## Chaos continued

**by** Jaspergirl (old_fashioned_gal)

### Summary

Continuing my episode by episode Gethan-centric AU.

### Notes

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“I take it all back” Ethan says, stretching out luxuriously on the sand. “Staying in California was a wonderful idea.”

“Yes, I thought so.” Giles is sitting up beside him on the beach, glasses on, focused on his writing.

Ethan rolls over onto his stomach. “Now, if only we could extend our stay…” A hand makes its way up Giles’ thigh. Giles sighs and sets his notes aside, then gently detaches the hand. “Ethan, you were the one who didn’t even want to come here!” This place is a compromise: Ethan had wanted to go to Tijuana for a week. Instead they’re spending a long weekend staying with Stephen in the quiet Californian coastal town he moved to soon after graduation, a town that Ethan had initially been rather dismissive about. Of course, get him on the beach in the sunshine and Ethan turns into the proverbial putty.

Picking up his notes again, Giles tries to ignore the soft, derisive huff his lover makes.

Ethan rolls onto his back again, and shields his eyes with one hand as he looks up at Giles’ papers. “That’d better not be a training schedule, love.”

“I’m almost done.” Giles crosses out some time set aside for demonology and replaces it with mixed martial arts. Better for Buffy to have practical knowledge than another class to skip. Faith, on the other hand, once she’s back, might do well to learn the worst demons are capable of, to keep her from being seduced again. He scribbles a note on her schedule, which is currently far sparser than Buffy’s. No word yet on when she’ll be back, after all.

“Rupert, we’re on holiday! Put it down!”

“This is important, love. I want Buffy to receive as much training as possible over summer, and then being at college should afford her more time than when she was at school. This is a chance to really prepare for the next threat.” He frowns, considering the practical implications of more hand to hand training. No library means such training will take place at the flat, which means more privacy but also less space. Still, Giles intends to make the best of it, especially given that college will change patrolling. The campus is further out the town centre than Buffy’s home, allowing the vampires more opportunity to take cover before she reaches the cemeteries and jump out at her once she does. Not to mention, any vampires living nearer the campus themselves won’t be able to rely on the opportunist tactics of those in the more populous downtown area: they may even employ the complex con-artistry of the rural vampire, luring victims in whilst avoiding any attention to themselves. That or not killing at all: Much as it pains Giles to expose Buffy to that sort of thing, it might be time to make her aware of the bite-house, just do give her a more detailed understanding of the habits of the undead. “Ethan, how do you feel about an excursion to the vamp house once we’re back?”

“Why? You feeling the need to spice things up?”

“Thank you, but I’ve quite outgrown near-death experiences. No, I was wondering if Buffy should see the place.”

Ethan laughs. “Ah, yes, I’ll just go up to a gang of vampire and say, “Just giving the slayer a tour of the establishment, don’t mind us” and then they can kill me, Buffy can dust them and carry my corpse home and you can start organising the funeral.”
“Ah. Yes, well, I suppose I’ll just tell her about it instead.” Giles writes another note.

“Rupert, how about you put that down? We’re on a beach in California – blue sky, blue sea, white sand and all you can think about is the bloody undead!”

“I’m just doing my job.”

“We’re on holiday! No-one’s supposed to do their job on holiday!”

“If I write this now, Buffy can start her training the day we get back.”

“But we only have three days! Gods, I’d have gone away with Oz and Xander if I’d known you’d be this dull all summer!”

Giles shakes his head: the postcards Xander has dutifully sent from each state the two young men have reached so far might make their trip seem fun but, “You’d rather spend hours on end in Oz’s van listening to Xander talk?”

“Well” says Ethan, “when you put it like that…it still sounds more fun than watching you plan a training schedule. Put it down.”

“I’m almost finis – oi!” Giles snatches at the pages Ethan has unceremoniously plucked from his hand. Before he can grab them, Ethan is up and sprinting towards the sea. “Ethan Rayne, don’t you bloody dare!”

It’s too late: Ethan is in, and chuckling gleefully as he submerges first the pages and then his himself. Cursing, Giles follows. “That’s three hours work, you bastard!” Only as the water hits his knees does he realise that – unlike Ethan – he’s still fully clothed. Coming up for air, Ethan grins and presses close, getting him soaked anyway. Giles tries unsuccessfully to shake him off. “Ethan, you sodding git! Now I’m going to have to write it all over again! You realise that was completely counterproductive to me spending more time with y –” He’s cut off by a kiss. Suddenly the new training schedule doesn’t seem so terribly pressing.

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The Strolak demon who always comes in for virgin saliva after the shop closes to humans looks so miserable that Ethan risks asking, “Something wrong?”

The Strolak blinks at him. “S’not for unbloods to question” it says easily, the standard reply to a being of another species prying into a clan matter.

“Ah, I see.” Ethan sets out the vials on his counter. “That’ll be Thirty-seven dollars.”

“Price’s gone up” the Strolak complains.

Ethan shrugs. “My source moved away.” He takes the money, waiting patiently as the demon counts it out, its clawed fingers clumsily rooting through a leather pouch. Human currency is unfamiliar to most demons but Ethan insists on it, unless they really have an alternative of value to offer. No damn kittens for a start; he’s not running an animal sanctuary here.

“My clan-chief” The Strolak grunts as it hands over fistfuls of small change. “Got taken by those bastard soldiers.”

“Sorry to hear it” Ethan counts through the cash and opens the till.
The demon nods the glum nod of someone confiding it a near-stranger for the sake of simple unloading. It adds, “Now the whole clan’s fighting over should we rescue him or give someone else a go.” It shrugs its massive shoulders. “Me, I say let someone else take the chiefship. Guy was a first-class bastard but we can’t go losing any more.”

Ethan frowns. This isn’t the first time this summer he’s been listening to a demon complain about a military presence, but this Strolak is as massive and mystically powerful as any of its brethren.

Then again, so was its chief.

“I’m sure you could take them” Ethan replies, carefully wording it as a statement of faith in the Strolak rather than a question as to whether they’re a match for a bunch of humans. But the Strolak just shrugs again. “I dunno. They took a Ghora last week. Don’t want to go messing with those things and they just snapped it up. Shit’s getting real.”

Ethan nods and packs up the vials in silence.

Honestly, he’s starting to wonder if he ought to tell Buffy about all this. If some idiot soldiers have decided the magical world’s ripe for invasion, it won’t lead anywhere good. On the other hand, the soldiers are human so there’s not much Buffy will be able to do.

No, Ethan decides, this doesn’t quite seem like slayer territory. He’ll wait and see what happens.
The Freshman

When Buffy comes round unannounced to find Ethan standing in the kitchen wearing nothing but Rupert’s shirt and his own bare skin, Ethan is in no mood to ease her embarrassment. After a dull summer of waiting for Rupert to finish training the wench, could they not spend fresher’s week undisturbed? Especially since half the time Rupert’s been preoccupied it’s been just waiting for Buffy to bother to show up so training can even start.

So Ethan stands in the kitchen doorway and leans in a way that hides his manhood without really looking like he’s trying to hiding it and says, “Hello, Buffy. And there was me thinking we’d have a break from the hellmouth.”

“I can just come over to visit” returns Buffy. “It doesn’t have to be hellmouthy.”

“So this is a social call? Wonderful. Not a great time, but I’ll tell Rupert you stopped by and –”

“No” Buffy’s eyes dart over his outfit and she blushes. “It actually is hellmouthy this time.”

Ethan sighs. “Of course.”

“Vampires on campus” she tells him apologetically.

“Well there would be.”

“Is Giles home?” She eyes the bundle of bedding on the floor suspiciously. “You guys got company or is something wrong with your bed?”

“Yes – to the company. And Rupert’s in the shower. Maybe you could go slay them and go to a decent sorority party to celebrate, and come back next week?”

Buffy stares him out levelly. “I will. As soon as I’ve spoken to my watcher.”

“Right. Try coming back in an hour or so then.” And then, just as it looks like Buffy might leave, they both hear the bedsprings creak as Olivia stands, and the padding of her feet on the stairs.

“Giles?” asks Buffy, and her eyes widen as Olivia comes into view. Unsurprisingly after the night of alcohol-aided reminiscing they had, she is rubbing her temple, but she still smiles easily at Buffy and tells her, “Sorry – I think he’s showering. Morning, Ethan. Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

Ethan issues a put upon sigh, but replies, “Olivia, Buffy. Buffy, Olivia. Buffy’s Ripper’s sl – err – student, from the high school.” Always so hard to remember who from the old days are in the know and who aren’t. Ethan generally isn’t very careful because he couldn’t care less who knows about the supernatural, but with Buffy watching, he makes the effort.

Buffy, of course, is so well versed in the leading of a double life that she immediately adds, “Giles tutored me in English lit, and I was wondering if he could give me some advice about a college project.”

“I see. Well, he’ll appear soon, right Ethan?” Olivia steps past them and into the kitchen. They hear the fridge open and the kettle click on.

Buffy mouths, Who’s she? And Ethan replies, “Olivia’s just passing through from London.”

“That’s right” Olivia adds from within the kitchen. “I couldn’t visit the state not call in to catch up
with Ethan and Ripper.”

“Ripper?” Buffy repeats worriedly. To Ethan she asks, “What kind of catch up was this?”

“Don’t worry.” Ethan grins. “We haven’t had a threesome…”

“Well yeah! I didn’t think it was that bad!”

“…for at least fifteen years now.”

Buffy goes bright red.

Emerging from the kitchen with a steaming mug in hand, Olivia touches his shoulder and murmurs, “Rayne, stop torturing the child.”

At the same moment, Rupert comes out the shower. “Torturing?” he asks.

“Your fiancé’s winding your student up.”

“My student? Ah” Rupert smiles vaguely at Buffy. “Hello, Buffy.”

Buffy, still red, stares mutely at him.

Ethan studies Rupert critically. Honestly, he’s only been in the bathroom ten minutes. Ethan hopes he at least shampooed his hair. Left to his own devices, Rupert has a terribly spartan habit of washing it in soap, which makes it course and wiry, like Ethan imagines tiger fur feels.

Rupert is mercifully brief with Buffy – well, mercifully from Ethan’s perspective. After she’s scuttled off, Ethan slings an arm around his partner’s shoulder, nuzzles his neck and asks, “So. Where were we?”

Olivia laughs. “That’s my cue to shower.”

“Don’t go on our account” Ethan says.

She shakes her head. “I’m not falling back on bad habits! At least not when I’m this hungover.” As she heads off, Rupert, still looking at the door Buffy exited by, says, “I hope I wasn’t short with her.”

“You were wonderful, Rupert. Very commanding and manly. Now where.” (kiss) Were. (kiss) We?” (kiss, teeth catching on Rupert’s ear just so…)

“Oh sod it. Ethan, with you around it’s a wonder I stayed a watcher as long as I did.”

Ethan grins.
Living Conditions

“Morning Buffy” greets Ethan as he looks up from an alfresco breakfast to see the slayer enter the courtyard.

“Hi” she returns. “Please tell me you and Giles have no threesome friends staying this time.”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “Honestly, child, you’re a student now. You ought to be openminded and experimenting.”

Humouring him with a smile, Buffy perches on the edge of the fountain. “After the way this jerk treated Amy this week, I’m all for the non-experimenting life.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, let’s just say college guys aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. Or actually, I guess the only ones I met before actually starting college tried to feed me to a giant snake demon, so I guess they are all they’re cracked up to be.”

Ethan frowns. “But in this case the snake demons were strictly metaphorical, yes?”

“Yeah. Just your standard hot guy sleeps with girl, says he’ll call her, doesn’t call her melodrama. Poor Amy though. Rough start to campus living.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. Oh, hey, and Xander’s back. Maybe I could set her up with him? He’s a non-college boy; I hear those are nice. But then, what with the whole love-spell truth-spell history, maybe not.”

“He’s back? Since when?”

“Only last night” Buffy replies. “Not Oz, though, he stayed in Oregon; some werewolf there owns a nightclub or something. Very Oz-friendly. Xander Greyhounded it back.”

“Oregon? So they did the full loop.”

“I think they skipped a few states in the middle.” Buffy’s eyes widen suddenly. “Oh – I was supposed to tell you; Willow’s not coming over for her magic lesson today. She’s hanging with Amy. You know, to cheer her up.”

“Oh. Right.” Unsurprising, Ethan realises, that with the combined effects of having learnt most of what he can teach her and exposure to the lure of college, Willow should lose interest in his tutelage, but it still hurts.

“Yeah” says Buffy, evidently aware of this, “But, look, I’m sure she’ll be over soon.”

“Yes” Ethan replies. “I’m sure she will.” Or not, but change is Chaos, all consuming and inevitable, so he fixes his features into a smile and asks, “But I take it that’s not all you came over for?”

“No. Is Giles in?”

“He’s out for a jog. Should be back any minute.”
“He’s what? He’s out for a what?”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised; how do you think he keeps in shape for training you?”

Buffy pouts. “I guess I just thought…I mean I figured he exercised at home where no-one could see him or…Actual jogging? With sweatpants and everything?”

Ethan nods. “Alas, it is so. He looks like a twerp but sacrifices have to be made in the fight against evil.”

At that moment, Rupert appears, running somewhat agilely down the steps and coming to a stop in front of them with his hands on his knees. “Oh” he manages. “Buffy. Good. Hello.”

“Hi” Buffy regards Rupert with amusement.

“Is something the matter?” Rupert asks with something not unlike hope in his voice. He’s been horribly at a loose end over summer, and a start of term he can’t join in with hasn’t helped.

“No” replies Buffy. “Well, demon. But mainly I came by to see if you’ve heard from Faith?”

Rupert’s expression shifts subtly. “I’ve heard from Wesley again” he answers, “But Faith’s still not, err, able to get to the phone.”

Buffy sighs heavily. “Still busy being interrogated?”

“I think they’ve moved on to counselling now” says Rupert, and Ethan, gathering his breakfast things, wonders exactly what that’s euphemism for. Still, at least it seems they won’t have to deal with a certain renegade slayer any time soon.

“You told him we actually want to speak to Faith?” Buffy is asking. “Fun as reminiscing with Wesley isn’t.”

“I told him” Rupert confirms. “Now, about this demon…”

Ethan heads inside and leaves them to it.

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When he next sees Buffy, she is under a net on his living room floor, with Rupert and Xander bundling her upright, tying her hands. “Um” manages Ethan. “Hello all.”

“Ethan” Rupert commands tersely, “give us a hand!”

Ethan looks from Rupert to the very angry slayer in Rupert’s grip and replies, “Actually, don’t mind me. I only popped home for lunch, but I could just go to the Espresso Pum –”

“Ethan!”

“Alright, alright” Ethan joins the other two in steering Buffy into a chair and securing her to it. “Care to explain what’s going on?”

Before Rupert or Xander can answer, Buffy chimes in with, “Yeah: these guys are going to pay!”

“Buffy’s possessed” Xander tells him. He turns to Rupert. “Right?”

“Yes, probably” Rupert whips off his glasses to avoid meeting his slayer’s eye as she yelps, “I am
“Alright” Rupert moves to Buffy’s abandoned bag, adding, “Ethan, would you be able to put a barrier spell around Buffy? I don’t want to trust the ropes alone.”

“You didn’t look in my bag yet!” Buffy is indignant.

“Sorry, Buffy” Ethan tells her, pulling his chalk from his pocket, he adds to Xander, “Hello, by the way. Good trip?”

“The best” the boy replies. “Not that there’s been much competition. Oz says hi.”

“What on earth did you come back here for?” Ethan asks him. “No offence.”

“I promised Willow. Besides” Xander gestures to a bound and livid slayer “there’s the draw of the glamorous world of demon fighting.”

Ethan acknowledges the sarcasm with a smile before kneeling, focusing on the magic. Janus agrees quickly and somewhat gleefully to encircle Buffy with a ring of thickened air. As Ethan opens his eyes, he finds Buffy glaring at him through a shimmer.

“They’ve grown?” Rupert is asking, examining the contents of a little bag.

“Uh huh” Buffy’s voice sounds distant beyond the barrier but she nods emphatically. “And she flosses her teeth on the bed! I have to kill her!”

Looking to Ethan, Rupert asks, “Could I borrow the keys to the Magic Box? There’re a couple of things I’d like to look up and you should stay here to maintain the barrier.”

“Yes” Ethan grumbles, “and have lunch.” He hands the keys over. “Hurry, could you? In case she’s still in a bad mood after she’s trans-possessed, I’d like for her not to associate me with all this.”

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Ethan and Xander, and later Willow, pass a relatively pleasant lunchtime until Rupert returns talking about demons and toenails. Surprisingly, it seems Buffy – who shrugged off the ropes at some point but is still glowering behind the barrier spell – is right about her roommate being evil, though whether or not the same can be said of Celine Dion is debatable. Rupert has found a ritual to restore the slayer’s stolen soul, and he and Willow crack on with it while Ethan readies the barrier spell reversal. Xander and Buffy watch, Xander blank faced and Buffy still murderous. This mellows to merely annoyed when her soul returns to her in a rush of light that leaves a sting in the air. Dropping the barrier, Ethan says, “Welcome back.”

“Right” she mutters, before adding a grudging, “Thanks, guys.” Stepping over to the weapons chest, she selects a large axe. “Now that’s done, it’s time to give Kathy what she deserves.”

“Um” squeaks Willow, “in a non-psychotic, not at all personal, just a slayer killing a demon way, right?”

“Right” says Buffy. “Absolutely.”

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A large axe not being an easy thing to walk down the street with, Rupert drives Buffy, along with
Willow, back to campus. Ethan and Xander come too and it strikes Ethan en route that this is the first time they’ve all been together since graduation.

At Buffy’s door they are met by a drawn and nervous-seeming Amy. She greets them with, “It wasn’t me.”

“What?” asks Buffy.

“I only came round just now – the portal was open already.”

Frowning, Buffy opens the unlocked door to reveal belongings scattered around a central point and a faint smell of sulphur. The air hisses in a way that is tantalisingly just off the human frequency level, but close enough to know it’s there.

“I think your roommate had to go somewhere” Amy says grimly.

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“She sounds better” Rupert tells Ethan the following evening, putting the phone down as Ethan steps out the kitchen.

“Which slayer was that?” asks Ethan.

“Buffy” Rupert replies. “Faith may or may not be better – I can’t seem to get a straight answer out of Wesley. It’s possible the Council aren’t being entirely open with him either.” He frowns. “I think they’re weening her off the sedatives.”

“Sedatives?” Ethan feels an unexpected flicker of sympathy for the second slayer. “Have you told Buffy they’ve got her drugged?”

“What could she do if I did?” asks Rupert. “No, I think once Faith is back, she’ll share what she’s comfortable sharing. In the meantime, I’ll keep Buffy informed enough not to worry her and no more. It’s not my story to tell.”

“Right.” Sensing his partner’s melancholy, Ethan tries to refocus him on the non-straitjacketed slayer with, “But Buffy’s alright?”

“Yes. Willow should be moving in this week.”

“Good” Ethan replies.

“Yes, poor Buffy. I think she was rather hoping that not standing directly over the hellmouth, things might go more smoothly at college.”

“And instead she got the very worst kind of demon: A Lite FM listener.” Ethan steps over to the door, pulls on his coat. “Well, I’m off out. Got to pick up an order at the shop.”

“Oh” Rupert looks a little crestfallen.

“I won’t be long” Ethan reassures him. “We could go for a drink if you like.”

“Yes” says Rupert, “That would be nice.” He sounds a little relieved, and well he might; he has barely left the flat all week except to jog or pick up groceries. Drinking aside, Ethan reflects as he leaves, what his partner really needs is a project. Possibly it wouldn’t be a bad thing for Faith to return soon after all.
Having declined Ethan’s suggestion he help in the shop for yet another day, Giles had planned to be passingly productive, to justify the refusal. Somehow, though, he still hasn’t finished sorting through the remaining books from the library by the time Ethan returns home, even with Xander’s help, or perhaps because of Xander’s help. Ethan, of course, doesn’t help either.

“About time” he says, watching them. “We’ve had books under our feet all summer.”

“This is the last box” Giles reminds him.

“These are all yours, right?” asks Xander, putting a set of Hatherley’s Demonology Encyclopaedias on the wrong shelf. “Cause there is technically still a high school, it’s just squished in with the middle school now.”

“They’re all mine” Giles confirms, moving the encyclopaedias to their correct place. “Oddly, the school didn’t have” He picks up a volume at random “Customs and Uses of Sacrificial Magicks catalogued before I arrived.”

“Oh, I don’t know” says Ethan. “It was a hellmouth school.”

“Yeah” echoes Xander. “I think maybe you helped yourself to a few kickbacks. To which I say bravo, by the way.”

“And yet you continue to mock me.” Giles confiscates Rituals of the Underworld before Xander can shelve it under the author’s first name. “Xander, do try to pay attention to where you’re putting them.”

“Yes, he’ll want it in alphabetical order” Ethan puts in. He picks up a copy of the motorcycle magazine Giles bought a subscription to over summer on a whim, and flicks through it. “Even his records are alphabetised. It’s bizarre.”

“Not really that bizarre, Ethan.” Giles doesn’t stop Xander when the boy wanders over to the sofa to look at the magazine over Ethan’s shoulder, even though he’s paying him to complete this chore. Ridiculous that he, and not the boy’s parents, should pay him to do jobs around the house, but Xander – like him – is yet to find work, and, apparently returned from his American road trip utterly broke. With books still to sort through and it being nice to catch up, it made sense. As do a lot of things that turn out to be actually very misguided, because, examining the shelves, Giles realises that around a third of the books are shelved under the author’s first name, another third by title and most of the remaining third seem to have put in order of estimated age of the picture on the front.

Sighing, Giles kneels by the shelf to set things right, not looking up when the door opens until Ethan says, “Hello Anya. I’m not sure we’re on don’t bother knocking terms yet.”

The ex-demon stops short. “We’re not? But we had an entire conversation at prom!”

“Yes” agrees Ethan in an amicable tone, “about how you used to kill people, as I recall, which actually makes it highly unlikely we’ll ever be on don’t-knock terms.”

She looks puzzled. “You’ve got wards on this place, haven’t you?”

“Well yes, but it’s more the principle of it.”
Anya shrugs, then addresses Xander: “I need to talk to you.” “You do?” Xander looks mildly alarmed.

“Yes” Anya pauses, and glances between Giles and Ethan.

“Outside” Ethan tells her.

“Sure” she says. “Go where you want.”

“No, I mean, you’ll have to go outside.”

“Oh” She frowns and takes Xander’s hand, leads him outside with a muttered, “That’s not very polite.”

Watching them go, Giles asks, “They didn’t keep things going after prom, did they?”

“I doubt it” replies Ethan. “I don’t think a long-distance relationship is Xander’s thing.”

“I don’t think a relationship with a former vengeance demon should be anyone’s thing” says Giles, “especially not anyone I care about. Then again, Xander has made a pig’s ear of stocking our bookshelves, so I’m still in two minds about whether he still fits that description.” But Giles still keeps an eye on the situation outside, going over to the window every now and then. “It looks like they’re just talking.”

“Well, it’s not like Anya could do anything to him.”

“Perhaps not personally, but she must know demons who’d do her a favour.”

“Actually, hardly anyone seems to know her” Ethan tells him. “Vengeance demons are fairly rootless. Besides, I think the consensus is she lost her powers pretty carelessly.”

“I wonder how she did?” asks Giles. He studies the now-woman talking to Xander with an appearance of disappointment rather than murderous rage. “She wasn’t very clear about that part when she helped us send the vampire Willow back.”

“No idea” is the reply. “But vengeance demons are a force to be reckoned with. Whoever took her down must have been truly fearsome.”

“I suppose so” agrees Giles. “Now, I think I’ve done my book-shelving for the day. Cocoa?”

Researching the Gem of Amara keeps Giles busy all the following day, which is mostly quite a relief after an idle summer, but it tilts into worrying when he discovers a text that indicates that it could actually exist, and be located in Sunnydale. Hence how he comes to be sat at the desk in Buffy and Willow’s shared dorm room, speaking with Buffy when Willow walks in.

“Hello, Willow” Giles greets, before taking the girl’s appearance in properly and frowning.

“Oh” She is obviously flustered. “Um. Hi, Giles. I, um, I didn’t realise you’d be here.”

“Early morning research party” Buffy explains.

“Oh. Right.” Her pupils are too large and her hands shake a little as she adjusts her clothing.

Her clothing, Giles notes, is actually very neat considering she has been out all night. This is not
the result of a heavy drinking session or a romantic tryst. He asks, “Where were you?”

“Um” Willow seems to notice her twitching hands and hides them behind her back. “Out with Amy. She needed cheering up because of – err – well, it’s not really a librarian-friendly story.”

“I think I get idea” Giles says. “Willow, are you –”

“Oh!” Willow claps a hand to her head dramatically. “I left my purse in Amy’s dorm! I’ll, um, see you guys later.” She hurries out before Giles can question her further and – with Spike potentially about to become unkillable – Giles has no choice but to let her go.

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Ethan looks up sharply as the shop bell clangs. With Spike still unstaked and racing towards being unstakable, he isn’t sure it’s wise to even be here alone.

But it’s not Spike, thank the Gods; it’s Willow. “I did something bad!” she tells him, stepping quickly into the shop, her hands twisting together in front of her.

“That big a night, was it?” Ethan replies.

“What?”

“Rupert told me you did the walk of shame. Well, not the expression he used, but congratulations on a milestone passed.” Actually, Rupert had seemed a little alarmed by the whole thing, but with Buffy racing Spike to the Gem, he hadn’t had time to properly explain why. Probably standard Rupert-overreaction.

“Oh” Willow is saying. “No, not the other night. I mean today. Just now. I did something bad. Or, really, Amy did something bad and I watched. But still, it’s bad!”

Honestly, bad in Willow’s world still generally means a late assignment. But she has also been known to unleash Angelus, so Ethan’s voice betrays a little trepidation as he asks, “How bad?”

“We, um. We turned a student into a weasel?”

Ethan laughs reflexively and stops himself. Willow tells him, “I’m not joking.”

“Oh, I know. But really, is that all? We’ll reverse it in no time and –”

“We used Cu Sith blood.”

Ethan, half way to the counter, stops and turns to look at her, all humour gone. “Cu Sith?” he asks. “Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t realise” Willow tells him miserably. “I didn’t know that’s what it was until we were done.” Her hands twist and twist.

Ethan leans back against the counter and puts a hand to the bridge of his nose. “You used Cu Sith blood in a transmogrification spell?”

“I didn’t know” Willow repeats, sounding tearful now. “Amy didn’t tel –”

“Where did she even get it?” Ethan doesn’t stock any Cu Sith parts. He values his relationship too much. “Actually, why didn’t she just rat him? It’s more instant.”
“She said she wanted to try something new” Willow replies. “We can undo it, right? He’s not going to be stuck like that?”

“Possibly” Ethan heads to the bookshelves and starts searching for anything useful. “When did this happen? Literally just now? In the last hour?”

Willow nods. Ethan plucks a book from the shelf, telling her, “We may have a chance.”

“Just a chance?” Her voice is small.

“We’ll need to prepare a thrice blessed Luhani offering so you get working on that and I’ll see if I can find the standard supplication ritual for this sort of reversal. Oh, and we’ll need to smear some tears of repentance on the, um, student.” He glances up “Where is he, anyway?”


“I didn’t lose him. It was sort of a, a teamwork thing.”

Ethan sighs heavily. A location spell is useless for a transmogrified subject. “Right. Can you at least tell me he’s not outside?” Only so many weasels running round inside a college building, after all. Outside, and he has no idea how populous they are. If they manage to find one, it might not be the right one.

“I can tell you whereabouts he is outside?” Willow tries for a smile that looks sickly, and no wonder – if they don’t find this poor chap before nightfall, he really will be doomed to live out his life as a weasel.

“I see” Ethan manages. “We’ll have to think about how to get around that. In the meantime, get started on the offerings.” They’ll need the Gods in a good mood.

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Arriving on campus some time later, laden with a bag of spell ingredients, they find Amy hanging around by some bushes. She leans side to side slightly, staring into the shrubbery without touching it.

“It’s in there?” asks Ethan, and then, remembering the creature’s original form, “Um, he’s in there?”

Amy shrugs. “Possibly. I lost track of him near the parking lot.”

“The parking lot?” squeaks Willow. “What if he gets squished?”

Amy shrugs again, an elaborate show of a shrug, but her expression is uneasy. To Ethan she says, “Look, I didn’t know it would be permeant. I just wanted to show him what a jerk he is.”

“Or rather, what a weasel?” Ethan kneels and peers under the hedge. There’s no sign of a weasel in there but it could just be camouflaged.

“He’s lucky I didn’t make him a skunk.”

“As someone who’s here to help you find him, I must say I’m grateful you didn’t. I can’t see him, by the way.”

Willow asks, “Do you think we could call him? Being a rat’s a bit of a blur but I think he might remember his name.” Experimentally, she calls, “Here, Parker, Parker” into the bushes.
Ethan glances up to see Amy roll her eyes. “People are staring already.”

She has a point: around them people are glancing at Ethan kneeling on the grass. He stands up and wipes his knees, says, “Well, we can’t cast a glamour—it’s going to be difficult reversing this hex. We’re going to need as much magic for that as possible.” He scowls at Amy. “Why couldn’t you have just invoked Hecate?”

Amy scowls back at him. “Because she’s not nasty enough for Parker.”

Ethan shudders. “Care to tell me what this chap did so I can be sure to never do it?”

“Unless you’re a lying scumbag, you won’t do it.” Amy turns her attention back to the bushes.

Willow, hovering nervously, gives Ethan a bright, false, smoothing-things-over sort of smile and says, “We found a way to find him with magic.”

Amy looks at her. “You mean like a location spell?”

“Something like that” replies Ethan. “It would still be easier if we had some idea where he is, but if not, the sooner we start the better.”

“Well, like I said, the bastard was heading for the parking lot, but I’m guessing a weasel would hide in there.” Amy gestures at the bushes again.

“Right” Ethan hands her an empty vial from the bag of ingredients. “I’m not particularly optimistic you’ll be able to provide any, but we need some tears.”

She stares at him. “I’m done crying over this creep.”

“You’re the caster—your tears will help more than anyone else’s.”

Amy’s mouth twitches into a humourless smile. “Only me that can save him? I kind of like that.”

Pulling the vial she filled in the car from her pocket, Willow says sternly, “I’d like it more if there was no way he’s going to be stuck like this.”

Amy sighs and studies her empty vial. For a moment, she does seem to be trying, closing her eyes, ignoring the students walking past. Then, opening her eyes, she admits, “I don’t think I can cry in front of all these people.” She hands the vial back. “Plus I have to go. I promised to meet someone.”

Willow stares at her. “You’re not going to help him?”

“I didn’t say that—I’m going to find the guy that sold me the blood. He might be able to help, but not if I keep him waiting.”

“Who is he?” asks Ethan.

“You wouldn’t know him” is the reply. Turning to Willow, Amy says, “I’ll explain later. You’ll keep looking in case he can’t help, right?”

“Of course.” Willow nods.

“Thanks” To Ethan, Amy adds, “I really didn’t know” and then she is gone.

Willow turns to Ethan and holds a hand out. “Should we start now?”
“May as well.” Ethan hefts the bag of ingredients and pulls out two pellets of compressed herbs, encased inside a leaf that he tears in two, kneeling again. Placing the leaf halves on the ground, he adds symbols in chalk on each one, wraps them round the pellets again and hands one to Willow.

Willow stares down at the pellet in her hand. “How intense is this going to be exactly?” Standing and shouldering the bag, Ethan examines his own pellet. “No way of telling.” He swallows his down.

The first thing he’s aware of is light. Light and a pulsing, almost magnetic pull as his magic strums inside him, alive with sensation at the presence of Willow’s. All around him, the buildings, the people, even the plants, fade to greyish shadows. He can see them, but not in detail, as though he’s looking at a photocopy of a lightly drawn sketch of an old black and white photo.

All sound is muted and distant until the wavering, pulsating light beside him speaks clearly: “Ethan?”

“Oh! It’s you, Willow! Hello.”

The light shivers in a concerned sort of way. “You didn’t realise it was me?”

“You’re more shiny than usual” Ethan explains. Looking around, he adds, “Well the bad news is, I can’t see anything that looks like it could be a recently transformed weasel. The good news is, it is working and I don’t think it’s affecting me badly enough that we need one of us to stay unhexed.”

“Okay. I’ll take mine then.” There is a munching from somewhere within the light. Then a gasp, and Willow says, “Ethan, you’re all sparkly!”

Ethan looks down at himself to find that a red, glittery shimmer is emanating from his chest. He is at least still visible, though, unlike the brilliance that is Willow. Ethan isn’t sure it’s wise to look at her directly.

“We should stick together” Willow decides. “I can still see everything non-magic, but it I’m still not completely sure I won’t bump into something.”

“Alright” Ethan replies and they set off, stumbling together through the grey world. Faces are blurred and voices too indistinct to pick out words. The sky appears overcast, reminding Ethan of winter back home, though it’s still perfectly warm. Perhaps seeking reassurance, Willow touches his shoulder now and then, but he doesn’t respond in kind: he can’t see the shape of her, she is all light. Brilliant, white light that almost eclipses his red glow. If only Rupert weren’t both busy and bound to fret about the whole thing, he could have joined in. Ethan would have liked to see how Rupert’s magic manifested.

“Anything?” Willow is apparently looking around for the weasel, though it’s hard to tell, what with her having no real form.

“Nothing so far.” Actually, aside from him and Willow, everything is bland and grey, washed out. Until…

“I’m getting something!” Willow says, just as Ethan notices it himself. A sort of pull, towards something out of sight. Willow moves ahead of him, looking, from his perspective, like a miniature galaxy floating along. Rounding a corner, she exclaims, “Oh! You’re not a weasel!”

“Y-you were hoping for a weasel?” asks a gentle-eyed girl with shimmering magic rising like mist from her skin.
“Transmogrification gone wrong” Willow explains. “A friend’s, that it, but I should have stopped it.”

Glancing between Willow and Ethan, the girl says, “Your friend’s been turned into a weasel?”

“No” Willow clarifies, “My friend turned someone into a weasel.” At the girl’s look of alarm, she adds, “Oh, god, that makes my friend sound bad, but really the weasel’s the bad one and he’s going be fine so really, it’s not as bad as it sounds because we can reverse it. Right Ethan?” To the girl, she adds, “This is Ethan, by the way. And I’m Willow.”

“Tara” the girl tells them. “A-are you guys okay apart from all that? Because you sort of look a little, um, spaced.”

“Spell to see magic” Willow explains. “To find the weasel.”

“Oh – you lost him?”

“Okay” says Willow, “Bad again, but there’s this whole context that I don’t really have time to go into right now, but really, I’ve never been involved in any gone-wrong transmogrification at all. Well, apart from that time that I got turned into a rat and this other time when Amy got, um, turned into a rat. But I wasn’t really involved that time. And the time that I was the, um, ratted one, really, but I was under a love spell so it was probably for the best.”

Ethan feels but doesn’t see an elbow nudge at him, as Willow whispers, “Help me out here?”

“We’re more responsible than we’re probably coming across” Ethan supplies.

“I’m sure” replies Tara in an encouraging tone. To Willow, she adds, “I’ll help you look.”

“You will?” The light that is Willow flares enthusiastically.

“Sure.” Tara smiles, and studying Willow, falls into step with them.

“I take it you’re a witch?” Ethan asks her.

“On my mother’s side” she confirms.

“Oh” says Willow, “I’d love to be a hereditary witch. My parents don’t really know anything about the supernatural.”

“It was nice h-having someone to learn from” Tara tells her, “But I’m enjoying breaking away from the past, you know? Finding my own way.”

“Are you in the wicca club?”

Ethan lets the girls talk, and, being as someone ought to be looking for poor Parker, studies the flowerbeds dotted around the campus, the low hedges at the edges of buildings. Even flowers look dull under the influence of this hex.

It is not long, however, before the flowers fade entirely and the ground becomes a soupy blur. Apparently, the herbs didn’t take their full effect right away. Reaching blindly for the swirling light beside him, Ethan’s hand encounters a shoulder. A hand closes on his wrist and he and Willow guide each other, faltering, through a forest of blank faced people, who gradually become harder and harder to distinguish from the foggy nothingness all around them.

“Should I go for help?” asks Tara.
“We’re alright” Willow reassures her. “Just help us find Parker, please? I don’t want anything to happen to him. Well, apart from what’s already happened to him.”

Nodding, Tara moves a little ahead of their uncertain pace and becomes a twinkling light, like a star or a Disney fairy, in the distance.

Speaking in an undertone, in case the young witch is not as far away as she seems, Ethan says, “She likes you.”

The more overpowering pulsating light besides him shivers in a way that he takes to mean Willow has turned her head. “What do you mean?”

“She was giving you the look.”

“The look?” Willow repeats blankly.

Ethan sighs. “Perhaps magic isn’t the only thing I should have taught you.” He stumbles forward, recoiling slightly as a figure materialises from the mist of non-magic, moving very fast. Probable that he couldn’t see a hand in front of his face now, so he checks, sticking his arm out in front of him.

His hand makes contact with a leather jacket. “Oh, sor –” Ethan lets his apology die as someone screams nearby.

“Tara!” yelps Willow, and Ethan sees their guiding light hit the ground a few feet away. Willow starts running – Ethan hears her footfalls though he can’t see her feet – but is apparently knocked back by something because her light wavers suddenly and then dims, bumps along the ground.

Unable to see what the threat even is, Ethan turns back to the pale grey nothingness in front of him with a general defensive spell on his lips – and is smacked around the face before he can complete it, with a force that spins him around and leaves his brain rattling in his skull. Next, he is lifted clean off the ground by the leather wearing something.


Before Ethan can so much as scream – which is really the only plan he has at this juncture – he is airborne. Hitting the ground with painful force, he covers his head and lies still.

Somewhere very far away, Buffy’s voice commands, “Ethan, run!” but Ethan isn’t sure if the slayer really is here, or if his survival instinct just sounds like Buffy these days. Either way, he staggers to his feet to flee, stopping when he remembers, “Willow! Willow?” He turns with no way of telling what he’s turning to – between being punched, being thrown and the world being a grey mess anyway, he’s lost all sense of direction – but what he sees isn’t Willow’s light, or even Tara’s.

On the ground, under a patch of darker grey that could be a bush or a car, trembles a little bar of weak yellow light. Parker.

Ethan is not the only one who’s seen it. As he watches, Willow’s radiant manifestation floats towards it, along with the sparkling humanoid shape that is Tara. The two seem to be clinging on to each other, which makes it look as though Tara is burrowed into Willow’s light, half coated with it.

As they close in on the weasel, Ethan steps forward to help, but is again knocked back. This time he suspects something is thrown into him accidentally rather than Spike actually punching him, given that he is still conscious and he really wouldn’t be if the vampire hit him twice. He finds his
feet again.

Over by the car/bush/clump of flowers, Willow and Tara are splitting up, surrounding the cowering weasel. As soon as Tara has hold of the struggling creature, Ethan calls, “Willow!” and throws her the bag containing the ingredients for the reversal. Then he steps sharply to the side out of the way of whatever battle is raging – very quietly from his perspective – between Spike and whoever has challenged him.

It must be a battle, he decides, because he is just about able to make out punches landing amid the silence of the non-magic, though Spike remains dangerously invisible.

“I guess the hex doesn’t think vampires count as magic” Willow is suddenly beside him.

“It’s only for human magic” Ethan explains, as she pulls him over to Tara and Parker. “I think someone’s fighting him.”

“Must be Buffy.”

Reaching Tara, they bump into something that Ethan takes to be a low wall.

Good – something to hide behind. Feeling his way around it, he crouches down and examines the bag of ingredients. It is open now, and its contents glow like jewels. He reaches in and takes out the thrice blessed Luhani, sets it on the ground.

“W-wait” says Tara, “Shouldn’t we get to safety first?”

“I can’t see where safety is” Willow replies as Ethan finds a candle, feeling up the length of it to locate the wick.

“I can – I’ll guide you.”

“And keep hold of him?” Ethan nods to the squirming weasel. He reaches in his pocket for his chalk, hastily draws a sacred circle. He can’t see the markings but he knows the pattern, and once the circle is closed, the magic unfolds and the chalk-marks glow.

“Tara” says Willow, “is there a blonde girl fighting with the vampire?”

“That’s a vampire?! But it’s daylight!”

“Long story. But is a blonde girl fighting him?”

“Yes”

“Then we’ll be okay to do it here. I don’t want us to let Parker escape again. Um, hi Parker, if you can hear me.” A tendril of light, perhaps a hand, gives the weasel a tentative pat on the head. It hisses.

Ethan lights a match, which flames greyly until it meets the candle and absorbs the magic of the circle, glows yellow at last. The world around them is becoming spotted with colour as the spell takes shape. Ethan jumps as Willow’s hand finds his. “Are you ready?”

“As I can be” he tells her. The hard part isn’t even started yet; they still have to find it in them to reverse the Cu Sith spell.

“I already put the tears on him” Willow says. “Tara, could you hold him over the circle?”
“Sure” The girl shifts to her knees to position the weasel, flinching at the sounds of fighting, which must be louder, and are presumably also newer, to her.

As Willow’s grip on his hand tightens, Ethan channels his magic. Amid all the grey, there is a sensation of fireworks, a popping and flickering of reds, oranges, vivid pinks. Then Willow’s magic surges, obliterating everything in a tide of white light. There is a twisting sensation, the world seems to crack and rearrange itself, and sound floods in. It is Ethan’s turn to flinch as he realises how close they are to the fighting. Then, another twisting, popping sensation and the magic washes over and away from them, a receding wave. Ethan opens his eyes to find that the circle is suddenly very full of naked young man.

“Parker!” says Willow brightly. “I never thought I’d say this, but it’s good to see you!”

The young man looks from her to his naked body and, eyes widening, lets out a shriek, scrambles up and runs off.

“Um” says Tara, “The vampire’s started smoking now…and, and it’s dived into a manhole.”

“That’s okay” Willow tells her, “We can see now. And, also, yay. Hi, Buffy”

“Hi” says Buffy, coming over. “Was that Parker? Was Parker naked?” She fixes Ethan with a look. “What did you do?”

“Why do you assume it was me?” asks Ethan. “Willow was the one who…” Not wanting to make Willow look bad in front of Tara, he trails off.

“Actually, it was Amy” says Willow, hurriedly.

Buffy looks doubtfully from Ethan, to Willow, and then to Tara. “Hi. Have we met?”

“I’m Tara” says the girl. “And, um, I promise th-they were like this when I found them.”

“That, I can believe” Buffy mutters, as she stoops to help them up.

*****

Assurances aside, Giles can’t help but think the Gem should have been destroyed. Instead Buffy has arranged for Jenny to visit and collect the damn thing, which currently sits like a target inside his desk drawer.

Giles can feel it down there, itching to lend its strength to something evil. Waiting.

When Jenny arrives tomorrow, he’ll have to talk to her about all the implications of it, so she is forewarned. After that, all they will have left to do is hope that between Jenny and the halfling she and Angel have befriended, Angel can be kept in command of the invincible body that will otherwise fall to Angelus.

Angelus with the Gem of Amara. It’s enough to give anyone nightmares, let alone he and Ethan.

Giles finds he has wrapped an arm around his partner at the thought, despite being officially angry with him. Ethan snuggles up, grateful for the reprieve, closing the space between them on the bed. Giles sighs. “Alright. I suppose you were only trying to help.”

“Bloody right I was. If it wasn’t for me, that young man would still be a weasel right now.”

“You’re going to have to talk to Willow. And Amy.” Or he is, and soon. But what could he say,
beyond offering himself up as an example of how not to be? Ethan has made a career of magic. All Giles has done has been minor, strictly necessary spells, ever since Eyghon. From Amy’s perspective, he is probably a sad, gun-shy old man, and Willow is bound to respect Ethan’s opinion more in this matter.

Mistaking the source of his frown, Ethan whispers. “We do know how to destroy the Gem. We could do it right now.”

“Buffy’s made up her decision.”

“Ah, yes, I forgot how Buffy has the inherent right to inflict an unkillable Angelus on future generations.”

“He knows about the curse now, Eth. He can ensure his soul stays in place.”

“Yes, until he succumbs and it isn’t.”

Raised as he is to prize courage, Giles bites back the urge to ask his partner not to say that right before they go to sleep. Apparently, the request still shows on his face, because Ethan switches to soothing: “Buffy wouldn’t have left it here if she didn’t want you to make the final decision.”

“Buffy already made the final decision” Giles repeats patiently. “She left it here because she lives on a university campus where any student might walk in and take it.”

“So, she could have left it with Xander.”

“You’ll have heard about his parents’ proclivity for drink? Not to mention, they aren’t in the know, they could invite vampires in. No, this is the only place she could have left it, and she’s trusting us to keep it safe.”

“I suppose so.” Ethan sits up with a sigh.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, possibly all this talk about unleashing Angelus is getting to me, but I rather need to piss.”

Giles waits for him alone, trying to quieten his mind and listening to the comforting sound of Ethan pottering about downstairs.

He is almost drifting when a burst of magic illuminates the flat. The smoke alarm goes off, the incessant screech almost covering the sound of Ethan swearing. As Giles scrambles out of bed and down the stairs, there is a padding sound as of someone smothering a fire with a towel and Ethan yells over the blare, “I’ve got! It’s out!”

Giles turns back up the stairs, silences the alarm and goes down again. In the living room, Ethan is pressing a wad of tissues to his face to stem a nosebleed and studying the scorched surface of the desk.

“What happened?” Giles steps forward to check Ethan for injuries other than the obvious. It is only when he sees Ethan’s eyes – magic darkened – that he realises the nosebleed is due to performing yet more magic after an already full-on day. Stepping back again, he opens the desk draw. The Gem of Amara is gone. Giles can see now some greenish smears amid the black streaks on the desk. “I asked you not to destroy the Gem.”

