

~~Jack~~

~Are you alright, master?~ Scully asked, perched on a powerline outside.

~I'm fine. Any kine wandering nearby?~

~No.~

~Any signs of Michael?~

~Not yet,~ Mulder said.

The ability to communicate with his familiars over distances psychically was freaky and awesome. Normally Animalism required some sort of visual or auditory contact. But now that Mulder and Scully were his familiars, dead and revived as half vampire creatures, no auditory or visual connection necessary. Full on magical connection. Ye're a wizard, Harry.

Garry waited, tapping his foot, growing angrier by the second.

“Kill me?” Jack said after a perfect dramatic pause, voice dripping with sarcasm. “What did I do?”

Garry glared at him as he came closer, eyes scanning for weapons. Well, Jack had none. He sat in a crummy old chair behind a crummy old desk, and with his feet up on the desk, he hooked his hands behind his head, and grinned at the Gangrel.

Garry growled, a little more like a predator — from Predator — than Jack liked. Scary. While Jack wore his usual suit, various shades of gray, Garry wore the usual as well, a white tank top and blue jeans. And with Jack sitting behind a desk, the situation reeked of a stereotypical Carthian Invictus encounter.

“The fuck are you up to? Fucking rat.” Garry came up to the desk, and licked a fang. Not the sexy kinda lick that Antoinette often did. This was an angry, get ready to fight kinda lick, like an animal getting ready to bite something.

It was an empty room, despite Garry's obvious concern it wasn't. No vampire sat around in the dark corners, waiting to spring up out of their Cloak, lit only by the few old bulbs flickering with age. Garry could tell. No explosives covered any surface. It was just a big, empty room.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Jack. I know you set up a meeting to talk to one of Roland’s relatives. The fuck are you trying to prove?”

Jack shrugged, and picked up a stack of papers on the desk.

“The fuck do you care?”

“The fuck do I care? You know why I care! Otherwise you wouldn’t be doing this.”

Grinning, Jack looked at the pages, picked one, and set it down where Garry could see the picture. A copy of a newspaper article from fifty years ago.

“1970. Mugger dies, quite randomly, in a dark alley. Stolen purse found on corpse. Cops delivered it to the woman who lost it.”

Garry’s eyes widened.

Jack flipped to another page. “1984. Car accident. A man nearly died, and the hospital needed a special kind of blood for him. Some weird deficiency. And for some reason, a woman no one knew shows up at the hospital to give him a transfusion of her blood. She had the kind of blood he needed to save his life. Turns out she lived in your neck of the woods.”

Garry’s eyes hardened into sharp slits.

Jack flipped to another page. “1920. A robbery goes bad and the robbers take a couple hostage. Later, the robbers are found dead, the hostage were fine, and all the hostages can say is something happened in the dark. Something loud, and crunchy.” He couldn’t help but laugh as he read over the paragraph again. “Cops were pretty perplexed, and it was the 1920s. A lot of them got superstitious about it. Called Dolareido the Blood City.”

“Are you fucking serious? You tracked my…” Garry snarled and looked away. That was as good as admitting.

Jack didn’t track all this information, of course. He didn’t know the first fucking thing about it. Hell, the idea that Garry would go out of his way to help Roland’s family after Roland’s death didn’t cross his mind. It crossed Antoinette’s mind though, and she dug up the details without issue. She was too damn smart.

He kinda wished she’d told him she’d left breadcrumbs pointed to him, though, breadcrumbs for Garry to find. He understood why she didn’t, cause he might given up what was happening if she did, but still, risky.

“As you can probably guess now,” Jack said, gesturing around them, “no member of Roland’s family is on the way. I tricked you into coming here, to take a peek at this.” He gestured at the stack of papers.

“You tricked me here? You?”

“Evidently.” The right word to use to piss him off.

“... and the distraction in my turf?”

“You knew it was a distraction.”

“Of course I knew it was a fucking distraction.”

“And when your tail told you I’d been up to something here, you came running when you realized I was distracting you. You have had a tail on my ass for a while now, right? Someone who noticed I was looking up information on Roland’s family? Someone who thought I set up a meeting with them?” Someone that Antoinette tricked. “You thought ‘oh that fucker Jack is distracting me while he gets involved in my shit. Well surprise, Jack, I know where you are’. Sound about right?”

Garry stared at him until his eyes twitched. Every word Jack said was right, and Garry was going to boil over any moment as Jack rubbed it in how stupid the man was. He wasn’t stupid, of course. Antoinette was just really fucking smart, and even she couldn’t have put this together without Jack’s help. Even she didn’t anticipate how important Roland had been to Garry. But, better Garry didn’t know it was her plan, not yet. Probably not ever.

“Jack... you’ve crossed a fucking line.”

“Have I? Just dug up some records.”

“You don’t—”

“Garry, shut up.” Oh the anger in the man’s eyes. It was kind of thrilling, doing this. As shitty a sport as bullfighting was, Jack couldn’t deny it must have been thrilling as fuck to be a matador. “Roland isn’t the first lover you’ve lost like this, is it? A little bird told me you were romantic with another man, someone in the Lancea et Sanctum. Lucas killed him.” Jack shook his head. “You really just can’t catch a break, can you? No wonder you hate Michael with—”

Garry flipped the desk. Papers went everywhere. Jack barely had time to react as Garry dove under the desk as it flew through the air, and tackled him. But Jack already had the necklace off, safe in his pocket, and his Beast responded just as quickly. He grabbed Garry’s wrists before he could get them around Jack’s throat, and held him at a distance. Jack was still sitting however, and inertia was a thing.

They landed in a roll. Jack wanted to kick up against the man's chest with both feet, push him off, but physics were a bitch, and the two landed and rolled the moment friction had a say in the matter. And Garry didn't come at him with some weak tackle either. The concrete floor ripped and tore up Jack's suit like a cheese grater as the two rolled until they eventually slammed into the wall.

No longer tethered to each other, Jack rolled up and away faster than Garry, and hopped up to his feet. Up and away. Garry, eyes wide with absolute rage, chased after him, and didn't bother with the slow build up like last time they fought. The man's clothes disappeared into his skin, talons erupted from his boots, a tail shot out from behind him, and giant wings burst from his back, leathery, with a giant claw on each main joint. Similar to the creature Jack had fought last time, but with some minor differences. Maybe he couldn't recreate the same shape every time? Well, either way, a gargoyle creature ran at him, and this time, Jack didn't have a dozen tables and a thousand boxes to hide behind.

Then again, Mulder and Scully weren't in the room either. They were circling outside, keeping an eye open for inevitable arrival of Michael. Which meant Jack didn't have to worry about them.

Garry charged at Jack with all the subtlety of a monster truck, mass included, and his talons tore up the concrete as he grew heavier, and bigger. His tail split into two, and flailed wildly behind him as spikes emerged on its tip. His jaw split down the center, and spread into mandibles. Extra eyes opened on his forehead, seven of them, and his newly formed mandibles grew extra sharp teeth that would have made a crocodile envious.

"Holy shit!" Normally Jack would say that in his head, but sometimes you see something so damn freaky you have to say it out loud.

Garry, on the other hand, didn't say a thing. He probably couldn't with a mouth like that, except maybe for some sinister laughter. Jack was tempted to make the joke about that, but the bastard closed the distance so fast Jack had to roll to the side as the behemoth stomped past him. Each step hit the floor hard and pulsed the area with vibration, like Garry weighed twice as much as one of the werewolves. Sure, he was like a mini Sándor, but that was still huge. Plus, he was really freaky, like 'oh god it's going to eat my brains' freaky.

And the look in his... nine eyes, was pure, unadulterated hatred.

Garry tried to veer and catch Jack on the roll, but whatever he did to his body, he was too heavy now. It was like a car trying to turn on a dime, or a transport truck. The freak alien gargoyle thing ran past Jack as he turned, and his talons ripped ravines through the floor as he struggled to stop his mass. But he managed, and picked up the chase again as Jack put as much distance between him and the Gangrel as possible.

“Kill you,” Garry said. Ok, apparently he could talk. It didn’t sound human in the slightest, like some freaky demon without lips had to use only tongue and throat to make sounds, but he managed. “Fucking kill you!” A loud, raspy voice, mixed with high pitched shrills. Yeap, alien.

