



Nightwing #42
Imari

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Gotham Central:

James Gordon was a cop, and because of this, he did what automatically came to him to do when facing an enemy: he reached for his gun. He let out a pained grunt as Constantine Drakon neatly sliced his arm with a blade he pulled from nowhere— clutching his right arm and cradling it to his chest, he glared at his attacker.

“My blood?” He spat. “I’m not the one who put you in a coma, Drakon. But you know what? If I had the chance—” He barely managed to stifle a scream as Drakon cut his arm again. How did he move so fast?

“Batman will have his turn,” Drakon said placidly, balancing the bloodied blade on the tip of his finger. “But for now, Commissioner... it’s yours.”

Nightwing

Issue Forty-one: **The Return**

Part Three (Of Seven): *“The Ties That Bind Us”*

Written by Imari Jade, with Charlie Wilkins and Alex Vasquez

Cover by Paul Johnson

Edited by Alex Vasquez, Charlie Wilkins and Imari Jade

Sarah Essen grimly checked the bodies that littered the streets. She and her men had seen plenty of corpses so far, but no survivors. Gotham was a warzone. “Damn,” she mumbled to herself, checking pulses and finding nothing but the dead.

A ways off, she could see Batman standing over someone on the ground, but she couldn’t make out who the other person was. She picked her way through the rubble and debris, over scores of bodies, and was stepping over one when she felt something grab her ankle. Essen whirled around, but was yanked down, landing hard on the ground, awkwardly colliding with a dead gangster. Jerking her leg hard, she pointed her gun down by her side, looking to see what had brought her down.

“Help... me...” A bloodied man groaned. “Oh... hel... *help*...”

Essen lowered her gun and pried the man's fingers from their vise-like grip around her boot, then looked around for someone to come help. "Officer Parker!" She shouted, and on cue, a uniform made a bee-line for her.

"Yes, Deputy Co... oh..." His face turned an interesting shade of green as he saw the mess the man was in, and he would have vomited if he had eaten today. "Guhh... "

"Get him to a medic, Parker," she ordered, getting to her feet. The officer moved to comply, and she took a moment to look around. Batman was still where she'd seen him moments ago, and she continued to head in that direction. "Found something, Batman?"

The Caped Crusader turned his head slightly her way, and then looked back down. She could hear him talking now, and she recognised the prone form that was lying at his feet. "Orpheus...! Is he... ?"

"He's alive," Batman replied. "But barely. He needs medical attention."

"I'll call a medic," Essen said, grabbing the radio from her hip.

"Don't bother," Batman muttered. "I've taken care of it."

"What are you—?" She stopped as she became aware of a humming sound. "Oh."

The Batplane soared overhead, and Batman busied himself with helping Orpheus board when it reached street level. He slid into the pilots' seat and glanced up, noticing the Batsignal was still shining.

"Damn," he mumbled, glancing at Orpheus. The man groaned, Dick gave one last look at the Signal, and then headed straight for the Batcave.

The Narrows:

'Jason,' she said, her face hanging off her skull by strands of ragged muscle, 'it's time.'

"—Shut up!" Jason snapped, as he was thrown across the room, and collided hard with a wall, causing him to fall to the floor with a loud clatter. He looked up with a worn expression, and spat the blood that had been collecting in his mouth onto the dust covered floor below. He climbed to his feet, and looked at his attackers. "I am not having a good day," snarled Jason Todd, as he picked up an iron rod from the warehouse floor. "So I'm going to ask you nicely, before I break your faces, stand down. *Now.*"

He'd tried to block it out. He'd tried so hard to block out the things that haunted him in the night, but it was an uphill struggle. The girl whispered to him incessantly, drawing him closer and closer to the brink, and she was distr—

"Hhhfff!" The punch was thrown hard, and he slammed the iron bar down on the man's elbow, shattering the joint. He jammed his hand against his attacker's chest, and his eyes opened wide. "You're dead."

They were the silent, pale monsters that he'd faced earlier on in the night— the same gaunt expressions, the same bloodied knuckles and faces. It was like they didn't care that he was chasing them down into the night, these night-zombies, these shadow-lurkers. Almost as if it was some kind of "... trap. Oh, £\$%^."

'*Run,*' whispered the girl, again and again.

"Batman," said the man that appeared from the shadows. The undead creatures receded away, leaving the newcomer face to face with the battered Jason Todd. He was tall, with piercing eyes that shifted colour from green to black as he stepped forward. Bone-white hair drifted slowly behind his back, and he wore the black-and-white of a dead man. "You have caused me too much trouble this night."

'... *It's time.*'

"Yeah?" Jason took three batarangs from his belt, and threw them hard, only for the weapons to be caught with apparent ease by the stranger. "And I can tell you're going to cause me some trouble. You're under arrest."

"You are in no position to give orders." The man crushed the batarangs, shattering the metal and allowing the shards to fall to the floor. "I think I will be giving orders. My name is the Prince of Lies. The last face you shall see before you die."

Jason simply smiled. "I could not be that unlucky, you ugly sonofa—!!"

Wayne Manor:

"No... " Talia winced as she stood up, and started to follow after the Wrath.

