

snakes and snails and puppy dog tails

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snakes and snails and puppy dog tails

by [irnan](#)

Summary

In which Bruce Wayne discovers it's never a good idea to go up against his children when puppies are on the line.

Notes

Starts out serious and then devolves quite rapidly into utter, pointless crack. I'd already written this before it occurred to me to actually, you know, look up the canonical history of Ace the Bat-Hound, who stuck around till No Man's Land apparently, but I like this version better. *sulks*

“What the *actual fuck* am I supposed to do with a puppy?”

Bruce doesn't actually jump – he knew someone had come in – but he's surprised that Dick's security system isn't up to keeping Jason out, he genuinely is, and he's torn between a twitch of pride at one son and annoyance at the other; at least until Jason leans over the workstation he's standing at and waves a sheaf of papers in his face: the documents for the Great Dane puppy Bruce bought him.

“What, no answer!”

“It's a puppy,” says Bruce, feeling confused. “You feed it, you walk it, you take it to the park and play fetch...?”

“Are. You. Serious.” Jason grates out.

“It’s a puppy,” Bruce says again. “They don’t come with more detailed instruction manuals!”

“Bruce,” says Jason. “Bruce, listen to me, OK, listen to me very carefully, for once in your life, I can’t take care of the damn thing. I live on the top floor of a comparatively run-down tenement building with a stack of secondhand books and a closet full of guns, OK, it’s a Great Dane, do you know how big they get!”

“You got on fine with Ace,” says Bruce, exasperated.

“ACE WAS DICK’S DOG!” Jason bellows back. “Just like the room was Dick’s and the costume was Dick’s and your whole screwed-up fantasy about who I was and would be was modelled on Dick, OK! And, you know, you seriously think I don’t remember that time when you had Ace put down while Dick was out of town and *forgot to tell him*, seriously –“

“The dog had cancer,” says Bruce, “I couldn’t in good conscience –“

“SCREW YOUR CONSCIENCE,” Jason yells, reaching up with one gloved hand to push his hair back while he shouts. Something about the way it hangs, shaggy, over his ears and forehead makes him look as young as he is: barely three years older than Tim. “I DON’T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT YOUR CONSCIENCE, and what’s more I bet Dick doesn’t either! You forgot to tell him you killed his dog, you cannot seriously think I’m gonna let you buy *me* one!”

“It’s not the same,” says Bruce.

“You’re damn right it’s not the same,” says Jason. “For one thing, you never had to throw me out of the house, did you?”

The boy’s not an idiot. He knows exactly how close he is to getting punched. Bruce closes his hands into fists, as if that will help, as if it’ll stop the guilt and the hurt and the bad memories.

“That’s *enough*,” he snaps, (always) preferring angry over defeated. “Do what you want with the dog, Jason, put it out in a cardboard box by the roadside, I don’t care. Do what you want. You always have.”

Jason’s face twists. “I sure as hell had a good teacher in the fine art of self-pity, didn’t I? What, you think I’m pathetic enough to take this” – he gestures between the two of them – “out on some harmless puppy?”

“You took it out on Tim quick enough!”

Really, he might as well have slapped him. Jason’s face closes down: the anger is parcelled away and locked down tight. Bruce feels a frisson of... almost fear.

He can handle his sons’ anger: Dick’s, Jason’s, Tim’s, even Damian’s. He’s never had to handle Cassandra’s, not in that way. He can’t quite handle it when they shut themselves down like this, when they throw his own attitudes back in his face. Like being confronted with a mirror, he sees a sheet of glass, no cracks or handholds to use in order to push back.

His sons shouldn’t look like that. (They’re supposed to be better than he is.)

Jason says, “I did. I’m not proud of it, which I’m sure you don’t believe. But Christ, Bruce – at least I was honest about it. Ten years later, you’re still standin’ there kidding yourself that taking me in was some selfless act of charitable nobility instead of your own fucked-up selfishness.” He

waves the documentation for the puppy again. “Don’t ever do anything like this again. Don’t come *near me* again.”

