

Tremor

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17395838) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/17395838>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Batman - All Media Types , Batman (Comics)
Relationship:	Jason Todd & Bruce Wayne , Jason Todd & Damian Wayne , Tim Drake & Jason Todd , Cassandra Cain & Jason Todd , Stephanie Brown & Jason Todd , Dick Grayson & Jason Todd
Character:	Jason Todd , Tim Drake , Damian Wayne , Cassandra Cain , Dick Grayson , Stephanie Brown , Bruce Wayne
Additional Tags:	Batfamily Feels , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Father-Son Relationship , Jason Is A Mess , Family Issues , Timeline What Timeline
Stats:	Published: 2019-01-12 Words: 16324

Tremor

by [LueurdeLaube](#)

Summary

Nobody can tell Jason Todd that joking about his own death is not a valid coping mechanism.

Notes

So the new Young Justice episodes have motivated me to finish this up. I started this story way back in 2015 I think??? And I have no idea what has happened in the world of comics since then, whether there has been yet another reboot, whether bruce has adopted like three more kids, i got no clue.

I just hope you enjoy this and please let me know what you think :D

I. Tim

He had no idea what the pretender's business was with him anymore. As far as Jason was concerned, he and Tim Drake could keep going with their respective lives and maintain their mutual dislike for each other. The rage that still surged within him and threatened to gorge at his sanity did not flare up whenever he set his eyes upon the replacement, yet despite some team ups here and there with Batgirl and Black Bat, Jason was fine with keeping his distance. And so were

most of the Bats, even if he could sometimes *feel* Bruce's presence in his vicinity. Bruce had always been a creep anyway.

Red Robin *plopped* next to him onto the very edge of the roof right next to Jason's favourite gargoyle, and if he had had any less control over his muscles, Jason might have actually jumped at the sudden appearance of the pretender. He blinked, already regretting that he had taken off his hood for a brief smoke break (he meant to cut back on his habit anyway), but there was no way in hell he was going to put it on now because he was fucking afraid to face his replacement. Jason took a few long drags from his cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose, casting wary glances at the boy next to him.

There was always a purpose to what Red Robin did and surely, he would eventually speak up instead of doing a spectacular impression of the gargoyle next to him. That, or Jason would just kick him off the roof because he found himself desperate to grab his gun or knife or... or *something*. He heaved a sigh and stubbed the cigarette out, close to the pretender's gauntleted hand. The little shit didn't even so much as flinch. Jason gritted his teeth and willed the acidic anger that bubbled up within his chest to remain buried and stay the fuck away. He really did not feel like starting a fight, not even with this boy.

"So you gonna speak or just sit there and try your best batman imitation?" Jason closed his eyes. He really was not at the top of his game tonight with his verbal barbs.

There was the obnoxious screech of leather as the replacement shifted in place, the rustle of his cape and the soft release of breath. Jason played with the small pocket knife in his right hand; it was still in its sheath, harmless and tiny, and not of much use if Red Robin decided to engage in combat, but Jason had been able to kill people with less than that.

"You and Batgirl took down that drug ring two weeks ago," the Pretender said blandly, as if Jason didn't know about it, as if he hadn't been there to bust that drug ring and almost put a bullet through Sobotka's skull if Batgirl hadn't stopped him and made him settle for busting kneecaps instead. Jason sighed. He really needed to cut back on spending time with the girls so much. He actually minded their presence way less than he expected. Hell, he even enjoyed bantering with Batgirl, and appreciated Black Bat's own brand of quiet sassiness.

"What about it?"

He squirmed again and it was decidedly such un-Red Robin like behaviour that Jason couldn't help but be even more alert.

“How was she?”

Jason cocked his head to the side before he took a moment to *really* look at the pretender. The hunched shoulders and slouch would have made Alfred have a mild conniption at such a poor posture. His eyes were averted, and even behind the pale lenses of the cowl Jason could see they were uncharacteristically unfocused and inattentive. Bruce would be so disappointed.

Jason heaved a heavy sigh. It would be so so easy to take him down now. Alas. He wanted to stay out of trouble for now at least. Instead of whacking the replacement over the head just because he could, Jason instead said, “Why don’t you ask her yourself, Pretender?”

Ah, there it was. The stiffening of the spine, the tight clench of fists as Red Robin raised his chin and gave him a stare, lips pressed into a thin grim line. For a moment it looked like the boy might just get up and leave, and honestly, that would have been perfectly fine with Jason, but then Tim unclenched his fists, long fingers splaying over his knees as Red Robin’s tense expression eased into a *fucking* pout.

“I can’t!” he said between gritted teeth, nails pressing against the fabric of his suit. “Because she won’t talk to me.”

Jason’s mind came to a screeching halt.

What the...

“Wait, wait, wait.” Jason pinched the bridge of his nose because this was not happening. Please, somebody tell him, this was not happening. “Do you want me to play messenger between you and Batgirl?!”

“No?”

Jason’s eye twitched.

“No?”

The little shit sighed then, exasperated and annoyed as if Jason had been the one to start this whole... whatever it was, as if he had actually sought out Red Robin's company instead of the other way around. What an arrogant little--

"Okay look, you've been teaming up a lot lately and I'm worried, not that she couldn't handle you, but... why is she hanging out with you, but avoiding me?!"

Jason could feel the beginnings of a throbbing headache forming just at the left side of his head, and he still wasn't sure if this was happening, if Red Robin was being serious or if he was somehow being pranked. He wouldn't put it past Batgirl and Black Bat to pull such a stunt and talk the replacement into helping them. Maybe they were hiding somewhere and capturing this whole ridiculousness on film.

"And you think I care about your relationship woes because--" A scoff was the only reply he got, and Jason's fingers were skirting dangerously close to the gun that was strapped to his thigh.

"Don't be ridiculous! I don't want your advice, I just want answers."

The insolent little...

Jason took a deep breath and ignored the roaring blood through his veins. "You think I have something to do with your...fallout?" He couldn't give two shits about what Red Robin and Batgirl were doing behind closed doors. For all he cared, she was way out of his league, but he was biased and nobody asked him. Then his eyes narrowed, before he added, "Why don't you ask Dickie-bird or the Demon Spawn? They've been teaming up with her more often than I have."

"Don't be stupid."

Jason could feel his patience running thin. He had been admirably patient this evening, hadn't he? Surely, nobody would be too hard on him if he beat the replacement up a little. Just like one knee cap. Maybe a few ribs, but no more than three.

"I can't ask Dick because he's just going to tease me and make fun of me," he said before he let his voice drop into that annoyingly condescending pitch that was so undeniably *Dick* that Jason felt nearly compelled to applaud his replacement. "*Oh Timbo, sex with the ex, huh? I can tell you a lot about that.*"

“Why are you telling me this?” Jason asked, despairingly, as he slapped a hand against his forehead. He really really didn’t want to know the finer details of these people’s sex lives. “And... wait, you don’t want to talk to Dick about it because he might *tease* you? Kid, I tried to kill you. Repeatedly.”

Naturally, Jason went ignored as the pretender blathered on and just waved a patronizing hand. If Jason wasn’t so annoyed, he might have been impressed at the sheer audacity the replacement was displaying, but no, Jason was pissed, damn it!

“And I can’t talk to Damian of all people about this. He’s a jerk. Also, he is twelve. And I can’t talk to Bruce either because he doesn’t *do* emotions and he has the worst track record ever with relationships. And I can’t tell Cass because Cass will probably tell Steph, and I want to figure this out before--”

“So you actually do want my advice?”

“No! I mean maybe a little?” He rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish and like such a teenager. “You’ve been spending time with her and maybe she said something to you?”

Jason snorted. “Contrary to popular belief not everyone gives away details of their love life during a drug bust, Replacement.” The boy crossed his arms over his chest with a huff, and Jason wondered why he was still humouring the boy. A quiet night was not worth being privy to this teenage angst of bullshit. Why he didn’t just get up and leave and worry about more important stuff like his new job at the grocery store he was going to start next week or the weird ideas that have been forming in his head about his future or what colour he should paint the walls of his living room next.

“Okay, so maybe I shouldn’t have walked out on her that night after we slept with each other. I guess it makes sense she is angry with me now after leaving without a word. Maybe it would’ve been less awkward if I had stayed, even though the whole--” he waved his hands around, a light pink dusting his pale cheeks, “sex was kinda awkward, you know.”

“Oh my God! No, I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. What the fuck do you want me to say?”

“Something useful, maybe, for a change?”

“Okay, that’s it! You want advice? From me. Even though, you know, I missed out some years on

the dating scene because of *reasons* .”

It was so very satisfying to see the little shit’s mouth snap shut with that. Ah, the small pleasures in life. The pretender dissolved into a mix of stuttered apologies and annoyed retorts, but Jason just waved a dismissive hand into his direction before he stood up, his hood clutched under one arm before he roughly patted the boy on his head with no semblance of affection or whatsoever in the gesture.

“Let me impart some *brotherly* wisdom to you, *Timothy* .” Jason bared his teeth in a horrifying grin. “The difference between sex and death is, death you can do alone and nobody laughs at you.”

II. Damian

After the girls, Jason hated the current Robin the least. Really. Maybe it was because the boy was just so audaciously unashamed of who he was and what came out of his mouth. Or perhaps it was because he was the one who replaced Jason’s replacement and that made him automatically better in Jason’s book. The boy also had no filter, refused to walk on eggshells around him and possessed the social grace of a rhino. Jason could only respect that sort of spunk. Also, it was a lot of fun to annoy the hell out of the brat.