"Wait," Alfred said from behind her. She looked back and saw him kneeling beside Mickey Fynn, trying his best to stop the bleeding. Talia went on anyway, stepping into the darkened hallway the Wrath had disappeared into. That face... that feeling of helplessness she felt... she shuddered, then turned back to Alfred. He saw her face and knew.

"Call an ambulance," was all he said to her as he checked Fynn. She went into the kitchen quietly to do as he'd commanded, and when she came back, Alfred nodded at her. "Master Richard just radioed in and will consult with you when he arrives. Go down to the Cave. I shall handle the proper authorities."

The Narrows:

"They are all so scared of you, are they not? But I can tell you are nothing, Batman. I can hear your mind whispering in self doubt... I can hear the voices convalesce and collide. You are weak."

Jason grunted, backing away slowly. He began to tick things off in his head, making a list of abilities this freak of nature had. Enhanced strength. Enhanced speed. Enhanced healing— invulnerability? He'd been able to shatter a batarang with ease, and his hand was no worse for wear. What else? Low level telepathy?

The crimson mouthed wolf padded behind the Prince of Lies, and Jason

tried to shut the image out of his head. Why was he haunted by this thing? Why was that girl, that poor, bleeding girl, haunting his waking and sleeping moments?

"You suffer. I can help put you out of your pain." The Prince of Lies arched his neck back to where the wolf would have been, and smiled. "Give yourself to me." The Prince's mouth began to grind open. Flesh that should have torn stretched— his throat cracked as it widened.

"Holy £\$%^," was all Jason managed to whisper before the swarm of darkness shot out from the jaws of the Prince.

Gotham Central:

Gordon assessed the situation he found himself in. He knew he couldn't reach his gun— he'd feel Drakon's cold steel blade before he could reach the holster. He could do something crazy, something Drakon would never expect... maybe rush him? He tossed that idea out the window at once. With a massive amount of luck, Gordon would be able to take *one* step before Drakon neatly slit his throat.

Gordon mentally shrugged. He knew the case-file from Drakon's spree a decade ago. Drakon would kill him, after putting him through the most extreme torture imaginable. Drakon wanted ten years' worth of blood, but not all at once— no, a drop at a time would be oh so much more satisfying.

Gordon wasn't interested in giving him that satisfaction.

Mentally preparing himself for the pain he knew would follow, he steeled himself.

But before he could throw himself forward, something caught his eye— behind Drakon, he saw a shadow.

It's about time you got here.

A piece of metal flashed as it passed through the beam of the Batsignal's light before landing in Drakon's shoulder.

"GAH!" Drakon whirled around to face his attacker, but found none—
"What..?!"

Gordon took advantage of the distraction and stumbled behind the immense spotlight. He slowly slid against it to the ground, squeezing his arm. Ripping off part of his shirt, he wrapped the shreds tightly around his arm to stop the bleeding.

"It'll do." Gripping his gun, he peered around the spotlight—
"Yaaugh...!" He screamed as something sharp cut his back. He fell to the ground, his revolver falling from his grip. Before he could grab it again, he was kicked into the shadows. Rolling over, he stared up into Drakon's face as the blade came down.

The Cave:

Batman laid Orpheus on the table next to where Alfred had the medical supplies waiting. His patient groaned in pain. "It's bad, isn't it?" Orpheus moaned.

"You'll live," Batman said, sincerely hoping that what he said was true. "I have to sedate you." After administering a cocktail of drugs, Dick began work cleaning the wound, assisting Alfred to the best of his ability.

"I'll finish here, Sir, if you would like to check on your other business," Alfred said quietly. Batman nodded and headed to where Talia was waiting impatiently.

"Richard..." She began. He pressed his gloved hand to her lips.

"Shh..." He hushed her, glancing back at Orpheus.

She nodded. "*Batman*," she amended. "I came to warn you."

"About what?"

She pursed her lips. "The League of Assassins is coming."

He froze. "To Gotham?"

She nodded. "Yes. In fact, they may already **be** here."

"Oh. Great." Talia still seemed uncomfortable. "... What is it? What aren't you telling me?" Batman questioned. She looked up at him, as if deciding how to answer. He read it in her face.

"...Oh. Great."

The Narrows:

The Prince of Lies watched as his onslaught subsided—the darkness seeped into the cracks across the concrete, and the Dark Knight was on the floor, twitching. "You are mine now. Rise."

Jason Todd shifted, his gloved fingertips digging into the ground and trying their best to support him as he attempted to bring himself up off the ground. "... Hhhhh."

The Prince of Lies smiled. "I said *rise!*"

The Dark Knight's head twisted to face the Prince, and the villain's expression contorted. "Gotcha," hissed Jason, his mask completely closed off and immune to whatever the Prince was trying to infect him with. "I'm not ready... for this..." He took a grapnel from his utility belt, and shot it into the air.

