

~~Damien~~

His leg worked again. Barely, but it did. Tomorrow night, he'd go back to work, helping the Invictus secure their borders and priority locations against Carthian fingers.

But for the moment, he'd enjoy what was left of his free time with his lover.

He eased his hips back, and gently pushed them forward, until every inch of his girth sank into his girlfriend's trembling body. Once he was snug inside her, he spent a few seconds lightly caressing her ass, before he lifted his hand, and spanked it, earning a weak whimper from Fiona, and a hard clench of her exhausted muscles. They'd been making love for a long time now, and with a belly full of Fiona's blood, he intended to go for a while yet.

He smiled down at her. Drained of blood, she was barely awake, head turned and resting on her pillow, ass in the air. If not for him holding her hips, she would have fallen over.

They were in her apartment. Her cozy, small, cheap apartment. Thin walls meant the neighbors likely heard the mewls Fiona made; Damien could definitely hear the neighbors, at least. But there was something comely about being with his love in this environment. Cushy, according to Fiona. Quaint, according to Maria. They usually had sex in his apartment, or in her nightmare realm, but they had fun here sometimes as well.

He looked around in the darkness of her apartment; she liked the lights off, which made sense, considering she was a shadow monster. He grinned at the bed, at the bright pink cover, and the various stuffed animals. Most of them had fallen off the bed, but Fiona clutched one now, snuggling into a big brown bear with a trembling arm. He almost felt dirty, fucking her from behind, spanking her, Kissing her, when the apartment made her seem so innocent. She was anything but innocent.

He smiled at the nearby laptop and the cute cat and frog stickers on it. He smiled at the vanity desk and the cute toys she'd arranged on it to look like a family of anthropomorphized animals having a meal around her makeup kit. He smiled at the posters on the walls, some of pop bands, some of cutesy cartoon animals, and one a rather detailed painting of a blue whale and unicorn swimming through the cosmos.

Fiona had the decor sense of an eclectic thirteen-year-old girl.

Chuckling to himself, he gently eased his length out of her squeezing, drenched insides, until only the head of his cock remained inside her, before he slowly pushed back into her yet again. No need to rush things. He'd cum once already, she'd cum half a dozen times, and their inhuman bodies would let

them go for as long as they wished. He felt like giving her body a break, and letting her recover before he'd build her up to another onslaught.

He spent a few moments caressing her large ass cheeks, fingertips teasing along her pinked skin from earlier spanks, before he gave her ass another slap. Instant pleasure. The exhausted woman mewled, clutched her teddy bear tight, and clenched on his shaft hard. She cracked open her eyes, her left cheek pressed to her pillow, and she managed to peek at him before it closed again as she—

“Damien.”

Damien froze and whipped his head to the side. Every muscle, every fiber, every ounce of vitae and Beastly instinct he had kicked into high gear. Sword? Where? By the door. Leg? Working well enough he could move, and jam vitae through it if he had to. Fiona? Out of commission. She was awake, but only barely, deep in a post-Kiss bliss coma. He... he knew that voice.

“Athalia?”

“Indeed.”

Slowly, he released the building tension in his body. Fiona turned her head to look toward her closet where the voice was coming from, but otherwise she made no movement. Hell, her eyes were barely open as it was.

“What're you doing here?”

“Watching you have sex with Fiona, evidently.”

At least it was Athalia's human voice, and not the raspy voice of her alien, skeletal form. How did she get in Fiona's closet? She hadn't been there before. Ah, right, the lair. The Begotten had connected their lairs, and could move swiftly between locations that were attached to those lairs. Fiona had a door to her lair in her closet; they'd used it before. Athalia had come through it, silent as a... shadow monster.

He frowned and tried to back away from his lover. Of course, doing that stirred Fiona from her coma, and she pushed her ass toward him, even as she reached behind her and grabbed his hand, her other arm still wrapped around her teddy bear. Her grip was weak, but the point was clear: keep going.

“Did you invite Athalia, Fiona?”

“M... Maybe.”

He rolled his eyes, and spanked her again. Mistake. Fiona whimpered, and pushed her ass toward him as she clenched. By the Lord, this woman.

Another whisper from the darkness. “Finish up, we can talk after. I’ll wait.”

“I’d prefer—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t spy.”

It wasn’t like Damien wanted to stop, not with a belly full of blood, and with Fiona whimpering for him to keep going. And not just regular blood either, Fiona’s blood. Thinking straight was borderline impossible. The desire, the hunger, it tingled along his skin and buried his mind in fog.

It took only seconds to forget about Athalia, and start fucking his lover again, and this time much harder. For another twenty minutes.

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He slipped on his boxers, and threw open the closet door. Athalia stood there, arms folded across her chest, and a strange smile on her face. He knew that smile. That was a mischievous smile. Fiona often used the same one. Seeing it on Athalia was strange though. He figured a stone better capable of the expression, but apparently not.

“You... spied.”

She chuckled. An even stranger phenomena than her smiling.

“Yes, I did. She seemed to be enjoying herself quite a bit, and you seemed enthralled.”

“It’s her blood. It affects me in—”

“Yes yes I know, she’s told me all about it.” Nodding, the tall, dark-skinned woman sat on the side of the bed, reached out, and pat Fiona’s shoulder. She lay under the covers, still snuggling her teddy bear, and had fallen asleep the moment Damien had finished. “She really has absurdly huge tits for a little thing, doesn’t she?”

“It’s enough to make a Mekhet nervous.”

“Huge tits?”

He blinked at her. “Knowing you can show up here and get this close, without me being able to sense you coming.”

She smirked. “Be happy I’m an ally, then.”

He raised a brow, watching her as he put his suit pants on. And she watched him, her cold expression less cold, even appreciative. She liked what she saw.

“What?” she said after a time. “You’re attractive. I can see what Fiona sees in you.”

“I like to think she sees more than just an attractive vampire.”

“Of course. She probably also sees an emo vampire fantasy, too.”

He frowned. She rolled her eyes, and laughed. Who was this woman? This was not the Athalia he remembered, the Athalia that betrayed them during the assault on the hunters all those months ago.

“We love each other.”

“Yes, I know. I’m only kidding.”

“Forgive me if I’m not used to hearing you make jokes.”

Sighing, Athalia shook her head, and gently pat Fiona on the shoulder a few times. “I’ve had time to think about what’s happened. Azamel’s helped me put things in perspective, and... and things are better. Fiona hasn’t told you?”

“No. She wants to, but she avoids gossiping.”

“That’s good.” She smiled down at her fellow monster, and stroked her shoulder a few times before looking back to him. “Azamel’s taught her well.”

“How... much longer does she have?”

Athalia frowned, and moved down the bed to sit at the foot of it, by him. “Not long. Her human half is giving up, and so is her Horror. A wound we can’t see, but it’s there, draining her a little bit more every day.”

“I’m surprised she’s lasted this long, then.”

“Yeah. We’re lucky. She’s taught us as much as she can in that time, about how to feed without drawing attention, about how to avoid killing prey, how to balance our hungers. She’s...” She sighed again and shook her head. “Sándor may be powerful, but he’s no teacher or parent.”

Damien sat down beside her. It made him nervous, sitting close to her like this, but it seemed like the thing to do. Athalia was opening up, and that was pretty much a miracle, especially because Damien was part of the reason her daughter was dead.

“I’m surprised,” Athalia continued, “that you’re so rough with Fiona. The spanking? The hard thrusts? Thought the bed was going to break.”

He squirmed. “She insisted. And, I wasn’t lying about her blood. It does something to me, something kine blood doesn’t. But, yes, she um... really enjoys it rough.” Why switch the topic from Azamel to sex? Well, Athalia was with Azamel a lot. Maybe she was emotionally exhausted, watching her friend and guardian slowly die, and wanted to talk about something more fun. Why talk to him, though? Damien had little to offer in the social skills department.

He was dating a Begotten though. Maybe that was why she wanted to talk to him?

“I can tell you’re wondering why I’m here.”

“I thought you wanted to talk to Fiona,” he lied.

“Partly true. But, I also wanted to talk to you... about Daniel.”

“The sheriff?”

She nodded, looking down at her legs and rubbing her hands against her jeans. “We... we...”

