



Nightwing #7
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Nightwing

Issue 7: The Great Unknown, Finale: One More Mile, One Step Back... "

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Robbie Malone created by Charlene Edwards. Used with permission.

*There are those who say, you can look too hard
For your place in the world*

*Takes some of us a little longer
A few false starts gonna make you stronger
When I'm sure I've finally found it
Gonna wrap these arms all around it*

Could be one more mile, or just one step back

Mary Chapin Carpenter, "A Place in the World"

"Kidnapped," Dick frowned. Oddly, he wasn't surprised. Somehow or other, it seemed that ever since he'd started wearing the Robin suit, life just naturally complicated itself. Other people, it seemed, could walk down the street without spotting a hold-up in a shop window. Other people could go hiking in the woods without stumbling across some criminal's hideout. And, odds were, when other people cut clear across the country to meet with a scientist, they could get to see him with relatively little difficulty.

Barbara nodded. "His first class of the day showed up in the lab and found it trashed. He hasn't been seen since."

"Any evidence to suggest that he was in the lab when they ransacked it?"

"The cops I just talked to didn't exactly want to fill me in on the investigation," Barbara shrugged. "Guess we suit up?"

"Nope." Dick shook his head as he shed the tacky jacket he'd been wearing. "This is a university, and we can both pass for students. With a campus population of about 3,200, it's got to be a pretty close-knit community. A teacher disappearing... people are bound to talk."

"Except that since this is such a small place, they'll know we don't belong here."

Dick considered that. "I think," he said slowly, "if we don't do anything to stand out, we should be alright. I mean, the school's not hermetically sealed; people are going to be passing in and out. Plus, students can arrive mid-semester. Wait!" He grinned. "You said it yourself: last year, you were a prospect scouting the campus. Think that story might hold up for two of us?"

Barbara nodded slowly. "And with all the excitement going on, nobody's giving us clear directions, so we keep getting lost." She stopped. "Normally, that would probably work. But with Divakaruni missing, they're probably going to have an eye out for anyone who doesn't fit in around here."

She had a point. "The costumes work better at night," he said. "And if anyone gets a good look... two kids in jeans and T-shirts who blunder into the wrong place at a bad time might attract some attention, but apart from grilling us for a few hours, there's not much they can do."

"They'd probably try to check our story."

Dick sighed. "Then I admit to being an undercover reporter from the Daily Planet, sent to cover the kidnapping, and ask them to contact the guy in Metropolis who got me my press credentials. And you can call Ollie, I guess."

"How about calling Bruce?" Barbara teased.

Dick pretended to think it over. "I'll call my dad, if you call yours first."

She blanched. "Don't even joke about that." She glowered. "And stop snickering!"

Dick raised his hands in a placatory gesture. "Fine." He held up the campus map he'd downloaded earlier. "Let's just walk around and listen to what people are saying." He stabbed his finger down at the parking lot. "We're here. I'll head west on Barton, then north on Campus. You take Anderson north, then make a left, and go west on Stewart. We'll rendezvous in a half-hour at the corner of Campus and Stewart."

"Got it."

Twenty-eight minutes later, the two met in front of the Alumni Hall for Basic Science. "We may have caught a break," Barbara said. "Someone spotted a bunch of military types hustling Divakaruni into a minivan at about 5:30 this morning and called campus security. All that bumper-to-bumper traffic we saw on I-10 westbound? It wasn't due to an accident, like we thought. They've had all the roads out of Loma Linda blocked since about twenty to six this morning."

Dick nodded. He remembered the drive in. There'd been no traffic problems on I-10 east, but they'd both noticed the virtual crawl in the opposite direction. A new thought occurred to him. "Was that normal? Him being up in the lab that early?"

Barbara raised her hands to shoulder height and spread them. "Nobody else seemed surprised by it."

Dick started forward. "And the abduction happened ten minutes before they set up the roadblocks. Either the kidnappers were driving very fast-

"Which they wouldn't have been, if they wanted to avoid causing an accident or getting pulled over for speeding-

"Right. Which means they're still in town. Maybe even still on campus."

Dick nodded. "Let's head back to the lab area. See if the cops missed anything."

By the time they got back to the medical centre building, the investigative team had gone. An 'X' of yellow crime-scene tape blocked the door off.

"Keep an eye on the corridors," Dick instructed. "I'm going to try getting in."

