

~~Antoinette~~

Veronica, still unconscious, lay in the ritual circle, bathed in the blue light of her chandelier. Antoinette and Elaine both pointed their tablets at her, observing with keen eyes as the humming machine in the background ran through the various wavelengths the devices were programmed to respond to. They started with the same frequency that had detected the remnants of the Strix upon Jack's person, and moved outward from there.

Nothing. Antoinette breathed a sigh of relief, sat at her nearby table, and logged the event.

"I guess the curse does not spread so easily," Elaine said. "I had thought that, perhaps, since he has loosed it upon himself, it would affect his blood."

"As did I. But it appears we worried over nothing. Did her blood taste different than another kine's?"

Elaine shook her head as she sat across the table from her. "No."

Nodding, Antoinette closed her laptop, and combed her hair over her shoulder. "Très bien. Though, I will perform this test once again, if Jack ever elevates her to ghoul. A drop of his blood might not contaminate, but perhaps if infused with will and vitae, it may."

"Perhaps." Elaine took several of her own notes, sighed, closed her laptop, and leaned back. "I have not seen Daniel for some time, Ann. Where is that old stone?"

Daniel was, as often this past year, searching for the mysterious disturbance within Dolareido. Whether that be through direct espionage, or separating from his body to explore the city as a projection with Auspex, she did not know. Such was the case with Daniel. He would do what he felt necessary, and while he always ensured her he would do as she bid, and that he would not risk his second life needlessly, he pushed himself.

Her sheriff may have been quiet as a stone, but she knew the man cared for her city, as much as she did.

"He hunts."

"Ah. Keeping secrets, old friend?"

Antoinette rolled her eyes. Such was the game. They both kept secrets from each other, her and Elaine, and it was a mutual understanding that they do so, but never to the other's detriment.

“Naturally.”

“Mhmm.” Elaine laughed, shrugged, and leaned forward over the table. “Does he still suspect me of foul play?”

“Has he ever?”

“Of course. I doubt he thinks my arrival here coincidental.”

“But he knows it is not. He knows you are here because of Jack, and the curse, and the legacy you have created.” Antoinette smiled at Elaine, her devious smile. “And for other reasons you refuse to share, I am sure.”

Elaine returned the smile. “Naturally.”

They chuckled. Such an old, silly game, the Danse Macabre, one they both laughed at, and yet, one they both played with dedication.

“Though if it is the sheriff’s touch you are after, I am afraid he seems quite interested in Athalia.”

That earned a sneer from her old friend.

“That woman is a pile of hate, rage, and baggage.”

“And Daniel is a rock, a foundation, that she could perhaps use to rebuild herself.”

“Then the sheriff sees potential in her I do not. She is Begotten, forever doomed to fight against hungers greater and more damaging than you or I could manage. And she is a broken woman, a mother who has lost her vile daughter.”

“I think, perhaps, there is more to this than is obvious.” She leaned in, voice softening. “Daniel forever feels a failure, for what happened with his childe Natasha, and how she fled the Ordo in her fledgling years. The man needs a project. Athalia is, perhaps, that project, someone he can help.”

A twinkle danced across Elaine’s eyes. “They are using each other.”

“You know very well we all use each other. That does not mean there is not genuine emotion to be had.”

“Too true.” Nodding, she looked past Antoinette, to the distant thrall sleeping upon the floor. “This Veronica Tam is quite the treat, and to Jack’s physical tastes, I am sure. Did you find her specifically for him?”

Laughing, Antoinette shook her head. “No, but when I examined her file, I knew she would fit well.”

“Fit well on Jack’s length, you mean?”

This again. The woman had a one-track mind, indeed.

“I knew she would fit well as his first thrall for a host of reasons.”

Elaine grinned at her, a knowing grin, stood up, and slowly walked over to the thrall. “Do not be coy. You think I have not noticed the way your eyes brighten, every time you have found a new way to spoil your lover?”

“I do no such thing,” she lied.

“Ha. Ann, I have never seen you as overjoyed as when you are spoiling your little Ventrue.” She reached down, and scooped the unconscious woman up onto both arms, horizontal and against her chest. “Like, a rich man, who delights in seeing his woman light up with bliss when he buys her jewelry.”

“Ugh, do not paint it in such an ugly light. Such a stereotype is unbecoming.”

Elaine shrugged, sat Veronica in a chair at the table, and sat beside her. “I think it is sweet. As you said, we all use each other. The boy clearly enjoys being spoiled, and you clearly enjoy spoiling him. And there is an undeniable connection between you two.” After a nod and affirming smile, she reached out and brushed the tiny thrall’s hair behind an ear, exposing the piercings there. “And from how this one reacted, I am sure she will bring the boy mountains of erotic pleasure. You are not concerned she will attempt to seduce him, when you are not present?”

“I am sure she will try, especially once the Vinculum is complete. But she will fail.” Antoinette smiled at the thrall, and adjusted the shirt with the wide, plunging cleavage, to cover the woman’s breasts correctly. “And besides, it will not be as if she is not allowed to participate. Once the Vinculum is done, and Jack is sure of her loyalty, I look forward to seeing her join us.”

Elaine laughed, a hearty sound, and she shook her head. “You mean you look forward to seeing Jack struggling to handle the sheer eroticism you are planning to bury him in. I do not think he truly appreciates what our stories have implied.”

True. Her love did not grasp that when Antoinette or Elaine talked of sleeping with dozens of ghouls and thralls at once, they were being literal.

“And I look forward to his growth as a Kindred.”

Elaine nodded, but her eyes settled on Antoinette, and a mischievous grin grew. “We spend far too much time speaking of your little Ventrue, and romance.”

“That... is true.”

“Like young girls, indulging in flights of emotion.”

Sighing, Antoinette nodded, and sat up straight. “And as fun as that is, perhaps we should stop. It is great having you here, Elaine, so that I can, as you said, indulge these flights of emotion. I have had only Natasha to speak with, and she does not appreciate my situation as you do. But, I think you are right. Far too much time, speaking of love and sex.”

She was not sure she believed her own words. Once a cold, tactical queen of Dolareido, and now a lovesick girl who could not think of anything else but her little Ventrue? Perish the thought.

“Agreed.” Elaine’s grin only grew, and she winked. She did not entirely believe her own words either. “Azamel’s end approaches. What are your plans?”

Straight to business then.

“Jack informs me she plans to have Sándor replace her. I see no issue with this. As broken a man as the gargoyle is, I think he will fit the city better than Azamel. She has a habit of—” Her phone buzzed. A message from Jack. She pulled out her phone, and stared at the message. “Merde.”

“Ann? What is the matter?”

“Jack... believes that Avery is confronting Maria, and he is on his way to stop her.”

“Oh. I can... imagine how that will go. What do you intend to do?”

“I sha—we shall go.” If worse came to worse, and she had to confront the curse, better to have Elaine with her. “And observe.”

“Observe?”

“Observe. If Maria dies, so be it.”

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~~Damien~~

Maria’s wrath was inhuman. The werewolves clutched their skulls, and screamed absolute and utter despair, as the elder vampire forced a nightmare upon their minds. Whatever it was, whatever the

poor fools were forced to see and experience, it had them horrified. Many reached up and clawed at their faces with their fingers. Others fell to their knees. Matthew and Arturo resisted for a few moments longer than the others, but they too fell, gasping and yelling as something wicked scarred their souls.

All except for Avery. Her necklace glowed a gentle blue for a few moments, hidden inside her white t-shirt, but before Damien could put two and two together, the woman transformed.

She transformed fast. Within seconds, the enormous beast of muscle, short gray fur, and claws erupted from the once small woman. Damien should have reacted, but it all happened so damn fast. Avery should have been on her knees, screaming and crying like the others, but she wasn't. The pack leader grabbed Maria by the throat with one colossal hand, and Maria's arm with the other.

Maria's eyes widened with shock, and the Nightmare she held over the pack vanished, her vitae plummeting as she realized what was happening. But it was too late. The werewolf squeezed, and pulled.