“Oh.” He smiled. That was not a development he expected. Sure, people knew Athalia and Daniel were interested in each other, but Athalia was a ‘tough nut to crack’ according to Jessy. Nothing short of divine intervention would help that woman relax, or so Damien had thought.

“I wanted to ask you, about being Mekhet.”

“Being Mekhet? I’m not sure there’s much to tell.”

“Anything’s better than nothing, and that’s all Daniel tells me. Nothing.”

He laughed and brushed his hair along the unshaved side of his head. “It’s hard to answer that question, honestly. I’ve been Mekhet far longer than I’ve been human. That makes it hard to draw comparisons to who I was before. But, I suppose there’s one very... distinct aspect about Mekhet.”

“Oh?”

“We have trouble coming out of our shell.” He pointed at his temple. “We live in here, and it’s a struggle to turn thoughts and feelings outward, and get them into the body, to be expressed.”

“That applies to any introvert.”

“It’s no mistake that almost all Mekhet are introverts. My sire was an exception, not the rule.” He shrugged. “For Mekhet, it’s stronger. It’s a Beastly instinct, to keep thoughts hidden. It’s... also a Beastly instinct, to hunt secrets, and information. It’s like candy to any Mekhet.”

“Maybe that’s why that damn man is always trying to learn more about me, even if he doesn’t make it obvious.” She grinned. “I suppose that explains why you fuckers are always spying on people.”

“Not... always.”

Grin turned to laugh, and she gave him a weak backhand against the shoulder. “Anything else?”

“I suppose if you’re trying to get Daniel to come out of his shell, feed him your blood. Though that’ll lead to a pretty... extreme result.”

She shivered and looked down again. “That’s not easy to just, do, for some of us.”

“Understandable.” Athalia had a rough history with other paranormals.

“Fiona has... gone on at length though, about how much she enjoys it, and what comes after.” Athalia gestured to the bed and the sleeping redhead within.

“Of course she has.” That girl. She and Jessy were alike in so many ways.

“And I got to see it for myself.”

“And you accuse Mekhet of spying.”

“Well, after hearing Fiona rave about how good a lover you are, I had to get a peek.” She grinned again. “Nice to see she wasn’t exaggerating.”

“So you dropped by, hoping for said peek?” He managed to keep a straight face, despite the compliment. Barely.

She scrunched up her nose a little and smiled. Whoever this woman was, she wasn’t the Athalia of old. Whatever Daniel and her had been up to, it’d done wonders for her.

“Daniel is most definitely not willing to get that aggressive, though. I think he’s... afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Of hurting me. Not physically, emotionally. Probably thinks getting rough will... trigger me, I guess.”

He nodded. “You’ve had a rough life.”

“I know. But I’m not looking for gentle, lovey-dovey sex all the time, okay?. Sometimes, sure, but all the time? I’m a grown woman, damn it.” Frowning, she kicked her legs back and forth a little. “I want what Fiona and you have. I want the dumbass to... to make me feel small in his arms. Small, and helpless, but protected and safe, you know? As he pounds me into a coma.”

“You’re... being awfully forward with me, about all this.”

“Well, you’re a church boy, right? Think of this as a confession. You’re not allowed to share this with anyone.”

He groaned. That, was smart. She wasn’t exactly confessing her sins, but she was still confiding in him in a similar manner.

“Alright.”

She nodded again. “My daughter... is gone. It had to happen. Azamel’s helped me accept that, and Daniel’s the first man who’s made me happy in a long time. For the first time in my life, things are looking up. So this whole complaint is stupid, and juvenile, but god damn it, I want the man to be a man, and stop treating me like I’m made of porcelain.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Oh shut up.” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. “I want the man to hold me down, choke me a little, pull on my hair, spank me, maybe even tie me up. Is that so much to ask?”

Oh good Lord. Hearing it from her made it sound absolutely filthy, but in truth, it was all things he’d already done with Fiona. Frequently, at that. Filthy was the wrong word. Some women — a lot of women, evidently — liked feeling helpless and meek during sex. Athalia was anything but helpless and meek, same for Fiona, but he knew from experience that, if he took Fiona’s wrists and held her down, she immediately grew aroused.

Never in his wildest dreams did he think he’d enjoy doing that to a woman, until Fiona asked him to. Well, Vrall did, technically.

“I don’t know how to get Daniel to come out of his shell. Your blood would probably work, like I said.”

“I’ll work on that.”

“Other than that, it’s hard to say. It’s not like there’s a one-size-fits-all solution to getting people to come out of their shell. Fiona’s is... is a unique case. She’s so happy, and radiates joy so powerfully, it’s overwhelming. But truthfully, it was her Horror that told me what Fiona wanted, sexually speaking. Vrall is a little...”

“Wiser?”

He grinned. “I wasn’t going to say it. But Vrall definitely understands things, about people, about Fiona, about me, things I suppose I will too, if you give me a few more centuries learning about them.”

“Vrall won’t be of much help to me. Not like she’ll ever talk to Daniel.”

“Then, all I can do is suggest being honest with the man. He’ll respond best to bluntness.”

“Yeah, but, I’m afraid of... scaring him off, I guess.”

“Daniel? The man’s been close friends with a succubus for hundreds of years. I’m sure he’s seen debauchery of truly epic scale.”

“Ha! That’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’m certainly no expert on this topic. I think you’d get a far better answer asking the Prince herself.”

“I’d... rather not deal with the Prince.”

He smiled. “Me neither. Maybe Natasha? She—”

His phone rang. Maria’s ring. He got up and retrieved the phone where he left it on Fiona’s desk. A text message.

~Xnomina is under attack.~

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He left Athalia with Fiona. She could explain why Damien left for him, and he trusted her with his girlfriend. Considering who she was, he trusted Athalia with Fiona more than most. They were a family. A very weird family, but a family, and they’d protect each other with their lives.

Maria’s arms had regrown, but she couldn’t use them yet. Avery hadn’t simply torn them off, though that’d been what it looked like. If the werewolf could call upon weird magical fire into her claws, maybe she could do other things to cause other actions to inflict more damage? Whatever she’d done, Maria was taking a long time to heal. She wouldn’t be helping him tonight.

He landed on the roof of the building across from Xnomina. The HQ was on fire, at least, as much as a building of concrete with marble tiling could burn. The contents were the issue. The desks, the tables, the paintings on the walls, the decorative curtains, the chairs, they all burned, visible through shattered windows.

He crouched low and scanned the streets. Kine gathered to watch from a distance, but no cops or firefighters had arrived yet. They’d likely been delayed by the Invictus, and on purpose.



What was the point in this? The Carthians attacking the Invictus headquarters in the middle of the night made no sense. A distraction? He knew Jack was at the Tanvar building, along with Jessy and a few others. If the Carthians wanted Invictus eyes on the Xnomina building instead of the Tanvar building, this would work. The problem was the Masquerade. Vampires could not be caught fighting out in the open, and Xnomina was near the entertainment district. Kine were everywhere.

Damien pulled out his binoculars, and engaged his Auspex. He peeled back the curtain of chaos, and scanned for the Beasts of nearby Kindred, perhaps in the crowd. A sweep over the people below showed several Kindred, young Invictus neonates, staring at the building in horror. Understandable. Most of them had remained relatively peaceful with the Carthians; fist fights and the like in secluded areas hardly qualified as true violence to vampires. Fire, on the other hand, was a very clear statement: we want you dead. No vampire who touched it would survive, barring a miracle.

He used his free hand to dial Gloria Jennings. Thank the Lord, she answered.

“H-Hello!?”

“Miss Jennings, report.”

“Mister Burksen! Thank god, where are you?”

“On the Mardok building.”

“I’m in the bunker! I’ve got a dozen neonates with me.”

The bunker, below Xnomina. She’d be safe there from anything save for a particularly strong, particularly foolhardy elder Kindred, but Damien didn’t sense Garry anywhere. Elder he may be, Damien was confident he’d be able to pierce the man’s Obfuscate with Auspex if he was around. He was no Nos or Mekhet.

“The building won’t burn down. You’re safe in there.”

“I may be, but other Kindred aren’t! Amanda’s up there! But the bunker is locked down and won’t open cause of the fire!”

Shit.

“The fire can’t spread. Not enough things to burn. It’ll pass in an hour. I don’t even know how the upper floors managed to—”

“The Carthians. Gunshots hit the windows from the outside, and then fire rained in. And then some kine and a few Kindred stormed the building, and... and I ran. We all ran, for the stairs and got to the bunker.”