The door wouldn't budge. Now, he noticed the card-scanner situated at what would have been knob-height-had the door possessed a knob. He knew how to breach the system, of course. All he needed was enough time and the right tools. For the kidnappers to do so, on the other hand... Dick bent down and examined the scanner carefully. He whistled. *That's a nice chunk of the science budget gone, right there*, he realized.

Abruptly, Dick moved away from the door, and motioned to Barbara. "Come on."

She exhaled in relief. "I wasn't sure how I was going to explain what we were doing if we'd gotten caught, just now. But... you couldn't get in."

"It doesn't matter. I forgot something important: the labs are off-limits to anyone without a pass-card. And this is one of the better systems: use the wrong card more than twice in a short space of time, and it alerts security. Which means that in order to get in, the kidnappers either had to have Divakaruni let them in, or they'd have to have stolen a card-

"They would have had to work fast, then," Barbara interrupted. "These things work like credit cards. Once you report them as lost, they get deactivated in seconds."

"Right. And using a cancelled card would also trigger an alarm," Dick nodded. "The other possibility is that someone at the university is affiliated with the kidnappers, somehow." He looked around.

"The delivery door's down this way, isn't it?"

Barbara nodded. "Another left. What do you think you'll find?"

"I don't know, exactly." Dick admitted. "But if the kidnappers were in military gear, and at least one of them also has a legitimate reason to be on campus... "

The loading area was deserted. Dick stepped forward to examine a pile of wooden crates.

"Want some help?" Barbara asked.

"No, thanks. If anyone comes, I was expecting a package from home, and it's late. I was checking to see if it got directed here by accident."

Barbara frowned. "That has got to be one of the lamest excu-"

"Fine. Come up with a better one, then." He saw a piece of black fabric wadded up next to the loading ramp. He was about to ignore it when he saw something glisten. "Oh sh-"

"You eat Alfred's brownies with that mouth, Short-pants?" She sobered when she saw the look in his eyes. "What?"

Dick lifted the garment. It was a jacket. And clearly, its owner had worn it during some sort of struggle. One of its epaulets had been torn off. The other, however, was intact. As was the red stone embedded in the fabric. A green ski mask that had been tucked into the jacket fell to the ground

"Don't ask me why, right now, Babs," the nickname came out automatically. "But it looks like the Carnelian Order is mixed up in this."

"The C.O.?" Babs repeated, once they were outside again. "I'd expect them to be more interested in biochemical weapons. I mean, even if they wanted Divakaruni to work for them-"

Dick sighed. "I know. Divakaruni deliberately avoided putting his theories into practise. Even if he could be somehow... persuaded otherwise,

it's not like he could deliver a super soldier to them in thirty days. And he'd need state-of-the-art facilities. So far, we haven't been able to uncover any evidence that shows that the Order is anything other than a bunch of guys with guns, who like to wear combat fatigues, and have some really screwy ideas about how to run a government."

He continued thinking aloud as they walked. "If someone spotted the kidnapping, and sounded the alarm, the jacket and mask are really the only parts of the uniform that would arouse suspicion. People do wear camouflage pants, and turtlenecks, after all. So, most of the terrorists leave with Divakaruni, and one loses part of his uniform and walks away."

"Why?" Barbara asked. "Wouldn't he leave with the others?"

"Maybe, maybe not. If they had access to the labs, then it might make sense that one or more of them would be enrolled here, either as bona fide students, or pretending to be."

"Makes sense," Barbara admitted. "So, how do we find them?"

Dick considered. After a moment, his eyes lit up. "Let's head back to the lot. I think I've got an idea."

"You've got to be sweltering in that costume," Barbara said. "How can you stand wearing it under your civvies?"

"Discomfort builds character," Dick answered with a grin. He was clutching a large bottle of water. In the ninety-degree heat, hydration was essential.

"I really hate that jacket," Barbara remarked. She stepped back and examined her handiwork critically. "Button it," she said. "You can still see the wire."

Dick complied. "Better?"

"No." She retorted. "It's hideous. And it makes you stand out like a sore

thumb, here."

"I'm from out of town, Barb." The New Jersey accent was back. "Dis is how we dress in da big city, see?"

"You're not funny. And you're going to get caught."

A broad grin spread across his face. "That's the idea, Barb. I don't know where to start looking for Divakaruni, but with any luck, somebody's going to take me right to him. And with any more luck, we'll get the whole scheme recorded," he tapped the sound equipment lightly, "on tape. Now, is the wire hidden?"