Bruce reaches for him anyway. “Jason – Jay, lad –“

Jason pulls away, stony-faced, and marches out. This is not – this isn’t – no. Bruce didn’t want – this is not the last conversation with his son that he –

Tim and Cass are in the garage; Jason marches right past them, heading for his bike. Bruce doesn’t quite dare to actually touch Jason to stop him.

“Hey, Jay, how’re you doing,” says Tim, and goes ignored.

“*Jason*,” Bruce says again, urgent and afraid. He reaches out, hands open, as if to touch, as if waiting for Jason to – to what?

Jason spins back around to face him. “What part of *shut up and stay away* is it that you’re suddenly having trouble with? Cause it seems to me that it’s been working for you really well lately, you know?”

“Jason, I meant for the puppy to –“

“Wait, what?” says Tim. “Hey! You bought Jason a *puppy*?” He throws himself between them, his back to Jason, Dick’s old Hudson U sweater hanging off his narrow shoulders. Bruce knows that expression: obstinate as a mule, shaded with indignation.

Bruce and Jason both jump, both stare, completely derailed.

“I bought him one of Titus’s litter-mates,” says Bruce finally.

“You bought Jason a puppy,” says Tim. “So Dick got a dog and Damian gets a dog but I don’t?”

The whiny edge to his voice seems to shake his brother out of his anger; Jason rolls his eyes disgustedly, but he sounds less furious when he speaks. “You can have mine, Replacement, I swear to God.”

Tim twists to glower at him. “Thanks, assface, but no thanks, I think I’ve spent enough time running around this town in your unwanted cast-offs.”

Genuinely shocked, Bruce says, “Tim!”

Jason’s jaw drops open, utterly amazed. “Cast... offs?” he splutters. “*Unwanted?*”

“I want a dog too,” says Cass from the sidelines. “I’ve never had a pet.”

Bruce says, “*What.*”

He’s beginning to have an uncomfortable suspicion that he’s being *played*.

Cass crosses her arms over her chest. “What’s your problem with getting girls dogs?”

“*I don’t* –“ says Bruce. “What!” He narrows his eyes at the pair of them. Tim glares at him. Cass cocks her hip and raises her eyebrows. Surely not. Surely not these two. Next to Dick, they are the least likely people to ever try and –

But then again, Dick.

“All right,” says Bruce, suddenly exasperated by the whole situation. God almighty, you try to do one small thing for that boy and it turns into a family-wide clusterfuck. “*Fine*. The breeder’s out in Gotham County. Come on.”

“Hang on,” says Tim.

“No!” says Bruce, ruthlessly quick. It’s always a bad idea to give your enemy time to regroup.

“No, no, you wanted a dog, your sister wants a dog, *you’re getting the dogs*. Jason, are you coming or not?”

“I don’t – “ says Jason, and almost trips over Titus when he turns around again. “Oh, for –“

“What’s going on?” Damian demands, planting his fists on his hips. “What’s Todd doing here?”

“We’re going out to Gotham County to buy another couple of puppies,” says Bruce, heading back into the other room to grab his coat. “Jason can give his back at the same time. We’ll take the limo –“

“What’s wrong with the subway, like any other normal human being?”

“For God’s sake, Jay,” Bruce snarls. “Fine! We’ll take the subway. Tim, Cassandra –“ He points, imperiously, at the elevator doors. “Damian, if you’re coming you’ll put a lead on Titus, *now*. Jason...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t actually miss this for the world,” says Jason gleefully.

“Why am I not surprised,” Bruce mutters. “Listen, all of you, I want it understood that Alfred will *not* be looking after the dogs, understand, they’re your responsibility alone.”

“Bruce, you know we’re adults here, right?” says Tim as they pile into the elevator, and Bruce skates very, very close indeed to bursting into uncontrollable Joker-like hilarity. “Except for Jason, obviously.”

“Oh look, Boy Killjoy tried for a joke,” says Jason. “Be still my beating heart.”

Bruce punches the buttons on the elevator controls with ten times more force than necessary and resolves to ignore them. He’s had practice. This can’t possibly be worse than Booster and Ted.