“No you didn’t” reasons Ethan. “You told me Buffy had made her decision. Well, I made mine.”
“You’re an incorrigible prat who’s going to be the death of me.” Giles hugs him hard. “Also, thank you.”
“Rupert, what are you wearing?”

Rupert looks down. “It’s my costume.”

“That’s the most ridiculous hat that ever paid for a milliner’s hooker. You’ll have trouble getting through doorways.” Rupert looks a little deflated so Ethan relents. Rupert tells him, “I just thought I’d be, err, festive for the trick or treaters.”

“Since when did you like Halloween?”

“Well, it, um, it breaks things up a little to have a celebration.”

Ethan glances at him, frowning. Since when did the day to day minutiae of their lives need breaking up? But all he says is, “Oh? Even if it’s a celebration of cheap tat?” He tugs experimentally on the string protruding from a plastic Frankenstein’s monster hanging from the ceiling and rolls his eyes at the results. “I wish you’d come with me to the shop. You’ll be bored here on your own.”

“I’ve been working in your bloody shop all week, Eth. Tonight I’m going to find a decent film to watch.”

“Suit yourself.” Really, Ethan knows why Rupert never puts a shift in at the shop after dark: he doesn’t care for Ethan’s clientele after dark. Then again, it is true his fiancé has been working at the shop all week, and though he seems happy enough, his is too active a mind to be content to assist in his partner’s business endlessly. He is still awaiting a project of his own.

Unfortunately, said project is still undergoing questioning under truth spells and lessons into the history of the Council that probably borders on brainwashing, not to mention routine sedation. No, it will be a long while before they see Faith again. And when they do, how likely is it that she’ll meekly submit to training?

“Well” he tells Rupert, “I’ll see you later.” A quick kiss on the cheek and he’s gone.

*****

Ethan gets home later than he’d planned, a few of his less-than-human customers having decided the Magic Box is a good place to congregate on a lazy Halloween night. Rupert greets him with, “If it wasn’t Halloween, I’d be worried. I thought we always call if we’re going to be late?”

“If it wasn’t Halloween, I would have” Ethan stares around at the assembled scoobies. “Hullo, all. No campus parties to get horribly drunk at?”

Xander shakes his head. “The first campus party I ever go to and it gets crashed by a fear demon. Lucky Anya here with her thousand years’ experience knew to go get Giles.” He indicates the ex-demon, who is dressed in an outfit that makes Rupert’s costume from earlier look positively toned-down. She gives Xander a withering look. “It’s not my fault I couldn’t help. I don’t have any powers any more. I needed Giles and his chainsaw.”

“You did help” Xander reassures her.

Raising a shy hand in greeting, Tara says, “Hello again, Ethan.” She is radiant in a medieval-
looking gown.

“Oh – hello, Tara.” Ethan smiles at the girl and, when she looks away, widens it knowingly at Willow. She makes an urgent, hushing gesture. Ethan nods to her costume and guesses, “Joan of Arc?”

“Yeah” she confirms. “But Tara’s the Lady of Shalott, so I thought I could be Launcelot as well.” As she speaks, red feathers sprout from the chainmail at her head, forming a striking crest. Tara smiles after a moment of wide-eyed surprise.

“And before you ask” Xander pipes up, “I’m James Bond. Not head waiter guy. I figured I’d go to the Magic Box on the way and ask you to change me into my costume like you did with the Buffster, but someone” He glances at Buffy “might have talked me out of using magic for a party.” Willow’s feathers wilt a little.

Ethan tuts, sitting down and helping himself to a handful of some dubious American sweets. “I’m not sure I could do that again in any case. Janus is bored easily, you know.”

“How psychopathic of him” says Rupert, sitting down opposite.

Ethan magnanimously ignores that. Eyeing Buffy’s costume he can’t resist saying, “Though if I were to cast it again, I can’t say you’d fare better than last time, Buffy.”

She fixes him with that look she reserves just for him. “Don’t even go there, Ethan.”

“Yes” says Rupert, “please don’t.”

“It was Buffy’s idea as I recall” Ethan protests. “You wanted to be princessified.”

“It’s true” she admits. “I did. But seeing you, Giles and Amy trapped in a fire and my damsel streak not letting me help? Not a great advertisement for magical party tricks.”

Willow’s feathers disintegrate into reddish wisps.

Then again” Xander adds, “There were a few guys who’d have fun with the whole costume possession deal – imagine getting soldiery know-how. Why cooler than Ancient Greek.”

Ethan frowns. “People were dressed as soldiers?”

Buffy nods. “All sneaky and camouflaged.”

“Yeah” Willow says, “They were really in character, all posing and stuff.”

Anya’s gaze flickers to her hands in her lap and then restlessly around the room. Ethan asks her, “You’ve heard the rumours too?”

Reluctantly, she nods, before adding, “But I haven’t been to a demon bar in a while. They don’t like me now I’m human.”

Buffy asks, “Rumours?”

Rupert frowns. “Ethan?”

Ethan steels himself for some interrogation and explains, “A few of my…more interesting customers have been mentioning some sort of military operation that started up over summer.”
“Military operation?” Buffy frowns.

Rupert asks, “You didn’t think to mention this sooner?”

“Well I did think to, I just decided not to.” At Rupert’s pointedly questioning expression, Ethan adds, “Well, it’s hardly a mystical thing! Just humans with guns, so welcome to America.”

“It still seems the sort of thing Buffy should have known about.”

“Why, so she could sign up?”

Willow says, “Wait, we’ve always had a military base. What’s with the worry?”

Ethan explains, “My customers aren’t all human. The military seem suddenly interested in Sunnydale’s demon population.”

Buffy shrugs. “About time”

Anyà, Ethan notes, looks uncomfortable at that. Buffy adds, “Also, I’m with Giles – I should have known about this. When were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.” Ethan folds his arms and forces himself not care one way or the other. It’s safer than pointing out he judged her likely to side automatically with the humans, no matter how foolish their endeavour.

Rupert says, “Well it is true that if these men are human, Buffy, I’m not entirely sure what you could do to stop them. Or why you’d want to.”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “Bugger that, Rupert.”

Rupert glares. Ethan tells him, “I expected Buffy to be all naïve about this –”

“– hey! –” Buffy pouts.

“Sorry Buffy. But Rupert, you’ve got years on her! You ought to be able to see how dangerous this is.”

“How dangerous it is depends on what their motive is” Rupert argues. “If it’s simply to clear the area of demons, I say bravo.”

“Well it’s not” Ethan tells him. “They’re not killing demons – they’re capturing them.”

“Ah” Rupert frowns. “Yes, that is a little more complicated.”

“Maybe they’re studying them?” Willow asks. “Trying to come up with better ways to kill them.” Beside her, Tara shudders.

“Sure, that’s all kinds of disturbing” puts in Xander, “But, military back up? That’s got to be on the plus side – when fighting current demons, that is” He nudges Anyà shyly and she offers a tight smile.

“That’s true” Buffy nods, looks thoughtful.

“You sure about that?” Ethan asks, “A lot of macho-men rolling up to do your job?”

“The way I see it, the more people on my side the better. Sorry if that’s naïve, but unlike certain
shopkeepers, I don’t hang out with demons.”

“I hope you’re right” Rupert tells her. “But best to, err, get a feel for their activities before we consider what to do.”

Ethan grimaces. “Make sure they’re not weaponising the hellmouth or anything, you mean.”

At that, everyone looks just a little uncertain and the subject shifts away from the newcomers.
Really, it’s too quiet at the shop to justify them both being here but it breaks up the monotony of being at home. So Giles is pleased to see Buffy, even when it turns out she is only calling in to ask if he has heard from Faith.

“Not directly” Giles admits. “But Wesley –”

Buffy rolls her eyes. “Is Wesley ever going to let her come to the phone?”

They are in the back room, seated among boxes of crystals and figurines. Buffy scowls at a representation of Woden, the closest stand-in for Wesley to hand.

“I doubt it’s up to him.” Giles tells her. “Wesley’s role is purely supportive at this stage.”

“Is he even still her watcher?”

“I don’t know.” Honestly, Giles doesn’t imagine the younger man would tell him if he lost the position. He supposes, “They might want someone – err – more experienced in the circumstances.”

“You don’t say.” Buffy frowns. “But he still has access to her, right?”

“Yes. The last time we spoke he told me she’s still having reflex training and I imagine there will be further truth spells and tests before she’s declared fit to return.”

“But they’ll let her go soon, right?”

“I’m sure they won’t hold her indefinitely, Buffy.”

“Yeah, ’cause this is Faith we’re talking about. Kind of a documented history of breaking herself out.”

“Yes, but, that aside, I’m sure they’ll let her go eventually. So far as they’re concerned, every day she stays in there, she’s not doing her duty. She will be back.”

“We hope” says Buffy glumly.

“I’m sure” Giles repeats.

“You think they’ll hire you back to watch her, if Wesley gets sent back to the tweed store?”

“I don’t know.” It seems unlikely, but Giles can’t help but hope so, given that Buffy’s interest in training has wavered significantly since she started college. “If they do, I’m sure I can find the time for two slayers.”
“Yeah, what with the gentleman of leisure thing. How’s that going, anyway?”

“Rather too much leisure and not enough gentleman. But I suppose I shouldn’t complain about a quiet hellmouth.”

“Throw a giant snake at it and it shuts right up. Why didn’t we think of it sooner?”

Giles smiles in what he hopes is an encouraging rather than an eager way, and says, “Was there anything else? No other supernatural goings on to report?”

“No” Buffy gathers her things. “All quiet on the college front. Maybe too quiet.” At Giles’ questioning look, she pulls an it’s nothing expression and adds, “It’s just that between Tara and Amy, Willow’s been Miss Popularity, and I’ve been Miss Oh Look I’ve Got The Dorm Room To Myself Again. No big.”

“Buffy, it’s hard, but starting higher education, people branch out and –”

“– meet new people, try new things, etcetera? Yeah, I know. I’m not about to sulk at Willow. Actually, I’m about to sulk at Xander – I’m going to the bar he’s working at tonight so we can hang in his downtime. It’s actually been a while since we’ve caught up.”

“He’s working at bar now? I wondered why he hadn’t been round to pester me for chores.”

“Oh shoot!” exclaims Buffy, “I wasn’t meant to tell anyone actually responsible!”

Giles is baffled for a moment before remembering the ridiculous drinking age this side of the Atlantic. He says, “I’m sure you’ll be sticking to soft drinks, yes?”

Another eye roll. “Whatever you say, Ripper.” Buffy smirks at his fluster, and then relents: “Relax, Giles, we’ll be safe. I’ll stick to coke and anyway, Xander’s working. How trashed could we get?”

*****

Very, it turns out, is the answer to that question. Giles next sees Buffy while out for a pint himself with Ethan that evening. Heading to the bar, he pauses at the sight of his slayer wandering in, hair a mess, gait unsteady. “Buffy?”

She eyes him suspiciously. “Want beer.” She pushes past him to the bar.

Giles retreats to the booth he left Ethan in and whispers to his partner, “I think Buffy’s drunk.”

Ethan grins approvingly and cranes his neck to watch Buffy. Over by the bar, she is quite literally scenting the air, hands pressed on the bar top to hoist herself up and examine the bottles behind the counter. Giles tries, “Let me rephrase that: Ethan, the slayer is drunk, and –”

“– and Xander’s a caveman.”

“And Xander’s a – what?”

Ethan nods to the door where a rather troglodytic looking youth has entered. Frowning, Giles recognises, “Xander! Good God!”

The young man lights up at the sight of him. “Giles! Giles get beer!”

“No” says Ethan, “I think you were right the first time – they’re just drunk.”
“Wipe that smirk off your face” Giles tells his partner. “We need to get them out of here before –”

There is a loud smash over by the bar. “Want beer!” Buffy, now on top of the bar, yells at some poor barman.

“Buffy!” Giles hurries over. “Get down from there, you can’t just –”

“No!” She shoves him back, hard enough that he stumbles. “Don’t tell Buffy what to do! Buffy strong.”

“Oh, ah” Giles takes a few hurried steps back. “Yes, yes, noted, but –”

“Buffy” Ethan is suddenly beside him. “I know where we can get much better beer.”

“Beer?” Xander joins them.

Buffy turns slowly away from the unfortunate and cowering barman. “Buffy want beer.”

“I know you do” Ethan says encouragingly. “I can give you lots. Much better beer than anything you’ll find here.”

“Ethan magic” Xander points out.

“Precisely” coaxes Ethan. “I can magic us up some. Really good stuff.”

“I’ve seen him do it” Giles joins in the ruse. “An endless supply.”

Buffy slips off the bar top. Around her, patrons give her a wide berth as she approaches them.

“Take Buffy to beer.”

Ethan gestures flamboyantly that she should lead the way out. Buffy stares at his fingertips. After a moment’s obvious frustration, Ethan sighs. “This way.”

“Our place?” asks Giles in an undertone, as they head outside, followed by the newly prehistoric Buffy and Xander.

“Magic Box is closer” mutters Ethan, before switching on a bright smile as Buffy joins them.

“We’re very close, just step this way.”

*****

“No!” Buffy pounds on the magical barrier that envelopes her a few minutes later. “Said beer! Want beer!”

“Man witch tricked us!” Xander bellows from his own prison across the room. Initially the plan had been to contain them together, but then Buffy had started to complement the boy’s scent most unsubtly, and separate prisons had to be arranged.

“I’m sorry” Giles tells his slayer. “But I’ve got to keep you from hurting someone until you’re yourself again.”

“After which you can be trusted to hurt the right someones” adds Ethan.

Giles asks, “What caused this? What changed you?”

“Want beer! Want outside! Giles bad!”
Giles removes his glasses. “I don’t think we’re going to get very far with this.”

“We could go to Willy’s” Ethan suggests, “ask around.”

“Or the college” Giles slips his glasses back on. “Buffy said they’d be drinking at a bar Xander works at. I imagine a, err, a young persons’ pub would be less discerning about who they serve, and, by extension, hire.”

“I think there’s only the one pub up by college” Ethan tells him. “A bloke who drinks at Willy’s sometimes has a brother who works there.”

“Let’s start there then. Phone Willow and get her to meet us, could you?” As Ethan goes over to the phone, Giles studies Buffy who glares mutinously at him through the shimmer of the barrier. After a moment, she screams, “Let Buffy out, old man!”

“Certainly not after that remark.”

“Want beer!”

“Buffy, you’ve been turned into a cave dweller; I don’t think this is the time for beer!” Behind him, Ethan puts the phone down and announces, “No answer. She must be over at Tara’s.”

“Or out with Amy” says Giles, remembering the girl’s bedraggled, post-spell state when he last visited campus. “We’ll just have to manage without her. Let’s go.”

*****

Entering the bar, they encounter a middle aged man whose smug nonchalance at his patrons turning into cavemen is quickly replaced with cowering co-operation with a little persuasion from Giles.

Xander and Buffy, it quickly transpires, spent the evening sampling a magic-spiked whenever a lull in customers allowed Xander to escape the bar. Unfortunately, a group of as yet unaccounted for young men were also drinking the stuff all night.

“So” says Ethan as they leave, “back to the bar with the non-cursed beer?” At Giles’ look he adds, “Sod it, you want to go and look for the cavemen, don’t you?”

“I do seem to recall swearing an oath to protect the innocent, yes.”

“These youths weren’t innocent, Rupert, they were out drinking under age. They’re probably off somewhere being only slightly more idiotic than they’d be on regular beer, so I say let’s resume our evening and leave them to it.”

“Ethan” Giles puts a hand to his head. Where to start? “Evolutionary regression is not an ethical punishment for flouting a frankly puritanical age limit – something you did regularly yourself at a far more tender age, I might add – and besides, they might hurt someone else.”

“I suppose I did” Ethan admits. “And I suppose they might. Fine, fine, we’ll drop everything and be unsung heroes. And unpaid, I might add. Where do we start?”

Giles looks around, considering. “It seems quiet here, so let’s walk back into town and see if they’ve wound up there.” He sets off. “We can check and see if Buffy’s dose has worn off while we’re at it. A cognisant slayer would be useful when we find the rest of the cave dwellers.”
They return to find the Magic Box door ajar. Freezing instinctively a few feet short of the entrance, Giles asks Ethan, “Willow?”

His fiancé shakes his head. “She still doesn’t have a key.” Ethan takes a cautious step closer – and then retreats quickly. “The wards are down.”

Giles frowns. There’s no way magically bound cavepeople could do that. Stepping in front of Ethan, he approaches the door and slips through it, fists balling until he sees, “Oh! Amy.”

The girl doesn’t respond beyond a vague smile and for a moment Giles suspects they have another cave dweller on their hands, until he sees her eyes. Her pupils are black discs, her irises eclipsed. Dark magic, a lot of it, and recently.

Buffy and Xander are nowhere to be seen. Giles asks, “What happened here?”

Amy smiles again, and the silence stretches for a long moment before she seems to understand that it is she who is being addressed. “Oh. I accidently broke a few spells when I came in. I’m vibing all wrong; I need something to steady me.” She looks around the room.

Stepping into the shop behind Giles, Ethan asks, “Where’s Willow?”

“I don’t know” Amy spins in a languorous circle. Possibly she is looking for something, but she gives the impression of simply wanting to spin.

Giles asks, “Amy: Buffy and Xander, where are they? Do you do something to them?”

“Why would I?” Amy stops spinning and heads around the counter, reaching up to lift a statuette down from a high shelf. Ethan hurries forward to confiscate it. “Gods, child, what are you on?” He replaces the statue as Amy leaves the counter, wanders to the shelves. “Where did you lose Willow?”

“Somewhere. Somewhere near campus.” Amy waves a hand. Sparks fly from her fingertips and Ethan grabs a fire blanket. “Is she as bad as you?”

Amy simply looks at him. Ethan says to Giles, “This puts cursed beer in perspective.”

Ignoring that, Giles focuses on the children who they at least know the most recent location of, asking Amy, “Are you saying you freed Buffy and Xander? Which way did they go?”

“Somewhere that way.” Amy gestures to the street beyond the window. More sparks. Ethan swears under his breath and pats them out as they hit the table. Amy adds, “I can sense them. They had magic coming off them.” She takes a book from the shelf. “What’s this about – oh, shit, sorry.” She steps back to let the rapidly melting book drip to the floor.

“Right” says Ethan. “That’s it. Outside.” He wraps an arm around the girl and steers her to the door.

“What?” she says, digging her heels in. “It was an accident!”

“Amy” Giles puts in, following, “If you can still sense Buffy and Xander, I need you to show us where they are.”

“Alright, alright, you don’t have to force me out the door!” Amy stops suddenly as they all get
outside, turning to say to Ethan, “You need to lighten up a bit. I could do some swapsies, if you like.”

Inwardly, Giles groans. Swapping magic is a sure way to send one’s powers into a destructive tailspin and for all they know, Willow is Lord knows where suffering the aftermath of it. Stepping quickly between his rattled-looking partner and the swaying witch, he says, “You’ve done quite enough of that already. Come on, show us where Buffy and Xander are.”

*****

Approaching campus via a different route, they notice a point where two trails of destruction seem to combine. “Well” says Ethan, as one kicked-over bin becomes five and an abandoned, smashed up car, “Either Buffy got really angry or they met the other cavepeople.”

“I’m hoping for the latter” Giles tells him. “If we can just contain them all, it should wear off by morning.”

“What’re you guys even talking about?” slurs Amy. She walks unsteadily, weaving along the path. Sparks still issue alarmingly from her fingertips, changing colour as they go, from pink as they leave town to a vibrant green by the time they reach campus. Then she stops. “There.”

“I don’t –” begins Giles, but then he hears what could be the sounds of a raucous party or the sounds of a raucous cave-celebration, coming from a nearby building. “I see. Thank you, Amy.”

“Now can I go?”

“Not until we know where Willow is” Ethan replies, taking her arm.

She scowls. “I didn’t do anything to Willow. She’s fine. Look, there she is!” She points to a figure emerging from the darkness off to the side of the building. Letting go of Amy, Ethan hurries to meet the newcomer. “Willow?”

“Ethan!” Giles calls, catching sight of the second figure following the first.

Pushing Amy out the way, he runs towards Ethan and Willow as they meet a little way off, apparently oblivious to the thing behind them.

Ethan stops being oblivious just before he reaches them, tensing noticeably.

“It’s okay” Willow says as Giles reaches them, pulls them behind him and towards the buildings. “He’s not real.”

“You sure about that?” Amy followed him, Giles notes. Good. Then all they need to do is... “All of you, get inside. I’ll hold it off.”

“Rupert, no way –”

“Ethan, get the children inside. Now.”

*****

Unarmed, all he can do is try to hold the thing’s attention until the others retreat. Hard that, since it seems fixated on Willow, demanding to know why it’s been summoned. Well might it ask, Giles thinks.

He throws a few insults at it in the handful of demonic languages he knows, which distracts it just
enough to let Ethan pull the two witches away. At some point as they flee, Willow seems to realise
that the thing is real, and Giles hears her wail briefly before a door is slammed. At that sound, the
demon hurls him aside and turns its attention to pursuing her.

Giles, head throbbing, struggles to his feet. And falls back. “Damn.” As he loses consciousness, all
he can do is hope that Ethan manages to erect a barrier.

*****

“No, no” Willow struggles against Ethan’s hold. “I have to help Giles – I – oh, God that thing – I
didn’t mean –”

“You didn’t mean” Ethan soothes hurriedly, “But you did, and here we are, and I really need to
stop that thing eating Rupert, Willow, so will you stop struggling and – oh, bugger it” He pushes
Willow back and into a startled Amy. “Amy hold her, could you?” Turning back to the door, he
pauses as Amy says, “Sure, but what about them?”

Slowly, Ethan turns back around to examine the room they’ve just taken cover in.

A circle of prehistoric faces glare up at them from the basement common area below them. At the
head of them, Buffy smacks a hand to her chest.

Behind them, the door rattles suddenly and sickeningly in its frame.

“Ah” says Ethan. “Buffy, I –”

“Ethan bad!” Buffy shouts, and around her, the young cavemen whoop and jeer, jumping up and
down. One drops a flaming something or other which quickly catches on the smashed-up remnants
of a chair. Xander adds, “Trapped us in the air! Promised beer! No beer!”

“It…um…it wasn’t me!” Ethan protests, stepping in front of the now shuddering door to block
Willow’s exit. “A, err, a really bad demon made me do it, and it’s out there right now!”

The cavemen chortle at this, slapping one another and hissing in a way that conveys disbelief. But
Buffy’s stance shifts and she stares past Ethan to the door. Clearly none of Buffy Summers is left in
there, but the slayer is alive and strong and scenting blood. Hopefully not his.

“Yes” Ethan reiterates. “It’s out there right now! And it’ll take your beer and kill us all unless
someone stops it!”

Besides him, Willow murmurs, “What’s going on?”

There is a hideous creaking as the door bends, allowing a few growls to enter through the growing
gaps. Amy stumbles down the stairs quickly and the cavemen don’t stop her. A few of them look
alarmed now, scenting the air as the growls fill the room. Behind them, the fire rises unnoticed.
Buffy thumps her chest again, a warlike gesture.

Without further ado, Ethan opens the door. The demon tumbles into the room. Buffy leaps to meet
it and they slam to the floor together. Around them, the cavemen jump back, and then notice the
fire, jump forwards again, and start to panic.

“Outside!” Ethan yells, pointing emphatically to the door. It’s all the encouragement they need, and
they push past him and Willow in seconds, followed by Amy.

“Ethan?” Rupert stumbles in as they leave, shrieking, into the night. He looks tellingly concussed
but otherwise okay. “I tried to stop it” he says, “It knocked me out, I – oh” he glances back “You found the cavemen, I see.”

“And Buffy” Ethan points to the fight going on in what is fast becoming a fiery pit. Rupert stares in horror. “Good God!” He starts forward and Ethan catches hold of him, letting go of Willow. “It’s alright, Rupert, she’ll be done in a minute and – Willow!”

Willow is halfway down the stairs.

“Willow!” Rupert calls, “Buffy! Get out of there! Leave it!”

But as he shouts, the fire changes, twisting, retreating and compressing itself into…

“Buffy!” Willow commands, “Move!”

Whether Buffy understands, or whether some deeply ingrained slayer instinct simply allows her to tell that something is headed her way, is not entirely clear, but she dives aside as the fire rises up, human shaped, and charges at the demon. Howling, it is reduced to ash in seconds. The fire vanishes as the ash hits the floor.

They are left with stunned silence. Willow breaks it first, sinking to her knees. “Oh God” she moans. “Buffy, I didn’t mean to, I swear I didn’t mean to!”

Buffy approaches her slowly and asks, “Hurt?”

“Ethan” Rupert gestures to the door. “Get the others contained and find Xander. I’ll try to get the girls to follow me back to ours.”

*****

“I let him go out without me for one night and he turns into a caveman?” Anya, arms folded, surveying her sleeping boyfriend. “Was he always like this on a night out? How did he even survive before I met him?”

Ethan joins her in looking down at the rumpled young man. “All questions I asked about Rupert when we first started dating” he tells her.

“Ethan” Giles reprimands half-heartedly. “Just help Anya get Xander to the taxi, could you? I’ll check on Buffy and Willow.”

Upstairs, Willow is prone on their bed, crying quietly to herself. Her head is in Buffy’s lap and Buffy rocks her slightly, stroking her hair and studying her face. She looks up with a soft, protective snarl as Giles approaches. He raises a placating hand and creeps away again, leaves them to it.

*****

“Ow” Buffy mutters, emerging finally from upstairs the following morning. Standing in the middle of the living room, she regards Ethan blearily. “Why am I feeling so awful?” She frowns, looking around. “Why am I feeling so awful here?”

“Think back” Ethan prompts, and then enjoys the look of horrified realisation on Buffy’s face.

Buffy puts a hand to her hair. She groans again and starts attempting to stroke it back into tameness. “Damn it, Ethan, why didn’t you tell me I have cave hair?” She stops suddenly.
“Where’s Willow?”

Ethan is saved from answering by Rupert, who enters from outside at that moment. “She’s just out there” he tells Buffy. To Ethan, he adds, “She wants to talk to you.”

*****

Willow is sitting on the far edge of the fountain, her back to him. Ethan heads around it to see her face. Pale, and she is shivering in the sunshine. Withdrawal, which must mean, “That wasn’t your first time at Rack’s, was it?”

She shakes her head slowly. Ethan sighs heavily and sits down beside her. “I suppose Rupert gave you the lecture?” At her nod, he says, “Good. Saves me the job.” There is a short silence then, and then a lecture bursts out of him anyway: “What were you thinking? Did it not occur to you that messing with that sort of high might come with a price? Did you not wonder why he hides the place? Willow, you could have died!”

“Who cares if I could have died? Giles could have died!”

“That too.” Ethan shudders. He tells her, “You won’t be going back to Rack, of course. And I say we make the theory lessons a regular thing again. Weekly, say – I’ll even be organised if you want it the same day every time.”

“I’m giving up magic.”

“And I really think leaving the hellmouth for a bit wouldn’t be a bad thin –” Ethan stops. “Wait, what?”

Willow draws a shuddering breath. “I’m giving up magic.”

“Right, and I’ll give up breathing” scoffs Ethan, before frowning at the look on Willow’s face. “You’re serious.”

“Majorly serious. I almost killed people, Ethan!”

“Oh” Ethan waves a dismissive hand over his shoulder at the flat. “Rupert’s fine.”

“I don’t just mean Giles. That thing probably followed me back from Rack’s place. If it wasn’t interested in me, it could have attacked anyone, and I led it right to you guys!”

“Yes, and it’s horrible to think about, but we’re all okay, and you know not to do it again.” Ethan pats her shoulder before continuing, “Now, I’m sorry to say it, but there’ll probably be some withdrawal, so you really should leave town. Go stay with Stephen maybe – it’s a quiet place but there’s a beach and there’s definitely no-one peddling Rack’s brand of suicide, even if you do cave.”

“I need to stay here for college. I’ll just have to be strong.”

“But if you leave the hellmouth, you can let your magic develop free of it for a bit. It could do you wonders.”

“Did you miss the part where I said I’m giving up magic?”

Ethan sighs again. “Willow, what happened last night isn’t all magic.”

“But it’s the magic I did! I was so focused on trying new magic, a part of me didn’t even care if it
was dangerous. Not until I actually realised that demon wasn’t just in my head.”

“Look. You’ve been giving Rack a taste of your core power in return for a superficial high. It messes you up, and it doesn’t exactly encourage you to think straight. Give it a couple of days before you give away your spell books.”

Beneath her pallor, Willow is starting to look annoyed. “I’m decided already. I can’t put the people I care about in danger again.”

“Willow, you’re not making sense! It’s like reading the words of a spell aloud, summoning a demon and saying ‘that’s it, I quit reading!’”

“No it’s not, everyone reads! Hardly anyone does magic.”

“Your girlfriend does” Ethan points out. It is a comment born of a growing unease that Willow might actually go through with this. Willow seems to realise this and visibly pushes down her anger, simply saying, “Tara will understand.” She stares off across the courtyard and adds, “I’ll have to tell her about Rack.”

“Willow” Ethan’s voice has a trace of desperation now, “You’re too good to just quit. You could waste years denying it.”

“I’m going to do better than years. I’m doing life.”

“But people can’t just give up magic, don’t you see? It’s part of who you are.”

“Exactly! It’s all I am now! It started off as fun but now it’s all I think about!”

“That’s Rack’s cheap buzz talking.”

“No, it’s not; it’s been happening for a while.” Willow wraps her arms around herself. “I love it so much that for a while there I started not to care if hurt me. Or someone else. Look what I did to Angel.”

“That was ages ago!”

“And I’m only clearheaded enough now to even see it! Doesn’t that tell you something?” Willow stands, then bends down to hug him. “Sorry Ethan. I’m got to do this.”

Ethan doesn’t return the hug. Finally, Willow drops the embrace and leaves with a sad smile, climbing the steps and walking off into the sunshine.
Wild at Heart

Rack’s place is cloaked in that way that isn’t really a proper cloak but just about close enough to one that it isn’t possible to find it unless one is looking. Ethan locates it at the edge of the woods without much difficulty; a hot patch of air as if a fire is burning unseen. What he will not admit to later is that he then pauses for a good stretch, hyping himself up before he bursts in.

The lost causes in the waiting area mostly ignore him, too strung out to see what he’s about. They only react when he heads straight to the door, and someone yells out, “Wait, it’s not your turn!” too late as Ethan shoves it open.

Rack is prone on a pile of cushions, watching a giggling young woman levitate unsteadily between the ceiling and floor, bobbing up and down languidly like the contents of a lava lamp. She hits the carpet with a thud as Ethan breaks Rack’s gaze, lifting him by the collar and throwing him to the ground.

Instinctively, Rack shoots out a bolt of magic – borrowed from the girl, as it turns out, and she screams behind Ethan as it is plucked from her. Ethan deflects with a curse of his own before sending a ripple of a pain over Rack’s skin. Rack howls pleasingly.

Bending close, Ethan tells the prone man, “Let Willow in here again, and I’ll come back and try out worse. You leave her alone, do you hear me?”

Rack, eyes screwed shut, nods. Ethan steps away and, glancing at the girl crawling away from them, rolls his eyes. “Amy. Come with me.” Grabbing Amy’s arm, he pulls her to the feet, out the door, through the waiting lounge and back outside.

Only as the air cools around them does she react, plucking her arm from his grip and taking a step back. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Saving you the trouble of getting yourself killed is what. Now run off home. Isn’t your dad expecting you?”

Amy shrugs, folding her arms, rubbing pointedly at the spot Ethan gripped. “He doesn’t mind what I do” she mutters. Then, in a quieter voice, “Not since he found out I’m a witch like her.”

“You’re not a witch like her” Ethan returns, “She at least knew not to share her power with creeps like Rack.”

Amy glares and Ethan stares her out. Finally she says, “I know what I’m doing. Just because Willow got carried away.”

“Willow wouldn’t even know about this stuff if you hadn’t pulled her into it” Ethan counters. “You know what, you can keep away from her too!”

“Oh trust me, it’s done!” Amy stomps away, back towards campus. “The idiot was on the phone to me all last night going on about how I should quit with her. What, does she think it’s as easy as that?”

“Yes, well, don’t get me started on that.” Ethan trails after her, relenting with, “Let me walk you home at least.”

“Why? I can handle myself.”
“Not if you accidently summoned something while you were levitating in there.”

“I didn’t.” Amy scowls at him over her shoulder. “I have self-control, unlike some people.”

“Oh, Willow has control.” Ethan draws up alongside her. “What do you think this giving up magic thing is all about?”

Amy glances at him. “You’re not down with the cold turkey either, then? Gods, I don’t blame you. It’s fucking pathetic.”

“It’s tiresome, is what it is.” Ethan shoves his hands in his pockets. “Just because she made one mistake, she thinks she has to stop altogether. Fear of things being just a tiny bit unpredictable is what it is.” He stops suddenly. “Of course, one can have too much of a good thing.”

Amy stops too. “What?”

Ethan nods towards the building. “You did summon something.”

“I did not!” Amy turns to look where he’s pointing. “That’s not mine.”

“Well you would say that.”

“That’s a werewolf! You can’t summon a werewolf.”

“Is it? Oh, yes.”

Amy folds her arms again. “You need your eyes tested, old man.” She steps towards the woods. “I’m going home a different way. Good luck, Ethan.”

She is gone suspiciously quickly. Ethan wonders if she’s learnt that shadow trick Dunsnarl’s always doing.

He eyes the distant werewolf. Instinct tells him to step back and under the cover of the trees, but that’s probably where the thing’s headed.

Or not: as Ethan watches, the werewolf bounds away around the side of a college building. Allowing himself to relax a little, Ethan gets out his phone and dials home.

“Rupert” he says, as soon as his fiancé answers, “I’m at the college. Any chance of a lift? There’s a werewolf, you see, so I don’t want to risk walking.”

He hears Rupert remove his glasses. “Ethan, you’re on the same college campus as the slayer and it doesn’t occur to you to call her when you see a werewolf?”

“Oh right.”

“I’m on my way.” The line goes dead.

Ethan is about to call Buffy and Willow’s room when there is a scream from the direction the werewolf disappeared in. A part of him wants to help and a thankfully larger part of him knows that making the call will help more. He presses call and sets off towards the path that encircles the building, bending when he reaches it to scoop up a fistful of gravel in absence of a weapon.

“Hello?” greets Buffy.

“Buffy, I’m outside the main lecture hall and there’s a werewolf running around. I just heard
As Ethan speaks, a door slams and he adds, “I think they just got inside.” Which, it occurs to him, means he’s the only one out here with the bloody thing. “Hurry, could you?”

“Ethan, get inside. I’ll be there in like three minutes tops.”

“Right. Thanks.” Is it him, or is something growling nearby? Ethan stares around, sees nothing. But there is, he realises with a shiver, something shuffling around in the bushes perhaps ten feet away. Ethan looks at the building in front on him. How long would it take to break a window? Too long. He runs.

For a horrifying moment, he is aware of something leaping and following, but werewolves are not built for speed and Ethan can get a good sprint on when he has to. Racing around the building, he circles it completely and runs towards the halls of residence. Just as he’s starting to flag, Buffy appears. She holds an arm out to stop him and he swings around to see –

Nothing. “It was definitely there” he gasps. “It was just behind me a moment ago!”

“Distracted by something maybe?” Buffy steps forward, peering into the darkness.

“Or someone.” Ethan hangs back.

“What were you doing hanging around the edge of campus anyway?” Buffy sets off the way Ethan came. Ethan can’t tell what she’s armed with, but her jacket bulges ominously.

Ethan follows reluctantly. “I had to see a man about a drug den. And I am allowed to be here, you know. It’s not my fault there’s a werewolf roaming about.”

“Drug den?”

“Mystical kind.”

She glances at him. “I hope you told them to stay away from Willow.”

“Told and demonstrated.” As they leave the better lit part of the campus, Ethan gestures to the bushes. “That’s where it came from.”

Buffy approaches the shrubbery cautiously, leaving Ethan on the path. He sees her shoulders relax as no wolf appears.

A new voice sounds beside him. “Can I help you?” A shorthaired, middle aged woman is coming up the path. Seeing the way he’s facing, she looks around and spots Buffy. “Buffy?” she calls out. “I wouldn’t go that way. There’s some sort of wild animal on the loose.” “Professor Walsh” Buffy quickly hides whatever weapon she’s got behind her back. “I, um. We heard a sound.” Glancing meaningfully at Ethan she adds, “But it looks like whatever it was has gone back to the woods.”

“Good” replies the professor. “But I still don’t recommend you linger.”

“Agreed” says Ethan. The professor looks at him curiously. Buffy says, “Right. Right, we’ll, err, we’ll head back then.”

Walking off in a different direction to the professor, she whispers, “Location spell?”

“Won’t work unless I know its name” Ethan tells her. “And probably not even then – they tend not to work on anything where there’s some sort of split of personas, you see, and with a werewolf –”
“– You’ve got a person and a wolf” Buffy concludes. “Great. So all we know is werewolf, somewhere.” She stops walking and glances back. “I think Professor Walsh is gone, so I’m going back there to see if I can find any sign of it. You get to safety. Tell Giles I’ll be in touch, okay?”

****

“So all we know is someone in Sunnydale is a werewolf” Buffy concludes the following day in the Magic Box.

“Yes” agrees Giles. “We could probably say it’s most likely a student. Near campus, and the fact there haven’t been attacks or sightings until now suggest that it’s someone who moved here recently.”

“That or a townie got out of their cage” Buffy points out.

Giles nods. “Or that. It’s not much to go on.”

They spent hours last night looking for the thing, a foolish endeavour in hindsight, since Xander and Oz took the tranquilliser gun with them around half the country and it never returned. “We’ll have to find something to knock it out.”

“Does chloroform work on werewolves?” Buffy shrugs. “Wait, do we have chloroform?”

“I’ll find us something today” Giles promises.

“Something not as close quartersly as chloroform? Because, thinking about it, I’m not sure how I’d use that on a werewolf.” Buffy sighs, leaning forward over the table to study the cover of a book discarded by a customer. “Even once we find out who it.”

“I’m sure there’ll be a way,” Giles reassures her. Truth be told, he feels a little invigorated by the mystery. Werewolves are a classic, after all.

Directing her attention to Ethan, who is replenishing a jar of newt eyes on the other side of the empty shop, Buffy asks, “Is there any spell to detect werewolves? Like the turning witches blue thing we did when Amy was her mom?”

“Probably” Ethan joins them at the table. “But what would you do, accidently spill a potion on the entire student population?”

Buffy deflates a little. “Point taken.” Standing, she tells Giles, “I’m going back to the woods, see if I can find any sign of which way it went. Maybe I’ll get lucky and find it dropped an earring or something, or trampled down the undergrowth back to its dorm.” Another sigh. “Or, you know, scratched its address and phone number on a tree.”

Giles smiles. “I’ll come with you.” He stands up too. “Two pairs of eyes are better than one and all that.”

“Yeah, and you can’t pretend you’re not really enjoying this.”

Giles faulters – he had thought he was hiding his enthusiasm well – and Buffy takes pity on him with, “And, yeah: extra person, always useful. See you later, Ethan.”

****

The woods yields nothing: no earrings, no trampled undergrowth and definitely no address and
phone number. “Great” Buffy mutters after they finish up in the same clearing a second time. “You think we might find something to help in the Magic Box after all?”

“It’s worth looking” Giles agrees.

“I guess we ask Ethan then.” Buffy sets off towards the paths. “I’d ask Willow too, but…you know.”

“Yes.” Giles risks a glance at Buffy as they make their way through the trees. She looks straight ahead. “How is she coping?”

“She’s tired” Buffy answers. “Kind of non-focused. She even skipped a few classes this week which is a scary level of non-Willow like behaviour.”

“I’m afraid some withdrawal is to be expected. Lethargy can be a symptom.”

Buffy looks at him. “So it really is like that, like an addiction?”

“With certain kinds of magic, yes. Not all.”

“But she’s still giving up all magic.” Buffy sounds faintly puzzled but not disapproving. She asks, “Is that even possible?”

“For some people.” There had been a time, not long after Eyghon, when Giles had considered stopping himself, but he doesn’t tell her this. “Some people find it useful.”

Buffy steps carefully over a fallen branch. “Can’t say a magicless Willow would be a bad thing.”

“I suppose not” replies Giles, thinking of the Angel incident. “Besides, if this is what Willow’s chosen, we should support it.”

“Yeah. Absolutely. It’s just…”

“Just?” prompts Giles.

“Just she seems so sad.” Buffy steps back on to the flattened grass of the path and looks around. “Look, I’ve got a lecture this afternoon. Could you get on the werewolf case?”

“I’ll start looking for a spell” Giles tells her.

“Thanks, Giles. I’ll be over as soon as I’m done with psych.”

*****

By the time Buffy has finished her lecture, Ethan and Rupert between them have adapted the spell for seeing human magic and prepared a pellet of herbs for someone – probably Buffy – to force down.

“It was only possible because werewolves are so close to human anyway” explains Ethan. “All you need to do is swallow it and you should be able to see it standing out from the crowd. They’ll probably be shiny or brightly coloured or something.”

“Probably best to get to campus before you take it” Rupert adds. “I’ll come, of course.”

“Right” says Buffy, staring down at the pellet in distaste. “Because why eat this here when I could do it in front of a load of people?”
“It’s not as bad as it looks” Ethan tells her. “I’ll come too, if you like. I’ve an idea what to expect from the spell and it’s quiet here.”

“Sure.” Buffy grimaces at the pellet one final time before slipping it into her pocket. “No time like the present I guess.”

*****

Seeing the spell done from the outside is odd. Buffy moves cautiously as though on ice, staring around her at what Ethan knows must look like a mass of grey, but which is in fact a crowded campus. Beside her, Rupert says, “Perhaps if we head towards the lecture hall.”

“No” murmurs Buffy. “No, I think I see something over there.” She sets off towards a seating area where students are milling with take aways and drinks in Styrofoam cups. “Unless it’s just a reflection from you guys, of course. You realise you’re both majorly sparkly right now?”

Rupert glances at her worriedly and takes her arm. “Watch the step.”

“There” says Buffy. “She’s sitting over there at that table.”

“She?” Rupert turns to look.

“I think…” Buffy squints, studying the young woman. “Giles, I think I know her. She plays at the Bronze. Her and her band, I mean. I think they’re called Shy? Or Cry, something like that. They’re pretty intense.”

“What is it with werewolves and music?” asks Ethan.

“Ethan” Rupert helps Buffy edge cautiously closer to the werewolf, “I don’t suppose there’s a way to break the spell early?”

“I don’t think so” Ethan replies. “You’ll just have to put up with shiny for now.” Out of interest, he asks, “What does she look like?”

“Like there’s something trapped in there” Buffy murmurs “Something fiery.” Gripping Rupert’s arm, she steps over to the table and switches on a smile, greets the wolf with, “Hi there. Can we talk?”

*****

They can, as it turns out, talk. What they can’t do is have a constructive conversation. The young werewolf – Veruca – turns out to have no interest in keeping herself from maiming people, instead waffling on about giving in to the beast. It’s all very tiresome and absolutely reckless.

After some initial interest – how do they know? Are they werewolves too? But surely she’d sense it – she becomes defensive. She will not consent to be caged. She will not tell them where she spends her wolf nights or if anyone else is aware of her situation. She leaves quickly, after a few threats that at least tell them she’s never heard of a slayer. Buffy, to her credit, does not threaten back. With students all around, they have no choice but to let her go.

As she stalks off, Buffy twists in her chair to study Ethan with a frown. He smiles back with that forced look of innocence he gets when he is being anything but.

“What did you do?” Giles asks as soon as Veruca is well out of earshot.
Ethan opens his palm to show them a sprig of Lethe’s Bramble. “So she doesn’t decide to come after us tonight” he explains.

“What is it?” asks Buffy, squinting through the hex she’s still under. “Other than really glowy, I mean.”

“Memory modification herb” Ethan explains. “She might have some hazy recollection of meeting us, but she won’t know that we know what she is.”

“Good thinking” Buffy says. “I wouldn’t want her leaving town.” She rubs at her forehead. “Or maybe I would. It would save having to decide what to do with her.”

Ethan huffs. “I think we know what to do with her.” At Buffy’s glare he adds, “Well, what’s the alternative? Wait for her to kill someone?”

“Ethan might have a point” Giles offers reluctantly. “Unless she agrees to be locked up for her transformations, it’s only a matter of time before she causes a death. We’re lucky she hasn’t already.” He watches the deepening realisation of what she must do play out on Buffy’s face, but he stops short of naming it. Cowardly, but what words can he use to tell her to kill someone essentially human?

After a pause in which she rubs at her eyes as the hex wears off, Buffy says, “What if we capture her tonight? Hold her until morning and talk to her again? Maybe she’ll listen if we show we actually will just keep her restrained unless we have to.”

“I think that’s worth a try” Giles agrees. He stands up. “Which means I’ll have to get us a tranquilliser gun quickly. I’ll see you later.”

*****

Fortunately, a contact has a contact who has a tranquilliser gun. Best not to ask too many questions in that sort of situation, especially as his contacts are not so numerous as they where when he was still in the Council.

“Okay, I’m in the college intranet” Willow announces from the sofa, where she is hunched over her laptop. She looks tired and unwell but smiles triumphantly as she announces, “She lives in New Building, room 108.”

Buffy looks at Giles. “Right by the woods. That’s probably where she goes every transformation.”

“That narrows it down a little” Giles says, “But still not by much. It’s quite a large area.”

“She’d probably avoid the caves” Ethan says, “There’s usually something living in them that’d make a werewolf’s fur stand on end.”

Buffy nods. “Faith and me turned out nests over there a few times. So we know woods, but not by the caves.”

“Thinking about it, she’d probably stay close to the campus side” says Giles. “They’re drawn to humans, especially to, well, humans giving off a significant amount of pheromones. Willow, I don’t suppose Oz could help us work out more specifically where she might go?”