The red-haired woman sighed. "You'll pass." Under her breath she added, "as long as you're not taking wardrobe consulting."

The plan was simple: walk around, ask questions and pretend to try to be subtle about it. He'd been right, before. It was a small campus, and faculty and students all seemed to know each other, by sight if not by name. Dick had only to mention that he was planning on a speciality in immunology or molecular genetics and had been hoping to meet with Divakaruni, and it seemed that everyone had a story to tell.

"And nobody knows where they took the guy?" He asked for the fifth time.

"No," returned a youth about his own age, with a snarl. "Cuz if they knew, he'd be back, right?"

Dick allowed himself a sardonic smile. "Maybe, but somehow, I don't think the guys that took him got too far. They might even still be on campus."

The teen squinted suspiciously at him. "How come you seem to know so much about this?" His hands reached out and grasped the lapels of Dick's plaid jacket. "If you had *anything* to do with-

"Ease off, Carlos." The voice was quiet, but rang with clear authority.

"He's just asking some questions. That's all."

Carlos relinquished his hold on the lapels, but not his belligerence. "I just think it's kind of funny that Dr. Divakaruni vanishes, and then this guy turns up all of a sudden and starts grilling us for info."

"Which means he probably doesn't know anything about the kidnapping, right?" The newcomer grinned. He turned to Dick. "Or you'd have all the answers, wouldn't you?"

He held out his hand. "I'm Alan Hilliker. Doctor Divakaruni's my honors advisor."

"Robbie Malone." Dick grasped the hand firmly. He smirked at Carlos. "Nice to know someone around here's got a brain."

Alan drew his brows together. "Let it go. You said you think he's still around?"

Dick nodded. "All the roads out of town are blocked, see? He's gotta be somewhere around here."

Carlos looked sceptical. "Such as?"

Dick spread his hands. "Hey, this is your campus. How'm I s'posed ta know? But I guess it would have to be a place where not a lot of people can get in. Like maybe one of the other labs?"

One of the young women listening shook her head. "They drove off in a van. They're probably in town somewhere, if they didn't get through the roadblock."

"Still," Alan said thoughtfully, "maybe we could check it out." He clamped a hand onto Dick's shoulder. "I'll give you a tour of the campus, and see if I can get security to open the labs for us. I have access to three of them, myself. Sound good?" He smiled.

Dick grinned back. "Lead on, pal."

It took every ounce of control Dick had not to turn around when he heard the light tread behind them in the corridor that led to the chemistry labs. Combat instincts, honed by years on the streets of Gotham, told him that there were six of them. He had an instant to wonder whether he couldn't have come up with a better idea. Then, leather-gloved hands seized his arms, forcing them behind his back. He tried to shout to Alan to run, but somebody jammed a wad of cloth into his mouth. A pillowcase was thrown over his head, and he felt a sash pass around his throat twice before someone tied it snugly enough to be uncomfortable, but loosely enough to allow him to breathe. He felt cold metal on his wrists, and he heard two clicks as the cuffs snapped shut.

"Get him out of here," someone said.

The hands on his arms tightened their grip and hustled him down the hallway.

As far as Dick could determine, they'd had the van parked right outside the building. They'd tossed him in, and taken a circuitous route to their destination. Dick suspected that it was still on campus, but he couldn't be sure.

Once the van stopped, hands took him again, and he was half-dragged, half-carried into another building. They marched him down a flight of stairs, and along what was probably another series of corridors, before his captors hoisted him into mid-air, and then plunked him down hard on a wooden chair. One wrist was freed, and then somebody immediately jerked it back, and re-manacled his hand behind the chair-back. Someone fumbled at the sash that fastened the pillowcase, while two other people bound his ankles securely to the chair legs.

The pillowcase was unceremoniously removed, and one ski-masked figure pulled the wad of packing out of Dick's mouth. Dick retched, and another of his captors held a cup to his lips. He took a tentative sip, trying to discern whether it might be drugged. It tasted like ordinary water. He quickly gulped the rest of it down, and the soldier took the empty cup away.

"Who are you?" The question was asked without preamble.

He didn't answer. His interrogator drew back a fist and delivered a punch to his lower lip. Dick tasted salt. Somebody else searched his pockets, and tossed his wallet to the man asking the questions.