But the huge alien came to a stop — after digging a few more trenches in the floor with his talons — when another person walked down the tile stairs and stepped into the concrete room.

“Garry Tones,” Michael said, snarling as his eyes moved from the alien to Jack. “Mister Terry.”

Garry stood there, all nine eyes showing some weird mix of hate, rage, and surprise.

“Well well, Michael, nice of you to drop by,” Jack said, and he waved.

Michael’s eyes hardened. “What is going on here?”

Garry looked between the two of them, and snapped both his tails against the floor, but said nothing. He was confused, too.

Grinning like the biggest jackass alive, Jack turned, and walked back toward the desk Garry flipped. Right past Garry too, to help stoke that rage. The papers were everywhere, but after rooting through a few, Jack stood up with one, and turned to face the two Gangrels.

“Michael. I got a record here about a financial collapse in 1953, a street corner store. ” Jack squinted at the paper, dramatically of course, before smiling at his boss. “And three days later, the store opened for business again. Apparently they’d gotten an anonymous donation, and some new traffic.”

Michael just stared.

“This one is even better. 1921. Looks like whoever held Roland’s funeral didn’t have to pay out of pocket.”

“Jack,” his boss said. There went the titles. “I’m warning you.”

“I got a bunch more here. Looks like one of Roland’s cousins, the one who came to the funeral, suddenly came into a hundred grand. And one of his daughters got a free education. And her grand daughter is currently undergoing leukemia treatment for free. Some sort of strange loophole in the insurance that doesn’t actually exist, but Roland’s family now thinks it does.”

Jack shrugged, and grabbed another paper. “Here’s a report about a guy who disappeared for a while. Addict, got mixed up in a bad crowd. Looks like he was about to get, uh, ‘iced’ by a loan shark, after a thorough round of torture.” Yeap, the language on the report actually said ‘iced’. “But then the loan sharks let him go. Told him to keep his nose clean, and his debts were wiped.” Jack tossed the paper aside. “Now, I don’t know about you, but the loan sharks I’ve met would sooner cut off their own

children's fingers than give up an opportunity to make a statement to other customers. Oh, and this guy was dating another person related to Roland.”

Garry took a step closer to Jack. “You had no right digging up shit about us, our past.”

“This was... is, our business, Jack. Not yours.” Michael came closer as well, his eyes drifting between Garry and Jack, back and forth several times, rage building.

Jack blinked between the two guys. “Wait, our business? You... knew? You two knew you were both playing guardian angel to Roland's family?”

Michael tilted his head to the side, like he was going to crack his neck. Vampires couldn't crack joints or knuckles, but the effect was still the same: intimidating. Michael was a big, beefy guy, and he looked like he was getting ready for a fist fight.

“We knew,” Michael said. “Garry's useless guilt gestures—”

“Gestures? Guilt!?” Garry stomped his way toward Michael. “You try and buy everything! Even love! Money won't wipe away your guilt you fucking—”

Garry was already boiling at full rage, which was exactly what Jack wanted, but Michael still needed—

“You think your empty gestures mean anything, Garry? Roland is dead because of you! You tore him apart, and helping his family with your useless acts means nothing. At least money helps them. You pretend to be a vigilante guardian angel for them, and then disappear. Useless!”

Ok, the gaps in the puzzle were filling in. Garry and Michael knew that the other was helping Roland's family out, and it turned into some sort of twisted competition over the years. That was a sort of a good thing? Kinda? It meant both had compassion for Roland, and Jack was banking on that. But it also meant they were trapped in some weird guilt spiral that had them trying to outdo the other. Which meant they were probably brewing up this rage guilt bomb over the past century.

Well, he had more than enough fuel to piss them off. Now the problem was whether he could use it to play psychologist.

“This is quite the soap opera drama, isn't it?” Jack said. “You two idiots had some bad shit go down a long-ass time ago, and now, instead of talking about it and working out your differences, you've got the whole damn city fighting.”

Garry stopped marching, and turned to face Jack instead as he clenched his hands into fists. When he unclenched them, he grew out his claws until they were six inches, and sharp on the inside curve, like swords.

“The turf war is not personal,” Garry said.

“Wrong.” Jack kicked some of the pages under his feet. “Contempt, anger, all just bubbling under the surface, edging each little brawl and scuffle until it turned deadly. Four more Kindred just died because of your bullshit! Oh, and don’t forget the shit Joe pulled.”

“Joe was...” Garry snarled and shook his head. “Joe was—”

“A fucking dog,” Michael said. “A dog you fed with your lies and bullshit and delusions of idealism. Viktor hurt him, and you took advantage. And now Bruce is dead because of that mongrel.”

More puzzle pieces.

“Joe didn’t deserve what Viktor did to him!” Garry roared, outright roared, and the room shook with the vibration. “It doesn’t matter anymore. The Carthians and Invictus can’t coexist.”

“It could!” Jack threw up his hands. Like talking to a fucking wall. Walls. “You don’t see what I’m fucking pointing out here? You two idiots have been at each other’s throats for so long, making everything worse for everyone, but you’re doing it over the most idiotic reason! You both loved this dude, and—”

Michael’s body erupted in an explosion of mass, flesh, and madness.

Jack jumped back and stared on as the man’s height rose until his head hit the ceiling. His shoulders expanded wide, and his arms grew thicker than his original body. As his suit disappeared into his skin, a third arm erupted from his right shoulder and neck, thinner than the others, but longer, with long claws. His legs remained short, but their width increased more than enough to handle the hulking titan of mutating flesh.

His face devolved, eyes shifting over his bulging bone until everything looked lopsided. One side of his mouth grew larger than the other, and the fangs on that side of his mouth grew large enough to split skin. And as the Gangrel grew heavier and heavier, he leaned forward, and put his weight onto his enormous knuckles, like some sort of mutant gorilla. As he did, another new limb shot out of his body, a tail, something leathery but still the beige color of his normal skin. The tail looked like it was made of hands connected to each other, holding onto wrist after wrist after wrist. John Carpenter would have been proud.

Jack stared on, and glanced at Garry, who didn't look super surprised by Michael's look, but rather by Michael's actions. Apparently he didn't expect Michael to flip out, but he'd seen it before. The two assholes had probably fought each other multiple times in the past, in secret. Elders didn't normally fight, but like Jack was saying, this shit was personal, even if they didn't believe it.

"Jack," Michael said, voice deep and gurgling in his giant, fat throat. "You tricked me into coming here. You tricked me into thinking you were going to tell Roland's family about me. You tricked me... and Garry, for what? To tell us that we've been fighting each other because of an emotional grudge based on nothing?" With a heavy, alien snarl, Michael's mouth opened far wider than it should have been able to, exposing a hundred misshapen teeth as rolls of neck fat fell over each other. "Your curse has made you a dangerous ally, but I was willing to put up with it. Now? After this insult? Die."

How the hell did either of these two dudes manage to talk with fucked up mouths like that?

Michael charged him, the same way a gorilla would. Small, beefy legs doing double time between galloping crunches of his hands against the floor.

Jessy had told Jack about the crazy shit her boss could transform into. She should have taken a picture. He was not ready for the absurd insanity of the disgusting monstrosity straight out of Resident Evil charging toward him. Sure, Jessy could transform into weird stuff too. He'd seen her grow enormous claws and weird, chitinous body armor. He'd seen her warp her skeleton so she could run on all fours, with a fleshy tail to match. Jessy was a strong Gangrel who'd displayed some impressive feats of Protean, but she had centuries to go before she could do anything like Michael was doing now.

He wants to kill you. Hit him. Hit him so hard he learns his fucking place.

Jack waited until the barreling monster was right on top of him, before he jumped, and drove his fist up into the titan's blubbery mess of a face. And he let the rage of the curse pour up through him as he did.

He didn't let the Ripper out. He had no plans to do that. Every time the curse got out, he got his stupid fingers deeper into Jack's mind, made it harder to push him out. But the curse had power. With the necklace off, Jack could summon some of that power. But in order to really tap into its ridiculous strength, he had to call on his Beast, the thing the curse infected. Gangrels did it all the time, but not Ventrue. Calling up the Beast and using it like a war horse was not something a Ventrue would ever be good at. But that didn't mean he couldn't do it.