Jason was bored and patrol was uneventful aside from a few muggings here and there. So when Robin crashed through the heavens like a Christmas decoration on fire and landed beside him, Jason knew his evening was looking up. The boy quickly curled in on himself before he rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames and rose into an elegant crouch with a haughty huff as his eyes focused on Jason standing tall and amused with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Red Hood,” Robin snarled, tiny fists clenching as he came to stand on his feet. Hazel eyes behind the lenses of his domino mask flickered from Jason’s face to the bodies sprawled behind him on the ground.

Jason smirked.

“Don’t worry, baby bat, they’re not dead. Just a few muggers who needed a good beating.”

The tension in Robin’s shoulders did not ease as he took on a fighting stance. “Since when do you make that distinction?”

Jason felt something sink into the pit of his stomach, something cold and poisonous that felt a lot like something stupid like hurt. What the fuck even. He raised his hands appeasingly, but the brat was not fooled in the slightest.

“Hey now, I don’t kill indiscriminately. These asses--” he poked one of the unconscious figures with a steel-toed boot, “are just that. Assholes. Muggers. All bark, almost no bite.” Robin scoffed and raised his chin, disdain oozing out of every pore of his small body.

“Please, spare me the details of your alleged *moral* code. Everyone knows that in a fit of anger your standards are lax.”

Okay, that fucking stung more than it should. Because Jason did not just kill anyone. He killed the worst of the worst, rapists, serial killers, human traffickers.

“Now, that’s just rude. And untrue. I only kill scum that has no business in walking the earth, scum that the world is better without, scum that nobody is going to miss.”

The kid gave an impressive snort and placed his hands on his hips in a ridiculous attempt to look tall. Give it a few years and he was likely going to shoot up to the height of a tree, considering how tall his father was, but right now the brat just looked stupid and cute with the fleck of soot smeared onto the tip of his nose. And Jason hated himself for thinking that.

“Maybe you should add yourself to that list of scum that the world needs to be rid off.”

This was not how Jason had planned for his night to go. The demon spawn was supposed to be entertaining, not questioning Jason’s morals. There were a lot of things Jason could have said and done in retaliation. He scoffed and gulped the ire within his throat down, and before he knew it, Jason was laughing, a rough, hysterical noise that made Robin flinch before the boy caught himself.

“And here I thought you’d be more considerate towards mommy dearest, but you wanna undo all her good work?”

The boy’s lip curled into a sneer as his hand went for a batarang. Jason had to give it to Talia, her son was insanely quick and strong. The batarang flew at Jason with deadly precision, but they both had had the same teacher, whether Jason liked it or not, and not letting your anger overrule your

judgment was one of the first lessons he had been taught.

Exploit the anger of your enemies, channel your own.

Not that it had done him any good in the long haul. Not that Jason had ever been particularly good at controlling his anger in any shape or form. He dodged the projectile and charged forward, smiling behind his helmet because the demon brat was practically emitting steam out of his ears. Robin clenched his hands into fists, baring his teeth and striking out his hand.

Jason parried his blow with a laugh, raising his leg to kick at the boy, but Robin was quicker, smaller and easily jumped out of his way to use Jason's leg to pivot himself up in the air. Jason grinned, his heart beating with delight, and blocked the boy's kick to grab the laces of his ridiculous, green combat boots. Robin let out a grunt, kicked against Jason's chest, before he grabbed a batarang from his belt to slice off his bootlaces.

Jason stumbled backwards, but caught himself before he could plunge down on his ass like a rookie vigilante. The boy's lips pulled into an ugly sneer that looked decidedly out of place on such a round and babyish face.

"What's wrong, baby brat?" Jason drawled. "Mommy still a touchy subject for you?"

"Don't call me that!" Ah, it was just so precious how he tried to growl, but Damian Wayne's voice had not yet broken, so he just sounded like a broken trumpet. "I was raised and trained by the League of Assassins. I am a warrior, the heir to the Demon and the *blood* son."

At this rate, Jason's face was going to split in two with how much the brat was making him grin. Ah, the kid was hilarious.

"Must have been tough to find out that you're the blood son of the man who doesn't give a shit about blood ties. And that Dickie-bird is still the favourite son."

"You talk too much, Hood." This time it was easier to dodge the batarang the kid aimed at his neck. Robin was becoming sloppy in his anger. Jason was ready when Robin ran at him, the boy's yell high-pitched and angry, "And never call me brat again!"

But then the boy skidded to a halt halfway through his attack, his boots squeaking against worn,

cracked cement. He pressed a hand against his ear and Jason could faintly hear the crackling of the comm. Right. They were all connected by Oracle, a network of crimefighters that were pretty much useless on the long run because Arkham and Blackgate were pretty much useless when it came to containing the more important maniacs.

Robin's eyes remained fixed on him.

Jason sighed, letting his stance relax and raised his arms over his head in a languid stretch. Playtime was over.

"Shit!" the kid hissed, making a grab for his grappling gun. "This isn't over, Hood. But I have more pressing matters to deal with."

"This pressing matter doesn't happen to be the one that set you on fire, does it?" Jason took out his own grappling gun just as Robin was zipping through the Gotham night sky, and followed the boy suit. Might as well see what the commotion was all about.

"What are you doing, Hood? Your presence is not required, nor wanted." Robin kept his eyes ahead, his lip curling into a sneer as Jason caught up with his smaller strides. "I don't need you to distract me from the mission. Again."

"Excuse you, but you could have left anytime you wanted. I didn't force you to stay and antagonize me. I wasn't even doing anything."

"Not doing anything? You were going to kill those people. And you insulted my mother!"

"What?! Okay, first off--" their grappling guns were ready at the same time as they jumped off the edge of a decrepit apartment building towards the roof of a convenience store, "I wasn't going to kill them. And that's like the first thing I told you when you made your dramatic entrance. And second--" The hooks connected with the familiar satisfying *twang* against red bricks as the cords pulled them upwards. "I didn't insult your mom."

They landed a few feet apart on the roof simultaneously, knees bent, weight on their toes. There was a split second of pause when they looked at each other and took in the likeness of their poses, the shape of their crouches, the lower angle of their right knees, the slopes of their spines.

“Your mere presence in my mother’s life is an insult in itself.” Robin’s brows creased even more as he took off again with a huff. Jason grinned, undeterred.

“Oh, that sounds like you’re jealous ‘cuz your mom spent more time with me than-- *oh shit* !”

Jason had only a second to grab the boy by his cape just as the flames came soaring at them from the left. Robin let out a yelp when Jason pulled him out of the trajectory of the fire, his heart jumping into his throat. It was almost beautiful how the crushing darkness was shoved away and the night sky glimmered in hues of red and orange. *Almost* . Because fire had the nasty habit of spreading like nobody’s business, especially if it was controlled by a lunatic with a flamethrower. Nothing was more annoying than a bad guy assuming flamethrowers made for efficient projectiles. Scratch that, there was something more annoying. *Two* bad guys playing around with flamethrowers. Fuck

He couldn’t allow himself to get burned. He couldn’t just call in sick the first week of his new job. Mrs. Jacobson would be pissed.

Jason had never faced off against Firefly or Firebug himself and as far as he was concerned there was no need to fight against these morons more than once.

Several fire-related puns, a charred jacket and nasty concussion later, Firefly and Firebug were down.

“Fuck,” Jason muttered, his vision going hazy. His stomach churned. *Fuck* .

“You are a moron,” Robin said, hands on his hips and Jason had the distinct impression that he was being stared at very imperiously. “I could have taken care of this by myself but you just had to get involved. Look at you now.” Small hands patted the side of his head down. Jason winced. “Now sit still. Let me see the damage.”

“Aw what is that?” Jason said, grinning. “Are you worried about me? Damn, you could knock me over with a feather. Or a crowbar, we know that works, too.”

Damian’s hands froze against his temples. Jason almost felt bad. Almost.

“Tt, yes, please allow me to do just that,” Damian muttered. “Idiot.”

Jason let out a bark of laughter, despite the nausea wreaking havoc in his stomach. He was going to throw up, right onto Robin's combat boots, oh god.

"Hmpf, I think you are fine, but I will call Batman to make sure you don't die on my watch."

Jason's mind screeched to a halt.

"Hell no, you won't." He staggered up to his feet, nearly doubling over.

"Hood, stay put."

"You won't call Batman. Of all the people, seriously?"

He felt sicker just thinking about seeing Bruce again. His heart hammered against ribs.

"Anyway, thanks for the checkup," Jason said, bracing himself against the wall. Reaching towards Robin, he flicked the kid's nose. A whine of outrage came out of his mouth and with a savage grin, Jason slipped into the next alley before Damian could do so much as shout for him to stop.

III. Cass

"No, thanks." Jason crossed his arms and stared Cass down. She had her hands clasped behind her back as she kicked some invisible dust with the toes of her sneakers around. All in all, a perfect picture of a demure, shy girl. Two things that Cass wasn't, and was playing up on purpose to guilt him into this. Manipulative little shits, all of them.

"This is the first time I got the main part," she said as if he hadn't spoken already. She waved her hands around excitedly, a smile blooming across her face as she declared proudly, "I am Clara!"

"She's called Marie in the book just so you know," Jason said just to be a shit and crossed his arms. Cassandra slapped his shoulder.

“This is not the book.”

“Ahem, it’s based on the story the Nutcracker and the Mouse King by E.T.A Hoffmann and--”

“Please?” she asked, brown eyes big and pleading and shit, Jason was not equipped to deal with this. Red Hood, Scourge of the Underworld, bested by puppy dog eyes. Damn it. He ran a hand through his hair and glared down at her. Cassie just smiled back serenely, a victorious glint in her gaze.

“Fine,” he sighed, defeated. “But--” he held up a finger, “Just this once, okay? Don’t expect me to do this again.”

