



Nightwing #5
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Nightwing

Issue 5: "The Great Unknown, Part 5: Little Acorns"

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*Oaks from little acorns grow
Tall plants come from tiny seeds you sow
Low hills turn into mountains, don't you realize
Big hurts came from little white lies*

Sonny James, "Big Hurts Came from Little White Lies"

A/N: Although the 'Robbie Malone' alter ego did originally appear in canon, this version traces its pedigree directly to the fan fiction of Charlene Edwards. He appears with her permission.

Part 5: Little Acorns

Dick wasn't sure what he'd been expecting. The clichéd image of a computer hacker, the one that Hollywood tended to serve up to the masses, was that of the social misfit, overly sloppy or painfully well-groomed, with coke-bottle glasses, a bad case of acne, and an Arnold Horshack laugh. Of course, that image was ludicrous. Off the top of his head, Dick could name several acquaintances—and two former partners—who were about as far removed from that stereotype as one could possibly get. Much like the dark-skinned man, with the Jamaican lilt, whose tapered fingers sped elegantly across the keyboard.

Doctor Arthur Barton finally looked up from the console with a serious expression. "Where'd you get these disks, mon?" the S.T.A.R. Labs

scientist asked.

Dick shook his head sullenly, forcing himself to stay in character. Being undercover didn't necessarily require elaborate disguises. An alteration of clothing style, a different attitude, a change of body kinesics—that was the hardest part of all—and a person became virtually unrecognizable to all save close acquaintances. There was no good reason for Bruce Wayne's ward to be in Metropolis, much less in this building. However, the surly, slouching young man in the grey sweatshirt half tucked into faded low-rise blue jeans, a Cincinnati Reds cap jammed over unruly dark hair, didn't bear more than a passing resemblance to the scion of Gotham's most eligible bachelor. Clark had introduced him as a new intern at the Planet.

Barton snorted. "Another one who won't reveal his sources," he said. "Fine." His accent seemed to intensify as he leaned forward. "Mr... "

"Malone," The name came unhesitatingly to his lips. "Robbie Malone."

"Mr. Malone," Barton continued, "I'm going to give you a wee bit of advice. The material on these disks is either classified or illegal. Maybe both. If I were you, I'd be destroy—"

"Well you ain't," 'Robbie' interrupted. He ignored Clark's frown. "I didn't come here so youse could tell me what to do, see? I came here so youse could tell me what I got." He didn't have the Jersey accent quite right. It sounded like too much of an affectation. *That's what years of Alfred's elocution do to a person.* He mulled that over. *Can the excuses, Robbie.* Bruce never has that problem playing 'Matches'. Acting like a journalism student intern who thought he was Heaven's gift to newspaper writing and didn't have to waste time trying to be nice to people seemed to come easily enough for him, though.

Barton didn't seem to notice the accent. "What you've got, Mr. Malone," he said, "looks very similar to certain *theoretical* data that our geneticists *here* at S.T.A.R be looking into. What's disturbing is that whomever you got this from, Mr. Malone, they seem to have gone far *beyond* the theoretical."

Clark leaned forward. "Artie?" The man's pulse was a good fifteen beats

per minute faster than it had been when he'd sat down. "What's on the disks?"

The programmer's eyes narrowed. "You're sure about him, Mr. Kent?"

At Kent's nod, Barton drew a deep breath. "Jagdeo," he called, "come over here a moment, mon?"

Another scientist working in the outer room turned in answer to the computer technician's summons.

Barton immediately arose from his terminal and gestured to the newcomer to sit down. "Is this what it looks like, Garcia?"

Jagdeo's eyes widened. "How... where did you... " he looked at Clark and Dick in some confusion. "If they're that far along in the testing," he said slowly.

"That's what I thought," Barton said grimly. To the other two men, he explained, "This is Garcia Jagdeo. He's one of our top experts in genetic engineering. Got his degree from the University of Santa Prisca. Garcia was lecturing over here in the States when Slaycroft took over. Our gain." He nodded to his colleague. "Tell them what-all you were working on, back then."

Jagdeo laced his fingers together loosely, and then pulled them apart. "I was involved with a project similar to this before I came to this country. It looks like somebody took the theoretical research... and is trying to find a practical application."

"Theoretical," Clark repeated.

The genetic engineer's face was ashen. "If this is accurate," he stated, "then somebody is extremely close to creating a... an enhanced human being." At Dick's frown, he continued. "A decade ago, maybe longer... we would have said... a 'super soldier'."

