



Nightwing #10
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Nightwing
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Black Friday Blues

Dick shifted impatiently, glancing at his watch. 8:00 p.m. He'd been driving in circles for ten minutes. Christmas shopping was not one of his favorite activities. People were grumpy, stores were crowded, and you could never find that last item on your list. It seemed that half the town was out shopping. Sighing, he shook his head. He should've known better; after all, it *was* the day after Thanksgiving.

He looked at his watch again. 8:15. He'd been waiting for fifteen minutes just to find a parking space. A minute later, he saw an opening and squeezed in past the shoppers and bell ringers. Pushing his way into the store, he stopped. This would be the fourth superstore he'd stopped at in hope of finding Bruce's present. He'd already bought gifts for his Titans teammates and for Alfred. But Bruce... Bruce was a different story. When he was younger, he'd always bought his guardian a tie. He supposed he could do that this year, but he wanted to find something special for him, especially since they'd just recently reconciled.

Wandering through the aisles, he stopped short. Five men, all wearing bulky coats, were lounging by the door, observing the holiday shoppers. Dick scanned the mass of people, his gaze resting on a group of four men standing by the store's other door. They too were wearing bulky clothing. Eyes narrowing, he tried to look like he was browsing the shop, but kept an eye on the first group.

Just then, the automatic doors of the store began to close. People frantically cleared the area. A quick glance showed Dick that the other doors, too, were inexplicably shutting. As he turned back, he saw a little boy, confused, standing right between where the doors nearest Dick would close. Before he could move, a man pushed his way hurriedly through

the crowd, grabbing the child. People shut outside the store were yelling angrily, trying in vain to force the doors open. Inside, trapped customers were stirring uneasily. A woman pushed her way through the crowd inside and grabbed the child from the man who had rescued him, thanking him profusely. Her relieved thanks, however, quickly turned into screams that mingled with those of several others. Dick's lips thinned as he saw that the men he'd been observing earlier had pulled mean-looking guns out from beneath their coats. Several 'customers' in the crowd had done likewise, and were now helping their buddies to round the shoppers into one manageable group. Dick had no choice but to go along, though he inconspicuously positioned himself at the edge of the crowd, near a gunman. The men herded the crowd to one of the two doors. A voice with a heavy German accent, booming over the loudspeakers, gave orders.

"I am now going to open the door nearest to you," the voice declared. Outside, other shoppers had seen the danger through the glass doors and had run away. "Most of you will be permitted to leave." A wave of relief was audible through the prisoners. "However, I will, of course, need to take hostages." Now the crowd murmured uneasily. Dick could hear the amusement in the voice as it asked wryly, "Any volunteers?"

Dick gritted his teeth in frustration, listening helplessly as the terrorists gleefully raided the store's hunting department. The men were conversing both in English and in a foreign language he didn't recognize. Tied up, the teen could do nothing. He'd startled his captors by volunteering to be their hostage when the voice had amusedly asked. He hoped that, from inside the store, he could somehow figure out a way to overpower the terrorists. Also, he figured that if he was a hostage it freed one more person from becoming one. He, along with eight others, was tied securely to a camping chair facing a wall. He could hear the two guards the others had left muttering behind him. The other gunmen must have gone on to a different part of the store, because he could no longer hear them.

Great, he thought. *I only need to take two of them out immediately.* Leaning back in his chair, he considered his options. He wore his bullet-proof Nightwing suit underneath his street clothes. That would help protect

him if he fought the terrorists. Of course, none of his fellow hostages had that advantage, and there was the little problem of keeping his identity a secret. Around him, the other hostages were weeping or praying; some of them were doing both. He sighed. Even if he could overpower his guards without harming the others, this was a major superstore. It had security cameras. And he bet that someone, if not the mysterious Voice, was watching the feeds for anything suspicious.