The only thing that kept Maria's head attached to her shoulders, was Avery's mercy. The werewolf had caught Maria totally by surprise, and if she'd wanted, she could have squeezed and popped the unprepared elder's head right off. But instead, she ripped off Maria's left arm.

Maria screamed, a sound that shattered the cries of the werewolves, and Damien's paralysis.

He brought up his pistol and fired at Avery. Two caught her in the shoulder, and she dropped Maria's arm; it was already falling apart into tiny cinders and ash. But the werewolf, roaring in agony as silver burned her flesh, turned and put Maria between him and three more oncoming bullets. The bullets hit the Nosferatu's body and stopped, turning Maria's scream of surprise into annoyed grunts. Bullets would do little to a vampire, especially one as old as her. But that didn't mean they didn't hurt.

"Put her down!"

"No." Avery glared at him over Maria's shoulder, woman held at arm's length in front of her.

"Drop weapon. Now."

"I—" He didn't get to negotiate.

Maria shrieked like a banshee, and drove her right fist into Avery's wrist. Crack. Avery's roar buried Maria's scream of rage, but the Nosferatu was free, and she wasted no time. She threw herself at Avery's stomach, tackling a monster almost twice her height. Not enough weight to push her over, but the following punch was hard enough to send Avery to the floor, rolling fast, until she hit the wall with an enormous thud.

And because physics were a thing, Maria went the opposite direction, but she landed on her feet. Five feet up against the wall. She hopped off, but before she could land on the floor, a stampede of giant beasts ran toward her. Her, and Damien.

He pointed his pistol and fired at the nearest wolf, one with black fur, one he thought he recognized. Arturo. He knew Art was fast, a breed of werewolf that did cloak and dagger, same as Mekhet, but Damien wasn't prepared for just how fast something that huge could be. The giant wolf ducked several bullets, but two managed to catch his leg, and he fell, momentum carrying him past Damien and into the back wall near the piano.

Damien didn't have time to capitalize. The rest of the pack charged, and judging from the size, and angry roar of the oncoming goliath, he'd just shot this one's best friend. Matthew was bigger than every other werewolf in the pack, and he shook the Earth with each step, claws tearing into the stone as he charged.

Damien pointed his pistol, and shot the beast. One, two, three, four. Matthew kept coming, the gaping holes in his side, shoulder, and thigh, caused by the silver bullets not enough to slow him down. Wincing, Damien pointed at the man's face, and pulled the trigger.

Click. Empty.

He ran at Matthew, and at the last moment slid between the giant's legs. Sword in hand, he sliced at the brute's legs on the way past, and managed to get his silver sword an inch into one of Matt's calves, before he rolled to his feet. Blood gushed and coated the sword, and sizzled. Judging from the roar Matthew unleashed, the silver was working.

Another werewolf ran for him. Monica he guessed, from her position and the darkness of her fur, but the werewolves all looked similar when transformed. He knew she was young, possibly the youngest of their pack, but she was fast. She was damn fast, like Arturo. She caught up to him far faster than Matthew had, and Damien barely had time to turn and face her when the colossal creature slammed into him.

The empty pistol flew out of his hand. He had another magazine, but no way they were going to let him reload. That was the problem with this fight. If he'd been up against other vampires, he could have exploited their solo nature; vampires sucked at cooperation. The werewolves, on the other hand, moved like they could read each other's minds. They moved together, flowed around each other, and circled him and Maria seamlessly. The moment his pistol landed, a nearby werewolf slammed a foot down on it, and kicked it away behind him.

That was fine, he still had his sword, and he drove it down into the werewolf who tackled him. She'd gotten her hands around his waist, her claws into his skin, but hadn't had the chance to tear into him yet. They collided with the floor, and he pulled on the blade, slicing into her back by her right shoulder, and drawing the blade up until it hit bone.

She screamed, a canine scream that blocked out his hearing with how close she was, and she threw him to the side with her one good arm. He somersaulted through the air, landed on his feet, and dashed for the nearest werewolf. They were all close and circling him. Better he take the fight to them, and prevent them from getting into their practiced positions.

He lost track of who was who. Fur, muscle, fangs and claws, they were everywhere, and they were all close enough to cut him open from head to crotch with one good swipe. He ducked under a werewolf's sideways slash, and sliced up with his sword, catching the towering behemoth along the abs. Might as well have been cutting steel. They roared and stepped back, and clutched their bleeding stomach with one hand. Damien's only advantage in this fight was silver. If he could deal a serious wound to every werewolf, maybe he'd have a chance.

Another came up behind him, and Damien dove forward away from them, crashing into the wounded werewolf's shoulder and knocking them over. In the tumbling mess of limbs, he rolled over and out of the way of the attacking werewolf's pounce. Fast at these brutes were, especially ones like Arturo, they still weighed hundreds and hundreds of pounds. They'd never be as fast as him. He sliced out at the arm of the werewolf that'd barely missed him, getting her deep in the forearm until he felt blade hit bone. He wasn't strong enough to cut through werewolf bone, not at this angle, but that didn't mean he didn't get through muscle and tendon.

He got up, and glared at Clara. Avery and some others were fighting Maria, and Damien was doing his best to get to her to help her out. Every other werewolf was trying to catch him, and judging from their swings, were willing to kill him if they had to. Clara on the other hand, watched.

No time to say anything or call her out. Another werewolf came at him, and Damien went up and over, a large jump that left him exposed, but they hadn't expected it. He sliced his sword across the werewolf's head, getting ear and skin, but again didn't have the leverage to get through bone. Nothing bleeds like the scalp, and red fountained over the werewolf, the floor, and his sword. It sizzled over the silver, until Damien could smell it.

The dome shook once again, thud thud thud, and Damien turned to find Matthew charging him. Damien lifted the sword, ready to leap at the man and sink his blade into his chest, but at the last second, Matthew threw his weight down, getting on all fours. For a moment Damien was sure the beast

meant to run into him like a charging bull, but Matthew had to know he wasn't fast enough to catch Damien.

Sure enough, another werewolf pounced over Matthew, directly over him from behind, hands out and reaching for Damien. Arturo. Despite the bullet wounds still bleeding everywhere, the werewolf came at him, rage in his eyes, animal hunger, and a need for violence.

Werewolves stood at Damien's sides, blocking his escape routes and forcing his hand. He jumped, up and over Matthew, and over Arturo, but the smaller werewolf — still bigger than most of his companions — reached up mid pounce, grabbed Damien's foot, and brought the vampire down with him as he slammed into one of Maria's desks. Wood shattered, splinters went everywhere, so did a laptop, and a pile of books.

By the time Damien realized what'd happened, Matthew's colossal weight slammed into them, and the three rolled up into a pile. Almost enough weight to break Damien's bones, but not quite, and he scampered away from the pile of claws tearing and scratching in a frenzy, ripping open his suit and skin.

Werewolf claws burn, they burn a lot. It wasn't like a knife, or a claw from any regular animal. Something about werewolves and their claws let them cut into things claws shouldn't have been able to cut, and burn like they were on fire. They cut through his suit like butter, and his skin, but he rolled away before they got too deep.

He jumped to his feet, and turned to face another werewolf. Clara. She walked toward him, several werewolves behind her, struggling to stay standing as they recovered. The silver wounds hurt them, badly.

“Clara,” he said, “don't make me—”

Clara opened her mouth, and roared.

Sound slammed into him, deafened him, and he raised his sword to prepare for her pounce. Rather, he tried to raise his sword. He looked down at his arm as it hung limp, and squeezed the sword as hard as he could, but his fingers barely responded. He tried to lift his arm again, but his body had grown weak, too weak to lift its weight.

Clara's walk turned into a charge, and he stared at her as she sank her feet's claws into the stone. She'd done something to him. That roar, it'd hit him, did something, sapped away his strength and paralyzed him. And she was running straight at him.



Move. He squeezed the sword harder, but his body didn't want to respond. His strength was there, but it was hidden, buried under the roar that echoed through his body, its vibrations seeping into his bones. Move. He poured vitae into his limbs, but they refused to respond. Something was blocking his brain from communicating with his arms.