Hell, it isn’t even so bad: his youngest four in a subway carriage in broad daylight for over half an hour, wearing civvies, not fighting, unless verbally...

They might even decide they like each other.

As far as Bruce is able to tell, they don’t decide they like each other.

The subway ride is awkward to say the least. They pile into a four-seat compartment, Cass and Tim opposite one another at the window, Damian wedged between Cass and Bruce, with Titus at his feet, and Jason and Bruce both half in the aisle. Jason’s lost a lot of muscle mass, hasn’t he? His shoulders have narrowed; he’s still taller, of course, than any of his siblings, but he’s lankier now than he was when he – when he first came back to Gotham. It suits him better, Bruce thinks.

Then he does a double-take.

“Dude,” says Tim, with that horrific surfer-lazy inflection he’d picked up from Conner bloody

Kent when he was about fifteen. “Is there something moving in your jacket?”

Jason huffs. Then he reaches up and undoes the zip of his bomber jacket a little more. “She’s a lot smaller than Titus,” he says.

It’s true, she is, a snuffly little thing all tail and big floppy ears poking out from the neck of the jacket. Cass makes a noise that, in Steph or Babs, Bruce would have called a squeal.

“You’re lovely!”

“She’s adorable,” says Tim enthusiastically, and scratches her ears. Jason even lets him.

“Not a state of being Titus has ever aspired to,” says Damian snidely. “Is it, Titus? No, it isn’t.”

“Oh, the mandibles of death over here –“

“Yes, he’s got mandibles of death, Damian –“

Bruce bites down hard on the inside of his cheek as Tim and Jason glare at each other.

The Gotham County subway station isn’t all that far from Tim’s childhood home, nestled into a little outpost of suburbia next to a post office and a place that used to be an ordinary greengrocer’s but is now... well, still a greengrocer’s, but apparently far greener than the last one?

It’s a sunny afternoon, which doesn’t exactly suit the mood of the party. They’re about twenty minutes’ walk from the Manor. Bruce hasn’t been back there in weeks.

Halfway up the subway escalator, Damian – staggering under Titus’ weight – says, “Has anyone thought to ask *Grayson* if *he* wants a puppy?”

“I’m pretty sure your brother’s got more than enough trouble on his hands as it is,” says Bruce, surveying the company before him with a jaundiced eye: Jason in combat boots, the puppy nudging at his chin, Tim’s oversized sweater and the holes in his jeans, Cass’s leggings and red, worn-down sneakers. GCTV has voted Bruce Wayne the best-dressed man in the city on an on-and-off basis for twenty years; he doesn’t understand why the only one of his children who *doesn’t* habitually dress as if he put his clothes on in a pitch-dark room full of charity shop donations is the eleven year old. He knows for a *fact* that Tim at least has dress sense. He just never bothers to employ it outside a boardroom.

“Not with *us* he hasn’t,” says Cass.

Jason laughs so much he almost trips over getting off the escalator.

“Mr Wayne!” says Cordelia Kennedy. “Is...” she leans a little sideways, staring at the teenagers parked on her porch steps behind him “... there something wrong? The puppies?”

“Not at all,” says Bruce. Behind him, Damian is playing with Titus on the sidewalk; Jason’s rubbing his pup’s ears and murmuring to her, Cass gives Kennedy a little wave, and Tim, two steps below her, bestows upon her a brilliant smile. “I’m going to need two more,” Bruce says, gesturing at Cass and Tim.

“Oh!” says Kennedy, and grins.

There are days when Bruce could swear the entire world is in conspiracy against him.

“If you name yours BG I swear I will take all your patrols for a month and not kill anyone,” says Jason.

Tim barely misses a beat. “Done,” he says, shuffling the newly-named BG into the crook of his left arm so they can shake hands.

“I approve,” says Cass, grinning. “Jay, what are you calling yours?”

“Hmph,” says Jason. “Jack.”

“It’s a bitch,” says Bruce, unable to stop himself despite a twist of relief. At least if Jason’s named the little blighter he’s not likely to give her back.