Without warning, the lights shut off completely. Outraged yells erupted throughout the store as the terrorists suddenly found themselves in total darkness. Dick's watch had glow-in-the-dark hands and, by craning his neck slightly, he could see that it was now 3:00 a.m. He heard a guard behind him, pacing down the line of hostages angrily while muttering in a foreign language. Dick held his breath, hoping that his agitated captor wouldn't take out his frustration on one of the hostages. Grayson was furious that the authorities had risked angering the terrorists. While one guard paced, the other yelled furiously. Then Dick heard static, followed by a reply. He realized that he was hearing a conversation with the police via walkie-talkie. Luckily, the reply was in English.

"The cops are probably using a translator," he thought idly, eavesdropping on the conversation. He learned that the authorities denied cutting the power, and that in fact the whole neighborhood was out. They were trying to fix the problem, they said, and would they just stay calm?

The guard yelled an angry answer, while the other came over and cut Dick's bonds. He cautiously flexed his sore arms, which had been tied to those of the chair for hours. Through the darkness, Dick could just barely make out the guard freeing four of his fellow captives.

"C'mon," one of the guards ordered roughly. "We're goin' to the front of the store."

The captives were made to walk in single file to the front of the store. Dick hated leaving the other hostages behind, but knew he had no choice. He once again positioned himself at the rear of the line, with only the gunman behind him. All at once, he pretended to stumble in the darkness. When his captor shoved him roughly with the gun, Dick

grabbed it with one hand, using the other to execute a karate knockout chop to the terrorist's neck before he had time to fire a shot. Cradling the assault rifle, he immediately took charge.

"Okay," he whispered to the other hostages. "Since the power's shut down and they haven't hooked up the generators yet, we know that they didn't see that on the security cameras. They were releasing us, and there's most likely a guard at the door expecting that. Hopefully, whoever's up there doesn't know how many of us were being freed. It's so dark that maybe if I follow behind you they'll think I'm the guard and won't suspect a thing." He looked contemplatively down at the terrorist, who was still out cold. "We're about the same build," he continued.

"Now, once you're out, tell the police that there are about 15 terrorists that we know of spread throughout the store. Also, tell them they've got some high-powered assault rifles." He peered through the darkness at the one he was holding. "Tell them that at least some of those are Kalashnikovs." A woman in his little group whispered loudly, "A what?"

Dick sighed. "It's Russian. This one's an AK-forty-seven." Squaring his shoulders, he continued. "Make sure they know there's still four hostages under at least one guard in the rear of the store at the hunting department. Okay?"

The still-stunned captives murmured soft replies.

"All right, then." He waved the gun. "Let's go."

The group arrived at the front of the store without any further problems. As Dick had expected, a man was posted at the door. He barely glanced at them as he took a ring of keys out of his pocket to unlock the doors. He struggled to pull them open a few inches and peeked outside. From where he was, Dick could see that the police had been telling the truth. The surrounding city was totally dark apart from the headlights of passing cars.

"We're sending out hostages," the guard yelled through the crack. "Stay back!"

He pulled the door open further and the newly freed captives rushed out. Immediately, the guard pushed the doors closed, locking them. He grunted.

"I knew we should never have taken so many in the first place. Too hard to look after." There was a pause, then, "They said you was gettin' nervous up there with all them hostages."

Dick tried to copy the voice of the guard he'd knocked out. "Yeah, well, what with it bein' so dark, it's hard to keep track of 'em all," he said defensively. He sighed. "Well, I guess I'd better get back." Pulling off his watch, he let it drop to the floor.

"Darn! I need to get the band on that fixed. Help me find it, would ya?" Dick crouched down, pretending to be looking for it. He saw the glow-in-the-dark hands on the floor to his right.