"Robert Michael Malone, hmmm?" The soldier held up his driver's license. The man sniffed. "What's this? A press card? You're a long way from Metropolis, aren't y-" he broke off in mid-word. Three quick steps brought him directly in front of the chair. He pulled roughly at the jacket lapels, ignoring Dick's angry protest, as the button popped off and fell to the floor. "You little punk!" He shouted, as he delivered another punch, this time to Dick's abdomen. He turned to his companions.

"He's wired. The bastard's wearing a goddamned wire!" The soldier ripped it off with a single savage motion and took another swing.

Dick winced when the blow landed. He was going to have a black eye tomorrow, no question about it.

"Who are you? Who's on the other end of this thing?"

His silence seemed to infuriate the questioner all the more. The man seized a handful of his captive's T-shirt and pulled. The chair tipped slightly forward, as the restraints dug into Dick's wrists and ankles. "Answer me, you little sh-!" His captor backhanded him again.

There was a ripping sound, as the chair rocked back, and the cheap T-shirt tore. Behind the ski-mask, Dick saw brown eyes grow wide.

"That suit," his interrogator gasped. He leaned forward, took hold of the fabric again, and ripped the shirt asunder. "Well, well. So, Nightwing... is really some punk-kid named Robbie Malone who works for the *Daily Planet*. Isn't *this* interesting?" He straightened, and started barking orders.

"You, you!" He pointed. "Stay in here with the prisoner." He singled out two more of his men and instructed them to stand guard outside. "The rest of you come with me. And nobody lay another hand on him until I

talk to Washington and find out what *he* has to say about it."

Whoa. Wait. Dick thought. *Washington?*

He watched as the other soldiers trooped out, and his two remaining captors took up positions on either side of the door. Then, he worked a lock-pick out of the lining of his jacket, and concentrated on getting the cuffs open.

"Um... yo?"

One of the guards looked up. "Quiet."

Dick turned his face away, feigning embarrassment. "I gotta use your bathroom."

"What?"

"Bathroom, washroom, head. Whatever youse call it in this part of the country." He sighed. "Look. How d'ya think I managed to keep from keeling over in this California heat of yours? I must've drunk a gallon of water already today, see. C'mon, I really gotta go, here."

The two guards looked at each other. "I don't know," one said.

The other trained his rifle on Nightwing. Then he nodded to his companion. "Untie him." As the first guard moved to comply, the second addressed the captive. "You try anything and-"

Nightwing rolled his eyes. "I know, I know. 'I'll have more holes in me than Swiss cheese.' Or is that 'I'll never have to worry about ventilation problems with the suit ever again?' 'I'll be a candidate for sainthood; they'll call me the Holey Vigilante?' How about... "

"You talk too much," muttered the guard as he loosened the second rope.

"Yep," Nightwing replied. "And I try too hard. See?" With that, he kicked the militant squarely in the jaw, while hurling himself sideways out of

the chair. Too late, his captors realized that their prisoner's hands were already free.

Nightwing flipped into a handstand, then somersaulted across the floor to land upright, scant inches from his gun-toting adversary. Before the other man could react, a quick chop to the wrist sent his rifle clattering to the floor. The young vigilante plowed an elbow into his face and followed with a hard blow to the solar plexus.

The Carnelian soldier doubled over, gasping. Nightwing heard the other man coming toward him in a rush.

They almost never just try to get away. They just keep coming until I knock 'em out. He sighed mentally and kicked the fallen assault weapon away, then poised to meet the new threat.

The second man got one jab in before Nightwing swung his manacled wrist in a wide arc. The free-dangling cuff connected with the soldier's face and he cried out, hands flying upward to shield his eyes. Of course, that left his abdomen defenceless against his adversary's roundhouse kick. The man sank to his knees with a groan.

Nightwing thought for a moment, and then removed one of the soldiers' jackets. He used what was left of the ropes to truss his two former captors back-to-back. Then he removed the other soldier's ski mask.

"Hi, Alan, imagine meeting you, here." He wished it surprised him, but the youth had been a bit too eager to help, and a little too quick to pump him for information. And, small campus or not, meeting up with someone purporting to have exactly the sort of clearance needed to get into the labs had seemed a little too convenient.

He made sure to remove the ammo clips from both rifles. He donned the jacket and ski mask, and pushed the door open, taking advantage of the other two guards' momentary confusion to dispatch them. Then he picked the lock on his remaining manacle, and cuffed their wrists together.