“I emailed, but he doesn’t remember his transforms. Besides, his wolf never really got to see much of Sunnydale.”
“Then I say we start off on the college edge of the woods and work our way in.” Buffy glances at the clock. “Willow, you’d better get back – it’s not long ’til sundown. Giles, are you sure you want to come with me?”

“Buffy, I’m not about to let you face an unleashed werewolf alone.” Giles studiously ignores Ethan’s exasperated sigh.

Buffy smiles. “Thanks, Giles.”

*****

A tranquilliser gun and a net seemed adequate protection before sunset, but, moving through the woods in search of a transformed Veruca, it suddenly seems rather flimsy. Still, Giles reflects, he’d rather be doing this than having yet another quiet evening at home. Not something he’d share with Ethan, that, least his partner take it personally or, worse, point out all the personality flaws such a mindset probably reveals.

“Anything?” whispers Buffy.

“I think you’d sense her first” Giles whispers back.

Buffy shakes her head. “Well then either my sixth sense is broken or she’s nowhere near here.”

They step carefully around a thorny patch of undergrowth, which Giles shines his torch at, stopping when he spots a tuft of snagged fur. “Buffy.”

She follows his gaze to the fur. “That could be werewolf.” Examining it, she adds, “Or, a really blonde bear.”

“We don’t know it’s from tonight” Giles cautions.

“But we know this is somewhere she’s been at least once” Buffy replies. “I say we circle round and come back here before we do the rest of the route.”

“Agreed. Failing that, we could –” Giles breaks off with a jolt as something howls up the path ahead of them. Buffy spins towards the sound. “Come on!” She sets off at a sprint. Giles follows, struggling to keep up. Glasses slipping, he almost crashes right into Buffy when she comes to a sudden halt. “Buf –”

“Shh!” A finger to her lips, Buffy puts a hand to Giles’ chest, keeping him from moving forward. Puzzled, Giles turns his attention to the sounds up ahead; the thrashing and rustling of undergrowth mingled with yowls and snarls. But no screaming. Giles shifts his weight slightly to signal to Buffy that he knows not to step forward. Her hand leaves his chest. Noticing that the torch is facing the ground, Giles switches it off before the beam gets them noticed. They stand in renewed darkness, listening.

At first, Giles presumes that there is more than one creature not far off, one presumably Veruca and the other, something else non-human. Humans, after all, would scream. But then human-sounding voices and the footsteps of humans – clumsier, generally, in this sort of environment than vampires – sound close by, moving in and out of clear earshot as whoever it is makes their way through the trees. With a rush of blood to his face, Giles wonders if they’ve accidently stumbled upon a liaison. That would explain the sound of thrashing.

But not of growling. No, that was definitely a werewolf. A werewolf now apparently silenced and surrounded by unafraid humans. Werewolf hunters? Or perhaps they are vampires after all? Giles
strains to hear what they’re saying but can make out only a few snatches:

“…call it in…”

“…never seen this type…”

“…a wolverine?”

“…fucking city boy…no, it’s definitely a sub-T…”

Giles and Buffy step back sharply as a beam of light slices through the trees. A new, more authoritative voice joins the conversation: “A Team, standard transportation procedure. B Team, go on with the patrol. Keep alert; might be more of these things.”

By the new torchlight, Giles sees a group of khaki-clad men lift what is unmistakably an unconscious werewolf. They carry her off out of the circle of light.

Buffy steps silently into a thick patch of plant life, pulls Giles with her and into a crouch. They kneel unnoticed as a second group of men traipse past, quieter now than when they were approaching Veruca, weapons raised.

It is the sort of weaponry that rather puts the tranquiliser gun into perspective.

Once they are gone, he and Buffy emerge and make their silent way to the spot the men had congregated. There is no sign whatsoever that a werewolf was ever there.

*****

“Fucking outrage is what it is” says Ethan in the Magic Box the next day.

Buffy, sat at the table with Xander and Anya, stares at him. “You were all ready to kill her!”

“I never said –”

“No, but you were right there with the implying!”

“This is different.” Ethan folds his arms, leans against the counter.

“Yeah” says Xander, “Different in an at least this way no-one dies way, right?”

“But they do get carried off by armed humans” Anya mutters.

“Better than what she’d have done to an unarmed human” Xander points out.

Ethan shakes his head. “That rather depends on your perspective.”

Giles, sat on the steps, removes his glasses to avoid seeing the young people’s reaction to his partner’s callousness. “Ethan, say your perspective was staring down the business end of a werewolf?”

“…point taken.”

Buffy sighs. “I kind of think it is for the best. I mean, I’d have probably had to kill her eventually.”

“And then she’d be dead” Anya supplies.

“Well, yeah.”
“No” says the ex-demon, “I mean, she’d be dead then as opposed to whatever she is now.”

Buffy frowns. “What do you think she is now?”

Anya shrugs. “At their mercy.”

Xander shakes his head. “Still better than being dead.”

“Is it?” asks Ethan.

“Again” Buffy rolls her eyes. “You wanted her dead.”

“I didn’t want her dead” Ethan insists. “I just know you’d have the right to do it if it came to it. Those soldiers, on the other hand, don’t have the right to carry her off to Gods know where.”

“She is human most of the time” Giles acknowledges. He is aware, suddenly, that the girl probably has parents who will report her missing, lecturers who will wonder why she’s absent, and all the while an unaccountable group of presumably government-sponsored humans know exactly where she is. It’s not a comfortable situation but still, “We don’t know what they’ll do with her, which means we can’t assume anything good, but we can’t assume anything awful either.”

Immediately Anya supplies, “Except that they’re operating in secret which tends not to lead to good.”

“Yes, well. Obviously we need to find out more.”

“Maybe they’ll give her some sort of rehabilitation like those creepy guys did with Marcie” muses Buffy. “That’s way preferable to me killing her, right?”

Ethan shakes his head. “Marcie was a freakish human, Veruca’s a werewolf. Those men could want nothing but hugs, puppies and rainbows – which is, as we all know, what the US army always wants – and they still don’t have the right to take her, mystically speaking.”

“I don’t care about mystical rights” returns Buffy. “I care about people not being dead.” She straightens up in her chair. “This way, Veruca’s not dead and all the people she could have eaten get a share of the not-deadness. I call this a win.”

“Rainbows and puppies all round” adds Xander.

No-one looks especially convinced.
Giles is rather pleased with the sketch. Despite what Ethan may say, he can draw something more detailed than a stickman when he puts his mind to it, and this drawing records his brief torch-lit view of the soldiers fairly accurately.

“That’s them” Buffy says, standing behind the sofa to look over his shoulder. Then, “Have you heard from Faith?”

“Not since last time you asked” Giles tells her. Honestly, it is not always easy to co-ordinate international phone calls, and Wesley’s schedule seems to be busy. Certainly busier than Giles’, though that is admittedly not saying much these days. He asks Buffy, “Perhaps I could come with you on patrol tonight? It might be worth seeing if we can find any more of these men, get an idea what they’re up to.”

“Tomorrow, maybe” Buffy replies. “Tonight, I’m party bound.”

“Oh?” Giles looks up at her. “Is that wise, given we still don’t know what these soldiers want?”

“We’ll go tomorrow, Giles. Or, you guys could go tonight – you don’t need me to keep an eye on a bunch of humans. Meanwhile, I’m taking Willow to a party because she really needs one.”

“The lack of magic still a suck fest?” Xander infers.

“In a big way” Buffy confirms. “So will you guys patrol?”

“Alright. I’ll, um, call you, shall I, if we find anything?”

“Sure. Thanks guys.” As Buffy leaves, Giles looks to Xander, suddenly aware that he might have just volunteered the boy to miss the party, but he is rubbing his hands together in anticipation and talking about which weapons they could bring. Apparently, Xander is as bored as he is and wasn’t expecting to be invited to the college party.

Nor is he likely to be feeling particularly able to help Willow, and Giles feels a rush of sympathy for him. So when Xander reveals that the rocket launcher wasn’t all he stole from the military base two years ago, Giles lets the illegality of that slide and agrees to take some guns and a distress flare on their scouting mission. Depressingly enough, it will be a relief to have something to do.

*****

“Hi, Ethan”

“What!” Ethan beams as the girl enters the shop, carrying a large cardboard box and accompanied by, “Tara, good to see you again. Willow, I found a book about earth magic that might –”

“I quit, remember?” Willow’s voice is subtly edged as she sets the box down on the counter.

“But it’s gentle stuff” Ethan argues.

“I thought you could use these things” says Willow, ignoring that. “Half of it you sold me anyway and I don’t really want reminders around.”

Opening the box, Ethan finds several years’ worth of herbs, candles, crystals and talismans, not to
mention a book or two. “I can’t give you a refund for all this.”

“I know. It’s just…Well, I don’t want it in my room. So if it’s useful…”

Ethan closes the box again. “I’ll keep it for when you’re ready to use it again.”

Willow gives him a frankly peeved look. “Not gonna happen, Ethan.”

Scowling, Ethan shoves the box back towards her across the counter. “Well if you’re so sure about that, you can put it all back in the basement yourself.”

Briefly, Willow looks alarmed. Then her mouth sets into a thin, determined line and she hefts the box and heads for the stairs.

Once she’s gone, Tara, still standing at the counter, tells Ethan, “You…You shouldn’t test her. Sh-she’s doing really well.”

“Yes, I can see that. Really well at denying her true nature.” Ethan studies Tara. “You didn’t want any of that stuff?” If Tara’s quitting too, it will only make matters worse.

“I took m-most of the books. B-but I’m trying not to have too many reminders for Willow in, in my room.”

“You can’t think she’ll actually stop for good. You must be able to sense her power.”

“I…Yes. W-when we d-did spells before she quit, she…she is powerful. B-but people do give it up.”

“Not often forever” Ethan argues, “But it’s always a waste either way.”

“W-Willow is good at other things.”

Ethan deflates a little. “She is. It’s still a waste though. And so very unlikely to work.”

“She…she’s managing. We’re going to a party tonight and –”

“And she’ll spend the whole night itching to cast just like she would anywhere else.”

“W-well, she’ll…she’s…”

“It will take more than a party to distract her.”

“W-we’re trying to help R-Riley talk to Buffy, so there’ll be something for her to focus on.” Tara looks down at the counter. “And me.” She blushes. “Sh-she can focus on me. I’m…I’m helping her. You should too.”

As Ethan and Tara look at each other unhappily over the counter, Willow returns, boxless. “Done” she announces. She says to Ethan, “So I’m guessing I was stupid to hope you’d help me talk to Amy.”

“What Amy does is her business” Ethan replies. Then, seeing her hurt expression, he adds, “She won’t stop going to Rack until she’s ready and trying to tell her otherwise will just suck you back in. You should stay away from her.”

“Right. And so will everyone else that could help her.” Willow takes her girlfriend’s hand. “Come on Tara.”
They leave Ethan alone to go down to the basement and refill the box with the contents Willow put away on the shelves, set it aside for when she comes back to herself.
Pangs

Through the depths of sleep, Ethan is passingly aware of a hammering on the door, and of Rupert leaping up beside him and hurrying downstairs. As a low, urgent conversation sounds below, and the kitchen light is switched into glaring life, Ethan rubs his eyes and reaches for the bedside alarm clock. It’s 4.25 a.m. Groaning, he shifts himself to see what’s going on.

Downstairs, he finds Rupert in the kitchen, in conversation with, “Angel, what a displeasure.” Ethan smiles benignly and looks from the vampire to his partner and back again. “What brings you here at stupid o’clock?”

“My friend had a vision” Angel replies.

“Something so intricate that it couldn’t be conveyed on the phone?”

“I’m here to help.” The vampire turns awkwardly to the side. “Would you mind putting some clothes on?”

Ethan looks down at himself. “Yes, I would actually.”

Glancing up from making tea, Rupert says, “Put some pyjamas on, Eth.”

“I don’t own any pyjamas.”

“Yes you do – I bought you some last month. I did show them to you.” At Ethan’s thoughtful frown, Rupert rolls his eyes and adds, “They’re in the bottom drawer.”

Nudity thus properly hidden away, Ethan returns downstairs. Rupert, now seated at the desk and taking notes while Angel examines the bookshelf, tells him, “There. They look good on you.”

Ethan acknowledges this a non-committal hum and goes to look over Rupert’s shoulder, pointedly placing himself between his partner and Angel. After scanning the notes, he says, “This is all too vague to justify waking us before dawn.”

“I couldn’t exactly come after dawn” Angel points out. To Rupert, he adds, “I’m going to have to stay here.”

Rupert looks a little taken aback, but responds, “Of course. Unless you’d prefer to find somewhere, um –”

“What? Dank and mouldering?” Ethan supplies.

Angel shakes his head. “I want to be on hand to help fight this thing.”

“Very well” Rupert agrees. “As it happens, Buffy is going to make thanksgiving dinner here tomorrow, so you can discuss with her how t –”

“– I don’t want her to know I’m here” Angel interrupts.

Rupert shuts up to stare at him. Ethan says, “What, so your plan is to hide in our bathroom all day and jump out to save her at the last minute?”

“If she knows I’m here, it’ll be a distraction. With danger headed her way, that’s the last thing she needs.”
“Danger’s always headed her way!” Ethan counters. “She lives on a hellmouth! Not to mention she’s a slayer. Actually, how is it you plan to protect someone stronger than you?”

“Like I said, I’m here to help her any way I can.”

“Honestly? I don’t think she’ll need you. But thanks for the heads up, and if you leave now, I’m sure you can find a nice crypt before the sun rises.”

“Ethan” cautions Rupert tiredly. He has removed his glasses, and wipes them before telling Angel, “You worked alongside her for years before you left for L.A. It doesn’t seem necessary to ask us not to tell her you’re here.”

“It’s better this way” Angel insists. “Trust me.”

*****

“Hello Buffy” greets Ethan as soon as the slayer gets through the door the following day. “Angel’s in the bathroom – he’ll be out in a moment.” As the vampire steps from his hiding place looking murderous, he adds, “I don’t trust you, incidentally.” He smirks at the glowering vampire and attempts to look passably chastened at Rupert’s glare.

Buffy is staring at the vampire. “Angel?”

Angel seems to make an effort to look less angry. “Hello Buffy.”

“What are you… I mean…” She steps towards him but stops suddenly short of him, reaches out to touch a hand but settles for a sleeve. It is hard to tell if she is thrown by the fact that Ethan and Rupert are in the room, because this is their first interaction as exes or simply by how long it’s been since she last saw Angel. Ethan grudgingly allows his smirk to mellow into a knowing smile and busies himself with research.

*****

Not that he’ll admit it, but it isn’t long before Ethan is regretting outing Angel. Vampire and slayer talk intensely and with a considerable degree of melodrama, voices occasionally raised, more often lowered, and sometimes unused in favour of lingering gazes. Naturally, Buffy has a lot to say about Angel’s original plan of keeping the visit strictly stalker-esque, and about Angel’s determination to protect her after nearly a year apart in which she managed not to die, but mainly there is just the ongoing emotional turmoil that seems to come with being Buffy and Angel. Not what one really wants playing out in one’s living room.

Finally, they head out to speak to a Father Gabriel, leaving Ethan and Rupert with some merciful quiet before returning to report that Professor Gerhardt isn’t this week’s sole murdered citizen.

The following morning, the lovelorn ritual begins afresh while Ethan and Rupert are left to alternate between looking into the murders and following Buffy’s brief instructions about how to prepare a thanksgiving dinner.

When Willow and Tara enter with history books, there is some debate about how to proceed (in regards to the vengeance spirit, that is, not the dinner, which is by now in the oven). Things erupt between Angel and Buffy, with the former somewhat hypocritically keen to kill the killer and the latter thrown by a conversation she had about historical atrocities with Willow the night before. Willow, for her part, is quiet, standing apart with her arms folded and a slightly nervous expression, though she does, when asked directly, say she won’t help kill the spirit. Tara stands shyly by the desk, watches Angel and Buffy argue with some alarm, and gives no opinion.
In all likelihood, Ethan decides, Willow is just not thinking straight because of the strain of suppressing her magic. If anything is going to twist a person’s mind into excusing murder it’s that. Willow is so far from thinking straight that she is unmoved when Xander shows up with syphilis.

As Rupert, Buffy and Angel disappear off into the kitchen, Ethan takes Willow outside, leaving Tara alone with Xander and Anya’s bickering. They sit by the fountain, grateful for the fresh air after the heat from the kitchen and the heated conversation inside. “If this is thanksgiving” Ethan decides, “it’s not what it’s hyped up to be. I don’t see why I should be stuck cooking a meal to celebrate the fact that your ancestors buggered off across the ocean years ago and left my ancestors wondering where all the religious types had got to.” He glances at Willow but she doesn’t respond. Her arms are finally uncrossed, one finger trailing the water behind her. Watching the ripples, Ethan makes a small noise of realisation. Looking tactfully away across the courtyard, he tells her, “Willow, you’re turning the water pink.”

“Oh!” Willow plucks her hand from the water as if scalded, and Ethan senses a rush of unsteady magic as she corrects the mistake.

Unsteady as in, not hers. “Willow” begins Ethan sternly.

“It wasn’t me!” Willow’s face crumples, and she hides it in her hands. “It was Amy!”

“Amy?”

“I went to see her this morning. I thought what with her being at her dad’s for thanksgiving she might be in a, a better frame of mind for –”

“For being told to quit?”

“Well, yeah. Look, I know you told me to stay away from her, but you’re not the boss of me and she needs help!”

“And I’m guessing it went swimmingly?” Ethan prompts.

Willow scowls at him. “You’ll be pleased to know she gave me some… a, like a zap of magic. I didn’t want her to!”

“I know you didn’t. And I’m not pleased to know.” Ethan pats Willow’s shoulder and, after a moment’s hesitation, puts his arm around her. She asks him, “You won’t tell the others, will you?”

“They’d understand. It’s not like you asked her to.”

“I know, but I don’t want everyone to worry.”

“So you’ve just been hiding it?”

“Yeah, it’s why I’ve been going around with my arms folded. I think Tara’s just been putting it down to withdrawal stuff, but really, it’s because I’ve been melting things I touch.”

Ethan hastily detaches himself and shifts away, and Willow gestures at him, saying, “See, there you go with the worry! I didn’t want anyone to worry! Especially not now, with Xander getting sick being more worry than we were looking for anyway.”

“We really ought to deal with this vengeance spirit, you know. You don’t want Xander to be the first person for a hundred plus years to have smallpox on his death certificate.”
“Don’t joke about that.”

“It’s not a joke.” A horrible though occurs to Ethan. “And, actually, if it’s contagiou –”

At that moment, a robed figure crashes into the courtyard. Or, on second glance, not a robed figure but someone with a blanket over his head. Smoke emanates rather alarmingly from whoever is underneath. Whoever it is knocks, somewhat hesitantly, at the door before stepping away sharply into a patch of shadows. Willow stands up quickly. “Spike?!”

Ethan stands too, looking closer at the slither of face they can see under the makeshift hood. When Buffy opens the door, the blanket falls back a little as Spike steps to the threshold with a plea for help. Ethan takes the opportunity to pull Willow into the brightest stretch of sunshine in the courtyard.

“Spike?” Angel has come up behind Buffy and stares at his kinsman. “Since when were you back in Sunnydale?”

“I thought I’d scared him off again” Buffy says.

“Yeah?” says Spike, pulling the blanket over further over his head, “Well turns out, you’re not the main problem in this town. Look, let me in, can’t you?” He glances up, stepping back into the shade. Tells them, “I had a run in with the same blighters you were fighting. The soldiers. They messed me up. I’m not a threat.”

“You’re always a threat” Angel says.

“Not now” Spike presses himself against the wall as what little cloud cover Sunnydale ever has shifts menacingly, flooding the courtyard with renewed light. “Oh for pity’s sake, let me in! I can’t hurt you!”

“You can’t?” Rupert takes his place in the doorway.

Spike shakes his head. “The bloody soldier boys caught me, didn’t they? Bolloxed me up good and proper.”

“Oh” Willow edges forward. “Like when you couldn’t kill me?”

“Yes” Spike seems to seize on this hopefully until Buffy snaps, “You were going to kill Willow?! I thought you were after me!”

“I was, but you weren’t there! But I couldn’t, could I, pet?” This to Willow, whom Spike fixes a pleading gaze on.

“It’s true” Willow tells them. “There were some performance issues.”

“He wouldn’t come to us if he wasn’t desperate” Ethan points out.

“There is that, I guess” says Buffy. “We do get to enjoy the desperation.”

Rupert sighs. Asks Spike, “Information?”

The vampire gives a quick nod. “I saw their base. I was right in the thick of it, for days.” This to Buffy, who rolls her eyes and remarks, “Great. Like that’d be worth not staking you.” At the fear that crosses Spike’s face, she relents with, “Fine. I’ll hear you out.”

“Buffy” Angel puts in, “You can’t trust him.”
“Oh, I’m way ahead of you there” Turning to Rupert, she adds, “But if he has seen anything, it’s not like we’re overloaded with intel.”

“Quite” Rupert looks over to Ethan. “Eth, are you okay with having him in our flat?”

“So long as he’s tied up” Ethan agrees.

“Naturally. Very well, come in Spike” Rupert steps aside as the smoking vampire dives through the doorway. “I’ll get some ropes.”

*****

“What if I need to take a piss?” asks Ethan.

“Then just walk in there and take one” Giles tells him, straightening a chair. He supposes a lot of households look like a battle have been raged in them immediately post-Thanksgiving. But his literally.

The children are gone now, Anya and Xander dropping Willow and Tara off at college while Buffy left with Angel for a private goodbye.

Ethan fidgets, glances at the bathroom door and whispers, “Rupert, you know I can’t piss with someone watching! Why couldn’t we tie him up in the kitchen?”

Giles sighs. The vampire has been secured in the bathtub for a few hours now despite Ethan’s ongoing protests, and he has no interest in moving him. “You agreed to invite him in” he points out.

“He has information.” Ethan fidgets some more. “And any chance to know what these bloody soldiers are up to is worth almost anything. But not him watching me piss.”

“Information he hasn’t shared thus far.”

“Oh, I’ll do a truth spell” Ethan waves a hand dismissively. “After I use the toilet with no-one watching!”

“We are not moving him, Ethan.” Giles casts a glance to the bathroom door and adds, “Besides, he’s just fed after apparently a long time without, so chances are he’s asleep. I’d go now if I were you.”

Ethan looks about to argue for a moment, before nodding and scurrying away. Once he re-emerges, Giles tries to keep from grinning as he asks, “Success?”

“Yes” Ethan tells him, “but only because he was asleep.” At Giles’ growing smirk he adds, “You’re a sadist, Rupert.”
“Can you get that?” Rupert calls through from the kitchen when the phone rings one morning. Ethan, already reaching for it, lifts the receiver and answers, “Hello?”

“Ethan” There is a mournful sob.

“Willow, are you alright?” Behind him, Ethan senses Rupert abandoning the washing up and coming to the counter.

“I can’t do this” Willow tells him.

There is no need to ask what she is referring to. “Well of course not” Ethan tells her. “I told you that giving up magic is –”

“No, I will do it!” Another sob. “I just need a little help.”

Ethan sighs, taking pity on her. “Is Buffy with you?”

“She’s in a lecture.”

“Can’t you just hold on for a bit until she gets back? Maybe if another person’s there –”

“I need someone who knows what it’s like” Willow’s snuffles shift into trying-to-stop-crying sounds, which is an improvement from crying sounds. Ethan rolls his eyes, turning around so that Rupert can’t see. “What on earth makes you think I’d understand what it’s like?”

“Well you know about magic at least.”

“But not about giving it up.”

“Well, no-one I know knows about that. You know?” Willow gives a shaky sigh. “Please Ethan, I just need someone to sit with me for a bit until I get it back under control.”

“Where’s Tara?”

“She already sat with me yesterday, and I don’t want our whole relationship to be about her stopping me doing magic. Look, Ethan, if you don’t want to get involved, can you pass the phone to Giles?”

“We’ll both come” Ethan turns to Rupert and finds he is already pulling his coat on. “We’ll be with you in a bit.”

*****

A bit, it turns out, is long enough for Willow to do magic. This is clear when Ethan knocks on her
dorm room door and she opens it seeming relaxed and comfortable as opposed to jittery and restless.

“Well, I knew you were coming” she tells him when he asks what she cast. “So that helped me calm down is all. Hey, where’s Giles?”

“He’s parking the car” Ethan takes a seat by the computer. “Willow, it doesn’t matter that you cast, but –”

“Yes it does! It matters because it means I screwed up!”

“So you did cast something?”

“Yes” Willow flops down on to the bed. “It didn’t work anyway.”

“Well, maybe you’re just rusty or something. I don’t know. Once you get back into the swing of it –”

“No! I’m not doing any swinging back into all that! I’m done with it.”

“Willow, magic isn’t –”

“Isn’t what?” Willow is up again, and pacing. “Isn’t dangerous? Because I seem to remember summoning a demon!”

“That wasn’t magic, that was –”

“That wasn’t magic?” Willow rounds on him. “Well, if magic’s so safe, why don’t you just go back to summoning things for fun with it?” There is a knock on the door and Willow answers it, while Ethan finishes, “…it was the way you were using it!” As Rupert steps into the room, he adds, “Hello, Rupert. Talk some sense into her, could you?”

Rupert turns to Willow. “Are you alright?”

She offers a small smile. “I’m okay.”

“She’s okay” declares Ethan, “because she did a spell. Willow, that’s the only reason you’re not a shivering mess right now.” A shame he reflects, because were it not for such side effects magic – all magic, even the dark stuff – would be such glorious fun.

“What spell?” asks Rupert, while Ethan wonders where that thought just came from.

“Just a…” Willow waves a hand. “Just something I thought might actually help me stop but it didn’t work. So, back to willpower.”

“You did a spell to stop yourself doing spells?” asks Ethan, distracted by the irony from a growing, almost long-forgotten craving. “Good luck with that.”

“It was going to be just one last spell” Willow counters. “But it didn’t work anyway.”

“It did something” Ethan shoots back. “It got you fired up after all this moping.”

“Oh, gee, I’m really sorry if my crisis is boring you!”

“It doesn’t have to be a crisis!”
Ignoring that, Willow turns to Rupert. “It was a mistake, Giles. I promise that was the last spell.”

“Willow” Rupert begins. “While relapses do happen –” Ethan snorts derisively and gets up, starts pacing. Rupert continues, “You’ve been struggling with this for some time now. I think we do need to ask whether this is the right approach for you.”

“What?” Willow looks horrified.

“I told you so” says Ethan. He glances around, hoping to find a crystal he could hold to quell his energies, which seem all over the place all of a sudden.

“You have a lot of power” Rupert goes on, “It was always going to be difficult to stop altogether.”

“But I have to stop altogether! It’s the only way.”

“I can see you think that, but –”

“No, you don’t! You don’t see anything!”

“You know” Ethan says suddenly, “I just remembered, I need to go to Willy’s today. I said, um…I said I’d help him with some wards. I’ll meet you back home.”

“What?” Rupert has removed his glasses and blinks hard a few times. “Yes, um, see you later.”

Ethan bolts from the room and heads straight for the Magic Box.

*****

It transpired soon after Spike’s arrival that truth spells and vampires are, as Buffy so helpfully put it, unmixy things. Last night Rupert found one that might be useful and today he sets about performing it, while Ethan searches through the books for reference to what he might need to complete a spell of his own. The restricted section of the Magic Box only goes so far. The best, the most dangerous books, have always been here.

He’s been getting ready all day and now the magic is building. He can feel it humming in every atom of his being, itching to get out…

“Bloody hell” Rupert pulls off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Glancing up, Ethan tells him, “Love, if you’re going to need to adjust your prescription, can we wait till we visit home? I don’t want to blow our savings on your crap eyesight.” He turns his focus back to the shelves, pulls a book onto his lap.

“My glasses are fine, Ethan” Rupert replies. “Usually.”

“Usually?” Spike splutters. “I won’t have you doing mojo on me if you can’t see what you’re doing! You’ll turn me into a stink beetle or something!”

Ethan shakes his head sadly. You’d think with more than a hundred years’ experience the vampire would know how impossible it is to get a transmogrification out of a truth spell gone wrong. Like buggering up baking a cake and accidentally constructing an A-bomb. No, he’ll show Spike magic. With a slow smile, Ethan turns the pages of the book to the chant he’s after, faithfully transcribed in Latin.

Behind him, Rupert bumps into something and swears. Tucking the book under his arm, Ethan climbs to his feet and touches his partner’s shoulder. “Do you have something in it?”
Behind him he hears Spike sigh and tut. “That’s right, sorcerer. You take good care of him. Two of you might as well be married.”

“That’s the general idea” agrees Ethan.

Spike nods and then – without warning – springs to his feet. Ethan can only gape. Before he can think of any defensive hex, he’s pushed – surprisingly gently – aside. Spike grabs his coat and flees before he or Rupert have quite caught up with things. “Bugger!” Ethan starts to follow but then finds he doesn’t care enough to abandon his spell. Automatically, he puts a restraining hand on Rupert’s arm. Rupert asks him, “What are you doing? We need to go after him!”

“What, before he gently shoves someone to death? He can’t do any harm.”

“Not being able to kill is a very different thing to not being able to do any harm, Eth.” Rupert rubs at his eyes again. Ethan sighs and tells him, “Love, you can’t go out there if you can’t see anything.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll call Buffy. Oh, and she was going to spend time with Willow! I really don’t like dragging her away from that. Are you sure you can’t do a location spell? Or go out there and cast an illumination?”

“Sorry, I need to get over to the shop” Ethan lies, “Late customer.”

“I don’t think any of your customers should take priority over finding Spike. Especially not the late ones.”

“You say that now, but next time we need information, you’ll be glad I kept them on-side.” Ethan folds his arms. “Why can’t Buffy just look for him tomorrow?”

“No, I think tracking him as soon as possible is the order of the day. Well, I’ll phone her. You… could you look in the first aid kit before you go, see if we have, erm, an eye bath or something similar?”

Ethan frowns. “It’s that bad?”

“I’m afraid everything is rather blurry, yes.”

Ethan nods, torn between worry and a stirring awareness that, bedroom-wise, this could be even better than a blindfold. If only he didn’t have his spell and bloody William the Bloody to worry about first. “Alright, love, I’ll find you something.”

*****

“Oh, Spike! Of course it’s yes!”

Ethan, standing in the kitchen, stares at Buffy and Spike with his mouth open. He shuts it. Opens it again. Shuts it. Manages, “Got to say, I didn’t see that coming.”

“See what?” Rupert, who has no hope of seeing anything right now, emerges from the bathroom, feeling his way.

Buffy and Spike break apart, and Buffy gushes, “Giles, Spike and I are engaged! Look!” She holds up her hand, expecting them to admire the ring. Poor Rupert is stuttering vague exclamations along the lines of “What? But…what?”
“I know it will take some getting used to” Buffy adds, “but I need you to try to be happy for us.”

Ethan reassures her quickly, “Oh, we are happy”. No point antagonising the hexed slayer, especially not when, now that she’s here, she can take over looking after Rupert while he gets back to making final preparations for what should be a brilliant bit of magic. He comes out the kitchen to give her ring the examination it deserves. “A skull. Lovely. I’d have gone for diamond myself, but –”

“I will get her a diamond” Spike tells him. “This was just what I had on me.”

“I don’t need a diamond. This is perfect.”

“Oh, good lord” Rupert stumbles his way to the sofa.

Ethan tells him, “You can’t judge, love. You proposed with a ring made out blutack.”

“Blutack!” Spike giggles. “And here I thought watchers are cheapskates!”

Buffy elbows him. “Spike! It was probably just a moment of spontaneous romance, like with us.”

From the sofa, Rupert gives a hollow laugh. “Not quite as spontaneous as that, I suspect.”

Ethan tells them, “It was very romantic.” He grabs his bag from its hook by the door and pulls his coat on.

“I’m sure it was” Buffy heads to the sofa. “And, Giles, I know you’re surprised but I really do want you to be happy for me. For both of us.”

Rupert gives her an unfocused stare and addresses Ethan. “Eth, please tell me we have scotch.”

Given that his evening has narrowed to the sofa and the sound of Buffy and Spike snogging far too nearby, Giles is rather relieved when Xander and Anya burst in, even if it’s to report a demon attack. After the understandable revulsion in response to Buffy and Spike’s display, they pool their information and work out the source of the mischief: Willow.

Willow who told Giles he can’t see anything. Willow who, in frustration at his lack of understanding, called Xander a demon magnet. Willow who said Buffy should marry Spike, though Buffy seems unable to see the connection between that and her sudden desire to marry Spike.

Willow who said, what, exactly, to Ethan? “Ethan’s been acting strangely” Giles says.

Xander replies, “So at least he wasn’t affected.”

Giles glares, though he isn’t sure he’s looking at the boy. “This is serious” he says, “Ethan’s been distracted today” Thinking about it, he’s sure Ethan would ordinarily stick around to help when his fiancé is completely blind, not that there’s any frame of reference. “Lord knows where he is now” Giles decides, “so it’s probably best to find Willow first. She may not be aware she’s doing this.”

“I thought she wasn’t doing magic anyway?” Anya asks. Presumably to Xander, she adds, “You said she quit.”

“She did a spell to have her will done” Giles realises, “It must have worked after all.”
“And it backfired on you guys” Buffy concludes grimly. “Come on, we have to find her.”

*****

Perhaps, Giles thinks as he leans in the doorway of Buffy and Willow’s room, he ought to have stayed behind. He can’t even see if Willow is in her dorm room or not, though not seems more likely, judging by the children’s reaction.

All he can be sure of is the door frame. But he can’t wait at home. Not with Ethan missing.

“Amy” Buffy says.

Giles becomes aware of a presence behind him. He stumbles into the room to let Amy in. Someone – hopefully not Spike – takes his hand and guides him to one side. Giles breathes deeply and catches a whiff of cigarette smoke. Spike, then. Damn.

Well, that or Amy smokes. She is audibly ruffling as Buffy interrogates her.

“Why would you give Willow this stuff?” Buffy is asking.

There is a noise like a heavy box being dumped on the floor, and Amy replies, “It’s not for Willow, it’s for Tara. She’s a witch, right?”

“Then why didn’t you take it to Tara?” demands Buffy.

“Yeah” echoes Xander, “and since when were you all giving away with the magic stuff?”

“Since I talked to Willow this morning” Amy answers Xander’s question first. “She said I should just give it up for a while and see how it goes, and I thought, hey, well I can do awhile.”

“I’ll bet” murmurs Buffy. Amy continues, “And I did take it to Tara, but she was out. What was I going to do, just leave bottles of demon blood on her doorstep?”

“You could have done that” Anya says. “The milkman does it all the time. Only with milk.”

“Whatever” says Amy. “Do you guys know where either of them is? I don’t want to lug this stuff around all night.”

“We need to find them too” Buffy tells her. “If you want to quit the quitting for like, a minute, we could really use a location spell.”

“Oh, I see” says Amy, “So when Willow quits, you guys all support her, but when I quit –”

“Amy” Giles interrupts. “We have reason to believe Willow may be a danger to herself. If you don’t want to cast a location spell, could you at least help us work out where she might be?”

There is a pause, and then, sounding amused, Amy replies, “Since when is that wardrobe called Amy?”

With a frustrated noise, Giles shifts to face where she seems to be now. Buffy puts in, “Sorry, Amy, I didn’t mean to be all do a spell now, it’s just…”

“We need someone to do a spell now” finished Spike.

“Exactly” says Buffy. “Amy, have you met Spike? He’s my fi –”
“Hey” says Amy suddenly. “Was the sky always that colour?”

There is a lot of shuffling, four pairs of feet turning to the window. Spike swears, and Xander says, “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“What?” asks Giles, who hasn’t bothered turning.

“Sky’s gone purple” Anya tells him.

“Purple like a sunset?” asks Giles hopefully.

“No, purple like an apocalypse. Oh, and now there’s blue smoke!”

Buffy says, “I need to get over there!”

What follows is, from Giles’ point of view, a confusion of running in darkness. Initially he thought he couldn’t possibly keep up, but Spike, who seems to have rather taken this son-in-law thing to heart, grips his wrist and pulls him along. After clattering gracelessly down the stairs, Giles has a moment to recognise from the suddenly-fresh air that they are outside, and then there is a shriek.

“Oh, man” he hears Xander say, “Where do they keep coming from?”

A demon then, presumably. Giles hears it growling. Around them, students react with a flurry of screaming and running feet.

“Get in!” yells someone as a car pulls up. Giles finds himself bundled in. From what Giles takes to be the front seat, Amy says, “Sure, bring the old blind guy, that’ll help.”

“Are they following us?” Buffy’s voice.

“Looks like.” That’s Xander.

“Good” says Buffy. Then, presumably in response to the looks she’s getting, “Well at least they’re not staying on campus.”

It seems to be a small car, and there are four of them crammed into the backseat. Anya seems to have hogged the passenger seat, and starts up a litany of panicked guesses as to what the purple sky might mean. On Giles’ left, Xander leans forward to comfort her, while on his right, Buffy and Spike seem to be kissing again. Giles sighs pointedly and braces himself against the seat to avoid being knocked against them as the car speeds towards the blue smoke.

At some point, the sound of traffic becomes louder and more urgent, as even Sunnydale’s usually oblivious population realise the need to put distance between themselves and whatever is now looming over the town. Above the screech of traffic, Giles picks out a more animalistic screech. A clatter of clawed feet sounds briefly on the roof, before whatever it is is thrown off. Xander mutters, “Can they not just leave me alone?”

“Demons?” Giles guesses.

“Still following” Xander confirms.

“Some of them are turning round” Anya observes.

“Yeah” says Amy, “Cause they don’t want to go towards it like us idiots.”

The car comes to a sudden stop. Giles hears the unpleasant lip-noise of Buffy and Spike
disengaging before someone yells a warning and he is dragged from the vehicle in something of a hurry.

They tumble onto tarmac – disturbingly warm tarmac – and Amy immediately screams, “My car!”

Buffy shouts, “Take cover!” and pushes Giles aside as a blast of hot air shoots down from somewhere. Overhead, there is a leathery flapping sound, as of monstrous bat wings.

“Giles, this way!” Xander pulls Giles aside, onto thankfully cooler ground. Amy and Anya follow, pulling Giles into a crouch. Amy is muttering, “Shit, my dad’s gonna kill me.”

“I don’t think so” says Anya. “The dragon might.”

“Dragon?!” yelps Giles.

“Yup” Xander confirms grimly.

Footsteps, and suddenly Buffy and Spike are close at hand. Buffy says, “Giles, any tips on dragon slaying? Like a nifty trick that doesn’t involve getting too close to them?”

“Is it still airborne?” Giles asks.

“Yeah it’s – oh, it just set fire to the factory!”

“Factory?” Giles has no idea where they are.

“We’re at the abandoned factory Moloch had a go at trashing” Buffy explains.

“At least it’s abandoned” Giles says. He frowns, trying to think of anything nifty about dragons from his training. Funnily enough, nothing comes to mind. Perhaps because, “Dragons are extinct in this dimension. Someone must have summoned it.”

At that moment, a familiar voice sounds: “Rupert! Hello” Ethan sounds so cheerful that Giles can’t help but picture him smiling and waving as he joins them. Buffy greets him with, “Tell me this isn’t your fault.”

“What isn’t my fault? Rupert, did you see the dragon? I got it for you.”

Xander asks, “Which anniversary is dragon again?”

Above them, a shriek issues far too close and Giles feels the air pulse as beating wings swoop past. Around him, the group instinctively duck and cower, except, Giles assumes, for Ethan, who comments, “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Buffy tells him, “I am so going to kill you.”

“Clearly” Giles puts in hastily, “Ethan is under Willow’s spell.”

“I’m not under a spell” Ethan says, “I just wanted to try something new.”

“Right” Buffy seems to make an effort to control her slayer instincts. “You’re right: He’s under a spell and he’s just to stupid to see it.”

“Oi!” says Ethan. “I’ll have you know, I just pulled off some extraordinary magic!”

Spike says, “Any chance you could extraordinarily undo it? Because I don’t fancy fighting that
thing.”

“No-one’s fighting my dragon! It’s a present for Rupert!”

“Ethan” Giles reaches for his partner and is rewarded by a firm hand gripping his own. “Just tell us how to kill it.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I rather think if we’re going to be pet owners, we should start off with something fluffier and less flammable. A rabbit, say.”

Anya gasps. Giles continues, “So how do we kill it?”

Xander adds, “And tell us you haven’t named it.”

“Well naturally it’s called Puff” says Ethan. “And it can’t be killed; that’s rather the point of dragons.”

Buffy asks, “How come it’s staying here? A whole town to ravage and it’s just flying in circles above us.”

“Probably just deciding which one of us to eat first” says Amy.

“No” Ethan explains, “It can’t stray too far from the summoning circle – it isn’t really in this dimension until all those herbs are burnt.”

“Cover me” commands Buffy, before darting away from them with a crescendo of hurried footsteps. Giles tightens his grip on Ethan’s wrist, but Ethan doesn’t follow, only shouts outraged complaints in Buffy’s wake, while Spike, his voice growing distant as he presumably darts away from them and into the dragon’s path, calls up insults to the beast. Whether the dragon understands, or is simply drawn to the fast-moving object below it, it seems to follow Spike, screeching and roaring like a sentient thunder storm, before a sudden snap seems to split the air and they are left with a ringing silence.

“Oh, come on!” exclaims Ethan. “I worked really hard on that!”

“You owe me a car” says Amy.

Buffy comes back into hearing range, having presumably put out the fire at the centre of the summoning circle. “Where’s Spike?” she demands.

“He went that way” Anya tells her.

“Where?” Buffy’s voice seems to come from several directions at once as she darts about looking. “Spike? Spike, sweetie? Oh, God!” Closer now “What if he burnt? Spike!”

“I’m right here, baby” Spike’s voice sounds from some distance away. There is a sound of footsteps as Buffy runs to greet him.

Shifting himself from the tarmac, Xander says, “I’m going to find a phone booth, call the fire brigade. Then we really need to find – Willow!”

“Guys!” Willow has joined them, sounding harried. “Are you all okay? We came as soon as we saw the dragon. Was it apocallypse? It’s over now, right?”
“No thanks to you” says Anya.

“Well we came as soon as we could” Willow sounds offended. “What happened?”

“Ethan summoned a dragon” Xander explains, “But only because –”

“Why would you do that?” Willow’s voice re-orientates towards Ethan, who is still being gently restrained by Giles.

“Don’t give me that!” replies Ethan. “You were the one who told me to do it! You said I should summon things for fun.”

“I didn’t mean you actually should!”

“Guys” Xander sounds suddenly alert. “I hate to break it to you, but – demons!”

“What?” A new voice, possibly Tara. “Oh, there’s so many of them!”

“They’re after Xander” Anya explains.

“Why?” asks Willow, “What did you do?”

“What did I do?!!”

“Willow –” begins Giles, but he is cut off by Amy calling over them, “Buffy! We need help here!”

There is a pause in which a growling noise creeps closer, and Buffy doesn’t reply. Just a pause, that is, before Willow exclaims, “Wait, Buffy and Spike!? What’s Buffy doing with Spike? Ethan, why would you do this, how could you?”

“Hey, don’t put this on me!”

“Willow” Giles snaps. “This is your doing: Your will-be-done spell is effecting everyone!”

“S-spell?” Tara asks quietly.

“That spell?” asks Willow. “But it didn’t work!”

“What sp-spell?”

At that moment, fighting breaks out as the demons attack. Ethan presses himself against Giles, Xander screams, Amy calls for Buffy again and Tara whispers a protection spell. Anya, pushing past Giles, apparently grabs Willow, who yelps, “What are you doing?”

“Undo it” Anya commands. “Whatever you did, stop it before Xander gets hurt!”

“But it wasn’t me!”

“Willow” Giles tries, “Could you at least try ending your will-be-done? Under the circumstances –”

“Right, right.” Willow quickly reels off a rhyming counter hex. It sounds like she’s making it up on the spot, but she has such power that it works all the same.

An indefinable something passes through them, and Ethan suddenly inhales sharply. “Oh Gods! Rupert, are you alright?”
“I’m fine” Vision floods back. Giles finds himself beside a chain-link fence behind some dumpsters, a building burning steadily some feet away. A few feet away from that, Buffy and Spike are springing apart with exclamations of disgust. The demons, mercifully, are gone.

“Oh” says Amy quietly. She looks down at her fingertips as they spark in response to the end of the magic. “Oh. It was a hex.”

“My hex” says Willow quietly. “Oh Gods, you guys – I’m so sorry.”

“You did a spell?” Tara puts a calming hand on her shoulder.

“Just one last one! I thought if I did a spell to get my will done, I could will my magic away and everything would be alright!”

“Some flaws there” mutters Amy. She steps slowly away from them and towards her ruined car, wrapping her arms around herself as she goes.

“I didn’t think it had worked!” says Willow tearfully.

“It’s over now” Giles tells her quietly. “Come on, let’s get out of here before we’re arrested for arson.”

They call the fire brigade from a booth on the next street before walking back to town, Tara’s arm around Willow’s shoulder the whole way.

*****

“Eat a cookie, ease my pain.”

Ethan smiles at Willow. “You needn’t feel any pain over me, sweet child. I rather enjoyed the whole thing.”

Xander pauses with his cookie halfway to his mouth. “You including the part where we almost got incinerated by a dragon and ripped apart by demons in that?”

Ethan shrugs. “We live in Sunnydale; it probably would have happened anyway.”

“I can’t argue with that logic.” Xander bites into his cookie. Buffy folds her arms and adds, “But I can argue that you’re sick, twisted and mean to laugh at me for kissing Spike.”

Ethan smiles and nods. Noticing that Willow is apparently feeling about as much sympathy over Buffy’s embarrassment as he doesn’t, he winks at her and points out, “And Tara was okay about it, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah” Willow sounds doubtful. “And at least I didn’t tell her to do anything except miss a lecture to hang out with me. But that’s bad enough!”


“Amy left town?” asks Ethan.

Willow nods. “She came round last night and said the magic induced non-magic was refreshing and she’s going to take a break from it somewhere Rack isn’t.”