Sir Edmund Dorance could not abide the odour of tobacco. As a soldier

and as an athlete, he preferred to keep noxious substances as far away from him as possible. He had snapped the neck of one of his lieutenants for lighting up in his presence once. He clenched his teeth as the short, heavy-set man chain-smoked his second cigarette.

"Fiitawa's asked us to find her better working conditions, Ned," Peel said between puffs. "She doesn't feel safe. Now, I was in Gerard's office when she came in, and after she finished talking, well, Senator Gerard wasn't too happy. You see, Ned, Linda needed a nice, quiet, *safe* place for her research. And six months ago, when you came forward with Dorance Tower, we were happy. She was happy. And one might think that the fringe benefits from her project might have made *you* happy, too."

Dorance couldn't help but recoil as Peel waved the cigarette directly under his nose for emphasis. This was a very bad sign. King Snake did not frighten easily. He assessed, he analysed, and once decided on a course of action, he pursued it ruthlessly.

For Dorance, expedience was everything. There was no room for affection or sentimentality in his life. His world was organized into three sections: that which provided a benefit, that which posed a threat, and that which did neither. The first category, he tolerated. The last, he ignored. As for the second, he either crushed it as quickly as possible, or, when this was not feasible, bided his time for the appropriate moment. A threat, though, was not a cause for alarm; it was an obstacle to surmount—preferably with no help from others. Or, as Lord Palmerston might have phrased it, Dorance had no permanent allies, only permanent interests.

Adam Peel's polished Harvard accent cut into Dorance's musings. "Doctor Fiitawa has appealed to us to find her a better, more secure, location. One with tougher security than a pack of adolescent delinquents running in the hallways."

"Accidents do happen," Dorance stated, carefully gauging the amount of concern to inject into his voice. Too much would depict weakness. Too little, and he would appear uncaring.

"Yes," Peel agreed dryly. "They do. Particularly when you ignore legitimate requests for increased security."

"These things take time!" Dorance protested. "There is a screening process, training..."

"How many people did you interview?" Peel demanded. "And how much training does it take to not let people come in if they have no business being there? Linda told the senator that the meta chippie picked up the basics in 5 minutes—you telling me she's some kind of rocket scientist?"

Dorance was not going to panic. This wasn't going at all well, but he had to retain his composure. "Clearly," he said slowly, "there will need to be some changes made. I'll have my retainer onsite at all times until—"

Peel lit another cigarette, flicking the ashes onto the mahogany partner's desk. Dorance held his tongue, but he gripped the top edge of the desk so tightly his knuckles whitened.

"That won't be necessary, Neddie," Peel interrupted. "We're relocating Dr. Linda Fiitawa to another facility."

Neddie. Dorance winced. Someone had tried calling him by that moniker during his early days in Metropolis. That man had survived, but his medical bills had cost more than the insurance company had been willing to cover. It had been the last time anybody had called him 'Neddie', or 'Ed', or any other diminutive name.

"You don't consider that action to be somewhat hasty?" He asked.

Peel leaned forward. "Let me give you some friendly advice, Ed," he stated. "When a place you thought was safe suddenly turns dangerous, and when the people you thought would back you... don't... when more and more, a person realizes that he's basically a stranger and doesn't exactly belong where he is, why then, the only sensible thing to do," he stubbed out his cigarette on the desk and rose to his feet, "is to get out while you can."

He turned without preamble and strode toward the elevator. "Be sensible, Ed," he stated as the doors parted. Then he was gone.

Dorance slumped in his chair. Peel's friendly 'advice' was not something that he could dismiss lightly. He could fight a challenger to his position in the Metropolis underworld... but if his government contacts also decided that backing him was no longer in their best interest, then it was time to cut his losses.

"Bobbo," he called.

Instantly, his aide was at his side.

"You heard."

"Of course, Sir Edmund."

King Snake permitted himself a small smile. Bobbo had learned early how much his employer valued another set of ears.

"Make inquiries," Dorance commanded. "Find out how many of our friends in Washington would support us against Lloyd Gerard were matters to come to that. See what our associates on the street are muttering about. And Bobbo, it wouldn't hurt to investigate a new site for our operations, should a change of scene be warranted. I should like you to locate a large urban centre, with a market for our product. If, indeed, we do need to carve out a fresh niche for ourselves, I would prefer minimal competition."

"Yes, Sir Edmund." He turned to withdraw, but Dorance called after him.

"One more thing, Bobbo. Find out what you can about the intruders from last night. There shall be a reckoning, and I, for one, should like to be prepared for it.

"Of course, Sir Edmund."