This war horse came with a second rider, someone trying to rip the reins from Jack's hands. He had to be careful.

His fist collided with Michael's chin, or something approximating it, and the titan slammed up into the wood beams above. The fucker's mass was enormous, and parts of his body continued forward with momentum even as his skull hit the ceiling and came to a quick stop. Body parts a lot harder than Jack thought they'd be slammed into him, and threw him back until he smashed into the back wall, again. Only then did the giant collapse to the floor under his own inertia, like King Kong falling.

Groaning, Jack got up to his feet, and glared at the two bastards as he summoned up more of his vitae. More, and more of it, until he was swimming in it, until its tingling power rippled down into his fingertips.

"You're both so full of yourselves," Jack said. "Like Viktor. Just like fucking Viktor. So fucking sure of yourselves, of what you're doing, of what's led you here, that you think it's okay. It's not okay, you stupid fucks. Christ, how many fucking Kindred have died because of you two. Not Maria, not Viktor, just you two, poisoning every interaction so Carthians and Invictus couldn't help but hate each other? All because you're both so fucking full of yourselves you can't accept you're both pissed at each other when you should be reconciling! You should be learning how to coexist so shit like Roland doesn't happen again, but instead, you blame each other, as if there's no fucking way you had a part in it."

He was tempted to bring up Amanda, but it'd have to wait. If Garry knew Amanda was alive, it might put him into politicking mode. He needed him emotional and stupid, not conniving like a typical Kindred.

"So you know what? Fuck the both of you. I'm going to beat some fucking sense into you. You don't get to do this. You don't get to be in charge, and be assholes, getting people killed because you're both too fucking stupid to see you're both nothing more than angry, idiotic, worthless morons. If you'd just talked to each other, come to some sort of understanding about Roland, how many people would still be alive?" Jack took a step toward Michael as the giant climbed back to his feet, and knuckles. "So yeah, I got you both here, tricked you, because you both need to be taught a lesson you're too stupid to learn on your own. You're both so pathetic, I could put you in a Shakespeare play and you'd fit right in with all the characters and their tragic bullshit. Get me? You're both children, pretending to be adults, and neither of you should be in charge of anything!"

Well, that did it. Garry didn't even look at Michael anymore. The huge gargoyle creature let out an ear-piercing shriek, and ran for Jack, leaning forward with wings snug to his back, tails flapping

around in the air behind him. No more thought, no more reasoning, no more words, Jack had insulted Garry enough the man went into full animal psycho mode. If Garry had his own curse, it'd have taken over.

Problem. Jack wanted the two of them to fight him, and each other. A big free-for-all mess where emotions would come out flying. But they weren't looking at each other. They were both looking at him, and even with their alien faces and strange expressions, he could tell they were both pissed. Royally, totally, didn't give a shit about the Prince anymore pissed.

But they both stopped when they heard the chittering, and the claws.

Jack stood his ground in front of the two beasts, and snarled as he glared between the two of them. They thought they were scary. They thought they were strong. It was a struggle to not laugh as he brought his vitae up to the surface of his skin, and pulsed the invisible force out into the world as he summoned his legion. The curse laughed in his head, coming right up to the surface with the Beast Jack needed.

He was in control. He was in control. He was in control.

Garry and Michael weren't as smart as they thought they were. Or more likely, they just refused to think a kid like Jack could actually be pretty smart. They refused to think Jack put this plan together; half true. And they refused to think Jack might have actually gotten ready for this fight they probably thought was a surprise.

It didn't even dawn on them he'd already prepared, had already left trails of his blood outside the building hidden in shadows, had already summoned legions of rats, and was ready for them. Veronica, and several kine besides, would sleep for a week, he'd drained them so deeply, but he knew he'd need it. And he did.

Garry and Michael both turned to the stairway, and took several steps back as the legion poured in. The streetlights were, conveniently, out. There were plenty of dark alleys. There was a manhole directly in front of the building. The rats had no trouble flowing up onto the street, and down into the building's storage basement, like a flood of living, breathing brown water.

Garry responded a little faster. Maybe it was because of his lither transformation compared to Michael, or maybe because he'd seen Jack summon the legion before and was ready for it. But when the flowing tide of rats scurried over each other until they rose, like a brown ocean with thousands of dark, beady eyes, he took a couple more steps back. It was far more rats than last time. It was the same amount of rats the Ripper used to defeat the hunters.

He was in control.

Jack pointed both palms at the two fucking dogs, and squeezed them shut. The rats launched themselves at the two monstrosities, swarming over them and around them with all the gentleness of a tsunami. Both titans fell, huge bodies crashing into the floor as thousands upon thousands of tiny bodies jumped them, and bit into them. Rat claws were irritants. Rat teeth were deadly weapons, capable of breaking through anything. Maybe not deeply or quickly, but not even a Gangrel's Resilience couldn't keep thousands of rats from puncturing skin, and flesh, not for long.

The moment the two juggernauts went down, they thrashed around as they roared, and limbs cut through the swathes of rats like butter. Jack didn't like seeing rats die, but he had no choice. Small comfort. The two Gangrels ripped through them with their alien limbs, enormous claws, and ridiculous mass. Blood and fur went everywhere. The squeaks of dying rats echoed through the huge basement. Hundreds of tiny, beady black eyes went out.

Jack jumped into the mess. Garry first. He'd hit Michael once, now it was time to hit the other bastard. Garry was on his back, twisting and turning and trying to throw off the myriad of rodents burying him. He'd found his footing though, and rolled onto a palm and knee, only to find Jack running at him.

Football kick, straight to the fucker's face.

Garry flew up and back, nearly hit the ceiling, and landed on his ass again, only for the rats to swarm over his new position. As Jack ran after him, the rats spread around Jack, avoiding his path. Moses, parting the Red Sea. And they parted just as smoothly when Jack jumped onto Garry's right arm, and punched down at his chest.

Crack. Jack felt it when his knuckles collided with the bastard's sternum, felt the bones bend and snap. The punch was hard enough to send Jack back in the air, and he stumbled back as he struggled to keep from falling over.

You suck at this. You don't know how to use your strength with your small body.

I'll manage.

You'll get us both killed.

Jack snarled as he shook his head. Shut up shut up.

Garry rolled over again, and spread his wings with a harsh snap. Rats went flying, squeaking and shrieking. Jack ignored the sad noises as best he could, and charged at Garry again.

Mistake. The sound of crushed rats and heavy impact announced Michael's charge, and Jack spun to face the giant. Something that big shouldn't have been able to move that fast, but Michael came at him like a freight train breaking through a snowbank, with little bodies scattering in every direction as he bowled through.

His body slammed into Jack's, and Jack went flying. The world turned into a streaming haze of colors as Jack spun, body turning into a frisbee from the angle of the collision. He was just too damn light. Michael hitting him may as well have been like a truck hitting him, and Jack choked out a groan as he rolled, rolled, and smashed into the back wall. For the third time.

Michael fell over, his huge mutated body hard to balance, but he recovered quickly, as if stumbling onto his colossal shoulder was a perfectly expected thing. A clumsy oaf of pure strength. Blood coated him, rat blood, and in places Jack didn't expect.

A mouth opened up on Michael's chest, big demon teeth and a big jaw, and bit down on one of the rats. The creature died instantly, and the mouth disappeared a moment later, only to reappear on a different part of the man's alien body to do it again. Holy shit, it really was like watching *The Thing*. What the ever living fuck. Gangrels could do some crazy shit with Protean, but not this.

You have no idea what an elder Gangrel can do. Garry is barely old enough to be considered an elder, but Michael is nearly twice his age.

I can handle it.

You mean I can handle it.

Jack got back up, and yanked on his arm. Pop, back in the socket. The split skin on his head and knees healed over fast. Torn AC reattached.

Two Gangrels and a Ventrue. This was going to be a long, bloody fight.

But Jack had prepared well, and more and more rats poured into the room, his army of devoted servants. And they poured over the back of Garry and Michael again in a new wave they did not expect.