The Prince of Lies' nails began to stretch out of his fingertips, razor sharp and deadly, and his mouth was shifting once more—this time his teeth were turning into daggers, ready to bite a chunk out of Jason's hide. "You dare resist me—?! *No-one—*"

"Bye." Jason shot into the rafters, and clambered out of the warehouse. He made it across three rooftops before pausing for breathe—he wasn't being followed. He knew that much. "God... God damn..." He needed back up. He needed help. He knew this. He knew that he needed someone to have his back, but he couldn't... .

'Run', she whispered. 'run!'

"What?" managed Jason, before being shot in the chest and falling to the ground.

"*Strange,*" whispered the bandaged man, as he levelled the shotgun at the writhing body of the Dark Knight, "*you're not the one I want. But you'll do.*"

"£\$%^," cursed Jason, as his eyes met those of Hush. *I am not having a good day.*

Gotham Central:

Gordon thought he was done. Drakon's blade hovered over him for an instant before coming down. He could see the gleam of the metal as it flashed coldly in the night. It was fascinating, actually. A long stick suddenly appeared out of nowhere, blocking the blade, and Gordon saw Robin standing over him.

Gordon rolled out from under the crossed weapons and raised himself to his knees. He could hear Robin's grunt as he struggled against Drakon, and watched the teen take a step back, still pushing against Drakon's blade. Drakon unexpectedly turned his weapon, causing it to go in toward the teen—

Gordon winced automatically, but was pleasantly surprised when Robin backpedaled quickly out of the blade's reach, navigating slightly toward Gordon. Drakon, holding his blade out with one hand, used his other to rip the metal out of his shoulder. Gordon could now see that it was an R-shaped weapon and not the Batarang he had thought it was. Draokon leaped nimbly toward where Gordon was still kneeling in pain only to be stopped by Robin once again.

Drakon's eyebrow raised— the boy was better than he had thought. *Oh, well,* he thought. *All the more satisfying when I slit his throat.*

The Cave:

"The Demon's Head started something. When a vendetta is brought up before the League... they're duty bound to complete it. And Ra's Al Ghul... my father... his vendetta against Gotham because of Bruce Wayne... my... my beloved... because of his betrayal, is one of the grandest he has ever raised."

Talia was shaking now. Dick saw her hands quiver in the stale light of the Cave, and he reached out to her. "Talia... what happened to you?"

She looked up, and Dick finally saw her. The dark rings beneath her eyes, her pale skin. She was drained, well and truly, of the life she had once exhibited. "The Joker. The Joker happened to me."

Dick froze at the words. The Joker had happened to him once too. Was this what he looked like, all those years back? Was he a wreck? "Talia, I... "

"He hijacked my plane," continued Talia, "killed my bodyguard. The pilot. He drugged me. Thought me paralysed. At his... tender mercies... his face... his smile... God... " Her weakened expression shifted to that of sheer defiance. "But I'm the daughter of the Demon's Head. From an early age, I was trained in the art of war, of defiance, of resistance. I... remember flickers... " The fire faded from her. "The pilot... did I... did I kill the pilot? Or was it the Joker? The plane went into a nosedive, I grabbed a parachute... leaped out... " Her eyes met Dick's. "I'm here now. And I want to help."

Batman smiled, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Any help you offer will be wholeheartedly appreciated and accepted."

—*DRRRRRRRRR!*

"What's that noise?" Dick span around, and saw the Cave floor shift— a staircase revealing itself leading deeper into the gigantic cavern they called home. A red light flashed down there, and then the grinding noise finally faltered— replaced by a quiet ringing. "What's... what's that?"

The Narrows:

"*You're not him.*" Hush placed the shotgun back behind his back, and took out his twin pistols, firing two rounds into the Dark Knight's chest. "*You're one of the... boys.*"

The Dark Knight said nothing. Each gunshot was like a jackhammer being pressed against his chest, and he was struggling to think for the time being, let alone unleash a scathing quip.

"*You're the problem.*" Another shot, another groan leaving Jason's lips. "*Batman is a scourge upon this city, but you perpetuate his name.*" Another two shots, and Jason grunted. "*Inspire him toward greater evils.*"

"Hey... £\$%^wit... " managed Jason, as his hand found the edge of the ledge.

"*Bravado. I'm not amused.*" He was about to fire again, when Jason swung over the side, and Hush cursed, rushing over to see his foe fall. "Uhhh—"

Jason grinned from where he hung, and fired a batarang at his attacker's bandaged face, causing him to reel back in pain. "Gullible? I'm pretty amused, *bitch.*" The Dark Knight climbed back onto the rooftop, and readied himself to break this guy open with his bare hands. "Fight back. I'm asking you nicely. Let's make this fun."

"*This is not a game—!*" Hush fired recklessly, come rounds catching Jason as he trudged forward. Jason swung back, his shoulder going dead on impact. "*Your... master... or whatever* he positions himself as... took everything from me! He stole away my whole life!"

"That's what all you bastards claim," shrugged Jason, raising his fist. "And look. You've stopped whispering."

Hush's skull collided against Jason's, and the two of them staggered away from each other. Hush looked up first, his eyes wide and manic. "That **bastard** stole my **son!** He **killed** my son!"

The Dark Knight took a moment before replying. "... Uh, yeah, that one's new."

To Be Continued!

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