"Alright," he snarled, pulling his mask out of a hidden inner pocket. "Where's Divakaruni?"

The man sat on the cot with a scowl. He had no idea how long he had been confined here, in this room. He had not been questioned. He had not been attacked. In point of fact, the only thing that his captors had done was instruct him to 'sit tight for a little while'.

His son would probably be thrilled, Ram Prasad Divakaruni reflected sourly. The young man was always protesting the long hours that his father spent in the lab. Perhaps he had staged this kidnapping in order to force the elder Divakaruni to relax. The geneticist's lips twitched at the idea.

Shouts reached him from outside the locked door to his room. He heard a muffled thud. Then, the door opened and a dark-haired young man whom he had never before laid eyes on poked his head in.

"Dr. Divakaruni?"

The doctor rose to his feet. "I am he."

The youth's face broke into a smile. "Nightwing. We need to talk, but not here. Feel like leaving?"

Divakaruni took a step forward. His eyes widened. "Behi-"

That was as much warning as he was able to shout. The masked figure looming behind his would-be rescuer suddenly gave 'Robbie' a hard shove, which propelled the youth into the room.

The heavy door slammed shut.

Dick sighed. He could probably get the door open and fight his way out alone, but with a civilian in tow, it was too risky. On the other hand, if Barbara's part in this was going according to plan... "Maybe we *could* talk in here, after all."

"You what?" Patrick Sewell could scarcely believe his ears. "I told you. The entire purpose of keeping the doctor here was to prevent him from meeting with Nightwing. You've locked them in a room together, you idiot!"

The soldier reddened. "Our unit consists of eight men. The hostile took out four of us in less than ten minutes. You ordered us to keep both prisoners alive and to hold them here until you arrived. Had we attempted to separate the two, we might not have accomplished either objective."

Sewell was shaking his head. "Keeping them separate was more important. If Divakaruni talks... "

"I don't think it's a problem, Sir." The masked man held up the mangled remains of the wire and transmitter that they had taken from Nightwing earlier. "Without evidence, there's not much he can do."

"Your first sentence was four words too long," Sewell snapped. "You didn't think. That's the whole problem." He sighed. "Alright, take me to them. Let's see what we can salvage."

The cell door opened. Robbie Malone broke off the conversation in mid-word and half-rose. When he saw that the newcomer in the three-piece suit was flanked by a half-dozen rifle-toting members of the Order, he settled back onto the stool.

"You guys just keep multiplying, don't youse," he grinned.

Divakaruni met Sewell's gaze squarely. "Hello, Patrick. It's been a few years."

Sewell shifted position, uncomfortably. "I would have wished for better circumstances, Ram."

Divakaruni's tone was neutral. "You seem to have engineered the existing ones, haven't you?" At the younger man's silence, the doctor rose up to his full five feet five inches. "Well? Did you, or did you not pay one of

my students to appropriate my notes? Did you not opt to continue a project that clearly violates scientific and medical ethics to a degree that-

"Ethics have a way of evolving," Sewell said, holding out his hands in a placating gesture. "There was a time when organ donation would have been considered an unspeakable violation of a cadaver, and the alarmists were painting horror stories of poorer patients being permitted to die so that their organs might be harvested for the wealthier. Ten years from now, Senator Gerard might well be seen as a visionary."

"Or a madman," Divakaruni retorted dryly. "I notice you haven't attempted to enlighten the general public."

"Tell the truth, Doctor. Do you really think they have the necessary understanding? How many of them do you seriously think would comprehend what it is that we're trying to do?"

"Enough of them." Divakaruni was emphatic. "Or at least enough of them that you're afraid to divulge the intent of your research."

Nightwing cleared his throat. Both men turned to look at him. "Ya know," he began, trying to stay in character as Robbie, "something about this whole set-up stinks. I mean, youse guys are government types, right? So normally, when it comes ta spending other people's money, ya fill out yer requisitions, ya make it all look kosher, ya remember ta skim a bit off the top for a week in the Caymans." His expression hardened. "Only something long-term, like this top-secret research, well, it's kinda like a sinkhole, ain't it? Ya keep asking fer more and more funding, and it seems ta me the guys handing over yer allowance might start asking more an' more questions about where it's all going. And one of these days, they might just call for that A-word." He smirked. "That's A like in 'audit', not like in 'annuity', by the way. And youse can't have that can youse?"