"Oh, there it is, right next to you." He waited until he heard the guard bend over to pick it up before swinging the butt of his rifle down where the man's head should have been. Hearing a satisfying thump as the unconscious man hit the floor, he retrieved his watch, strapping it on securely. He ran back to get the first man he'd knocked out. Then, he took the second man's keys and gun. Using the stolen keys, the teen unlocked the door and deposited the terrorists outside. He locked the door again, not wanting to take a chance on the police storming the place with the hostages' lives in danger. Further away from the doors, he found shelves. Dick stuffed his street clothes behind the boxes on the shelves. Strapping his mask on, he muttered to himself, "Here comes the fun part."

Nightwing began walking toward the hunting department, where the remaining hostages were. There was a crackle, then a quiet, "Nightwing? Can you hear me?"

Talking into the two-way in his collar, he stopped walking. "Yeah, Batman?"

"I've been trying to reach you for hours. Did you just now change?"

Nightwing looked down at his suit, tugging absently at his sleeves. "Yep. Knocked two out already. Four hostages were released. I'm getting ready to go for the others."

"Good. I tapped into the store's security system. I've been watching everything through the cameras. That is, I was watching until I cut the power.

"You-!"

"Yes," he said gruffly. "I made sure the whole neighborhood was out so that they wouldn't get suspicious. I was hoping that you'd have a better chance of getting away to change clothes." Dick could hear grim satisfaction in his mentor's voice as he continued, "I didn't know it'd make them so nervous that they'd start releasing hostages."

"Well, let's hope they released enough. It's not going to be easy trying to get four hostages out of here unharmed."

Batman's voice was grim as he said, "I know. I've been listening to everything through the two-way. Pretty tough situation."

"Have they made any demands?"

"Yes... you didn't know?"

"Of course not! You've heard everything that I have."

"Right." The self-satisfaction that Nightwing had detected earlier was now replaced by embarrassment, which was quickly covered. "The police have been contacted by a man who as yet remains unidentified. He's demanding three and a half million dollars, and a clean getaway. He's said his people will be using the hostages as shields, but after the terrorist are far enough away they will release the captives."

"That's all this is about?" Nightwing said disbelievingly. "Three and a half million bucks?"

"No... they wanted something else," Batman said slowly.

"What?" Nightwing asked, dreading the answer.

"The release of two of Arkham Asylum's more well known residents... E. Nigma and Pamela Isely."

"What!" This time, it was in outrage. "We can't set them free! They're way too dangerous!"

"Exactly. Now you understand why I was so desperate for you to become Nightwing."

"Well, we'd better hope that I can get these hostages out," Dick said grimly, tugging at his sleeves a final time. "'Cause there's no way those villains can be released."

The gunman standing guard over the hostages was nervous. Things had been very quiet, something that, to his mind, was almost as unnerving as an attack. The cops had better release the Arkham villains, or someone was going to get hurt. In fact, after receiving orders to do so from his boss, he'd told the cops that unless they met their demands, he'd start shooting a hostage every two hours. That was... he shined a flashlight he'd stolen off a nearby shelf onto a wall clock... an hour and forty-five minutes ago. He peered at the silhouette of a female hostage, who hadn't stopped wailing since the terrorists had captured her. Yes, she'd be the first to go. Maybe that would help lessen his headache. Next to go, he decided, would be the man that had been trying to bribe him into releasing him for the past two hours. The sudden sound of breathing beside him made the agitated gunman jump a full inch off the ground. "Who- who's there?" he yelled frantically, waving his gun in the direction of the sound.

"Your worst nightmare," a quiet whisper came from behind him. The terrorist swung his gun around, but this time, someone jerked it from his hands. Before he had a chance to scream, a gloved hand clamped over his mouth. He was able to turn his head slightly, and saw the silhouette of a muscular man. At that moment, a series of shots rang out behind them, sounding louder than they actually were in the darkened store.

The hand holding him pulled away, its owner apparently deciding that without his MAC-10, the terrorist was no threat. That was fine with him. Cowering behind the rack of fishing poles, he watched the silhouette perform a graceful back flip onto the top of one of the shelves, knocking boxes of bobbers in the fishing aisle onto the floor.