So, the Carthians had broke the windows, threw fire into the building, and then sent a contingent to rush inside. Dangerous for them, even if they had ghouls doing it. One mistake and one, or all of the Kindred would be dead in flames. Hell, if he was lucky, they'd all be dead.

No, much as he wished otherwise, if Carthians died during this stupid raid, it'd elevate the situation. Even if it was their own stupid fault, it'd intensify the squabbles, the turf war, and Kindred would start outright trying to kill each other. Jack didn't want that, and now that Damien was trying to rebuild the church in Doleido, he didn't want it either. And he didn't want his friends to get hurt, friends like Jack, and even that damn idiot Jessy.

"Where's Mister McDonald?" he asked.

"I don't know!"

"How the fuck did the Carthians rush through the building? Don't we have defensive measures?"

"I don't know, I don't know!"

"Either way, stay where you are. I'll deal with this." Sighing, Damien turned and—fucking jumped out of his own skin. "Sándor! How did you—"

The man leaned over the roof edge and peered out into the fire. "Athalia dropped me off."

The damn shadow monster was beyond sneaky, her and Fiona both. They made Mekhet look like stumbling children.

"Leave. Jack told the Begotten to stay out of this."

"Is that what this is? Problems with the Carthians?"

"You could say that. Now if you'll excuse me." Damien blanketed himself in the Cloak of Night, backed up, and made a running leap off the roof. The street wasn't wide, and reaching the building next to the Xnomina HQ easy enough, even with one leg refusing to work well.

A glance back showed Sándor followed him, jumping across to the next building without issue. Half jump, half fly. This high up, no one would see them, especially not with a nearby fire to watch and film.

And that was the problem. A fire meant kine, with smart phones and whatnot to film the mayhem. The Kindred inside had to be careful. A Masquerade violation meant death for whoever was stupid enough to get caught, especially if that meant getting caught on film. Maybe that's what the Carthians were hoping for? Put the Invictus in a position where someone might use their Disciplines to escape the flames, get caught on camera, and earn a swift — or not so swift — death at the sheriff's hands.

“Don’t follow me, Sándor. If Garry finds out you’re here, he—”

“I’m just watching.”

Damien frowned back at the man, but shrugged. As long as he didn’t get involved, he couldn’t make things any worse.

“I need to get into that building.”

“The building’s contents are on fire, Damien.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m wearing a fire retardant trench coat.”

The man didn’t smile, or make a sound. Eerie, how calm and stoic he was, considering a large building was on fire not far away, and outright war was just around the corner.

“If you die, Fiona is going to—”

“I’m not going to die. But I am going to do something, before everything goes to Hell.” Before an Invictus or Carthian made a mistake and broke the Masquerade, if he could help it.

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~~Jack~~

He snapped his gaze back down at Kathy. “Hold still. Stay there.” He punched through her consciousness and crushed her Beast beneath his will. It was dangerous to hit her mind so hard, but he didn’t have time for shit anymore.

Jack turned, and glared out the broken window, surrounded by the groaning bodies of thralls, and two paralyzed vampires. On the street, Jessy had switched off, and was doing her best to take on Steve.

“Jessy, get to the shadows!” Christ, if she did anymore crazy transformations, and some random kine got a picture of it, that was it. The Prince would side with the Carthians, and the Invictus would be finished.

Would that be so bad? If something happened to Jack, Antoinette said she’d declare him effectively dead, and keep him in her tower. And—no, he couldn’t just let that happen. The idea of the love of his life killing the people he worked with, and maybe even his friend Jessy, in a great purge, was gut wrenching.

Jessy nodded, still grappling with the other vampire, and threw the two of them into an alley. Better than nothing. But Steve was ancilla, and Daeva. If Jack couldn't keep tabs on them, there was always a chance Jessy would lose that fight. He had to deal with this shit and deal with it now.

Hella and Joe rolled up toward the Tanvar building, and then into it, glass cutting into them as they tossed and turned. Jack couldn't watch, eyes still locked on Garry, but at least those two were off the street.

“Garry, the fuck is this?”

The man grinned as he walked forward. The idiot wore no weapons, no armor, just jeans and a black t-shirt, and he licked a fang as he approached the building.

“Knew you were here.”

“Spotted me?”

“Nah. I've shared this damn city with your asshole boss since I was just a young vamp. Him, that fucker Viktor, and that bitch Maria. I know how he thinks.”

Jack looked up outside the window. Hard to see black on black, but some subtle motions told him Scully and Mulder were around, and more crows besides. But this part of North Side didn't have the same crow and rat population of other places like South Side, where they grew fat on the leftovers left by the night life and tourists. If he wanted to summon a legion, their numbers would take time to swell. And he didn't want another hospital incident anyway.

“So, what, you came here to fight me? I'm trying to keep everyone alive.”

Garry snorted. “You know what, kid? I believe you.” He came closer.

“You... do?”

“Yeap, I do. Julias was a good man, and now he's dead. And the white-haired queen, sitting pretty on her fucking throne, would just love it if everyone took it up the ass for her.”

So much for cooperation.

“So, what, you're here to kill me?”

“Maybe. I'm here to kick your ass. We'll see if killing is necessary.” He came closer, and Jack took a small step back. Not retreating, just making room for the asshole to hop into the lobby of the building with him. The glass crunched under his combat boots, and his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

Jack glanced to Hella. As much as Team A, Hella and the kine, were supposed to be guarding the building, and his six, the kine were out of the fight, and Hella was dealing with a Gangrel just as old as her. Joe was supposedly only thirty years embraced, but the bastard was strong. A dumbass, but strong. A big man, bigger than Garry, with a shaved head just like his boss. He had no trouble thrashing Hella around.

Past Garry, Jessy and Steve had vanished, but Jack could hear their yells and grunts of fighting. Behind the elder, Bella had vanished as well. Damn Mekhet. But Ryan's gun wasn't firing anymore either. The two were probably engaged, and Mekhet fighting Mekhet was a game of assassins. Whoever spotted the other first usually won. Better for Jack to not draw attention to Ryan's existence, if the man wasn't shooting anymore.

Team C were still out of the picture, and if those three cars came back, the fight would quickly swing in the Carthians' favor. And if Jack reached for his radio right now, there was a good chance Garry would jump him.

Garry. The youngest elder in Dolareido, barely old enough to be an elder. The files on him told a different story. He'd grown up in Dolareido, and even from a young age, gave the Carthians some direction; usually to fight against the First and Second Estate. The issue was, the files on him made one thing abundantly clear: the man was really, really good at fighting. Not smart, but stupid either. Not a good leader, but not a bad leader either. In typical Carthian fashion, his Kindred followed him, listened to him, because he was 'real', because he didn't bother with the Danse Macabre bullshit.

Or he didn't used to. After the Terra Den maneuver, maybe his covenant thought of him differently? Maybe coming at Jack directly was a chance for Garry to show his covenant that he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty if they went to war, unlike the other elders? Or maybe his ego demanded it?

"Where're the others?" Jack asked.

"Others?"

"The other Carthians. Intel told me if you idiots really came for the Tanvar building, there'd be a lot more of you."

The man smirked, and wiped the corner of his mouth with his knuckles, like a boxer might after a fight. He had the scars of a street fighter, including a nasty one on his lip, probably from a fist busting it open badly enough to require stitches. Those were things he'd gotten when he'd been kine. Hell, Jessy got into a lot of fist fights when she'd been kine, and she didn't have a quarter of the scars Garry did.

This dude had been baptized in fire before he'd ever been cursed with his own Beast.

Garry shrugged, and came closer. “Hitting the Xnomina HQ.”

Jack froze.

“You sent Kindred up against Michael? They’ll die.”

The bastard grinned. “If they were trying to take him down, sure. I ain’t Lucas though. Kamikaze? No thanks.”

“Then—”

“Go ask em, if you survive.” And the man came at him.

Without hesitation, Jack reached into his jacket, pulled out two pistols, and unloaded bullets at Garry. A little vampire strength allowed better control of recoil, and he held the trigger down on both pistols. Fully automatic.

Maybe Garry didn’t expect him to be willing to shoot him. Maybe he thought Jack would want a fist fight or something. The man’s eyes widened, and he staggered as a dozen bullets slammed into his chest. Predictably, he wasn’t wearing a vest, vampires never did, and he stumbled back as the metal tore through his shirt and flesh.