He sighed, in mock-commiseration. "So where can youse get yer cash? How can youse afford ta set up yer pet scientists in a state-of-the-art lab? Well, youse can always ask fer donations." He shook his head. "No, youse can't. Because the first thing the donors would want to know is why they should pay extra on top of their tax dollars. And the second thing they'd want to know is what the project is. They might even

investigate on their own. And youse can't take the chance that they'll be... um... enlightened enough not ta go ta the press. How'm I doing so far?"

"You're being extremely entertaining," Sewell said. "I'm sure you're much in demand at children's parties." He shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. "Is there a point in all of this?"

"I'm getting to that. See, there just aren't a lot of people or organizations out there that hand over large wads of cash, with about the only question being 'when do we get it back?' In fact," he frowned, and the New Jersey accent vanished, as though it had never existed. "You know something? I can't think of a single *legitimate* enterprise that would hand over that kind of money to you on an ongoing basis. It's also extremely difficult to believe that you would set up your star researcher in a lab in a building owned by one of Metropolis' more notorious drug czars." His eyes narrowed. "I guess you could always plead ignorance and admit you didn't run a background check on the owner. Except that, well, it seems one of your researcher's pet projects found its way into King Snake's arsenal. Now, I make it my business to be aware when a new weapon hits the market, and I can pretty much assure you that your scientific team had a virtual monopoly on that strain of coral snake venom... until King Snake got his hands on it."

He looked at Sewell, who, for the first time, seemed to be a bit rattled.

"So, *Patrick*," he continued, "why don't you explain to me why Fiitawa was so willing to share her results with the Metropolis mob?" He got up, seemingly oblivious to the six rifles now trained in his direction. "See, it's always possible that the public won't see the ethical issues surrounding your research. But the ethics of your boss taking money from organized crime, and supplying the mob with biological weapons, the inherent wrongness in a senator collaborating with a known terrorist organisation dedicated to bringing down the government said senator allegedly represents... Oh, I think they could probably get a handle on those. What do you think, Patrick?"

Sewell stood motionless for a moment. Then, slowly, he brought his hands together and applauded. "Very good, Malone. Or do you prefer 'Nightwing'? I have to admit you've put together a thoroughly

convincing theory. Unfortunately, there's not a shred of evidence to place me here, right now. If you persist in accusing me at a later date, I'll laugh off your allegations as a pitiable attempt to cast aspersions on the senator. Fiitawa's been reassigned; we have reason to believe that Dorance won't be a factor in Metropolis, much longer. Naturally the senator and I are both horrified that an illegal organisation would stoop to abduct a prominent scientist of our acquaintance, but to accuse us of being somehow involved in said abduction? That would be a serious accusation. One you'd need quite a bit of proof to back up."

The way Sewell was talking, Dick thought, it sounded like he planned to keep them both alive. As much as he appreciated the sentiment, Nightwing had to admit that doing so would be an act of sheer stupidity. As the cliché had it, the two captives knew too much to be allowed to go free. Still, he concealed his scepticism as Sewell smiled and held up the wire and transceiver that the Carnelian Order soldiers had confiscated earlier.

"I imagine," Sewell continued, "that that's why you brought this in. We've already neutralised it, of course." He opened his hand and let the equipment fall to the floor. Deliberately, he stepped on the transceiver. "Still, why take chances?"

"Oh, I agree," Nightwing said, making no effort to hide his amusement. "I figured the fastest way to find Doctor Divakaruni was to let your people take me right to him. And, I had to assume that if you guys were smart, you'd search me before you tried locking me up somewhere. So, I gave you something to find." He held up his left wrist, which sported an ornate wristwatch. "And once you did, you stopped looking."

He paused. Then, seemingly speaking to the empty air, he added, "Did you get all that?"

Instantly, Barbara's voice issued forth from a speaker built into the watch. "I got it, the LLU amateur radio club has been broadcasting it, and the local police force picked it up. The cops should be there any second."

Sewell's jaw dropped. "But then... I just... " As he realized the full import of the information that he had relayed a moment ago, his face paled. "No."

At that moment, they heard a voice from outside speaking through a bullhorn. "This is the police. We have you surrounded. Come out with your hands up... "

"How did you get it on the radio?" Dick asked, later.