"You two fucking assholes," Jack said, "you probably think I'm here to kill you, or to take your positions. You probably think I'm in this for me, that I'm here, putting my ass on the line dealing with you two, because there's some way for me to spin this so I'll come out on top. Christ Garry! I spared Tilly's life for no fucking reason other than I'm trying to save as many lives as I can!"

He raised his hands, and the rats flowed off the snarling, clawing Gangrels, giving them a moment of peace. They were covered head to toe in bite marks, some of them deep enough to draw vampire

blood. But just like Jack, their wounds healed over quickly as the writhing veins of Kindrd blood pulled skin over skin, flesh over flesh, in the most disgusting way to heal imaginable.

More rats poured in, more and more, joining the original swarm that now sat back and waited for their master's next order, and both Garry and Michael peeked over their shoulders at the growing flood. The three of them were spread out now, each a good fifty feet from each other, but that didn't mean much to a vampire. Ballsy of them to actually look away. Either they were intimidated by the ever increasing, scurrying flood of rats, numbering in the tens of thousands, or they didn't think Jack would stab them in the back. They were right.

Garry spoke first. "I think—"

"I think," Michael said, voice bubbling up through his titanic chest as a booming gargle, "that you're a naive fool, child, and you deserve to die for disrespecting me. You need to die because of your curse, before it breaks the Masquerade and dooms us all. You will die painfully because of your manipulations."

"My manipulations? You're the one with Amanda hidden in a box somewhere, staked! The fuck did she say to you, Michael? The fuck did you say to her? The fuck happened?"

Garry froze and slowly turned to face the other beast. "Amanda's alive?"

Ah fuck, Jack you idiot.

Michael snorted, and slammed one of his huge arms against the ground, the bigger arm. The whole body was pretty lopsided.

"It doesn't matter. You know that. This war had to happen."

Garry slammed his tails against the floor, hard enough the concrete splintered. "Except the Prince thinks I started this war! You motherfucker! People are dead because of you!"

"You're the one who brought fire to this war!"

"You fucking deserved it, you lying fuck! Roland's dead because of you!" Bit of a segue, but Garry was spitting venom at this point. Jack knew the feeling. No coherent thought, just pure anger driving the brain and turning every word into a mess. "You've ruined everything, again!"

"It does not matter! We should deal with the boy first. Then—"

Garry opened his crazy mouth, and bit into his wrist. Oh shit.

The elder splattered his blood against the floor. Jack quickly pulsed out his vitae and told the army to attack, but it was too late. The tide poured over itself, raised into giant mounds five feet high, and rushed toward the two elders. But as the rats reached Garry, the mound collapsed. Thousands of rats rushed over Michael and again poured over the titan to renew their assault, but the rats near Garry fell upon each other. Chittering turned into shrieking as the rats killed each other, biting into furry necks and clawing at faces.

Stupid. Stupid fucking idiot! He gave them a break, a pause in the fight, and the moment he fucking did everything went to shit. It'd worked on Maria. A couple good hits in and she was able to at least talk to him. But the look on Garry's face, including all the extra eyes, was the same look Angela gave Jack when she tried to kill him in the hospital. Pure, utter hatred.

Garry loved Roland, more than Jack had figured.

Garry rushed Michael. So much for politicking. His massive talons ripped through the floor as the Gangrel summoned a new rage. Learning that Jack had tricked him using very personal history, with plans to beat sense into him? That pissed him off. Knowing Michael faked Amanda's death? That pushed him past the point of no return. Garry roared, more of that shrieking alien sound Jack attributed to H. R. Giger creations more than anything, and the younger Gangrel pounced the older.

Garry's form was big, but Michael's was bigger, thicker and taller and a shit load grosser. More importantly, heavier, and even though his legs were kinda small for his body, his titan arms rarely left the ground. He was too damn big to knock over. Garry crashed into him, climbed onto him, and tore into him like a lion mounting a water buffalo. And unlike the rats' teeth, Garry's claws were very, very long.

Michael roared as the elder sank his claws deep into his hulking flesh, and tore into him. But the titan was too big, too much mass, and Garry's stab was like trying to kill a boar with a sewing needle. Sure, he punctured flesh, a lot, but all he did was make the creature angry. Michael spun around, sending rats flying and forcing Garry to hold on tight.

A fresh arm grew out of Michael's back, shooting out of his spine with zero subtlety. It cracked and broke on the way out, bones snapping and reforming as it added on length until it was the size of a normal arm, but covered in fleshy lumps that looked like knuckles buried under skin. It grabbed Garry's ankle, yanked him down hard, and slammed into the floor hard enough Jack felt the impact. And before Garry could get back up, Michael slammed both of his much larger arms and hands down against the alien gargoyles.

The rats swarmed over Garry and up Michael's arm. Many rats still fought amongst themselves, torn between Jack and Garry's control, but thousands, lost in the mess of orders from both Gangrels, worked together on Michael. Maybe Michael wasn't very good at Animalism compared to Garry and Jack, Jack didn't know, but maybe he didn't need to be considering he was a Protean expert. Either way, he made no effort to control the swarm, but Garry did, and in the chaos of the two of them trying to claim ownership, plenty of the rats knew to attack Michael with kamikaze intent.

They bit into him, his arms and legs, his back, his extra arms, his neck, his face, but Michael ignored them as he smashed Garry into the floor again, and again, and again. Garry tried to get up, but Michael went full ape mode, and slammed down both hands like an angry gorilla, hammering them down on the other Gangrel over and over. Bits of concrete broke, splinters turning into churned chunks as Michael crushed Garry.

The aggression came at a cost. The rats kept eating Michael alive, but the man just didn't care. For all his proper, controlled attitude, this Michael was a snarling, roaring freak of nature, hollering and yelling as he crushed his rival underneath him. It wouldn't have surprised Jack at all if he thumped his chest in a quick beat, like a gorilla.

"Michael! Stop!" Jack walked toward them, waving his arms in the air. "Stop it! Stop fighting! I'm trying to get you to see how fucking stupid this fighting is! You morons let your hate over Roland's death poison every fucking thing you've done to each other for a century! Enough!"

The fuck are you doing? You wanted them to fight.

Fight, yes. Not rip each other to ribbons! They're going to kill each other.

Yeah, and? Look at them tearing into each other. Wait until they weaken each other, kill whoever lives, and take over. It's a perfect plan.

That wasn't the plan!

Sure it was. You knew they'd fight each other if you forced it. And you knew there was a good chance they might kill each other. Win-win scenario. A very vampire plan.

Shut up. Shut up shut up!

The worst part was, he knew the Ripper had a point. Jack wasn't stupid. He put this plan together knowing this might happen, that shit would get so crazy the two elders might actually flat out try and kill each other. Elders were paranoid by nature, and avoided risking their own necks, but not always, not Gangrels, not if you pushed the right buttons.

Roland was apparently a bigger red button than Jack anticipated. Or maybe he had, and a part of him hoped Garry and Michael killed each other. Maybe.

Jack ran up to Michael, and threw himself at the giant's back. The extra arms were still there, two of them, and they swung out to grab at Jack as he scaled the titan's bulging spine. But Jack was small, and ducked around the gross limbs as they brushed against bits of Jack's suit.

Climbing monsters was a lot harder in real life than video games. Holy shit, just trying to get a grip on something was basically impossible, especially since Michael's suit was gone, and all he was now was a towering behemoth of warped flesh. But Jack managed, getting his shoes hooked into blubbery flesh mounds as he scaled the titan, got one arm around his giant throat, and with a proper anchor, punched Michael in the back of the head, hard.

The giant teetered forward, and stopped punching Garry as he used his arms to keep from falling over. His arms reached out and caught the ground around Garry instead, and he roared as he spun around all the more. But Jack was a much smaller target than the huge gargoyle, and the extra limbs struggled to get a grip on him.

Jack punched him again, hard enough the blubbery layers of fat and skin split against Jack's knuckles. And he hit him again, and again, each time causing Michael to stumble forward. A human — or anything alive — would either be dead or unconscious from their brain bouncing around in their skull. Even an ancilla vampire would probably get knocked into torpor. Not an elder, and especially not Michael. But that just meant Jack had to keep punching him, slowly building a crater in the back of his damn head.