Cassandra shrugged and it had a certain smugness to it as if she could actually convince him to attend more than one of her ballet performances. Hell no. Jason might be curious to see her use her incredible skills on the stage put to different use, but that didn’t mean he actually wanted to risk running into the other Bats during one of her performances, even if she did promise him none of them would be present for the day she invited him. And he believed her because Cass knew better than to try that with him and he appreciated it, really.

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said with a bright smile and Jason felt the rest of his resolve just melt away. She placed a ticket in his waiting palm.

“Me too,” he said and actually meant it. Somewhat. But Cass tipped her head to the side, pleased and happy, and still smiling, so that Jason found himself smiling back at her in spite of himself. He pulled out his wallet and put the ticket inside. “Well then. I’ll see you on Friday.” He gave her a curt nod and a wave before he revved his bike and sped through the streets.

He hadn’t always been fond of Cassandra’s enhanced body language reading. Initially, it had just unsettled him, freaked him out how she knew what he was thinking and feeling and planning to do with just a few glances in his direction. However, as time went on and the more he teamed up with her, he had come to welcome her skills. It was still odd, but it felt less like he was being invaded whenever she looked at him, and more like a conversation that took place on a different level, unspoiled by words and insults and resentment, untainted by his own stubbornness, because regardless of what came out of his mouth, Black Bat could always see right through him.

So when that dreaded Friday came, Jason took a shower and put on his best suit, ironed his white dress shirt and silky black tie, combed his hair back, and polished his shoes. *Might as well blend in*. He ended up taking a cab to the theater district and tipped the driver generously when he got out of the car. Jason just ended up following the mass of well-dressed people who were chatting

animatedly among themselves. It was a little awkward because he was pretty sure he was the only one who had come alone. Well, he was in no position to complain since he'd insisted on it.

He checked his wallet for the ticket for the upteenth time when he walked up the stairs of the Jenkins Center for Performing Arts. It was a massive complex of several buildings and their separate performance facilities. Jason recalled a few trips to the Jameson Beaumont theatre with his class here and there and the one time Bruce had brought him along to the Avery Geffen Hall for the Christmas concert of the Gotham Philharmonic. Jason hadn't been particularly keen about classical music, always preferring the hard edges of rock music, but that one trip had given him a new appreciation for a completely different branch of sound. There had been some redesigns and renovations to the campus during his absence, but the Rosie Robinson Plaza remained largely the same.

Jason's steps were slow and deliberate as he took in the fountain at the centre, lit up in a dazzling soft yellow at the sides. People, dressed in their finest, were mingling about, talking and laughing and chatting. There was a slight twinge in his chest as he looked at his watch. Twenty minutes until Cass' performance was supposed to start. Well, it wasn't like he had to wait for anyone here. As nice as the whole scenery of modern buildings was, so unlike the usual gloomy gothic architecture Gotham tended to boast, Jason didn't really need to stand around outside like an idiot.

He took a turn to the left, leisurely walking behind a young a couple as they entered the building. He had never been to the Garrison H. Cook Hall before and had actually never been to a ballet performance either. The promenade area was bustling with even more people. The heels of his shoes squeaked against the fine inlaid marble floor. God, they really hadn't spared any expenses with this building, had they? Balconies at the sides were overlooking the area, the high golden leaf ceilings nearly blinded Jason with their opulence.

It felt like ages when he finally made his way up the winding staircase with the *golden* railing and passed the large double doors to the auditorium, only to be met with even more flashing and glittering lights, courtesy of the massive rounded chandelier hanging from the ornately paneled gold ceiling. The architect really loved his gold, huh?

Jason checked his ticket again because this place was huge and he had no idea where to he was supposed to sit. Row H, Seat 111. He squinted down at the tiny letters. *Centre orchestra?* Fuck, he was way too high up. It took him another five minutes until he had successfully manoeuvred himself around some slower people and took another set of stairs down and approached what were practically the front row seats in this place. Shit. Maybe he should have brought Cass something? Maybe a bouquet of flowers as a thank you and for a job well done (because she was definitely going to rock this thing). Or some fancy chocolate candies in a pretty box. Fuck, what did people do with events like this?

"Um, excuse me, Miss?" he began, shuffling awkwardly. The lady in the red dress looked up at

him, flashed him a faint smile and stood up to let him through. He nodded at her with a smile of his own. "Thank you."

He plopped into the seat with a sigh, absently watching the orchestra getting ready as the seats slowly but surely were filled up with people. The lights dimmed, the idle chatter died down, and Jason grasped the armrests of his seats in anticipation. It seemed everyone held their collective breaths as the conductor stood at attention, and soon, the lively tunes of violins drifted through the air, the curtains pulled aside to reveal the lavish stage.

Cassandra didn't appear immediately, but that didn't stop Jason from taking in the other dancers with his undivided attention, transfixed and awed. They moved so fluidly, so gracefully, all the while smiling brightly like guests attending a Christmas party would. And when Cass finally did appear, Jason held his breath, letting it rest in his lungs before he released it with one sudden exhale.

She was flawless.

Jason hadn't expected her to be anything less than stellar, but still, seeing Cass dancing like this on the stage, moving with the lightness akin to a feather, elegantly jumping to the tips of her toes, was another experience altogether. But she wasn't wearing a tutu! Aw, and he had been looking so forward to tease her about that. Instead she was clad in a silky, pink, flowy dress of muslin, her movements unhindered. It might be the first time ever that he had seen her wear anything pink.

Cassandra's face as Clara Stahlbaum lit up when she spotted her godfather Drosselmeier, who entertained the children and brought them all neat presents. The fondness on Cass' face did not look fake at all when she graciously accepted the nutcracker from Drosselmeier and danced with it cradled in her arms, eyes shining with delight.

Jason hadn't realized he was sporting the goofiest and broadest of grins until Cassandra was cowering with fright, the mice advancing on her menacingly. He chuckled quietly to himself. Cassandra Cain, Damsel in Distress. An oxymoron if there ever was one.

And when the nutcracker toy was encased in smoke only to be replaced by a boy-man who valiantly fought the mouse king and his devoted followers off, Cass' elation felt all too real. The young prince went down on a knee in front of her, all grace and charm, when he placed a gentle kiss atop Clara's knuckles. Cass smiled, looking positively lovestruck as they danced together. Jason smirked. How romantic.

He filed this particular detail away for later, so he could tease her about the potential crush on her

partner at least if he wasn't reading her wrong, if she was indeed even more talented than Jason thought.

Jason's heart felt light in his chest as the young prince took Clara to his palace in the Lands of Sweets, and the residents entertained the young pair with music and dances. The whole thing was over far too soon, but one glance at his watch told Jason that he had been sitting here for nearly two hours as the music came to an end and Clara, woken from her dream of the young prince in the Lands of Sweets, stared at the nutcracker again, uncomprehending and devastated.

The audience erupted into uproarious applause once the curtains closed and Jason was one of the first to rise to his feet and clap for Cassandra. The curtains were drawn back again, the dancers smiling at the enchanted audience, Cass and her prince standing in the centre. The boy took her hand with a twinkle in his eyes as he brought them both forward and they took a deep bow. When Cass was standing upright again, her eyes caught Jason's in the audience and her smile was so sweet and joyous and *honest* that it made his heart clench.

It was nearly forty minutes later when he was waiting for Cassandra just outside the auditorium. She had texted him to wait for her and she sure was taking her sweet time. He was struck out of his boredom at the sound of excited chatter, and stepped away from the railing of the staircase just as Cass dressed in simple jeans and a shirt, a large bag slung over her shoulder, came through the Staff Only door, accompanied by three other dancers. The boy Jason recognized as her partner, and the two girls as the marzipan dancers.

"Jason!" When Cass spotted him she broke out into a slight jog. The hug was unexpected, but not unpleasant and Jason could only wrap one arm around her waist like a dumbass. She pulled back with a grin, turning towards the other dancers, as Jason distinctly realized *he* was the one in the spotlight. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants.

"This is Jason," Cass said, motioning towards him. "He's my brother."

The word made Jason's stomach lurch and left a bitter taste on the tip of his tongue, yet he couldn't deny the warmth that spread through his chest. She said it without an ounce of irony or sarcasm. And well, it was technically right? Legally, they were siblings. Then again he was also legally dead. Jason always made sure never to use that word seriously or think about it too deeply. Yes, Bruce had adopted him. That was a fact. And yes, Bruce had also adopted Cass. Even if Jason were comfortable with referring to her as his little sister, he preferred not to, because his traitorous mind would whisper that that made Dick Grayson and Damian Wayne his brothers, too, and... the Pretender as well. Jason shuddered.

"Your brother?" One of the girls asked. She was taller than Cass, her skin a dark shade of brown, her black hair out of its tight bun, cascading down her lithe back. "Another one? How many

brothers do you have, girl?”

Her tone was teasing, but not unkind as Cass shrugged, and then the girl turned her brown eyes to Jason. “I swear, it’s like with each performance she gets another brother. But anyway, still nice to meet you. I’m Jessica.” She held out her hand towards him, and Jason shook it firmly, laughing at her remark despite himself.

The other girl introduced herself as Natalie; she was a wispy tiny thing, but her handshake was surprisingly firm and her green eyes were flared with passion and strength. The boy’s name was Misha. Russian if Jason had to guess, but the boy had no noticeable accent. He was tall and broad-shouldered, handsome and charming with his crooked smile, his blonde hair and blue eyes. A perfect prince charming.

Jason was grateful that Cassandra made sure to keep the conversation short and just like that the other three were already saying their goodbyes and praising Cass on another job well done. She gave Misha a shy wave when he smiled at her. Jason’s lips curled into a grin, but before he could utter even one word, Cass elbowed him in the side, scowling up at him.

“Not one word,” she said, jabbing her finger against his chest.

“I wasn’t gonna say anything.” Shit-eating grin firmly in place, he followed her outside. “But damn, Cass, what would Dad say?”