Barbara grinned. "Basically, I tinkered with the controls so the transmission had enough static to be annoying, but not so much that you couldn't hear what was going on. Then, I knocked on the radio club's offices, and told them that I'd been fiddling with my dial, and started picking up a weird transmission, and was there any way they could maybe make it any clearer."

"And then they heard-" Dick started to laugh.

"They did."

He thought of something, then. Not that it was of serious importance; he could always find another alter ego if this one was compromised, but he had to know. "At what point did they start listening? Did they hear-?"

"They came in around the part where Divakaruni started cussing out Fiitawa." Barbara understood the reason for his apprehension perfectly. "They heard Sewell call you 'Malone', but a surname that common-I think the alias is still safe."

Dick nodded, but resolved to wait at least a month or two before using the identity again.

"So, Nightwing," she teased. "You've destroyed an illegal genetics lab, handed the *Daily Planet* some fascinating computer discs, destroyed a political career, rescued an abductee, and taken down a cell of the Carnelian Order. What are you going to do next?"

Dick grinned. "I'm going to Astroland!"

Barbara laughed. "What?"

"It's an amusement park on Coney Island, Barb." He closed his eyes. "I'm heading back."

"To the Titans."

Dick nodded. "I think I knew this new life as a vagabond was just a temporary thing. I wanted to see if I could cut it on my own. No Bruce, no team, just me and my motorcycle."

"That Bruce bought you."

"Well, yeah." The grin dimmed. "And to answer the question, I can. But I don't want to. It's like I'm back under the big top. I was in the act from the time I was five until I was twelve. Do you know how many times I needed the safety net?"

Barbara looked at him. "No."

"Zero." He chuckled at the look on her face. "Not one time did I ever *need* that net. But I needed to know that it was there, just in case. For the last two weeks, I've been trying to prove that I have what it takes to be a solo act. I do. But each time I have someone along for the ride, I'm glad. Bottom line? I do need to work more on my own. But I need to know that if I get in over my head, I've got a support network out there. So the plan as of now is to go back to New York. But, I think I'm going to be splitting my time between working with the Titans and striking out on my own."

"And school."

"Right." No point in telling her that he was beginning to have second thoughts about school. He was going to finish out the semester, anyway. And after that, who knew?

"Um, Barb... look. When I found out about before, you and Roy, it threw me. I... "

"I would have told you, Dick," Barbara ventured. "But, you made it pretty clear how you felt about me. I didn't want to hurt you. Anyway, it's over, now. Really over."

Dick nodded. "I understand."

"We can still be friends, then."

A warm smile creased his face. "Always."

Heard on radio station WTOP, one day later

"Senator Lloyd Gerard's political career appears to be over. The senator has not been seen since yesterday, when he was implicated in the kidnapping of geneticist Ram Prasad Divakaruni. A preliminary investigation has found evidence linking the senator with both organized crime and the terrorist Carnelian Order. The Senator's office could not be reached for comment. For more on the story, we join our correspondent, Rita Andrews in Loma Linda... "

Metropolis, six weeks later

Perry White was sure that he was halfway to a stroke. Kent and Lane hadn't reported to the office, yet. He *needed* that report on the Genesis Corporation for page three. Page three currently had a large blank space on it instead of a story. It was three hours and twenty-two minutes to press time, and there was a full-page photograph of the Invisible Man on page three, instead of the story! And to top it all off...

"Look! I don't know how you got this number, but I have no idea who... no, I will NOT call my HR department!" He banged down the receiver with an oath. Three minutes later the phone rang again. He let it go to voicemail. The phone kept ringing. He waited for it to stop. It didn't. Finally, Perry groaned and picked it up. "Fine. Tell me again. You're saying that one of *my* reporters is the vigilante known as Nightwing. You do know that Nightwing is based with the Teen Titans in New York, and that this is Metropolis, right?" He felt his temper rising again. "You do realize that the *Planet* has *one* New York correspondent, who, by the way, happens to be a woman? Fine. What was the name again? Hold."

He stabbed the direct-dial button for human resources. "Hi, Viola, I

didn't know if anyone was working in your department, this late. Listen, can you do me a favor and check personnel to see if we have a... 'Robert' or a 'Robbie Malone' working for us? Have we ever cut a cheque to such a person for freelance work? No? That's what I thought. Could you hang on one sec?" He placed her on hold, furious with himself for giving in to the caller on the other line. "First," he muttered, "some moron draws a pair of glasses on a photo of Superman and tries to tell me it's Kent. Now, this idiot thinks I've got Nightwing on the payroll.