Move. Move! He focused his mind and told it to ignore the strange vibration coursing through him. Whatever Clara had done, it wasn't something physical. It was a Discipline, the werewolf equivalent, and whatever it was, it was confusing the fuck out of his insides. But, it also didn't last.

The vibration in his body settled, and the moment he could feel strength flow through him again, even if it was only a small amount, he poured every ounce he had into his legs, and jumped.

Clara saw it coming. She reached out and grabbed his ankle as he flew overhead. Inertia turned his world into chaos as her grip pulled down on him while his body kept trying to flip over her. He managed to keep his grip on his sword, and he swung it—

The world turned white, and he screamed. His body collided with hers, draping over her shoulder, and his scream died away as he watched his sword fall, half flying away with his momentum having pendulum swung him into Clara's back. Tink, tink, metal against the stone, rolling away, before Clara rolled him off and set him on the ground.

She growled, and pressed down on him with one foot. Claws sank half an inch into his back, and he yelled as the burning sensation shot through him again.

“Hold still,” she said.

He turned his head and glared up at her. She met his gaze, and the animal rage in them melted away. Slowly, she turned her head, bits of his pant leg dangling off her enormous teeth, and looked to where his leg had fallen. Damien didn't bother looking. The sound of his leg burning away into ash and cinders in a matter of seconds was sickening enough.

He looked over to Avery, and winced. In the thirty seconds of fighting, he'd done a lot of damage to the werewolves, but there were too many of them. Avery had surprised Maria, somehow being immune to her Nightmare, and that'd changed everything. Even as Maria broke the arms and legs of werewolves that came at her, she was just one person, with one arm, and it wasn't long before Avery got her hand around the tiny woman's neck, and lifted her once again. Werewolves healed broken bones in seconds.

And once again, Avery ripped off her arm, her one remaining arm.

“Enough!” yelled Avery, barking voice cutting through the madness around them, and bringing everything to silence. She tossed the limb aside, and it rolled over the floor toward Damien, before it burst into cinders, and faded away. “Enough. Show secrets. Now.” Avery shook Maria, hard, and the tiny woman’s legs dangled and swayed, like wind chimes.

“Fuck you,” Maria said, glaring eyes staring hard at the werewolf.

Damien sighed, and let his head drop to the floor, temple pressing to it as he watched Avery and Maria. Jack and Jessy weren’t going to get here in time. He’d sent the message five minutes ago, so unless they—

He whipped his head around to the tunnel, and he breathed a sigh of relief as someone stepped into view, a small man with two crows on his shoulders. Well, holy shit. Thank God for miracles.

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~~Jack~~

His friends circled above, and cawed a few points of interest. The werewolves were hurt, but recovering. The ones hurt by silver were recovering damn slowly though, and Jack knew they’d take days, maybe weeks to heal from wounds they’d normally heal in literal minutes, if not seconds. And the ones that weren’t hurt by silver, did. One werewolf near Maria pushed themselves back to one clawed foot, and Jack winced as he saw, and heard, their leg snap back into place at the femur. Werewolves were ridiculously durable, and regenerated like an elder Gangrel.

Which just meant he’d have to break their limbs multiple times.

“You have five seconds,” he said, and he lifted his left hand, fingers out, “to let her go and get out.”

“Jack,” Clara said, “we are here to—”

“One.” He pulled down a finger, and steeled his gaze at Clara. A silent warning. He wasn’t going to pull punches here.

“Jack!” Matthew this time, easy to tell apart from the others by his size. The giant roared. His leg was hurt, still bleeding. “We cannot—”

“Two... Three...” He nodded toward Damien, and his friend pulled himself across the floor toward the closest wall.

Arturo, and probably Caleb and Carter, judging from how sneakily they moved, spread out from the group, moving to the sides. Despite the silver-inflicted wounds still bleeding, the wolves moved as if the holes and gashes in their flesh didn't exist.

“Four...”

Avery let out a bellowing roar, and threw Maria back against the wall, near her coffin. He'd been worried the pack leader would kill her, but maybe they needed her to find what they were looking for. Or maybe it just wasn't in Avery to be that much of a bitch. Either way, it took Maria out of the line of fire.

Brave of Avery to come at him first. No vampire would do that. Elders didn't do things on their own unless absolutely necessary; they had bigger fish to fry. Instead, they sent armies, underlings, thralls or ghouls, or their childer. He didn't blame them, honestly. Antoinette wouldn't have been able to create Dolareido if she kept risking her neck. Jacob wouldn't be the deadly witch he was now, if he'd gotten his hands dirty every time something needed to be done.

Werewolves worked differently. They thrived on doing things hands on, on dangerous hunts, on growing stronger by testing their mettle, and surviving things that would kill almost anything else. And their leaders taught by example, if Avery was any indication. He knew she'd run at him first, and the others would collapse on him when she'd created the opening. He also knew he could break her, grab her mind and turn into her an obedient dog, and end this whole fight before anyone got hurt.

He met her eyes, reached out, and her necklace glowed blue. Wait, necklace? Werewolves were naked, nothing but fur. Why'd she have a nec—

Her claws met his body, and he yelled out as agony scorched through him. Her grip sank into his shoulders, claws cutting through his suit and into his muscle and bone, and she roared at him as she picked him up.

Ok, so, whatever the necklace was doing, it stopped his mind from being able to reach hers. Good to know, but too little too late. That was one powerful necklace.

“Will do what I did to Maria,” she barked between snarls. “Teach you a lesson.”

Jack knew what it felt like to lose his limbs. It wasn't a memory he looked forward to re-experiencing.

Avery leaned in closer, until her growling snout was only inches from him, and her predator eyes were wide with animal rage. Her grip tightened, and pulled, and holy shit, there was enough strength in that grip to throw a car.

But his arms stayed where they were. The werewolf howled and pulled harder, but vitae coursed through his limbs, through his body, and out from the wounds her claws had created. Blood pulsed out from the holes, against her claws, defying the werewolf's will.

It was Jack's turn to snarl, and he slammed his head forward against her snout. Crunch. Her tight grip gave him more than enough leverage to put power into it, and he grinned as her blood gushed from her wolf snout and onto his forehead. He licked it off his lips. Damn, that tasted good.

Howling in surprise and fury, she let go and fell back, almost falling over as she clutched her face with one hand. The pack was surprised, but only for a moment, and they rushed him from the sides.

But before they reached him, Jack snapped his gaze over at one of the rushing werewolves, and glared. Just like the time he tried to get into Sándor's mind, he was met with a gate, and there was something growling at him from the other side of it. Though in the werewolf's mind, the gate felt more like rough foliage, a line of trees, the entrance of a dark, cold forest tipped with snow and dotted with rocks, and carcasses.

Jack was more skilled now, compared to then, better at controlling the curse. Back then he'd been worried about destroying Sándor's mind if he kicked down the gate. Now, it wouldn't happen. And even if it did, he wasn't going to just let them injure him, not after what they did to Damien and Maria.

And judging from the looks in their eyes, he wasn't sure they'd be able to stop themselves from taking things too far. Supposedly werewolves had a habit of going berserk when transformed into their Gauru form, and after seeing their leader get their face smashed in, several of the wolves roared fury that sent a thrill through Jack's body. Sounded an awful lot like animals going berserk. The thrill dancing up his spine was his curse reacting to their anger, anger that had their eyes wide and their mouths open as they looked at him like he was their next hunt. If he wasn't careful, they'd kill him.

He smashed the thick line of trees blocking him inside the werewolf's mind, and found the human half, Caleb, standing next to an enormous wolf. The wolf snarled at him, and lunged. But it was pointless. Jack snapped a hard glare at the beast, and a moment later, the wolf fell to the metaphorical floor of the metaphorical forest, whimpering, defeated. Caleb fell a second later.

Caleb wasn't immune to his Dominate. And his wolf half wasn't immune to his Animalism.

Back in the real world, Caleb turned, and with a roar of agony and fury, threw himself at the other werewolf charging Jack. The two went down in a heap, and claws found fur as they cut into each other.