Clark frowned. "When you use that term," he said, "'super soldier', it conjures up too many images of 60s B-movies. Could you get a little more specific?" He shot Dick a hard look, silently ordering him to keep his mouth shut and let him do the talking. Fine with Dick. Clark knew all

the right questions to ask, while Dick was still trying to remember his high school biology.

Jagdeo nodded. "The information contained here suggests that these researchers are attempting to create an enhanced human being. The subject would enjoy increased strength, endurance, and resilience. He, or she for that matter, would be impervious to pain, illness... they're trying to find a way to incorporate a healing factor, or at least faster recuperation."

Dick leaned forward. "Why would they be working with snake venom?" He asked, indicating a labelled diagram on the screen.

"They weren't," Jagdeo said slowly. "They were working with the *anti-venin*, in an attempt to improve the immune system and make it naturally resistant to poisons. In their experiments, they also managed to develop a hardier strain of the coral snake toxin. Its symptoms take longer to develop and move more slowly through the bloodstream, but this new variety is also far, far deadlier than the original. They've also developed an antidote for it, and that's a very good thing, because the new version is too strong for the standard antivenin.

"No fooling," Dick let out a low whistle. Clark was frowning at him, making it all the harder for him to stay in character. Robbie Malone should not be feeling relief that he *hadn't* known which injection to take out of his snakebite kit last night. Dick Grayson, however, could offer up a silent prayer of thanks.

"What concerns me," Jagdeo said, "is who's bankrolling this. The US government scrapped the idea after the project head, Dr. Ram Prasad Divakaruni raised ethical objections. It's on record that he never intended his theoretical work to be put into practice."

"Then who could... " Dick wondered.

Barton cleared his throat. "Garcia, this name mean something to you?" He indicated a text file, apparently a scientific abstract. "Linda Fiitawa?"

Jagdeo scowled. "Now that, Arturo," he didn't seem to realize that he'd just pronounced the Spanish version of Barton's first name, "is a name that should not be attached to any ethical research department. But," he

added, "it helps us to make more sense of the matter." He cracked his knuckles noisily.

"Fiitawa studied under Divakaruni, and she was associated with the super-soldier project. Divakaruni and the university filed charges against her after it came out that she was performing unauthorized genetic experiments on human subjects. Fiitawa lost her license and almost went to prison for that."

"I thought you said they never developed a practical—"

"They didn't," Jagdeo interrupted Dick's comment. "But she was attached to other research projects before joining this one. Her methodology came to light shortly before Divakaruni dropped his bombshell."

Dick considered that. "Let's say I wanted to talk to this doctor. Where would I find him?"

Barton punched a few keys. "He's a professor at Loma Linda University. That would be out in Southern California."

Dick's face fell. That was clear across the continent. He couldn't... *wait just a minute! Why couldn't he? He wasn't doing anything else right now. But... California?* "F I wanted ta get ta Loma Linda," he demanded, "what's the most direct route from here?"

"You don't have a computer of your own somewhere, Malone?" Barton asked. At Dick's headshake, the heavyset man let out a long-suffering sigh. "Top of the line piece of equipment," he mourned, "and we're using it to Google travel directions. Okay. You're gonna start here in Metropolis and go east on the Interstate to... "

Dick was only half-listening. Barton would give him a printout later, he was sure. He wasn't used to this. Usually, once a lead or suspect was outside Gotham City limits, Batman would call off pursuit. There were always plenty more mooks on the street. And he couldn't recall a time when Bruce had actually packed everything up and journeyed to meet with a contact. He normally remote-hacked their computers, or, if a plausible scenario suggested itself, found a way for Wayne Enterprises to invite the contact into Gotham. Running clear across the country was

going to be a new exp—

"Then, from Las Vegas, you're gonna go... "

"Vegas?" Dick perked up. "How far is Loma Linda from there?"

"About 2 hours, mon. Not too much farther."

Babs. That settled it. He could stop over in Vegas and drop in on Barbara Gordon, do some catching up. And then...

California, here I come...

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I don't recall asking whether you did. Report."

*"I messed up, okay? I blew it! Is that what you wanted to hear, Bruce? I goofed, they got away, the munitions shipment is headed to South America anyway, and it's **my** fault, end of story."*

Silence

Moments pass before I look up. He's just standing there; about as mobile as that stupid tyrannosaurus I thought was so cool the first time I saw it in the cave. His cowl's still on, which is surprising. Normally he pulls it off the minute he gets out of the Batmobile.

"What?"

Silence again. Then, without a word, he reaches over to the printer tray and hands me an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven and a pen.