“What difference does that make?”

“Oh, none I’m sure,” his father mutters, beating a swift strategic retreat. “What about you, Cass?”

“I don’t know,” says Cass. “What do you think I should name her?”

“I don’t think *you* should name her,” says Tim immediately.

Cass sticks her tongue out at him. “Dick says it’s a good name.”

“It’s a tautology,” says Jason. “Besides, Dick couldn’t name anything if you paid him.”

“Nightwing’s a pretty cool name,” Tim points out.

“It’d be even cooler if he’d come up with it himself,” says Jason.

“Well, who came up with it then?” Damian demands belligerently.

“It’s a Kryptonian myth, ninja kitten. Superman gave it to him.”

“How would *you* know?”

Bruce wouldn’t mind knowing that himself. He’s never asked Dick about the whys and wherefores of Nightwing. He’s always reckoned he forfeited that right around the time he realised how angry Dick was that he’d given Robin to Jason.

“Um,” says Jason. “Cause I asked him once and he told me? Hey, newsflash, grasshoppers. He was *my* brother *first*.”

Damian draws his lips back in a vicious snarl.

They’re about to leave, puppies and all, when there’s a shower of indignant yipping; another puppy comes tearing round the corner of the house and jumps up at Tim, who staggers in surprise and almost knocks Damian into Jason.

Bruce sighs.

“Sorry,” says Tim, straightfaced.

“Oh, Ash, heel,” says Kennedy. “I’m so sorry, everyone.”

“Ash?” says Cass.

“Because he’s lighter than the others,” says Kennedy, smiling.

“Is he the last one?” Cass asks.

“That’s right. I think he’s a little protective. Aren’t you, Ash?”

Ash strains at her restraining hand on his collar, clearly aiming for Titus, who wags his tail at his littermate enthusiastically. Ash whines, and jumps up a little on his hind legs, and then lies down, head on his paws, tail tucked in, when Kennedy refuses to let go. It’s clear he understands he’s being left behind. It’s equally clear he’s upset about it.

Bruce stares at him. Then he glances up and finds Damian glaring at him. So is Cass.

“Oh, for –“

“We can’t leave him!” says Cass.

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” says Damian. “It’d be different if you could trust Grayson to leave the house unsupervised, do you not remember what happened with that mirror business?”

Tim says, “It’s a cute dog.”

And Jason, who of all of them knows exactly how to twist the knives Bruce has set for himself over the years, says dryly, “You could even pretend to yourself that it’s an adequate apology for putting Ace down.”

“I apologise in advance if I’m back here in a week because my eldest doesn’t want it,” Bruce says to Kennedy.

She brushes her grey hair out of her eyes, laughing. “I don’t think you will be,” she says. “Your Richard – and Jason here – always struck me as the type of boy who *needs* a dog.”

“Ha!” says Jason.

“Jack’s a good name,” she says merrily.

Jason sighs. “Yes, ma’am,” he says.

Is the woman *magic*?

Dick hadn’t meant to fall asleep on the couch, but the penthouse was empty for a change, and it had been a long week. He wakes up a few hours later to a sudden weight on his chest and the sensation of being sniffed at.

“Damian,” he says, prying his eyelids open. “Get your dog –“

“It’s not my dog,” says Damian, grinning.

Dick turns his head. The blue Great Dane puppy surveys him curiously from where it’s squashed between the back of the couch and Dick’s side. There’s a steady *thumpthumpthump* in the vicinity

that Dick slowly realises is the little thing wagging its tail at him.

“Uh,” he says.

“His name’s Ash,” says Damian. “You’re welcome.”

“You bought me a puppy?” says Dick blankly.

“No, Father did. Thanks to my intervention.”

“... oh,” says Dick, still staring at Ash. Cute little bugger. So was Ace, of course.

There’s a silence. Then Damian says, “Grayson, if you don’t want him –“

“No,” says Dick suddenly, and concentrates very hard on blinking. “No, Dami, I want him. Did you buy him from Ms Kennedy?”

“Yes,” says Damian.