As soon as the words tumbled out of his mouth, Jason regretted them. He slammed his lips shut, heat rising to his cheeks. It had come so easily, too. The familiarity, the casualness. Cass regarded him carefully for a brief second before she huffed.

“I can like who I want.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped with relief, grateful that she wasn’t going to dig deeper into the slip-up. He forced a frail grin on his face, the cool night air pleasant against the warmth of his skin.

“So you *do* like Misha, huh? It’s cool. Your secret is safe with me.” He placed his hand above his heart. “He seems like a nice enough guy.”

There was a subtle shade of pink dusting her cheeks as she averted her eyes to the toes of her worn

sneakers.

“He is... very nice.”

God, she was adorable. Badass, ninja assassin who can kill you with just a flick of her wrist had a crush. Getting flustered and shy and all that. How very precious.

“Also a great dancer,” Jason said, meaning it.

“Yeah, he’s pretty amazing.”

He cracked a smile at that, barely resisting to ruffle her short hair.

“You, too, by the way. You were incredible, Cass.”

She looked up at him, the corners of her eyes crinkling with her joy. “You liked it?”

“Of course. I don’t know how you guys do it, dancing on your toes like that, I know it can’t be easy, but you make it look easy and beautiful.” It felt odd to be so open with his praise. It was easier to hide behind sarcasm and wit, but he had no reason to do so with Cassandra. She could already read him like an open book, he might as well put his sincerity into words.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, fiddling with the strap of her bag. “I’m glad you... enjoyed yourself.”

There was a weird uncertain tilt to her voice, and okay, he couldn’t exactly blame her being doubtful, considering how he had not wanted to attend her performance at first. And blowing her off like that might have been pretty rude. Damn it.

“Yeah, I had a blast,” he said, unable to help it. Nothing like deflecting with a bad joke, right?

Cass remained silent, staring at her shoes pensively, and for a moment Jason thought she might have missed the underlying meaning in his words, but then her gaze shot up to meet his, her deep brown eyes sharp, almost offended as she placed her hands on her hips.

“You’re an ass.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her brows furrowed as she pursed her lips.

“No, you’re not. Ass.”

Jason chuckled and hooked his arm around her neck, pulling Cass towards him and ruffling her hair. She let out an indignant yelp, which made him just laugh harder, but really, there was no way, she hadn’t seen this coming. She pulled away with a half-hearted frown and attempted to smooth down the chaotic mess that was hair now. Five seconds later, she gave up and crossed her arms, saying, “I’m hungry.”

They ended up getting some burgers and fries, a milkshake for him and cola for her. Since it was a very nice night in Gotham for once, they decided to eat outside, both perched on top of a roof. Cass wasted no time and dug into her burger with gusto. They sat in silence for a while; it was nice, companionable, not the kind of silence that made you fidget from the awkwardness.

But it was always like this with Cass. Pleasant. Comfortable. Even though, by all accounts, she should despise him, but there never was any condemnation in her eyes whenever she looked at him. Sure, there was judgement, always judgement, and he was used to that from pretty much everyone. He knew that Cass was pretty serious about the No-Killing rule. She was probably the last person on earth who’d be able to be swayed into killing. He vaguely knew of her story, knew she had been raised to kill and know nothing else by her good for nothing father. A childhood of abuse, of violence and death and yet this is how she turned out. A beacon of justice. Jason rewrapped his burger and put it away, appetite gone.

Cass was already done with both her burger and the fries, and was licking her fingers before she drank the last of her coke through a straw. She let out a burp, instantly clapping a hand over her mouth, as her dark gaze flitted over to him.

“Oops, sorry,” she said, sheepish. Jason sighed.

“Just don’t do that around Alfred.”

She nodded at this with utmost seriousness before she let out a groan and proceeded to unlace the ties of her sneakers. She kicked them off, pulling her socks off right after, and Jason's eyes nearly bugged out.

"Jesus, that looks horrible!" Her feet were covered in blisters and bruises and band-aids. He winced and felt his own healthy toes curling in his fancy shoes. He knew the kind of strain ballet dancers put on their feet had to leave their marks, but *fuck*. "Do your feet always look like this?"

She wiggled her toes and let out a sigh.

"Often... yeah".

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. But I like it! Dancing! I like to dance."

The bleary light of the crescent moon reflected in her dark eyes. She let her legs dangle over the edge of the building, her face peaceful, serene. Jason leaned back, palms flat against the smooth surface of the roof as he gazed up.

"How come you went with ballet?" he asked.

"I went to... see a show. With Harper. I liked it a lot. And I wanted to do that, too. He found a teacher for me. Mrs. Martinez. At first... she refused. Said I was too old to start now. Most dancers start when they're kids. Said I couldn't do it."

Jason smiled. "But you proved her wrong."

"It was... difficult. It's a different way of moving, communicating. And something new. A fresh start."

This was all Stephanie's fault. And Cass'. But mostly Steph's. If she hadn't been blathering on and on about her dumb classes at Gotham U and all that other college life nonsense, Jason wouldn't ever be in this position in the first place.

Okay, it wasn't like he was a stranger to menial labor. You couldn't be too picky when you grew up in the Narrows, especially not when you were a kid and had to take care of your ailing mother. Nobody hired a minor for normal jobs, not even in Crime Alley. So, stealing tires it was. But now as an adult, legally dead as he may be, Jason did not have the same excuse. Sure, he could ask Talia or some of his other contacts, but he preferred to call upon them whenever he needed supplies for his nightly work of vigilantism.

There was no way in hell, he was going to ask anyone for help, no less for financial help in this matter. It just felt *wrong* to use all that drug money back from the days of his brief stint as a drug lord, too, so working as a cashier it was. Today was a slow day as Wednesday mornings tended to be since people usually got their groceries stocked in the beginning of the week. Jason hated working on Mondays. But there were certain things that made it just a little more bearable other than the money he was earning.

His boss, Mrs. Jacobson, a lady in her mid-seventies, was very kind and generous and scared the shit out of him. On his first day on the job, she had given him a small pouch of delicious cookies that could almost rival Alfred's and patted him tenderly on the head and wished him a good day at work and assured him that he could always come to her if he needed help with anything. On Jason's second day on the job, he found out that Mrs. Jacobson had seven kids and several more grandchildren, was widowed once and now married to a man fifteen years her junior. On Jason's third day a group of shiteheads with goofy Disney masks tried to rob the store, shouting for money and aiming guns at Mrs. Jacobson, his coworker, Shelly, and him. Before Jason could act, the old lady grasped at something under the counter, which he initially believed to be some sort of emergency signal or something even though it would have been odd to find that kind of thing in Crime Alley. However her old gnarly hands came up with an axe instead, which she promptly raised over her head one handed and pulled Jason out of the robbers' periphery by the scruff of his neck. And then she jumped over the counter with an agility that people her age ought not to possess. It was awesome, and no money had been stolen that day.

Jason swore to never quit this job, ever.

It was day 288 on the job when it happened. No, not another unsuccessful attempt at robbery. Jason was stocking up the milk bottles when a stupidly familiar voice nearly made him drop the bottle he was holding.

"Ah, excuse me, could you maybe tell me-- Jason?!"

Jason let out a sharp breath between his teeth as he jerkily placed the bottle on the shelf and turned around to see *him* standing there. Richard Grayson, Robin 1.0, former Nightwing, part-time Batman, the progenitor of the kid sidekicks.

“Yes, hi. How may I help you?” Jason asked because as compelling as it was to punch Dickie-bird in the face, Mrs. Jacobson could potentially (literally) cut Jason’s head off for being so rude to a customer.

“Um. Hi.” Dick’s eyes narrowed with suspicion as he let his gaze sweep the place, checking every minute detail. Jason sighed.

“I actually work here, Dickface. I don’t have any hidden agenda. So what do you want?”

The tension in Dick’s shoulders eased a little at that, but the wariness in his eyes remained, and it wouldn’t ever go away whenever he looked at Robin 2.0. Not that Jason could blame him. There was a lot of bad blood between them and Dick had no reason at all to trust him. And Jason had no wish to change any of that. Because fuck that guy. He might have looked up to Dick years ago when he had just become Robin and they had teamed up a little here and there and Nightwing had bestowed him the utmost ridiculous of monikers. *Little Wing* . And he had said it so fondly, too. Jason could have almost believed it.

“I just wanted to know if you had any red fruit jelly here. And not the powdery stuff you have to mix with water. The real deal where I don’t have to add anything to it, but just add it to-- anyway, do you have it?” There was a weird quality to Dick’s voice, stuck somewhere between a fundamental polite that Alfred always expected of them, the dark tint of justified bat paranoia and the...something else that Jason did not want to analyze further.

“Yeah, I think we do,” Jason said as he walked towards the aisles at the other end of the store, trying for a casual gait, but Dick’s gaze bore into the back of Jason’s neck, making his skin prickle with unease. Jason ran a hand through his hair as they reached the aisle with the baking condiments and crouched down, Dick’s shadow falling over him. *Oh, how very apropos.*

Jason found the jars filled with the red jelly and snatched one of them before he rose to face Dick again, who stood there with his hands in his pockets.

“Here.” Jason thrust the jar out, holding Dick’s gaze for only a second before he turned away. “If you don’t need anything else, I’ll just go...work and stuff.”

“Jason, wait!”

Damn it.

Jason closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath, schooling his features into something neutral and less homicidal.

“Yes?”

“Um,” Dick began. Jason raised an eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“It’s, uh, good to see you.”

Jason let out a snort. “You really mean that, Dickie-bird?”

“I do,” Dick said earnestly, taking a step towards him as Jason staunchly stood his ground, even if every fibre in his body was screaming at him to distance himself from the first Robin. “I mean it’s good to run into you...like this.” Dick gestured around them.