Several more people came into view, some wielding guns, others empty handed except for the occasional flashlight. Shots reverberated throughout the store, nearly overpowering the screams of the hostages, who, stuck facing the wall, had no idea what was going on. A fight among the terrorists? A police raid?

Hearing the terrified yells, an inspiration struck the guard. Dashing from behind the fishing poles, he ran over to the hostages. As he ran, he stole a glance at the battle taking place an aisle away. The man who had stolen his gun was now kicking, throwing, and flipping the terrorists down with ease. Reaching his destination, the guard produced a switchblade. Holding it beneath the sweaty throat of the woman who had so annoyed him earlier, he yelled above the fray, "Stop! I've got a knife, I've got a hostage, and I'm not afraid to acquaint the one with the other!" He watched ecstatically as the mysterious hero halted, his hand stopping a hairbreadth above the neck of a terrorist in what would have been a knockout punch. Slowly, the figure backed up, raising his hands. One of the braver terrorists came up behind him, swinging the butt of his gun into the back of the man's head. The crack could be heard loud and clear, even over the sobbing hostages.

The guard winced. He retracted his blade before joining his cohorts in staring at the vigilante. He had no need of it now, he knew. That blow could possibly have even killed him. Kneeling down, one of the terrorists rolled the body over while another shined his light down. Now, even the hostages were silent, curious about their would-be rescuer. The light illuminated the vigilante's head. The result was a masked face... oh no. A Cape. And a young one at that. The older Capes always seemed to go on the warpath when one of their protégés was injured. Suddenly, the guard was struck with a terrible thought: what if there were more of them? They could show up as silently as this one had... a fierce-looking man (he hoped he was a man) whose glare alone had unnerved the toughest men... a nearly invincible alien from a lost race... an expert archer/martial artist—and the female vigilantes could kick butt, too.

The same thought had crossed the others' minds, and one of them shined his light onto the masked man's chest, where a symbol was marked. "Oh... " was all he could say.

The guard felt the same way. "Nightwing."

One of the two female terrorists gasped. "You idiots," she shrieked. "We've brought the Bat on us!" As obscure as the phrase, 'the Bat', might seem to some people, everyone in the room, terrorist and hostage, knew that she meant the Batman. Nightwing had been seen frequently with him, and few of the gunmen cared to risk the other vigilante's wrath.

The thought, however, that nobody dared to voice was: what if the rest of them were in the store, waiting?

The man who'd knocked Nightwing out gave a hard laugh. In a heavily-accented voice, he said, "Sheila's right: you're all idiots. Of course none of the other supers are here. Do you really think that they would have let Nightwing here get knocked out like he did?"

The realization brought a palpable wave of relief.

"Now tie him up in case he comes to. I doubt that'll be for a while," he said, observing the blood matted on the vigilante's head. "But with these freaks, you never can tell."

Nightwing slowly returned to consciousness, dimly aware of noises around him. They were quiet... a soft question here, a bit of static from a walkie-talkie there... but the more awake he became, the more the sounds reverberated through his head, nearly overwhelming him. He was aware of a sharp pain at the back of his head. He felt as if his skull had been whacked by an iron bar. Painfully opening his eyes, he saw an assault rifle propped carelessly against the wall, and remembered.

"Oh," he groaned. He recalled stopping the fight, and hearing a terrorist come up behind him. It had been maddening to have to stand there and let the villain strike him, and not to have been able to defend himself. But

he had been afraid that if he had, a hostage would have been killed.

A wall clock was hanging only ten feet away from him, but his vision was so blurry, it was hard to make it out. After staring at it intently for several minutes, he saw that it was now past five o'clock. Horrified, he looked frantically around him, searching for the hostages. They were nowhere to be seen. How could he have been unconscious that long? He berated himself. When he had been led out with the first hostages, he'd heard part of a conversation between the guard and someone on the other end of a walkie-talkie. The orders had come to start shooting hostages every two hours. There'd been time to kill several hostages by now- and he could barely see straight.