“Michael! Enough! You're going to listen to me, you fucking asshole, even if I have to—”

Something grabbed his ankle. Jack jerked his head down, and gulped. That wasn't an arm, that was a tail, that freaky long tail that looked more like a centipede made of arms and hands. It yanked on Jack hard, and lifted him into the air.

Michael whipped Jack into the concrete, and didn't let go. Jack grunted as the impact knocked the wind out of him; he didn't need the air, except to make noise, and his noises came to a sudden stop as his diaphragm stopped working.

Michael swung him again, onto his back this time, and Jack's skull cracked against the floor. Only his vitae and Resilience kept his head intact. But Michael wasn't done. He whipped Jack up into the ceiling, bending his body against the pillars above and tearing his suit into bits, before slamming him

into the floor again. The Gangrel ignored the hundreds of rats biting into him, focused entirely on Jack, and slammed him down again, whipping him around between each slam.

Bones broke. Knees dislocated. Shoulders dislocated. Femurs snapped. Forearms snapped. Neck broke. All mixed into a maelstrom of sensation that was too big and overwhelming to register as pain. He could tell when each body part stopped working, but couldn't really feel the pain of bones grinding and tendons tearing. White noise. The colors of movement as Michael whipped him around were pretty lights, blurring together, and Jack stared on as he went limp.

Michael slammed him into the floor one last time, before his tail let him go, and the brute turned to face him more directly. He raised his two arms into the air, eyes locked on the jumbled mess of a vampire on the floor on his back. He was going to kill him.

The world went black. Jack tried to stay awake, to stay in control, but his skull had been smashed open. Still no pain, but he knew it'd come for him later. For now, all he felt, was his consciousness grow heavy as torpor pulled him under. And something massive rose up to take his place.

Everything faded away.

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~~The Ripper~~

Michael's fists slammed down together, full body double hammer punch. And Jack took it, absorbing the huge blows into his hardening body. What a fucking joke, getting beaten up by an oversized mutated gorilla. The Gangrel pulled both his hands away and stepped back, but when he looked down at Jack, probably expecting to see a splattered vampire going poof in a cloud of ash, he roared with frustrated disappointment, lifted his hands, and tried again.

But it was too late. Jack returned the snarl as he slowly sat up, his skin already pulsing and swarming with snakes of crimson. Arms and legs snapped into place. His neck straightened itself out, spine righting itself. Tendons and ligaments reattached, pulling joints back into their sockets. His skull sealed, cranium growing new bone to replace the old, before his blood covered the wound; regrowing skin could wait. He just needed his body functioning again. The pain of missing skin and exposed muscle and bone would be a fun spice on the fight anyway.

Jack put his hands up, and caught Michael's. Of course Michael was thousands of pounds heavy, and hilariously massive. His weight drove Jack straight into the ground, but Jack caught the weight regardless, his back against the concrete. Unharmed. Michael tried again, and this time Jack rolled out of the way.

"He gave you a chance," Jack the Ripper said. He couldn't help but laugh. "You spit in his face. Guess you die."

Michael wasn't listening. Just another stuck up elder utterly convinced of their superiority. What a fucking tool. The Gangrel charged him again, but Jack got in close. No point trying to beat him at the range game, so Jack got within a foot of the bastard, a full dash straight for his crotch. Old Jack would have gone for the chin. Old Jack was an idiot.

He punched Michael so hard his fist went through his dick and into his pelvis. The following high pitched shriek from the Gangrel was orgasmic; ironic. And before Michael could recover from what must have been the worst pain he'd ever felt in his whole second life, Jack ripped his hand out, drove his strength into the floor through his legs, jumped, and smashed the same hand up into Michael's throat.

New Jack punched a lot harder than old Jack, and Michael flew back as his head snapped up hard enough to tear things in his neck. The way his weight, his back, his extra limbs and big, fat, disgusting, inflated limbs, all crashed into the concrete floor, was glorious, and Jack laughed louder, loud enough for it to echo in the room.

"Christ I've been wanting to hit you for years, you fucking sack of shit. Guess it's my lucky day. No one's leaving this—" He swung his arm out, and backhanded Garry. Fucker had gotten up, put himself back together, and sprinted for him. Not Michael, but him. What an asshole.

Garry was pretty tall all transformed though, and Jack had to backhand him in the shoulder. But he hit him as hard as he fucking could, poured every bit of vitae he could summon in the split moment into it, and the gargoyle creature flew to the side as his shoulder cracked and collapsed inward. Jack spun like a top, the force of the hit sending him flying back and turning on his shoes. Strong as he was, he wasn't a fucking ballerina, and he spun out of control and fell on his ass.

Laughing all the more, Jack got to his feet, and rotated his shoulders inside his ripped and ruined suit, and looked between the two Gangrels. Michael was, of course, still on the floor, trying to recover from having his dick imploded.

"As I was saying! Neither of you are leaving this room except in an urn."

Garry dragged himself back to his feet. Talons. Whatever.

“Fuck you.” And the look in his eyes said it all. He was going to turn into a cloud of smoke again.

Jack pointed a finger at him, and poured his vitae through him out into the room, and further, out into the blood that he’d circled the area with. This area was his, he’d claimed it, and no one was leaving.

The swarm rejoiced, and rejoined him, abandoning the weaker Garry’s call. His legion ceased fighting among themselves, and like a hive mind, a living creature of ten thousand autonomous parts, the rats threw themselves at Garry. And the rats dug into him, clawing, biting, tearing, and the Ripper spared no expense. The rats were told to use every bit of energy they could, every possible spark of effort they had, to bury Garry in agony.

Their teeth broke, and some of them broke their jaws. But that was the point of an army, after all, to sacrifice it to make the bigwig sitting behind the desk more money. He was the bigwig tonight.

“Where’s that fuck Jeremy?” Jack said. “And his fucking grenades? Where’re your ancilla buddies? I didn’t hurt them that bad, did I? First thing I’m gonna do after I rip off your fucking head, is take a visit to Bella. Gonna fuck her and cut her open at the same time, see how long it takes before she turns to ash, all over my dick. Gonna—”

Garry shrieked his banshee cry, and slammed his wings outward hard enough they buried the area in a tornado of force. The rats couldn’t hold on. And before they could reestablish their hold on the gargoyle, Garry burst into a cloud of smoke, and flew out the stairway.

“Fucking coward! You can’t run from me! I’ll get you!” He was tempted to chase him, but it’d be pointless. A Ventrue running through the street, waving his arms in the air like a mad man, foaming at the mouth? Not a very empowering image. Ah well, he’d get Garry later, probably over the ashes of all his friends. He knew where to hit him. Some kid named Mike.

Jack turned, and faced Michael. The big guy was only just getting back up off the floor, hole in his pelvis partially healed, but a thousand rats had been munching on him the whole time. His skin was covered in holes, and while they closed quickly, not quick enough. He couldn’t heal from that, and the massive hole Jack had punched through his crotch, all at the same time.

Jack ran up beside the titan, and kicked him in the face. Michael collapsed onto his side, nose broken in, and he glared up from the ground as he recovered. Tough brute.

“Those transformations take a lot out of you, don’t they?” Chuckling, Jack smashed his boot down on the fucker’s face, knocking him back down. It half launched Jack into the air doing it too; the curse

of being small and light. “They take a lot of vitae. You can’t go around looking like Swamp Thing’s inbred cousin, and pop out of here with that smoke trick at the same time. If you even can normally. Garry got that trick mastered, and you don’t?”

“I—”

“Shut up!” Jack kicked the man in the face again, hard enough his shoe split at the toe. Ugh, not again. These were expensive shoes. Fuck it, it was worth it to see Michael’s cheek split and the cheekbone dent. “That’s probably why Garry’s managed to do so well, despite being so much younger than the others. He’s smart enough to know when to run. You, on the other hand, are used to giving orders, having them obeyed, and being a big, stomping Goliath of idiocy. If you were as smart as Viktor, maybe it’d work.”

“Viktor,” the giant gargled through the swarm of rats that poured over his neck and shoulders, biting and scratching, “was a tyrant. And you are no better.”