“Well yeah, not all of us can expect our rich daddy to pay for all our needs.”

Dick’s brows furrowed as he pressed his lips together into a thin line.

“You know he would if you asked him.”

“Yeah, not gonna happen. Goodbye.” And with that Jason turned because no way in hell was he going to continue this ludicrous conversation any longer. Hell would freeze over before he asked Bruce for money and what the hell was Dickie talking about anyway? Why would Bruce be willing to spend his money on a scoundrel like Jason. Bruce might have spoiled him rotten when Jason had been a kid and the world had been relatively okay, but the Jason Bruce had pampered with the newest tech and books and clothes had become someone else entirely. The antithesis to Batman’s

antiquated morals.

“Jason--”

“What do you want, Dickface!?”

“I just--”

But before Dick could finish what he wanted to say, another voice cut in, making Jason’s back go ramrod straight.

“Jason,” Mrs. Jacobson began in that stern voice of hers as Jason wilted under her disapproving stare. “I think you’ve been working here long enough to know that this is no way to speak to a customer, my dear.” She pushed her glasses up her nose before she turned to Dick with a brilliant smile on her face. “I am so sorry. This one here--” she tapped Jason on his forearm, “is a bit temperamental. Which is, of course, no excuse for the way he talked to you.”

“Don’t I know it,” Dick laughed. “But don’t worry, Ma’am. Jason wasn’t trying to insult me. My name is Dick, well, actually it is Richard, but I prefer Dick.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Jacobson’s grey eyes flitted from Dick, dazzling, picture-perfect potential husband for Granddaughter #14, to Jason, who just wanted to shrink into a tiny atom or summon a black hole to swallow him out of existence altogether. Her eyes lit up together with her polite smile. “You’re brothers, I see!”

Jason raised a hand. Just how did she jump to that absurd conclusion?

“We’re n--”

“Yep!” Dick cut in, all charm and charisma and wasn’t Mrs. Jacobson just glowing with approval. “We haven’t seen each other for so long though. Jaybird here *is* a temperamental one.”

Jason grimaced and closed his eyes, unable to stomach Dick’s obnoxiousness. *Jaybird* . Really?

“Jaybird? Isn’t that just the sweetest nickname!” Mrs. Jacobson exclaimed, clasping her hands together.

“No, it’s not,” Jason grumbled under his breath. “So yeah, it was nice seeing you, *Dick*. But, you know, I really need to get back to work.”

“It is quite alright, my dear,” Mrs. Jacobson said warmly, her eyes twinkling. Jason wanted to throw up because he knew what was coming next. “You can finish up early and catch up with your brother. You should never neglect your family. Even if you are busy, you can always take the time to give them a call.”

Jason forced on a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Jacobson. I really appreciate it.”

She nodded her approval and patted his arm, her wrinkly face alight with joy and Jason really couldn’t find the strength to be angry at that.

“And it was such a pleasure meeting you, Richard,” she said, facing Dick as he took her hand to shake it.

“The pleasure was all mine, Ma’am.”

Jason made a face at Dick, making sure that Mrs. Jacobson had her back to him and wouldn’t see the grimaces he was pulling. Dick’s lips twitched into something resembling more genuine amusement at that, which just pissed Jason off more.

“And please take care of your brother, Richard. He’s working so hard and I don’t want to imagine how he’s going to juggle everything at once when he is going to start school.”

Dick perked up at that and released her hand as Jason slapped his forehead, letting out a groan. Why had he ever told her of his potential plans for school? Hell, he had only mentioned it in passing and she still remembered. Urgh.

All the goodbyes and last pleasantries exchanged, Jason had just a few minutes to grab his stuff from the staff room before Mrs. Jacobson was ushering them both out. As soon as they stepped out

of the store, Jason turned left without a glance back at Dick. It was naive of him to think that Dick would just leave him be and sure enough, Dick was right behind him like the annoying man he was.

“You actually wanna do the whole ‘catching up’ thing, Dickie?” Jason asked without stopping just as Dick matched his stride, the stupid jar of red jelly gripped in his hands. “What do you want to know, *Big Brother*? Though I doubt you don’t already know what I’ve been up to the past few months. Hell, you probably even know what I’ve had for breakfast.”

“You didn’t have anything for breakfast today,” Dick stated simply as all colour drained from Jason’s face, eyes wide with horror.

“Oh my God!” Jason quickened his pace.

“Hey, I was just joking!”

“Oh, really? How did you know that I skipped breakfast then, you total creep?!”

“It was a lucky guess. I swear. Also skipping breakfast is far too common in this family. You’re not the only one to do that.”

“I’m not a part of your family.” Jason gritted his teeth and shot Dick an icy glare. “We never were brothers, dipshit. So don’t pretend that we’re friendly with each other.”

“I... I’m not--” Dick heaved a sigh, mouth curling downward. He sighed again and if he did it once more, Jason was going to punch him right in the face. “So you’re really going back to school?”

Jason blinked before he narrowed his eyes.

No point in denying it anymore.

“Yeah, so? What’s it to you?” he asked, squaring his shoulders. He couldn’t help the insecurity that crept into his voice, made it waver, made him sound defensive. He didn’t give a damn... shouldn’t give a damn what Dick thought about his plans. Jason didn’t need his judgment or approval. Whatever. Jason wasn’t sure if he was even going to do this. He was just saving up money just in case. Nothing was set in stone. So yeah.

“I think it’s great. You were always better suited for this than I was,” Dick said quietly, a faint smile on his face.

“Huh?”

“No, really. I couldn’t handle business school. I couldn’t sit still and listen to the professor drone on and on. You’d have probably graduated magna cum laude if…”

Jason snorted as his heart clenched painfully in his chest. Oh. He hadn’t even realized that his fast steps had become a leisurely saunter. He and Dick walking side by side, having a civil conversation and Jason wasn’t feeling particularly murderous right now.

“Not that it would have mattered. But you can bet your ass that I would’ve passed that shit with flying colours. But I doubt I’m going to major in any business related field.”

“Oh? You got pretty good grades in English class, right? Perhaps, that could be your major.”

“Hah! I got good grades in every subject, Dickie-bird.”

“Yeah, what was it again? A GPA of 94.8.”

“Yep. I worked my ass off for that, don’t you forget it.”

“Never.” Dick slowed down and Jason automatically matched his pace. “You’re going to do great, Little Wing.”

Suddenly, as if an invisible hand was choking him, Jason’s throat felt too tight, making it harder to breathe. God, what had happened to him? When had he become such a stupid sap that couldn’t get over a dumb childhood nickname he had always hated anyway?

“I’m taller than you,” Jason said dumbly.

“Which is outrageous. I’m the older brother,” Dick said, sighing with faux distaste, but then he was beaming that Dick Grayson Mega Watt Smile and Jason had to consciously fight the urge not to smile back because--

“We’re not brothers.”

Dick’s shoulders slumped as his smile faltered. “I know we hadn’t been... very close back then. And I wish--” he shook his head, his bright blue eyes dull in remembrance. “I’m just glad that you’re going to do this, Jason.”

Jason let out the breath he wasn’t aware he had been holding, relieved that Dick was not going all sappy-- well, *sappier* -- on him right now. Jason didn’t need to hear any of it, Dick’s regrets and whatnot, and how everything might have been better if they had been closer like actual brothers. Fuck it. Jason was not here for Dickie-bird’s redemption.

“Yeah,” Jason mumbled, absently checking his phone for the time. “Life is short and all that jazz, you know. I’m an expert on that, heh. You only live once or how did it go? Yolo, right? Although yolo doesn’t seem appropriate anymore, does it?” Shit-eating grin firmly in place, Jason fished for a cigarette in his pocket. Damn it, he was supposed to cut back on them.

“Really, Jason?” Dick stated blankly as Jason braced himself to get scolded by the stupid Golden Boy. “Nobody says yolo anymore, you dumbass.” Jason coughed right around the smoke that invaded his lungs.

“Well, excuse me, Dick-face,” he croaked with a glare. “I missed out on some pop-culture and I’m trying to catch up on it. I was dead, you know. Cut me some slack.”

“For someone so smart you sure are slow on the uptake,” Dick chuckled and evaded Jason’s half-hearted shoulder-punch with Nightwing’s grace.

“You’re a dick.”

Dick just smiled and Jason made no move to leave until he finished his cigarette. They might as well enjoy this brief reprieve before they faced each other in their masked identities as adversaries again.

V. Steph

“Okay, so I need you to be at this nice place called Molly’s ASAP. It’s a bit of an emergency. ‘kay? Thanks, bye!”

“Steph, wait--”

The constant beeping that invaded Jason’s ear did, in fact, mean that Stephanie had just hung up on him. Rude. He had no idea how she had gotten his personal number in the first place, not recalling that he had ever shared it with her, but Stephanie Brown was still a Bat, if happier and more optimistic than the average Bat was, so he really shouldn’t be surprised that she was also a master in the art of creeping. He heaved a sigh as he sluggishly pulled the blanket aside to sit up. A quick glance to the clock told him that it was 2pm, two hours earlier than he had intended to wake up. Patrol last night had been gruelling. With a mass breakout from Blackgate to handle, together with the Bats in his vicinity, it had put enough of a strain on him to last the entire week. Stupid Cassandra with her stupid earnest eyes making him not use his guns and inviting him to her next performance (Swan Lake) with all the others.

Jason took a quick shower, dressed in jeans and a warm sweater before he threw his jacket on and wrapped the ridiculously fluffy and long and *purple* scarf, gifted to him by Stephanie after his bad run-in with tonsillitis, around his neck. Steph had said ASAP but Jason took his sweet time and stopped by at a nearby Starbucks for a Caramel Brulée Latte, because she couldn’t just ring him awake, disregarding his clear intentions of wanting to preferably sleep through the whole day. She might have said it was an emergency, but an actual Steph emergency would have been Steph crashing through his window and taking him by the scruff of his neck, hauling him outside, before his favourite safe house exploded with his favourite Longquan celadon tea set still inside.