"Well, you're awake now, I see." A burly terrorist had noticed him. "It's about time."

Nightwing said nothing. His head was aching, and he was worried about the hostages. Had Batman heard what was happening to tell the police? Was he able to hear the conversation now? He wondered if the sound quality from the two-way was good enough for Bruce to run a voice comparison test to try to ID some of the terrorists. He hoped his radio was still intact. The gunmen had no doubt frisked him, but his two-way was well-concealed in his collar.

"Who else knew you that were coming here?"

Again, Nightwing remained silent.

The man's face reddened.

"Answer me!" His shout made Dick's head ache even more, but the youth still said nothing.

A vicious slap sent him sprawling across the floor. Although his hands and feet were tied with professional knots, he was anchored to nothing sturdy. Nightwing rolled his tongue across his mouth, feeling to see if any of his teeth had been knocked loose from the impact. The terrorist used his foot to roll Nightwing onto his back, then stuck a steel-toed boot on his abdomen. He pushed down slightly, and Dick tried not to wince. He knew what was going to happen next. His tormentor's foot caught up

under his ribs, and he raised it slowly. Dick struggled to keep from gasping; his Kevlar suit offered precious little protection. The man's foot finally rose up higher than Dick's ribs were willing to follow, and an audible crack sounded as several of them broke. This time, Nightwing did gasp, holding his stomach. He didn't know which hurt worse, his ribs or his head. As he was forced to roll onto his stomach, he decided on his ribs. His torturer quickly sliced the rope around Dick's wrists. Then, before the teen could resist, his captor grabbed Dick's right arm and twisted it back and up. Dick gritted his teeth as the man forced his arm into a particularly excruciating position. The man held it there, enjoying his prisoner's pain. He leaned down to face Dick, and the teen, even through his blurry vision, could see his tormentor's glee.

"Now," he said, giving Dick an evil grin, "that you've had a taste of what I can and will do, do you care to answer my questions? If I bend your arm any further, I'm afraid that it will break."

The vigilante's head swam with pain, but he whispered through his sore, swollen lips, "Do your worst."

"Very well."

The last thing Dick knew before he was caught in the sweet painlessness of oblivion was the excruciating agony of his arm as it snapped from being forced into a configuration that God certainly hadn't designed for it.

Dick came to consciousness, and a voice that betrayed an uncharacteristic apprehension, whispering in his ear. "Dick? Nightwing, are you all right? Hello?" There wasn't a spot in his body that wasn't aching; he was in utter agony. Not wanting to give away the news that he was connected to the outside world, he didn't answer Bruce's soft questions directly. He groaned as he opened his eyes, both of which were swollen from more of the terrorist's interrogations. They'd retied his hands and feet. He wished that he could flex his sore limbs- except for his arm, of course. He couldn't quite bite back an exclamation of pain as he accidentally jostled his arm trying to squirm into a more comfortable position. This started a new volley of questions from Batman, as he shifted around a new spasm of pain. Forcing the words through his sore jaw and cracked,

dry lips, he said, supposedly to himself for the benefit of any guards or bugs, "Oh... take it easy there, Nightwing. Nice and easy."

"Nightwing, I heard everything. Are you all right?"

Dick pressed a hand over his ribs. Since the earlier torture session had broken quite a lot of them, he was miserable when he was conscious. He groaned. "That's gonna be sore for a while."

"Nightwing, the police have agreed to release Riddler and Poison Ivy. They've decided a raid poses too much risk to the hostages."

"How many?" Dick mumbled. To all others, he appeared to be counting cracked ribs.

"How many what?"

"Oh... " the youth groaned. "Man, that last attack just about *killed* me," he said, putting a slight emphasis on the word.