“Good for her.”
Willow regards him tiredly. “So you think Amy can do it but I can’t?” she asks, “Not that I’m disagreeing at this point.”

“I think she can and should take a break” Ethan says. “That’s not the same as quitting for good.”

“Right.” Willow gives a small nod. Buffy squeezes her shoulder in comfort until some remark from Spike, who is back to being tied to a chair, draws her into a round of bickering. Ethan indicates the door with a sideways nod and Willow sets the cookies down, follows him out the door.

*****

“It’s not working is it?” Willow asks as soon as they’re outside. “I can’t get rid of it, I can’t quit it. It’s in me.”

“That’s a good thing” Ethan tells her encouragingly.

“Is it?” Willow sits down at the edge of the fountain. “Cause I hate it.”

“No you don’t. If you hated it, you really would have gotten rid of it with that spell. But it wasn’t really your will.” “I guess. But I hate what it could make me do. Like, remember yesterday, when I almost killed you all?”

“Only indirectly.” Ethan sits down beside her.

“Not really looking for a qualifier on the almost-killed-my-friends front.”

“Well, we’re all okay, aren’t we? No harm done.”

“Tell that to the factory.”

“Willow, you’ve come back to magic and all it cost was an empty building that was just waiting to be a vampire nest anyway. It’s a small price to pay.”

“It could have been a lot bigger.”

“If you do insist on fixating on what-ifs, imagine what could happen if you don’t start casting again” Ethan counters. “Think about all the demons you won’t be able to ward away and all the apocalypses you won’t be able to help stop.”

“I guess.” Willow sighs. “I guess I’m back to it whether I like it or not. I can’t stick to quitting. I know I can’t. It wasn’t working. Even casting without knowing it, I felt all whole and like me again.” She gives Ethan a sidelong look. “Feel free to start gloating, by the way.”

“I don’t want to gloat. I’m just glad you’ve realised at last.”

“And you’re not worried I might actually kill everyone next time?”

“The only thing I’m worried about is how you will insist on controlling everything. A spell to stop yourself doing spells, really?”

Willow pouts. “Well, call me strange, but I don’t like my life being out of control.”

“You are strange. Everyone’s life is out of control.”

“And everyone’s scared by it.”
“I’m not.”

“Whatever, chaos-guy.”

“Look, you want to take control of things? Fair enough. Not my cup of tea, but it’s your life. But Magic isn’t the way to do it. And that doesn’t mean magic can’t help you with anything else.”

“I guess.”

“Well you said it yourself, quitting didn’t work.”

“It didn’t” Willow agrees, frowning. “I guess I need to find a new mojo for my mojo. A non-controllly, new-me kind of thing.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Maybe. It’s just…How?”

Ethan sighs. “By not being scared of it would be a start. By leaving the hellmouth for a while if you possibly can. And by getting to know your powers again, stop treating them like a problem.”

“You say that like it’s easy.”

“Well it will get easy. You could try studying your history and theory again.”

“With you?”

“If you like.”

“I would like.” Willow smiles.
Ethan rolls over sleepily to find Rupert awake and smiling at him. He smiles back and says hello. Or tries to.

That’s odd. He’s completely lost his voice but his throat isn’t sore at all. Now Rupert mouths “Are you okay” at him and frowns. Seems to try harder to speak.

Ethan hopes he wasn’t talking Latin in his sleep. That would be embarrassing. He tries coughing and feels himself cough but produces no sound. Bugger. Pen and paper then, hastily retrieved from the bedside table where he keeps them to scribble down spell ideas and the occasional sketch. He writes, *Possibly you could have taken Buffy’s prophetic dream a little more seriously, love.*

Rupert gestures helplessly. Snatches the pen and paper to write, *I did research it.*

Ethan snatches it back to scribble: *You hung out with Olivia all day!!!!*

Rupert rolls his eyes, takes the pen and responds: *I know things are bad, love, but you really don’t need to resort to more than one exclamation mark.*

*****

While Olivia, quiet beyond merely being unable to talk, is in the bath, Rupert scribbles a note in the back of the phone book: *The news is calling it an outbreak of laryngitis. Make sure Olivia doesn’t have reason to question that, won’t you?*

Taking the pen from him, Ethan writes, *I suspect she might in the circumstances.*

Rupert’s reply: *Try not to encourage it.*

Ethan doesn’t have to ask why. Rupert will stick to the bloody council protocol of telling no-one unless there is no other choice, even when not taking a wage from them. Thinking of the council, he writes, *You think the boys in tweed could help?*

Rupert shakes his head, but replies: *I’ll email them, but they don’t always reply very promptly.* Frowning, he adds, *It will be someone’s job to monitor news coming out of Sunnydale in any case. Switching to a fresh page, he asks, Could a general reversal spell help?* He passes Ethan the pen.

Ethan replies, *I could try.*

*Try in the shop, is the reply. And thank you.*

Right – Olivia. Even counter magic can’t be done at home. Not that it would be a bad idea to look through the books in the Magic Box for any clue as to what’s causing this.

Whatever it is, it doesn’t feel like magic.

At that moment, Olivia appears, towel-clad. She raises a hand in greeting and smiles a strained smile, then mimies drinking. Nodding, Rupert pours them a whisky each and settles at his desk to start researching, with only the word “gentlemen” to go on.

*****

Counter magic proves futile, in part because Ethan can’t speak the incantation. Possibly if Willow
were here they could manage to offer enough wordless magic between them, but she and Tara are at least well out of this, holidaying in LA to let Willow’s magic unfurl away from the hellmouth. Ethan wonders if they’ve seen the news.

The town is sealed off – they couldn’t return if they wanted to – but in case they have any insight he sends them an email anyway. It ends up being longer than it needs to be simply because by this point it’s a relief to be addressing someone, even by writing.

Email sent, Ethan goes into the back room to see to the shrine. Janus, it turns out, isn’t interested in prayer put to him in the form of voiceless yearning. Always was fickle like that. Ethan leaves a little blood from his palms in the dish by the shrine, but neglects to change the candles.

He reads for a while before taking a break to explore a town altered, familiar rendered strange the way it would be after snow-fall.

Unlike a snowy day, this is not quiet. Trying to make up for the bewildering absence of speech, people pummel their car horns, slam doors and tap their fingers against the solidity of park benches. Those who are out, that is. Most seem to have stayed at home. No children out to play in the silence despite the unasked for holiday. A man with an admirable sense of opportunism sells boards and marker pens. The street preachers are marginally less annoying than normal.

Willy’s Place, is busier than usual. Eric, a huge Lava Demon from the caves, holds court over by the juke box, playing a succession of cheesy eighties pop songs at high volume, warding away any quiet. Seeing Ethan enter, he extracts his arms from his folds and addresses him with a series of specific gestures. Ethan gapes: since when do Lava demons know sign language? He shrugs to convey that he doesn’t understand. Looks over to the bar when Willy taps the counter.

Turning to the board that usually displays the cocktail menu, Willy writes, *He wants to know did you do this?*

Ethan writes on the whiteboard he purchased from the entrepreneur: *You understand him? Am I the only person who doesn’t speak ASL?*

Willy writes: *I took a course at the college.*

Ethan rubs out his questions with a sleeve, and replaces them with, *So what’s Eric’s excuse? You might want to answer him,* Willy writes. *He’s not good with quiet.*

*I hadn’t noticed*, writes Ethan, aware that writing might be the best way to communicate in here right now even if they could talk, the music is that loud. *And obviously I didn’t do this! Why would I? I came in to see if anyone knows what’s going on.*

Eric shrugs his massive shoulders and turns back to Madonna. Willy writes: *You think it’s those soldiers meddling?* Ethan shakes his head. Writes: *Can’t see how they would.*

Willy shrugs. Scribbles: *It’s just it’s normally someone who’s at least stopped by. Whatever it is, it hasn’t been here.*

Finding no further answers at Willy’s, Ethan returns to the Magic Box, where he resumes his research without much hope of success. To his honest surprise, a few customers turn up. Some are in the know, looking to fix the situation with magic, while others are just calling in because his is the one shop open and not selling booze, and, given the strangeness of the situation, they want to
Could be that a few of them are seeing magic in a new light since they woke up voiceless, but if that is so, they do not show it. Sunnydale selective observation prevails. Really, Ethan decides, Sunnydale is always silent in a way – silent on the subject of the supernatural, certainly. Perhaps this is just the hellmouth taking that truth and reducing it to its purest form, like that time it made that unfortunate girl invisible.

Rupert and Olivia show up with lunch, a good thing as the café across the road is closed. Ethan smiles at them and clasps Rupert’s hand, and they settle down at the table.

The children arrive later, first Xander and Anya, then Buffy, who had the forethought to purchase a whiteboard.

Showing Buffy his own whiteboard, Ethan writes, *Know what’s causing this?*

Buffy shakes her head. Scribbles on her own board, *Is it you?*

Ethan grimaces. *Why does everyone keep asking that?* He shakes his head just make sure it’s clear. Writes: *Believe me, I’d make this more fun.*

Her response: *Don’t get any ideas.*

Getting up in the night, Ethan finds Olivia up and peering out the window. Automatically, he tries to speak to her and then remembers. She senses him anyway, and looks around, blank-faced, then points out the window.

Stepping closer, Ethan can see something moving out there. He can’t see it clearly, but something about it still makes him shudder. Literally shudder, that is, and Olivia puts a comforting hand on his shoulder.

They both jump back when a demon glides past the window. Instantly, Ethan’s body lets loose a scream which of course Rupert, asleep upstairs, can’t hear. That’ll be the point, he realises, chilled. No-one can hear him scream. Any of them scream. Shit.

But – thank you, Janus – the creatures don’t seem interested in them. They just smile their grim smiles and drift away, leaving Ethan and Olivia gasping and shaking and still alive. Before Ethan can calm himself down enough to think, let alone move, Olivia has a pencil in hand for sketching.

Rupert and Ethan are cuddled up in bed the following night, listening to the silence of the flat, interrupted here and there by the watery music of Olivia showering. She’s been doing that more than she has too since this started, using the mundane ritual of it to escape the unnerving situation. All the more unnerving for her, with no previous knowledge of the supernatural. And she can’t even ask questions, poor thing, without the hinderance of a pen and paper.

For that reason, or perhaps simple dread of the possible answers, she hasn’t asked questions yet. Ethan suspects this will be her last visit.

All of a sudden, there is a brief glimmer in the air and then a soft – but audible – sigh escapes Ethan’s lips. He sits up and tries, “Love?”
“Ethan?” Rupert sits up too. “Good. That’s a relief.”

“Thank the Gods for slayers, eh?”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t have wanted to find out what they needed those hearts for.”

“Me neither. Though I’ve got to say, I rather wish we’d tried keeping words out the bedroom while we had the chance.” Ethan lets a hand trail down Rupert’s bare chest. Rupert looks put upon and slips into sarcasm. “Yes, I suppose there’s always an upside.”

Doomed

“You could come with me if you like” offers Ethan, standing from the breakfast table and ready to head to the shop.

“Thank you” replies Rupert, “but I think I’ll have a quiet morning.”

These days, Rupert doesn’t have any other type of mornings, but today he’s recovering from dropping Olivia off at the airport for an early flight, so Ethan nods understandingly. “Alright. Well, I’ll –” And then the earth shakes.

Ethan gasps and stumbles sideways. He’s caught by Rupert, who pulls him under the table. They crouch there together, breakfast things shattering around them, until the shaking stops. “Bloody California!” exclaims Ethan as soon as it’s over.

Rupert helps him up. “Are you alright?”

“Fine, fine. I’d better get over to the shop and clear up. You sure you’re not coming?”

“I’ll clean up here.” Rupert bends to pick up broken china, stacking brittle shards into the bowl of a larger piece. “I may call round later.”

“Later then” As he leaves, Ethan doesn’t hold out much hope of seeing Rupert before he returns home. Now and then, his partner seems to find helping in the shop a distraction from his unemployment-bred boredom, but recently he just seems to resent being unpaid labour. It has crossed Ethan’s mind to offer him a wage but he’s not sure how he’d take it. Not to mention, having Rupert muck in every now and then is one thing, but if Rupert had regular hours they’d be on top of each other, and not in the good way. All the time they’ve lived together, they’ve had at least a few hours a day apart. Ethan doesn’t know what working together might do to them and, with Rupert in the mood he often is these days, he isn’t sure he wants to find out.

*****

It’s a good thing he gets to the shop when he does, because some of the things the shaking earth flung from the shelves really shouldn’t mix. When Ethan enters, tentacles are growing out the floor and some of the crystals are glowing ominously.

Fortunately, he’s got it more or less under control by the time Willow arrives.

She looks well, the colour back in her cheeks and bounce back in her step. She chats about her holiday as she helps sweep up, and bemoans coming home to find that the earthquake saw her lectures cancelled.

“Well you missed fun here” Ethan tells her.

“The voice thing? Yeah, I was going to reply to your email but then the town opened up again so I figured you guys fixed it.”

“I hope we didn’t cut your holiday short?”

“No, we were coming back today anyway. Hey, do you know where Buffy is?”

Ethan frowns, suddenly aware that he doesn’t even know if she came through the show down with
the gentlemen in one piece. Rupert must have heard from her, though, or he’d be worrying. “I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“She wasn’t in the dorm room when I got back. Must be a Riley thing.”

Behind them, the bell clangs and Rupert comes in. “Ethan, have you – oh, Willow, hello. How was L.A?”

“Demon free and fun. I’ve got loads of photos to show you guys. Giles, do you know where Buffy is?”

“She just left our flat.” Rupert looks at Ethan. “She’s very worried that the earthquake may be foretelling something. I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything?”

“No” replies Ethan. “Though with the recent mutism that isn’t surprising.”

“I suppose not.”

Willow pipes up, “I bet it’s just regular tectonics. But I’ll go find her and do the listening thing – I must have just missed her.”

“Yes” says Rupert as Willow goes, “Well, good to see you.”

“You too. Bye, Ethan.”

“See you, Willow.” Ethan frowns at Rupert. “You don’t think it was a portent, do you?”

“Not really. Not without other signs. But Buffy is a little sensitive to earthquakes, as you can imagine.” Rupert frowns. “So much so that wasn’t especially interested in my theories about what the soldiers might be up to and where.” He sits down, lost in thought. Ethan sweeps up around his feet, and replies, “Well those must be shaky theories, to be fair. All they seem to do is pop up, be annoying and bugger off again.” “I was going by Spike’s information. And our sightings.” Rupert sighs. “She didn’t ask after Faith either, though I can’t say I’m not a little relieved about that.”

“She not adjusting well to the no-killing lifestyle?”

“It won’t be possible to tell how she’s adjusting unless they stop using magical means of mind control whenever she puts so much as a foot out of line. Or at least, that’s the impression Wesley gave me when we last spoke. And if even Wesley’s having qualms…”

“Then Gods help the girl” Ethan concludes grimly.

“I wouldn’t mention it to Willow. Not at this stage in her recovery.”

Ethan forces a smile without abandoning the grimness. “Wouldn’t want her to know that the dear old council can be all for reckless magic when it suits them?”

“I’m not about to defend their every policy. But it’s not as though there’s a precedent for discipling a slayer like Faith.” Rupert stands. “I should research the earthquake, if only to put Buffy’s mind at rest. Keep an ear out for rumours, won’t you?”

“Will do. See you later.”

*****

“Cheer up” Ethan tells Giles a few hours later, once Buffy has gone off to the library and Xander,
Willow and Tara have left to search the museum for the book the Vahrall demons need to complete their ritual.

“Cheer up?” echoes Giles. “Yes, because that’s what one needs in the face of the apocalypse: good cheer.”

“At least you’ve got something to do now.”

Giles is a little stunned by that and it must show on his face, because Ethan hastily amends with, “I just mean, you’ve done this before and all we need is to find this book and it’s all sorted. There’s no need to act like it’s –”

“The end of the world?” finishes Giles dryly. Entirely possible, he reminds himself, that Ethan is scared and covering it with false optimism, so he sets annoyance aside and sticks to practicalities: “It would help if we knew where the Word of Valios is.” He picks up a book and thumbs it open.

Ethan stares. “Wait, what’s it called?”

“The Word of Valios” Giles repeats.

Ethan raises an eyebrow. “That thing you got in that estate sale?”

Giles gapes. “What?”

“That thing from the estate sale you took me to in Bristol, remember? Looks like a fancy arrow head.”

Giles takes off his glasses, trying to picture it. “A book with an arrow head on the front?” He’s fairly sure he didn’t buy any books at that sale.

“It’s not a book.” Ethan steps over to a chest by the counter and starts pulling things out, scattering them across the floor. “I’m sure the bloke called it the word of something.”

“But we didn’t get anything useful at that sale” Giles reasons, joining the search nonetheless. “It was mainly fakes, wasn’t it? We only bought the hellhound fang and the…and the…”

“Word of Valios?” Ethan holds it up with a triumphant grin.

Giles takes the talisman. It does look a little like an arrow head, a small tube, flat at one end, the other end pressed into a point that is topped with a symmetrical symbol. “You’re certain this is it?”

“More or less.”

“Right” Giles gets to his feet hurriedly. “You call Xander, I’ll take the car and catch up with Buffy.”

*****

“Why is he here?” asks Buffy, leaning against a tree in the woods some time later, indicating Spike, whose half-hearted attempt at cynical commentary seems to be finally grating on her.

“And why is he wearing that?” adds Ethan, glancing up from the incantation he’s scratching into the soil around the edge of the sacred circle with a twig.

“Sod off” mutters Spike with a lack of threat that is characteristic of him these days.
“He was g-going to stake himself” Tara explains.

Buffy doesn’t appear particularly distressed at the thought, but she makes no further comment, perhaps not wanting to upset the witch, who stands a little closer to Spike than anyone ought, as though to offer comfort. Spike makes a show of looking disgusted by the concern, but doesn’t step away.

“Done” says Willow, setting the last ritual candle in place.

There is a howl a little way off and they all freeze and look towards where it’s come from. An owl. Hopefully an owl.

“Tell me again why we’re doing this outside” mutters Xander.

“Because the ritual calls for it” replies Rupert, studying the book in his hand for the next step, his other hand holding the torch. “Now lay out the crow bones to the north of the ram skull.”

“Which way is north?” asks Willow.

“It’s, err…” Xander puts a finger in his mouth and pops it out again, holds it up. Willow tells him, “That’s for wind direction.”

“Right” Xander hastily dries his finger.

Seeing Rupert look to him, Ethan says, “I’m not sure.”

“Well, we need to know for certain” Rupert tells him. “Unless the Word of Valios is properly destroyed, it’s only a matter of time before the demons find it.”

Tara steps over to a clearing and looks up at the night sky. “Which one is the north star?”

Joining her, Willow stares around for it, before murmuring, “I think that’s Leo, but…oh – guys!”

Stepping over to see what she’s pointing at, Ethan backs away at the sight of the demons advancing through the undergrowth. “Rupert!”

“We need a barrier!” Willow hurriedly grabs supplies from the bag, crouches to get started, as Buffy hefts her weapon and marches towards the attackers, undergrowth crunching in her wake.

Doubling back to stand behind a tree, Ethan pushes past Spike, who has leant against it with the chuckle of someone expecting a good show.

“Where’s Faith when you need her?” murmurs Willow, glancing up as Buffy gives the three demons a traditional slayer greeting. Tara asks, “Shouldn’t we wait until she’s back here before we get the barrier up?”

“She can manage” Rupert tells her. “And our priority has to be destroying their means of ending the world.” But then he steps away from the ritual circle as though to help, and Ethan has to halt him with a hand on his arm and prompt, “Rupert, the ritual.”

Rupert looks torn for a moment before snatching up the crow bones, making a quick judgement call as to which way is north and crouching to set them out one handed, the other hand still clutching the torch, book balanced on his knees. Seeing this, Ethan hurries over to help him. A little way off, Willow and Tara have started the barrier spell. Xander, stupid boy, seems to have run after Buffy. The slayer is not visible now, but the frenzied rustling of undergrowth, the sporadic
thuds and growls paint as clear a picture as any view of the battle. Just as Ethan is wondering whether someone should pull Xander away before he is trapped on the wrong side of the barrier, the boy returns, slamming through the undergrowth with a yell of, “Buffy says hurry!”

Ethan finds the stick and completes the written portion of the incantation. Magic swells beneath his hand. Standing over him, Rupert draws breath for the chant.

And that is the moment one of the Vahrall demons gets past Buffy and crashes into their midst… just as the barrier spell goes up, trapping it inside.

“Uh oh” Willow manages, before the demon lunges. Springing to her feet, Tara pulls Willow back as Xander jumps into the demon’s path, crumpling as it strikes him.

Rupert gives the torch and spell book in his hands to Spike of all people and, joining the fray, yells over his shoulder, “Ethan, finish it!”

“Right” Getting to his feet and taking a few quick steps away from the unfolding fight, Ethan turns to Spike and explains, “It takes two – I need you to read this part of the chant” He reaches for the Word of Valios, which Rupert tucked into the pages of the book, pointing to the chant as he does so.

“Are you insane?” counters Spike, attempting to hand the book to him.

“You can follow a basic spell, can’t you?” Ethan argues. He crouches down again and slides the Word of Valios under the ram skull, kneels with his hand on it. “You did that whole thing with Drusilla and Angel.”

“Yeah, back when I could fight! I don’t fancy standing in front of that thing doing exactly what it’s here to stop.” Spike gestures to the demon, who seems to be enjoying itself throwing Rupert and Xander about. Huddled under a low hanging branch, Willow and Tara are working on getting the barrier down again. “You’ll do fine” Ethan insists.

Spike, after staring incredulously at him for a moment, begins the chant with an air of one unfairly put upon.

For every word from Spike in Latin, Ethan adds a line of Greek. It is stilted at first but the waiting magic swells again, responding to it and lifting it, forcing them into a more flowing supplication.

Then the demon crashes through the sacred circle. Instinctively ducking down and to the side, Ethan tightens his grip on the skull, the magic demanding that the ritual be complete.

Spike, apparently, has no such intuition, and abandons his chanting just because the demon picks him up and throws him against a tree. Pages of the dropped book flutter to the forest floor as the magic dissipates and Ethan lets go the skull, scurries behind a nearby rock and away from the demon.

The demon looking for the Word of Valios, he realises belatedly. Which he left underneath the skull in the centre of the chalk circle, not a foot from where the demon is standing. Bugger.

At least it’s hidden. And the demon hasn’t spotted it yet, seems more interested in beating up Spike. Standing up behind the relative safety of his rock, Ethan shouts, “Rupert – a little help here!” But then he spots Rupert, unconscious on the ground, and Xander slumped against a tree, groaning. Willow and Tara are deep into their chant.

“Damn it” Ethan looks round to the demon, the skull and the currently-being-pounded vampire. If
the barrier were down, the heroic thing to do would be grab the Word of Valios and run. Thankfully, it is not down, because Ethan isn’t sure he could pull that off. Isn’t sure what he should do instead either so he settles for running over to Rupert, cradling his head in his lap.

“Rupert?”

Rupert groans reassuringly.

Ethan glances over to the demon. Its foot is dangerously close to the skull but it still hasn’t noticed the talisman beneath it. Having caught Spike with the book, it seems fixated on punishing him, and Spike finally retaliates, twisting with a growl to give himself leverage to throw a punch that knocks the demon back and over the skull, flipping it over.

Next, several things happen at once: the demon sees the talisman, Spike, apparently not in pain, gives a triumphant whoop and lunges at it, and Willow and Tara’s chanting reaches a peak that sends magic pulsing through the night air and tears the barrier down. Buffy appears, rushing in from the other side to get the last demon, but, honestly, Spike has this in hand. Watching the fight unfold, Ethan jumps when Willow touches his shoulder. “Is he okay?” she nods to Giles. Behind her, Tara is reviving Xander.

“He’ll be fine” Ethan confirms. “Someone needs to do the ritual.”

“On it” Willow nods. “Come on, Tara.”

*****

“Buffy!” A muscle-bound young man hastily lowers his torch as they emerge from the trees. Ethan freezes as he clocks the camo.

“Riley” Buffy blinks at him for a moment. She doesn’t seem surprised to see him but neither does she seem to know what to say.

“Is everything alright?” he asks, and the question seems coded, as though he’s not sure how much to say in front of strangers.

“Yeah” Buffy replies. “Everything’s sorted.”

“Oh. Good.” The young soldier nods shyly at the others and smiles widely when he recognises, “Willow, hi! And Tara, good to see you.”

“Hey Riley” Willow grins at him. “You just out for a walk in your camo gear?”

“I” Riley glances down at himself, eyes widening. “It’s just, err…”

Ethan, deciding that the newcomer is not about to shoot, doesn’t stay to hear the rest. Supporting Rupert who is conscious but not necessarily coherent, he edges sideways and away, towards the safety of the well lit campus. Spike comes round to Rupert’s other side to help, obviously keen to escape the soldier’s notice, and Ethan doesn’t begrudge him this.

*****

“Very convenient, us having the talisman in our living room” Rupert comments later. It is the second time he’s said it in as many minutes and Ethan looks at him worriedly. Replies, “I suppose so. Except for it leading directly to your obvious concussion that is. Come on” He stands up.

“Hospital, now.”
Rupert, sprawled on the sofa, waves a hand dismissively. “I’m fine. I just mean to say, if we had more artefacts like that…”

“Then you could enjoy even more concussions, yes.” Ethan pulls his fiancé to his feet and steadies him, guides him towards the door.

“I mean” murmurs Rupert, “Just think of the Gem of Amara, just sat there for who knows how long! If we’d known about it, we could…Where are we going?”

“Hospital. We could what?”

“Well we could prevent things before the demons even start causing trouble. And it would give me something to do.”

Ethan nods, not necessarily understanding, but keen to be supportive for as long as it takes to get Rupert in the car. “That sounds like a good idea, love. Come on, let’s get you patched up.”
“So then I thought it might be worth checking the catacombs at the convent” Rupert tells Ethan, side stepping slightly to let the young partygoers mill more comfortably around them. “I’ll have to come up with a suitable cover story, of course. Tell them I’m a historian or something.”

“It seems like a lot of trouble for one chalice” replies Ethan, looking around. Over on the other side of the room, Buffy is entwined with the muscular soldier. Probably not the best time to go up and wish her a happy birthday.

“Not at all, when it has the mystical potential of this one” says Rupert.

He’s been at this all week, pouring over his books for obscure references to obscure artefacts hidden in Sunnydale, things that could be used by or against them. Already they have a cursed urn hidden behind the kitchen bin and now it seems Rupert is pretty close to finding this chalice that may or may not be referenced in an ancient text he visited the museum to study.

Really, Ethan can’t help but be a little worried about having all these appealing little apocalypse starters just lying around the house, but better they be in Rupert’s possession than anyone else’s, he supposes. That and its given Rupert a purpose at last. One that involves both books and a lot of exploration of old tombs no less. “Remind me to start work on that protection spell” he says. “It’s only a matter of time before you disturb something’s nap.”

“I think I can manage a demon or two” replies Rupert loftily.

“Oh, I know you think that.”

“I’ll be alright, Ethan. Besides, I do wonder if the soldiers haven’t reduced the demon numbers a little – I’d have thought I’d have come across some by now.”

“I wouldn’t talk about that too much here.” Ethan nods to Buffy’s new squeeze. He still has his arm around her and is talking to a group of other young men. Probable they’re all soldiers.

Rupert looks puzzled, and Ethan suddenly realises, “Oh – you don’t know!”

“Don’t know what?” Xander joins them, trailed by Anya.

“About” As a group of men wander past, Ethan drops the comment, but nods meaningfully to Riley.

“Oh” says Xander with a look of dawning understanding. “That”

“Yeah, that” mutters Anya.

“That?” repeats Rupert, “That what? What are you all talking about?”

“You don’t know?” asks Xander. “But you were there when we all left the woods.”

“And he’d just taken a blow to the skull, remember?” Ethan says.

“Oh, yes. How’s that healing, by the way?”

“I’m fine” replies Rupert, coldly. “Except for not knowing what you all apparently know, that is.”
“Well, the thing is…” Xander goes quiet as the music cuts out briefly and a track is changed. He looks to Ethan for help.

“Well” Ethan tries, “You recall how your slayer has a tendency to sleep with the enemy?” Again, Ethan nods meaningfully at Riley.

Rupert’s eyes widen. “But… I can see his reflection in the window!”

“Not that kind of enemy” says Anya.

Rupert’s wide eyes narrow again with understanding. “Oh.”

“Yes.” Lowering his voice, Ethan says, “We’re essentially partying at base camp.”

“While things get dissected right under our feet” Anya concludes.

Rupert says, “And none of you thought to tell me this? Not even with all the theories I’ve been working on about” Glancing around, he lowers his voice “about this matter?”

“Well technically, you were there when we all worked it out” says Xander. “Just not all there.”

“Sorry Rupert” says Ethan. “I should have realised you hadn’t taken it in.”

“But really” adds Anya, “we haven’t known long and there’s plenty of time for them to capture us all either way.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that” Rupert reassures her. He watches Buffy and Riley. “And he seems a nice chap in himself, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah” says Xander. “He’s pretty solid.”

“Sweet to her” agrees Anya. She catches Ethan’s eye, and they share a look that acknowledges how little it matters unless these muscle clad boys stop whatever it is they’re doing in the town’s underworld.

*****

Giles is woken by badly suppressed giggling, to find Ethan standing over him with a camcorder. “Wake up Rupert…Rupert…ha…ha ha…”

As Ethan finally dissolves into helpless laughter, Giles sits up. “I’m awake. Ethan, what on earth are you doing?”

“Rupert, you…” Ethan laughs, “You… you might want to look in mirror…”

Giles stands and, with a disorientating feeling of bigness, heads to the stairway mirror.

At the sight of his demonic reflection, he roars and charges back to the bedroom. “Ethan, you arse, undo it this minute or I swear to Go –”

“Rupert, I don’t know what you think you’re saying, but it’s coming out all growls.” Ethan finally sets the camcorder down. “It’s rather lovely actually.” His hand ghosts over leathery skin. “You know, I’ve always wondered what it would be like to bed a fyarl demon. Care to help me find out?”

Giles sinks to the mattress, head in hands. “Oh God, and once again your depravity leaves me
wondering if I feel more pity, amusement or disgust.” Or arousal, but he’ll leave that part out even if Ethan can’t understand him. Apparently he really can’t because the hand on Giles’ scaly shoulder now slips to his back and Ethan purrs, “Can I take that as a ‘yes’?”

“No you bloody can’t!” Giles smacks the hand away. Looking around, he spots the circle Ethan apparently used to transform him as he slept. He points emphatically at it. “Undo this or it’ll be the couch for you tonight! Unless I decide to eat you that is.”

Apparently his tone if not his language is familiar, because Ethan rolls his eyes and kneels down by the circle. “Alright, alright. I’ll have you back in your usual gorgeous body before you know it. Happy anniversary, Rupert.”

Giles sits down across from him, the circle between them. “You’d better have got me a present too” he grumbles.

*****

“Well” Rupert says, when he’s seen Buffy and Riley out the door, “Buffy obviously trusts him.” It had taken a lengthy phone call to convince Buffy that she ought to formally introduce her new beau, but the afternoon had gone well. Except for the inconvenient fact that, “He has the IQ of a Labrador” Ethan points out, “and he’s the one that’s told her to trust the rest of them.”

“Be fair, Eth.”

“I am: I said ‘Labrador’. I wanted to say ‘sea cucumber’.” He could swear he sees a smile play at the corners of Rupert’s mouth but his partner keeps it out of his voice as he replies, “Buffy can think for herself.”

“And when it comes to romance her thoughts tend to run along one track.”

“I said be fair.” Rupert warns. Sitting down, he adds, “I’m just happy she’s found someone new at last.”

Ethan sighs. “Don’t get me wrong love: any sea cucumber is better than Angel as far as I’m concerned. But I might just revise that principle if I find myself, say, being dissected.”
Chapter Notes

Some dialogue in this chapter is from BtVS season 4 episode 13, The I in Team, written by David Fury, and some is from episode 14, Goodby Iowa, written by Marti Noxon.

“Well” Ethan snaps the book closed. “That was dull, wasn’t it?”

Willow smiles gamely. “It was okay. I mean, kind of stodgy, but I know I need to know this stuff so I can understand the Macaria Ritus Mortem manuscript.”

“True, and that is vaguely interesting. For a set of rules that mostly tell you what you can’t do, that is.”

“What we can’t do like can’t be done or can’t do because really bad idea?”

Ethan frowns at her, and cautiously replies, “Because it has a tendency to go catastrophically wrong. Really, there’d be no need for a manuscript to say what can’t be done; people can work that out from trial and error.”

“Right.” They are seated at the table in the Magic Box, and Willow’s gaze flickers guiltily to the restricted section.

Ethan asks, “Are we going too fast here? I mean, this stuff is –”

“No: I can handle it.”

“You’re sure? Because we could go back to scrying.”

“No, no. I mean, I get all the principles behind that stuff, it’s just the deeper stuff where I really need to know the rules. Sorry – I know you don’t like rules, but for some of us? Really useful.”

“Well, to each their own, I suppose.” And really, it is high time Willow had the core philosophies of resurrection magic conveyed to her, even if the groundwork is terribly dull. He asks, “How are you doing with all this? Are you alright being in here?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it actually helps in a weird way. I’m not craving the bad stuff so much anyway, now, but being here with all the energies, it’s soothing, you know? Like a sort of magic comfort blanket.”

“Good” Ethan stands up and heads over to the shelves, slides the book they were reading back into place. “Not exactly the vibe I was going for with this place, but…”

“No, it’s a good vibe.”

Rejoining her, Ethan asks, “And how’s college going? Not adding too much stress?”

“Nope, just lots of distraction. But less good vibes, what with Buffy all hooked up with the
Initiative.”

Ethan glances up. “Wait, what?”

“Well” Willow shrugs. “I’m not saying she’s joined up or anything, she’s just hanging with them a bit. And, you know, beating them up.” Seeing Ethan’s confusion, she adds, “For training.”

“For training them, yes? Because Buffy doesn’t need to practise to beat up a load of human men.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it was more like a demo. I’ll ask her more about it tonight at the Bronze – we’re all meeting up, just scoobies and love interests.” She pauses. “Which I guess means she’ll bring Riley. Maybe we should have made it just the three of us? But I couldn’t not invite Tara, and Anya seems to come with Xander these days. You know, like a free gift in a cereal box where it catches your eye but then it just hangs around criticising human society while you’re trying to hang out with the cereal.”

“Honestly? It sounds like you could all do with going out and getting wasted together.”

“No thanks – I’ve done my getting wasted. We’ll just hang out. And maybe Riley won’t come anyway if it’s his go out and be commandery shift.”

“Let’s hope.”

“Right, and then I can actually talk to Buffy with her looking at me and see how deep she’s in.”

“Good. Warn her while you’re at it not to give all her secrets away. I’m not one to endorse the secret identity rule but even I know there are limits to who should know about the slayer.”

“And a secret military operation who experiment on demons might not make the cut? Right there with you. I mean, Buffy was all I used a guy to block a taser and I’m thinking right, so now they know a taser would affect you. But that’s probably me being paranoid and anyway I couldn’t say because then Riley walked in and had a twinkie for lunch.”

“I see” says Ethan because he mostly does. “Look, you should call her out on it if she’s ignoring you as soon as Captain America walks in. Back when I was at uni, no-one ignored me just because their boyfriend was around.”

“Didn’t you meet Giles at Oxford? Because I’m thinking maybe you were the one ignoring them.”

“Oh” Thinking about it, Ethan realises that he can remember Rupert’s bedroom in more detail than he remembers his housemates’ faces. “Well maybe, but I bet Buffy’s worse. Listen, I was thinking we’d do a bit of practical next lesson. I know you don’t exactly need practice, but a demon at Willy’s has a load of frozen Gaiafor tears for sale that I thought we could do something with.”

“Aren’t Gaiafor extinct?”

“Maybe that’s why they were crying. We’ll need a Doll’s Eye Crystal before we can get anything out of them, so I’ll buy the tears and keep them in the freezer here until –”

“Oh” Willow beams. “Tara has a Doll’s Eye Crystal. I could ask her along, maybe?”

“Alright, then I’ll just get the tears. See you tomorrow afternoon?”

“Great, see you then.”

*****
Unfortunately, the Ranlir demon who was selling the tears is not at Willy’s when Ethan calls in the following morning. Neither are Harux, Marvin or anyone else worth talking to, just a bad-tempered screegrol behind the bar and a few hungover vampires who have apparently been here since last night. Deciding that he doesn’t want to be forced out, or to end his days as a hangover cure, Ethan buys them a round and sits down to wait for his supplier to show up.

Show up he does, not half an hour later, by which time Ethan is engrossed in a discussion about the Doobie Brothers with one of the vampires. They all look up as the demon stumbles in, clearly exhausted.

“Took you long enough to get here” grumbles the screegrol at the bar. “Left me with the blood rats and the fucking human.”

“Sod off” Ethan tells it easily. Noticing the newcomer’s limp, he asks, “What happened?”

“Soldiers” yelps the demon. “I just” He stops to gasp for air. “I just gave the soldiers the slip. They were out” Another gasp “chasing this vampire, he led them right to me” He gasps again, stumbles to the booth. A few vampires shove over to make room for him. One asks, “They’re not still following you, right?”

“Nah” pants the Ranlir. “I just lost ’em. Been running hours.” Bending sideways, it clutches the scaly section of limb that serves as its ankle. Ethan asks, “Do you still have the Gaiafor tears?”

“Dropped ’em” is the grunted reply.

“You what?”

“You think I had time to stop and pick them up? You know how fast those bastards come at you?”

The vampire with strong opinions on music apparently has strong opinions about where the Initiative should stick those tasers too, and begins to loudly share them. Over this spiel, a shouted command sounds from outside, and then another. They all pause, the vampire stopping mid-sentence, crude hand gesture still in place, frozen in front of him. Over by the bar, the screegrol stops unloading bottles of something unidentifiable from a crate and slowly puts its claws out.

“Shit” says a vampire. “You told us you lost them!”

“I did!” says the injured Ranlir. “I swear I did!”

Scrambling to their feet, they freeze again, this time in something not unlike horror as footsteps, heavy but rapid, sound in the street outside. “Back door?” asks Ethan.

The screegrol jabs a clawed finger over its shoulder. “Sewer entrance that way.” The vampires run for it.

“Sewer entrance?” Ethan repeats, aghast. “Do I look like I’m dressed for the sewers?” But the footsteps are on the stairs now. Thinking better of pointing out the glaring health and safety failings of the establishment, Ethan runs for the back room, the injured Ranlir hobbling in his wake.

Before Ethan even reaches the back door, the front door is down. Within a second, humans outnumber demons for the first time in Willy’s Place’s history. The screegrol leaps over the bar with a roar and grabs one of the invaders, to much – but brief – commotion.

“Thank God!” says Ethan, spinning round as a group of young men overtake him and pour into the
backroom. “You have to help me! I was on my way to work and these monsters grabbed me and –”

“Fuck you, Rayne!” exclaims the Ranlir. Ethan offers it an apologetic shrug.

Then they are both blasted with electricity.

*****

“Thank you, Willow” Giles, phone in hand, glances over at Anya, Xander and Spike. Spike is swinging the cognac, watched by Xander who keeps turning worriedly to the door while Anya busies herself readying the area around the vampire with towels and extra lights, something only someone who has seen surgery performed at the kitchen table would know to do. “Hurry” he adds, “won’t you?” In an undertone – he shouldn’t care if he alarms Spike or not but he has no desire to do it gratuitously – he explains, “If it really is a tracer that we’re dealing with, we might not have much time.”

“Sure, I’ll be over right away.” Willow puts the phone down, leaving Giles wondering if he should have asked whether she knows where Ethan is. Naturally he had called the shop first, not wanting to bother Willow for a spell when she’s still trying to find a balance when it comes to using magic to solve problems. But there had been no answer, and in this case, magic might be the only way. To help Spike, that is, and Giles still isn’t entirely sure they shouldn’t just hand him back to the Initiative, but something about the idea is unpalatable. Spike is harmless now, after all.

And meanwhile, where is Ethan? Giles sets the question aside for the time being. There is much to do and his partner is perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

*****

Ethan opens his eyes. For a moment he can see nothing but grey metal, as though he’s been swallowed whole by a giant, robotic demon. Which would explain why everything hurts.

Then he notices feet, booted feet with camo-clad trousers rising up from them. And the tip of a gun, a large and complex one, trained on him, and on a mangled screegrol, which lies beside him, vibrating slightly as the floor rumbles. Van, Ethan notes with the detached lack of urgency of the recently electrocuted. They are in a van.

His mouth tastes of blood. He closes his eyes again.

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*****

Ethan opens his eyes again. For a moment, all he can see is glaring light, but then he sees Buffy. For a distorted second, he thinks she’s walking upside down on the ceiling but then the picture corrects itself and she is walking high above him, on a ledge or mounted walkway, or maybe he is in a pit. She is carrying a gun (a large and complex one) and doesn’t look down to notice him, so he calls up to her – or tries to. He can’t speak. Bugger.

Oh well, she was probably a hallucination anyway. Ethan does feel a little stoned.

Now the woman Buffy was marching away from leaves her collection of monitors and descends to Ethan’s level. She is the same woman he met when he was showing Buffy where the werewolf was, that same professor. Wash? Walsh? Something like that. But that is probably a hallucination as well.

She asks for a report, and a man in a white coat steps into view and starts describing a series of sedatives some poor bloke has been pumped full of.
Oh. That would be Ethan, then. Well, that explains a lot.

Ethan closes his eyes.

*****

When he next opens his eyes, Ethan feels more clear-headed, and, therefore, more alarmed by his surroundings: a cell-like interrogation room with a set of manacles (which he is unfortunately wearing) looped through openings in a steel table, and stains on the far wall that he decides are best not examined. He clears his throat and manages to speak this time, addressing whoever might be listening beyond the steel door: “Hello? Anyone out there? I want to call my…” He stops, unsure who he wants to call. Not Rupert – these bastards can’t get their hands on him too. Maybe Willow? Between tech know-how and magical prowess, she’d be useful right now. But what if the soldiers think so too? Or he could call his lawyer. But then, tell him what? *I’m in the custody of a top secret demon research branch of the US military complex?*

Besides, they’re not going to let him make a phone call.

Ethan tries again: “You’ve made a mistake here! I’m human!”

Nothing happens. Some unmeasured stretch of time passes, during which Ethan studies the stains on the wall despite himself, internally laments the Gaia for tears currently defrosting somewhere in Sunnydale, hopes that Willow might be discovering that the shop is still closed and raising the alarm right now, and tells himself that he doesn’t need to piss.

Beyond the walls is silence, broken once, dramatically, by a cry of “Agent Finn I order you to stop!…Riley!”

Ethan sits up at that. Riley? If Riley finds him here, this whole debacle could be sorted out. He tries yelling again: “Riley? That you? It’s Ethan in here – remember me? Ru –” and he stops, loath to mention Rupert.

More time passes, and Riley doesn’t appear like a Labrador in shining armour to save him.

By the time the door opens, Ethan has moved past horror at the stains’ probably-blood status and started to notice that one of the splatters looks like a hedgehog. He looks up to find himself face to face with Buffy’s professor.

So she wasn’t a hallucination. Honestly, he hadn’t realised anyone on the faculty was involved with all this, but it makes sense. Ethan greets her with, “I need to speak to Buffy Summers. She’s a friend of mine.” Not how he’d usually characterise his relationship with Buffy, but *she’s my watcher fiancé’s Slayer and went to school with my magic tutee* would just take too much explaining. He adds, “She can vouch for me. I’m human. I run a magic shop in town and I sometimes go to that” He makes a quick decision to *not say demon bar “bar for supplies. Also, is there any chance I could use the men’s room?”*

Looking pokerfaced from him to the clipboard in her hands, the professor replies, “Our tests indicate that you’re human.”

Tests? A shiver runs down Ethan’s spine and the need to urinate is suddenly more noticeable. “I don’t remember agreeing to any tests” he replies, his voice aiming for light-hearted and hitting shaky.

“We are also aware that you have supernatural abilities.”
How? “Look, we’re agreed I’m human, so how about you let me go? No hard feelings, of course. I mean, your boys found me with those demons, what were they supposed to think?” Where are those demons now? Did they catch the vampires? “Or could you at least let me speak to Buffy Summers? She knows me.”

“I’ve made arrangements for you to be transported to a facility in Nevada.”

“On what charges!?"

“I’ve been asked to inform you that how comfortable your stay there is depends largely on your attitude upon arrival.”

“Just let me speak to Buffy Summers! Or Riley Finn – he met me at a party. He came to –” Ethan stops before he tells her that Riley knows where their flat is. Keep them away from Rupert, he tells himself. Just keep them away from Rupert.

“If you are able to share with my colleagues in Nevada any information they are interested in, you will find the experience mutually beneficial.”

Rupert will come, Ethan tells himself. As soon as Willow goes to the shop and realises he’s missing, as soon as Buffy goes to Willy’s Place to find out where he might be. But just in case, “I’d like to call the British Embassy.”

“If you choose not to co-operate, you will find the experience less fulfilling” the professor concludes. “I’d think about it carefully, if I were you.” At that moment, an alarm starts buzzing somewhere, a low but persistent drone. The professor looks round as a young man enters behind her. “Professor!” He hurries forward and takes her aside. Even Ethan can see this is a breech of protocol, but there’s an urgency about the soldier that cannot be ignored.

Speaking of… “I still need to use the toilet” Ethan tells them. Maybe he can escape through a convenient bathroom window or something? It seems a little far-fetched.

The alarm cuts out, as the soldier continues whatever he is saying: “… wrong with the 314…”

That number, that little reference to what the psychic demons all over town have been so panicked by lately, would catch Ethan’s attention if he wasn’t busy panicking somewhat himself. Setting aside nerves, he makes a show of being in a huff, leaning back as far as the restraints will allow so as to appear casual while listening in. His alarm ratchets up just a little when he hears, “… awake…”

There’s only so scared you can be on a full bladder. “I’ve decided” announces Ethan loudly, “that if I’m not taken to the loo in the next minute or so, I’m going to go anyway just to piss you off. Um, no pun intended.”