"What's this for?"

He turns around and starts to tug at the cowl. For some reason, he never faces me when he unmasks. It makes no sense, but there it is. "I want you," he says,

"to write down everything that went wrong tonight, every detail, no matter how slight, for which you were personally responsible." He tosses the cowl into the canvas laundry bag Alfred leaves down here, and takes one of the clean folded towels from the shelf above. "I'll review it while you take your shower."

He comes back from taking his about a half hour later. I've got three quarters of the second side of the page written on and I'm still going strong. I missed one of the scouts that the smugglers had posted. I didn't notify Batman of my position. I didn't notice how easily I was trouncing the henchmooks and I gave chase without considering that they were leading me into a trap. I mistook an unmarked police cruiser for a getaway car and wasted about five minutes keeping it under surveillance. I jumped about three seconds too early, let the gunfire distract me so I stumbled my dismount from the ledge... seeing line after line of my smudged confession almost makes me want to cry. Scratch that. I do want to cry, but I think tonight's already been embarrassing enough.

Bruce reaches over and plucks the pen from my hand. "Go on," he says, gently.

I wish he'd just yell. I hate it when he gets all quiet like this. I grab my towel, almost bumping into him as he dumps his costume into the laundry bag and mumble an apology as I head off in the direction from which he just came.

When I come back, he's sitting at the computer. A negligent wave of the hand draws my attention to the litany of stupidity I was working on, earlier. I guess he wants me to finish it, now that the hot water's done its job and calmed me down a bit. I blink. Almost every entry I wrote down now has a bold red line bisecting the words. In the white space I've left for a margin, I see comments like: 'reasonable hypothesis'... 'hindsight'... and my eyes widen. He did NOT actually print in block letters "Don't be silly," and underline it twice! It's next to where I'd written that bit about how I should've been in the rafters above Batman in case he needed a hand (which he did), instead of clear on the other side of the building watching the cop car. Oh, I've got to frame this, no wait... I bet he just wrote that because he thinks now I'll hang on to this paper. I was planning on burning it. I look up.

"What do you mean, 'don't be silly'?"

He keeps his eyes on the monitor screen. "Suppose it HAD been a getaway car."

"But it wasn't."

"I KNOW it wasn't. What if it had been? Suppose their plan had been to divide their force, keep both of us occupied at the front of the building, while they escaped through the rear? You would have been in the perfect position to block them."

I grimace. "Instead I watched some officer wolf down a sandwich and a cup of cold coffee."

"What kind of sandwich?"

"I saw some lettuce sticking out," I answer reflexively. "And something yellow squeezed out the other end when he bit into the Kaiser roll. Probably egg-salad."

"And you knew the coffee was cold because..." he continues.

"Paper cup. They cool off faster. Besides, he was holding it for a couple of minutes without looking uncomfortable. And he stirred creamer into it. You don't do that for tea."

Bruce does this a lot: quizzes me about every detail, no matter how insignificant, making sure that I notice everything. I'm improving, too. I can look at a tray of a hundred objects for two minutes and list seventy-two of them. When we first started, I was lucky to get twenty.

Huh? I blink. He repeats the question.

"How could you have known that it was a police cruiser?"

Great. There's some trick I should have remembered. Something about the license plates, or something weird about the radio antenna, or something. I don't know anymore. I start to mention the license, hoping that my brain will catch up and fill in the blank. Bruce shakes his head. When I grasp at something else, he holds up a hand.

"Dick. The car was unmarked, remember? There is no way that you could have known. The question was rhetorical."

He turns to face me, now.

"Some things, in hindsight, could have been handled better. But without knowing then what we do now, it's hard to assess blame." He reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "Not that you haven't done an impressive job, of course," he adds.

I catch myself grinning. You almost have to when Bruce cracks a joke—it happens so rarely.

He sobers. "Some things you do need to work on. I agree that the gunfire shouldn't have rattled you. Not checking the area behind the door where that last henchman was concealed was a serious error, yes. As far as giving the hostiles time to reload, I'm not sure you had a choice.

"Do you know why I asked you to draw this list up?"

My first guess would have been as a punishment, but now I don't think so. I shrug.

"I don't want you to dwell on your mistakes, Dick. I don't want you to ignore them, either, mind you, but the fact remains: they happened. They're in the past. Analyse them. Try to determine whether there were any reasonable precautions you could have taken, and if so, resolve to take them the next time. Then chalk it up to experience and move on."

If my real dad had given me that advice, I'd probably rush up and hug him about now. Since it's Bruce, I just grin.