"I'm going to assume you're asking how many hostages were killed," Batman stated, grunting. "The answer is 'none'. The terrorists claimed that they suddenly felt generous and decided to give the authorities more time-probably because of your appearance. The police don't know anything about that, by the way. Since they've been holding up the store for three days, we weren't sure how much time we had left until the terrorists contacted the police this morning."

Nightwing looked up, warned by the sudden creaking of the door that someone was coming into his 'cell', formerly the store manager's office. Four terrorists entered, three of them clutching assault rifles. They watched him nervously as though he might suddenly attack them. The fourth one dragged Dick roughly to his feet. Their apprehension amused him, in a way.

"It takes that many of you goons with assault rifles to guard me? After you've broken my arm and cracked my skull and ribs?" His voice was hoarse as he taunted them. He had to let Batman know what kind of shape he was in. From his mentor's sharp intake of breath, he'd heard everything.

The guards said nothing, but flanked him as the unarmed one untied him and pushed him along towards a room filled with monitors and old cups of coffee. The screens were dark, since Batman still hadn't restored the power. The electric company was probably baffled. In a swivel chair, a man sat with his back to them. He turned, still sitting, and gave Dick an evil smile.

"Well, Nightwing, I hear from Charlie that you haven't been very cooperative." The man's voice was familiar, Dick realized. It was the same voice that had been giving the orders at the beginning of the attack. He must have been the leader of the group. Charlie, Dick surmised, was probably the name of the terrorist who had 'interrogated' him. "I have to admit, though," he said, taking in the angle of Dick's arm, the way he winced if one of his guards jostled his ribs, and his swollen face, "you've held out longer than I thought you could." He shook his head ruefully. "I should've known better than to try and pump information from a Cape by tormenting his body." Nightwing watched him warily. "No, what I should've done in the first place is to torment your conscience." He raised an eyebrow. "What if I told you that I would kill a hostage every time you refuse to answer one of my simple questions? Could you live with yourself?"

The room spun. Nightwing's head had ached simply from standing up, but even the short walk to the control room had intensified his pain. What should he do? If he answered their questions, then they could learn his identity, or who was helping him, or anything else they wanted. If he didn't, the terrorists would start shooting hostages.

The lights suddenly came on, and the monitors came up amid whirs, buzzes, and beeps. The head terrorist's initial look of surprise look settled into a grin as he observed the room coming to life around him. The grin dissolved into a look of fear and shock as a masked head, teeth clenched in anger, appeared on nearly every monitor in the security room.

"Adolph Shwartz." The severe voice came loudly from all of the speakers in the room.

"Batman?" Adolph was staring, shocked, at the largest monitor.

"You know, don't you, that you have now made several Costumed enemies." Dick could hear his guardian speaking through the two-way.

Adolph laughed somewhat nervously. "Of course! I could hardly expect to demand the release of two of Arkham's worst without drawing the attention of you Capes, now could I?"

"Of course not," Batman agreed. "And of course you couldn't expect to torture one of our own without our noticing."

Schwartzten stared. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. You don't really want Superman as your worst enemy, do you? And that's exactly where kidnapping and torturing Nightwing is going to get you."

Adolph paled. "How could you know that?"

Batman sighed impatiently. "Are you forgetting that Superman has super hearing and x-ray vision?" He leaned forward ominously. "He knows."

Turning red with rage, Adolph sprang from his chair, grabbed Dick by his dislocated arm and pulled the injured teen to him. Dick yelped in pain. Schwartzten pulled a revolver from his belt, and pushed it against Dick's temple laughing hysterically.

"Even Superman wouldn't try anything so long as I've got Nightwing hostage," he crowed. "You hear that, Superman? I'VE GOT NIGHTWING HOSTAGE!"

Nightwing shifted slightly, trying to make sure the tip of the gun was pointed at an angle that would lessen the damage it would do when it went off. He moved slowly, not wanting to startle the madman screaming at Batman's image.