Jack faced the remaining werewolf, and did something the fucker probably never expected from a Ventrue. He came in closer. The giant beast faltered, trying to slow so he didn't overshoot and tumble over Jack. An opening, and Jack stepped into it with a snarl and a grin. He poured his vitae into his arm, into the blood that flowed out of his wounds under his suit, and fueled a simple uppercut straight into the titan's belly.

Connection. His fist crashed into a wall of steel muscle, but an Uratha wasn't a giant gargoyle. Muscle bent, and the wolf's body absorbed the impact as Jack's feet were driven into the floor. Crunching ribs and damaged organs, Jack felt them. The wolf went up ten feet into the air, momentum carrying him over Jack's body, and he crashed into the remaining desk, shattering it on impact. It was a darker wolf, with a few gunshot wounds that weren't healing, and he curled up in a ball to clutch their stomach as he vomited blood.

Turning to watch what happened was a mistake. Another werewolf came at Jack's back, and claws sliced down from his left shoulder, down across his back, to his right hip, and his suit jacket and shirt shredded like paper. The claws struck against his skin, but didn't penetrate any deeper than skin deep. Blood gushed out wherever claws met his body, and blocked the inhuman weapons from getting into him.

But the claws still burned, almost as bad as fire would. He felt them cut through the summoned blood, and almost get past it, felt it down where his Beast controlled it. Werewolf claws were not normal claws.

Jack spun around, and grabbed the hand of the werewolf. They'd expected to do more damage, from how they'd stopped after the one slash. Gave him just enough time to get a grip on her wrist, and slam his hand down on it with the other. Bone cracked, and his driving fist crashed down on the wrist hard enough to push the broken bone through the flesh.

The werewolf shrieked and tried to step back, but he held on, and yanked. The pain must have been excruciating; he knew from experience. Before the werewolf realized he'd yanked on her, the momentum carried him forward toward her, and he kicked. He was no martial artist, but a side kick was simple enough, easy enough to use the whole body to drive a shit load of force into. His foot collided with her knee, and she shrieked again as she fell to her side. The moment her shoulder landed with the floor, Jack drew back his other foot, and kicked her like a football.

Physics didn't like that. His right foot drove into the werewolf hard enough to break every rib she had, and send her soaring through the air a good thirty feet, but the impact also meant his left foot flew out from under him. He landed on his palms, and another wolf dove at him. Probably thought he was wounded, or maybe that he couldn't fight on the floor.

He rolled onto his back as the wolf pounced on him, and tried to bite his face off. He got an arm underneath their neck, holding them back, but it only took them a second to realize he was strong enough to keep their teeth at bay. Instead they switched to their hands, and started slashing. Each rake of claws against his skin, shoulders and chest and arm and face, each was met with flowing, dark blood that protected him. But pain snuck through, getting to him, his Beast. Those claws were brutal, and they were going to wear him down.

*Jack you moron. Let me out. Let me fight!*

Fuck you. You'll kill them.

*Only if I have to. I'm better at this than you. Let me kick their asses!*

Shut up shut up!

He pulled his feet up underneath him, and kicked upward. With the ground to his back, he had good leverage to drive his weight into it, and his strength up into the werewolf's stomach. A lot of strength. He poured his vitae and his frustration into the kick, and the werewolf flew into the air, up and up, until they collided with the ceiling fifty feet up, hard enough they cracked their skull. Brains rattled, they landed hard, and Jack smirked as they bounced. Heavy things go crack and crunch when they fall from high heights.

He got back to his feet and found most of the pack ready for him, though now they were circling him and weighing their options. Two werewolves had jumped Caleb, and were trying to get through to him. They would. Jack didn't have the time to properly brainwash him.

Clara stood a little further back than the others, analyzing, looking for the right moment. She meant business, despite the sadness in her eyes. It hurt to meet her gaze.

Sighing, Jack reached up and tugged on his suit jacket shoulder. "Not again." A small tug was enough to rip the whole damn shirt and jacket off, leaving him shirtless, and he threw them to the floor as he glared at the wolves. "Just pack up and go, guys. Don't make me crack every single one of you in half until you do."

Taunting them was a mistake. The biggest werewolf charged him, and the whole damn cave shook with each slam of his feet. Paws? Nah, closer to t-rex feet than a fucking wolf's, with how big those

claws were. He tore up the floor, literally, as he ran for Jack, and Jack stood his ground. Just a little guy, standing as a t-rex ran at him with mouth open, ready to gobble him up.

Jack met the man's crazed eyes, and reached out again. Again he found the gate of the man's subconscious, and he kicked it open, breaking down trees as he exposed the forest within. Physically strong as Matt was, mentally he was no different than Caleb. The crazy anger and rage that poured out of him, a berserk fury of aggression and need to destroy, none of it saved him from Jack's grip. Crushing his wolf and human halves was easy.

The man slowed, and slowed, and eventually came to a stop. He stared down at Jack, eyes shaking as the man struggled to escape Jack's Dominate. But he couldn't. He twisted and turned, pulled away, but came back a moment later, as if an invisible leash bound his limbs.

"Now!" Jack yelled. "Everyone's going to calm the fuck down! You're going to leave, and—"

Avery appeared over Matthew's head, healed, with something massive and black in her hands. She must have noticed when Jack Dominated Matt, and grabbed it then. Smart. Really, really smart. Smart enemies were a giant pain in the ass.

She threw the grand piano down at him. That was a lot of weight, and wide, and it came at him at professionally pitched baseball speed. The best he could do was raise his arm and block as much of it as he could.

It shattered on contact. The wood came apart over his arm and continued into him. Piano keys, piano wire, wood, it all slammed into him, and as much as the shield his blood provided protected him from any serious wounds, it didn't stop inertia.

The weight of the piano struck him into the ground, hard, and his skull slammed into the stone floor even harder. He heard a crack, and blinding pain flooded him. And then, blackness.

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Fucking. Finally.

Don't mind me, Jack. Bit of a drop in your concentration — and consciousness — there. Too bad.

Grinning until his cheeks hurt, New Jack pushed himself back up onto his feet. He poured waves of his vitae into the crack in his skull, and the bone sealed snug. Old Jack was like a child behind the wheel of a Lamborghini. No grace at all, and wasted power.

Bits of piano surrounded him, completely smashed. Avery, panting heavy, stood beside Matthew, and she dragged the man off and away. He didn't fight back; brainwashing hadn't been completed. Damn Avery interrupted before Old Jack could get his fingers into the man's consciousness very deep. Useless kid.

Jack snickered as he watched her drag the sandbag away, and his eyes drifted over to Caleb. His struggles were fading too, faster than they should have. Making the man fight the people he loved was probably too much to ask for without more than few seconds of Dominate and Animalism. If he'd had the time, Jack could make the man slit the throats of everyone he loved in their sleep, but no way he'd get that deep into the man's head in a few seconds, not with all the other werewolves there to stop him.

Clara took a step toward him, and he grinned at her. The shock in her eyes said it all. She knew.

"Jack... don't..."

"You fuckers could have left," he said, "but your noses are so far up your asses, you don't seem to get that you can't just do whatever you want."

"Jack... Please, just—"

He leaned down to his bare wrist, bit into it, and gave Clara his best devil's smile as he yanked back his head while swinging his arm out. Blood. His blood. With an effort of will, his blood gushed out from the wound, splattering over the floor in a big circle. Will kept the blood from immediately turning to cinder and ash. Will infused it with the Discipline. Will, would summon his legion.

The moment the ring of blood landed on the floor, Clara dove at him. What a bitch. She landed on him, pinned him, and got to tearing, claws slicing at his chest over and over. Well, he had been distracted. He'd have done the same thing.

But he wouldn't have done it with that look in her eyes. The other wolves, they looked angry, aroused with blood lust, and hungry for the hunt. Her? She looked sad. Fucking annoying.

He snapped his arms out as hers came down for the tenth time in two seconds, and he squeezed on her wrists. She howled, a lovely sound, and stood up to try and get away from him. Being that he weighed almost nothing, she had no trouble standing up, but he came up with her, grip still on her wrists.

"Jack's not home." Grinning at Clara, squeezing until her bones snapped in his grip, he flipped his legs up and pressed them to her chest. And pushed.