He passes me another blank paper. "It's equally important to understand what you did right," he says. "That way, you'll continue to improve. I expect you to find at least as many items for this new list as you did for the previous one. And," he adds absolutely deadpan, "I expect to have to strike out fewer entries this time. Get busy."

He doesn't smile. He doesn't have to. I raise my hand in a mock salute and pick up the pen.

Dick smiled at the memory as he gathered his belongings together and packed them tightly into the oversized knapsack. A final check of the

hotel room revealed that he'd left his shampoo in the shower caddy. He grabbed it and gave the cap an extra twist before jamming it into one of the outer pockets.

Almost automatically, he began to compare his performance on that night, some five years prior, with the way he had handled himself a few hours earlier. The parallels were painfully apparent: both times, he'd gone into the fray sure he knew what he was doing, been proven wrong, rallied, and managed to escape with his life. And, as had happened five years ago, he was thoroughly disgusted with his performance during that exercise.

Mistakes are for correcting, he reminded himself as he reached for a piece of hotel stationary. *Don't dwell on them. Don't ignore them. Identify, assess, correct and continue.* In a steady hand, as he had done so many times in the last five years, Dick began to jot down each obstacle that he had encountered at Dorance tower, how he had surmounted or evaded it, what he could have done differently, and whether he should reasonably have been able to predict the course of events that had actually transpired. Once he finished that list, he would repeat the exercise, taking note of what had worked, and whether its success could best be attributed to luck, skill or planning.

He owed Bruce for that technique. *Not to mention a few other things*, he reflected. And he had promised Clark to make that phone call. He sighed, squared his shoulders, and picked up the receiver. He'd better just get this over with. When his call to Wayne Enterprises went through to Bruce's voicemail, he stifled a sigh. Whether it was out of relief or frustration, he wasn't quite sure.

"There's no mistake, Sir," the desk clerk repeated. "Your bill has already been settled."

Realization set in. Dick closed his eyes briefly, torn between gratitude and anger. *I don't always need you to bail me out, Bruce, sheesh!* He blinked as the clerk slid an envelope across the counter to him.

"A messenger just left this for you, Sir."

Shrugging, Dick opened the envelope and removed a parking lot claim ticket and a brass key ring. A key was threaded onto it. He shook the envelope, and a second slip of paper fluttered into his hand. He read the message on the paper and turned back to the clerk. "Where's 39th and Shuster?" He asked.

Twenty minutes later, Dick stood next to a candy thunder blue Koumori Ninja motorcycle, a dazed grin on his face. An envelope much like the first was taped to the dashboard. There was a thin sheet of notepaper inside: *Think of it as a birthday present. Full details on the enhancements have been downloaded to the onboard computer. I will not interfere further. Do not disable the GPS tracker.* He shook his head disbelievingly. Did Bruce really need to go to such lengths to keep tabs on him? He supposed that it was a giant improvement if Bruce was actually admitting that there *was* a tracking device on the cycle. He sighed. After all this time, Bruce's behaviour shouldn't surprise... Dick blinked as he read the final word on the page. *Please.*

Slowly, he stretched out a hand to touch the gleaming handlebar. The cold metal felt oddly reassuring in his grip. "Jeez, Bruce," he muttered, "even if I don't actually need to hear it, couldn't you just come out and say it once in awhile?"

He slid the knapsack into the storage compartment, swung himself onto the seat, donned the waiting helmet, and turned the key in the ignition.

Fifteen minutes later, he was on the interstate, on his way to Las Vegas.

Two nights later

Lionel Morton passed a leather satchel across his desk with a resigned expression. In marked contrast to the opulence of the public areas of the Virtuosa Herradura Casino, Morton's office was austere in furnishings and atmosphere. The larger of the two men caught the satchel and opened it. He glanced inside briefly, and then snapped it shut. His companion smiled.

"Where's the rest of it?"

Morton blanched.

"It's all there. Ten per cent, just like Scarapelli wants it. You went over the books, yourself."

The slightly-built man smiled again. "That's right," he agreed. "I did." At his gesture, the other man passed the satchel to his companion, leaned across the desk and seized Morton, hoisting the casino manager up by the front of his shirt. The shorter man continued. "Both sets. Let's get away from the Strip. Too many lights."

The men left, dragging their struggling captive with them to a waiting vehicle.