A crackle came over a guard's radio. "We're almost there with Isely and Nigma," a voice, probably a policeman's, announced. "Why don't we exchange them for hostages at the front door?"

Adolph considered, then told the guard, "Get the hostages and make the exchange." The guard was startled.

"But sir," he began.

"Just do as I say!" The madman's finger tightened on the trigger. Dick had been able to inconspicuously turn his head slightly so that the tip of the gun pointed a little more to the front. If it went off now, the bullet would graze him and slam into one of the many screens currently displaying the Dark Knight's image. Still, he didn't want to take any more chances than absolutely necessary. As the guard began to leave the room, Adolph gave him one more instruction.

"Tell them that I've got Nightwing as hostage, so they shouldn't try anything." The guard nodded, then hurried out to complete his boss's orders.

Adolph turned to largest screen. "Tell me who you are or I'll shoot," he addressed Batman's image.

"Batman." Bruce was short. *He's worried*, Dick realized.

Nightwing looked at one of the screens. This one didn't show Batman, but a bunch of nervous hostages flanked by several armed terrorists. They were at the front of the store, standing near a set of doors, obviously waiting to be exchanged. Dick had to be sure the hostages were safe before he tried anything.

"That doesn't tell me anything," Adolph said. He appeared to have calmed down a little now that everything was going smoothly, though Dick knew that could change in an instant.

"What do you want to know?" Batman knew, too, and was stalling, while trying to keep him happy.

Nightwing glanced at the screen featuring the guarded hostages. Apparently, the group had noticed something through the glass store doors, and were motioning to something on the other side of them.

"Your name, for starters. And Nightwing's, too," Adolph stated calmly.

Batman hesitated. The last thing he needed was someone-especially this madman-finding out his identity. On screen, his mouth twitched furiously in indecision.

On the other screen, the doors were open and the exchange was in progress. The hostages were elated, the villains cool, and the cops and terrorists wary.

"I-" Batman stopped. Ever since he'd begun his career as Batman all those years ago, he had been able to conceal his identity. He had drilled that practice into a twelve-year-old boy's head, before allowing Robin to join him on his nightly patrols. This could endanger not only himself, but his son... and Alfred... but if he didn't, he might lose Dick forever.

Schwartz's temper began to flare at Batman's obvious reluctance. The man's finger tightened on the trigger.

"Tell me!" He bellowed.

On screen, the exchange was now over, and the terrorists, Nigma, and Isely were leaving the front of the store.

Dick's life was more important than the cowl. Batman growled. "I'm-" He was cut off as a bullet blasted into a screen. Nightwing had dodged it, and the trigger-happy guards now sprayed bullets in all directions. Adolph's bullet shattered the screen of the monitor he'd been addressing, and the glass exploded. Dick stuck his leg out, tripping the madman, who crashed to the floor. Taking the butt of the gun Schwartz had dropped, Dick slammed it into the villain's head with his good arm, knocking him out. Nightwing felt several bullets hit his Kevlar suit as he crawled on the floor through the glass, cradling his sore arm.

"Dick, what's happening?" Batman yelled into his ear. "Dick, answer me, now!"

Nightwing ignored him. He was having trouble staying conscious, and he wanted to escape before he fainted. Directly in front of him, a terrorist fell, shot by one of his own comrades. Nightwing moved around him,

intent on reaching the door. He got there a minute later, and heard hurried footsteps and shouted orders coming closer.

Reinforcements, he thought wearily. But the people storming the room wore police uniforms, and they were rushing the terrorists. Nightwing felt his face. His mask was missing. Charlie had taken it off him during their first interrogation. He grinned a little.

At least one good thing came of those beatings, he thought. *Even without my mask, my face is so messed up I doubt they'd recognize me.*

Grabbing hold of a stack of boxes, Nightwing struggled to pull himself up. With his good arm, he delivered a hard left punch to the gunman nearest him. Unable to do anything fancier, he brought his leg up to connect with the terrorist's chin. He clutched his protesting ribs as the gunman slumped to the floor. Recognizing several of the officers who now crowded the room, he pushed his way through, heading for the exit. An officer stopped him.