The slide and thunk of joints coming out of sockets was beautiful. The tearing of flesh, more so. But what really got his vitae pumping was the shriek of utter agony from Clara, as he ripped off her right arm. He'd planned for both, but physics were a bitch, and once the right arm came off, his pushing pressure against her chest caused him to spin off her, and he had to let go of her left arm so he could land on his feet.

Howling like an animal in a bear trap, Clara fell back and scampered away, getting back to her feet behind Avery and clutching the shoulder socket where her arm used to be connected. The arm, now in Jack's possession, shrank. The fur sunk into the skin, clothes emerged, and the mass vanished, leaving him holding a normal human arm.

"Vampires can regenerate lost limbs," he said. "Maria and Damien will be fine eventually. But still, you deserved this." He winked at Damien as he waved the arm around in the air, and laughed. The man stared at him, not finding it funny for some reason. Church boy had no sense of humor.

He assumed werewolves could regenerate lost limbs, too. But if they couldn't, ah well.

"Jack!" one of the werewolves said, one with a few bullet holes in him.

Damien snapped his head to the dark werewolf. "Arturo."

"Ah, Arturo," Jack said. "I'd make some joke about beating you to death with your buddy's arm," he gestured to the arm, "but we know it'll take a lot more than something like this to kill you." He tossed the girl's arm over his shoulder, reached down, and grabbed something else, something that just so happened to be near him on the floor.

A silver sword.

The werewolves stared at him, some of them with eyes widening as they glanced down at the gleaming blade in his hands. Clara's glare lacked the rage the others had, but there was plenty of fear there, and seeing her take a step back from him as he waved the blade around was just marvelous.

*You're not going to kill them!*

Shut up and calm down.

New Jack rolled his eyes, and tossed the sword behind him too. Clink clank on the stone floor, until it stopped beside Clara's severed arm.

"Think I need a silver sword to kill you fuckers?" Laughing, he took another step forward, as Mulder and Scully cawed from above. "But you do deserve a beating, the kind your daddy gives before

he finishes his last bottle and blows his brains out.” Again the wolves stared at him, and no one laughed. Not a drop of humor in the whole damn place.

The moment’s rest created a pause in the noise. Perfect. Werewolf ears perked up, and many of the giant beasts turned to look at the tunnel.

“Jack,” Clara, voice wavering. “Don’t!”

Ah, that’s right. Clara’d been with him, when he’d kicked the gargoyle’s ass. She had recognized why he bit into his wrist. And now, she’d recognized the noise. Which only made it all the better, cause half the werewolves looked to her, saw the fear, and snapped their heads back to stare at the tunnel with renewed anxiety. Oh it was so fucking good. Only thing that’d make it better would be someone playing creepy horror music on the piano. A glance back showed the remains of the piano, and he sighed. Damn.

When the quiet scritch scratch noise rose to a crescendo of squeaks and claws on stone, the tide broke, and dark brown washed upon the room like vile water. Thousands and thousands of beady eyes flooded into Maria’s den, and the werewolves stood there, jaws hanging, eyes wide. Only when the rats made an obvious dash for them did they finally react.

David versus Goliath, except more like, ten thousand Davids versus a dozen Goliaths. Tiny bodies bit and clawed and climbed up enormous wolves, earning howls of frustration and rage from the titans as they did. Werewolves were brutes of aggression and strength, but the fuck could they do when overwhelmed by thousands of rats?

Jack groaned with bliss as the rats flowed over each other and onto the werewolves. The mix of rage and panic was so damn good, he’d be hard if he’d been Blushing. Three of the werewolves threw themselves at the rats, slamming their giant hands and feet of claws around, killing rats by the dozens with each swing. Crunch. Splat. Jack laughed as the werewolves were quickly overwhelmed, and their assault turned into a hopeless defense, the titans doing their best to wipe rats off their limbs as his legion climbed up their bodies.

Laughing, nice and loud — wouldn’t be any fun if they didn’t see him coming — Jack walked up to the werewolves. Rats poured, scurrying around him, between his shoes, avoiding his steps with ease, and biting at the feet of closer werewolves. Who was this one? David? Carter? Didn’t matter. Whoever they were, they looked at him, animal eyes staring, and Jack met their gaze with a wicked grin.

The werewolf dove at him. Mistake. They were probably expecting another fist fight, but now that his legion had come, Jack had a moment to do what he wanted. He reached out with his vitae, his mind, and grabbed the consciousness of the beast glaring at him.

David. The spirit talker. This man's mind was different than the others. They'd had minds that looked like forests, typical Northern forests with creeks, big rocks, bits of snow, lots of pine trees, shit like that.

David's was nothing like that. David's mind looked straight out of a Studio Ghibli film. A serene, glowing lake of turquoise, dotted with small islands of mossy boulders. Dense green grass that looked almost like shag carpet. Giant trees, thick as houses, each with veins in their trunks that glowed the same as the lake. Mushrooms grew out the sides of the trees and boulders alike, some small, some enormous, white with hints of turquoise within. No sun reached past the dense canopies above, but the forest pulsed with light, the glowing veins, the mushrooms, all of it fading in and out in a slow beat.

David sat upon the edge of the lake, and his wolf sat beside him. His wolf glowed, unsurprisingly, turquoise.

"So you're the one that talks to spirits," Jack said. "Nice digs you got here. Makes me think I should pop some DMT and hallucinate about forest spirits with wobbly heads."

David slowly got up and looked at him. Wow. The dude was a fidgety, nervous mess in the physical world, but here in his mind, he looked calm and confident.

"You're chaos and destruction incarnate," the man said, voice smooth.

"Ha! You guys marched into Maria's den and got violent. Insult me all you want, but it's you fuckers who stepped over the line."

David watched him, unsettled. A tall white guy with broad shoulders and short, blonde hair, who looked beyond dull, but the way he stood there and looked at Jack, was downright creepy.

"Don't hurt my family."

"Oh I'll hurt em, hurt em until they regret coming to my city. But I won't kill them, be happy with that." Jack walked over to a nearby tree, touched one of the larger, pulsing mushrooms, and promptly punched it so it tore off the tree trunk. "But now that we got a minute to talk, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask?"

"About Black Blood."

The man frowned, but it passed quickly, the dude returning to statuesque posture. “What about it?”

“Do you trust him?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Black Blood. He’s up to something. I remember Avery saying once that you guys came here because spirits said you should, that something was up. I know you’ve been investigating the tears.”

“I won’t—”

“David David David.” Jack reached out, opened his palm, and pointed it at David. The world shifted, like someone had changed the channel on an old TV. Now David was on his knees in front of Jack, throat in his grip. “I’m not here for a friendly chat. I’m here to take advantage of a serendipitous occurrence.” The glowing wolf snarled, but Jack snapped his gaze to it, and the beast whimpered as it fell to its stomach.

“We... we’ve been... trying to find out who’s been making the tears. We d-don’t think it’s Black Blood, at least not... directly.” This may have been in their heads, meaning Jack squeezing his throat was just a metaphor, but it was a damn good one.

“You think Maria’s been doing that, instead.”

“Yes. We... think... she’s trying to resurrect Lucas, and is going to... do a ritual that threatens the Gauntlet.”

“And you think Maria’s been doing this, why? What’s your evidence?”

“Spirits... are working with her. They told me.”

Jack squinted at the man, and his steady eyes. The way he choked out ‘they told me’ was solid, and hit Jack straight to the soul. Whoever this shaman was, he knew his shit, or at least he believed he did. He probably performed some strange ritual or binding to talk to the spirits, something that forced the conversation to happen on his terms.

“So you don’t think Black Blood has anything to do with this?”

“That spirit, it... it gets its fingers into everything. So maybe. But Maria—”

Jack gave the man a hard shake, and David coughed in his grip. The idiot still thought Black Blood was a spirit. So either Black Blood really was a spirit — he wasn’t — or the fucker was playing a

trick on the Uratha. And if Black Blood could convince experts in spirits that he was a spirit, the fuck else could he convince them of?