The professor, suddenly harried, says to the soldier, “Just take him, Private. I’ve wasted enough time here. I would have been there to stop this if it wasn’t for this batch of arrivals.” She hurries out while the soldier removes Ethan from the restraints protruding from the table to cuff his hands in front of his body. If he were Rupert, he would be able to take advantage of the millisecond’s freedom, but he is not.

He is so far from being Rupert that he is not even able to take advantage of being flung into a porta-loo-like cubicle so small, cold and white that it feels horribly like being in a refrigerator. Once he’s seen to nature’s call, he stares around for a bit but there is no convenient window. Unless he finds some magical supplies soon, that’s him out of ideas. Experimentally, Ethan runs a
hand on the metal seam of the sink, hoping to draw blood to offer Janus. When that doesn’t work he searches his pockets awkwardly, still in handcuffs, to see if they’ve left him with any talismans. Nothing. Not even chalk.

The door opens (they don’t, Ethan notes, knock to check he’s finished) and the young soldier who escorted him here pulls him out and hands him over to an even younger soldier with an even bigger gun, on orders to take “this hostile” to “the loading area”.

Being thus walked down one white corridor towards another, Ethan becomes aware of a commotion, somewhere not far off in the building. The young soldier seems aware of it too, and glances around at a series of bangs and crashes behind them. Hopefully, Ethan reflects, that will be Rupert’s band of warrior teens come to save him. But then the growling starts and he realises it can’t be. Then, closer, a shout from the professor: “No! No tasers, he feeds on it!”

Alarmingly, the noises seem to be moving closer, not further away. When Ethan glances round at a particularly loud crash, his escort barks, “Keep moving!” and shoves him along, but when an almost desperate sounding professor shouts, “Adam, stand down!” Ethan and the soldier turn as one.

“Damn it” mutters the soldier, then quickens his pace until the corridor gives way to a short flight of stairs, going up. A buzz from some intercom at the soldier’s belt and he soldier pauses, glances back towards the commotion, and then takes the stairs tugging Ethan along. From here they turn a sharp corner and emerge in another white corridor, and then another, wider now, with multiple routes leading off it, going who knows where. There is a large set of doors at one end and a small military vehicle overtakes them, moving the opposite direction. “Come on” calls a soldier within it to Ethan’s escort, “All personal to the research area!”

“Yeah, I need to get this hostile secured first.”

“Aren’t you going the wrong way for that?”

“Freak human – going to the boys in Nevada.”

“Fine. Just hurry.” The vehicle moves on. Ethan’s soldier continues to march him towards the imposing doors which, as they draw closer, Ethan realises has a series of what can only be called cages set to one side of them.

They are all empty, but he has a horrible feeling they won’t be once he reaches them.

“You said it yourself” he tries, turning to the soldier. “I’m human.”

The soldier ignores him, quickens the pace as brakes screech against a sound of gunfire not far off. Then the lights go out. Ethan makes a grab for the gun.

Of course he doesn’t succeed. The soldier flings him to the ground where he instinctively curls up, protects his head as the soldier yells.

Around them, there is a mechanical sigh and the lights come back on, different now, warmer. A back-up generator, perhaps. It sets in just in time to illuminate something barging into the corridor in a series of heavy footfalls.

Whatever it is, it is huge. Ethan, from his vantage point of the floor, has a brief impression of a muscular, multicoloured, heavily sutured chest, strong limbs, metal and a military haircut before it slams into the young soldier, hurling him to the ground. Ignoring Ethan (he doesn’t seem very
noticeable today) it then runs on to the doors, stops when they don’t open. Examines a control panel on the wall beside it and starts pressing buttons in a quick but precise-seeming procession.

“Christ” the soldier on the ground mutters, semi-conscious. Ethan reaches over and slides the dropped gun away from him. The monster looks round. “You” it addresses Ethan, “What am I?”

“You’re about to open that door” Ethan replies. “Right?”

“Yes. That is my intention. But it is not my being.”

“Well now we’re getting philosophical” Ethan gets painfully to his feet. “Honestly, I could have stayed in the pub for that.”

The monster looks at him blankly. “The pub?”

“Well, the bar.”

The monster studies him. Ethan finds his own attention snagging on the spear like bone jutting from its arm.

“What are you?” asks the monster.

“He’s not important” a voice answers at the end of the corridor as a group joins them. Ethan identifies Professor Wash-or-Walsh but doesn’t turn around: he doesn’t want to turn his back on that spear.

“Mother” says the monster, possibly just for the sake of making things more unnerving than they already are.

“That’s right, Adam.” Wash-or-Walsh addresses the monster, coming closer in a series of cautious, light steps. Behind her, Ethan can hear the shuffling of many booted feet, the click and slide of big guns being readied. “You know me, don’t you?”

“Yes. But I don’t know me. Why is that?”

“There’s been a malfunction in your programme. You weren’t supposed to wake up yet. Come with me and we’ll sort this out.”

Ethan shakes his head, regaining the monster’s attention. “You don’t want to do that. Seriously, old chap, open the door.”

“Private Green” the professor calls back, down the corridor. “Shoot this hostile.”

“No, no!” Ethan yelps. He spins round, finally, side-steps to block the professor’s path, placing her between himself and the soldiers behind her. One of them, gun aimed, pauses. Ethan meets the professor’s eye and mines a zipping motion over his mouth.

She glowers at him, but says, “Private, at ease.” The gun is lowered.

Behind Ethan, there is welcome grating of metal on metal and cool, fresh air, blissful stuff, breezes into the corridor as the light alters again. There is bird song and Ethan – not daring yet to turn around – senses the monster’s head turn in the direction of it.

“Adam” the professor commands, “Walk to me and we’ll get this sorted out. I’ll answer all your questions.”
Ethan turns slowly, unchallenged with everyone’s attention on Adam. The monster is still in the doorway, staring around. Looking from it (him?) to the soldiers, Ethan makes a quick decision. Being careful to keep the professor between him and her backup, he walks up to the monster. Adam turns at his approach. Behind him, the outside world is tantalisingly close, a welcome square of forest slicing into the white-tiled wall.

Just a few steps and Ethan would be free, but Adam is blocking his way, studying him intently. Making eye firm eye contact with the mismatched eyes, Ethan nods meaningfully towards the other humans assembled. Unlike that Adam understands what a meaning nod is, but it directs his attention none the less. Ethan takes the opportunity to shuffle sideways, one foot encountering soft soil and leaf litter.

Adam’s hand shoots out and holds him in place. Ethan flinches, but the monster’s attention is still on the professor.

“Adam” the professor tries again, “I know that you’re disorientated. That’s because of the malfunction. Let me examine you and we can sort out the confusion. I can give you access to your files.”

Adam looks from her, to the soldiers beyond. He takes a step forward, his hand dropping from Ethan’s shoulder.

Ethan runs.
“Ow”

“Sorry” Giles adjusts his position to dab more gently at the cut at Ethan’s temple.

Ethan flinches again. “I said ow!”

“I know love, but if we let your pain threshold set the pace, we’d be at this all night.” Giles lets his actions become gentler still nonetheless.

“I’d be in favour of that” replies Ethan sulkily. He eyes Xander’s basement room with an unimpressed air. Giles points out, “At least we’ve got the bed.” With Ethan turning up in the state he was in, all mud and shallow cuts and needle marks, just as they were starting to worry, it was inevitable they’d been granted the sofa-bed. Xander has even cobbled together privacy curtains out of spare sheets and towels. Giles says, “As soon as I’ve done this, you can get some sleep.”

“As soon as you’ve done this, I’m starting a cloaking spell.”

Giles shakes his head: cloaking spells take time, and starting tomorrow rather than tonight makes little difference. Then again, he would think that, from the privileged position of not having been held captive by an unaccountable branch of the military all day. He says, “They don’t know that we know Xander. No-one will think to look for us here.”

“Ah, yes, because no-one from the US military has any ability to spy on anyone. They’ll never find us all the way across town in a friend’s basement.”

“They may not even be looking for you.” Giles ignores the icy sarcasm. He finishes cleaning Ethan’s cut and sits down beside him on the bed, pulls him into his arms. “You may be more trouble to recapture than you’re worth to them.”

Ethan shrugs. “Just because you think I’m more trouble than I’m worth.”

“Oh, come on!” Giles pulls his partner closer still and plants a kiss in his hair. He smells of disinfectant, but also of the forest he ran through and the sweat it cost him. Giles rubs his arm, fingers lingering at the crook of Ethan’s elbow, where the mark left over from an IV line is obvious. “You know that’s not true. Now. How about you try to sleep and I’ll wake you up when Xander gets back with supplies? You can start your spells then if it puts your mind at ease.”

“No. I’m too worked up to sleep.” But Ethan doesn’t protest when Giles starts stroking his back in a well-practiced way that he is bound to succumb to eventually, beyond muttering, “That’s cheating, Rupert.”

“So be it. You need sleep.”

There is a tap at the wall on the other side of the “curtains” and Buffy steps into view. “Hey. Feeling better?”

Ethan scowls at her. “I’m fine. No thanks to your boyfriend.”

“He didn’t know.” Buffy puts the case Giles packed earlier on the bed. Giles asks her, “Are the three of you all sorted?”
"Yup. I get the chair, Willow gets the sleeping bag and Anya gets the bean bag. We’re not really sure what Xander gets yet."

Ethan stares at the case. “So were the lot of you just remarkably well prepared for me becoming a fugitive, or am I missing something?”

Buffy leans against the wall, folds her arms. “Professor Walsh tried to kill me.”

Ethan looks from her to Giles and makes a there-you-go sort of gesture. “I knew it!”

“Well you might have warned me!” pouts Buffy.

“I did! I told you I didn’t trust them.” Ethan shakes his head. “So now we’re all in hiding?”

Giles nods. “I’m afraid we were already packed to come here before we even realised you were missing. Willow hadn’t been able to get to your lesson because Spike turned up with a tracer that required magical intervention.”

Ethan looks despairing. “I don’t believe this. I leave you people alone for one afternoon and you get yourselves wanted by the US army?”

“Like you can talk!” Buffy retorts.

“It was different for me! I had circumstances.”

“Circumstances like hanging out with demons? If we’re having an I-told-you-so fest, I did tell you that might be a problem.”

“It’s not just demons they take” points out Ethan. “It turns out they’ve got a whole facility in Nevada for humans.” His expression is sombre all of a sudden, his tone slipping from triumphant to troubled. “It was where they were going to send me before Adam interrupted.”

Buffy takes this in, straightening up, apparently unconsciously, into a battle stance. She tells Giles, “Now I don’t know if we should focus on that or Adam.”

“We can’t focus on that, Buffy” Giles replies heavy-heartedly. “We don’t have the power to take on the army. But I will report to the Council; it could be that they have the resources to change things.”

Ethan tuts. “They’re probably in on it.”

“They wouldn’t do that to humans” Giles insists and wishes he could be more than seventy percent certain he’s right. Seeing that Buffy doesn’t look any more convinced than his partner sounds, he adds, “And there’s a coven in Devon that might be able to do something. I really don’t know what, but they are powerful.”

“Oh, that’s right” Ethan mutters, “Set the hippies on them.” But he sounds marginally relieved.

Buffy says, “Good. So I guess that leaves us with Adam?”

“Adam’s their problem” Ethan tells her. “He went back to them. Our problem is staying out of their way.” To Giles, he asks, “What supplies did you tell Xander to get?”

“Basic ingredients for memory charms and some things for cloaking, though whether you’ll really need to do both is –”
“I’ll do both.”

“And I’ll help.” Willow enters their sheeted-off cocoon. Anya follows with refreshments, setting a plate carefully on the bed and looking around for somewhere to put the mugs.

Buffy says, “Actually, Will, I was thinking you could deal with the computer stuff. You were right – we need to find out what their goal is.”

Anya puts the mugs down and says, “I’m betting it has to do with Adam.”

“Yeah” Buffy frowns. “Willow, if they have any convenient files marked Frankenstein that’d be… way too easy I guess.”

“’Fraid so” Willow retreats back behind the curtain.

“Frankenstein’s monster” corrects Anya.

Buffy responds, “Huh?”

“It was Frankenstein who built the monster. Except that was out of dead people, not demon parts and robots. Weird book, but then, what do you expect from a woman who lived with that poet voluntarily. I kept waiting for her to summon me, but no…”

Willow reappears, cradling a laptop. “I’m not sure they’ll be a demon parts and robots file either”

“I imagine there’s a code name” says Giles, keen to refocus the group.

“314” supplies Ethan.

“Like pi?” Buffy asks. “Evil pi?”

Ethan shrugs. “It’s what the demons have been on edge about lately.”

Watching Willow set the laptop down as she types, Anya asks, “Are you in?”

“In as in got the laptop on? Yep. In as in currently hacking a secret demon-hunting branch of the military? That might take longer.”

“Well we don’t need to wait for that, do we?” asks Ethan. “Last I checked, Buffy was still dating one of these soldiers. Where is the lovely Riley?”

There is an awkward silence, in which Giles watches his slayer slip from battle stance back into merely defensive. His arm has slipped from Ethan’s shoulder during the conversation, but he pulls him close again now, subtly reminding Buffy that Ethan needs allowances made today. Willow types in silence, eyes on the screen. Anya explains to Ethan, “See, the thing is, last you checked was before he went storming out the flat in a mood because Buffy had the nerve to almost get murdered.” To Buffy, she adds, “I agree with Spike. Your choice of boyfriends is tragic at best. Have you ever considered vengeance?”

“He’s just confused” mutters Buffy. “He’ll come around.”

“I hope so” Giles replies, letting it sound simply supportive, but also aware how useful an informant would be, someone with access.

Ethan frowns, then looks at his suitcase at the end of the bed. Pulling it towards him, he opens it up and examines the contents. “This is all you packed for me?”
“Sorry if our need to escape capture took priority over ensuring you have a full wardrobe, love.” Giles keeps his voice light, glad to see Ethan distracted.

“Rupert, I mean that I need spell ingredients – probably more than whatever Xander will find. Although, now you mention it, these are a little drab.”

Buffy rolls her eyes. “We were going for incognito, not Disco Stu.”

“Oi, watch it, Buffy. Look, can I make you a list? I’ll need galena and some Hertanian offering beads for confusion hexes.”

Buffy looks dubious. “Can’t we just send Xander out again for that? He’ll be back any minute.”

“He won’t find those anywhere in town that I know of but it’s all in the Magic Box. And since that might be being watched…”

“Got it” Buffy straightens up. “Sewer entrance, not Xander friendly. Not me friendly either, by the way, but at least I won’t be eaten by anything down there.” She pauses, frowns. “I’ll go look for Riley first though, see if he’s ready to talk. I don’t want to do that post sewer.”

“Good luck” Willow tells her.

“Thanks. And you guys will be okay here?”

“We’ll be fine” Giles assures her. “We’ve all got research to keep ourselves busy, except for Ethan who needs to sleep.” He directs the end of that sentence pointedly at his partner, but Ethan smiles thinly and corrects him with, “except for Ethan who’ll be working on defensive spells. Just as soon as Xander brings my supplies, that is.”

“Just as long as they’re defensive” Buffy tells him as she sets off. “Remember, these guys may be sketchy but they are human.”

“The best monsters always are” Ethan murmurs.

*****

Ethan, despite his best laid plans, is sleeping off his adventure by the time Xander returns with magic supplies sourced from dealers all around Sunnydale.

Letting him sleep, Giles directs Xander to leave the supplies at the foot of the bed and resumes pacing. As soon as Ethan was out, the anger hit. What those bastards had tried to do, it doesn’t bear thinking about.

What they could still do.

There isn’t much room to pace, between all their luggage and bedding, and the rounded-up mystical artefacts he’s been gathering from around Sunnydale, an enchanted dagger now joining the urn and the chalice. He’d had to bring them, of course – a poor show to track them down for safekeeping only to let them fall into the hands of the Initiative.

Finally, after more skirting around bags and boxes than his nerves can tolerate, Giles stops pacing. He hears Xander let out a long-held breath as he ceases.

Willow looks up from the laptop. “You want me to start on some spells?”

“No thank you, Willow” replies Giles. “Ethan can start on that once he’s awake.”
“Are you sure? Because I can handle it. I’m doing better with magic.”

“I know you are, but frankly I think Buffy’s right – we need to know what their agenda is.”

“Yeah, but we also need to not get captured.”

“They don’t know we’re here, Will” says Xander. “Or they’d have waltzed on in here before now.”

“I guess” Willow supposes, “I guess we don’t know that this isn’t Professor Walsh’s vendetta. Maybe with Adam awake, things change anyway. I mean, that’s got to be what Buffy was getting too close to, right?” She focuses on her work again, leaning closer to the screen. “That or what they’re going to do with him.”

“So don’t want to think about that” says Xander.

“I’m going to call the Council” Giles decides.

*****

Getting through to anyone in a position to do anything takes some time. Explaining the situation takes more time and then Giles is dismissed, left to wait while the Council consider the situation.

Maybe he should get Ethan on a plane, send him home? Get him away from Maggie Walsh and her plans.

He joins Xander and Anya in researching known examples of humans, governments especially, using the demon world for their own gain, but such accounts are poorly sourced and patchy. None of them end well.

Giles paces again. Willow, still working on the computer, glances up nervously.

There are far too many of them in a small space. It reminds Giles a little of the squat he and Ethan lived in briefly when they first arrived in London. No wonder they kept getting high back then: it distracted from the smell of cooped up humans and the lack of comfortable seating to go round.

When Ethan finally emerges, he is carrying the magic supplies and asks, “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because you were kidnapped and injected with God knows what” Giles tells him. “You needed to sleep.”

“I needed to be working on wards.” Ethan roots through the bag. “Is Buffy back yet?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m getting worried” Anya comments. “I bet they’re dissecting her.”

“That or she’s fighting Adam” echoes Xander.

“She may still be looking for Riley” Giles tells them, quashing down his own growing worry. “She’ll be fine.”

Ethan starts pulling packs of herbs and crystals from the bag, starts pushing the mess of blankets on the floor aside to chalk out a rough circle. “Alright. We’ll do memory charms first.”
“Will you be able to be precise enough with that?” Giles asks. The last thing anyone needs is a building full of armed men who’ve forgotten how to control the mechanical monster in their midst.

“Possibly” Ethan replies, off handedly. He uses memory magic, Giles is aware, to ensure that the more dangerous creatures in Willy’s Place don’t remember him, but that is done in the moment, with the creatures in front of him. From a distance – of time or space – the spell is more complex.

Willow speaks up: “If we throw in a supplication to Mnemosyne and mix the lemon balm in with the Lethe’s Bramble, we could at least make them a bit confused about who they’re looking for. Maybe not have a clear idea of what you look like at least. Buffy, they’ll probably remember, what with talking to her over days and everything. I don’t know how to change that from a distance without general memory loss, which…”

“Which probably isn’t a good idea” Giles agrees.

“It isn’t?” asks Xander. “Because having them forget all about us doesn’t sound like a bad plan.”

“We couldn’t do it without them forgetting a lot else besides” Giles explains. “What these strange creatures in cages are or why they all have guns, for example.”

“Ah”

“Would that be so terrible?” Ethan muses. “Letting them panic and kill each other off honestly has it’s appeal to me after the day I’ve had.”

“You don’t mean that” Giles tells him. He sees Ethan consider the matter, his thoughts flickering over his ordeal and what he could do in response behind his carefully closed expression. “I suppose not” he decides, grudgingly. “Alright then. What about their computer records? I can’t be sure they didn’t take photos.” He shudders, and Giles puts a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Willow replies, “It’ll take a while before I’m in but maybe I could at least corrupt some of what they added today if I infect a computer virus with a target-specific Erisian hex. It’s what I did to get the government to give you your green card back.”

Ethan shudders again, but more for show this time. “Gods, child, are you sure you don’t want to work for them?”

Willow grins. “I didn’t hear you complaining back then.”

“And you won’t now. But it is extraordinary.”

“Wait” says Xander, “You changed more than a day’s worth of records then. Why not now?”

“Because we want to know what their plan is” explains Anya. “We can’t do that if all their computers turn to mush.”

“That’s right” says Willow. “Plus, I’m guessing they have the best protections out there. Maybe mystical stuff too.”

“Do you have what you’ll need here?” asks Giles.

Willow examines their supplies. “Probably not. Maybe I could go to Tara’s? They haven’t met her any more than Xander and I don’t like to think of her out there on her own.”

“But she lives on campus” Ethan points out.
Anya shakes her head. “You don’t want to risk that.”

“I kind of do for Tara. Or maybe I could call her and invite her over here?”

“Sure” says Xander. “One more fugitive won’t make a difference.” Beside him, Anya looks around at the limited space and raises an eyebrow doubtfully.

*****

Tara’s arrival makes the room more crowded but significantly calmer. Between her help and Willow’s, Ethan has soon cast enough spells to feel safe from imminent abduction.

Which leaves them with nothing to do but watch Willow work her other magic on the computer and grow increasingly worried about where Buffy has got to. It’s been hours now.

Giles is just about to suggest a location spell or a search party when she comes down the stairs. From above, Xander’s mother loudly announces her arrival, and Xander yells up, “Thanks, mom!” before greeting Buffy with, “Jeez, Buff, what took you so long?”

“Got chatting to some creepy men in black types.” Buffy empties her pockets, hands Ethan a packet of beads and a chunk of mineral. Ethan tells her, “I don’t need them anymore” and Buffy glares at him. Xander asks, “Men in black as in top secret with snappy suits?”

“Yep” Buffy sits down. “Oh, hi Tara. Welcome to outlaw central.” She looks at Giles. “Not that we’re that apparently.”

“According to the men in black?” Willow sets her laptop aside.

“Yep” Buffy folds her arms. “I was just done looking for Riley and these super conspicuous guys come up to me and want to go somewhere to talk. I figure why not because I could take them.”

“Did you find Riley?” asks Anya.

Buffy grimaces. “I’ll get to that. Anyway, these guys took me off to an office in town that they’d blatantly only moved into, like, today. They gave this totally non-threatening speech about how Professor Walsh decided to kill me all by herself and she’s going to back off now because “we” have no interest in interfering with the slayer.”

“Who’s we?” asks Willow.

“That’s what I wanted to know” replies Buffy. “Guess how much they told me.”

“I’m gonna go with diddly squat” says Xander.

“Not even that” Buffy brushes a strand of hair from her face, folds her arms again. “But they kind of implied that I don’t get murdered as long as I don’t tell anyone about the Initiative. And let’s face it, who’d I tell?”

“Giles told the watchers” Anya supplies.

Buffy asks Giles, “Do you think they sent the creepy guys?”

“Doesn’t sound like them” mutters Ethan sarcastically.

Ignoring that, Giles replies, “I’m really not sure. But given how quickly they arrived, I’m inclined to think not.”
Ethan nods grudgingly. “That’s a point. The council’s many things, but it’s not fast.”

“Indeed” Giles admits.

Ethan asks Buffy, “Did these men happen to mention if the Initiative are still after me?”

“No. I mean, they didn’t mention you at all. Just did this whole you-back-off-we’ll-back-off dance. Except not an actual dance.”

Willow asks, “Does that mean we can leave? No offence to your basement, Xander.”

“None taken. I mean, much as I like having this exciting lack of floor space…”

“I’m still going to cloak the flat when we go back” says Ethan. This seems excessive to Giles, but after what Ethan has been through, he can’t blame him for wanting to do it. He says, “Alright. And Willow, your um, your intervention will…”

“Will hopefully make sure they just vaguely remember they arrested some random human but they won’t know who. They’ll probably put all the vagueness down to the massive distraction that is Adam.”

Giles asks Buffy, “Did you find out anything else about him?”

“Nothing” Buffy shrugs. “I guess they put him back in his cage.”

“H-he sounds scary” murmurs Tara.

“Well he’s a mix of demon, robot and military-type” says Ethan. “All the worst things.”

“M-military type? Did they u-use one of their soldiers?”

Buffy’s eyes widen. “I hadn’t even thought! I guess I just assumed they used a dead guy, like our science fair Frankensteins.”

“I sure didn’t need to know different” mutters Xander with a shudder.

“We’ll probably find out once we’re in their system” Willow gestures to the laptop. “Um. You said you’d get to Riley?”

Looking briefly cornered, Buffy glances around at her assembled friends. “Yeah. Um. He’s not talking to me. I found him on campus and it’s like I wasn’t there. Completely blanked me.”

“Classy” says Xander.

“Spike was right” Anya says grimly.

Buffy glares at her. “Spike’s never right” she retorts. “Especially not about my love life. No, Riley’s just confused is all.”

Ethan looks incredulous. “Confused about whether to side with his girlfriend or the people who tried to kill her?”

“He wasn’t there” Buffy says defensively. “He’s been working for these people for years, he trusts them.”

“Oh, I see: he’s confused about whether to believe his girlfriend or the people who tried to kill
“Ethan has a point, Buffy” says Giles. “It sounds to me as though he’s made his choice.”

“Yeah” counters Buffy, “after years of brainwashing! Look, I’m not saying he’s not majorly in the doghouse, but this is hard on him too. As far as he’s concerned he was G.I. Good Guy and now his boss wants me dead for finding out she stitches monster parts together in her free time?”

“It’s got to be a mind fuck” concedes Xander.

“Yeah” says Willow, “but still. He must have seen Adam by now, shouldn’t he be all eep I’m on the wrong side?”

“He might still get there” says Buffy.

“And if not” says Anya, “there’s always vengeance.”

Frowning, Buffy asks, “What if it’s not just confusion? What if they’re controlling him somehow?”

Giles asks, “Do you have any reason to think that’s the case?”

“Other than wishful thinking” mutters Ethan. Giles elbows him gently and Buffy glares. Buffy replies, “Well, there’s the fact that there’s a monster made of probably-soldier bits lurking somewhere under campus. These guys aren’t exactly signed up to employee rights.”

“So he’s scared” finishes Xander. “Well can I be the first to say big whoop? I’ve been scared plenty of times being in your life and I never said Oh golly gee I might get hurt, I’d better blank her.”

“But we don’t know what they’ve threatened” argues Buffy. “Maybe he’s got to do what they say or they’ll go after his family. I mean, it’s not like he attacked me, he just ignored me. If it’s a choice between an upset girlfriend and his family and all their dogs being fed to Adam, I can see why he’d pick angry Buffy.” Quietly, she explains, “He has a lot of dogs.”

“And no balls” Ethan adds. Buffy glares again. Then she asks them, “But could it be more than that? I mean, he was behaving like a robot, what if they did something to him?”

“Like mind control?” asks Willow.

“Like they weren’t scary enough” murmurs Tara. Willow takes her hand.

“Something like that” says Buffy.

“I’m not sure we have proof of that” says Giles. “Buffy, I know it’s hard, but you do need to face the possibility that he may simply not be the man you first thought him.”

“The man she first thought him” Anya puts in, “is a nice bland TA from Iowa. He lied pretty well then.”

“Yeah” Buffy retorts, “Because he’s a secret agent; it was his job. He thought he was keeping people safe, going after demons. Thought he was keeping me safe from it until he found out I’m the slayer. This was different.” To Giles she adds, “And what with the whole monster made out of partly human parts, I’m not going to put anything past them.”

Giles nods, considering this. “Then you’ll have to try to speak to him again.”
“In a sneaky way” adds Xander. “What with the back-off-and-don’t-get-murdered dance.”

“Check” Buffy agrees. “Sneaky rescue of Riley coming up.”
“So this Hula necklace is powerful?” asks Buffy, shining a torch around the subterranean temple as she and Giles step over the threshold.

“Hulechla” says Giles. “And yes, it is. Nothing we can use but it’s prophesised to play a role in an apocalypse around the turn of the next millennium.”

Buffy gives him a sideways look. “Giles, you know I love that you’re organised, but isn’t that taking things a little far?”

“We may not be around by then but I’d like the human race to be.” Giles examines a carving in the wall, running the beam of his own torch over the length of it.

“And this thing will help?”

Giles nods. “Or dramatically hinder. I do wish prophesies were clearer but this one has been rewritten several times over the years.”

“So it’s either good powerful or bad powerful and we don’t know which?” Buffy slips a hand gingerly into an opening carved into the wall by the shrine.

“The Council will be able to guard and study it.”

Buffy looks over with a scowl that he catches briefly in a sweep of his torch. “We’re giving the potentially world endy jewellery to the watchers? Not much that could go wrong there.”

“Well we mustn’t destroy it in case it turns out to be world – err – world savey” Giles scowls himself at his language. Ignoring Buffy’s laugh he goes on, “I’m having a few things collected by the Council that shouldn’t be laying around Sunnydale for the demons to find.”

“You’re really into this ancient artefact quest, huh?”

“I am rather.” Giles steps over to the shrine, stoops to shine the torch underneath it. “It gives me something to occupy myself with, given that um, that –”

“That the library blew up?”

“Yes, well that did rather leave me at a loose end.” Giles glances up. “Thank you for coming with me, incidentally. I know you’d probably rather be, well...”

“Stalking Riley? Nope. I’m backing off for now. Only so many times you can get the brush off before you actually brush off.” Buffy’s light tone hides a depth of pain.

“He’s still not talking to you?” Giles asks gently.

In the torchlight, he sees Buffy look down before turning back to the roughly carved wall. “Not talking, not looking, not answering his calls. I can’t help him unless he speaks to me.” Quieter, slipping her hand into another crudely hewn hole in the wall, she adds, “Maybe he doesn’t need rescuing after all. Or if he does, I need to find a different way to do it. I can’t just grab him and put him under a truth spell. Unless I just grab him and put him under a truth spell?”

“I’m not sure that wouldn’t make you a target again.”
“I guess.” Buffy doesn’t sound remotely convinced. “Also, I haven’t exactly had time to talk to him alone – he’s always surrounded by other Initiative types and they’re all acting weird. Or maybe I’m just noticing the weird now.” She heads over to the shrine and examines the wall behind it. “How’s Ethan?”

“Still a little paranoid” Giles replies. “I’ve been keeping him company in the shop all week.” Admittedly this has been only partly Ethan’s reluctance to be left alone – the rest has been Giles’ reluctance to leave Ethan alone.

“I’m sure he’ll – oh!” Buffy reaches into the mouth of a carved demon head at the back of the shrine. “Found it!”

“Oh!” Giles hurries over and shines his torch on the gold and ruby necklace. “Excellent. That’s –”

“Slayer” A low growl from the entrance way has them spinning round to face a group of demons.

“Great” mutters Buffy. “Why do creepy artefacts always have horny things guarding them?” She pauses, fists raised. “Um, forget I said the horny part.”

“Happily” Giles reaches around for a weapon, his hand closing round a ceremonial club at the side of the shrine.

A demon steps forward from the rabble. “Your soldiers took five of my boys” it grunts. “It’s time you paid.”

“Seriously?” Buffy rolls her eyes. “Where were you when I stopped working with the army? And they were never my soldiers!” She adds to Giles, “How convenient would that be?”

“Very” says Giles, hefting the club. “But, err, given that we’re outnumbered…”

“Time to focus. Got ya.” Buffy steps towards the demon. It swings a massive fist and she ducks neatly, sends it toppling with a kick.

Giles quickly loses track of Buffy’s side of the fight, taken up, as he is, with the need to not be killed himself. The club is adequate but clumsy, useless unless he has room to swing it, so he has to constantly keep moving, keep space around him and stop them from closing in.

There are five of them, he works out, but one is big enough to count as two. Briefly, the doorway is clear, but Buffy is being grabbed at by the big demon, and then Giles too finds himself clutched at, pinned to a wall as one demon hits him round the face and another prises the club from his hand. Over his assailant’s shoulder, he can see the doorway is blocked again, and that Buffy is also being lifted off her feet. Then the demon in front of him leans in and Giles tilts his head back to try for a headbutt.

Before he can swing his skull down, the demon yowls. Blood hits Giles’ face and, a second later, so does the demon’s head. Giles recoils, pulling free of another demon’s grip in his haste to get away from the falling corpse. The other demon grabs at him until it, too, sinks to the ground with a spurt of blood. With both of them fallen, Giles is able to see past them to, “Faith!”

“Hey G-man” Faith winks at him. “Long time no see.” Casually, she frees Buffy by decapitating the demon that has hold of her.

Stumbling forward, Buffy gasps, “Faith?!”

Faith grins. “Do I get a hug?”
Buffy looks so delighted that Giles is sure for a moment that they will hug and leave him to handle the two remaining demons. But then Buffy leaps backwards, clobbers the demon behind her, and Faith takes her blade to the final one.

“I see Sunnyhell hasn’t changed” says Faith, slinging her weapon back into a sheaf on her back, once they are standing among demon corpses.

Buffy gives her a shaky smile and then the suggested hug. “How are you here?” she asks. “We weren’t told…” She looks to Giles, as though suddenly remembering he is there. “Were we?”

“No-one told me” he replies. Then, least Faith feel interrogated, he asks, “Do you still have the necklace?”

“Um, yeah.” Buffy hands it over. Glancing at it, Faith says, “That’ll suit you, Giles.”

“Well” Giles slips the necklace into his pocket, deciding in the moment not to tell Faith what it is. “Let’s go somewhere more comfortable, shall we? Faith, how did you know to find us here?”

“I just arrived in town and I figured, what fun place might B and Giles be hanging out in tonight?” Faith follows them out, torchlight mapping a path down a pitch tunnel, and Giles can’t help but wish she had gone in front. Faith elaborates, “Nah, seriously, I got to town, thought I’d find you guys patrolling and saw you come down here. What was that stuff about soldiers?”

“Long story” answers Buffy.

“Well” says Faith, “it’s been a while since I had anything to do.”

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“So” says Giles, setting the phone down after a series of illuminating calls. “You didn’t actually complete the rehabilitation programme?”

“Hey” Faith, looking as harmless as she ever has on their sofa with her arms wrapped around her torso, shuffles under his scrutiny. “I rehabilitated the hell out of myself at least ten times over, and they still wouldn’t let me leave.”

“So you escaped?”

“I had to” Faith looks around, taking in Giles’ carefully blank expression, Ethan’s look of unease and Buffy’s sympathetic frown. Reaching for Buffy, she says, “B, they were using this spell on me, making me all spaced and useless. They could have told me to jump off a cliff and I’d have done it.”

“What did they actually have you do?” asks Giles.

“Training and a load of question answering” is the reply. “Which, fair enough, but as soon as I had questions of my own, they hit me with all that mind-control crap. And then there was the drugs.” To Buffy, she adds, “Not as fun as it sounds.”

“So you had to get away from them” Buffy concludes.

“Did you do it without killing anyone?” asks Ethan.

Faith nods. “Wesley helped.”

Buffy offers a hollow laugh. “It must have been bad to make Wesley rebel.”
“Well you say that” Ethan tells her, “Personally I find watchers rebel rather impressively. And the tweedier they start out the better.”

“Thank you, Ethan” Giles quickly intercedes. “Faith, the Council have decided that now you’ve, err, got yourself here, it would be best to see how you cope in Sunnydale rather than intervene.”

“Let me guess” says Buffy, “that decision comes with a big old We’ll kill you if you screw up?”

“I imagine so, yes.”

Faith shrugs. “So, I won’t screw up. Only put the pointy things in the bad guys, right? I got this.”

Really, if that little gem of wisdom is all the Council have managed to impart, Giles wonders if Faith might have been better off staying in Sunnydale after the ascension after all. He continues, “Yes, well. As I understand it, opinions have been divided as to whether you should be sent a watcher. The compromise is that I should watch you in a voluntary capacity.” He feels a tentative hope as he says it, which fades a little as he takes in everyone’s expressions.

“You’re not going to be paid?” asks Ethan.

“What about me?” asks Buffy.

“I don’t need a watcher” declares Faith.

Giles sighs. Deals with his partner first. “Ethan, I lost my job when the Council decided I’m not fit to be a watcher. Really, I’m lucky they’re letting watch Faith at all.”

“I’m not sure luck in the word.” Ethan shakes his head despairingly. “We’re never going to leave this town, are we?”

Faith scowls at him. “Is that code for hurry up and die?”

Ethan shrugs. “You just said you don’t need a watcher. Now it’s life and death?”

Letting Faith dwell on that, Giles turns to Buffy. “Buffy, you know I’m here for you if you need anything at all. You knew Faith was coming back and that I might have a role in it. You thought it was a good idea.”

“I know” Buffy’s tone slips into petulant. “But I guess I didn’t think they’d really…”

“What?” asks Faith, “Make you share?”

“No, no” Buffy protests. “No, I just mean…Look, it’s okay. Absolutely, Giles should be your watcher. He’s a great one.”

Giles feels a smile spread over his face. He asks Faith, “So, what do you think? It might be beneficial for you to have a, a point of contact.”

“Contact with what, the council?” Faith rolls her eyes disgustedly.

“I’m hardly the Council” Giles points out. “Technically, I’m just a volunteer.”

Faith looks torn for just a moment, looking from Giles’ eager face to Ethan’s disgruntled one, to Buffy’s look of forced supportiveness. “Fine” she decides. “I’ll give it a go. No early morning training, all right?”
“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Okay then” Faith settles back into the sofa, making herself comfortable. “So, what’s been happening while I was gone? Did I miss much?”

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“It’s pretty fucked up when you think about it.” Faith crosses her legs on her motel bed, staring off into the middle distance.

Ethan, kneeling by the door in preparation to cast wards, glances over. “You mean Joyce?” After some apparent internal debate, Joyce had decided not to invite Faith back into her home just yet. Honestly, Ethan gives it a month before the two slayers are snuggled up with their mum/pseudo-mum for a film night after all, but Faith still took the rejection with an expression of abject hurt.

“Nah” says Faith, all forced nonchalance. “I get that Joyce wouldn’t trust me after…I get I fucked that up. It’s what I do.”

Ethan, knowing nothing to the contrary, limits his reaction to a noncommittal hum and focuses on his task. Faith continues, “No, I mean these army guys are fucked up.”

“Ah, well, we’re agreed there.”

“Trapping things and poking them with needles and spiking them with downers when they could just kill them? Takes a real piece of work to think of that.”

Clearly, she is speaking from her recent experience with needle-wielding, tweed-wearing thugs and terribly polite and proper sorcerers with mind control spells at the ready, but Ethan doubts she wants to relive that experience, so he says nothing. Concentrates on the growing magic thrumming within the circle he’s chalked out.

Wards set, there is briefly a sense of calm and security in the dingy room. It is somewhat spoilt when a demon casually strolls in. Ethan scuttles out the way.

Rising from the bed, Faith exclaims, “Oh, what? I thought you put a barrier up!”

“A barrier to anyone who intends to hurt you” Ethan explains.

“Well that’s a waste of magic. They never intend.” Fixing the newcomer with a death-glare, Faith demands, “What the hell do you want?”

The demon offers her a parcel. “Got present for you. From the Mayor.”

Faith looks like she’s been slapped. Gaze swivelling downward to the proffered parcel, she takes it, and stares at it while the demon turns and leaves. Ethan locks and bolts the door behind it. Then he wonders if he shouldn’t have left with it.

Turning, he finds Faith still staring at the parcel. “What is it?” asks Ethan.

Opening the parcel carefully, Faith extracts a video and a something else. The something else is mechanical, a small gadget of some sort. Faith sets it to one side. Studies the video. She asks Ethan, “Will you help me break in to some place with a video player?”

“Sorry” Ethan replies. “My days of petty housebreaking are long past. I could drive you back to the flat if you like? We’ve got a video player.”
“Nah, Giles doesn’t need to know about this.”

“Um, I do sleep with the man. I’m inclined to share things with him.”

With a frustrated gesture, Faith casts the video aside and runs a hand through her hair. “Whatever, it’s probably just some messed up weapon.”

“Shouldn’t your watcher get to examine your messed up weapon?”

“It’s not my anything. I just want…” Her gaze flutters to the video, lingers there hungrily.

Hit by a sudden understanding, Ethan finishes, “You just want to see his face.”

Faith shrugs, jolting her shoulders harshly. “He’s probably not even in it. Might be he just got Trick to record something.”

“But what?” Ethan wonders.

Faith shrugs again. “Some message for if the whole apocalypse thing didn’t work out I guess. It’s probably nothing.”

“So no harm in Rupert seeing it” Ethan concludes.

Faith nods. “Yeah. Absolutely. But I want to get settled in to my exciting new pig sty, so I’ll show him tomorrow. Hey, maybe it’ll tell me how to get my apartment back?”

Ethan shakes his head. “Last I heard, a lot of what the Mayor owned was taken back by the city. Turned out he was on the make, who’d have thought it?” At Faith’s despondency, he adds, “Your best bet for getting a decent place to stay is grovel to Joyce.”

“I don’t do grovelling.” Faith is still looking at the video and the hand-sized weapon, both strewn across the bed. “Look, if you’re done, I’ll say goodnight. I’m kind of jetlagged.”

“Alright” Ethan agrees reluctantly. “And you’ll show Rupert this stuff first thing?”

“Bright and early” Faith’s voice is lousy with forced cheer and her eyes are tired.

*****

“So I heard from Willow” Buffy tells Giles and Faith when she meets them the following afternoon in the woods. “She’s not been able to hack her way through to the Initiative computer system yet but she’s thinks she’s getting closer. And she already sent some digital hex their way to get rid of their files on Ethan.”

“Good” replies Giles. “Buffy, I was just talking to Faith about a parcel she received yesterday.”

Buffy glances at Faith. “You’re getting mail already? You’ve been back in town for like, a day.”

Faith shrugs, folding her arms and casting a sulky expression Giles’ way. She had been openly annoyed to discover that Ethan had indeed told Giles about her late-night delivery and reluctant to say what was on the video, just as Giles was reluctant to insist he show it to her. And according to Faith the device that had accompanied it was “a dud”.

“I’m telling you” she says now to Buffy, making an effort to walk a little faster than easy conversation allows, “I couldn’t get it to work. Maybe he there was something else with it and the delivery demon stole it or something.”
“So what was it supposed to do?” Buffy hurries to keep up, Giles following behind her.

“I dunno” Faith repeats. “He was vague.”

“So what did he say?” Buffy stops suddenly as Faith does.

“That’s personal” mutters Faith. Then, staring ahead into the undergrowth, “Listen – is that them?”

“Probably” Buffy admits, as the sounds of male voices permeate the surrounding woods.

“Finally” Faith’s voice drops to a murmur and she proceeds quietly, stalking closer to wherever the soldiers are heading.

Hanging back a little, Buffy whispers to Giles, “Should we make her show it to us?”

“Make her how, exactly?” Giles whispers back. Seeing Buffy’s troubled expression, he adds, “It could be that she’s just keeping hold of it for, err, sentimental reasons.”

“Because she’s sentimentaling about that creep? See, that’s worrying all by itself.”

“Agreed. But we need to give her time. Once she’s adjusted to being back, she may hand it over voluntarily, without us having to undermine her trust.”

“I guess” Buffy looks unconvinced. “But I don’t like it. And I don’t like how keen she was to come here and spy on the Initiative.”

“Personally, I take that as a good sign; we are concerned about their activities, after all. And having a slayer that the Initiative haven’t encountered is certainly useful.”

“Maybe” says Buffy. “Just so long as she doesn’t do anything reckless like –” and at that moment, there is a scream and a burst of gunfire. Buffy rolls her eyes heavenward. “Like attack them at random” she finishes with a sigh. Then she bolts in the direction of the commotion.

Racing to keep up, Giles arrives out of breath, in time to witness Buffy joining the fray.

There are perhaps ten soldiers, all armed, though this is a situation where long-distance artillery is useless, and there is no further gunfire. Instead the men reach for their tasers, and Giles, seeing that, smacks one around the face before he can turn it on either slayer, and is hurled against a tree for his troubles. Buffy is quickly beside him, pulling him out the way before lifting a soldier off the ground and throwing him at his fellows. “Faith, come on!”

Faith, a little way off, is busy punching some unfortunate young man. He, somewhat to his credit, Giles feels, gives as good as he gets, swinging at the attacking slayer, flipping to bounce to his feet as soon as Faith knocks him down.

Only as he regains his footing does Giles recognise Riley. Beside him, Buffy catches her breath and tenses. Sensing that she is too thrown to get through to Faith, Giles calls out, “Faith, we need to leave!” Impossible to imagine that none of the fallen men around them called for backup. A few are stirring now, one sending a bolt of electricity crackling through the air, heating it inches from Giles face when Buffy knocks him sideways. Giles calls again, “Faith!”

Ignoring him, Faith punches Riley yet again. Somehow, he still stays on his feet, but does stagger briefly allowing Faith to grab hold of his arm. There is a glint of metal at her palm before she is gripping Riley’s hand fiercely. Something, something not quite magic, or perhaps something magic but tainted, pulses through the air.
“Faith!” Buffy knocks a weapon from a soldier’s reach, stepping closer to Giles. Behind her, the last of the soldiers are down but the sound of backup approaching through the trees is growing.

Faith ignores them both, fixated on Riley, who looks oddly blank faced, simply watching Faith grip his hand hard, light pulsating around them, until she breaks the connection. Dropping Riley’s hand, Faith throws yet another punch, knocking Riley back. He staggers and she stares at him in apparent amazement. Looks slowly down at herself.

“Faith” Buffy darts forward and grabs her, pulls her back until she is standing beside Giles staring at her raised hands.

Turning to Riley, Buffy says, “Riley” and then pauses, as though trying to work out whether he is still ignoring her. Which they don’t have time for: the hurried footsteps of approaching soldiers are growing louder still. Reaching for Buffy’s wrist, Giles tugs her away and they run, dragging Faith with them.

They make it safely to campus, the backup apparently stopping to help the soldiers Buffy and Faith incapacitated between them.

As soon as they are among the student body, Buffy turns to Faith, gripping her shoulders. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What was that thing?” echoes Giles.

“What thing?” Buffy asks him.