"Olsen!" He bellowed, "When Lane gets back, do me a favor? Ask her if she's secretly Wonder Woman? Thanks!"

He returned to Viola in HR. "Viola. Listen, go home. I know those files are a mess, but the streets aren't safe late at night. Go. Call a cab; bring the receipt to accounting, tomorrow. And have a good night."

He disconnected and went back to the first call. "Like I told you the first time, Mister," Perry White snarled, "*there is no Robbie Malone employed at the Daily Planet!*"

He slammed the phone down and went to get himself a coffee.

*It's Independence Day I'm free
And it's a strange place to be
I'm gonna break these chains
Unleash the changes in me*

*I see an endless road
I feel the restless wind
I've lost the fear inside
Cause I've got no choice
But to live or die*

*Suddenly you're in this fight alone
Steppin' out into the great unknown
And the night's the hardest time
When the doubts run through your mind
Cause suddenly you find yourself alone*

Suddenly you find yourself

Desmond Child/ Andreas Carlsson, "*Suddenly*"

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From the same author on Feedbooks

Nightwing #1 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Pt. 1 (of 7): Breaking Down. Exploding from the pages of Detective Comics and Teen Titans! What caused Robin to leave Gotham and strike out on his own? Return to the night that shattered three lives, and spun them in directions they had never before considered.

Nightwing #6 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 6 (of 7): Rolling With the Punches.

Still reeling from the revelations last issue, Nightwing plans to continue on to Loma Linda. But leaving Las Vegas may not be as easy as he thinks!

Nightwing #2 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 2 (of 7): More to Me. Robin is no more! In his place stands Nightwing. He's left Batman and Gotham far behind him... or has he?

Nightwing #3 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 3 (of 7): Decisions in the Dark.

Nightwing's on his own in Metropolis... and he's about to find out that when you wear a costume, even if you don't go looking for trouble, it has a way of finding you!

Nightwing #4 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 4 (of 7): Beyond the Shadows.

Nightwing must fight an enemy he can't see! While he and Grace battle King Snake and the Ghost Dragons, someone from Dick Grayson's past takes a new interest in his current activities!

Nightwing #5 (2006)

Nightwing: The Great Unknown, Part 5 (of 7): Little Acorns. What exactly is "Project Venom"? Dick's off to California to find out. And with Loma Linda only two hours away from Las Vegas,

this might be the perfect time to hook up with a former teammate! Guest-starring the New Outsiders!

Nightwing #8 (2006)

Nightwing: Giants at the Door.

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 6!

Entrusted with a mission from Batman, Nightwing flees Gulag Gotham with the one man Darkseid wants the most: Scott Free! But can the two refugees reach the open city of Metropolis before Deviance the Pursuer catches up to them? It's a pulse-pounding flight out of the frying pan--- and into the fire!

Nightwing #9 (2006)

Nightwing: Rebuild.

In the aftermath of Crisis, Nightwing and Batman are aiding Gotham in its recovery. It's a time for renewal, and reconciliation as two heroes ponder what the future might hold!

Justice League vs. America #2 (2007)

Justice League vs. America: Heroes or Traitors?

The Crisis heats up as the revelation of who or what is behind President Lord's actions comes to light. But an attempt to stop the villain's plan turns sour and the League is wanted more now than ever. And one member takes the ultimate stand for his actions, in the second chapter of this year's big event!

Nightwing #27 (2008)

EVERYTHING CHANGES WITH THIS ISSUE!

Nightwing: Historic Continuity.

A frantic call from Alfred sends Dick speeding back to Gotham to deal with the fallout from Batman's climactic battle with Ra's Al Ghul. The landscape has changed, and Dick will face more than one critical decision before the story's done!

Nightwing #28 (2008)

Nightwing: Twisted Logic, Bleeding Hearts.

There's a serial killer on the loose, and Batman won't rest until he's brought to justice. But will his determination prove his undoing?

Nightwing #29 (2008)

Nightwing: Heart of a Hero

Cornelius Stirk has Batman in his clutches! Robin's hot on the trail, but even if he gets there in time, can he prove a match for Stirk's metahuman powers? Tune in for the thrilling finale... and see!



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