“Nice,” says Dick. Who knows, maybe it’s Ace’s great-grandson. That’d be cool. He sits up, carefully; the dog climbs into his lap. “Hey, Ash. There you go! Ash. Sit, Ash.”

Ash does no such thing: he jumps up instead and licks Dick’s chin.

“Todd named his Jack,” says Damian. “And Drake’s is BG. Cain hasn’t picked a name yet. She probably won’t even bother.”

“Cass isn’t really bothered about names,” says Dick. “Wait, Jason got a puppy? Tim *named his BG?*”

“The whole rotten expedition was his fault,” says Damian disgustedly.

Dick stares at him in amazement for a minute or two; then, still feeling a bit like someone’s just hit him with a blunt instrument and he hasn’t quite worked out which way is up yet, he starts to laugh.

“So what you’re saying is, you totally outsmarted yourselves,” says Conner.

“Yes, OK, fine,” says Tim. “We totally outsmarted ourselves. Now will you please come over here, Cass and me need a crash-course in dog-owning.”

“Allow me to fetch my faithful assistant,” says Conner. “The show will begin when everyone’s seated.” He hangs up and slouches out into the hall.

“MA!”

“Yes, dear,” says Ma dryly. She’s in the back garden but she doesn’t raise her voice.

“I’M GOIN’ TO TIM’S, HE’S GOT HIMSELF A DOG!”

“Oh, that sounds lovely!” says Ma. “Take him some apple pie, too.”

Conner packs the apple pie and heads out, whistling for Krypto as he takes off.

Barbara's elbow-deep in an operation for the League when her boyfriend calls; she snaps the speaker on with a plunge of the blunt end of her pencil and says, without looking up from the screen, "Sweetie, I thought I asked you not to bother me while I was working."

"Oh, I know, I know," says Dick, warm, affectionate voice rumbling down the phone line and making her insides go gooey. Ugh, he's the worst. "I just wanted to check –"

"Yah?" says Babs.

"You're OK with us having a dog, right?"

"... is this a build-up to *let's move out of our respective towers and get a neat little picket-fenced place in the 'burbs*? Cause we *could* do that but I don't know where we'd put your gym equipment. Or, come to think of it, your little brother."

"I feel it's my moral duty as your boyfriend to inform you that Tim's apparently named his BG," says Dick.

Babs says, "What."

"The puppy."

"What puppy?"

"The puppies Bruce just bought everybody this afternoon. Pay attention, love."

"Bruce bought everyone puppies?"

"Yep."

Babs is silent for a long while. Then she says, "Did you check –"

"Yes."

"And if –"

"That too."

"No substance –"

"None whatsoever."

"Oh my God."

"Babs," says Dick. "I don't believe it either, but it's true. *Batman's got mellow.*"

Barbara says, "I'm gonna have to call you back."

"Don't bother," says Dick. "I'm coming over. With the puppy."

She's still laughing when he gets there.

Over in the Bowery, Tim's sitting cross-legged on the dining table scratching Jack's ears and outlining his patrol route for Jason while Cass pilfers the refrigerator.

“What about just Black?” she asks suddenly.

“No,” her brothers chorus.

“You could call her Dog, though,” says Jason, amused. “That’s got style.”

“Do you ever read too much,” says Tim.

“I got a while of death to catch up on,” says Jason, shrugging.

“Man, you didn’t miss *that* much.”

“I missed the *Star Wars* prequels, actually.”

“You *really* didn’t miss much,” says Cass.

Jason laughs.

“Why on Earth couldn’t you have got them all cats!” says Selina. “D’you know how many strays I have right now?”

Bruce shakes a kitten irritably out of one of the shirts he left here the other week and says, “Alas, yes,” which is an ill-advised statement that takes an hour or so to redeem; not that he minds in the least.

And this time tomorrow he’s going to be patrolling with Jason, or at least, you know, in the vicinity of Jason, armed with a promise that no one will get murdered and a water-tight excuse to talk to him. There’s always *something* going on with puppies.

Not a bad day’s work, all in all.

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