But, he was a Gangrel, and an elder. Predictably, he adapted. Before Jack had managed to get through half the magazine, the bullets no longer sank into Garry’s skin. They slammed against his t-shirt, ripping the fabric, but flattening against his hardened body before falling to the floor. Protean.

Jack had never dealt with a Gangrel using their Protean ability. Sure, he’d seen Jessy use it, transforming into animals, or evolving strange, monstrous limbs. It could do other things, too. He’d heard stories about the strange and insane things Michael had done, when putting a stop to a brawl between the Carthians, Jessy, and Eric. But Michael was twice as old as Garry. The younger elder wouldn’t be able to transform into a towering creature straight out of Resident Evil. Would he?

“That hurt.” Snarling, Garry dashed for him again, a dozen holes in his chest barely fazing him.

Jack stepped back, eyes wide as the man came in close, full on punching distance. Not just punching distance, boxing punching distance. No hay makers or stupid shit like that. He closed the distance quick until only two feet were between them, and the man brought up both hands before putting out a swift jab.

Jack poured vitae into his body, preparing the blood barrier he’d relied on so many times now. But with the Beast tied down, leashed by the necklace, it was like trying to get a car out of mud. Garry’s

punch collided with his chest, and Jack flew back, spine crashing against the lobby desk. He slumped down, ass on the floor, back against the front wall of the desk.

There were several small holes in Jack's chest. Jack blinked down at his suit shirt, then at Garry's knuckles. He had a spike on each knuckle.

Gangrel didn't usually do small transformations. Subtle wasn't in their toolbox. Transforming into large predators, or monstrous shit like Michael could do, or even just some super long claws, sure. But subtle? Never.

Jack grabbed his radio. Mistake. Garry pounced at him, a literal pounce, legs turning into enormous wolf legs that launched him at Jack. A moment before Jack's finger hit the button, Garry slammed into him, and the desk exploded. It was one of those big desks with a solid wood wall on the front and sides. And directly behind it was the door downstairs, that managed to stop Jack's body with a welcoming thunk of his skull.

Garry got up from the mess of torn wood and splattered computer parts. A handheld radio was in his hand, and grinning, he crushed it in his grip. Not like Jack couldn't contact his friends with his smart phone, but it was in his jacket pocket, and that'd take more than a few seconds to get out and use, unlike the radio.

"No hard feelings, kid. I always liked your sire. Julias was a cool guy. His sire, not so much." With a very animal growl, Garry stalked toward him, legs bulging against the inside of his jeans with increased muscle mass. Weirdly shaped legs. How the fuck did what was probably very wolfy feet work in those boots? No, Garry was probably just controlling the transforming perfectly to conform to the boots.

Everyone thought the Carthians were brutish morons, shortsighted idealists, and all-around fools. Garry certainly acted like one sometimes, too. But he didn't fight like one.

Jack forced himself to his feet, glaring at the man. "Garry, I'm trying to keep everyone from killing each other."

"You're an Invictus, drunk on power and control. You might have good intentions now, but we know where those lead. You're gonna be the next Viktor at this rate. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Garry, you—"

The man charged him again, and again, the Gangrel transformed. Jack expected more spiked knuckles, but instead, the man grew a tail, something long, thick, and covered in spikes along the spine.

He leaned forward as he charged him, and this time the man full on tackled him, driving his weight — more than he should have had — straight into Jack’s chest.

The door at Jack’s back exploded, wood splintering as it shot outward and around them. But when downward stairs greeted them instead of a flat floor, the world started to spin. Wack, wack, wack, each bounce on the hard surface punched him in the back, sides, legs, but he was light enough it didn’t hurt too bad. Garry had let go of him after the first bounce, and had continued to tumble, turning their bodies into rolling balls. He was much heavier. Hopefully he’d break a bone or two on the way down.

They landed at the bottom, against the next closed door, this one made of metal. Garry was up in an instant. Just as Jack rolled onto his back to face the man, so Garry didn’t start pummeling him in the back, Garry sprouted a giant claw, and sliced open the lock down the door seam.

Clawing through metal that thick, that easily, that precisely, took skill, and power. Jack gulped.

Garry kicked the metal door open, reached down, and grabbed Jack’s foot. Before Jack could kick him off, Garry dragged him into the room, and threw him, hard. The first few wooden crates to block Jack’s path broke apart, while others scattered over the floor.

“Michael and I know each other pretty well,” Garry said, following Jack in, boots crunching over the smaller boxes the crates had held. Cigars rolled away from his boots. “If you were wondering why you were put here to guard this building with only a small force, even though there was a risk I would show up, it’s cause Michael’s hoping I might kill you.”

Forcing himself to his feet, hand on a nearby stack of crates, Jack glared at the asshole.

“Michael doesn’t want me dead. He wants me to use my curse.”

“He wants you to use the curse, sure. He wants you to trigger the war.” Garry pointed at both his temples. “Think, Jack!... is that the right meme? Mike can’t shut up about memes. Kid spends way too much time online.”

Jack stared at Garry, blinking several times. “Um... yeah, it is.”

“Ah, good.”

“What the fuck is—”

Garry charged him again. The tail was gone, and this time, enormous claws broke through the man’s boots, tearing at the concrete basement floor as he sprinted at Jack. So much for subtle transformations. Every time the man came at him, he did it differently, a different tactic, a different body part. The best Jack could do was bring up vitae through his limbs to defend against the Gangrel.



Fast, so damn fast, almost as fast as a Daeva or Mekhet his age would be. The man got in close, ducked left, but twisted right, and slammed a fist up against Jack's face. He'd tried to block the left, falling for the feint, and it cost him, his ass on the floor and the world spinning.

"But," Garry said, "Michael's a smart fucker. He wants you to use the curse to start the war, but he also wants you gone, before you turn into another Viktor. So he's doing what all elders do. Making sure that both possible outcomes are good for him. Play chess?"

The fucker was taunting him, knowing damn well getting Jack pissed or frustrated would make it easier to kick his ass. It wasn't just that people didn't realize how smart Garry was, but rather, Garry didn't let people realize it. He'd been playing dumb, all these years, letting people like Jack think he wasn't smart enough to play the Danse. Fuck!

"A fork," Jack said, "in chess."

"Ha! You surprise me, Jack. I didn't think kids played chess these days."

"You—"

Again, Garry came at him, but Jack saw it coming; fucker kept coming at him whenever Jack responded, but the trick would only work so many times. He rolled back, over the table, and Garry sliced down where Jack had been. The man had summoned four giant claws, and they slammed down into the table, skewering it. Apparently less for slicing, more for stabbing.

With a second to react, Jack pulled the necklace off and stuck it in his pocket. Remain in control, remain in control. There weren't any pianos in the basement for someone to smash into his head, just a big room filled with wooden crates and metal tables. As long as Garry didn't somehow nail Jack in the head with one of those tables so hard it put him in torpor for a second, the Ripper would stay out of this.

Garry grinned at him, yanking his hand free, and slowly walked around the table. "The fuck are you even doing, working for the Invictus? You're just a nobody, some random kid Julias liked. Carthians? We've been fighting since long before our embrace. We've had homes taken away, friends lost, streets corrupted and turned into nothing more than shitty coffee shops and mini banks, half of them fronts for black markets and loan sharks. Carthians have been fighting for the people who fucking live in this city, like I've been, almost two centuries."

Jack kept the big table between them, strafing around it, peering at the man around the few crates that remained on it. "Half of the shit the Invictus does in Dolareido only works cause the kine embrace it. This is a city of sin, Garry. We don't force anything on the kine. Be happy we keep shit under control like we do. Far better than most do."

“Just because—”

“Don’t give me that shit. You’re no champion of the people, Garry. You got an agenda, like everyone else.”

Snarling, Garry snapped his foot out, claws still pushing through the boots. He slammed his heel against the table, driving it at Jack, but Jack was ready. He jumped up, letting the table slide underneath him. The bastard had kicked it hard enough, it crashed into a third table, filling the room with the thunder of metal slamming into metal, and more crumbling crates.

Garry dove at him again, leaning forward, with a tail sprouting out from behind him again. He expected Jack to do anything he could to avoid the charge.