“Ok, thanks for the info. Now, get up, and go kick your friends’ asses.” Might as well take advantage of the situation. The werewolves were busy trying to stop his legion from biting off their toes. That give him a good ten, maybe fifteen seconds of in-the-real-world time, enough to plant a proper, more powerful suggestion in David’s head.

“I... I won’t!”

Oh, the fucker was resisting him. How god damn mother fucking cute.

Jack glared into the man’s eyes, and squeezed harder, as black smoke oozed out from Jack’s body. David’s eyes widened, and unlike werewolf eyes, human eyes were infinitely more expressive. The emotions there, painted across his gaze, complete and utter terror, was better than any Kiss could have been.

The smoke poured out of Jack, out of his nostrils, his ears, his tear ducts, and then out from his pores. It engulfed him, onyx smoke, and fangs, claws, beaks, teeth, everything you could find on creatures vampires identified with. The wolf at David’s side whimpered all the more, and the man in Jack’s grip trembled as his eyes were forced to look higher and higher.

And Jack spoke, his voice an earthquake in the fool’s mind that stirred his lake to boil, and his trees to fall over. As each tree fell, splinters and branches rained down on him and David as the trees collided with each other.

“I. Wasn’t. Asking.”

And with that, he forced his will upon the fool’s mind, and placed a single key phrase in the man’s subconsciousness. Sick ‘em, boy.

He let go of his neck, and let go of the connection on his mind. Back in the real world, David stood five feet away from Jack, ready to pounce but never quite committing. Rats flowed past him, between his legs and onto the werewolves behind them. Ten, maybe twenty seconds had gone by, enough time for some of the wolves to realize what was going on, and that the legion were a distraction.

Well, not really a distraction. The rats bit and clawed, and some of the lucky ones managed to pierce skin, but werewolf hides were tough as fuck. The main result his legion could bring, was pain. The howls and roars of the werewolves as hundreds upon hundreds of teeth bit into their skin, was music to his ears.

His rat servants might not be able to do much damage to Uratha, but another Uratha could.

With a growing smile and cackle, he pointed at the werewolves behind David.

“Sick ‘em, boy.”

David turned, and charged into the group. And this time, they wouldn't break Jack's Dominate so easily. The rats split apart like the red sea, creating a path for David, and the werewolf sprinted down it full speed until he crashed into one of the wolves. David fell on them, and started biting and clawing. From how the victim shrieked, and how chunks of meat went flying, werewolves were as susceptible to werewolf claws and teeth as vampires were.

Matthew and Arturo didn't like that. As Avery and one-armed Clara tackled David, Matthew and Arturo ran past the chaos and toward Jack. Dumbasses. As they got close, Jack waved a hand, and a few thousand rats poured around Jack's feet and up into a wide mound. The rodents threw themselves at the giant wolves, and Art and Matt stumbled as their shins slammed into hundreds of furry bodies, and their feet turned dozens of rats into chili.

Jack ducked under their sloppy charges, got low, and punched upward, using the floor as his anchor for the uppercut. Oh, the delicious crunch of his fist hitting Arturo's jaw from underneath, the sound of bone breaking, the cut short howl. Fucking beautiful. The dark wolf stumbled back before falling, and the rats poured over him, more and more, until the huge beast disappeared under a carpet of gnashing teeth.

Matthew got his hands on Jack once his partner was out of the way, both hands clamping down. A close up of the giant showed a dozen wounds, and a thousand rat bites, but the fucker still wouldn't go down. He sank his claws into Jack's body, and immediately the difference in power between him and the other werewolves was obvious. Stereotypical tank of the team, a juggernaut, a hulk. A moron.

Jack ignored the titan's power as Matt squeezed on his shoulders. The blood coursing through him was stronger than this fool could tear through, not within a few seconds, and Matt realized it. So of course the idiot double downed and snapped his head down to try and bite Jack's off.

Jack pulled his leg back, and kicked the werewolf in the crotch. With Matt's grip on his shoulders, he had a good anchor to pour strength into the kick, and holy shit, the result was amazing. Werewolves didn't have dicks, not when they were fighting like this anyway, but that didn't mean that part of muscle and flesh wasn't softer. Matthew went up into the air several feet, and fell to the ground, howling like he'd just learned Firefly was canceled.

“You two don’t get to spit-roast me, fuckers. Do I look like Tash to you?” Fucking sacks of shit. Jack gave the man a hard kick, and the huge pile of meat spun a one-eighty on the floor, sending rats around as his limbs collided with their furry little bodies.

And the moment he did that, five werewolves jumped him. Holy shit. He laughed as the five titans leapt what must have been thirty feet, and all came flying through the air at him. Fast as he was, he was no Daeva or Mekhet, and the best he could manage was to half duck, before they collided into him. Well, before one collided into him. Werewolves were big as fuck, and even shoulder to shoulder, only one had room to catch him.

He went down with a thunk, and his rats retaliated. They wouldn’t let their general lose. They swarmed up over the werewolf holding him, and the poor bastard howled and stood up, letting Jack go so he could swipe rats off his body. Blood, everywhere, rats dying by the dozens to their claws.

On his back, Jack spotted flapping wings above. Mulder and Scully, still cawing, still announcing information to him. Nothing he didn’t already know, except that the werewolves were making progress managing the chaos. Rats continued to pour into the tunnel and into Maria’s den, unending, fueled by the city and its endless population of rodents, but the werewolves were quickly figuring out how to manage keeping rats off them. Surprising both the wolves and Jack though, was how much damage the rats did to werewolf skin. He’d assumed they’d have trouble breaking through werewolf hide, but then, he should have known better. He knew rats could get through concrete given time, and were making their own progress on cutting through werewolf hide.

The four remaining werewolves fell on him, like raptors looking to tear into a freshly caught fish. Claws and teeth all fell on him, biting and scratching, and he laughed. Was this what it felt like to be them, getting eaten alive by rats?

But as painful as it was, their claws and teeth, for all their strange magical shenanigans, couldn’t get through his protective blood shield. Wherever they managed to cut skin, they got no further as blood poured out of the wound and wrapped his body. It coursed and swirled around him, covering more and more of him as the wolves tried harder and harder to rip him apart.

“Get off.” He swung his fist out at a nearby knee. Crack. Kicked his foot up at a nearby chest. Crunch. Snapped his other hand up to grab the jaw bone of one of the werewolves, and yanked. Rip and tear. The wolf jerked his head away, but not before Jack ripped the jaw half off to the side, exposing throat and tongue and teeth. More howls of pain, and Jack grinned at the last werewolf.

The final werewolf got up and backed away. Not out of fear, though the beast was obviously terrified. Nah, the titan was just looking for more of his pack to surround Jack, cause one-on-one certainly wasn't working. Smart. Probably Noah, then.

Jack held out his hand. Mulder and Scully flew down, scooped up the silver sword, and dropped it in Jack's palm.

"Thanks, loves," he said in a shitty, fake Australian accent, and he laughed again as he threw the sword at Noah. Easily dodged, but the werewolf was conveniently distracted by a giant mountain of rats that poured up and onto his legs, tail, and back.

Of course, throwing a sword never works like in the movies. You can't just grab a throwing axe, throw it at someone, and expect it to land blade first. It spins a bunch. But thankfully there's a lot of blade on a sword, and it was silver, so all it had to do was touch Noah, which it did. It nicked across his thigh, drawing some blood and some sizzling before it fell to the floor. Damn, that would have been so cool if it'd stuck him proper. Well, he didn't want to use the sword anyway. Fight would be over too fast.

Jack walked toward the remaining werewolves, big grin on his face with each step, and made a show of cracking his knuckles. He was a vampire, so no nitrogen buildup to pop in his knuckles, but still, he tried.

"Guess I'll just have to do this the old fashioned way."

"Jack! Stop!" Clara again. She clutched her empty arm socket, catching bits of blood that leaked from it. Not bleeding nearly as bad as it should have been. Werewolves healed fast.

Poor girl, so stupid. Every time she looked at him, he could see the sadness there, and every time, it sent scorching heat through him. Not the good kind of heat. Bad kind. Angry kind. The kind that made him want to rip off her other arm and jam it down her throat.