“I am better. Unlike Viktor, I’m more than willing to get my hands dirty. I don’t need an army, they’re just a nice bonus.” He kicked the fucking shithole again, hitting his mutated jaw hard enough it cracked and dislocated. The cracking bone sounds followed by Michael’s roar of agony made it all worthwhile. “So hey, good job, you fucked up so bad you’re going to die, and I’m going to take—”

Jack spun around and brought up an arm, and poured his vitae through it until blood poured over the skin. But he’d been in the middle of a beautiful speech, a speech worthy of presidency. The best speech. No one did speeches like him. So, yeah, a little distracted.

Garry’s enormous set of claws slashed into his forearm, hard. And for some reason, the claws also hit Jack’s shoulder, despite his forearm being in the way. That was weird. He blocked the attack.

Jack looked down at left his arm as it poofed into a mess of ashes. Garry’s claws were now sunk halfway through Jack’s left arm above the elbow, and everything below the elbow was now on the floor as a pile of soot. Well damn, Garry hit hard, and cut clean through the forearm and into Jack’s upper arm.

“Not running. Strategic retreat,” Garry said, and he leaned into his claws, trying to push them through what was left of Jack’s arm and shoulder. But the claws were stuck now, the blood shield that coursed in and out of Jack’s body locking them down and refusing to let them go any further. Considering they’d gotten halfway through the arm and shoulder, and nearly into his torso, it was probably a good thing.

Jack smashed his remaining hand down against Garry's assaulting hand, right on the wrist, and the Gangrel shrieked like an animal as the wrist broke, and the claws came out like popping sticks out of the mud. Of course, that mud being Jack's flesh, having Garry's claws pop out hurt like a motherfucker.

Before Garry could respond, Jack kicked the man. Garry was smart enough to see the crotch kick coming, and twisted away enough it hit him on the inside of the thigh. But Jack kicked hard, and Garry collapsed back as his leg threatened to break from the impact. It didn't. He rolled away from it in time so all Jack managed to do was put a good dent in it. Fucker was good, especially considering he had wings and two god damn tails.

Jack looked down at the stub below his left elbow. Dark vampire blood flowed over the wound, sealing it well enough to keep the wound from splitting. Regrowing binding tissue was easy for someone as strong as Jack. Regrowing half a limb was a little more difficult. He'd do it later. For now, he'd deal with these fuckers first.

"You came back. Honorable," Jack said, grinning at the man, "but foolish." Complete with a heavy Chinese accent.

Garry didn't get the joke. He charged Jack again, and a hard shake of his broken wrist snapped it back into place as the beast ran to him. He thought Jack was vulnerable, that he was weaker cause he was missing an arm. Fucking idiot.

The two crashed into each other, and everything turned into rolling colors again. That was good. Michael and Garry had the tools to fight from a distance, or at least a bigger distance than he did, with their Protean transformations. But when shit turned into a wrestling match was when Jack could really lay into the fucker.

They landed in a heap, but Garry landed on top. Garry wanted that. But before he could right himself in a full mount and claw Jack's face into mincemeat, Jack pulled his knees up to his chest, and kicked straight up. Short legs were easy to maneuver, and he got them right under Garry's chest and sternum. The huge creature flew up and slammed into the ceiling of the storage basement hard enough he cracked the beams above, and put a huge dent into the next floor.

Garry came crashing down, and Jack rolled away before the Gangrel could recover. Once Jack had a couple feet between them, he pointed his good hand at the man, and summoned his legion. More rats poured into the room from the stairway, fresh recruits to join his reclaimed legion.

"The Crow Lord will not be undone by a couple of dogs!" Laughing until he thought he'd burst, Jack poured his vitae out into the world, and demanded his army come. The world went silent, even the

rats ceasing their biting and chittering for a few seconds, as the sound of hundreds of beating wings teased his ears.

The wall of black feathers came in a moment later, just as Garry got up. He turned to face the new threat, and Jack could feel him try and break Jack's hold on the animals with his Animalism again. But it was useless. Old Jack was like a general, while new Jack was a dictator. The birds, the rats, they obeyed him and only him. And they swarmed over Garry with the pure heartlessness of a swarm of piranha. Swarm of anything, really. Nothing said 'heartless devouring force of nature' quite like a swarm.

A shame he only summoned a couple hundred crows. Anymore and he'd be risking the Masquerade, even in this area where he'd sabotaged the lights.

The gargoyle fell to his knees and covered himself with his wings, but he couldn't stop both a hundred beaks from pecking him, and many hundreds of rats from biting at his ankles, and then his legs, and then his thighs and chest and arms and neck. He looked up at Jack for only a split moment, a mix of rage and fear in his many eyes, before he looked back down and did his best to stop the rats from devouring him alive.

Fear, in the eyes of an elder. If only Jack had a camera to take a picture. Ah well, Beast would ruin a picture anyway.

Michael got up, and charged him. Even as bits of his body fell off, even as one of the extra arms he'd grown rolled off his back and burst into ash, chewed off by the rats, the giant charged him. Like an angry elephant, all mass and bronze, no finesse or grace at all. But when you're that big, you don't really need any, and while Jack was busy directing his choir to trap Garry beneath a living, breathing blanket of fangs, claws, and beaks, the big brute smashed into Jack's side and flung him.

Jack flew through the air, for the millionth time tonight, and crashed in a roll. Again he smashed into the wall in the back of the room, opposite of the stairs, and he landed on his ass, back against the wall. He stared at the two elders as Michael tried to follow up his charge, but the big bastard fell over with an enormous thud as the rats worked through one of his bigger arms. Too thick to cut through it completely, but a hundred rats biting into anything was enough to weaken it, and one of the brute's giant arms cracked below the shoulder, unable to carry Michael's weight anymore.

Michael landed so hard, it was like someone had just shot a rampaging elephant with a high gauge rifle. And the moment he was down, the rats resumed their attack, joined by a few dozen crows.

Mulder and Scully stayed outside. Probably for the best. Jack didn't want old Jack screaming in his head for all eternity about a couple dead pets, assuming the Ripper couldn't eventually crush the other personality into fucking dust.

Laughing again, voice bright and cheery, Jack pushed himself back up to his feet with his one hand. It gave him trouble, fighting the broken bones and torn ligaments. The shitty thing about being small: people could throw you really hard. He was beat up, and for all his power, this damn body refused to heal fast enough. The stump of an arm was proof.

Just like when Avery got him good in the chest with her stupid fancy magic claws, he couldn't heal from everything instantly. Fucking infuriating.

Well, two elders down, and this body was only, what, not even four years embraced? He'd get stronger with time, stronger than any other fucking vampire. Strong enough he could throw the Masquerade away, and become overlord of the entire planet!

It was always good to think big, and shoot for the stars.

"Ok, I'm done fucking around. Time to die." Jack gently shook out his head until his brain stopped bouncing around in his skull, and marched his way over to the two Gangrel's still pinned beneath his army. They used a lot of vitae to use their transformations, smoke cloud included, and they didn't have the power or reserves Jack the Ripper, mighty Crow Lord did.

What would he do once these two were dead? Kill any Carthians who disagreed with him, or any that didn't like him, or any that looked at him funny. Same for the Invictus. Except maybe Leauvion. The things he'll do to her.

He chuckled. Hell, he giggled, as he tossed and turned the gory thoughts in his mind as he walked back over to Michael; he was closer.

"Christ, you don't even know, Michael. You're so fucking ignorant." Jack squatted down beside the giant as he was devoured alive. "You're not the first elder I've killed."

"What?" Wow, he could still gargle a response, even as rats bit into his face.

"I killed Viktor and Tony, you moron. That fire? I set that fire, knowing full damn well what would happen."

"You..."

Jack pat the downed man on his massive, disgusting shoulder.

“I killed Lucas too. Dominated Damien, and tricked that fucker good. Cut his head clean off. But I don’t have a sword now. So, I’m just gonna rip yours off like I did Joe’s.”

Michael’s eyes widened as his world shattered around him, realization setting in. Christ, it was better than murder. But hey, he got to do the murder part too, so best of both worlds. Jack set both his hands on Michael’s head, and braced his feet.