“The device you had” Giles addresses Faith. “Was that what the Mayor gave y –” He stops when he sees the look on her face.

She is frightened. Her hands shake and her expression is frantic. Before Giles can say anything, Buffy is asking, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Buffy?” Faith seems to properly take in the fact that Buffy is standing in front of her. She reaches for her. “Buffy! Oh God!”

“Faith” Buffy returns her embrace mechanically. “What’s going on?”

“Faith?” repeats the other girl, blankly. “Faith who? I’m Riley!”
“This is so bizarre” Faith (Riley?) studies her hands and then glances up, flustered, to accept a mug of coffee from Willow. “Oh, thank you.”

Willow smiles nervously and then, returning to stand beside Giles, mutters, “Definitely not Faith.”

“You sense something about her?”

“No, but she’s being polite.” Willow stares across the dorm room to where Buffy watches Riley—or-Faith watch Ethan prepare a reveal spell. Bundling a frightened Riley (Faith?) into Buffy’s dorm room and calling Ethan had seemed like the only option earlier, but now Giles feels uncomfortably close to the soldiers they’d just been fighting. He glances at the door.

Draws back a little when it opens, aware that Buffy, too, looks over sharply, but it is only Tara. She offers her shy, sideways smile and then frowns when she takes in the figure on the bed. “Oh yes” she says. “You, you’ve definitely been body swapped, h-haven’t you?”

“Is it even possible?” asks Faith/Riley.

Ethan asks Tara, “You can tell just from looking?”

Tara nods. “It’s in her aura. Um, h-his. Is it his?”

“I’d prefer his.” Riley nods Faith’s head.

Ethan decides, “We can probably skip the reveal then. Just err…” He gestures from Riley/Faith to Buffy. “Tell us something only Riley would know, perhaps.”

Riley contorts Faith’s expression into something shyer than it’s ever been and beacons Buffy closer. He whispers in her ear. Buffy straightens up and offers a guarded smile. “Hello, Riley.”

Ethan mutters, “I don’t want to know.”

As the situation sinks in, Giles sinks into the chair by the desk. Seeing that Willow was working on something that could possibly be hacking, he turns her laptop away from Riley’s line of sight. “Foolish girl” he murmurs.

Buffy looks hurt. “What did I do?”

“Not you, Faith.”

“Oh” says Buffy. “I need to get used to someone else being your slayer.”

“And I need to get used to a slayer who throws herself into an undercover mission without running it past me, apparently” replies Giles. Foolish, foolish girl. Could she not have waited for Willow to
tap into the computer system? To learn more about the situation and plan what to do once she was in?

Could she not have asked him first?

“How’d she even do it?” asks Willow.

“Gadget from the Mayor” Buffy explains. “This must be what it does.”

Riley asks, “Is there a way to put me back?” and then Faith’s cheeks pale a little, and he adds, “Um, not that I want to go back like that. I mean not if…” Faith’s voice fades as Riley stops speaking.

Buffy asks, “Riley, what’s wrong?”

“You mean apart from me being trapped in a girl’s body?”

Ethan rolls his eyes, reaching into the bag of magical supplies he brought from the shop. “That girl’s body is stronger than you’ll ever be in your own.”

“What?”

“Faith’s a slayer” explains Buffy.

“Oh. But still, I’m not a girl.” Riley glances down at his new form and quickly away again.

“Huh” murmurs Willow, “So Faith can blush.”

“We’ll get you back to your own body as soon as we can” promises Buffy. “We just need –”

“No” says Riley. “No, I don’t want to – I mean I can’t – I mean I just don’t want –”

Buffy puts a firm hand on Faith’s shoulder, and asks Riley, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“What they’ve done to me.” Riley moves Faith’s hand, apparently without meaning to, to her chest, then yelps when it makes contact with a type of anatomy he is not accustomed to having.

Catching hold of his hand, Buffy asks, “What did they do?”

“A chip” Riley replies. “They put a chip in me like they did with Hostile 17. But here.” He indicates the place on Faith’s body, more precisely this time.

“When did this happen?” asks Giles.

“I don’t…” Riley seems to pause and consider, Faith’s voice catching as he forces himself to calm down. “I had a surgery before I was deployed to Sunnydale. Routine stuff…Or that’s what they told me. They must have put it in then. And then they activated it when I went back that day Professor Walsh tried to have Buffy killed…Oh God, Buffy, I should have listened to you.”

“It’s okay, Riley.” Buffy sidesteps to allow Ethan to set up a new spell, sprinkling powders in a circle around Riley. She ends up sitting on the bed beside him, close enough to Faith’s body that their shoulders press together.

“What did it do?” asks Willow, “The chip, I mean.”

Faith’s hand drifts again to the indicated spot as Riley absorbs the question. “It forced me to obey
them” he replies. “Everything they said, it made me do. It’s plugged into my central nervous system. I couldn’t even talk without their permission. That’s why –” He turns to Buffy. “Buffy, I’m so sorry I’ve been ignoring you. I didn’t want to, I wanted to talk to you, but it wouldn’t let me. They wouldn’t let me.”

“I know” she reassures him. “I mean I know now. I’m sorry I didn’t realise.”

“How could you?” Riley shudders, shaking Faith’s form. “I tried to cut it out at first. They’ve kept me under watch since then.”

Stepping closer to the sacred circle Ethan has traced on the floor, Tara asks, “B-but what about Faith? If she’s in the body with the chip…”

“She’ll be forced to obey them” Giles realises, meeting Buffy’s expression of sudden horror with his own. “And she won’t be able to get back to us to reverse the swap.”

“Or to get Riley’s body to us so we can get this thing out of him” adds Buffy. “And after what Faith went through with watcher-flavoured mind control, I’m not sure the Initiative version will do to her.”

Giles frowns. Seeing that Ethan has finished his preparations, he asks, “A different reveal?”

Ethan nods. “To see what type of bodyswap spell that gadget used. That’ll show us how to reverse it.” He kneels and lights a candle. “Of course, getting Riley’s body here is another problem entirely.”

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“Okay” says Buffy heavily after the video ends, the picture disintegrating into white noise, a welcome alternative to the smug palliness of the Mayor. Extracting the video from the player, she says, “I really want to smash this up.”

“Me too” Giles admits. “But I doubt Faith would thank us for it.”

“Right. In her own time, blah blah blah.” Buffy tosses the video onto Giles’ desk, not troubling to set it down gently. Rather, she treats it like some particularly unpleasant insect she doesn’t want to handle. “You know what this means?” she asks, “It means that creep was all set to let me take the blame for everything he did trying to ascend! If Faith hadn’t come back to our side and hadn’t been hurt, he was for her just stealing my body and walking away in it while I got arrested. I mean, she’d have been arrested, right?”

“I’m not sure” admits Giles. “As I understand it, the Mayor disposed of the evidence connecting her to Mr Finch’s death, but I suppose had she not been among the wounded someone might have realised she was connected to the events at graduation in a causation capacity. Or perhaps the Mayor assumed that if he failed, you’d kill Faith. You had the backing of the Council after all, not to mention friends. Faith would have been quite alone.”

“So switch our bodies and Faith could get you to kill me.” Buffy shudders. “Can I just say how glad I am the guy exploded?”

“He was as soulless a monster as any other we’ve faced by the end” Giles agrees. He wonders if there’s a warning it that. The creatures they’ve faced seem to be getting progressively more human, the youthful, naïve but combat-trained Initiative soldiers a far cry from the Master.

Though even he must have been human once, one supposes. Startling the extent to which humanity
can be eroded.

To Buffy, Giles says, “Of course this means that the Mayor realised you were likely to stop him.”

“Gee, I’m flattered.” Buffy scowls. Then she says, “Nothing about how to reverse it.” In sudden alarm, she adds, “God, what if it isn’t reversible?”

“It will be” Giles reassures her. “No bodyswap spell is irreversible; Faith’s natural state is in her own body.”

“Do you think it will just switch back spontaneously like with me and Willow? With the slayer power just having enough?”

“I doubt it” Giles admits. “From what Ethan’s reveal discovered, this is a stronger, older magic than the spell he used then. Whoever made that device for the Mayor, it was obviously infused with something ancient.”

Buffy turns her attention to what is left of the body-switching gadget, scrapped from the forest floor before they’d searched Faith’s motel room for the video. Apparently crushed underfoot by retreating soldiers, it is reduced to a few benign clogs and wires. “I’m guessing superglue isn’t going to cut it” she says.

“No” agrees Giles. “And I suspect it worked by somehow containing a spell anyway. With the spell cast, there’s not much left – just the container.”

“Single use evil” muses Buffy. “Right. And the Mayor wasn’t all and this is how you reverse it because the plan was I’d be dead in Faith’s body. God, what is she thinking?”

“I imagine she wanted to gather intelligence.”

“Well, she could sure use some! Who just jumps into an undercover recon mission in someone else’s body without running it by anyone?”

“I agree” says Giles. “It is reckless. But being imprisoned and unable to fulfil her destiny as a slayer for so long doubtless left her impatient, and then there’s the fact that she’s probably keen to show you she can be useful. It’s made her reckless.”

“Made her more reckless” Buffy corrects him. “She wasn’t exactly Jane Sane before.” Her frown deepens. “And now she’s trapped in Riley’s body being forced to do God knows what and we don’t have any way of getting her out of there.”

“We don’t have any way yet” Giles amends. “We will get her back, Buffy, and we’ll do it without sending Riley back to them.”

Buffy nods, and seems to make an effort to shake her thoughts from whatever dark path they are headed down. “You’re right.” She heads towards the door. “I should get back to the dorm. I’ve left Riley long enough.”

“I’m sure he’s fine with Willow and Tara there” Giles reassures her. Or at least, his mind adds, as fine as one can be when washed up in the wrong body after a week or so of total loss of autonomy.

Pulling her jacket on and opening the front door, Buffy says, “Hopefully they’ve found something to undo the swap, or Ethan’s turned up something at the shop. Because God knows we haven’t found any answers.”
“Will it work?” Buffy asks. Beside her, out of place in the Magic Box, Riley looks unnerved by the idea that it might not.

It’s odd, seeing Faith look lost, even if it’s Riley powering it. Ethan wonders if this was how she looked at the hospital straight after graduation – like a child.

Not that Riley is a child really. Just led like one.

Rearranging a sales display, Ethan answers Buffy: “It should be fine, just time consuming. Accessing the nether realm is rather involved and then they’ll actually have to forge something to use in a reversal spell out of whatever they find there.”

“And once that’s done” Rupert adds, “We still need to find a way to get Faith and Riley in a room together.” He smiles reassuringly at Riley. “Which I’ve no doubt can be done, but I do think you should prepare yourself for a couple of days in Faith’s body.”

“Oh, okay” replies Riley, contorting Faith’s voice into a tone of forced cheer. “It beats being chipped at least.” And with that, the false cheer falls away entirely but he powers through with, “But what if she, err, needs to go to the bathroom? And what about showering? I don’t want to give her body back dirty but I don’t want to…”

Buffy looks a little stricken. Probably she hadn’t thought about just how well Faith and Riley would be getting to know each other. Ethan rolls his eyes and replies, “Whatever else she’s doing, she’s probably getting a good view of your body in all its glory. I wouldn’t worry about that.” He joins them at the table.

Buffy smiles a tight smile and says, “Thanks, Ethan.”

“Well, I’m just saying. Or you could blindfold Riley here and wash Faith’s body yourself but then that’s getting into kinkier territory and I imagine that’s not your style.”

“Stop imagining!”

“It’s okay” Riley tells her. “I’m just trying to get my head around the etiquette here. I’ll just have to man up and take a quick shower tomorrow.”

“Or woman up” Ethan supplies. Riley gives him a look that implies he’d thank Ethan not to supply anything in this conversation. Coming from Faith’s features, the expression is a little unnerving, and Rupert, bless him, steps in to say, “Well, yes, quite, the, err, etiquette of a bodyswap is rather unchartered territory, especially when opposite genders are involved. But I’m sure so long as both sides are respectful it’s a surmountable problem.”

“Sure” says Riley. “And it’s not like it’s anything I haven’t seen before.” Catching sight of Buffy’s expression at that, he amends, “I mean, I have sisters – I mean, not that I’ve seen my sisters’ – I mean, you know, since we were small, but – Look, this is just a lot to take in, okay? And I’m not Mr Articulate at the best of times.”

“Yes” says Rupert. “Well, moving on.” Spotting Ethan’s grin, he nudges his partner under the table.

Buffy nods hurriedly. “Right. Well, I’m not Miss Articulate either so…Look, Riley, the best chance we have to get your body here to reverse the swap is for Willow to hack the system and override whatever’s controlling the chip remotely. At least that’s what Willow said.”
“Can she do it?” asks Rupert.

“Give her enough time and Willow could hack like, NASA or somewhere” replies Buffy. She frowns. “Which makes me think maybe you guys should be the ones visiting the nether realms so Willow can get started on that straight away.”

“Ah” says Rupert. “Well, that’s…it’s…”

“It’s more likely to work when a hereditary witch like Tara is involved” Ethan explains.

Buffy asks, “Couldn’t you have done it with Tara?”

Ethan feigns indignation. “And here you were insecure about your boyfriend showering in your friend’s body!”

Buffy looks puzzled for a moment, and then blushes. “Oh” she says. “Oh, well Willow did say it was intense but I didn’t realise, um. Oh.”

“Indeed.”

Still frowning thoughtfully, Buffy moves her hand unconsciously to Faith’s hand but Riley pulls it away restlessly. “Sorry” he says. “Just processing here.”

Buffy studies him. “Hey, you want a work out? It could be the slayer strength being all pent up.”

“Maybe” Riley sighs. “You know I said I got it before? Well I really get it now. Buffy, how do you live with this much strength just day to day? I feel like I’m always on the brink of breaking something.”

“And on that note” says Ethan, standing, “Maybe you would like to leave my shop and go off on patrol.” “No” says Rupert decisively. Buffy and Riley pause, their chairs half-pushed back, and look at him. Rupert goes on, “Riley, I know it’s probably not easy to talk about, but we do need to know what the Initiative are doing, aside from chipping you.”

He has a point, Ethan has to admit. Aside from anything else, he’d like to know if he is being tracked. He gestures for Buffy and Riley to sit back down and Riley tucks his chair in again with a heavy sigh. “I guess I had to tell someone eventually” he says, “But can you guys even stop any of it?”

“Not if you don’t tell us what it is” Rupert points out.

“And it’s not like you can report it to anyone else” adds Ethan. “It’s government sanctioned.”

Putting a hand on Faith’s shoulder, Buffy asks, “Do we really need to do this now? He only just got out.”

“No” says Riley, “it’s okay.” Looking across the table at Rupert he asks, “What do you want to know?”

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“Well” says Rupert later, once Buffy has taken Riley, in his borrowed slayer form, to unleash some tension in Sunnydale’s night-time cemeteries. “That was unpleasant.”

“Not really surprising.” Ethan replies. So far as he is concerned, the main thing to take from the revelations is that he is not – so far as Riley knew at least – being actively pursued by anyone.
Distracted with cashing up for the night, he is surprised when he glances up to find Rupert looking at him questioningly. But perhaps it is not so surprising – Rupert is council born and bred, trained to do awful things on the understanding that no-one else in the human race ever will and that is why they deserve protection. Monstrous humans with demonic victims doesn’t fit comfortably into his worldview. Taking a patient breath, Ethan reasons, “Well think about it, Rupert. Why would they want to put behaviour modification devices in vampires?”

“Possibly just to see if it works. For all we know a lot of what they do is just to see what happens, so…” So very like he and Ethan when they first summoned Eyghon, Ethan watches Rupert realise. Rupert stalls.

“Or maybe the US military doesn’t fund idle curiosity” Ethan tells him. “Remember, governmental bodies have budgets.”

“I suppose so” Rupert concedes, looking troubled. He draws closer to the counter, apparently wanting comfort as well as to help close up for the night. “I suppose it was too much to hope that they might have been looking for effective ways of killing demons. Staking vampires is cheap.”

“Exactly”

“Really, I just assumed the chip was simply a way of keeping Spike from hurting anyone while further research was conducted” Rupert says.

That at least is a reasonable theory, but Ethan is not shocked by the revelation that some of the previous sixteen hostiles survived the process, and the collection of chipped vampires is now up to Hostile twenty, all taken from around Sunnydale, nine of them still in the bowels of the Initiative complex. Rupert adds, “I wish Riley had an idea what they’re planning on doing with them.”

“I imagine they don’t talk about it in front of foot soldiers often” replies Ethan. “Even chipped ones. Probably don’t talk about it out loud at all any more than they have to.” That is how inhuman humans work after all; by pretending everything is normal. He concludes, “But we can fill in the blanks, can’t we?”

Cautiously, Rupert asks, “We can?”

“Well I don’t know for sure. But if I were some military top brass with a load of chipped vamps I tell you what I’d do – I’d keep them hungry and come the next war I’d parachute them into a town I wanted to capture. And then I’d turn the chips off remotely.”

Rupert stares at him for a moment. “Thank God you don’t work for the army.”

“Oh come on, Rupert. Can you see me in the army?”

“I can see you socialising with demons. Maybe that’s where you get ideas like that, but –”

“– But can you think of anything else they’d do with nine vampires with chips in their brains?”

Rupert frowns. “No” he admits. “No more than I can imagine what they’re thinking chipping Riley.” He comes round to stand beside Ethan and starts moving the bowels of talismans from countertop to the lockable cupboard beneath it. “At least they haven’t done it to any of the other soldiers” he says, and then looks startled for a moment, adds, “So far as we know, that is. They wouldn’t be able to tell each other, would they?”

Ethan nods grimly. “At least we know what they’re doing with Adam” he says.
This is what Riley was able to shed the most light on: Adam’s daily routine of tests and training. A good deal of military knowledge seems to have been built into him, but Walsh is improving it alongside testing his reflexes and stamina on a series of unfortunate demons. Some reprogramming has seen him become more compliant than when Ethan encountered him, though he gets the impression that Walsh is the only one who can reliably control him. Maybe they can at least hope the mess of a monster will eat some soldier-boy while she’s not looking. Preferably the one who called him a freak, but Ethan isn’t fussy. “What I want to know” he says, forcing himself to voice what he’d really rather not think about, “is where they plan on getting the humans from.”

Rupert doesn’t need to ask to know that he is referring to the grisly demon parts Riley has seen stored in freezers, the electronic parts in restricted areas, waiting, apparently, to become parts of new Adams. “Perhaps the next creatures they make will be only demon and android” he replies, but even as he says it, he seems to realise it is a futile hope. After all, some human is needed for the higher level co-operative abilities required in any military exercise, and for the empathy needed to, if nothing else, predict how an adversary might behave.

Ethan says, “They have humans in Nevada.”

“That’s in hand” Giles reminds him, and Ethan tries to be reassured by this, as though the council have given him reason to think they’d want to help or the coven reason to think they can.

As they finally close up and leave, Rupert asks Ethan, “Will you still do a cloaking spell?”

“No” replies Ethan. Honestly, he hadn’t found one he’d be capable of performing that wouldn’t hide the shop from customers. He could ask Willow, of course, but she might well have to alter an existing spell, or create a new one, and that’s a lot to ask someone who so recently tried to quit. “I doesn’t sound like they’re looking for me, after all.”

“Indeed.” Rupert wraps a reassuring arm around him. “We will sort this out, Ethan. It’s going to be okay.”

****

“So reversal is going to be easy” Willow concludes, opening the wooden box in her hands to reveal a glowing presence trapped within. “But the problem is the chip is proving kind of unoveridable and we still need to get Faith-in-Riley here.”

Buffy, shifting closer to Riley-in-Faith on the sofa, says, “Can we maybe not call her that?”

“Sorry” Willow takes a seat at Giles’ desk and glances around at the assembled group.

Anya asks, “So how do we get Faith-in-Riley over here?”

“Anya!” Buffy’s rebuke is more resigned than annoyed. In answer to the question, she says, “Well the men in black won’t help. I checked their offices today and they’ve cleared out.”

Xander says, “Maybe we could just try to grab Faith-in-err – we could grab Riley’s body.” Ignoring Ethan’s smirk and Willow’s blush masterfully, he continues, “I mean, they can’t be guarding you all the time, can they?” This to Riley, who contorts Faith’s expression into one of extreme doubt. Xander adds, “And even with the chip not letting her help, Faith’s not going to attack us.”

“Unless they tell her to” points out Riley.

Willow nods. “Plus, Faith’s not going to attack us might sound more convincing if she’d actually
finished that How Not To Murder Everyone course we sent her on.”

“Be fair, Will” cautions Buffy. “She did this to try to help.”

“Without telling anyone” points out Willow, not unreasonably.

“We’ll have to have a conversation about that when she’s back” Giles agrees. “But for now, getting her back must be the focus.”

Buffy asks, “I’m guessing there’s not a convenient spell to override the chip?”

Willow shakes her head. Tara adds, “Not one that we could find.”

Giles turns to Ethan. “Eth?”

Ethan, too, shakes his head. “Nothing springs to mind. And there aren’t many summoning spells that can be used on a human, and they all assume that the subject will be in the right body.”

“And magic that meshes with tech is still in the early stages” Willow adds. “Not to mention Faith being a slayer is going to affect any spell we try.”

“Makes sense” says Riley, turning Faith’s head to glance at Buffy. “I thought I understood before but this is something else. I mean, the power is –”

“Not something you’re going to wax lyrical to the Initiative about” Ethan finishes for him. He has a point, Giles supposes: no need to build supernatural soldiers if one were to find a way of distilling slayer strength. Perhaps he ought to suggest that to the Council – it might motivate them to intervene promptly if they think the Initiative might be such a direct threat to Buffy. And it may or may not be true.

“I’m not having anything to do with them ever again” Riley is insisting. “After what they did to me…” Automatically, he starts to move Faith’s hand to that certain spot on her front where the chip is in his own body. Buffy intercepts it. Riley concludes, “No. I’m through with them. And there is a way to get the chip out, right?” When no-one answers immediately, he asks, “You’re not just going to send me back to them?”

“No” Giles reassures him. “We’ll get it out, it’s just, well – as you can see, this isn’t an ideal place to perform surgery.”

“Believe me” replies Riley, “I’d rather have surgery on that table-top than not be in charge of my own self again.”

Willow says, “I guess I just have to keep trying to override the chip remotely. But if I thought hacking into the Initiative computers was hard…”

“Sounds like you could use my help” says a voice from the doorway, and everyone turns, relieved, to welcome Johnathan.
Some dialogue in this chapter is from BtVS season 4 episode 17, Superstar, written by Jane Espenson.

When one invented the internet, taking control of implanted behaviour modification technology remotely and without being noticed is straightforward. All Giles can do is watch in bafflement as Jonathan does just that, and it is not long before there is a knock at the door.

Opening it, Giles finds a blank-faced Riley, or, to put it more accurately, Riley’s body. Still seated in the living room, Riley gives an exclamation of surprise at the sight of it, twisting Faith’s body around to look.

Smiling as Riley’s form steps inside, Jonathan says, “You can speak, Faith.”

“Thank fuck!” The exclamation is anomalous coming from Riley’s mouth. “You have no idea how much I’ve been needing to swear!” As Buffy and her own body enter her line of sight, she adds, “Riles, your boss is a mega-bitch. Hi, B.”

“Hi Faith” Buffy seems to try and fail to hold back a smile. Jonathan adds, “And feel free to move as much as you want as well.”

“Thanks” Faith makes a show of stretching Riley’s muscles. “Hey, nice six pack by the way.”


“So are you going to all stand gawping or get this chip out of me?” demands Faith. “Because, Johnny-boy, much as I love and owe you one big time, I seriously don’t want you in charge of when I’m allowed to pee. Or you could just switch us back. I don’t care if you tell Riley when to pee.”

“We’re doing both” Jonathan tells her. “The only question is, which first?”

In the end, Riley plays the gentleman and agrees for the bodyswap to be reversed before his body undergoes the surgery needed to remove the chip. This is a more communal effort than hijacking the thing, and not without its risks, given that this is surgery to remove a foreign object from the boy’s central nervous system performed at the dinner table with nothing but alcohol as anaesthetic.

“Man” says Faith, now back in her own body and watching Riley swing brandy, “We should have let me do the drinking part and then switch back before the hangover.”

“Missed opportunity” Ethan agrees.

“You got no idea. Trying to get drunk with slayer constitution? Practically have to steal the bar. Am I right, B?”
Buffy, crouched beside Riley, acknowledges the comment with a huff and returns her focus to Jonathan and the incision he’s making in Riley’s chest. Following her gaze, Ethan says, “Really, the way things are going round here we should just buy some medical anaesthetic.”

Willow pulls a face. “And just work out how to use it through trial and error?”

“It could be fun trial and error.”

“Actually” Jonathan tells them, “I’m a trained anaesthesiologist.”

“Oh, right. Good idea then.”

Watching the procedure a little longer, Giles finally says, “Faith – a quick word?” He gestures to the door.

Faith rolls her eyes and follows, waiting until they are out in the courtyard with the door shut before saying, “Look, I know what you’re going to say but it was a good plan – go in, get info, maybe screw them over a bit and come back and tell you guys everything. I didn’t know they’d gone and chipped him, did I?”

“If it was a good plan” Giles reasons, “why didn’t you involve us from the start?”

“’Cause I knew you’d try to stop me.” Faith shrugs.

Giles sits down at the edge of the fountain, leaving the possibility of her sitting beside him unspoken but obvious. She remains standing. Taking his glasses off, Giles asks, “Why would we stop you if it was such a good plan?”

“Okay so it wasn’t a great plan.” Faith shrugs again.

“It was extremely dangerous. You could have been killed.”

“I could have been killed any day I’ve been alive. Only safe people are the dead ones.” Tentatively stepping closer, Faith sits down at last. “Anyway, like I said, I didn’t know about the chip. You think I’d have done it if I did? I’m through with mind control. It’s just not my scene.”

Putting his glasses back on, Giles points out, “Even without the chip, there’s a world of things that can go wrong with body swaps. You could both have ended up in a stranger’s body, you could have shifted one of the bodies into a different dimension or one of you could have been injured by the spell itself. Not to mention you didn’t know it was Riley you were fighting – you could have picked any soldier who didn’t know Buffy and how could you predict how he’d behave in your body?”

Faith looks unimpressed in a theatrical, demonstrative sort of way that hides whatever she is really thinking. Giles tells her, “You aren’t expected to atone, you realise. You have a new start moving forward.”

“Really? So everyone will stop looking at me like I’m about to stake them? Anyway, not sure I believe in new starts. There’s always baggage, you know? Well, I guess you would know.”

“All I’m saying is we aren’t expecting you to take unnecessary risks to make up for anything that’s past.”

“What’re you calling unnecessary? I got the intel, didn’t I?”
“Yes, and it’s useful, but the price could easily have been too high.” Giles watches Faith closely as he says this, but she gives nothing away. He asks, “Are you alright?”

“You know me” she replies breezily. “Five by five.”

Heading back inside, Giles half expects Buffy to want a word herself, or to be perturbed by the second slayer having had what could only be perceived as – and arguably was – a watcher/slayer heart to heart. But Buffy barely acknowledges their entrance, distracted as she is by Riley, now chip-free and hugging her. Behind them, Willow is cleaning up the chip, apparently keen to take it home and study it, and asking Jonathan how to ensure it won’t be traced. It’s an ominous thing, small and grey, curling to a talon-like point where it had been embedded in its host.

Next comes the question of where Riley can hide now he’s essentially a fugitive, but fortunately Jonathan solves this by offering both Riley and Buffy a room in his mansion. That settled, it’s not long before everyone has gone home for the night.

“I hope Faith’s alright” Giles says once they’re gone. “I wonder if we ought to have offered her the sofa.”

“As comfortable as I’m sure an underground lab is” replies Ethan, “I imagine she’ll appreciate her own bed tonight.”

“The whole thing must have been an ordeal. She might have preferred not to be alone.”

“She’d have probably refused if you had offered” counters Ethan, and Giles supposes he is right. He says, “At least Riley’s free now.”

“He was always going to be, with Jonathan on the case.”

They go to bed soon after, and are awoken not long after that. Summoned to the mansion, it is not long before they, along with Buffy and Faith, are seated before the fire in the pallor, listening to Jonathan’s explanation of why Riley is sick: “It’s been clear to me for a while that the Initiative has been drugging its soldiers. With the physical demands of fighting demons each night, they wouldn’t want to rely on weaponry alone when oral genetic editing, pain-reflex suppression and heightened stamina are all on offer with the right combination of pills.” Jonathan sits back. “I’ll have my lab work on finding out exactly what they gave him, but in the meantime, I can treat him for the withdrawal symptoms.”

“Damn” mutters Faith. “I didn’t even realise. I mean, they sure gave him a lot of vitamins, but that’s all they said it was.”

“At least he can get clean now” Buffy says, looking shaken.

“Yes” Giles reassures her. “I’m sure he’ll be fine in a few days.” He tries not to wonder what permanent changes the lad will be left with. They’ll find out in good time.

“So” says Ethan. “We don’t have gangs of soldiers running round Sunnydale, we have gangs of stoned soldiers running round Sunnydale?”

“Way more fun” Faith deadpans.
“Actually” Jonathan tells them, “I don’t think what Riley’s been given has had a significant impact on his behaviour; it’s more physical.”

“So at least he hasn’t been high the whole time I’ve known him” says Buffy.

At that moment the phone rings. Jonathan, seated beside it, answers with his usual dazzling smile, but that soon slips when he hears whatever he’s being told on the other end. Improbable, but Giles is sure that for a moment – just a moment – Jonathan looks afraid. “Trouble?” he asks when Jonathan puts the phone down.

“Just a demon” Jonathan replies smoothly. “Nothing I can’t handle alone. You guys need to focus on taking care of Riley.”

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So they do, or rather, Buffy does, and everyone else pops in as needed to keep her – and Riley once he’s improved – company. Actually, Giles gets the impression that the pair don’t want to be alone together just yet. Buffy must have been hurt by Riley not believing what she told him about Walsh for all that he more than paid for it, and Riley’s recent experiences of the supernatural world that Buffy is so clearly a part of have hardly been positive.

Nonetheless, life returns to what might more or less pass as normal in Sunnydale. The Initiative are doubtless hunting for Riley, but are hardly going to search Jonathan’s mansion. Some soldiers – or at least, Buffy takes them to be soldiers in suits – arrive to question Jonathan (The nerve, Giles thinks, to question the man who gave the world punk) but Jonathan is of course more than capable of sending them away without suspicion. And with Faith unknown to them – it seems the description given by the soldiers she fought amounted to little more than “strong brunette chick” – they have at least one slayer who can patrol unimpeded.

Unfortunately, she is not patrolling in the right place to prevent a horrible demon attack on Tara a few nights later, and that is the point when Buffy confesses to be worried about more than Riley: “He blinked” she tells them at Giles and Ethan’s flat the following evening. Jonathan hasn’t arrived but everyone else is here except for Tara. Willow keeps glancing at the clock, apparently keen for Jonathan to show up and start the meeting so that she can go home and take care of her. Everyone else is focused on Buffy and the bizarre theory she is attempting to convey.

Except for Faith, that is: she, Giles realises, looks resigned rather than incredulous. “Do you believe any of this?” he asks her.

“I dunno.” Faith pushes off from the wall she’s leaning on. “I don’t want to think badly of the guy. I mean, he did the whole second chance thing, got me away from the watchers.”

“He killed Eyghon” Ethan points out. “We’d be six feet under without him if we were really lucky.”

“He’s saved all our lives” agrees Willow.

“But what if he hasn’t?” presses Buffy. “What if we’re all seeing what he wants us to see?”

Faith shakes her head sadly. “I dunno, B.”

Buffy says to her, “You must sense something off.”

Everyone is looking at Faith now. She scowls at Buffy. “Yeah” she admits at last. “I mean there’s something...But he’s not like other people anyway so it’s not weird that he weirds the slayer
“He weirds Adam out too” Buffy tells them. “I heard those soldiers who came to the mansion tell him that Adam called him a lie.”

“Adam?” Xander repeats. “We’re basing this on what Adam said?”

“He’s got parts from demons with psychic abilities in his brain” Riley says quietly. Xander goes quiet himself at that.

Buffy says, “Right. And it’s not just what Adam said, it’s what Anya said.”

“Don’t bring me into this” Anya mutters.

“Tell them about alternate realities” Buffy instructs.

As Anya launches into some odd, shrimp-based analogy. Giles murmurs to Ethan, “What do you make of this?”

“Well I imagine life without Jonathan would be more chaotic” replies his partner. “So there’s that. Unfortunately for us we’d all die screaming with no-one to save us too soon to enjoy it for long.”

“Is it even possible?”

“For us to die screaming without Jonathan? Yes, certainly.”

“I meant is a spell to change reality possible?”

“Oh.” Ethan thinks for a moment. “It would take some doing, but yes. Anything’s possible. That’s the beauty of magic.”

Surely they’d know? But then, Giles reasons, of course they wouldn’t. One can only deal with reality as one perceives it.

“Ethan” says Buffy suddenly, “pass me that calendar.”

Ethan detaches the swimsuit calendar from the wall and hands it over.

*****

“I sure wish I could help” says Riley some time later, once both slayers have gone with Jonathan.

“Help with what exactly?” asks Xander. “Ending the world as we know it?”

“I can’t take just sitting here” Riley replies. “I need to do something.” He paces a little. Giles wonders if he misses the slayer powers he got a taste of in Faith’s body. But whatever the cause of his restlessness, he is still healing and doesn’t actually make a move for the door. Keeping an eye on him, Giles lets his thoughts stray to Buffy and Faith, wherever they are. Slayer strength will be a match for a spell-born monster, surely? The strength of two slayers, no less.

Clearly thinking along the same lines, Willow says, “They’ll be fine, right? I mean, I know, monster, scary but there’s two of them.”

“I think it rather depends which side Jonathan picks” says Ethan.

“He wouldn’t hurt Buffy” dismisses Xander. “Or Faith.”
“I don’t know” Ethan counters. “He did go to all the trouble of changing everything to make himself a virtual god and all it cost was one little monster. And slayers die all the time, don’t they? So what do we do if he comes back and says oops, they were both killed?”

“He wouldn’t do that” insists Xander.

“And if he does” Giles decides, “I’ll kill him myself.” He studiously ignores the scandalised gasps from the children, but hazards a glance at Ethan, finds him sporting an odd look, somewhere between fear and awe.

“You couldn’t take him” points out Xander.

“We’d be stuck in the wrongness then” says Willow.

Xander says, “I’m still kinda rooting for that. But without the dead slayers, obviously.”

“They’ll be fine” repeats Willow. Behind her, Riley paces.

*****

“We found somewhere for Riley to hide” Buffy tells Faith and Giles the following day. “Decidedly non-mansiony, but it will do.”

“How is he?” asks Faith.

“Still kind of shaken. I mean, they completely took him over for a while there.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there.”

“You took him over too? Yep, I got that part.”

“No, I mean I know what it’s like to be all chipped up and drugged up.”

“I guess so.” Buffy eyes her sister-slayer cautiously. “And then there was the whole magic can change reality thing – kind of a brain-ache for us all but worse for him. I’m thinking he’s not a magic fan after all that.” She sighs. Asks Faith, “You think he’ll ever come round from the whole don’t-trust-anything-vaguely-connected-to-the-supernatural thing? Because I’m done with being side eyed anytime I bring him food.”

“I don’t know” replies Faith. “Everything supernatural he’s seen lately was fucked up. And guys are pretty simple.”

Giles coughs slightly. Faith adds, “Most guys, anyway.”

“Thank you, Faith. Buffy, perhaps Riley just needs a little time?”

Buffy shakes her head. “What he needed was for me to realise something was up and I didn’t.”

“Well, how could you?” Giles points out.

“I guess.” Buffy seems to focus on the present with some effort, fixing Giles with a forced and tired smile. “So, what am I doing here?”

“Helping me train Faith” Giles explains. “I thought an hour or so a week with an opponent who matches her in strength would be useful. If that’s alright with you, that is?”
“Sure” Buffy shrugs.

“Is it alright with your living room?” asks Faith. “Because, two slayers going for it, I think you can kiss goodbye to that lamp.”

“I’m hoping to persuade Ethan to let us have the back room in the shop” Giles tells them. “Really, he doesn’t need the storage, he just thinks he does because it doesn’t occur to him to organise the space. Today we’ll stick to basic sword play techniques. And stay away from the lamp.”

“I get to use the swords?” Faith asks, and for a moment, her smile is not the smile of a would-be killer, but of someone much younger and keener to please. “I didn’t think you’d let me so soon.”

“Given the things you’ll have to face here, I see no use in delaying these things.”

Faith looks at Buffy. “You sure you want to do this, B? I mean, I get it if you’d rather go hang with Riley.”

Buffy shakes her head. “Faith, if it wasn’t for you, Riley would still be a prisoner. I kind of owe you. Not that I’m giving you a pass on the whole jumping into danger thing, by the way.”

“Great, another lecture” Faith mutters. She accepts a sword from Giles and studies it’s hilt, swings it experimentally once he’s out of range.

Buffy looks at Giles. “You already did the lecture?”

“I did” Giles confirms.

“A lot of blank slate crap” Faith elaborates.

“Faith” says Giles, “if you’d rather I was firm –”

“Trust me” Buffy interrupts, “Firm Giles is no fun.”

“Thank you, Buffy.” He is, Giles realises, going to have is work cut out with two of them. Not that Buffy has turned up for a training session in a while. He hands her the second sword. “Really, you’re just here for the physical side of the training.”

“What, I don’t get to impart any wisdom?” She pouts.

“Well” says Faith, “If you ever get any…”

“Hey!”

“Enough” Giles tells them. Gods, he’s tired already. “Shall we begin?”
“All that for this?” Faith wrinkles her nose at the Saint Menas Stone, as Giles wipes the last of the vampire dust from it. Who knows how long the vampires were here with the stone sealed in the wall beside them but the nest seems long-established. Giles points out, “You did seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“Well, yeah” concedes Faith. “I like me a good brawl, but do you really face things down for a load of stones and bits now? What happened to librarian-man?”

“The library blew up” Giles replies, and then sees the quickly-buried pain pass behind her eyes. He adds, “It’s just something to occupy my time now I’m a, err, a gentleman of leisure. And it will hopefully keep some powerful objects from falling into the wrong hands as well.”

Faith eyes the stone doubtfully. “It’s really that powerful?”

“It has considerable magical properties, yes. I wonder if Ethan would be interested in it.”

“Does he get everything you steal?” asks Faith as they leave the ruined building, stepping back into glaring sunlight.

“It’s not stealing” Giles replies testily. “The last guardian of the Saint Menas Stone died years ago. For all our sakes, it should be passed to people who can properly secure it.”

“Like Ethan?” The doubtful look is back as Faith slips into the passenger seat of the car for the drive back to town.

“Not in the long term.” Giles takes the driver’s seat. “I’ll probably send it to the Council.”

“Right, so they’re the ones who profit.”

“We all profit from the stone being out of harm’s way. It could be used for great good or great ill depending on who wields it.”

“Sounds like even more reason the watchers shouldn’t get this stuff if you ask me.” Faith slouches in her seat as they set off, puts her feet on the dashboard. Giles coughs loudly. Her feet stay where they are. Giles says, “Well, I may yet decide to send it to the Devon coven. Some of the things I’ve found have gone elsewhere. Other benevolent covens, or to people already tasked with protecting sacred artefacts. Faith, get your feet off my dashboard.”

Reluctantly, Faith does. As Sunnydale comes into view in the distance, she comments, “Shame B couldn’t come. I’d have thought she’d be up for a training field trip.”

Giles shifts gears, considers how to reply. He doesn’t especially want to tell Faith that the times Buffy has been round to help with training her have also been the only times Buffy has really shown up for any training since she started college. Better for Faith to assume the only potential role model she has is more conscientious than that. He says, “She’ll be around for patrol.”

“Yeah, she’d better. I’m going to be partying tonight – someone’s gotta do the staking.”

“Partying?” Giles asks sharply.

“I don’t need to ask your permission do I? ’Cause I’m not gonna.”
Really, Giles doesn’t know if she technically should ask. He is the adult in charge of her, but it’s not as though she lives with him, so to call himself her guardian would be going a bit far. (But if he isn’t, who is?) And it’s not as though he’s even being paid to watch her. He decides, “I think so long as you’re safe and either you or Buffy is, as you put it, doing the staking, you can do what you like.” Within reason, he almost adds. But that would sound like he doesn’t trust her.

“Sweet”

“Do check with Buffy, though, won’t you? In case she has other plans too.”

“Uh huh. I’ll go find her when we get back. Hey, could you lend me some money before you drop me off?”

“It’s paid entry?”

“What?”

“Your party.”

“Oh. No, that’s at the frat house. I just mean for food and shit.”

“Lowell House? You’re going to be partying right above the Initiative?”

“Well, they don’t know me. Hey, remember when I said I needed money for food?”

“I’ll take you shopping before I drop you off” Giles tells her. Perhaps it is time the girl found a job. Unpaid as he is, Giles can’t really offer her an allowance. But before he can suggest that, there is the problem of, “Just because you’re not wanted by the Initiative doesn’t make socialising with them a good idea.”

“Why not? I might find out stuff.” “More than you found out during the bodyswap? I doubt they’ll be talking about classified mission statements at a party.”

Faith shrugs. “So I’ll just go and party. Some of those guys are hot.”

*****

“It’s beautiful” Willow studies the Saint Menas Stone, hand hovering to trace the swirled mineral layers without actually touching it.

“One of Rupert’s better finds” Ethan agrees. He hands her the book they’ll be wading through today, a stodgy ethics volume that Willow really should read at some point.

Still focused on the stone, she asks, “It was really just stuffed into a wall in some vamp nest?”

“Lucky they didn’t want to remodel the place” Ethan confirms.

“Is it yours now?”

“Alas, I’m just borrowing it until Rupert gets it shipped over to hippy central.”

“I’d like to meet this coven.”

“Especially now they’re getting their hands on this, you would.” Ethan sits down opposite her. “Lucky bastards.” At Willow’s raised eyebrow, he explains, “Earth magic. Slow and boring, and a lot more orderly than it looks from the outside.” “But peaceful?”
“Far, far too peaceful. Now” Ethan indicates the book. “Shall we start? I was thinking we’d skip to chapter four, since you already got the memo on not turning people into animals.”

“Right” Willow opens the book and reads the title. “Oh – mind control.”

“The whole chapter is a rambling way to say don’t do it” Ethan tells her. “Though there are a few examples of some of the more benign mood control alternatives. We could skip another few chapters but –”

“But it’s probably best to actually read it” Willow agrees. “Right”

“We can discuss the finer points once you’re done.” Ethan pulls the Saint Menas Stone towards him. “If we don’t do some discussion work to break up the reading, you’ll die of boredom.”

“It can’t be that bad” says Willow, though she does frown as she reads, and doubles back here and there to re-read sections of the stodgy text. Ethan rests his hands on the stone and feels the steady beat of magic within, and waits.

The peace is broken by Buffy, who wanders in to the jingle of the shop bell. “Hi guys. Oo – shiny.”

“The Saint Menas Stone” Ethan tells her proudly, handing it over.

Buffy frowns as she touches it. “It feels sort of hummy.”

“It’s super-powerful” Willow tells her enthusiastically.

“What’s it for?”

“Oh, a whole range of spells” replies Ethan. “We’re going to have to find something to try with it.”

Buffy nods, but her frown stays in place. Her eyes flicker to Willow’s book and, seeing the subject matter, she relaxes a fraction. “Ethics, Will? You should get credit for these lessons.”

“I wish” replies Willow, cheerfully. “Hey, how’s Riley?”

“He’s all better.” Buffy sounds, not dismissive exactly, but as though this isn’t her first choice of conversation. “Bored being all cooped up. I’m wondering if I should help him leave town?”

“Not many places where the US army won’t be” Ethan tells her.

“Doesn’t he want to stay with you?” Willow asks.

“I guess” Buffy frowns again. “But I want him safe.”

“He’s probably safer where you can rescue him if he got caught.”

“Could I, though? Maybe he’d be better off with those guys in Devon. I mean, they got the place in Nevada shut down, right?”

“I’m assuming with outside help” says Ethan. “Like I said – earth magic is slow.”

“Giles was saying the watchers took over custody of some prisoners?” asks Willow.

Ethan replies, “Don’t get me started.”

“Well” says Buffy, “only the really dangerous ones. And much as I don’t have a lot of time for the
council, it’s got to be better than being held captive by the brains who brought us Adam.” She drops the topic of watcher-sponsored incarceration quickly, though, when Faith walks in. “Hey, Faith.” “Hi, B.” Faith breezes in, nodding to Ethan and greeting Willow with, “Still geeking?”

“That’s me” mutters Willow, returning to her book.

Faith tells Buffy, “We missed you in training.”

“Welcome to Rupert’s world” mutters Ethan. Faith frowns. Turning back to Buffy, she says, “I’m at a party tonight. You’re patrolling, right?”

“I am?” Buffy asks. “Don’t I get some nights off for patrolling all the time you were away?”

“Come on, B, it’s been ages since I went to a party. Like, a year.”

“Where is it?”

“Lowell House”

Willow says, “Not a lot that can go wrong there.”

“Well, no” Faith shrugs. “They don’t know me. But I know them. Hell, I’ve even peed next to some of them. I’m thinking it could be fun.”

“And I’m thinking I don’t want reminding of how you peed in my boyfriend’s body” Buffy replies, before colouring starkly. “Oh god, forget I said that.”

“Forgetting” says Willow hastily.

“You know” says Ethan, “I don’t often say this, but Buffy’s right.”

“Hey!” Buffy sits down besides Willow, mock-scowling at him.

“You’ve already spied on them from inside Riley.” Ethan tells Faith, before pausing to grin at a disgusted Buffy. “You’re not going to get more useful information than that at a frat party.”

“Yeah, but I will get a frat party” says Faith.

“Well there is that, I suppose.” “And they don’t know you” concedes Willow.