Jack came in, getting low. Garry wasn’t a tall guy, but he was taller than Jack, and getting under him was easy. And with the necklace off, the Beast in Jack’s guts poured through him, flooded him with instinct, drive, and power. The curse and the Beast were entangled, and as the Beast let out its rage, the curse’s power came with it.

Jack drove his fist up into Garry’s chest, and the man flew into the air, hard. He collided with the wooden beams of the basement ceiling, cracking them before he bounced back down to the floor. And before the man could recover, Jack dashed forward and kicked the man in his side, sending him flying through the air again. He didn’t go high, but he did go far, crashing through more crates and sending them tumbling as he flew.

Growling, Jack stomped after the man, but he’d disappeared in the mess of crates and tables. It was a huge basement; had to be, to move all the merchandise.

“Holy shit,” Garry said, standing up a good fifty feet away, grin on his face. “A Ventrue, throwing a punch. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Julias taught me how to punch.”

“Funny. Viktor would never punch.”

“I’m not Viktor!”

Garry grinned some more, and walked toward him, stepping onto and over crates with casual grace. He kept the tail, and the huge talons poking through his boots. He walked like a fucking dinosaur.

“You know Jack, you could just walk away. Give me the building, and no one has to get hurt.”

“You said you were attacking Xnomina right now! People are getting hurt.” He had to deal with this and deal with it now. If people were dying back at the HQ, he had to get there and help. Michael could deal with it, but what if something happened? Jessy was here, Jack was here, and Damien was still out of commission. Isabella was at the HQ, but he trusted her to defend the building as much as he trusted her to prioritize the Invictus over her plays.

The elder snorted. “People that deserve it.”

Snarling, Jack came at him, and Garry grinned the whole time. He was enjoying this.

Jack threw a crate at him, but Garry slapped it aside. It was good enough for Jack to close the distance completely though, and take a swing at Garry’s face. The Gangrel brought up his arms and blocked, and Jack had to take a second to mentally register that. A block? Vampires almost always dodged, once they realized the vamp they were fighting had some serious Vigor to put into their punches. They simply had too much power to risk blocking. But when Jack’s fist hit the man’s forearm, it felt like punching a steel wall, and—

Garry’s fist collided with Jack’s face, and Jack went flying. The world spiraled, until collision pain quickly reminded Jack he was in a room full of painful corners. But Jack recovered quickly, Beast instincts grabbing hold and forcing him up from the mess of destroyed crates. There were sharp points on Garry’s knuckles, and sharp pain in Jack’s cheek. He ignored it.

“You think you’re so righteous,” Jack said. “You’re doing the exact same shit with Terra Den. Hell, you sired Jeremy Long.”

“I ain’t happy about any of it, Jack, but it has to be done. The Invictus are a problem, and they need to be gone.”

“Then why aren’t you attacking Xnomina yourself?”

“Too big a risk. The battle could get pretty hectic, you know? Way too many humans in the area. Gotta protect the Masquerade.” The grin on his face said it all. He was lying, and making no attempt to hide that fact.

“Bullshit. You’re here cause I’m here. You’re here cause the Carthians are afraid of me, and don’t want to get into this war unless they know I can be beaten.”

Garry paused, and his grin grew. “I’ve been building up to this war for decades, kid. And it needs to happen. You fucking Invictus are scum, bad for the city, bad for everyone, and someone needs to get rid of you. When Viktor died, I started getting ready.”

“Started? You... You wanted Michael to take the Mirrden district.”

More grins. “But then you pulled this curse thing out of your ass. Now Michael knows what I’m doing, and he’s hoping you’ll put the dent in the Carthians that allows him to win this war.”

“We don’t need to have a war!”

“Yes, we do.”

There wasn’t any arguing with this man. Garry didn’t hate Jack, but he hated the Invictus. He hated Michael and Viktor and Maria, Xnomina, and everything the First Estate represented. He hated them down to his bones, and there wasn’t any way Jack would get through to this man with a simple conversation.

Jack bit into his wrist, and splattered his blood on the floor.

Grinning, Garry bit into his wrist, and did the same thing.

The swarm didn’t take as long to arrive as Jack thought. Scully and Mulder came in first, and took to high perches in the room, up in the wooden beams overhead. Other birds came in as well, but in North Side, the rats were the larger population. Hundreds of dark brown bodies poured down the stairs and toward the two vampires, massively outnumbering the few birds that navigated through the three doors it’d take to get into the basement.

And then they started killing each other.

Jack stared down at the carpet of bodies, at the hundreds of furry creatures that’d served as his legion many times before. Normally they were summoned by his blood, the dark liquid infused with vitae and sending a pulse into the world that vermin could not ignore. They’d come to it, and upon reaching the source, understand who was their master. From there, Jack could use Animalism to direct and guide them, like a general plugged into the minds of his soldiers. With the Beast guiding his actions and reflexes, it was a smooth poetry of control.

But now, the rats arrived, and found two masters. Maybe if Ripper had cast the Discipline, there’d be no question about who was master, but Jack couldn’t use the curse with nearly the same level of skill.

*You’re right. You can’t. Let me out. Let me deal with this cocky fucker.*

Jack snarled, shaking his head, drawing a raised brow from Garry.

“You really just decided to show up with a few cars for a distraction, and five vamps to take this place?” Jack asked. “Sounds very... not-tactical. Sounds random.”

“Yeah well, sometimes you gotta go with instinct.”

“Bullshit. You don’t win wars with instinct. You’re just an idiot doing shit on the fly.” If he could antagonize Garry enough, get him angry, he might make a mistake.

“And the Invictus are paranoid fools, desperate to protect their house of cards. Cause that’s what it is, a house of cards. All your rules, all your money, your ranks and protocols, it’s all there to keep your stupid bullshit from falling apart.” Garry came at him, grinning the whole time, but stopped short. Instead, he spun, and swiped at Jack with his tail.

Jack raised an arm to block. He’d fought a long-ass battle against a giant gargoyle with four arms and a tail. Paying attention to shit like extra limbs felt natural, at this point. And if he could stop the tail and catch it, he could get the upper hand.

Except, when the tail came within inches of Jack’s arm, it erupted in spikes, suddenly covered in them, like a medieval mace. They punctured through his suit, his skin, and sank an inch into his flesh and flowing vitae, earning a yell from Jack. Garry ripped the tail back and out, shredding skin on the way, and as Jack stumbled to the side, Garry closed in, opposite of his tail, and sank his right fist into Jack’s face.

The world turned around again as Jack went flying, landing on a pile of rats. They softened the landing, but the creatures were mad with confusion, and they bit at each other as they scampered over and around him. Rat claws tore up his suit, and dozens of rats bit into him in the chaos of swarming bodies.

Jack jumped to his feet and scanned the ceiling. The crows weren’t fighting, but they cawed at each other incessantly. Mulder and Scully were in there, he could hear them, feel them, and they were trying to convince the other crows what to do. They weren’t listening. Hundreds of chittering rats bit into each other, dozens of cawing crows sat overhead, and crates lay everywhere, scattered and broken, with cigars and cigarettes carpeting the floor. The room was mayhem.

“Your problem,” Garry said, “is your attachment to routine, schedules, structure. You can’t evolve, can’t adapt, can’t roll with the punches.” The man threw aside a nearby table, sending rats bowling over, like a wave of water. “All I have to do is do something a little unexpected, and your plans crumble. I make friends with a suit, and you fuckers don’t have a clue. I show up here, willing to get my hands dirty, and you idiots don’t have the first fucking idea how to deal with it.”

Jack took slow steps back, giving himself a few extra seconds. Vampire blood coursed through him, filling in the holes the bastard was putting in him, but failing to prevent them. Garry was fucking

deadly, punching straight through Jack's defenses like Avery's claws had. If he wasn't careful, the Gangrel was going to cut him in half.

"Guilty. I do love routine."

Smiling, Garry came at him again.

Jack met his eyes, and reached out.

The difference was immediately apparent. No small creature guarded the inside of Garry's skull. A roaring, massive Beast waited behind the gate of his mind, a huge creature, swirling mist of black pouring around what could only be a really big... cat? A tiger? Lion? No, it had black fur, and it was way too big to be any Earth cat.