Everything went black. Jack could still feel Michael’s head, and even hear him, but someone turned off the lights, blanketing in the basement in total darkness no vampire could see in. The joys of a basement. Except, there wasn’t anyone else in the room. What the fuck?

A few moments later, someone turned them back on.

The world froze. Jack froze. The sound? What happened to the sounds of the city? Gone. The sounds of his army were still there, but they stopped attacking the two pinned Gangrels as they looked to the stairway.

Everything had changed.

Jack slowly stood up as he looked around. The storage room was different. The same, but different. Darker. The few weak lights had grown weaker, and had changed shape. Instead of incandescent bulbs inside wide metal shades, they drooped from darkness, as if a layer of black fog coated the ceiling over their heads.

The floor had changed. It was damp. And the concrete was tinted red. Red veins moved along the concrete too, almost invisible in the dim, weird light of the strange bulbs above. And the walls trickled with the dark, crimson liquid, as if a flood of red water had soaked the area. As if a monsoon come by, and drowned the city in blood.

He knew where he was.

The Earth shook, and Jack fell back on his ass as vibrations tore the ground out from under him. He stared up and around at the ceiling as it warped and twisted, and lifted. The walls ripped and shredded. The support pillars, now a strange shade of black, came up off the floor as the ceiling above flew higher, and tilted back. It was like someone was opening the basement the way you’d peel open a can of sardines.

“Jack,” a voice boomed, deep and loud enough it vibrated his body almost as much as the tearing ceiling. He knew that voice, too.

“Azamel! The fuck are—”

The world tore apart. Thundering crashes and explosions of impact turned the basement into the center of a giant subwoofer blasting a fucking RATM song. Jack covered his ears, but his rats and birds did more than that. They scattered, squawking and chittering like the world was ending. It felt like it was.

Light broke through a line along the wall by the stairs, met by crumbling bits of concrete and wood and tile, as the ceiling raised higher. Only once it was hoisted up a few feet could Jack see the shadow through the growing crack of where the ceiling over his head was supposed to be connected to the ground by the stairs. It wasn't. It was rising.

Finally, a pair of hands pushed under the crack of the building's basement ceiling, and picked it up. All of it. Two fucking giant hands, each the size of Jack's whole damn body, and they trembled as they put Azamel's strength and power up into the building from the bottom up.

She lifted the library up off the ground, and pushed it back onto the street behind it. It was a pretty big building, three stories high. A small library, sure, but small libraries were still enormous buildings, and Jack stared on as Azamel's elephant god body came into view. He couldn't move if he wanted to, trapped at ground zero as the building crumbled. Buildings weren't meant to be scooped up and pushed over, and the library ripped itself to shreds under its own weight.

Jack sat there as the wood, concrete, bars of metal, and even the fucking tile of the floor above rained down around him. Most of it rained behind him, past the back wall of the basement, and onto the mayhem of destruction that threatened to blow his eardrums. Again he tried to get up, and again he fell as the Earth decided it didn't want him standing anymore. It wasn't just the building falling over, literally directly behind him, that had the whole place vibrating. It was Azamel, her, her absurd size as she shifted and moved to pick up a fucking building and push it over. The whole nightmare trembled as she went retro and played a game of Rampage.

Dust and dirt should have splashed over Jack and the two Gangrels, and buried them in it. But as the building collapsed, they got buried in something else. Rain. Red. Fucking. Rain. The nightmare chamber didn't bother with things like dust and dirt, as if that wasn't worth the effort; more like whoever dreamed up the nightmare was a little more focused on other shit. And the rain fucking poured.

Finally, the crumbling building shut the fuck up, and Jack stood up. Reality smacked him in the face, and he snapped his gaze around. Garry was slowly pushing himself back up to his feet, but Michael was down. Not dead, not even in torpor, but down, a hulking mess of ripped open alien flesh that couldn't handle its own bulk anymore, just like the upturned library.

“Jack Terry,” the four-armed elephant said again. And the bitch made no attempt to speak softly. That flubby elephant god’s chest boomed with a voice so loud, what few rats and crows still remained either fled, or froze solid. Animalism would not move them. They were broken inside, mentally shattered, heartbeats skyrocketing and so much adrenaline pumping through their veins they were close to death. Some did die, just rolled over and died, rather than process the fact they’d been pulled into a nightmare version of Dolareido, with an ugly elephant god who literally pushed over the building they’d been under.

“Azamel, the fuck are you doing?” He pointed his remaining hand at her. Way way up at her. “Don’t interfere!”

The stupid, old beast sat in the middle of the street, cross-legged and knees apart, two hands empty and resting on her knees while two others held her symbols. Those two hands held a chain by each end, one end a dangling fishnet filled with hundreds of human skulls, the other a dangling corpse from a hook, like bait. A fishermen of men, literally. Jesus would have been proud.

On the ground beside her were two scimitars, the size of trucks.

He was kind of getting sick of all the big fuckers he had to deal with. Fist Garry transformed into a tall bat gargoyle thing. Then Michael transformed into a giant hulk mutating beast. There was Sándor, who transformed into a much more classic, but much bigger gargoyle than Garry. Even Athalia and her weird half-body-skeleton nightmare thing was pretty damn big. And if Jack stacked them all on top of each other, they wouldn’t have been as tall as Azamel was now, sitting on her ass. What a pain.

“If Jack Terry remained in control, I would not have.” The monster leaned forward and looked down at the trio of vampires. “But you’re not Jack Terry. You’re an abomination.”

Despite her attempts to sound commanding and powerful, she sounded weak compared to the first time he’d heard her talk through her Horror. Winded, weak, and pathetic. A dying beast putting on airs. Considering Azamel the human — human body anyway — was an emaciated old woman on death’s door, it made sense her Horror would feel the same way when they merged. How the fuck the two entities worked together, he had no idea. A big diff between Begotten, and old and new Jack’s relationship. But either way, they seemed linked. If she died, it died.

“Ha! Funny, coming from you, someone who owes their existence to the dark corners of other people’s minds. You’re nothing more than the reflection of someone else’s fears. You’d be nothing without the people you feed on.” He grinned up at her. “So you can act all high and mighty and call me an abomination, but you and I both know you’re just a leech.”

“How quaint, the vampire calling a true monster a leech.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t created in the mind of some terrified, religious shmuck running through the jungle.”

“No. You were created as a tool, nothing more than an infection for your masters to spread. And where are those masters now, you cursed thing? Where are their black wings? Shadows of shadows. Useless remnants of an age past, desperate to hold onto the Kindred who left them behind.”

“I…”

She was talking about the Strix. She knew them? Knew about them? Even he didn’t know a damn thing about them, except what Susanna had to do to create him.

“Jack Terry. Are you capable of taking control, or not?”

“Old Jack is shutting up until I’m done.” Shrugging, Jack pulled the necklace out of his pocket. A sturdy string, barely a necklace at all. “This is the only reason old Jack even exists anymore.” An ancient artifact from back in the day when assholes made shit like this, hidden in caves or forests or underneath castles, deep in abandoned dungeons.

“Then put it on.”

“You know what? Sure.” The Jack inside was fighting to get back in control, and the Ripper knew he’d win that battle eventually. As long as there were two of them sharing this body, he couldn’t keep old Jack suppressed forever. Which meant, if he destroyed the necklace, old Jack would eventually retaliate. Go to Antoinette, lock himself in a box, wait for sunrise, something.

You’re never taking this body.

Yes, I will. You can feel it. You know each time I come out, I take more control.

You sound like a Saturday morning cartoon villain.

Jack snickered as he looked down at the necklace, and put it back into his pocket.

“I’ll put it back on, after I’ve killed these two.” He turned around, gave Azamel the finger over his shoulder, and walked toward Garry.

By this point, the man had regained his footing, and he took a small step back from Jack as he got into a fighting position. But the man knew he was outmatched. It was written in every one of his nine eyes.

“You do not get to kill these two,” the stupid booming voice behind him said flatly.

Jack snapped his head back. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You will not be killing Garry, or Michael.”

He laughed. “And why the fuck not?”

