dick *had* come close to despair, and closer to surrender. But in threatening Robin, Stirk had given Batman the impetus he needed both to withstand Stirk's head games, and to bolster that resistance with every fiber of his being.

And it had worked. He was loose, and Stirk was under control. Batman breathed a sigh of relief. Then he used his teeth to remove his gloves and began massaging his wrists as best he could. His fingers were still almost completely numb at the moment, but he knew they'd soon feel as though they were on fire as his circulation was restored.

The bindings on his ankles yielded easily to his shears. Robin passed the flashlight's beam over the closet door. He grimaced. From the way the screws were aligned, there were two deadbolt locks securing the door. He had a set of lock picks in the suit. He could work on the locks from the inside, but it was going to take time. Time that Batman might not have. Robin swallowed and set to work.

It was frustrating work. Robin kept struggling to keep the light steady with one hand and turn the screwdriver with the other, all the while praying that the flashlight wouldn't die on him. He was also trying to ignore the pain in his arm where the taser barb was buried. Finally, after what felt like hours, he heard one bolt slide back. Tim breathed a sigh of relief. Then he grimaced. The second deadbolt was about two inches over his head. That was going to make things tougher. If he'd had some running room, he might have tried kicking the door down. But, of course, he didn't have that room. And the door was far too solid for him to consider kicking down without it.

He froze as he heard footsteps approaching the closet. Damn, not now! He dropped the lock pick but kept the flashlight. Maybe he could buy

himself a few seconds by shining it in Stirk's eyes.

The footsteps stopped. Robin swallowed. It was going to be hard enough fighting in these close quarters without losing the element of surprise.

"Hey, Hansel," a familiar voice called. "Is that you?"

"Bat..." Tim hesitated, then smiled. "Um... Gretel?"

There was a sigh on the other side of the door, followed by a rueful chuckle. "I deserved that. Sit tight—it's easier to get one of those things open from this end." There was a muffled curse. "Sorry. Hands are still a little numb. Hang on another—there!" A click, a rattle, and the second bolt retracted. The knob turned, the door opened, and Batman was looking in at him.

"Don't worry about the witch. The cops showed up and hauled him off." He smiled wearily. "It's over. For now, anyway."

Tim exhaled with relief.

"Interesting how they knew to come here," Batman said fixing Robin with a steady stare.

Tim shifted. "I... called them before I came. I didn't think Gordon believed me..."

"You called Gordon?"

Tim bit his lip, shrugged his shoulders, and nodded.

"Good thinking."

Robin glanced up, startled. Batman was actually grinning.

"If things had turned out differently and I hadn't gotten loose, GCPD still would have had their man," he continued. His voice grew stern. "Now, about your behavior tonight."

Tim swallowed. "You didn't answer your signal. I tried to call the Titans

but—”

“You disobeyed a direct order coming after me.”

“I...” He swallowed. Batman was right. “I know.” And he’d do it again, should the situation arise.

“Nice work.”

Robin blinked. “But... I got captured.”

“So did I. Remember?” Batman shook his head, but he was still smiling. “Stirk caught me tonight because I went down to the docks alone, and didn’t have someone watching my back. And if you hadn’t made it here when you did, I don’t know if I would have been able to get free.” He clapped Tim once on the shoulder. “Thanks... partner.”

Slowly, guardedly, Robin smiled back. “Anytime.”

“Ready to head home?”

“You know it.”

Batman extended his arm in an ‘after you’ gesture.

“By the way,” he asked as they walked down the corridor, “how *did* you find me?”

Tim cocked his head and smiled crookedly at his mentor. “Would you believe, the witch left a trail of gingerbread?”

Epilogue

He hadn’t spent much time in Bruce’s study since he’d returned to Gotham. He’d walked through it on his way into the cave, but never lingered. Dick looked around now, letting his gaze rest on the knick-knacks on the fireplace mantel, the rubber tree in the corner, the mahogany desk with its assortment of paperweights, pens and...

Dick picked up the framed eight-by-ten photograph from its customary spot next to the reading lamp. He could remember Lucius Fox snapping the picture of him and Bruce years ago, on the day that his seventh grade science fair project had placed first in the junior high division. Bruce had his arm around Dick's shoulders, while Dick held up his first prize ribbon. It was one of the few times that Dick could remember Bruce not just smiling his 'polite society' smile, but grinning from ear to ear. Afterwards, he could remember Bruce telling him that there was no limit to what he'd accomplish in life, so long as he didn't lose faith in himself.

He bit his lip, remembering Bruce's final taped message to him. Dick hadn't wanted to believe that he could be Batman—that he could truly do justice to the cape and cowl. Bruce's last words hadn't convinced him. Tim's speech hadn't convinced him. But several nights ago, when he'd finally subdued Stirk, something had changed within his mindset. Maybe Bruce would have done things differently, but that was all right. Dick wasn't Bruce. But that night... he *had* been Batman.

Dick reverently touched the glass covering the photograph. "You win," he said quietly. "I guess I can do this after all. But I suppose you don't mind if I don't always do things exactly the way you would have?" His lips twitched. "I really hope that was a 'yes'... but I guess it doesn't really matter after all. I mean, if you gave me the suit, then you have to trust me with it." He broke off. "What I mean is... *I* have to trust me with it. And I think I'm starting to." He replaced the picture on the desk. "And, I think you were right: I'm going to do this just fine." His eyes started to blur. "I just wish you could be here to see it."

He flicked off the light switch before he closed the door.

The End

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