Dick Grayson resolved never to enter a strange city under cover of darkness again. At the moment, he was utterly lost. Well, perhaps not utterly. He had a fairly good idea where he was, because he'd spent time here before, in Gotham, in New York, in Star City, and yes, even in Metropolis. He was in 'the bad part of town.' Sometimes it was called Crime Alley, Hell's Kitchen, or Suicide Slum. Sometimes it was a housing project, or a once-affluent neighbourhood gone to seed. Here, in Las Vegas, it seemed to be located between the bright lights of downtown and the brighter lights of the Strip casinos. He could always recognize the bad part of town. The street lamps always seemed just a touch dimmer, feet moved at a more frantic pace, their owners lingering no longer than they had to. Here, even ordinary sounds like a cat's meow or an aluminium can rolling along a sidewalk, echoed in the silence.

Nightwing wasn't worried. This time, he was in costume. This time, he felt prepared. With a helmet over his mask, and a nylon shell jacket on top of the Nightwing suit, his boots and leggings would not elicit a second glance from drivers or pedestrians. And, if trouble did find him, at least he was in the Kevlar with full access to weapons and gadgets.

Out of his rear-view mirror he saw a car, driving too slowly for the area. He'd learned to obey his instincts without hesitation. Nightwing drove

the 'cycle around the corner and engaged stealth-mode. The motor died down to a soft hum, the headlights dimmed, and he spun about in a tight U-turn to follow the car some distance behind.

Other eyes observed the pursuit.

Morton doubled over in pain, hands clasped tightly about his head. A blackjack against his patella dropped him to one knee. Someone kicked him in the ribs, and he felt something snap.

Suddenly, light stabbed through his closed eyelids. His assailants cried out.

"Like the trick?" A new voice demanded. "I learned it from a man in Metropolis."

Morton cupped one hand over his eyes to protect them as he slowly raised his lids. Motorcycle headlights shone a harsh yellow light on the three of them. In a moment, Scarapelli's goons were charging the newcomer.

The figure waited until they had almost reached him, and then he leaped up at a ninety-degree angle, as though fired from a cannon. The bruisers looked about dumbfounded. There was nothing above them but empty air...

Suddenly, the newcomer landed in a handstand on the shoulders of the shorter of the two goons. He kicked out, first with one foot, then the other, connecting each time with the other mook's face. As the large man staggered, the young acrobat dropped to the ground, and delivered a quick chop to the neck of one with the side of his left hand, and a hard blow to the nose of the other with his right. The two fell back gasping.

Morton saw the shorter man reach under his jacket. So did the stranger. A circular throwing knife whistled through the air, slicing deeply into the hireling's hand as it pulled out a small pistol. The man cried out in pain and the gun fell to the ground. That was enough for the larger man. He ran back to the car and jerked the driver's door open. "Nick! Get in!"

He shouted.

Nursing his hand, the younger man hastened to obey. Over his shoulder, he called back "Morton! Scarapelli gets his money in forty-eight hours. Every last cent. Or you and yours are buckwheat*, you got that? Buckwheat!"

The car sped away.

Nightwing tensed. There was someone else out there, he realized. Three 'someone elses'. But they were keeping their distance, and the man on the ground looked like he might need medical attention. He approached slowly, doing his best not to startle the injured party. "Hey," he whispered. "You alright?"

Morton shook his head. "You just got 'em mad," he replied. "Now, even if I pay Scarapelli... " He closed his eyes. "What am I saying? I can't come up with two hundred G's in forty-eight hours. What the hell am I going to do?"

Nightwing probed the man's torso gently, drawing his hand away when Morton cried out. "You've got at least two broken ribs," he said. "Where's the nearest hospital?"

"No time," Morton insisted. "I gotta get home. Get Claire and the kids outta here before it's too late. If they can't find 'em, maybe they'll just take it out on me, ogodogodogod, what am I gonna do?"

Nightwing identified the sound almost an instant before he recognized the shadow, visible in the beam cast from the motorcycle's headlights. He didn't flinch as an arrow, fletched with green feathers, hissed through the night air to embed itself in the wall next to them. Nonplussed, he removed the business card from the shaft of the arrow and handed it to Morton.

"Green Arrow: On... target?" Morton read in a shaky voice. "What's going on?"

"Funny," the emerald archer replied, his approach flanked by a woman in skin-tight purple and a man in a formfitting body suit, a red "V"

contrasting sharply with the inky blackness of the rest of his costume. "We were just wondering the same thing."

**Buckwheat: refers to a particularly gruesome death taking a minimum of fifteen minutes to complete. The victim is kept fully conscious during the ordeal.*

The three newcomers eyed Nightwing with varying degrees of suspicion. Dick realized suddenly that even though Green Arrow and Huntress knew *Robin*, they probably didn't recognize him in the new suit. Then he saw a faint smirk on the blond bowman's face. *He must have caught the acrobatics*, Dick thought to himself. He drew a deep breath.