“Their deaths will create a vacuum. More chaos. I will not allow this city to—”

“The fuck do you care!?” He turned around, marched up the short stairway up to the sidewalk, and stared up at the fat bitch.

The nightmare version of Dolareido was pretty damn big, and impressive. A blood moon, with raining blood, and an especially large amount of it pouring over the Elysium tower too if memory served; couldn’t see it from here. Only a couple cars in the street this far out from the city center, but just like last time Jack came to this nightmare, there were some people in the cars. Petrified, and made of literal stone. A few of them stood in windows of nearby apartments, more statues. One stood next to a streetlight. A fucking weird streetlight that didn’t do a very good job penetrating the darkness of the city, which was also too dark for Dolareido in general.

Everything was tinted red. The nightmare wasn’t subtle at all. Whoever dreamed this insanity had one very clear picture in mind of what Dolareido was truly like: a bloody place full of cold, lifeless people. Probably some dumb bastard in Devil’s Corner who offed themselves cause their mom didn’t love them enough. Roland, maybe? It’d figure, but nah, the nightmare looked mostly modern.

“I care because I will not leave my family to political chaos and a bloody, ash-filled wasteland.”

“Ah I get it. You want your nest to be a good place for your kids? Newsflash! They ain’t your kids!” He laughed again as he faced Michael and Garry. “And besides, you really want these two idiots around? They’ve got the city fighting itself, vampires killing each other and burning down buildings, because they can’t get over a grudge! Over something they didn’t even do! Roland killed himself you stupid fucks! It’s not your fault!” He pointed at Garry. “Or your fault!” He pointed at Michael. “It’s Roland’s fault! Get it? He killed himself! The only one to blame, is him! But you’re both looking back at the past with rose-tinted glasses so thick, you’ve apparently turned this guy into a fucking martyr!

“You don’t even realize the Prince and the werewolves are trying to save the city from a strange, weird ritual being done in it, or on it or something, do you? They’ve been working on this problem for years now, and you don’t have a fucking clue. Course Avery won’t tell you, Garry, cause she knows what everyone knows! You, Michael, you’re both too pathetic, stupid, juvenile, shortsighted, and fucking deluded to take five fucking seconds to think maybe there’s more shit happening in Dolareido than your moronic grudge!”

Garry stared at him, obviously confused. He tried to hide it of course, but the hints were there. Michael reverted his transformation, a disgusting display of popping, gurgling bubbles of flesh and bone that shrank in on themselves like thick ooze going down the drain. But soon his suit emerged from the folds of muscle and skin, and Michael remained. A broken, tattered, beaten Gangrel, who half sat, half knelt, as he tried to push his weight onto his hands but only succeeded with one. He looked confused, too.

“Oh I’m sorry, did you not catch that? Let me repeat. No one told either of you for a fucking reason! Because everyone knows you two are so fucking worthless, with heads jammed right up your asses, that telling either of you anything was a recipe to tip off whoever’s doing it! You can’t be trusted by anyone, and hey! Guess what? You proved everyone right, by starting a war, over a fucking hundred-year-old grudge!” He marched toward Garry, and clenched and unclenched his only remaining fist. “So die, you fucking useless sacks of shit.”

He didn’t get much further. Azamel roared, a full on elephant roar, complete with a trumpet of her giant elephant trunk, and Jack whipped his head around in time to see her swing her hand for him.

She was slow, slower than he remembered. A giant, heaving creature soon to die of a wound it should have died of months ago. But, problem: he was pretty fucking beat up, too. Kinda had his body broken and smashed into mulch ten minutes ago, not to mention getting his left arm cut off. And the fact she was fifty feet tall, sitting, made dodging a giant hand difficult.

But he managed. He jumped high, damn high, clearing twenty feet so her huge hand swooped underneath him, nearly smashing into the two Gangrels; no such luck, she avoided hitting them. He landed on his feet, and turned to face Azamel, ready to give her another speech. But the damn bitch took another swing for him, with her other hand, palm open. Jack jumped it again, this time jumping straight toward her.

Yeah, she was gigantic. Yeah, she was fucking strong as hell. Yeah, this was her nightmare, her home turf, and for Begotten, home turf meant a fucking massive advantage. But she was old and dying, weak, vulnerable. One moment of focus, one moment as she recovered from lugging those gargantuan arms around, and he’d reach out and break her mind. Breaking the mind of an ancient vampire like Daniel might have been out of his reach, for now, but an old, dying bitch with a superiority complex? He was going to make her rip out her tusks and stab herself to death with them.

“Oh I am going to beat your fucking ass until you’re dead! I don’t know where Sándor and the others are, but all they’re gonna find is your fucking corpse you fucking—”

She swung at him again, with her third and fourth arms, and plucked him out of the air. That, he hadn't expected. Those hands had held the fishing net of skulls and the long hook with the corpse on it like they were symbols essential to her existence. He at least expected her to set those objects down if she was going to use those hands. But she let them go, and the net, the huge black chain that connected it to the hook, it all came crashing down.

The giant net of skulls fell apart, and hundreds of the beautiful orbs scattered over the red-soaked street, shattering into dust. The hook landed on a roof of a parked car, and sank in through it, dragging the corpse along with and tearing it in half.

Azamel glared down at Jack as she brought him in front of her, holding him with both hands, like a god damn child holding a doll. He was just barely big enough that she needed to use two hands to make sure she completely encased him, with only his head and neck sticking up from between her leathery skin.

And before he could reach out through her dark eyes and into her mind to break the damn bitch, she slammed him into the ground. She was a lot stronger than Michael.

Jack, pinned on his stomach on the street in front of Azamel's knees, pushed his elbows down against the cracked asphalt. She kept his torso buried under one palm, and he managed to push up against it enough to shift the colossal weight. She may have been strong, but so was he.

"Let go of me you fucking—" The world cracked around him as a new weight slammed into him. Bitch just squashed her one hand onto the other, and she was not kind about it, pinning him to the street with both hands hard enough his vitae struggled to keep his bones from breaking into powder.

"Stay there," Azamel said.

"Good job." Garry's voice. That fucker. It was muffled, Jack buried under two giant hands after all and unable to see, but he could still hear him. "You... should probably kill him. That curse—"

"I will do nothing of the sort."

"I mean, he—hey! What the fuck!"

Loud sounds. Crashing. Thundering. Azamel was moving. Dealing with Garry. She kept one hand on Jack, and at this point Jack was a pancake. The rage tore through him, boiled his insides, lit an inferno inside him until he was screaming and roaring as he pushed up against Azamel's hand. But she fought against him, trumpeting her stupid elephant sounds as she refused to let him go. Even as he dug deep, poured his power through his body until his remaining hand cracked the asphalt as he pushed against it, Azamel rumbled her weird god sounds, and pushed her weight down against him.

And through all that, Azamel's weight shifted side to side. Judging from the grunts, roars, and pained hollers of Garry, and Michael evidently, she was fighting them. And winning.

"You will cease and desist! You are trapped here, in my domain!" Her voice poured through her arm, into her hand, and into his fucking head. Supposedly whales could sing so loud, if you were in the water with them and near them, it could pop your eardrums. Same fucking thing.

"Azamel!" Michael's voice. "The curse has to be dealt with. He—"

"I am in control here. You will silence your useless mouth, or I will crush you into oblivion. Do you understand me, blood leech?" Old bitch had apparently caught the two of them, judging from the sounds she was making.

Yeap, she'd caught them. She lifted her hand off Jack long enough for him to see Garry in one of her left hands, and Michael in one of her right, both back in their human bodies and trapped in her grip. But the moment Jack got back to his feet, she'd already brought her hand back down on him, two of them, and not to pin him. She crushed him, like swatting a spider.

He poured his vitae through his limbs, his skin, his bones, his muscles, everything. He was Jack the Ripper. He was better than her, a dinosaur falling apart at the seams. He was better than these two fucking cunt Gangrels. He was better than them, stronger than them! It wouldn't be long before he could kill them all, every last one of them, take the city for his own, and everyone in it. It wouldn't be—

Azamel swatted him again, hard enough he sank through the asphalt. Last thought before torpor took him: he probably made a funny human-shaped hole in the road.