The colossal creature prowled left and right behind the gate, a gate everyone had. You couldn't simply walk into someone's mind, you had to get past the barrier. And when dealing with paranormals, you had to deal with the creature inside. Garry's gate looked like a chain link fence, topped with barbed wire, guarding a prison. A second gate, then? And the prison had a guard dog. Cat. Thing.

Garry stood beside his Beast, hand on its shoulder. He couldn't reach its back, with how big it was. And he was petting it.

Snarling, Jack kicked open the front gate to the prison, and marched forward, his own Beast following behind him. Before the curse had awoken inside Jack, freed by his stupidity, he'd never been able to really see these mind-to-mind engagements before. He could feel a person's mind when he attempted to Dominate them, same as any Ventrue could, but to actually see the inner battle that took place was something that'd only started happening after his first conversation with his Beast, and the curse bound within. A side effect of the curse or something.

He kind of wished he couldn't see this. He didn't want to know what sort of man Garry was on the inside, see that the man's mind was a prison fortress, but also something scarred, something that carried weight with it. Shame? Guilt? He couldn't tell, but the place reeked of an early twentieth century prison, and there were bloodstains on the path that led to the inner building.

"Get out," Garry said, grinning, as he scratched the back of his Beast's arm.

Jack looked up at the dark, cloudy sky. It cracked with lightning, and rain fell, sound drowned by thunder.

"Submit," Jack said

Garry snorted a laugh. "No."

Jack hadn't come alone. His own Beast followed behind him, obviously eager for a fight. It rose up, dwarfing Garry's, a tornado of black mist, and it snarled with alien tones Jack's brain struggled to recognize.

"Submit!" the curse said.

Garry just grinned. "No."

Before Jack could say anything else, Garry hopped up onto the back of his own Beast. The metaphor slapped Jack in the face hard, and he ground his teeth. Gangrel's didn't fight against their Beasts, not like the other blood clans did. Gangrels found a way to keep their Beasts up on the surface of their skin, right on the edge, ready to empower them. That's what he was looking at now.

Garry's Beast roared. Garry roared. Somewhere, somehow, the two entities blurred, and the combined force of their roar smashed into Jack hard enough it sent him backward. Him and the curse both.

Back, in the real world. Back in a room filled with fighting rats, tables and destroyed crates, with smaller boxes everywhere crushed under Jack and Garry's fight. Back, where Jack was losing the fight.

"Get out of my head!" Garry's voice. He'd stumbled back, after ejecting Jack from his mind. Well, at least it took him effort, cause right now, Jack felt a little humbled. That was the first time anyone had ever managed to do that to him, since the curse had been freed.

*These ignorant fools, oblivious to what goes on inside the mind. Be happy I let you see.*

If you didn't have to, I'm sure you wouldn't let me.

*Pfft. I've awoken true awareness in you. These weaklings, completely unaware of the Beast within. Even this idiot Garry, a Gangrel, so in tune with his Beast, doesn't get to see what you do.*

Jack snarled and shook his head again.

Garry came closer, slower this time, eyeing Jack with a suspicious smirk. "I'd heard this weird curse thing wasn't the big gift some people say it is. There's rumors going around, saying it's a problem for you. That maybe it's driving you insane."

Insane. Christ, am I insane?

*You're not insane. You're stupid! Let me out! This asshole is stronger than you. Stronger than your stupid boss.*

How the fuck is Garry stronger than Michael? He's been losing against the Invictus for decades, and is young as hell compared to him.

*Your boss has been sitting in a chair for centuries, ruling a covenant through a council. Garry here has been putting his neck on the line, fighting, and fighting, and fighting. He's risen to his position because he's earned it, not because he just happened to live long enough.*

You heard about what Michael did to Eric.

*And you saw, felt, what just happened when we tried to Dominate this fucker. You saw what happened when you tried to summon the legion. You really think this fist fight he's aiming for is just his way of beating you? He's toying with you! Let. Me. Kick. His. Ass!*

Jack shook his head again. "I'm not insane."

"You look insane. Your eyes were flickering around just now, like you were having a conversation in your head."

Fuck.

"I'm not insane." And the last thing he needed was Garry knowing about the curse having its own persona.

"Then I have to say I'm pretty disappointed, Jack. This all you got? This is the prodigal childe, the young Kindred that escaped the hunters, defeated an ancient Begotten, got his revenge on his sire's killers, and took down Avery's pack? She told me about that fight, told me about how strong you were. What a letdown."

"Is that what this is? You just looking for a good fight? People are going to die, Garry! Kine and Kindred."

"Like you care about kine."

Jack clenched his fists hard, and glared daggers into the asshole.

"You—"

"You know what I think, Jack? I think you've convinced yourself of some real bullshit. You got good intentions, but that's all. In reality, you're just this cynical little punk kid who got his hands on his daddy's gun, and now you're tempted to use it on everyone and everything. I think you're on the fast track to becoming another Viktor. I think, given time, I'll have another maniac asshole, convinced he's better than everyone else, willing to crush the whole city under his thumb to get his way, willing to torture kine and Kindred alike for whatever reason he can think up at the time."



Ice ran down Jack's back. Much as Garry was jumping on some serious assumptions, the words weren't alien. Jack had thought them before, especially when the curse had been sealed and secret, but seeped into his thoughts, corrupting him. He'd been terrified he was becoming another Viktor.

"I'm... not Viktor, Garry. I won't let it happen to me."

"Yeah well, you'll have to forgive me if I don't trust you."

So that's what this was, then. It wasn't just Garry wanting to prove to his Carthians that Jack wasn't the threat the rumors made him about to be. He wanted to make sure Jack wasn't becoming another Viktor. He was determined to make sure Jack didn't. And nothing Jack could say would make him think differently.

"Tell your people to back off, Garry. Tanvar building is ours, but no one has to die over this stupid turf war. Work with me, and the Invictus and Carthians can get along. I have bigger fish to fry than this."

"Bigger fish?"

Shit. Tell him, don't tell him? He was sure Black Blood was the problem, and Black Blood worked with Jacob. And Jacob occasionally worked with Garry.

"Back off Tanvar and I'll tell you."

Garry snorted on a laugh, and charged.

Jack grounded himself and poured vitae through his limbs as the man dashed forward. More, and more, he infused his will into the dark, thick blood coursing through his undead body. If there were kine or weaker Kindred around, Jack could easily Dominate them and turn them into his slaves for this fight; assuming they weren't already under his command. That was how Ventrue won fights, with an army.

He had to get his army back.

Jack held out his hands around him, and focused. Rats. His legion. They were confused, torn between the two pulls, the elder Gangrel, and Jack. Even now, in the mayhem of chitters and squeaks, he knew the rats knew him, just as they knew Garry. The Gangrel was known as the Fighter to the rats, someone who fought against other creatures at the top of the food chain. And Jessy was right, they knew him as the Crow Lord.

The Fighter versus the Crow Lord, and the rats were getting pulled in both directions.

Fuck that. They were his army. How many times now had he summoned his legion? Even if the curse had been the one to do it, he'd done it with Jack's body, Jack's blood, Jack's vitae. The curse was just an amplifier. Jack could do this without the fucking Ripper.

He poured his will into his blood, and prepared. Garry came at him, fingers elongating into massive claws, and he struck at Jack's head, fully intending to behead him. But Jack raised his arm and blocked, summoning a wave of vitae into the limb. If he hadn't, Garry's blade fingers would have cut straight through the arm and his neck. But Jack managed to harden his body enough to block it, even if the blade managed to pierce his skin.

Hell, he'd been counting on it.

The pain was immense. He recognized it, too. It was pain like when the werewolves sliced him with their claws, a pain that went well beyond what a simple blade should have been capable of. With the werewolves, he was pretty sure they had some sort of magical empowerment. With Garry's claws, it was vitae. He didn't know how or why, and neither did Jessy, but their claws could do ridiculous damage, more than enough to cut through Jack's hardened skin, and muscle, until his claws slammed into Jack's bone and came to a dead stop.

With a bit of will, Jack's blood flowed out of the wound, down his arm and elbow, soaking through his suit jacket, and coating the floor. And with every drop of the thick liquid, he poured his command.

Immediately, the rats stopped fighting among themselves. The crows overhead ceased their squabbling. Every dark eye in the basement turned, and looked at Garry.