Jack looked past her to David. He'd fucked some werewolf up before one of the werewolves got him in a head lock, and with Noah's help, managed to subdue him, but they had to ignore the rats biting on them to do it. A few of the werewolves were buried in rats, and combined with their wounds, were slowly succumbing to exhaustion. Combined with the bunch Jack had just beat up, Art and Matt included, most of the pack was incapacitated.

Except Avery.

The bitch stood in front of Clara, snout fully healed, and she stared at him with a delicious mixture of rage and growing fear. Finally, he was getting through her thick skull. Finally, she was



starting to accept that she couldn't just go around fucking with shit in Dolareido like she owned it, not if she didn't want a vamp like him to come along and fuck her up.

More rats poured into the room. And more. And more. But they didn't swarm the werewolves. Jack stood in the center of the room as his army grew around him, piled high around his legs, and he licked his fangs as he looked around. Slowly, his legion flowed off the injured werewolves they'd buried, and came to join the whirlpool of flesh that built up around him. More, and more. The flowing mound of rats piled high behind him, until it towered over him, while the mound in front of him stayed at waist level.

Groans filled the room, injured werewolves that the rats had taken advantage of and injured a thousand times more. Now without rats covering them, they could recover, but it'd take them a while. They wouldn't be in fighting condition any time soon.

He took a step toward Clara and Avery, and they stood their ground against the oncoming legion, the leader and second-in-command of the pack. Like the Spartans before the Persians at Thermopylae, except this wasn't a movie. And much as people like to forget, the Spartans lost that battle.

"There, I stopped, see?" He slowly turned, and his legion of rats turned with him, as he gestured around at the wake of destruction. A thousand dead rats coated the floor, mixing in with the gashes left in the stone by werewolf talons. Rat guts, rat blood, rat fur, everywhere. But a thousand rats didn't matter, not when ten thousand more swirled around Jack, ready to die for him.

"Jack," Avery said. "Leave!"

Oh the audacity on this bitch.

"You come into my old boss's home like you own the place. You ignore the rules of Dolareido. You hurt my friend. You hurt his new boss." He came closer, and his legion followed. "And you actually thought you could hurt me." He gestured to his shirtless torso and the blood coursing over his skin. They had hurt him, but the injuries were only skin deep. "I should put you in the ground."

"We are trying to protect city," Clara said. "Maria threatens Gauntlet!"

"Nah, she doesn't. And even if she did, even if she fucked up and tore the whole thing down and the city burned because of her stupidity, that's her choice. This city belongs to us, the vampires. Every kine in it is our fucking slave to kill or eat." He stepped closer, and again, his legion followed. "They belong to me. The city belongs to me."

He grinned as he looked to Damien and Maria. Both sat with each other, backs against the wall near her coffin, eyes locked onto him. Damien looked disturbed. Maria was shocked. God damn it felt good to make that old sack of shit surprised. So sure of herself all the damn time, but not anymore.

“It does not,” Avery barked.

“Ha! Yes it fucking does. It—”

Clara roared, and Jack froze. His limbs froze. His vitae froze. Everything in him froze, as the whole fucking cave echoed with the boom of her roar. Like someone set up a fucking explosion in his damn skull, everything stopped listening to him.

And that included the rats.

The swarms surrounding him scattered, rats being rats, and Jack stood there, staring, dumbfounded. Even as he heard the thud thud thud of someone giant running for his back, he couldn't turn around. What the fuck?

Clara collapsed. Whatever she'd done, it drained her of whatever she had left. On her back on the floor, she panted openly, with only enough energy to hold her bleeding arm socket with her other hand.

He had to admit, she was damn impressive. Course it was hard to stay appreciative, when a giant werewolf pounced him from behind. The momentum should have slammed Jack into the floor, but Avery pounced at him too, straight on, and where Matt's claws sank into his back, Avery's claws sank into his chest. Whatever Clara's roar had done, it'd suppressed his blood shield enough for the damn wolves to hurt him.

Matt's claws hurt. Avery's claws burned. Whatever it was that'd allowed her to burn the azlu in the tunnels, something that made her claws glow dark orange, she used it now. And Jack screamed as his skin turned to ash around them.

Feeling flooded him. The vibration in his bones and skin vanished. Paralysis fled. His senses came back to him, his power, all of it. Whatever Clara had done had been temporary, and his control came back to him in a glorious flood of power. His Beast, his slave, its power coursed through him, and his blood shield burst into full strength again, rendering Matthew's claws borderline meaningless.

Avery's claws, on the other hand, burned, and burned. They tore through his blood, and ripped down from his collar to his chest, and down through his stomach.

“Get off!” Jack swung his arm to the side, and the back of his fist collided with her head. He made sure to hit her head, not just her snout, and the bitch went flying, half spinning sideways before

slamming into the ground. And as she did, Jack drove his elbow into Matt's gut, hard enough the damn beast, already a wounded mess, fell back as a dozen ribs shattered.

With his power returned and the damn dogs off him, Jack resummoned his legion. They came to him quickly, resuming their protective circle around him.

He looked down at his chest, and winced. She'd burned him. God damn, the bitch had burned him, like she'd come at him with a flaming chainsaw. His ribs were exposed, so was a chunk of his collar bone, and some of the bone was cut through; only thing keeping it together and working was his blood. His guts were exposed too, old withered things, and he scooped them back into his stomach so his blood could get a proper grip on them, and keep them there, before it coursed over his body with its flowing veins once again.

Snarling, Jack spun and looked at Matthew. Stupid dog was on his knees, coughing up a fountain of blood, but his eyes were on Jack, ready to pounce him the moment his body got working again. So Jack drove his fist down at the man's stupid werewolf face, broke his cheek bone, and sent him to the floor.

"I fucking put the fight on pause, and you try and get a sneak attack in on me?" he said, gesturing to Matt, and Avery, and Clara. "Fucking hell, that's pretty damn good. I figured you'd die with your honor, but nope, you guys fight dirty when you need to. I can respect that." He walked over to Clara and squatted down over her. "Gotta admit, you've surprised me. No wonder you're second in command."

She growled up at him, but made no attempt to hit him. Not like she could do much exhausted, and with an arm missing.

"Good girl." Smiling down at her, he leaned down, pat her cheek, and gave her doggy snout a quick kiss.

An angry roar announced Noah's charge. Ah, Clara's magic roar earlier had broken David's brainwashing, the surface brainwashing anyway. So naturally Noah decided to come at him while he was distracted.

Jack pointed a hand at Noah, palm open, and five thousand rats poured up in front of Jack like a tsunami. The mountain of meat crashed into the injured wolf, and buried him in biting teeth and claws. He bit and clawed in return, but the werewolf disappeared under the swarming bodies like one of those diggers in *The Mummy*. Only one of his giant clawed hands remained visible under the pile, twitching with spasms.

David stood there, frozen, shell shocked from his broken brainwash. The werewolf beside him was apparently smart enough to learn they'd been beaten, and just stared at Jack.

He loved that stare, the jaw agape, eyes wide, body frozen stare. The petrified stare. Seeing it on their faces despite the fact they were in their big war form was intoxicating.

He looked around at the rest of the pack as they watched Noah get eaten alive. The rest of them were battered, beaten, bleeding from a million holes, and struggling to stand. His legion left them alone for now, making an example of Noah, and only once the man stopped struggling against the swarm, did Jack pull his legion back.

What was left was a Jackson Pollock of blood. The rats had gotten through a lot of Noah's skin in that swarm, and had shredded through tendons. Wrists, ankles, behind the knees, under the shoulders, all the soft places, torn up. But the fucker was alive, and he'd live, given what Jack had seen these dumb dogs survive; they'd live through anything barring cutting off their heads, or cutting them in half, heh.

"Now, for the rest of you!" He swept his hand toward the rest of the pack. "I'm not going to kill you. Calm the fuck down, before I put you all in the ground." Please, please give him a reason to kill you. To feel their worthless hearts pop in his grip, splat. To break bones. To see fear in their eyes before death takes them. God, he wanted that.

Avery, wobbly and shaking, rolled off her side and onto her foot and knee, half kneeling. She tried to get up, but Jack skipped over to her, and kicked her in the chest. The impact sent him back, but his legion caught him, keeping him standing so he could watch as Avery fell onto her back, clutching at her chest. More broken bones.