"Speedy sends regards... Sir." He felt his face redden. He never had felt comfortable addressing Bruce's peers informally. "Or at least," he admitted, "if he'd known I was coming, he would have."

Oliver Queen laughed. "I thought that was you, Kid. I have to admit, the suit's an improvement. What happened? You got tired of dressing like a giant bulls-eye after all those years?"

Dick returned the grin. "We all have to grow up sometime. Sir."

"Please," Queen's expression was pained. "If you're such a grownup, you can drop the 'sir'. It's GA. And you're..."

"Nightwing."

"Pleasure."

Huntress gave a start. "*Robin?*" She asked.

Dick sighed. "Hello, Huntress. It's been awhile. I didn't realize you'd moved—"

"I live here," she informed him curtly, as a groan from the pavement

drew their attention back to Morton.

Green Arrow unstrung his bow. "Vigilante," he snapped with a gesture toward the hulking figure, who had thus far remained silent. "Huntress, get him back home, collect his family and make sure they pack only what they need. I'll see what we can come up with."

The other man spoke for the first time. "I'll ensure their safety until your arrangements are made, Arrow. If Scarapelli's people make another attempt, it won't succeed." He sounded very much as though he hoped that they would.

With Huntress' support, Morton managed to rise to his feet. "We're parked not far from here," she stated. Her tone was carefully neutral. "Can you manage?"

He nodded.

"Let's go." Over her shoulder, she called back, "catch up with you later... Nightwing."

After they'd gone, Green Arrow grinned. "You know how to make your presence felt," he laughed.

"Did I make things worse by interfering?"

Queen shook his head. "We'd been tailing them from the casino. If you hadn't stepped in when you did, we would've done something similar. Can't get the police involved," he added in response to an unspoken question. "Those that aren't owned by the mob aren't going to interfere with those that are."

"No, kid," he continued. "The day Morton decided to stiff Scarapelli on his percentage of the casino profits was the day he lost any chance at police protection. We're going to have to get him out of town, somehow." He grinned. "So. What brings you to Vegas?"

Dick shrugged. "I've got business in California. I was passing through and," *how much did GA know?* "A friend of mine moved here last fall. I thought I'd look her up."

Green Arrow pretended to think about that for a moment. "This... friend," he said. "She wouldn't by any chance have left Gotham around the same time you did, for more or less the same reasons?"

"You know her?" He asked excitedly.

"Sure. I met Barbara a couple of years ago, when... " he caught himself. "Well, it was awhile ago. But she's good at what she does. We work together, these days. She's one of my... " he paused, considering. "One of my team."

"Whoa! Small world." Dick glanced around. "So, where is she?"

Ollie's expression grew serious. "She's fine. Actually," he said, dropping his voice a few decibels, "she took a bit of a pounding last night, but you should see the shape of the other guy." Noting the look on Dick's face, Ollie repeated, "she's fine. We'll go visit her in the morning. The hospital's keeping her overnight for observation, but it's just a precaution. They're planning to release her tomorrow.

"So," he added. "How's Bats doing?"

Dick shrugged. "We haven't spoken since the holidays. I'm here on my own."

There was a speculative gleam in Oliver Queen's eye. "You don't say. Listen," he added. "I've got a spare bedroom if you need a place to crash for the rest of the night."

"Omigosh!" Barbara exclaimed the next day when Dick walked into her hospital room. "Dick? I can't believe it! What are you *doing* here?" She saw the bouquet of roses that Dick was holding. "They're beautiful! I... " she hesitated, looking around the hospital room for something to put them in. "If you ask at the nurses' station, they've probably got a vase or something. How long are you here for?"

Dick finally stopped grinning long enough to answer. "A couple of days,

I guess. I'm heading out to Loma Linda, but I was in the neighbourhood. How are you feeling?"

Barbara touched her shoulder gingerly, and winced. "Stupid, if you want the truth," she admitted. "I really thought I connected with the guy." She paused. "Well, okay. My foot connected with his solar plexus... "

Dick laughed. "Sounds like true love right there."

"You want to eat those flowers, Buster?" Her expression turned serious.

"I'll say one thing, Dick. This time out? Nobody hung me from a meat-hook and treated me like I was a piñata. That's *never* happening again."

"I understand," Dick said quickly. "So, Ollie says they're releasing you, today?"