Yeah, Jason was still bitter about that one.

Molly’s was a a very well-kept diner on 39th Ave Jason remembered from his childhood in passing, and it had survived all these years in Crime Alley; earthquakes, shoot outs and gang wars notwithstanding. It was a place that served the best waffles in Gotham, according to Steph, but Jason had so far never bothered to find out if that was true.

He made sure his salutatory grin was extra wide and obnoxious when he entered the diner and spotted Steph right away. Really, she was not hard to miss, especially with that ridiculous pout on her face as she stabbed her fork into a poor defenseless waffle upon spotting him. It made his grin falter just the slightest bit.

“Sup,” Jason said as he sat down in the seat across from her. The leather was a polished brown, not torn or cracked, the table wiped clean, aside from the mess Steph had made with all that syrup. She sniffed, pointedly impaling the waffle again and tearing off a piece which she promptly *inhaled* .

“I was going to pay for your food, too, but--” she said, chewing loudly as she pointed at him with the fork and then glared at his Caramel Brulée Latte, “you’re late.”

“Well, you see,” he began, flashing her a genial smile that had more often than not charmed many lesser people. “Since my sleep had been so rudely cut short, I needed some caffeine in my bloodstream to come here in one piece.” She snorted as he waved the large paper cup in hand around and took a sip from it. “So anyway, what is this emergency you were speaking of before you hung up on me. Which is super rude, by the way.”

Stephanie’s wrist snapped in the direction of her drink as she yanked it towards her mouth and gulped it all down through the fat, striped straw. He had never pegged her for such an aggressive eater or drinker.

“So, it has come to my attention that you and Tim had a very interesting conversation... regarding me.”

Jason groaned, all humour and good mood draining out of his entire being. Leave it to the pretender to ruin his day without even being present. God, Jason hated that kid.

“It was not much of a conversation. It was mostly him just blabbering and being a snooty little shit,” Jason said with a downward twist of his mouth. “And I really couldn’t care less about what goes on between the two of you. I don’t need to hear any of it, okay?”

“Oh my God!” Steph slammed her hands onto the table, rattling the plate and silverware *and* Jason. “He told you!”

Jason cast a wary glance around the decently crowded diner, wincing at the glares their booth was attracting.

“He didn’t really tell me much. Just--” he waved a hand around with a cough, “stuff.”

Stephanie’s eye twitched and Jason flinched.

“Did he tell you how he just left after we had sex? After I fell asleep?! After he... he-- okay, to be fair he hadn’t done it before, so it makes sense he wouldn’t, you know, last long the first time. Though he was super attentive afterwards? So I don’t even know what his problem was?! It’s normal to be a little embarrassed, but it wasn’t like he didn’t pay any attention to my needs.”

Jason put his drink down and buried his face in his hands. “ *Jesus* , why me?”

What exactly had happened that he had become the go-to guy for relationship advice when he could count on one hand the dates he had been on? None of them had led to much of a prolonged dating phase either. And his sex life was equally uneventful, but nobody needed to know that because it wasn’t fucking proper to announce that kind of shit to the whole world.

“Look, I just want to know what made him bail, okay? I thought we were okay, ready to be together again because we’ve both grown up-- don’t you dare laugh! But anyway, we’ve both grown up and matured apart from each other. I rejected him back then when I was new to the whole Batgirl stint because it wasn’t a good time for me to be in a relationship with anyone, much less my ex-boyfriend. But I thought now would be a good time and he agreed and now he pulls such a dumb stunt.”

Jason took back everything he thought about the pretender and Stephanie being together. It almost caused an actual physical ache in his chest, how he could now clearly see why these two were meant to be together - what with them being prone to blathering a lot about things Jason really didn’t want to hear.

“The pretender is an idiot if you ask me,” Jason said wearily, taking another sip from his Caramel Brûlée Latte.

“I know that. I mean I know that you think that about Tim and it’s totally unfair the shade you throw at him.”

“I thought you were angry at him!”

“Well, I am! But still.”

Jason rubbed his forehead, swallowing down the sour taste of his anger. “Maybe you two idiots should just sit down and talk or something. Heh. I know, Bats and talking about their problems,

what even is that? But it sounds like the little shit freaked out and that's why he bailed on you and then he somehow got the idea that I'm responsible for why you've been avoiding him instead of... everything else."

"Urgh, this sucks." Stephanie planted her cheek against the smooth surface of the table, keeping her skin and hair carefully away from the syrupy mess she had made, and let out a growl. "I really don't need Tim-drama in my life right now. Finals are killing me!"

He smirked. Jason could totally work with that.

"Really?" he said haughtily, raising an eyebrow. "And here I thought you were more resilient than me."

"Harharhar, a kneeslapper that one." She lifted her head from the table to give him a bland stare, thoroughly unimpressed. "Speaking of finals though, you could actually start your classes next spring I'm sure. Most people start in fall, but I don't think that should be a problem at Gotham U."

Jason's eyes focused on the Christmassy pattern of the paper cup; it was really pretty, a nice winterscape with fir trees and reindeers on a red background and--

"Jason."

He sighed at her imploring tone. There was no way that Steph would actually let him weasel out of this conversation.

"I don't know. I think I should wait a little, work a bit more and save more money. And start in fall."

"I'm pretty sure you've already saved up enough to pay the tuition for a year. Don't put this off."

"Don't tell me what to do," he mumbled petulantly, draining the remaining latte in one go, and kept his gaze stubbornly down.

Sometimes he wished he didn't like her so much because it was her fault that he had even

considered something mundane like *college* . He had always liked to learn, hell, he had even liked going to school, liked putting on that preppy private school uniform of Gotham Academy, the blue one that made him look like a little Bruce--

Jason shook his head, derailing that train of thought before it could veer into a place he'd rather not think about. He crushed the paper cup between his fingers and gritted his teeth. He wished sometimes that he hadn't spent so much time with Stephanie, hadn't listened to her inane and amusing tales of campus life, of classes and lectures and crazy professors. Wished that he hadn't helped her with that paper about the character of Shylock in Merchant of Venice. Wished that there wasn't this burning longing that had latched onto his brain like a benign parasite until it nearly consumed him.

Attending college meant the acquisition of a degree, something tangible and real, something that promised a future, a career, a job, something that hadn't been relevant for Jason since he had been blown apart in that warehouse. College meant doing something pretty much every other twenty-something year old in Gotham did. It was normal. It made him anxious. Was normalcy even attainable to him after all these years of antagonizing the Batman and killing criminals? If he could start college, did that mean there was some semblance of *going back* ? Could he keep up the vigilantism and maintain a college life? He definitely couldn't-- *wouldn't* stop his night job; it was far too important.

He raked his fingers through his hair, a distressed sigh escaping through his teeth as Stephanie's sneakered foot poked his shin under the table, making him look up.

"You okay?" she asked, worried.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Look," Steph said after a while, letting out a sigh, and looking at him with far too big, baby blue eyes. Concern. Understanding. And in that moment, Jason hated her just a little because she probably did understand him better than anyone else. It left a bitter taste on the tip of his tongue, the knowledge that someone with such close ties to the person he despised the most got Jason so well. "Maybe you can just attend a few classes here and there in spring, not start officially but just get a feel for everything. What do you say? And don't worry, I'll hold your hand, so you don't get lost." She smiled cheekily and Jason was almost inclined to return the gesture.

She made it sound so easy.

"I don't know. Ask me again when your spring term starts."

“Yeah, so you can be conveniently absent when I do.” She snorted as Jason’s eyes narrowed. Unconcerned by his mounting irritation, she flicked her fringe off her forehead before she added, “I know you well enough that this is exactly what you’d do, Jason. A mission or some other nonsense that has you suddenly out of Gotham. You can’t keep running away from your problems.”

“You don’t know shit!” he snapped, clenching his fists.

“Oh? Am I wrong then? Because I don’t think I am. You’ve been working so hard for this and now you’re just not going to take the chance to... to--”

“To what?”

To start over? To go back? To make up with Bruce? To build himself a future?

Jason’s eyes narrowed into slits, his guts churning as the lump in his throat made it hard to breathe. He could just leave and be done with this stupid conversation because he didn’t owe her anything. Didn’t owe any of them shit. He wasn’t stupid; he knew what Steph was trying to do, had been trying to do since their occasional team-ups had become more permanent, and he hated her just a little more for it.

“To do something for yourself and not let your life be defined by all the bad things that have happened to you,” she said simply, her lips pressed into a thin line and for the first time since he arrived Steph actually looked uncomfortable.

"Oh, sorry. Of course, you’re right. Why don’t I just strive to be more like you, huh?” he scoffed, resentment bubbling in the pit of his stomach as he tried to push aside this nearly overwhelming desolation that threatened to crush him. The one that made it a struggle to get up in the morning when he’d rather spend the whole week in bed or just preferably never get up at all, the struggle that only lessened a little whenever it was time to patrol. “Why don’t I just get over it and stop being so depressed and just do something.”

He never tried to think too much about it, about how *good* Stephanie Brown was. After all the shit life had thrown at her, she had still risen above it, had become a better person, a light in the eternal gloom of Gotham. It was admirable, really, but... how did she do it? How did she turn out so good when everything in her life seemed to guarantee her to be another fuckup... like him.

“That’s not what I said,” she hissed, fists on the table. “Don’t you dare suggest that I just got over my problems, that it was easy and that I’m fine all the time. Because it wasn’t and I’m not. Nobody can make your decisions for you, Jason. You have a choice. You either go with it or don’t because you’re not helping yourself if you’re stuck in limbo and keep killi-- hey, where are you going?! Jason!”