"Fuck me, look at this," he said, and he gestured to his chest. Avery had wounded him, badly. Only thing keeping him upright was the Discipline Juggernaut, and his mastery of it. Blood flowed around and over him and over the wound, like crimson snakes, but her claws had burned him, greatly. He wouldn't be healing the four giant gashes slicing him from neck to waist anytime soon.

"Don't... don't hurt her," Clara said.

"Ha! I said I won't kill her. Didn't say a damn thing about not hurting her." He stepped over Avery and over her waist, grinning down at her. She tried to move, but was struggling to breathe. Major impact to the diaphragm and a bunch of broken ribs could do that.

She did manage to growl though. So naturally, he sat down on her sternum, forced her hands aside, and punched her in the face. Her head snapped to the side, and bits of teeth flew out.

“Let me make this perfectly clear,” he said between chuckles, and he punched her again. “You crossed a line. This is not like back then, when you and whoever that Simon dude was decided you could just kill one of us and not suffer consequences.” He punched her again. Blood soaked his fist. “While you’re in Dolareido, you answer to us, to me, and not the other way around. You don’t get to waltz into my city and think, just because you have a holy mission or what-the-fuck-ever, that it gives you the right to—hey!” She tried to get a swipe in at him, but he bat her hand aside, and punched her again, in the snout again, and broke it again. “Don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.”

“Jack! Please! We understand!” Clara got up. Not werewolf Clara, normal Clara. Human again, she held her arm socket tight to her, blood dripping between her only set of fingers, and she wobbled worse than a drunk prom date.

“I know you understand. I bet the rest of you do, too.” He looked around at the group. More of the werewolves had managed to get back up, wounds healing, but they were still beat to fuck. Thousands of bite marks, not to mention the far heavier wounds Jack had inflicted personally. Werewolves were awesome like that. He could beat one into a pulp and they’d live, only so he could do it again. Some of them even looked ready to charge him again, but his rats swirled around him and Avery, daring the dumb animals to try.

“Then stop, please!” Clara begged.

“No.” He grabbed Avery’s oncoming claws, and twisted, breaking one of her fingers back until it hit her forearm, while the other gripped her wrist, squeezed, and slowly twisted her arm out of the way despite her every effort to stop him. “It’s the old farts like this one that need the biggest punishment. They just won’t learn.” Cackling, he set his free hand to her throat, and squeezed it as well. Big throat though, and he couldn’t get a proper grip on it. Didn’t matter. He threw Avery’s wrist aside, and punched her again. Not much left of her face anymore, and her blood gushed out of the gory mess. It soaked the floor.

The pack winced as he did it, and he could tell they were weighing their options. Attack him again, and risk getting more hurt, or even killed. Or just stand there and watch their boss get beaten black and blue for being a bitch.

David looked especially guilty, and Jack winked at him. Oh, he had plans for that man.

Through a garbled mess of blood and missing teeth, Avery gargled up something.

“I’m sorry, what was that? Speak up.” He stopped punching, and gave her broken snout a few light taps on the side.

“I... concede.”

Laughing, Jack stood up, and rubbed his drenched hands together. Blood dripped from them and down onto the werewolf’s chest.

“There. Was that so hard?” He stepped back from the bitch, and held up his hands. “Fight’s over. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.” Nobody laughed. A shame. Jacob would have laughed.

The werewolves looked at each other, then at him. They struggled to stay standing, and some of them didn’t even try, trapped on the floor by their injuries. But everyone looked at him like he’d stab them in the back the moment they exposed their flank.

“Seriously, dumbasses, fight’s over. I could kill every single one of you right now if I wanted to, but I won’t. You can thank Jack for that.” There, you see, shithead? I can play nice. “So heal up, scoop up your wounded, and go.”

Well, he supposed he did look pretty scary, standing there with thousands of rats circling him. The rats climbed over each other, occasionally creating mounds a few feet high, before the mound collapsed and the rats flowed over each other like water. Thousands of tiny chitters. Thousands of tiny claws, scratching the stone floor. Thousands of whiskers and beady eyes looking around for their next target. They’d liked the taste of werewolves.

Clara was the first to listen. She really was smarter than the rest of them. Course, being that she only had one arm, she couldn’t do much, but it started the chain reaction. Slowly, more of the werewolves transformed back into their human selves, and scooped up their wounded.

“Clara, take this,” Jack said, and he snapped his fingers. Immediately a hundred rats fled to the side of the room, and returned with precious cargo. Her arm.

She snarled at him, and turned her back to him, the first to do so. Brave. Caleb helped her pick Avery up, hooked her arm over Clara’s shoulders, and the two dragged the broken woman away. Transformed back into human form now, Avery was just a tiny thing, and her face looked worse than as if she’d just told her drunk, abusive husband about her affair.

Well, if Clara didn’t want her arm back, whatever. He snapped his fingers, and the rats devoured it, coordinated and quick. Piranha would have been envious with how quickly the rats gobbled it up. They would have been petrified by how easily the rats devoured the bones, too.

Watching the werewolves — now human — go was delightful entertainment. Each left a blood trail behind them, and Jack breathed deep the smell of it. He should have taken a drink of one them, but

that was hard to do in the middle of a battle. He'd been lucky to get the moment he had to get his claws into David.

Ah, David, their shaman. The man looked at Jack again, and Jack finger waved at him, big grin on full broadcast. David looked away, and helped the more injured werewolves leave.

Jack watched them go, and only when they were truly well and gone did he turn around, and walk over to Maria and Damien. Maria still looked shocked, but as Jack approached, Damien went from disgusted, to anxious, like he expected Jack to attack him. Matthias sat nearby, frozen solid.

"You won't have to stake me, buddy," Jack said, squatting down in front of his friend. "You didn't ruin it for me this time. I got to have the fun!" He clapped his hands together once, and blood splattered everywhere. Neither Maria nor Damien blinked, each staring at him like they didn't know who he was.

"Jack," Maria said at last. "Or... curse?"

He laughed. "Come on, this is getting old." He leaned in, and grinned at the two vamps. "Just call me the Ripper. I know you're all thinking it." He paused, gave them each a dramatic, evil grin, and stopped, once he thought about it. "Or, you know, Ripper, if you don't wanna get all classics about it."

The both blinked at him, then each other, and him again. Jesus fucking christ, no one in the whole damn city had a sense of humor except that Jacob asshole.

"Very well," Maria said. "I... have to thank you, Ripper, for saving me."

"I was nearby when I got Damien's alert. Surprised Jessy didn't show up." Shrugging, he reached down and held out his hand for Maria. She looked at it before glaring up at him, and he laughed. "That reminds me. Maria, there's something I've been wanting to tell you."

"Jack..." Damien said, eying him.

Oh the grin on Jack's face. He knew it was there. There was no way he'd be able to hide it. He squatted down in front of Maria again, and leaned in a little closer.

*Don't!*

"It was Jack."

"What?" she asked.

"Jack." Oh god this was gonna be amazing. "Jack is the one who killed Lucas."

The explosion of shock on her face was perfect, and he felt his cheeks ache with his growing smile. Silence followed, and Jack glanced at Damien and his angry face, before looking back to Maria, waiting excitedly. This was too good.

“You... you mean... you killed Lucas?”

“Nope, not me. I was just a whisper in the boy’s mind, back then. Jack did it. Tricked Lucas. He possessed Damien here, and just when Lucas thought he’d won, he made Damien cut Lucas’s head, clean off his shoulders.”

“You’re... lying...” Eyes locked, unable to blink, she looked at Damien. If he’d had time to prepare, he’d probably have been able to lie about it, but right now, all Maria had to do was catch a glimpse of Damien’s eyes, to know New Jack was telling her the truth.

Jack got up, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed some more, as he walked away from Maria and Damien, and headed back to the surface. His legion followed, spread out and carpeting the floor like a living, breathing flood.

There. Remember what Black Blood said to the vamp he helped? Five days, before one of his enemies got him. Try surviving without me now, Jack.