“But what if you get into trouble?” asks Buffy. “What if they’ve been monitoring me and seen you patrolling with me, and they decide to take you in for questioning?”

“Well, when you put it like that” Ethan says, “It may not be worth it for a booze up.”

“Well” says Willow, “maybe she could reach out to some of the soldiers? If it comes up, I mean. Some of them have got to be having qualms about the whole what’s-that-creepy-Frankenstein’s-monster-for-and-who’s-he-made-of thing.”

“But it’s not going to come up” says Buffy. “They’re not going to be talking about the secret lab at a party.”

“But they might be looking for parts” muses Ethan. “I’ve just thought – with the prisoners in Nevada out of their reach, how are they going to get the human parts for more Adams?” It is, he thinks, something he should have thought of sooner, but then, Rupert only heard from the council yesterday.
That and the question is one he really, really doesn’t want answered.

“Ew” mutters Buffy. “I so didn’t need to think about that.”

“Well I’m thinking they’re going to want human prisoners” says Ethan, looking meaningfully at Faith.

“Or maybe Adam 2.0 won’t have human parts” says Willow hopefully.

“All the more reason to get close to the guys” argues Faith. “If I can get into their pants at this party, maybe they’ll want to hook up again sometime and I can get more intel. Or Ethan can cook up a truth spell.” “Faith” says Buffy slowly, “We don’t do sex-based espionage.”

“Pfft. Maybe you don’t.”

“We could use a truth spell” suggests Willow.

“Why?” counters Buffy, “In case they’ve sat their soldiers down and told them everything? We’re talking about people who chipped Riley without telling him.”

“I guess” Faith muses. “Actually they didn’t seem that big on the Q and A from what I saw.”

“We’d just get lies they’ve swallowed and think is true” Ethan concludes. “Nothing like propaganda to bollocks up a truth spell.”


“And this has nothing to do with you wanting a party” Buffy deadpans.

“Hey, I’m totally in this for the party! I just think I might be able to get something else out of it and then you and Giles’ll get off my case about it.”

“Faith, I’m all for you having fun at a party, it’s –”

“– That why you’ve invited me to the Bronze so much since I’ve been back?”

“Faith that’s not fair. I’ve been sorting things out with Riley.” Beside Buffy, Willow raises her eyebrows in a way that implies that isn’t the sole reason. Come to think of it, Ethan can’t recall Willow mentioning them all going to the club since before he was captured. Buffy continues, “It’s just that at this party, you’ll need back up. Which, by the way, no-one should need at a party. And I can’t be back up gal because they all know me. I’m supposed to pretend I don’t know the Initiative exists or Walsh will have me arrested.”

“Not arrested exactly” says Ethan. “When you’re arrested, you get your rights read.”

“Well” says Willow, leafing through the book, “What if we cast a glamour? Get you looking unBuffified?”

“The ones that change your entire appearance are too unreliable” says Ethan. “They don’t last long and they don’t work well on people you know. They’re more for getting past someone than holding a conversation with them.”

“Oh. Well…Hey, what about that spell we cast on the regular army base when we stole the rocket launcher?”
“Man” mutters Faith. “I missed some good times.”

“It was pre-calling for you” Buffy explains. “We used it to stop the Judge.”

“What did it do?” Faith asks, “The spell I mean.”

“It just made people kind of loopy” Willow shrugs.

“It causes confusion and a general relaxed mood” says Ethan. “But it wouldn’t last long enough for you to go to a party.”

“Plus you can be relaxed and confused and still put me in a cell” says Buffy.

“Maybe you’re freaking about nothing?” suggests Faith. “I mean, they haven’t kidnapped you yet, have they?”

“Not officially, but if I go to their actual building? Not sure they’d be pleased to see me. And they’ve got to be wondering if I know where Riley is. I’m already worried I’ll lead them right to him when I bring him supplies; really not looking to draw attention to myself right now.”

“Wait” Willow is still leafing through the magic book. “What about this? The Liber Incantation. It sounds like a longer lasting version of what we cast to get the rocket launcher.” She passes the book to Ethan.

“And it’s in the ethics book?” asks Buffy. “As in, don’t do this, it’s unethical?”

“No, it’s there as an example of a mood-changing spell that doesn’t infringe on free will.”

“Oh. And it would really stop them arresting me?”

“It could do” says Ethan, scanning the page. “If we added a little chaos to the mix, that is.”

“We could add in a protection spell too” says Willow. “Just to be sure.”

“Is it safe to just slam all that magic together?” asks Buffy.

Ethan taps the Saint Menas Stone. “With this to channel it? Certainly, it is.”

“Well, B” says Faith, “looks like you’re all out of excuses. It’s time to party.”

*****

“Can you believe her?” Willow asks, once the two slayers have left. “All ready to sleep around just in case she ends up in bed with someone who knows something!”

“There are worse ways to get information” Ethan points out. He places the Saint Menas Stone in the centre of the arrangement of candles and sands on the shop floor. “Now. It’s important for this part that we clear our minds so that –”

“And then Buffy’s acting like she’s just been away on vacation! Since when is learning to not murder people a vacation?”

“Willow”

“Okay, okay, I’m clearing.” Willow seems to make an effort to let go of her annoyance. They sit down in the circle and join hands.
“I used to sleep with people so they’d teach me magic, you know” says Ethan.

“So didn’t want to know that.”

“Well, I’m just saying.”

“You were in the sex, drugs and rock and roll era. Faith’s just in a look-at-me-I-used-to-work-for-the-mayor-but-I’m-just-skanky-now phase.”

“Willow”

“I’m clearing! My mind’s totally clear now.”

“Good.”

“Hey, Ethan? You can come to the party too, if you like. You know, if you and Giles want to go back to rock and roll. Just not the other stuff.”

“Thank you, sweet child, but I’ve a prior engagement at the Espresso Pump.” Besides, he knows she doesn’t really want to party with two middle aged blokes.

“Okay” Willow closes her eyes. “Are you ready?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let’s get started then.”

Sitting in the Espresso Pump that night, Ethan savours Rupert’s voice as it lifts the room, casting a subtle magic so that the ordinary scene feels transformed. This is a treat: Just a lucky few, these days, who get to hear Rupert sing.

And that lucky few apparently includes Tara: Glancing to the side, Ethan sees her standing in the entrance way, looking a little stunned.

Ethan stands as quietly as he can and makes his way over. Whispers, “You not at the party?”

“I, I was” Tara replies. “But, but something’s gone wrong w-with the spell. Everyone’s acting crazy, and the way Willow is right now, she won’t change it back.”

“Damn” mutters Ethan. Over by the counter, Rupert has spotted Tara but carries on masterfully. “Alright, I’ll undo it. But I think I’ll need Willow’s help.”

“Sh, she won’t.”

“Could we come with you, try to persuade her?”

Tara nods. “There’s more” she whispers. “There’s a, a presence in the house. Something that’s been woken up by, um, I’m not sure if it was woken up by the spell going wrong or if it’s what c,caused it to go wrong.”

“Bugger. Demon?”

“I d-don’t think so.”
Rupert finishes his song and hurries over. “Something wrong?”

“Rupert” Ethan takes a deep breath. “I’ve got something to tell you.”

“Something wrong?” Rupert grumbles as they approach the house, drawing close enough that the air pulsates with the music booming from the place. “You cast a spell that will affect both my slayers and it didn’t occur to you to tell me?”

“I didn’t think you needed to know – it was only supposed to be something subtle, so Buffy could go to the party.”

“You used the Menas Stone, Eth; it amplifies everything!”

“Well, you didn’t tell me that!”

“I didn’t think I’d have to!”

“Here” Tara leads the way in.

Inside, Ethan half expects to see someone with glowing eyes, so strong is the olfactory memory triggered by the place. Incense, smoke, sweat, the earthy scent of sex, and the sight of it, right here in the hall. Rupert and Tara both flinch away. “Th-this is bad, right?” asks Tara. “Willow told me the spell wouldn’t affect free will!”

“It won’t” Rupert assures her grudgingly. “If the spell was to make people relaxed, I suspect along with chaos magic and the Saint Menas Stone, it will have removed inhibitions entirely. People will do what they want to deep down anyway” He casts a disgusted glance at the figures on the floor. “Even if it is…”

“Group sex” Ethan finishes.

“Quite”

“O-oh” says Tara. “So, so it’s taking the sense of societal pressure from everyone in the building? No-one cares what people will think?”

“That’s right. I’m afraid we’ll be affected too, now we’re in here. We’ll lose our sense of shame.”

Ethan shrugs. “I don’t feel any different.” Rupert eyes him knowingly.

“W-why isn’t anyone fighting?” asks Tara. “The way some people were arguing when I left, if they’ve lost their inhibitions…”

“The protection spell must be holding” Ethan tells her.

“Thank the gods for small mercies” says Rupert. “We need to find –” He is cut off by the sound of breaking glass as a wineglass, abandoned on the stairs, shatters spontaneously. “The presence?” he asks Tara.

She nods. “I-I think it’s a ghost. Maybe a poltergeist?”

Behind her, a young man walks past, smoking something bitter-scented. He addresses the hallway in general: “Dudes, you’ve got to check out this wall” and wanders through to another room. From in there, the sounds of a messy break up compete with the music until that is turned up higher still.
Tara flinches. “I think Xander and Anya went this way” She leads them further down the hallway, stepping over discarded bottles and clothing, stepping around people. “Y-you’d think” she says as she hurries along, “that people would want to do something more worthwhile with no social pressure. L-like write a book and who cares what people will think of it.” She stops suddenly and announces, “I need a pen and paper.”

“Tara, dear” says Rupert, “That’s the spell influencing you. Try to focus on finding Willow.”

“O-of course, Willow.” Tara resumes walking. “It’s j-just, I worry it’s silly usually and I always tear up my first draft. I wonder if there’s a phone here? I need to call my dad and ask him –”

“Tara, focus”

“Right. Okay, focus.”

They hurry on, past two young men who are having a heated discussion that the protection spell is straining to contain; Ethan feels the multi-threaded magic in the place squirming and distorting around them. Further on, another youth appears to be declaring his undying love to the young woman in his lap while she openly lists the pros and cons of being with him. At the end of the corridor, two men seem to be trying to dissuade another from leaving the military and another two are kissing passionately. All in all, it’s quite a party.

It’s only as they reach the far side of the building, that Ethan starts to feel the effects himself: a loosening up, a slipping away of pressures and worries, leaving him lightheaded and quietly exuberant. Beside him, Rupert takes his hand.

They find Xander and Anya in a small games room, entwined on a couch. “Hey, guys” Xander greets them.

“Xander” says Rupert, “are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Kind of a wild party.”

“We just had make-up sex” Anya informs them.

“Xander, we need to find the others – you’re all under a spell.”

“Well, Willow and Ethan put a spell on the whole building, right?”

“It worked a little too well” Ethan admits. He slips his hand into Rupert’s back pocket and Rupert shifts closer to him, snuggling up, unconcerned for once with how the children will react. He tells them, “You’ve lost your inhibitions.”

“Well that explains a lot” murmurs Anya, glancing at Xander.

“That doesn’t sound like a problem” Xander reasons. “I mean, it’s kind of nice to let loose like this.”

“N-nice until you remember that it’s your inhibitions that k-keep you alive” says Tara.

“But there’s no danger here.”

“I think there is” the witch replies. “Where’s Willow?”

“Not sure.”
Rupert asks, “What about Buffy and Faith?”

“I dunno about Faith, but Buffy went off somewhere with Spike.”

“They were fighting something crazy” Anya adds. “Spike’s lucky no-one seems to be able to do actual violence.”

Around them, the walls shiver ominously, rippling and bending. “Um” says Xander, “What was that?”

“The thing that will break through the protection spell any minute” Rupert replies. “I’m going to find Buffy. You lot, get out of here.”

“No way” says Xander, struggling up. “I’m not leaving you and Buffy if something’s about to attack.”

“And I’m not leaving you” Anya tells him.

“L-let’s look for Willow and Faith then” says Tara. “Giles can find Buffy.”

“Good thinking” Rupert agrees. He heads for the door and then hesitates, takes Ethan’s hand again and leads him away.

*****

“I must say” says Ethan, once Rupert has released him from a fierce kiss to carry on down the hallway, “This social-niceties-free version of you is rather fun.”

“Shut it” replies Rupert, focused on the doorways around them. “Buffy?”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “She’s not even your slayer anymore, you realise.”

“Unapologetically so.” Rupert turns a corner and exclaims, “Faith! Excellent. Are you alright?”

“Yes, wonderful” Rupert deadpans, “take away everyone’s sense of responsibility, what could possibly go wrong?”

“You really are a boring old git at your core, aren’t you Rupert?”

“You really are a boring old git at your core, aren’t you Rupert?”

“Unapologetically so.” Rupert turns a corner and exclaims, “Faith! Excellent. Are you alright?”

“I’m good. This is Paul.” Faith lounges in an armchair someone apparently decided to drag into the
hallway, indicates a young man leaning against the window beside it. For all her bravado, it turns out that what Faith wants to do, when induced to care about no-one’s opinion but her own, is not have sex.

Rupert ignores Paul. Faith adds, “He’s a –”

Rupert interrupts, “Have you seen Buffy?”

Faith scowls. “I guess I knew you wouldn’t be here to find me.” She leans back sulkily. “She went in there with Spike.”

Rupert pushes against the indicated door, while Faith, with a shrug, returns her attention to Paul, pulling her feet up onto the chair and twisting round. After an apparently dazed moment, he continues, Ethan, leaning beside the door, catching snatches of their conversation between Rupert’s hammering:

“…wouldn’t believe the things they do…”

“…think I can imagine it…”

Ethan frowns. “Wait, what was –” He is distracted by Rupert getting the door open to reveal a laundry room, currently occupied by one slayer and one vampire. “Hey, Giles” Buffy greets them, “Ethan.” She stares around the room, studying light fixtures, air vents. “I don’t think we can use anything here” she says to Spike.

“It’s like I said, pet” he replies. “We need to get into the lift shaft.”

“Too obvious. And don’t call me that.”

“I’m not scared of them.”

“Because you’re stupid. You can’t hurt them, remember? Not that I’d even let you.”

Rupert steps into the room. “We’re discussing what, exactly?”

“I’m taking on the Initiative” Buffy tells him. “Spike’s helping.”

“I’m getting the chip out” Spike adds.

“Like hell you are” Buffy replies. “Giles, do you think I could get into their ventilation system from in here?”

“I have no idea, Buffy, but I know it’s not safe to try. Come on, we need –”

“No, I’m done with them! I’m going to get back at them for what they did to Riley and then I’m going to end this before something worse than Adam happens.” To Spike, she adds, “And I’m going to have to kill Adam.”

“I can help there” the vampire replies.

“Just as long as you don’t punch the human parts” points out Ethan.

Buffy shakes her head. “From what you said, I’m prepared to bet there’s nothing human about him. Not anymore.”

The lights flicker on and off. From across the building comes a sudden crescendo of shattering
glass and a smattering of screams. Buffy turns to the noise. “What was that?”

“That is one of many good reasons we need to leave now” Rupert tells her. “You’re all under a spell and this building is likely haunted.”

Buffy shakes her head. “I’ve been in this building plenty of times. The only creepy thing about it is the secret lab underneath. Why’d there suddenly be ghosts?”

“All the sex” replies Ethan, suddenly struck by the idea.

Buffy stares at him. “Ew”

“What do you mean?” asks Rupert.

“Sexual energy” explains Ethan. “Poltergeists, apparitions – they’re all drawn to it. Feed off it, don’t they?”

“Do they?” Buffy asks.

“He’s right” says Spike. “Bad as bloody succubus, that lot are.” Another rumble echoes round the building and Spike scowls around at the walls. “Piss off can’t you?” he calls, apparently to ghosts in general. “We’re busy here!”

Beside him, Buffy rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that’ll do it!”

Faith comes in behind them, followed by Paul, who is wearing an odd, bland smile. Faith asks, “You guys hearing that?”

“Ghosts” explains Rupert shortly. “Or similar, hence our need to leave.”

“Shouldn’t we slay them?” asks Buffy.

“They’re already dead” points out Ethan. “That’s rather the point of ghosts.”

“Stop them, then.”

“We can’t from in here” Rupert tells her. “They’re feeding off the sexual energies in the building” He scowls at Ethan “which given this we’re at a college party where everyone has lost their inhibitions, is considerable.”

“I wondered about the orgy in the lobby” says Faith. “Want me to go throw a bucket of water over them?”

“I don’t think that will cut it” Rupert replies. “Our best bet is to encourage everyone outside and perform an exorcism. Come on, we need to find the others.”

*****

Possibly they are not the only ones noticing something off about the building, or at least about the electricity in it, because as they pass the back door, a horde of party goers are moving the festivities outside. Once the partiers are out the building, of course, the spell no longer affects them: through the open door, Ethan watches them slip into awkwardness as their inhibitions return, voices dropping and body language shifting into something shyer and more formal than the handsy embraces and showy gymnastics displays they left with. As they gather on a patch of grass a little way off, laughter picks up again and they stand chatting with their arms folded, perhaps wondering how they got carried away.
Paul stands briefly in the doorway too, but then takes a step back and Ethan, turning to him, sees that the others a little way ahead, hurries after them. Don’t want to be separated when there’s a haunting going on. Paul walks with him, staring blankly ahead and saying nothing. Really, Ethan thinks, he’d have expected Faith to find someone more interesting to talk to.

The lights go out again as they near the front of the building, flickering disorientating before plunging the place into a lurid half-light, the bulbs glowing an eerie deep orange that they are not designed to go. More people head for the exits, confounded by the unnatural plant life that seems to have invaded the lobby, cocooning the embracing couples and groups who are suddenly visible only as glimpses of naked flesh among the shrubbery. Puzzlement turns to fear when the ground shakes again, violently this time, as though the party has its own private earthquake. Startled, Ethan dives for Rupert and buries his face in his shirt, not caring what the slayers, Spike or Paul think. Rupert wraps his arms around his fiancé and manages to keep them upright as the shaking increases, a few people around them losing their footing altogether. For a moment the air is rich with groaning earth, screaming young people, creaking vines and, beneath it all, a sinister howling. Finally, it ceases, and Ethan lifts his head from Rupert’s shoulder, steps away. “Rupert, are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Rupert dust a fine powder from Ethan’s shoulders. Ethan has a horrible feeling it fell from the ceiling. What if this whatever it is brings the building down on them? The protection spell is gone; he knows that with a cold certainty, the absence of it lending a chill to the air. “I love you” he tells Rupert.

“I love you too.” Rupert side steps a swell of people doubling back down the hallway, searching for a way out. “We need to find a way to get these people outside.”

“I was only winding you up when I said you were a boring old git” Ethan tells him.

“Yes, love.” Rupert pats him and turns away, steps over to where Buffy is helping fallen people up, Faith and Paul are attempting to cut through the vines with what looks like a kitchen knife, and Spike is laughing at the panicked humans. Ethan follows, adding, “You know I don’t really think you’re boring, don’t you? I couldn’t stand for us to die with you thinking that.”

“We’re not going to die, Eth. Buffy, we need to break a window or something.”

Ethan takes Rupert’s hand. “I’m only in this hellhole because I love you so much.”

“Ethan” Rupert detaches his hand. “I love you too but I need to focus. And we’re only in this hellhole because you put a spell on the party.”

“I meant the whole town.”

“Oh. I see.” Rupert turns to Paul as the young man speaks: “All the windows are blocked. Back door too.”

“How do you know?” asks Buffy with a frown.

There is a pause, as though the lad is processing the question. Before he can answer, the students who fled for the back exit return, doubly panicked, talking about more vines. Some hurry up the stairs and other mill about, scared, calling out for friends lost amid the press. As the hallway floods anew with frightened people, Ethan feels someone knock into him in the crowd. “Careful” he says, turning to face them. Then, “Oh, Xander. Hello.”

“Hey guys” Xander shuffles sideways so that Anya, Tara and Willow can join them. “What the
Holy Santa’s happening?”

“Ghosts” explains Faith.

“Well we knew that” Anya retorts. “All I want to know is, is this Willow’s fault?”

“It wasn’t” Willow, folding her arms, replies. “Buffy, I swear it wasn’t me! Me and Ethan did the Liber Incantation, but I don’t know anything about any ghosts, I swear!”

“She’s telling the truth, Buffy” adds Tara. “The ghosts, or whatever they are, are, are something different.”

“I know” Buffy assures them. “Look, guys, we need to find a way to get these people out of here.”

“The people screaming” asks Xander, “or the people boinking?” He points through a gap in the swelling plant life to the continued liaisons. “Because how the hell are they still doing that in the middle of all this? It’s got to be supernatural.”

“It is” says Rupert grimly. “I doubt they can hear any of this commotion. The spirits have cut them off from everything else so that they’ll continue, err…”

“Going at it” supplies Spike.

“Yes. So that the ghosts can feed off their sexual energy.”

“So at least someone’s having fun” says Faith.

“Until all the energy is gone and they die” concludes Rupert.

“Well” says Ethan. “They’ll die doing what they love.” As the lights flicker again, he adds, “Unlike me who’s probably about to be killed by this building.”

“We could get everyone down into the lab” suggests Faith.

“Where we can die being eaten by Adam? Wonderful.”

In the blinking light, Ethan sees Faith scowl at him. She replies, “At least then they won’t be crushed if the building collapses. Me and Buffy can handle Adam.”

“Can you, though?” asks Anya.

“Yes” says Buffy firmly. “And Faith’s right – it’s safer than being trapped in here.”

“No it’s not” says Ethan. Deciding he’s now very much done with this spell, he says to Willow, “We need to end this.”

“Agreed” says Willow. “But I don’t know any anti-ghost spells.”

“I mean we need to end the Liber Incantation so no-one thinks a visit to the Initiative is a good idea.”

“But it is a good idea!” says Buffy.

“Even if I wanted to lift our spell the ghosts would interfere” Willow points out.

“Isn’t the first thing to do getting outside?” points out Xander.
“No!” Buffy pouts. “We need to get down to the facility. If they’re distracted by all this chaos it could be our best chance!”

“Buffy” pleads Rupert, “That’s the spell talking. You’re not thinking straight.”

“Giles, I’m thinking if the building shakes like that again we’re all going to be crushed unless we’re sub-basement level. I know where the lift shaft is; we need to get people down there.”

“We don’t know that they’re not affected by this haunting too” Rupert tells her. “Not to mention the Liber Incantation.”

“Well I’d rather take that risk than leave everyone here!”

“No” says Paul suddenly. “We” He pauses, seems to focus on some internal calculation. “They can’t breach protocol to let this number in and we can’t sneak them all in.”

There is a silence (or a relative silence – everyone not in the know is still panicking at the lack of exit), which Buffy breaks, asking Faith, “Who even is this guy?”

Faith addresses Rupert: “I did try to tell you, but you were all focused on Buffy.”

“I work for the Initiative” explains Paul, quirking a sickly smile. Beside him, Spike growls softly.

“So why’d you help us?” asks Xander.

“If you could see what they’ve got down there” Paul tells him, “You wouldn’t need to ask the question.”

“Stuff like what?” asks Tara. “Adam?”

Paul nods. “That’s just for starters.”

“So they’re evil” says Anya. “We knew that already.”

“Right” says Xander. “I’m still thinking we should be focused on getting everyone out the way of the earthquake-happy ghosts?”

“Agreed” says Rupert. He adds to the slayers, “Let’s at least get these people to safety first and see if you still want to take on the Initiative tonight once you’re out of range of the spell and you’ve got your inhibitions back.”

“Screw these people” says Faith. “They’ll find their way out. I say we let Paul get us down there and take on Walsh while we’ve still got the nerve.”

“You mean the spell-stupidity” says Xander.

“Look” says Buffy, “I guess we could –” And then the lights go out. Around the building, the trapped party goers react with a flurry of exclamations and curses, grabbing at friends so as not to lose them. Just as the commotion dies down, the building shakes again, and fresh screams erupt. In the sudden darkness, Ethan can find no handhold and falls, finds himself trampled as people try to take cover. Instinctively, he covers his head. Amid the screams and clatter, the smashing glass, Buffy is yelling, “Everyone stay calm! Stop pushing!”

“Oh God” moans Tara somewhere off to the side, “Oh God, oh God…”

“Tara?” Ethan risks rising to a crawling position on the rumbling ground, shuffles sideways,
feeling his way in the dark.

“Ethan?” he hears Willow call out.

“Eth!” Suddenly Rupert is beside him – almost tripping over him, in fact. He crouches down. “Here, I’ve just realised!” He pulls Ethan to his feet and almost unbalances himself. The shaking is so continuous it almost feels like they are on a fairground ride. Except not fun. “Realised what?” Ethan asks, as they find their (relative) balance.

“The door – you can open it!”

“I can open it? You’re the big strong watcher – if you and your slayers can’t get through those vines, what am I supposed to do?”

“You worship a God of doorways” Rupert reminds him, staggering as someone pushes past them in some desperate bid for freedom.

“Oh” Ethan finds the vine-coated banisters, clings to it. “Well, yes. But he’s not a doorman, love, he doesn’t just spring things open on command.”

“Try?”

“I’ll need a knife” Ethan tells him. “For the supplication.”

There is just enough light to see the shape of Rupert’s brow shift as he frowns. “Faith had one, didn’t she?” he says, and moves off to find her, swallowed quickly by the darkness. Ethan hears him stumble as he goes, knocked off his feet by the constant shaking, rising again somehow. For his part, Ethan stays where he is, gripping the banister and trying not to be sick. Even the screams are dying down now, replaced with despairing moans and crying as the ghost-induced earthquake goes on and on. Thanks to the spell, people don’t even try to hide how terrified they are. Several feet away, someone is reciting some sort of last rites while someone else yells at them to stop.

“Rupert?” Ethan manages after a prolonged and hellish stretch of shaking and darkness, “Love? Wher – argh!” He lets go of the banisters as a thorn grows up and pierces his hand, and promptly falls over.

“Ethan?”

“Willow!” Ethan struggles into a seated position, gripping his hand. “Where’s Rupert?”

“I don’t know. I can’t find anyone with all the shaking. These ghosts want us dead or out.”

“Well as they’ve trapped us here” says Ethan, “my money’s on dead.”

“I’m not sure if that’s how it works” says a third voice – Tara – beside them. “If they really plan. But we have to get out of here.”

“There must be some spell –” begins Willow.

“Janus” says Ethan, realising suddenly that he doesn’t need to cut his palm anymore – the damn supernatural plant life has done it for him. Scrambling to his knees, he crawl-stumbles into the apparently growing tangle of monstrous vine, as close to the front door as the spirits will let him get. It’s a little disconcerting, the thorns scraping at him, the stems shifting, and the fleshy scent of the plant reminding him a little of the first thing out of the hellmouth last year. At least this way, he thinks, as the shaking tosses him to the side, he is cushioned by the plant instead of trampled on by fleeing people. The thorny plant, that is. Which has stabbed him once already. At that, Ethan
decides he is close enough to the door and slaps his bloodied palm against the plant with a flinch. Closes his eyes against the dark-anyway surroundings and focuses through the fear, reaches out to Janus.

The God is close by, enjoying the blend of enhanced enchantment, ghostly visitations and unforeseen consequences. Must be like a pick and mix for him, Ethan realises, and quashes brief bitterness; Gods don’t experience these things in quite the same way, after all. Ethan lets his mind latch onto Janus’ power and hold on.

Nothing happens. Or rather, nothing practical. Gods don’t just do things; rituals are required, the muscle and tangibility magic lends to deities in the human realm. Desperate to escape, for Rupert to escape, Ethan offers Janus everything he has and Janus takes it. Magic swells through Ethan, flares and fades, leaving him drained and to no avail: The vines stay very much solid and the door doesn’t open. Ethan tries again. Still nothing.

“Here, use my power too.” Willow must have followed him through the thorns. Her hand closes round his, offering a well of magic to draw on.

Draw on it Ethan does, channelling it, adding his own, offering all of it for Janus’ use. Within the enormous vine before him, something creaks and snaps. Ethan ducks, covering his face as the smaller vines recoil like cracked whips, flicking and zipping around them as the bulk of the plant trembles and recoils, snaking across the floor as if to escape. Behind them, a series of thuds as people are caught up in the plant’s transit, topple as it recedes.

The earth stops shaking, the sudden cessation laying bare the sounds of fear. Then the plant shrinks, a distant howl – audible only as the shaking stopped – ceases, and the lights come on. The door swings open. Rebonding magic bolts through him, and Ethan topples forwards into the space that is suddenly no longer cocooned by evil vines but is still very much occupied by couples who up until this interruption were very much occupied with one another.

“Rude!” snaps a girl, shoving him away, while her boyfriend lifts a dazed face to the crowd. “Fuck is going on here?”

Realisation that the doorway is clear ripples through the crowd. Ethan, along with the previously-busy couples, dives sideways to avoid being crushed underfoot. Then, groaning, he gets to his feet. Beside him, the couples do the same, murmuring confused questions. Some follow the others outside and others make their way up the stairs, leaving behind them a silence broken only by the music, which is, remarkably, still playing.

Only the scoobies are left in the place, Ethan notes. Well, and Paul. And Spike, though whether he is a scooby or not is sort of debatable in Ethan’s mind. What is not debatable is that all he wants to do is find Rupert and go home. “Rupert?”

There is a tell-tale groan from the living room doorway. “Ethan?”

Ethan hurries over to find his partner looking a little crumpled and rubbing his head. “Knocked out?” he asks.

“Think so” Rupert feels around for his glasses, finds them mercifully unbroken under a side table and slips them on. “Last I remember, I was looking for a knife so you could use your blood to get the doorway clear. I take it you managed anyway?”

Ethan holds up his hand in answer, but finds it is healed. Probably just a little side effect of Willow’s magic.
Realising exactly what just happened, Ethan turns to the girl. Her power, laid completely bare, was deeper and stronger than anything he’d known. Janus hadn’t freed them alone. Willow had helped. Drawing power from her, a God had found strength he didn’t have alone.

Who is this witch?

“What?” asks Willow, catching him staring. She pats her hair uncertainly, then turns to her girlfriend. “Tara, you okay?”

“I’m fine” says Tara. “But can we get out of here now?”

“Agreed” says Ethan.

“Not yet” says Faith, as the others join them. “Not until we get inside the Initiative.”

“No” says Tara. “N-no way. It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous not to” Buffy counters. “Willow, if you do a new protection spell and we make sure the Liber Incantation’s affecting them too –”

“It is” puts in Paul. “The no worries, no cares thing? Everyone’s doing whatever they want down there.”

“Sounds fun” mutters Ethan, because nothing, ever, has sounded less fun. Behind Paul, Spike seems to be thinking the same thing. He eyes the soldier speculatively and then steps silently through the open front door and away.

Rupert takes the opportunity to stand up and turn the music down. Then he puts Pink Floyd on and turns it back up again. “It would be remarkably dangerous –” he says.

“Exactly” says Xander.

“– but if the Liber Incantation is affecting them too, it might be possible to get some information, or even do them some damage. Now the civilians are safe, we could at least consider it.”

“G-man, so not where I was hoping you were going with that.”

“So you’re in?” Buffy asks.

“In what?” snaps Anya, “The Let’s Get Captured suicide mission?”

“But if they’re under the spell too…” says Willow.

“…Then loads of them will still want to capture you!” Anya concludes. “They’re scientists, remember? They pull things apart all day down there to see how they work; do you think they’ll all stop because Willow and Ethan took their shame away? They’ll step it up! Or the soldiers will open fire as soon as you get down there.”

“So we use a protection spell” argues Buffy.

“Unreliable and short term, remember? Or you’d be under one every time you went on patrol.”

“She’s right” says Ethan. “You don’t want to go gambling your life on a protection spell being all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Well” says Willow, “Maybe not a protection spell. But a protection spell plus barrier spells if they
attack, plus a lot of confusion hexes…”

Beside her, Tara folds her arms. “I th-thought you were being careful with magic now?”

“I am! But… I mean, shouldn’t we take the opportunity to get something useful out of tonight?”

“Useful like two dead slayers?” asks Anya.

“Be fair Anya” says Ethan. “It might be useful like two dissected slayers.”

“There is that” Anya concedes. “Or useful like two slayer-based Adams.”

“Not going to happen” Faith intercedes. “We go down there while they’re under the spell, we use magic if we have to –”

“Oh!” yelps Willow, “Glamours! I could hide us as we go in and then we can look around the unguarded parts. I bet there’ll be some, what with the Liber Incantation.”

“…That” finishes Faith. “We get some info and we get out. Maybe we get a few chipped soldiers out of there. Maybe we end a few of their cut and paste monster projects.”

“But not with glamour” Rupert adds. “Willow, I don’t want you going down there.”

“Oh, but you can go?” Willow retorts. “Because you’re going, right?”

“No” says Ethan, at the same time that Rupert says ”Yes”.

“He’s not” says Buffy. “Neither are you, Will. This is a slayers only thing.”

“Oh, because that always ends well!” says Xander.

Ignoring them, Rupert answers Willow: “We’ll go with them; don’t worry.”

“Giles!” Buffy snaps.

Rupert turns to Ethan. “How much longer will the Liber Incantation hold?”

“It won’t, once me and Willow reverse it.” Ethan turns to the witch. “Willow, this is madness. You go down, you die. If you’re lucky.”

“I don’t need luck, Ethan. I can do this – with the spell distracting the soldiers, plus my magic –”

“We don’t know the spell’s distracting anyone!” argues Tara. “We don’t know what they’ll do to you if they catch you.”

“Exactly!” says Ethan. “We only have that” He waves a hand at Paul “randomer’s word for it.

“There’s no need for magic” Paul intones. “Everyone’s distracted already.”

“Willow” Tara tugs her girlfriend aside. “Please don’t do this.”

“I have to” Willow tells her. “I have to actually use my magic for something good for once.”

“N-no. Sweetie, you don’t have to prove anything.”

Faith interrupts, “But you do need to decide quickly.” Taking Paul’s elbow, she steers him out the room. “Anyone in, follow me.”
“Don’t follow her” Buffy fixes them with a glare. “Remember: This is slayers only.”

*****

“Remember what I said about slayers only?” Buffy asks half-heartedly when Giles and Willow join them in wandering down the hallway.

“I’m not letting you go in there alone” says Giles. He tries not to remember the fear on Ethan’s face when he left to follow her. With the spell still affecting him, it is unnervingly easy. “The others will alert the Council and come after us if we’re not back in three hours.”

“You told them to come after us?!” Buffy slaps him a little more than lightly on the arm, drops her voice to a hiss so that Paul, up ahead with Faith, won’t hear. “They can’t come after us!”

“So your plan is to surrender ourselves to our fate if we’re captured?” returns Giles.

Buffy scowls, then turns to Willow. “What’s your excuse?”

“You need me in case the Liber Incantation isn’t enough to distract them” points out Willow. “We’re not going back, Buffy.”

“Fine” agrees Buffy, with every sign of reluctance. “Stay close to me and keep an eye on Paul – I don’t trust the guy.” Her voice drops as, up ahead, Paul stops by a mirrored panel. Beside him, Faith steps away and comes closer to them. “What’re you talking about, B?” she murmurs. “He’s a useful idiot.”

Slayer hearing, Giles realises; Faith had been nodding along to whatever Paul was saying while listening to the three of them too.

Faith is not, of course, a renowned judge of character.

It is only as a beam of light slices through the mirror and a robotic voice greets “Agent Pilinszky, Paul” that Giles really allows himself to acknowledge the danger they could be in. They have only Paul’s – the useful idiot’s – word that the Initiative were effected by Ethan and Willow’s spell, and no idea what they face down their if it is. And yet Giles finds he is not afraid. Rather, he is eager to finally see the place and get the measure of it. Actually do something about it at last. And if they do get caught, so what? They have two slayers on their side.

The mirror slides away to reveal a lift, a blank white box. The five of them step into it, the scoobies exchanging glances, Paul staring straight ahead. Giles is beginning to wonder if the boy is stoned. Or possibly injured: he moves a little oddly.

At a robotic prompt, Paul says his name into a grid on the wall, while Willow takes something from her pocket and blows it at the camera, which promptly dies with a flickering green light.

“Nice going, Will” murmurs Buffy.

“They won’t be watching anyway” Paul assures them, as Willow starts chanting a simple glamour to hide their entrance.

“Still” says Buffy, “better safe than –” At that moment, the lift opens, and ten guns are trained on them “sorry”.

For a moment, all they can do is stare at the guns. The soldiers pointing them are expressionless, somehow barely looking at them. Behind them, the facility is noisy, growls, laughter and screams
all mixed together.

Faith turns to Paul. “Bastard.”

“Willow” mutters Buffy, “glamour?”

“Sorry, Buffy” murmurs Willow, “I thought I’d have longer to finish it.”

Giles addresses the soldiers: “We’re unarmed. It was my idea to come here – I insisted the girls join us.”

“Giles!” says Willow.

“Don’t take the credit, Giles” says Faith. “It was my idea.”

“Yes” says an oddly detached voice from somewhere beyond the soldiers, “Yes it was.”

They see his shadow before they see him. He looms. “Adam” Buffy realises.

“Buffy Summers” he replies. There is a mechanical sound as though a disk is turning in his head. “Vampire slayer and partner of my brother, Riley Finn. I’ve been waiting to meet you.”

Buffy shrugs. “I’d have been happy to keep waiting.” She and Faith inch forward, almost imperceptibly, but not imperceptivity enough. The guns click menacingly.

“Guard the entranceways to levels six and ten” Adam commands. “Let nothing past. Agent Pilinszky, return to your unit.”

Paul steps out the lift and moves off with the other soldiers. Only seeing them all move in that same stilted way, with the same blank expressions, does Giles realise: “They’re all chipped.”

“Not all” says Adam, almost conversationally. “Only a few so far have the honour.”

“Some honour” mutters Faith.

“Faith” Adam notes, “Known to us only as of tonight. Another vampire slayer. Interesting.” He tilts his head. “You’re scared.”

Buffy glances at Faith and briefly takes her hand.

“Glad I’m not the only one” murmurs Willow. Giles steps sideways slightly, placing himself between her and Adam.

Adam steps back a little, almost courtly, and gestures into the facility with a sweep of muscular, spear-tipped arm. “Follow me. Mother would like a word.” He turns, leaving them to step into the facility.

Presumably an orderly place when not hexed, the entire complex is currently in uproar. A large, metallic-walled pit in front of them seems to have been made into an arena of sorts, in which three demons prowl, sizing each other up. Above them, leaning over railings, scientists and soldiers whoop and cheer.

A little way off, two white-coated men are doing something with a scalpel to a figure strapped to a table that Giles doesn’t want to look too closely at. Beyond that, two soldiers seem to be racing little golf-buggy-type vehicles, while another wanders around topless, whistling. Only the chipped soldiers stand to attention, blocking exits that lead off this main area where, presumably, demons
languish.

Adam leads them down a white tiled hallway. He doesn’t look back, but Giles gets the impression that making a break for it wouldn’t be wise. The soldiers milling about seem not to be functioning as a cohesive unit, but they are all armed, and all it would take would be for just one to decide to intervene if they fled.

Besides, Adam looks as though he could catch up to them in a few strides unaided. Giles sees Buffy studying him, wonders if she’s thinking along the same lines. Faith barely glances at Adam or their surroundings, stares straight ahead. Nothing she hasn’t seen before, Giles supposes, though Adam doesn’t know that, which is oddly heartening.

He tries to keep track of the turns they make, first right, then left, down identical corridors, past soldiers bickering, wrestling, two firing guns at empty shells of body armour stacked onto crates. Male voices bounce from tile to tile, and behind them, to great jubilation from the onlookers, one of the gladiator-demons moves in for the kill, it’s unfortunate competitor letting off an unearthly shriek that follows them into the labyrinth.

Gods, but this place is a hell-hole. Giles wouldn’t wish it on any demon.

Maybe Angelus.

Adam knocks on a door and enters. “They are here, mother” he announces.

Faith enters first, balling her fists. Buffy lets Willow and Giles enter next so that they are sandwiched between slayers.

The room is a small office, lousy with filing cabinets, some of which have papers staked on top of them. The desk – too big for the room – is also overburdened with papers, mainly brown envelopes and long reams of small print schematics. A computer with two screens (really, thinks Giles, who needs two screens) rises from it as though keen to escape and a series of computer disks sit to one side of it, a pop of colour amid sepia and brown. Professor Walsh moves as though to pick these up as they enter but pauses at the sight of them. “This is everyone?” she asks.

“Yes, mother. The others left the building after the infestation was cleared.”

With four of them plus Adam – who takes up rather a lot of space – in this small room, they are obliged to arranged themselves in a line before her desk, like naughty schoolchildren sent to the headmistress.

“Professor Walsh –” Buffy begins.

“Let me guess” the professor responds, “You walked brazenly into a secret military instillation but you were just curious and meant no harm?”

“No” says Buffy. “We totally meant harm.”

“What you’ve done to those soldiers is sick” adds Faith.

Giles finds that for all his rage at what these people did to Ethan, he doesn’t need his lost inhibitions – only his gradually returning common sense – to tell him that there is little to be gained from attacking Walsh. Other than all their deaths, that is. He exchanges a glance with Willow that speaks volumes about their shared lack of faith in this confrontational approach, but they have two spell-reckless slayers on their hands. Really, they are lucky no-one has launched herself across the desk.
“I’ve done nothing that wasn’t state sanctioned” Walsh declares.

“Then the state’s an ass” says Faith.

Walsh smiles a tight, dangerous smile. “That’s your perspective. You don’t know the full scope of what we hope to accomplish, and nor will you, Miss…?”

“Miss Fuck You” supplies Faith, voice flat and uninterested. Surprisingly, Walsh’s smile slips into something more genuine. “And” she checks a note, “from what you were saying tonight at the party, you’re a slayer.” She turns to Buffy. “I thought there was only one of you?”

“What can I say?” Buffy shrugs “You thought wrong. But I guess wrong is familiar territory for you?”

Walsh turns to Giles. “I don’t think we’ve met?” Perfectly pleasant in tone, as though she were going to do nothing but make them tea. Clearly, she is expecting an answer, but Giles finds himself defiantly staring her out. After all, he can say nothing about Ethan – she’s likely to barely remember him, of course – but to say anything else seems a betrayal. He sticks his chin out, a throwback to youthful gambles, nights of picking fights and hoping for the best. After a while, Walsh’s smile takes on a poisonous edge and then she turns to Willow. “And you’re Willow. I don’t know your last name and I doubt you’ll tell me, but I will find out. Adam tells me you stopped the infestation. How?”

“Not something I could teach you if I wanted to” Willow assures her. Oddly, she manages to match Walsh’s menacingly friendly tone. “Not that I would.”

Walsh makes a note on the paper in front of her. “It’s a shame you couldn’t join us a month or so ago. We had the most impressive facility in Nevada. Nevertheless, here you all are. The question is, what to do with you.”

“And what is that?” asks Faith. “Chip us?” Her voice shakes so slightly, that Giles doubts he’d hear it if he wasn’t standing next to her.

Walsh replies, “Our behaviour modification devices are used only in exceptional cases.”

“An honour” echoes Adam. Somehow, despite his bulk, Giles had almost forgotten he was there.

Walsh inclines her head in agreement. “Not even all my men have implants, or I could override the effects of this” A shudder, as though talking about something unseemly “spell. So no, we won’t chip you. It will have to be something else.”

“Something else state sanctioned” says Buffy grimly.

Walsh looks up at that, something calculating in her face. Her hand moves again to the computer disks, but at that moment, there is a commotion outside and a soldier bursts in. Immediately, it is clear he has not had the honour of a chip. His uniform is in disarray, his hair ruffled, and he speaks without being directed to: “Sorry to interrupt, Ma’am, but we’ve got a lupus-category hostile causing mayhem out here.”

Walsh glares. Adam, meanwhile, steps out of the office to stare down the corridor, towards the source of the shouts and growls. Walsh asks the soldier, “What exactly happened?”

“Lewis and Hunter, ma’am, they’re under the effects of infringement. Well, we all are.”

“Is it in its secondary form?”
“Yes”

“I see. Well –”

“Hey B” says Faith, “cover me” She leaps across the desk, grabs the computer discs and bolts from the room.

“Run!” yells Buffy and Willow and Giles obey. Giles pulling Willow to the side as soon as they clear the doorframe so that Buffy can launch herself at Adam, who is already swinging at Faith as she ducks and darts out of his lumbering way.

“After them, private!” Walsh commands the soldier still in the office, and Giles swings, catches the man on the chin as he bursts into the hallway, scrambles for his gun as he drops. The soldier is not unconscious, but is dazed enough that he lets it go without much of a struggle. Giles finds himself with more fire power than he knows what to do with, so he points it at Walsh.

“Giles!” gasps Willow, and Giles wonders distantly why she cares. For a tense moment, Walsh, frozen in the doorway, stares at him and Giles thinks of the needle marks on Ethan’s arm. Then Willow pulls him away. “Giles, you’d just get us killed!”

They skirt out of range of the fight between Adam and the slayers. One glance is enough to tell Giles that this is not a situation where he can assist – Adam is simply too powerful, he’d only get in the way, and Faith has told them shooting the monster does nothing. So he darts over to retrieve the disks where Faith dropped them at some point while dodging blows, and focuses on the only worthwhile thing in his power: saving Willow. Shoving the disks into his pocket, he takes her arm and runs, giving her no choice but to run with him, for all she is trying to focus on a spell. Spells are slow, and they could be fired at or charged at by Adam right now. Giles follows the pattern of turns down white tiled corridors in reverse, aware of footsteps behind them, a gasp as someone stumbles. Chancing a look back, he finds Buffy helping Faith up. Giles covers them, pointing the gun over their heads until they catch up. “You got the disks?” Faith shouts, and Giles nods, out of breath. Buffy, meanwhile, has taken over herding Willow, who still seems lost in a cloud of magic, eyes closed, Latin on lips.

“He’ll be following.” Faith stares back the way they came.