Jack could feel it, how his will smashed against the Gangrel's. Their Beasts silently snarled and growled at each other, but now Jack had recast the Discipline, and fueled it with a dozen times more effort and vitae. Every bit of training, every fucking drop of effort and will he had, every shred of concentration he could spare went into those drops of his blood, all with the one goal of roaring louder than Garry's Beast could.

The rats, ripping through boxes of cigars as much as they poured over them, flowed onto Garry's legs, and obeyed, taking advantage of how he exposed himself attacking Jack. He leapt back, but a dozen of them had already latched on, and they bit and tore at his jeans in seconds. The man landed back on one of the tables, growling like a tiger more than a man, and tore the rats from his legs. A few precious seconds spent dealing with rats was a few more seconds of rats closing in on him, surrounding him, flowing over the crates and overturned tables like a living brown carpet.

Jack bit into each of his wrists, and splattered more of his blood over the floor. Much of it landed on the rats, but they didn't care. Spreading his vitae onto his territory was how he created the connection with the horde, how they recognized him as the ruler of the land, and their master. Controlling hundreds of rats was difficult. Controlling thousands was extremely difficult, and exhausting. Doing it and overpowering Garry's own attempts to control the swarm, was overwhelming.

But he did it.

Snarling, Garry jumped to another table, glaring at Jack as he spun, kicking off the rats that managed to reach it. With crates everywhere, including still on most of the tables, move from table to table was difficult, and Garry kicked and killed rats by the dozens as they worked together to get him.

"I might not be much of a fist fighter, Garry. Not much of a gun fighter, either. But I am good at one thing." Jack pointed a palm at Garry, and focused.

Not many crows had come, but enough did, and fifty birds descended toward Garry like bombers. They made diving passes upon the man, clawing at him before moving past and retreating to the rafters of the basement. He ducked and weaved with the reflexes of a boxer, deftly dodging each crow, but the bombardment left him vulnerable to the rats, and a few managed to latch onto his legs again.

They ripped into his shins and calves, biting and tearing with their little rat claws, and Garry snarled as pain ran across his face.

Maybe taunting him was a bad idea. Much as Jack had the upper hand now, the basement was just one room, and one covered in a mess of debris. Moving around in it wasn't easy, and Garry knew that. If he could get his footing, he could come back at Jack again, and then Jack would have a hell of a time keeping Garry from ripping his head off. He could sprout claws, or—or grow fucking wings.

Garry's shirt ripped apart as two wings erupted from his back. Bat wings. Massive bat wings, complete with unusual, long claws on the thumb and fingers. Not bat wings then, but demon wings. Air pushed outward from the sudden explosion of mass, and birds collided with both the wings and the rafters and crates as they struggled to compensate. Garry's tail grew as well, getting longer, growing as thick as a leg, with spikes at its tip growing longer. The man's boots tore apart as his feet expanded in size, and Jack took a step back, eyes wide, as what might as well have been the feet of a raptor straight out of Jurassic Park crushed the edge of the metal table like squeezing a beer can.

Grinning, the bastard jumped off the table, and leapt at him. Half fly, half pounce. Garry closed the distance faster than Jack predicted, and he took a dozen steps back as he tried to compensate, rats

barely avoiding his feet. Only vampire reflexes kept Jack from stumbling over the crates and fragile boxes of tobacco.

Garry slammed into him, hands crashing into his shoulders. So heavy. Whatever Garry did, his mass had increased drastically, and Jack stared up at the man as he fell to his back, pinned, with a couple wood crates breaking apart underneath him. Garry had grown taller, his arms and legs thicker, and his fangs had grown longer. All his teeth had grown bigger, and sharper. This wasn't like fighting a vampire anymore. He was fighting something as heavy and big as a werewolf.

The playful look in Garry's eyes was gone. Hell, the human look in his eyes was gone. His pupils were dilated, and they had a slit shape to them, like a cat's. His mouth and nose stuck out a little more, almost like a snout. Oh good god he really was transforming into some sort of bat demon man thing. And comical as that was in theory, it was terrifying from up close.

The grip on Jack's shoulders quickly hit crushing levels, and Jack screamed as something in his arms went snap.

"If you just got out of my way, Jack, I wouldn't have to—aaargh!"

Garry let out a scream of his own, albeit far more inhuman, as Jack kicked the man in his crotch. The impact was hard enough to push him away slightly, and Jack brought both feet underneath him, and kicked again. With both feet planted against the man's chest, Jack drove him straight up into the rafters hard enough for wood to splinter and break against his back, skull, and wings. He came down six feet away, and rats poured over him the moment he did.

There weren't enough rats in the area to provide Jack a true swarm, but there were enough to give Garry a hell of a time getting back up. He roared his frustration as his wings snapped out, sending a hundred of the furry creatures about, and stopping more crows as they tried to harass him. Judging from the angry look on his face, he didn't like that Jack had taken control of the swarm, despite his attempts to block him. Well, fuck him.

Jack screamed again as vitae forced his bones back into position. He screamed some more, as he rolled onto his side, then onto his hands, and forced himself up. Pain was an old friend at this point. The Prince told him getting used to pain was a part of any vampire's second life, but she also admitted Jack had found himself in extremely painful situations far too often. Broken shoulders sucked, a lot, but when compared to getting his hands cut off, or getting his entire chest cavity cut open by magical werewolf claws, this was nothing.

With vitae forcing his bones together well enough to function, he ignored the pain and stood up.

*You're slow. You waste vitae and you make stupid decisions. You can't control the power the Strix gave us. Let me deal with Garry!*

Shut up shut up!

Snarling louder, Jack grabbed one of the nearby tables. They were long things, big enough for twenty people to sit, and covered in crates. The metal bent slightly in his grip, and he dug his feet into the floor as best he could as he lifted the table up on an angle, raising the further end higher, until its legs were higher than the other tables. With its weight pressing down toward him, he had the friction to anchor himself to the floor, and he spun, swinging the table toward Garry.

Crates went everywhere, and rats squeaked as they disappeared in the debris. Impact, hard enough to partly bend the table's edge around the elder vampire, announced success, but so did the dying squeaks of the rats. If the curse had been in control, he could have guided the rats like they'd been an extension of his body, and simply moved them out of the way. If the Ripper had swung the table, he'd have smashed the table into Garry's body so hard, the man would have folded in half.

Jack wasn't the Ripper, but that didn't mean he couldn't kick this man's ass.

Garry, on his butt with a battered table beside him, hissed and groaned as he got up. He clutched his side for a moment, but only a moment, before standing up straight again; as straight as a beast with a tail and wings would, anyway.

"Been a while since I've had a good fight. Thanks for that, kid."

"Fuck you, Garry. This isn't a game. People are dying."

The Gangrel laughed. "You think? Christ, if only you knew."

"Knew what?" Probably a dumb question to ask. Letting Garry know that Jack didn't know what he meant was a classic blunder in the Danse Macabre, but at this point, he didn't care.

"Invictus and Carthians have been killing each other, in this damn fucking city, for centuries. None lately, but before you were embraced, every so often, a vampire would just disappear." The winged creature took a step toward Jack, before casually using his other foot to knock away a dozen rats. Less rats took their place, and less, and less. There should have been more.

Jack may have taken control of the rats in the immediate area, but Garry had stopped more from coming. Shit.

"The Prince—"

“Has been doing her best to keep us cooperative, and she’s succeeded. That don’t mean we don’t kill each other, Jack, we just make sure it stays out of the limelight. You know how many friends I’ve lost to the Invictus, in just the past twenty years? Five. Five vampires that, as far as the other covenants care, simply left the city. They know what really happened, though. The Invictus are good at covering their tracks, but they know. And as long as her precious Masquerade is upheld, and her city continues to function, that fucking bitch Prince won’t do a damn thing. Lazy, useless whore.”

Jack took a step back as another slew of his rats died to Garry’s tail. They’d bit into him a hundred times, but the damage was superficial, just like it’d been with the werewolves. And unlike with the werewolves, Jack didn’t have thousands upon thousands of rats this time, and they weren’t replenishing either.

“You—”

“Viktor was responsible for their deaths.”

“Then what the fuck!? He’s dead! Move on!”

“Michael and Maria will follow in his steps. They’re Invictus. They’ll do everything they can to gain control, until eventually they can oust the Prince, maybe kill her, and rule the city. But you,” he pointed at Jack with a long claw, “are convinced you Invictus can play nice, and it’s pissing me off. You’re all assholes who’ll run anyone over for a dime.”