"Nightwing, are you- are you okay?" The young officer stared at the vigilante.

Am I okay? Dick thought. His skull was cracked, he sported a broken arm, and many of his ribs were fractured. His face was swollen and bruised from the beatings he had received, and blood streamed down his face from where Adolph's bullet had grazed him. He was aware that his suit was ripped and bloodied in several places, and he was fighting dizziness that threatened to overtake him.

He gave the officer a lopsided grin. "I'm alive, and that's all that matters. Right now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go have dinner, then meet with a friend of mine."

The officer looked incredulous, taking in his appearance, then laughed. "Sounds good to me. But I'll escort you to the door to be sure no one tries to stop you."

Nightwing was too tired and weak to protest. Outside the store, Batman was waiting for him. Dick opened the door to the Batmobile, and

collapsed in the passenger seat, exhausted. Batman had to get out and close the door himself before heading to the cave.

When they got there, Bruce had to half-drag, half-carry Dick in. He got out medical supplies, while Alfred, wanting to give the younger men some time alone, went to get some leftover turkey from their Thanksgiving Day feast. Although he'd known that Dick had been hurt badly, Bruce hadn't been prepared for this. With clenched jaw, he helped Dick to an examination table, and, without waiting for Alfred, began to treat his wounds. As he was taping his ribs, Dick came to and gave Bruce a weak smile.

"Hey, Bruce, I'm okay. We did it." He inhaled sharply as his guardian began to rub medicine into his wounds. Batman winced inwardly—one of the hardest parts of being Batman, he thought, had always been treating Robin's injuries—setting his broken bones, bandaging his cuts.

"You almost died." The first words he'd spoken since they'd arrived.

"That comes with the mask," Dick replied easily. "You can't have this job and not expect there to be risks. I mean, you were Batman for years before I even started to train as Robin, so you know what I mean."

"I know that," he snapped. "But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Dick smiled. "I knew there were risks when I first signed on as Robin. And I came out fine," he said. He chuckled at Bruce's stare. "Well, alive, anyway."

Sighing, he laid his head back.

"I know you did what you had to."

It was as much an apology as the teen would ever get, Dick figured. As he started to reply, Batman interrupted him.

"While you were in there, I was... listening. I heard the guns going off, their threats—and later... I heard them... torturing you." Bruce turned

away from him. "I could hear you cry out when they beat you, and it was as if it was happening to me." He gave a short hard laugh. "I would rather it *had* been me than to have listened to you going through that."

Dick was silent for a moment, nearly stunned by his mentor's unusual display of emotion. "Bruce," he began. "You, Babs, Alfred... you're all my friends. More than friends. You're... family." Batman turned to look at him. "When you fired me, I was furious, and hurt. It wasn't until later that I understood that you'd done it because you were worried about me. I understand that, now. But I also know that it's my own decision whether or not I put my life on the line. Personally, I'd rather die helping hostages escape than die from food poisoning, or being hit by a car or something." He grinned. "I'm making a mess out of this. What I'm trying to say is, that we're all going to die sometime-and I consider myself blessed to be able to help people like this. I think I have a duty to use my abilities to help people." He smiled. "Regardless of whether I die or not."

Batman was frozen for a moment, then he nodded. "We'll have to get Leslie to take a look at that arm," he stated abruptly. Brusquely, he turned to the tray Alfred had brought in. Dick gratefully observed the glass of milk and a sandwich made from the leftover turkey. "I know you haven't eaten in days," he said gruffly. "So eat up."

He was right-Dick was starving. Hungrily, he reached for the sandwich, opening his mouth to take a bite-then winced. Putting down the sandwich, he said, "Thanks, Alfred, but," He rubbed his sore jaw. "Do you think you could just make me soup?"

FIN

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