"Yep," Barbara nodded. "They only kept me for observation." Her expression hardened. "So you can report back to Bruce that I'm fine."

"What do you mean by that?" Dick's bewilderment was evident.

Barbara's eyes narrowed. "Bruce didn't send you to check up on me?" At Dick's head-shake, her face took on a rosy tint. "Oh. I thought... " She sighed. "Sorry, Boy Wonder. I asked Alfred to use the cave computer to run some traces for me. A couple of days ago, he turned up here. Batman, I mean." She looked away. "One of Arkham's residents is in the area. I told Bruce he had no jurisdiction here," she smiled at Dick's chuckle, and deftly changed the subject. "So, what's in Loma Linda?"

Dick filled her in quickly. Barbara considered. "I know the ULL campus," she said thoughtfully. "Before I decided on enrolling for courses here, I came up to see what the university looked like. Loma Linda was another prospect, so I checked them out, too. If you need some backup... "

"Sure! It'll be almost like old times."

"Almost," Barbara agreed seriously. "Except that this time, neither of us needs to impress the Bat."

At that moment, the hospital room door opened and a doctor came in. "Ms. Gordon, I've got the results of your tests." He glanced at Dick. "If we could have some privacy?"

"Sure," Dick agreed. "Babs, I'll just go grab a coffee. Catch you soon."

"So, how did you like your glimpse of the Naked City, last night?"

Dick sputtered on his coffee as he looked up, forcing his eyes to slide up past the woman's long shapely legs, microskirt, and form-fitting top, to meet her own sparkling blue eyes. "Huh?" He managed, after he stopped coughing. "I... b-beg your pardon?"

The woman broke into amused laughter. "That's what they call the area of Vegas where Ollie found you last night. Naked City. You didn't know?"

Dick shook his head, flushing slightly. "You're serious?"

"Not if I can help it," the woman countered. "But I'm not making that bit up." She extended a hand. "Dinah Lance. Black Canary. One of Ollie's Angels."

That earned her a chuckle. He considered. Barbara already knew who he was. So did Ollie. He glanced around the cafeteria. Assured that nobody was within earshot, he clasped her fingers, warmly. "I'm Dick Grayson. But I'd rather you didn't shout it to everyone."

"Because you can't do what you do if *Teen People* is looking for a cover-shot of America's most eligible frosh, heir to the Wayne—"

"You catch on fast." His tone was flippant, but Dinah noticed that he wasn't smiling this time.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it." The grin was back, if a bit subdued. "Let's just

change the subject."

Dinah nodded. "I was just coming down here to let you know Barbara's got a clean bill of health. They're releasing her as soon as she fills out some paperwork. If you've finished the coffee, I can take you back up."

"I think I know my way," Dick said. He downed the rapidly cooling liquid in one gulp. "But I don't mind the company. Actually... Dinah," he ventured, "would you happen to know of a good restaurant in these parts? And maybe some place a man might want to take a woman that doesn't involve the casinos?"

Dinah grinned. "Well, let's see. There's the all-night wedding chapel... " She took one look at Dick's expression and burst into laughter.

"All set to go?" Oliver asked as Barbara emerged from the accounting office clutching her stamped receipts.

"Just about. Listen, if you can spare me for a couple of days, I think I'm going with Dick to California."

Ollie's raised eyebrow earned him a light punch in the arm. "Don't start. It's business. Besides," she continued, "we've worked together before. If there's any kind of trouble, Dick and I've trained together and fought together enough to anticipate the other's moves."

"And of course you want to show off some of what you've been learning from Dinah and Helena."

Barbara punched him again, harder this time. "I do NOT show off," she protested. "Well... maybe a little."

Ollie snickered. "From the way you handled yourself against Skorpio, you've got every reason to want to strut your stuff a little. You fought like a wildcat." His eyes narrowed. "Or a cougar."

"What do you mean?" Barbara demanded.

"Nothing," Ollie said. "Only... well, isn't he a little young for you?"

Barbara gaped at him. "Di-you're talking about me... and Dick? Ollie, we're just friends."

"Does *he* know that?"

"Yes!" Barbara insisted. "I mean I know he's had a crush on me, but I never did anything to encourage... I mean... it-it's not like when Roy and I were... "

A strangled gasp made the two spin around. Dick and Dinah were standing several paces behind them.

"You just *had* to steer things in that direction when you knew we were on our way up, didn't you?" Dinah asked coldly. "You're a class act all the way, Mr. Queen."

Dick barely recognized the voice that issued forth from his lips. "Babs? You... and *Roy*?"

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