“You talk like you didn’t kill any Invictus either.”

He snarled, and took a step closer. “Yeah. Revenge. Justice served.”

Jesus. Jack knew the Invictus and Carthians squabbled, but he had no idea it was this bad. Killing each other, and then covering it up so the Prince couldn’t act it on? Holy fuck.

“Garry, we—”

The Gangrel charged him, a burst of speed that sent the corpses of rats, and dozens of crates flying. There was no arguing with this man, no getting through to him. He hated the Invictus, hated them with a passion, and had been playing shadow games with them for decades. Centuries.

The only way Jack was going to talk some sense into Garry, is if he knocked some into him first.

Garry came in close, and swiped, raking claws straight down, starting at Jack’s head. Jack stepped back, avoiding the swipe, but only by an inch. There was an opening, one Garry left on purpose, fully expecting a Ventrue to back off. So Jack stepped in, and drove his fist into the man’s sternum. Might as well have been punching metal. But it was enough to force the Gangrel a step back.

Jack was good at recovering quickly when he got hit, but Garry was better. The fucker might as well have been a boxer. A punch to the chest hard enough to break bricks wasn't enough to stop him for long, and he came in again. And, he got bigger.

Seconds later, Garry was an eight-foot gargoyle-like creature. Well, damn, déjà vu. He wasn't nearly as big as Sándor, but he also moved a shit load faster, vitae fueling his movements. Charging forward, Garry's footsteps shook the boxes and rat corpses with the vibrations of his weight, and his charge sent them outward like a runaway train breaking through wooden walls, smashing them to bits. Jack could only keep backing away, until his back hit the wall.

In the back of Jack's mind, a nasty thought ran in circles. Jessy had told Jack about Michael's fight with Eric, and the crazy shit Michael did. Sure, Michael had zero tact, and if Jack had to guess, the man focused on his Protean transformations more than Garry did. But so far, Garry hadn't done anything Jack couldn't handle. Sure the transformations were scary, but they weren't all that much crazier than what Jessy could do. Sure, the man's fighting skills were far better than Jack's, but they weren't anything Jack hadn't dealt with from fighting the werewolves.

Garry, the youngest elder in the city, was feared by Maria and Michael. Hell, he'd been feared by Viktor, considering the man had invited Garry to his balls to try and placate him. Much as Jack's grandsire was willing to be a shitty asshole and have a shadow war with Garry, he didn't want to take the man head on.

There was only one explanation for the elder's behavior in this fight. The curse had been right. Garry wasn't trying. Jack almost laughed; the gamer in him found that very insulting. Why wasn't he trying? Did he not want to kill Jack, or was he testing Jack, thinking he might be holding back as well, and waiting for an opportunity to strike?

Garry got close to Jack, stopped, and spun. A giant tail with large spikes on the tip came swinging for him, and he had to drop to the floor to keep from getting hit. The tail came down, and Jack rolled to the side, putting another table between him and the elder. With a heavy roar, Garry kicked the table, knocking it over and sending it at Jack.

He caught it, but the damn thing was heavy, and Jack was not. It drove him through a dozen crates before slamming him into the wall. Garry followed the path of destruction, snarling with every heavy step.

Jack reached down, and picked up the table by its edge, forcing it onto its side. It was big enough for Jack to use it as a shield, and Garry's oncoming tail smashed into it. The spikes on his tail skewered the table, and when Garry yanked back on his tail, the table came with it. His tail was stuck.

Why was Garry playing with him? What was he trying to do? If he was trying to spare Jack's life, the asshole could have just talked to him. Christ, he had to know Jack was more willing to talk than Michael would be. Didn't he? Or did he really believe Jack was another Viktor, just waiting to be let out?

Garry stumbled back, the weight of the attachment throwing off his balance, and Jack took advantage. He pounced at the man, driving both hands and feet into the floor and launching himself at Garry's torso. His foot collided with Garry's face, and the huge beast fell backward, balance ruined. The wings flapped wildly, smashing crates and creating a mountain of chaos, sending Jack back as one of them crashed into him before he got the chance to drive his boot up the man's nostrils.

Jack landed on his back, and groaned as crates broke his fall again. Wood crates were going to haunt his torpor nightmares for years, after this.

*You suck at fighting.*

Yeah, I get that.

*You are right, though, as was I. Garry could be coming at you harder than he is now. He may be young for an elder, but he's had to kick some serious ass to get where he is. And he kicked us out of his mind. Me! He removed me! He's dangerous.*

Little late warning me now.

"Garry, stop! This is stupid!" Snarling louder and louder, Jack forced himself to his feet. "You think I don't realize you're just fucking with me? The fuck are you trying to do? Hope I'll trigger the war?"

Garry ripped his tail free of the table as he got up, and stomped his feet as he came at Jack again. "The war never ended! This was just a break, a breather."

"You're wrong!" Jack jumped back, ran, and slid. It was a big room, and despite all the destruction and chaos, the broken tables, dozens, probably hundreds of smashed crates, and dead rats everywhere, there was still a lot of room to move around. Once Jack had some space between him and Garry, he slid under a table, and hopped up. Now, a whole bunch of shit blocked Garry's view to Jack.

"Get back here!"

"We had a truce, and you and Michael are ruining it!"



“How the fuck is it a truce if both the people in charge are trying to break it?” Crates smashed, and Jack put another stack of them between him and the Gangrel, as bits of cigars and shards of wood flew overhead.

“Don’t give me that shit. You don’t want to see Kindred dying anymore than I do.”

“Says you. I’ll dance on the ashes of every Invictus.”

Garry’s voice was full of anger and rage, but something else, too. Something was on Garry’s mind, but the more Jack thought about it, the more he realized it couldn’t be the usual, like the Danse Macabre and shit. That just wasn’t Garry. Garry was a Carthian, and had dedicated his life protecting his people. Sure, the man had gotten out of his comfort zone lately, going to Viktor’s balls, and working with Terra Den. Not exactly the sort of shit Carthians would normally do, but Garry was willing to get his hands dirty, and blacken his soul, if it meant helping his covenant.

Garry probably hated himself, for playing the Danse. He probably hated himself for the Carthians that died, and felt the only way he could stop it from happening, was playing the game, and killing all the Invictus. Deep seeded rage Jack would never be able to appreciate. Even when the curse had ransacked Jack’s mind, all that rage had been on the surface, and explosive. Garry hated the Invictus in the same way roommates could hate each other. Hate from intimacy and familiarity; they had to share a city, after all.

“That’s not true. You don’t hate the Invictus. You hate what the Invictus have done, to you and your friends. But you know damn fucking well that Maria and Michael aren’t that bad. That was all Viktor!”

“That’s funny, coming from his grandchilde.”

“I am not Viktor!” Christ, this was like arguing with a crazy person. A mad man. Garry was certainly mad with rage, to the point he couldn’t think clearly.

Crates flew overhead, dozens of them, and the room echoed with metal hitting metal. Jack threw himself to the side as the closest table smashed forward. It collided with the table behind where Jack had been, and more crates flew around. Maybe putting barriers between him and the Gangrel hadn’t been the best idea.

Crows above panicked and flew away, but Mulder and Scully didn’t. They flew overhead, cawing, announcing Garry’s approach.

A couple of crates flew up and smashed into the rafters above, each thrown by the elder, directly at the crows. And both Mulder and Scully fell.

Jack froze, staring up at the rafters above, at his two friends as they disappeared behind the walls of crates that surrounded him. For a quiet, freezing moment, Jack watched a few black feathers slowly spin and fall.

No. No no no.

“Jack!” Garry jumped over one of the knocked sideways tables, and landed on the concrete beside him. “If you don’t want anyone to die, just—”

Jack turned, vitae pouring through him, over him, around him, coursing through his skin and the nicks and cuts this stupid fight had given him. The blood broke through his suit, his jacket and shirt, and coiled onto him as it slithered around, and around his joints.

He drove his fist into Garry’s face, and the man flew back, spinning through the air like he weighed nothing, before he collided with the floor, his own claws tearing up the concrete. His jaw half hung off his face, broken, and his animal eyes were wide with pain.

Jack stomped after him, glaring, hands clenched, and hell burning through his veins.

“I’m going to fucking kill you.”