He threw the crushed paper cup into a nearby trash bin, carefully kept his back towards Stephanie as he raised his arm to lazily wave in her general direction. She didn’t need to see his face right now because he didn’t want to see his own face, either, to see all the indecisiveness and pain open and raw.

“Thanks for the pep talk,” he said, cursing how thick his voice was. He had meant to sound casually indifferent. “See you around.”

And with that he exited the diner without a glance back. Stephanie curled in on herself in the seat and cursed her big mouth she could never keep shut during important moments.

“No, you won’t,” she whispered sadly.

VI. Bruce

Jason’s fist crashed against the skinny idiot’s nose with more force than was warranted. And he was pissed. He couldn’t even kill the fucker because he was *only* a rookie gang member, following his big brother like a lost puppy. The nasal bone gave away with a satisfying *crunch* as Jason let the sniveling dumbass drop onto wet concrete. A shadow at the corner of his eyes made him clench his fists; there was something stirring in the pit of his stomach, something ugly and wretched and bitter, something that twisted and churned as it made his blood boil, made his muscles tense and his limbs quiver.

Batman tied the other goons up, all of them heaved into a sad pile of broken limbs and concussed heads. This was never supposed to happen. Jason had been doing so well in steering clear from the Batman, when a stupid gang of drunken fratboys, of all things, while Jason was out stacking up on groceries, brought them together. Fuckers were harassing the cashier at the 24hr convenience store, threatening to beat him up good if he didn’t give them booze for free.

The worn leather of his gloves creaked as he eased his fingers apart and took a deep breath through

his nose as he cast a cautious glance at the dark knight. Time for Jason to take his leave before the other man decided to break the silence and applaud Jason for not killing fratboys.

His heart was heavy in his chest, the drum unsteady as Jason averted his eyes, feeling stupidly vulnerable without his helmet, without his mask. Stuffing his numb hands into the pockets of his jeans, he walked away from the scene with quick strides, his shoulders hunched. He didn't dare to look back, to see Batman standing there, or worse, seeing him *not* there, already gone and wholly uninterested in Jason. There was a lump stuck in his throat as he clenched his fists within the pockets and he told himself that the treacherous stinging in his eyes was because the wind had picked up.

Jason wasn't upset.

Or maybe he was, just a little though, because he couldn't finish his grocery shopping and he really needed some milk, damn it. He sighed and let his shoulders drop, a deep weariness settling within his bones before a thud just to his right made him perk up again. All fatigue fell away from Jason just as the figure stepped out of the shadows, lithe arm raised, gun glinting under the street light. But the woman wasn't even sparing him a glance and--

Jason's blood turned to ice as all colour drained from his face and a crushing, overwhelming terror took hold of his body. He didn't even have any time to shout a warning to Bruce, or to wonder who this woman was and where the hell she came from because her finger was already squeezing the trigger and nonononononono-

His ears were ringing like they hadn't in a long time as the world tilted from its axis and oh, when had he moved from his place? What had he done? He couldn't breathe. Why couldn't he breathe?! There was liquid in his mouth and a searing pain in his lung. He coughed, pressed his hand against his chest.

Oh.

He had been shot.

Oh .

How embarrassing. He wasn't even wearing kevlar. Hell, even in his Red Hood suit he was nowhere near as padded and protected as Bruce was in his batsuit. And here Jason had still taken a

fucking bullet for him like the obedient little soldier he wasn't supposed to be, the Robin that had long ago died in that shack in Ethiopia.

And just like that the fuzzy veil in his mind lifted and there was only pain, the coppery taste of his blood on his tongue and the bullet pulsing and *burning* in his flesh. He might have screamed or he might have just whimpered.

“Jason!”

He wrenched his eyes open - when had he even closed them? - to see Bruce hovering above him, one large hand pressed to Jason's chest. Bruce. Right. Jason blinked, but then Batman's-- no, Bruce's voice was calling for him again, urgent and... shaky, and Jason realized he had closed his eyes again. This was so very humiliating. A Robin-relapse and a total shutdown of all his survival instincts at once. Way to put a crowner on the crappiest night of his life. Man, that woman got him good. Speaking of which, what happened with her?

“Taken care of,” Bruce said gruffly as he... he... Jason had no idea what Bruce was doing, but dang, he took her out pretty fast. Could give the Flash a run for his money. *Heh* .

“Stop talking,” Bruce scolded gently, in that tone he'd used whenever Jason had been mischievous, had broken something super expensive in the manor in his excitement to try out some of the new moves he learned or whenever he had gotten into a fight at school with the alpha jerk because he wouldn't stop making fun of the kid with the lisp and bully him to tears.

Perhaps he should say something to Bruce? Jason was pretty sure he was dying. Again. Last words were still a thing, right? Maybe he should apologize, or simply give Bruce a last Fuck You. Damn. After being beaten to near death and then blown up to actual death courtesy of Batman's archnemesis, dying by the bullet of a random stranger on the street was ridiculously anticlimactic. Dying for a man who didn't even need his help, who had never needed him.

Shit.

He had promised Cassandra to attend her Swan Lake performance. Hopefully, she wouldn't be too upset about this. Oh, this was also putting an inconvenient damper on his college plans. He really should have seen this coming though because whenever things seemed to be looking up for him, they just tended to get worse in the end.

“Jason, stay with me!”

Jason’s head lolled to the side just as Bruce cradled his face and ran his fingers through Jason’s hair. Bruce’s words blurred into an indistinct mash of syllables and noises, but it could have been worse; worse than having Bruce hold him as blackness overtook Jason’s mind, worse than hearing Bruce’s voice in a constant stream of worry against his ear. *I could have been alone* , Jason thought as he closed his eyes.

When Jason woke up it was to the muffled sound of collective squeaks that was startlingly familiar. It might have made him jump if his muscles hadn’t felt like they had been pumped with lead. His tongue was dry, his mouth stuffed with cotton as his fingers twitched and he slowly opened his eyes.

He knew he was shot up with the good stuff when his immediate response to the batcave wasn’t panic or any other sudden outburst of negativity. A heart monitor was beeping steadily to his right, there was a scattering of tubes all across his body and his chest was wrapped. Jason blinked blearily.

Right.

He had been shot, taking a bullet for Batman. Urgh. He dug the heel of his hand roughly into his eye with a groan. *Way to go, Jason* . Way to go. He had wanted to avoid Bruce by all means and now he had ended up in the lion’s den...well Bat’s den completely vulnerable. *Urgh* . Bruce was probably going to take this as a sign that Jason was on his side now and shared his dumb moral code and all that nonsense. He was probably going to *talk* to Jason about everything that happened instead of ignoring the whole debacle as Jason intended to do.

Yeah, ignoring his problems was something he was good at. *Damn it, Steph* .

“It is so good to see you awake.”

Jason actually gasped at the familiar voice as his fingers dug into the mattress below. The heart monitor sped up embarrassingly so as Jason’s breaths came short and flat, his eyes stinging before he closed them, blinking away the treacherous tears that had no business appearing.

“Hey Alf,” Jason croaked before he gulped.

The old man smiled guardedly, checking his vitals, looking at the bandages across his chest, and shit, Jason was not equipped to deal with this at all. Not with the onslaught of fondness that warmed and squeezed his heart at once, or the unbearable rush of memories, of Alfred patching him up after patrols, of his proud smile whenever Jason had him read over his homework, of him making Jason soup after he had caught a nasty cold during the cold weather.

His eyes were stinging again and Jason could only turn his head to the side, blinking rapidly as he took in a shuddering breath.

“You gave us quite the scare, Master Jason.”

“I’m sorry?” Because really, what else could Jason say at this point? He would have yelled at Bruce, thrown some insults and done anything to make him leave, but he couldn’t do that to Alfred. Alfred who still looked at him as if Jason had never left, had never been away, had never killed anyone, hadn’t tried to kill Bruce, had tried to make Bruce kill someone.

“It is quite alright,” Alfred said mildly, patting Jason’s shoulder. “I am just happy to see you awake.”

Jason took a deep unsteady breath, his throat raw and parched, and Alfred was truly a godsend as the butler stood beside the bed, a glass of water clutched in long bony fingers. He helped Jason into a sitting position before he held out the glass for him to take. The water was like a salve, making Jason sigh deeply, contentedly.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, managing a faint smile for the butler as his heart stuttered in his chest. This time Alfred patted him gently on the head as if Jason was still a twelve year old boy before he excused himself with strangely glassy eyes.

The next breath he took felt like the first one in ages; the air staggered in his lungs, hot and sticky and unpleasant, his chest expanding shakily. Jason clenched the crisp white sheet that covered his legs in his fists, trying to regain some semblance of calm and peace, but his reprieve was short lived.

Bruce didn’t so much as walk up to Jason’s bedside as he barged into the medbay, his hair tousled, his clothes rumpled, looking generally haggard in a way Jason could recall witnessing only a few times. Bruce’s arms were raised in front of him, *indecisive* and *hesitant*, and Jason hadn’t even realized that he had curled in on himself. The heart monitor was going haywire and *shit*, this was embarrassing.

Eventually, Bruce dropped his hands to the railing of the bed, his knuckles white. Jason gulped as the direst sensation of dread made his throat close up, sitting there like a rock. His stomach churned, something vile and rotten stirred there as Jason realized that he was trembling. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face, his eyes defiantly meeting Bruce's. Shit, he looked ridiculous! Jason's lips twitched.

"Somebody woke you from your nap, Bruce?" His voice wasn't steady enough to attain that casual disdain Jason had always been trying to maintain whenever he faced Batman. Actually, he sounded like crap, weepy and insecure, like a fucking kid.

"Alfred put sedatives into my drink," Bruce said in that grave tone that indicated nothing short of an unforgivable betrayal. Jason's lips pulled into a faint smirk. Ah, Alfred.

"What's Alf supposed to do if you refuse to go to bed like a good kid, huh?"

It was ridiculously easy to keep making glib remarks like this.

"I was supposed to be here when you woke up." Bruce's grip on the railing tightened so much that it looked like his knuckles might pop out of his skin. And Jason would rather focus on that rather than the way the lump in his throat was expanding, felt like it was going to crush his windpipe, or the treacherous twinge in his heart that made him come too close to believe that Bruce actually did care about him. But no. Jason knew what Bruce thought of him because Joker would not be alive if it had been Dick that maniac had brutalized and killed like that. There was no other truth Jason felt reverberate with clear certainty in his very marrow as that one. And he couldn't have Bruce trying to derail that truth just because he happened to look a little bit exhausted. Well, perhaps more than a little bit.

"So you could interrogate me more easily that way?"

"No, why would I interrogate you... about what?"

The confusion in Bruce's voice was so blatant that Jason felt almost embarrassed.

"You know," he said, waving a hand around, "about that woman who..."

Bruce's grasp tightened even more. Maybe he was actually going to bend the railing with his bare hands instead of losing his knuckles.

"Miranda Dubanowski. 29. She was hoping to rise in the ranks within the Sobotka family by taking me out. She failed and has been taken into custody by GCPD."

"I see." God, how much more humiliating could this get? He had almost become the collateral damage of a wannabe gang leader. Jason let his head sag, unable to bear Bruce's sharp eyes on his pathetic form. "Well, good to know that I'll never do this again. I'm just gonna leave when I don't feel like death warmed over. Okay? Okay. I should be okay by tomorrow--"

"You're not going anywhere!"

"Well, too bad. I'll leave when I damn feel like it." The anger invaded Jason's system in an instant and pushed everything else away. How dare Bruce make demands?! Jason pushed the blanket off, letting it pool to the ground. "You know what? I'll just go now."

"You are in no condition to go anywhere, Jason," Bruce said with a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. Jason's blood was boiling, searing through his patience and rationality as he pushed himself up and let his bare feet touch the freezing ground. He refused to stay here a minute longer!

"Jason!" Bruce's hands finally released the railing to push against Jason's shoulders, who bared his teeth and tried to get his spine to work properly just so he could at least look a little bit like he could back up his bark. But Jason's stance shrivelled at Bruce's gentle touch, white hot agony shooting down his chest as Bruce's voice phased out of existence and all that Jason could hear was his own harsh breathing, his panic, cutting and harsh. There was a hand against his sweaty forehead, cold and pleasant, as he was guided back to lie down.

"Fuck."

"Jason, the bullet--"

"Fucked me up. Thanks for letting me know." He blinked a few times to clear his blurry vision only to see Bruce hovering over him like an overgrown obnoxious mother hen.

“You can leave when you’ve recuperated.” Bruce retracted his hand to place it on top of the railing, but he made no move to leave, just stood there like an awkward turtle and watched Jason with his unnerving gaze. “You’re welcome to stay as long you need.... want.”

“Really?” Jason let out a snort. Bruce nodded, closer to his usual stone-faced self and either ignored the sarcasm or didn’t even notice it. “Well, I really don’t want to stay here.”

“What would you even do on your own like this?”

Jason ignored Bruce’s frown and cracked a bitter smile just so he could pretend how much this man’s presence wasn’t fucking him up, ignore how frail his pitiful control was, how easily the rage and resentment threatened to crash and burn inside of him. He took a shallow breath and decided to go for some honesty.

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably crash on my couch or do some stuff like, oh, The Walking Dead is--

“You need to stop this.”

Jason blinked, dubious. “Hah?”

Bruce ran a hand through his hair as he took a step back and actually starting to fucking pace. A nerve jumped in his thick neck as he gritted his teeth.

“Joking about your life and death like this. As if it didn’t matter,” Bruce muttered and for the briefest second there was a small flicker of utter anguish in his steely eyes. But it was there long enough to make Jason look away because he didn’t need to see any of this. And then Bruce’s words dawned on him.

“Wait, what? For the love of--” Jason licked his lips, his fists clenched at his sides as he released a short bark of laughter. “The only time I actually don’t try to go for a stupid death joke, *you*, of course, take offense. The Walking Dead is actually a TV show, Old Man.”

“Oh.” Bruce rubbed the back of his neck and it was fucking hilarious and painful how awkward this man was. “We could always relocate you to your old room if you want to watch TV.”

“No.”

“But--”

“Absolutely not.”

“It is quite cold here. Maybe you’d heal more quickly if you were in the manor.”

“What do you not understand about a simple No?” Jason exhaled harshly, patience wearing thin.

“I just think it’d be better if--”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about what you think.”

“You’re being unreasonable, Jason. Maybe you’ll change your mind when--”

“Forget it. I’m not going to my old room or to any of the other rooms. Over my dead body.” Jason said it just to be a shit because Bruce was doing this exasperated scolding thing that he had no business of doing, no reason to act like he actually cared about Jason’s wellbeing at this point. The only reason Bruce had brought him here was because of his stupid, misplaced sense of guilt. Hell would freeze over before the Batman let even the vilest of creatures die on his watch. Jason smirked cruelly, raised his head just to see Bruce finally snap and chase him out of the cave.

Except that was not what happened. Jason’s smirk faltered. Bruce was hunched over, his lips pressed into a thin line as he gripped the railing again. When he spoke, his voice was low and thick, wrought with pain so raw and in the open that Jason had to pinch his arm to make sure that this was actually happening right now.

“I held your dead body in my arms!”

All the air whooshed out of Jason’s lungs as his heart thudded in his chest cavity at a harrowing pace. Why would that asshole say such a thing? Why... why would he sound so agonized? Why couldn’t he just stop talking and leave him be? Jason parted his lips, but no sound escaped his mouth, no smartass remark, no insult, because his stupid body was failing him. He closed his eyes

instead, but it only made the incessant beeping of the heart monitor only more present. Oh God, he was a mess.

“And when you took that bullet and were lying in a pool of your blood, it was too much like... like...”

Why wasn't he shutting up? Why was he still talking? But Bruce's voice dropped to the softest of cadences and he wasn't even fucking planning to stop, was he?

“I thought I was going to lose you again. And all I could think about was the last time we talked... the last time we had a conversation that didn't involve threats and insults and I realized that... I couldn't remember.”

Fucking asshole, going all sentimental on him. What made Bruce think that Jason wanted to hear his bullshit? Jason tried to make his muscles cooperate, tried to move his mouth in a way that it produced at least one useful word, but all that came out was a pathetic gasp. He gripped his head, ready to tear his hair out as he kept his eyes squeezed shut even when they were burning behind his eyelids. Bruce didn't care about losing him, damn it! He didn't. If he did, why was the Joker still alive? Why had Jason been replaced mere months after his death. No, Bruce didn't... he couldn't... but why... why did he-

“And whatever issues we've had and still have... I refuse to leave them unresolved. I am not losing you again, Jason.”

“Why?” There was no place for dignity anymore. Jason couldn't keep his control, couldn't stop his limbs from quivering, couldn't stop the ugly whimper of a question. “Why are you telling me this?” The fight had left him completely; he was drained, weak, his arms heavy like lead as he focused the rest of his feeble strength on keeping his eyes closed, even though they were leaking, hot and scalding tears dripping down his cheeks. But if he didn't open his eyes at all, he could still pretend that Bruce was not completely destroying him with his words.

“You're my son.”

“No. No. No, I'm not. Why are you--” Jason's voice broke, a sob tearing through his throat as he clutched his head more tightly, curling into a pitiful heap of a broken boy. He couldn't...no, he wasn't anyone's son. Nobody's son. Both mothers dead, one dead with a needle sticking out of her arm, the other dying with him in a blaze of fire and hell and betrayal. His father, a no one. Willis Todd, a crook, killed by Two Face. Dead all of them. But Bruce (Dad! He once used to be Dad) was here... calling him son, telling him these things in that gentle deep voice of his, sparking that

wretched kind of hope in Jason's heart that shredded his sanity, clawed at him with its ugly spindly fingers and squeezed his heart.

"Please." But Jason didn't know what he was pleading for. He just wanted it all to stop, but couldn't say what *all* was. He didn't fight Bruce when his large arms enveloped Jason's shuddering frame. Suddenly, he could breathe, even through his loud bawling, even as Bruce smashed Jason's tear-streaked face against his broad chest, even when Jason clutched at the man's arm, utterly helpless. Why couldn't he be angry? It was so easy to be angry.

"Shh, I got you. It's okay," Bruce murmured against Jason's temple, stroking his sweat-damp hair as if he was still a little kid, still that boy who admired this man so much, because there was a time when nothing had been more important to that kid than his Dad's approval. But that kid was dead. Jason wasn't... he didn't want... didn't care... yet he was clinging to Bruce for dear life, couldn't let go.

Nothing is okay, he wanted to say, yell, scream. *How can things be okay?* Jason was a killer, unrepentant to cleanse Gotham of its scum. He couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. But he couldn't say it, couldn't let go of Bruce because Bruce called him his son, told him he didn't want to lose him again, as if it was that easy to forgive and forget. The Joker! He was alive... but Bruce was holding Jason like this, his embrace strong and warm and safe, broad shoulders shaking as he continued to whisper comforting words against Jason's ear.

Oh God.

Bruce cared about him, was terrified of losing him, terrified of leaving him on bad terms.

Jason's heart flooded with warmth. The hope spread and crushed through his doubts and denials with an agonizing force.

"I got you," Bruce said again, and Jason held on tighter.

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