“Then we need to hurry” responds Buffy. “Let’s –” That is when a werewolf appears, pursued by a handful of soldiers. “Oh great!” says Buffy. “Because that’s what this needed!”

Instinctively, Giles raises the gun, but then pauses at the sight of the soldiers. He has no experience firing a gun so large and knows his aim will likely be less than perfect. Rather than kill humans or a werewolf with stray warning shots, he turns and fires back the way they came. It won’t slow down Adam, but it has the desired effect of sending the werewolf back the way it came. Faith takes the opportunity to jump on it’s back, pinning it down. Buffy charges past her and knocks out the soldiers in moments. “Faith, we don’t have time for this, let’s go!”

“What do I do with this?” asks Faith.

Buffy pauses, and Giles can see the dilemma: a conscious, angry werewolf will slow them up at best (and, more likely, kill them at worst) but it is too close to human to leave in here.

“Oh wait” says Faith. Raising her fist, she clobbers the wolf. It whimpers and falls forward, unconscious. Faith stands and lifts it with a grunt, just as rapid footsteps sound from several directions. “Man, do we not get a break down here?”
“Let me take it” Giles offers Faith the gun, holds out an arm for the werewolf. “You’re hurt.” The bruises on the slayer’s face are rising fast.

“No way, Giles. You’re slow enough already.”

“Faith, I’m your watcher. For once in your life, do as you’re damn well told.”

She doesn’t, of course. She steps deliberately back, away from him.

“Guys, come on” Buffy pulls Willow with her further down the corridor, Willow whose eyes are tightly closed now, furiously chanting. “We need to – oh!”

Giles follows Buffy’s gaze to the wolf, which is shrinking and paling in Faith’s disgruntled grip. Soon what the slayer is carrying is not a wolf but a bruised and naked woman.

“Leave her” says Buffy. Giles frowns but then recognises, “Veruca!”

“Yep. Faith, leave her, I’ll explain later.”

“No way. I’m not leaving anyone down here.”

“Faith, I don’t like doing it, but none of us are going to get out of here if we don’t –” And the hallway fills with soldiers.

There is a snap in the air, as though all the atoms blinked. The soldiers all fall forward, unconscious. Willow falls too, pale, nose bleeding, into Buffy’s startled arms. “It won’t have worked on Adam” she tells them, sleepily, before fainting away.

Buffy lifts her. “Okay, Will. Let’s get out of here.”

*****

“How is she?” asks Ethan.

Buffy rolls her eyes. “Are we talking about the homicidal werewolf or the suicidal witch?”

“I’m not suicidal” comes a weak voice from behind a makeshift curtain.

Buffy offers a grudging smile. “Go see for yourself.”

She exits the basement. Fortunately, Xander’s parents are out of town, leaving the small army of fugitives from injustice with an entire (appallingly decorated) house to invade. Only those unable to move – Veruca in her magic-forged cell and Willow in the pull-out bed – are confined to the basement.

As Ethan passes, Veruca looks up, wild eyed, before letting her head drop again. Her hair is shaved unevenly, little patches of thinker growth here and there and, curving round her ear and down her neck, a raw, badly stitched scar. Ethan can’t see where else she’s hurt.

Stepping past the sheets hanging round the bed, he switches on a smile for Willow. “Awake at last?”

“Kinda. Hi, Ethan.” Her voice is still horse, but at least her nostrils are clear of blood at last.

Ethan sits down beside the bed, in the plastic garden chair Xander dragged down here. “I was thinking” he begins, “For our next magic lesson we might go over how not to do stupidly reckless
sleeping spells that could kill you, and how, if your magic tutor acts like hexing an entire building of soldiers is ever a good idea you shouldn’t listen to him.”

“Well” says Willow, then pauses, swallows painfully and tries again, a little louder, “You didn’t know what would happen.”

Ethan shakes his head. “That sleeping spell could have killed you.”

“I know. But the one you taught me wasn’t going to cut it with that many and, well, they were going to capture us.” Willow sighs, then winces. “No, the badness started with my hey-let’s-just-hex-everyone idea. Because it was all my idea. Like I’ve learnt nothing.”

“The Liber Incantation isn’t an unethical spell” Ethan points out. “Really all it should have done was make everyone relaxed and confused. Like grass back in the day.”

“But it didn’t.”

“Well even the no inhibitions thing wasn’t awful” Ethan reasons. “No-one did anything they wouldn’t anyway if they decided to really let loose.”

“Like how Buffy and Faith decided to really let loose and go down to the lab?” Willow sighs again. “I should have undone it as soon as it didn’t go the way we thought.”

“Well you can’t give yourself a hard time over that; you were affected too.”

“Exactly! I was being stupid.” Willow pauses for air, drawn painfully through mouth and nose as though to stave off another fainting fit. “And it didn’t even do what it was meant to, did it? I mean, I think I dealt with the cameras, but they all got a good look at us. They’ll have remembered after the happy-no-hang-ups passed and they’ll be coming after us.”

“I’ve cloaked us; don’t worry. Or rather, worry about Spike because he’s not here, but we’ll be okay.”

“Oh, Spike will be okay too: When I garbled their records on you, I did his too. They don’t know him anymore.” At Ethan’s questioning frown, Willow adds, “Well, I figured he could be useful.”

“I suppose so. Don’t worry about anyone then.” Maybe Veruca, but with the girl possibly listening a few feet away, Ethan says nothing.

“At least we got the disks” says Willow heavily, after a while. “Tara said they’re encrypted?”

“Yes” Ethan replies. “If only we knew someone good with computers…” He smiles.

“I could give it a go.” Willow grins. Grin slipping, she adds, “Too bad I’m not as good with magic.”

Gods but if she knew what her raw power, shared, felt like, she’d never doubt herself again. But Ethan senses such an insight would scare her, so he merely replies, “You’re an incredibly talented witch, Willow.”

“Powerful” she responds, “not talented. I know I’ve got power. I just wish it would do what I ask it.”

“Willow, the spell would have gone fine except for the Menas Stone.”

“But there’s always an except for! Doesn’t it ever scare you?” Willow shifts painfully, pulling
herself a little closer to upright in her nest of pillows. She adds, “Magic I mean. Any magic. Didn’t it scare you, your first few years of it?”

Ethan thinks back to those days. “Honestly, back when I was starting out, I was too out of it most of the time to care.” High, or half-delirious because he’d forgotten to sleep all week, or just too pleased with the mayhem he’d spread to worry about a few glitches here and there. He’d barely registered that magic could be dangerous before Randall was taken. “And you know Chaos magic tends to the unpredictable anyway. Not controlling it is rather the point.”

Willow nods, her face pinched by a frown. “Right. Only me with the magical meltdowns then.”

“Hardly. Every witch and warlock that ever was made mistakes.”

“Mine seem pretty big.”

Ethan shakes his head. “You’re an exceptional witch, Willow. Don’t let anyone tell you that’s a bad thing.”

“You mean that? ’Cause it looked pretty bad from where I was standing right before I fainted and almost died.”

“Hence, you’re never doing that spell again. But like you said, they were going to capture you.”

“…Because I’d cast a spell that got everyone reckless enough to go down there in the first place – Exactly.”

“But you’re all safe now. Look, Willow, it was one spell gone wrong: learn and move on. That’s the way to be.” Warming to his subject, Ethan adds, “I mean, look at me: I’ve had my share of mistakes.”

“Yeah, like truth-spelling the whole school.”

“No, that was deliberate. I was thinking more of the time I turned the entire watcher’s council into woodland animals.”

Willow immediately claps a hand to her mouth, stifling her giggles. “Really?”

“Oh yes. Ages, it went on, before I even realised.” Seeing her mirth increase, Ethan explains, “I’d only been trying to change this one jumped up little git into a ferret because, well, he was asking for it. I believe they almost had me assassinated.”

“Didn’t you feel bad after?”

“Well, I did when I realised Rupert had spent the entire day as a hedgehog.”

Willow finally gives in to laughter and hastily stops herself as Rupert comes down the stairs. Stepping round the curtain, mug in hand, he asks, “What’s the joke?”

“Nothing” Ethan tells him.

“You’re not telling Willow anything inappropriate, are you?”

Ethan attempts to look innocent. “Of course not! No need to be prickly.”

Behind him, Willow cracks up.
Rupert looks between them in confusion for a moment and then hands Willow the mug. “Tara sent me down with this. She’ll join you in a moment, after she and Anya have had a go at the disks.”

“Tell her I can help now.” Willow sips her steaming drink.

“Not until you’re healed” replies Rupert.

Willow takes another sip and then adds, in an undertone, “Will you get a coffee for Veruca? Because she hasn’t had anything since that juice when she first arrived.”

“I’ll find her something.” Rupert matches the whisper. Beyond the curtain, Ethan senses Veruca lift her head again, listening. “Has she spoken to you?”

“Once or twice, but I was kinda out of it. I think she was too.” Willow lets her whisper drop to a mere breath. “Giles, what are we going to do with her?”

Rupert glances back at the werewolf. The barrier spell around her contain the chair, and she is seated in it, curled around herself protectively. She looks small in Tara’s spare clothes. “I don’t know” answers Rupert.
Sorry about the long wait for an update. RL is full on at the moment.

With Willow still recovering, it falls to Ethan to cast a truth spell on Veruca. The young werewolf is clearly unhappy at the prospect, but, bound as she is, she is in no position to stop him. Soon her eyes glaze over and her obstinate expression goes dreamy. She turns to Buffy, Faith and Rupert, as though the spell can tell where the questions will be coming from.

Buffy asks, “Are you alright?”

Briefly, Veruca looks angry, but the spell reduces her voice to a monotone as she answers, “I will be.”

“What did they do to you?” asks Faith, in a tone that implies she doesn’t really want to know.

“Tests” is the flat-toned response. “They took samples from me in human shape and wolf shape. They electrocuted me to bring the wolf out. They filmed it all.”

Individual truth spells don’t bring about the glorious chaos of truth that similar spells cast en masse create. They are dull things that quash the creativity and spirit needed to lie.

Veruca’s information is limited. She knows no specifics as to what type of demons the Initiative has or what they are doing with them. Has seen no proof of more parts being harvested for more Adams. Hasn’t even seen Adam, come to that. No human prisoners that she’s seen, so that’s something.

Buffy asks, “Do you know what they wanted with you, ultimately?”

Veruca shakes her head slowly. Everyone waits but she doesn’t elaborate. Rupert asks, “Do you have any theories?”

“They wanted a weapon” is the reply.

Rupert frowns. “The wolf?”

Within her small encasement of magic, Veruca stands and stretches.

And changes. With a tearing of fabric and a bristling of skin, a bearing of teeth, the wolf supplants the girl and then, just as quickly, the girl is back. Veruca makes no attempt to cover the patches of skin exposed by the ripped clothing. She simply stares at them through the barrier spell.

“Crap” says Faith. “How’d they do that?”

Veruca shrugs. “I don’t know.”

Ethan concedes, “I doubt they explained it all in the consent form.”

Rupert asks, “Can you control it?”
“I think so.”

Buffy asks, “Do you want to?”

Veruca nods and starts to speak, shuts her mouth again and twists her face. Buffy looks at questioningly at Ethan.

“She’s fighting the truth spell” he explains. “Just give it a moment.” They wait, watch as Veruca screws her eyes shut, paces in her small space. Then she changes back into the wolf, dropping to the floor.

“That might bugger things up” admits Ethan. “Try asking something else.”

Buffy raises an eyebrow. “She’s a wolf now.”

“Worth a try. Maybe she’ll change back.” Addressing the growling animal, Buffy asks, “If we release you, are you going to hurt anyone?”

The wolf merely howls.

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Having the run of the entire Harris home in Xander’s parents’ absence had seemed to provide them with more than enough space when they began hiding here. A few days in, and the illusion has cracked. The place is in sore need of refurbishment, the washing machine is noisy and unreliable, the shower is low pressure enough as to be a lukewarm trickle and there is no kettle. And there are far too many of them sharing two bedrooms and a basement.

Veruca is still stubbornly in wolf form. Giles isn’t sure if this is a choice on her part, a way of avoiding more truth spells, or simply because it is actually full moon now. At least Ethan cloaked the garden too, such as it is. After a few hours of listening to Veruca growl, Giles heads out there for some peace, but it turns out Xander’s neighbourhood isn’t particularly peaceful, even if one is out of a werewolf’s vocal range – or at least, further out. He can still hear the howling, but it is muffled now.

“You getting fed up too?” Ethan joins him, and places one of Xander’s father’s icy bottles of cheap and foul beer in his hands. Giles accepts it. Gods, it’s been four days since he last had a cup of tea – it’s enough to drive any man to drink.

For a moment, they are quiet, listening to the howls from the house and the sirens and shouting from all around.

“I’ll cloak our flat tomorrow” Ethan tells him. “Then we can finally sleep in a decent bed.” Willow and Tara have been in Xander’s parents’ bed since the former grew well enough for the latter to let her leave the basement, leaving the rest of them to manage with the limited sleeping options remaining. Going home is tempting, especially as, “They don’t seem to be actively looking for us.” Giles replies. They haven’t seen any soldiers on Xander’s street, nor have there been any appeals on local television. Giles had expected trumped up charges, and for local law enforcement to get involved, but they’ve had nothing of the sort. But, he reasons, the Initiative must be searching for them; they broke into the base, after all. Perhaps they haven’t involved the police or the regular army simply because what they have planned for them is too dreadful to involve people trained in due process. He asks Ethan, “Do you really want to risk it?”

“Well we need to leave eventually” Ethan points out. “We’re running out of food.”
This is a good point. Soon after they arrived, Buffy contacted Riley, who risked a journey from his own hiding place to theirs, using his Main Street master key en route to bring a few supplies. Now, though, between nine people, they are running low. Ordering food in isn’t an option – cloaking spells are strong but lack nuance; a delivery person wouldn’t see the house if they were looking straight at it. Even Xander’s parents won’t see their home if they return while the spell is still in place. And every night they stay here is a night with no slayer patrolling the hellmouth. The situation is hardly sustainable.

“And you need tea.” Ethan opens his own beer, swigs from it and pulls a face, sets it aside on an upturned bin that serves as a garden table. “Hello, all” he says as the back door opens.

Giles tries to be pleased that the young people are joining them although, honestly, he could do with a break from their company after almost a week of confinement with them all. Catching Willow’s eye, he asks, “How is the err, hacking going?”

“Decrypting” she corrects, “and it’s not, really. There’s some really high-level protections on there; it’s going to take me a while to get in.”

“And in the meantime, we’re all stuck here” Anya concludes grimly.

“We don’t even know if what’s on there will be useful” Buffy points out. “Especially not if… well.”

“…And we’re back to conspiracy theories” Riley mutters. He tries to temper the comment with a smile, but Buffy looks hurt all the same. She says, “I’m telling you – Adam was holding back. They wanted us to get those disks.”

“Or Adam did” Faith agrees. “Maybe not Walsh.”

“She kept reaching for the disks” Buffy argues. “Like she wanted us to notice them.”

“Maybe” Faith shrugs.

“Well if she wanted you to have the disks, she won’t be after you for stealing the disks, right?” asks Anya. “So we can all leave?”

There is a pause in which no-one leaves. Riley breaks it with, “I’m not going to risk being captured on the off chance Professor Walsh has had a change of heart. And if she did, wouldn’t she have just handed you the disks?”

“Maybe not with Adam there” replies Buffy.

“Or” says Faith, “She didn’t want me to snatch the disks but Adam did want us to make a get away.”

“So you agree he was holding back?” asks Buffy.

“Fuck, yeah. He could have thrashed us.”

Ethan says, “Maybe with the spell making everyone do what they wanted to deep down, what Walsh or Adam wanted to do deep down was pass you information without the other knowing.”

Buffy glares at him. “Or maybe the spell is just the reason I can’t go patrolling right now.”

Ethan scowls. “It’s not my fault that what you really wanted to do was barge into the Initiative.”
“But it was your fault I was reckless enough to do it!” Buffy snaps back. Beside her, Willow wilts. Seeing this, Tara pulls over a plastic chair from across the lawn and helps her into it. Buffy, looking a little guilty, reaches for her friend’s hand. Giles tells them, “I think we need to see what’s on the disks before we can jump to any conclusions.”

“Let alone leave” Riley agrees.

“We need to leave eventually” Faith points out.

“I’m going out tomorrow to cloak the flat” Ethan tells her. “I could do your motel room too if you like.”

“And increases the risk of being captured” Giles points out.

“I’ll come too” Willow speaks up. “I want to help do some cloaking.”

“You can help by unencrypting the disks without stressing about more magic” Buffy tells her.

Willow looks a little hurt at that. “We could cloak our dorm rooms too and then I can use my laptop. No offence to Xander’s dad’s computer but it’s kind of tired.”

Anya says, “Or maybe you’ve just been too into magic this last year or so to keep your computer hacking skills honed.”

Willow’s hurt expression deepens. “Decrypting” she repeats. Beside her, Tara says, “Willow can be good at two things at once, you know.”

“We know” Xander agrees quickly, “Don’t we, An?” Anya offers a tight, too-bright smile.

“If you do insist on leaving the cloaked area” says Giles, “You should take Faith or Buffy for protection.”

“Bagsy” Faith blurts. “I stay cooped up in here one more day and I’ll go crazy.”

“Again” Willow mutters. For a moment a moment Giles, standing beside her, thinks only he has heard, but then Faith (of course, her slayer hearing) asks, “You say something?”

“Nothing” Willow replies hastily. Giles is almost relieved when a particularly loud howl echoes around them. The edges of the cloaking spell amplify the sound, bouncing it around them as they pause and listen. “Only two more nights of this” says Xander with false cheer. “Well. And all day if she wants to drive insane.”

“Unless we kill her first” Anya murmurs.

Xander shifts uncomfortably. “We won’t kill her, An. We’re the good guys, remember?”

“You think it will be easier to wait until she’s back in human mode?” asks Anya.

“No-one’s going to kill her” Tara says uneasily.

Giles wishes it were so simple as that. But the young werewolf clearly has no interest in caging herself during full moons. Freed, she’d pose an immense danger to any innocent who strayed across her path on nights like these.

“I heard back from Oz” Willow tells them. “He said the people he lives with now – werewolves he lives with, I mean – they won’t take in a werewolf who won’t try to fight her wolf side. Some of
them haven’t always been…well, some of them might be tempted back into giving in to it if she was around doing the tempting.”

“And there’s the whole how would we get her to Oregon thing” Xander points out. “What with being wanted fugitives and all.”

“So far as we know” Giles cautions.

“So we’re back to give her back to the Initiative or kill her?” Buffy asks. “I was really hoping Oz could be another option.”

“Sorry, Buffy” says Willow.

Buffy asks, “Giles, what about the Council?”

“I haven’t even been able to get hold of them to help us get the army off our backs” Giles admits. “They may have helped with the Nevada situation but it’s not as though any of us are employed by them anymore. And closing the Nevada facility left them with more than enough prisoners to manage.” As to what they’d do with a werewolf who can transform at will, Giles doesn’t know and doesn’t want to. A relief, really, that he hasn’t been put through to anyone at a decision making level.

Apparently Faith is of the same opinion because she says, “Lucky for her. Kinder to kill her.” Noticing their expressions, she adds, “I didn’t say I want to!”

“So what do we do with her?” asks Xander, at least partly, Giles thinks, to break the uncomfortable silence that greets Faith’s assertion. More uncomfortable silence is all that answers him.

It is broken by Willow. “Well” she says, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I was wondering about mind control.”

“No” replies Ethan immediately. “Your clue’s in the word control, Willow. As in, you’d lose yours.”

“As in, you don’t like it because you’re allergic to control” she corrects him. “I’d keep mine.”

“No you wouldn’t” Ethan replies. “Mind control never goes well.”

“Ethan’s right” says Tara. “A-and Veruca needs to decide for herself how to behave. A spell to take that from her…it would just be wrong.”

“Wronger than killing her or giving her to people who’d lock her up forever?” asks Willow. “All I’d change is making her not want to hurt people.”

“B-but doing that would hurt you” Tara points out. “Mind control spells always have a price.”

“A high one” echoes Anya. “I’ve seen it with vengeance. The people who called on me because they found out their warlock hubby took away their free will? Very angry people. One girl asked me to –”

“But hang on” Xander jumps in quickly. “Yeah, sure, taking away free will sounds kind of dark but it’s only Veruca’s free will to kill people.”

“Magic doesn’t work like that” says Ethan grimly.

“Precisely” agrees Giles. “When it comes to dark magic, motive makes little difference.” Lord
knows he, Ethan and their friends were just trying to have fun.

“I don’t want you hurting yourself, Will” says Buffy.

Faith says, “Much as I’m not in favour of Willow going dark mojo on us, isn’t giving her back to the Initiative kind of taking away her free will too? Even if they don’t chip her, I mean. They’re not exactly poster children for freedom and love.”

“Exactly” Willow says. “But if I magic her so she’s compelled to always lock herself up at full moon —”

“She could change any other time” Buffy points out.

Willow shakes her head. “Not if I change that too. Make her not want to hurt anyone.”

“Mind control’s never that neat” Ethan tells her.

Willow makes a gesture of frustration. “How is that not neat? There’s nothing neater than not ripping someone to shreds!”

“You think a werewolf that’s been let out in daylight’s going to just lie dormant in-between it’s big nights in the cage? You’re going to have to change the wolf, and change how she sees people, and stop her seeing the wolf as who she is and is this messy enough for you yet?”

Willow glares.

“So we’re back to killing her?” asks Faith tiredly.

“Unless we just lock her up forever instead” Anya concludes. “Anyone would think she’s a murderer.”

“H-has she killed people?” Tara asks.

Buffy frowns. “Not that we know of. But back before the soldiers caught her she was all ready to just run around being a werewolf and who cares who she meets. If she hasn’t already, she’ll kill someone eventually.” Another howl rings out, slicing through the night air. Buffy adds, “Maybe she deserves to be locked up forever”

“By people who’d torture her to see how the wolf works?” Ethan asks.

“Well no.”

“Why not just keep her here?” asks Riley. “Maybe she’ll change her mind eventually.”

“Eventually could be a lot longer than I’ve got the house to myself” says Xander. “Uncle Rory’s divorce is only going to drag on so long and then my parents will be back to remind me about the no pets rule.”

“We can keep her somewhere else” says Tara. “S-somewhere else the Initiative won’t find her. Maybe she will change.”

“From what I’ve read on the subject” says Giles, “werewolves who embrace the wolf rarely return to a more human way of thinking. It’s becomes a type of demon possession, you see, if the person lets it.” Thinking of it that way reminds him, suddenly and brutally, of Randall. Randall with glowing green eyes, so close to human but irreversibly not. Veruca is the same; the wolf never goes away. Literally, now.
“That’s not what you told Oz” Willow says.

“Well there are exceptions” Giles concedes. “Strong people who push the wolf to the corners of their minds. Would it have helped Oz to know the alternative?” In fact, he had deliberately played down the implications of his condition to the young werewolf, hoping that ignorance if nothing else would ensure his humanity remained untainted.

“We don’t have the right to keep her here indefinitely” Buffy decides.

Riley asks, “But you’ve got a right to kill her?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“We’re slayers” declares Faith. “We’ve got the right. Just not, you know, the pleasure.”

Ignoring that, Buffy says, “We’ll find another way. But it’s not like there’s whole load of options for the ethical imprisonment of renegade werewolves.”

“Which is why we have slayers” mutters Anya. Buffy glares at her, but Anya doesn’t seem cowed. Buffy says, “She’s a person.”

“Not right now.”

“She has a soul. And right now she’s trapped. I couldn’t justify…” Buffy trails off, troubled.

Ethan tells her, “It is the better option really. I do feel for the girl, but if the alternative is sending her back to the boys in khaki, well, she’d probably rather die than end up spare parts for Eve. You’d be doing her a favour.”

“A favour?” Buffy glares. “Ethan, she’s bound down there; you want favours done, why don’t you go down and murder her yourself?” She turns to Anya. “Or you.”

“I’m not the slayer.” Anya shrugs. “And I don’t have my powers anymore, so unless you want her to go out being pounded with Xander’s father’s power tools…” Beside her, Xander shifts again, studies the sky.

“Buffy” puts in Willow, “Couldn’t I at least try mind control?”

“Sweetie, even if it was white magic, it would put your recovery way back” Tara takes hold of Willow’s hand and stares at her imploringly. “And you’re still weak.”

“She’s right, Willow” says Ethan. “Plus, what do you think you’d do anyway? Hard to control someone’s thoughts forever when they’ve left town to avoid being abducted and experimented on.”

“I’d find a way” Willow insists. “I’d make a way, invent a spell if I had to.”

“Ah, yes, wonderful idea, that, when you’re weak.”

There is a shiver in the air around them. For a moment, Giles thinks the weather is on the turn, but then he realises: magic. Around him, the young people notice it too, and glance up, stare at the night sky to try to work out what the change is. Suddenly, Ethan laughs, not his usual giggle but a cold, humourless grunt. “You could have at least made it dramatic” he says.

“That’s more your thing” replies Willow, who is suddenly several shades paler. Beside her, Tara looks horrified. “The cloaking spell” she whispers.
Gods, Giles realises: she’s right. The cloaking spell has been broken. Which is to say, the stones have crumbled at Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids just rose up, spun round and sat back down again. Cloaking spells are old magic, one of the first spells invented when magic was still being tamed. They can’t be broken except by their creator, that’s one of the rules. It’s simply how magic works. Willow has just changed how magic works.

The other youngsters don’t get it, of course. “Great” says Buffy, “now Ethan has to redo it.”

Anya is not young for all she looks it. She stares at Willow, appalled.

“I told you I was close to doing it” Willow tells Ethan, her voice growing fainter. “I knew when you gave me the impossible homework that I’d make it possible for me. I could change things for Veruca too. We don’t have to kill her…” Her voice fades entirely as she slumps back, unconscious.

“Willow!” Tara exclamis. Ethan rolls his eyes and says, “She’ll be fine. Just wasted her strength on melodrama.” He takes a step towards the house. “I’ll get us recloaked.”

“Wait” says Buffy, “She hasn’t freed Veruca, has she?”

Ethan pauses. “No” he decides after a considered moment, “I’d feel it if she had.” As he heads towards the house, Giles decides to follow, just in case.

In the basement, the wolf has given up howling and simply paces, growls. Sitting on the end of the pull out bed and watching Ethan lay out the required items for the fresh cloaking spell, Giles asks Ethan, “Are you alright?”

“Yes” is the grudging reply. “Pissed off, but other than that.” Ethan lights candles and takes his chalk to the basement floor, sketching out symbols that were, until tonight, a guarantee that he alone could reveal their location.

Thinking again of Willow, Giles says, “I had no idea she had that much power.” Unnerved by Willow’s power already, this little demonstration has left him chilled, and therefore numb. The sort of power it takes to change the rules of an ancient spell is too much to think about amid everything else they have to contend with. And, more than that, it is too big to think about, the way the size of a planet can’t be fully comprehended by a creature simply living on the surface of one. Perhaps the gods could consider all of Willow’s power at once, but not Rupert Giles.

Perhaps she could do something about Adam. Perhaps she could do something about Veruca, after all. But Giles doesn’t suggest it. The last time he suggested magic be cast and the best blindly hoped for, a young man died.

Completing the symbols and sitting back to check them over, Ethan comments, “I’d worry but we’ve got more immediate problems.”

“Adam” says Giles heavily.

“Screw Adam – he’s not the real danger.” Ethan finally leans forward to arrange various stones and bones in the centre of the chalk circle. “Actually, don’t screw Adam. He’d hardly be a considerate lay, let’s face it.”

Giles rolls his eyes. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

Ethan steps back, surveys his arrangements again and then does the spell. Watching, Giles senses
the magic settle itself around the building, seemingly a little disgruntled, like an elderly beast briefly disturbed by a much younger animal.

Sitting down at last, Ethan asks, “What are we doing, still here?”

“I’m not sure it’s necessary” Giles agrees, “I don’t like to run the risk of being captured, but I am starting to think that if they were looking for us, we’d know about it by now.”

“Oh, very reassuring.” Ethan takes Giles’ hand. “But I mean, why are we still living in Sunnydale?”

“Oh” Giles sits up straighter, edges away ever so slightly.

“I mean it Rupert: Buffy’s not been round for training in an age and it’s not like you’re even being paid to be here.”

“I have Faith to train” Giles replies. “And my helping either slayer isn’t dependent on being on a payroll.”

“Buffy doesn’t need help, and Faith doesn’t want it.”

Giles flinches and stands up. From the bed comes Ethan’s standard conciliatory tone. “I’m sorry, Rupert, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course you can help them; Buffy should be coming to you for help. But she isn’t, really, is she? And Faith can just look to Buffy. And failing that they’ve got a historically powerful witch who doesn’t listen to her tutor anymore. We might as well go home.”

“Ethan, when we came here, we agreed: we’d stay here while I watched over Buffy until she…for as long as…until a new slayer has been called.”

“Well that ship’s sailed already.”

“You know what I’m getting at, Ethan, so don’t make me say it out loud.”

“Oh” Ethan stands and runs an appeasing hand over Giles’ arms. “I know. But when we agreed to stay until she…until the big cheer squad in the sky gets a new recruit, I don’t think either of us were thinking she’d end up a student with a team of friends helping her with the slaying and enemies that are mostly human in any case.”

Nor did Ethan expect her to live this long full stop, Giles knows. Didn’t think he’d end up hiding out in a grotty basement with his own freedom potentially on the line either. But none of that negates duty. To leave now, with both slayers facing so many dangers, is unthinkable. Unthinkable too, that Giles should give up his calling as a watcher entirely, even in an unofficial capacity. “I’m sorry, Ethan.”

Ethan scowls, shakes his head and turns away. “Right.”

“Love, we did agree we’d stick it out.”

Ethan sighs heavily. Giles tries, “It’s been a long day. Why don’t we go up and see if we can find somewhere passably comfortable to sleep?”

A short silence, and then a small nod. When Ethan turns back to him it’s with an only-slightly-forced smile. Giles leads the way up the stairs, horribly aware that this won’t be the last time they have that conversation.
There is no rest for the wicked, or for Rupert Giles, so, getting himself a drink from Xander’s increasingly understocked kitchen, barely past sunrise the following day, he finds Buffy waiting. “What do you think we should do? Really, I mean.” she asks.

“Well…” Reluctantly, Giles takes a seat at the table.

“Don’t say I have to kill Veruca.”

“No-one has to” Giles clarifies. “But we do need to accept that unless someone does, she will spread the curse and doubtless end up killing someone.”

“I don’t get it” Buffy says. “Why not just get a cage?”

Giles sighs. “Some werewolves think more with the wolf than the soul, and the idea of a cage becomes unpalatable.”

“And she’s not going to palate it now she’s tried out the Initiative version” Buffy concludes.

“Exactly.”

Buffy runs her hands through her hair. “Is the mind control stuff really not going to work?”

“I’m not sure” Giles admits, “but the effect on Willow could be extreme.”

“What if you and Ethan helped?”

“We can’t change the way magic works.” Though apparently Willow can. Again, Giles wonders briefly about letting her try. Wonders about telling Buffy exactly how extraordinary the young witch’s demonstration last night was, too, but a careful look at her tells him she has enough to cope with already.

“I don’t know what to do, Giles. I can’t kill someone with a soul but I can’t let her hurt anyone. And it’s kind of shirking the whole sacred duty thing to give her back to the Initiative. Anyway, how’d we even do that?”

True, that; they can hardly get a secret government agency that may or may not be hunting them down on the phone. And letting Veruca leave in hope she will be recaptured is tantamount to simply releasing her. Really, that option was always a false hope. Only one thing to be done.

Buffy says, “Let’s wait and deal with the whole Frankenstein’s-monster-mad-scientist problem first. Maybe she will change.”

Reluctantly, Giles tells her, “I’m afraid I don’t think that’s likely.” “I know” says Buffy. “She’s let it win. But we might at least get a chance to do another truth spell if she ever goes back to human form. We can at least give her a chance.” She looks at him. “Don’t tell Faith, okay? If we have to… Not until it’s over, I mean.”

“Agreed” says Giles because killing something so nearly human is the last thing Faith needs. Not that it would be good for Buffy either. But Buffy won’t have to do it, Giles decides. He will.

With so many young people traipsing about, the basement – even with Veruca in it – is a better place to sit and read than the rest of the house. Besides, Ethan finds when he goes down there,
Veruca is asleep, curled up with her head tucked under her tail.

Willow, awake at last, is upstairs focused on decrypting the disks and speaking only as much as she needs to. Hard to tell if she’s in a sulk with him, Tara, both or everyone, but at least after that row with her girlfriend last night (just what they needed, cooped up here together), she has stopped talking about mind control.

After Ethan, stretched out in the beanbag, has read for twenty minutes or so, Veruca stirs. Sitting up, she shifts back into human form and eyes him speculatively, shifting her naked limbs. “So when are you planning on letting me go?”

Ethan glances at her. “I’m not the person to ask.”

“You put up this barrier” she points out, and, when he doesn’t reply, “You don’t have any right to keep me here.”

Ethan looks away. “When did right come into it? I’m not the one ready to turn werewolf on some poor sod.”

She shrugs. “Like people are so great. And being a werewolf is just how I am, I didn’t choose it.”

“And you’re obviously cut up about it.”

“Literally” She indicated the scar curling round her skull. “Curtesy of your precious humans.”

From the stairs, a new voice says, “She’s got a point there.”

“Faith, hello.” Ethan sets his book aside, giving up on reading. Faith steps past Veruca encased in her shimmery barrier, studying her carefully. She gives Ethan a sideways nod, indicating the sheets hung up around the pull out bed. Following her out of Veruca’s sight, Ethan raises a quizzical eyebrow.

Faith whispers, “B’s going to kill her.”

“You know that for sure?” Ethan asks, matching her pitch.

“You know it too. Where else is this going?”

“I don’t know” Ethan admits.

“This mind control crap definitely won’t work?”

“Not without sending Willow over the edge.”

“Last thing we need” Faith agrees. “Could you do it?”

“No, I rather value my sanity.”

“Hm” Faith nods, glancing back at the fabric screening Veruca from them. Turning back to him, she asks, “So are you going to get that barrier down, or do I have to ask not-nicely?”

Ethan blinks. He finds his fists are curling instinctively and he makes an effort to relax them: This is a slayer. There is no fighting, no running. Best to just go along with whatever she wants. But he does risk saying, “I wouldn’t have thought you’d care.”

Faith’s flinches. “Yeah” she replies, “You and everyone else.” There is a pause in which Ethan
becomes aware of just how close she is standing. But when Faith speaks, it is in a subdued tone: “I’m done with killing. And I know it would screw Buffy up. I don’t want that for her.” She studies Ethan. “So unless you’re going to do it, I say it’s time to get that barrier down, don’t you?”

Ethan glances meaningfully at the ceiling and Faith says, “No-one’s around. Your hubby’s in the garden watching Anya and Xander have a domestic, Buffy’s off with Riley pretending like they still have a domestic, and the witches are shut away doing tech stuff and, well, probably having a domestic because there’s a lot of that going round. So if we’re going to do it, we better do it now.”

Ethan nods. “Alright then.” Pulling back the hanging sheets, he heads over to the corner where he’s stashed his supplies. Faith follows, eyes trained on Veruca who watches them cautiously. Ethan wonders how much she overheard.

“Get your clothes on.” Faith indicates a change of clothes – Tara’s again, apparently the poor, generous girl will lose two outfits from this – that sit ignored just inside the barrier.

“Not really looking to looking to dress like a freshman” Veruca tells them.

“It’s that or be naked.” Faith replies. At Veruca’s sly smile, she shrugs and murmurs, “Huh.” Then she adds, “I see you again, you’re dead. Don’t want to do it, but I will if you try anything in this town.”

“Like I’d stay here” Veruca returns.

Watching them, Ethan wonders about running upstairs after all, now that Faith is distracted. Entirely possible he might make it.

But he finds he doesn’t want to. Not because he especially wishes a werewolf on anybody but because Faith is wrong: Buffy won’t kill Veruca. Rupert will. Ethan has seen where that leads.

Taking down the barrier is simple enough. Once it drops, Veruca steps through the patch of air it once occupied, stretching gracefully. She looks at Faith for a long moment and Ethan imagines she’s about to thank her, but the slayer pre-empts it with a scowl. “Like I said” Faith tells her, “I never see you again.” Once Veruca has nodded her understanding, Faith indicates the stairs. Veruca turns away from them, and again it crosses Ethan’s mind that he could reverse this. The basement is full of excess kitchenware and the odd power tool – he could grab anything and swing it, and knock Veruca out before she goes off to hurt anyone.

But then, of course, he’d have to deal with Faith. And then if she didn’t thrash him and let Veruca go anyway, he was back to watching Rupert kill the girl and implode under the weight of the guilt. Only difference would be, he’d have a few bruises to wear while it happened.

Veruca climbs the stairs noiselessly and Faith and Ethan follow. The front door is already open, a bid to get some fresh air into this overpopulated house.

Veruca steps over the threshold, her nudity starkly absurd until she drops to the ground in wolf form. She shouldn’t be able to see the house on that side of the cloak, her gaze ought to slide over it and on to something else. Yet when the wolf turns, she stares straight at them for a moment. Then she turns and scampers to the middle of the road, and trots quickly away.
“You let her go!?” Buffy stares at Faith. As does everyone else in their overcrowded temporary household.

Faith shrugs. “Better all round, B.”

“Yeah” says Xander weakly. “Except for whoever gets mauled by a werewolf.”

“At least Buffy doesn’t have to kill her now” says Faith.

“I wasn’t going to!” says Buffy. “Or at least not…right away. I was going to wait and see if anything changed first.”

Faith rolls her eyes. “Oh, now you tell me!”

“I didn’t tell you anything –”

“– Yeah, I noticed –”

“– so I’m wondering how you got so convinced I was about to kill her!”

“Not to mention” Anya adds, “Killing monsters is a slayer’s job. If Buffy was going to do it, it’s not exactly off point.”

Buffy asks, “Faith, what were you thinking?” and, turning to Ethan, “And how could you let her?”

“Buffy” cuts in Rupert, “be fair; it’s not as though saying no to a slayer is particularly easy.”

Buffy stares at him, then at Faith, before turning back to Ethan, gentler now. “She threatened you?” and to Faith, “You threatened him!?”

Easy, of course, to say that she had (and she had, sort of. She’d implied.) but Ethan finds himself saying, “I wanted to help.”

Faith looks at him, taken aback, and Ethan shrugs. Everyone’s against the girl, after all. Why not side with her a see what happens? Not to mention, a slayer who thinks well of one is never a bad thing. And Rupert will get over it.

Rupert and Buffy both turn on him as one, the former saying, “I don’t understand” and the latter snapping, “Help!? Help the out of control werewolf?”

“I could have actually helped her” Willow tells them. “I could have designed a spell that would –”

“Would kill you or change you?” asks Ethan. “And we could take bets on which one?”

“I thought you liked change.”

Buffy cuts in, “I can’t believe this. I need to go after her.”

“I’m coming with you” Rupert steps forward, but stops when Buffy shakes her head. “Sorry Giles; if I’m going to find her, I’m going to need to move at slayer speed.” She heads for the door, but Riley catches her arm. “Buffy, you can’t leave – Walsh will find you.”
Shrugging him off, Buffy responds, “Sorry – duty, etcetera.” Looking pointedly at Faith, she adds, “There’s this whole protect the innocent thing I don’t get a lot of say over.” As her sister slay steps forward as though to go with her, she holds up a hand. “No. Stay here. If I get caught, the others are going to need you. Plus, I really don’t want to be around you right now.”

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After Buffy has left, Willow scoops up the laptop and, not meeting Ethan’s eyes, heads upstairs, followed by Tara. Riley wanders off in the direction of the living room and Faith heads back to the basement, leaving Anya and Xander with Rupert and Ethan. “So” says Anya. “Are you two going to yell at each other now?”

“Anya” mutters Xander, warningly.

To Ethan’s surprise, Rupert shakes his head.

“Are you sure?” asks Anya. “I mean, he did help our prisoner escape. And it is your turn to yell.”

“I don’t think more yelling is what we need in this house” Rupert tells her. He exits, beckoning Ethan to follow.

The kitchen is the only room free. As soon as they reach it, Rupert rounds on Ethan, his voice ominously level. “What in God’s names were you thinking?”

It crosses Ethan’s mind to say he was threatened after all. He could swear Rupert to silence somehow perhaps, get him to think that keeping an eye on Faith without confronting her is the best course of action. That way Faith still feels indebted to him and his currently angry partner is appeased, perhaps even protective. But the idea of so many different half-truth-based versions of events floating about in a house overcrowded already is far from appealing. “What were we supposed to do?” he asks. “I might be a selfish old git but I don’t especially want to help you all bury a missing student.”

“She’ll kill people, Ethan!”

“Then she’s a nasty piece of work but since when were we the supernatural police?”

“We protect the innocent!”

“Like the girl we had trapped down in the basement who’d just been tortured by the military?”

“A werewolf who refuses to make herself safe at full moon!” Rupert runs a hand across his face, leans back against the counter. Glaring, he adds, “It wasn’t your place to do this.”

Ethan says nothing. Honestly, he’s rather wishing he had gone with the line. Too late now.

Glancing to his left, Rupert reaches over and uncovers a hidden bottle of whiskey, opens it, scowls at the contents. He doesn’t offer any to Ethan, but turns the scowl on him. “Is this about you wanting to leave Sunnydale?”

“No.”

“So you’ve sent Buffy off into danger on some other whim?”

Oh Gods, where to begin? “I didn’t send Buffy off anywhere. And wanting to not be in a town
where a secret military branch are hunting us down isn’t a whim! And if any of the children had not wanted to kill someone, you’d have been all oh bless them and their morality!”

“Not if they’d unleashed a murderer, I wouldn’t!” Rupert glares. “And, frankly, why am I not surprised that a rare display of “morality” on your part results in a killer on the loose?”

“She hasn’t killed anyone!”

“Yet!”

“We don’t know that she won’t just live out her days as a wolf just roaming round the wilderness now! Now she can change at will, she might not have anything to do with humans ever again!” Ethan pauses. “Anyway, why isn’t Faith getting any of this lecture?”

Surprisingly, Rupert’s angry expression slips. “Yes” he replies, crisply sarcastic, “because she’s so likely to listen to me.” He eyes Ethan.

Ethan opens his mouth to explain that Faith had only been protecting Buffy, but then Rupert adds, “About as likely as you, I suppose” and he closes it again. Let Rupert stew for a bit; he deserves it. Ethan turns and walks away.

*****

“Ethan?” Buffy announces her return after nightfall.

“Buffy!” Xander hurries out the kitchen, followed by Rupert and Riley. Rupert leans in doorway, still clutching the now less than full whiskey bottle. Riley embraces Buffy but she breaks away quickly, turns to Ethan as he wanders through from the living room, were he’s been curled up with a book for the last few hours, trying hard to ignore everyone, especially Rupert. “Ethan, can you make it so Spike can find the door? I’m thinking some extra muscle that’s been inside the Initiative wouldn’t be a bad idea. Plus, he has the shopping.” To Xander, she adds, “He has an invite, right?”

“He does” agrees Xander, “And can I just say, a bitter, soulless vampire is just what this place needs.”

“Or not” states Riley. “Buffy, we can’t trust him.”

Letting them bicker it out, Ethan heads out the house and steps through the cloaking spell, which sends an electric tingle through his skin. Standing on the pavement a few feet away is Spike, overburdened with shopping bags and looking put upon. “Warlock” he greets.

“Spike, hello. Good to see you’re still not in a cell.”

“Same to you.” Spike nods in the general direction of the house, his gaze sliding over it. “This will be the reason then? Can’t see the damn place.”

“I’ll sort that. Not that I can recommend a visit.”

“Cabin fever?”

“That’s just for starters.” Ethan sets about altering the cloaking spell so Spike can enter, a simple enough procedure with a little of his blood and the right chant. Leading the way to the house once that’s done, he asks, “So how’d she drag you into this?”

“Caught me trying to scare a few dollars out of people leaving the Bronze” Spike explains. “Made
me join in a werewolf hunt, then forced me back here. Even stopped for supplies on the way and had me pack the bloody bags for her. Slayers for you. Can’t exactly say no to them unless you’re looking to lose a lot of weight very fast.”

“The day I’m having, I can relate more than you’d think.”

Stepping back into the house, they find two slayers in the hallway, all but squaring off as sniping scoobies cluster around them.

“…so she’s still out there!” Buffy is saying, “And if she hurts anyone –”

“B, she was basically human! It would have killed you to slay her!”

“But kind of her job” mutters Anya, who is seated on the stairs watching the whole thing.

Buffy rounds on her. “Can you stay out of it? I know you like killing people and all but this is slayer stuff.”

“You said it yourself, B – people!”

“Come on Buffy” Xander steps closer to Anya.

“And you’d know all about killing people” puts in Willow, eyeing Faith.

“I’m sorry, Anya” Buffy holds up her hands. “It’s just, the day I’ve been having –”

“Would have been easier if you’d let us help you” points out Riley. “Instead of running off on your own –”

Meanwhile Faith glares at Willow. “Hey, if you’ve got something to say –”

“Just said it.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Anya is demanding of Xander, “Come on? I give you sex night after night –”

“Anya!” Xander yelps, “Could you not –”

“You didn’t want to help!” Buffy is telling Riley. “You wanted me to hide in here!”

“I wanted to help!” Willow exclaims. “I wanted to do a spell that would stop Veruca hurting anyone!”

“Yeah, and you hurt yourself just demonstrating your power!”

“I can handle it!” Willow bristles.

“Not what I was seeing! Look, if I want someone reckless who’s going to get people killed, I’ve got Faith –”

“B, I’m standing right here!”

As the completing rows spiral, Spike looks from face to angry face and grins. “I don’t know” he decides. “Hiding out here for a bit might just be fun after all.” Heading into the kitchen, he dumps the shopping bags. “Hello, watcher.”
Rupert, is slumped at the table listening to the children fight, but when Spike enters he gets up and heads through to the hallway. “That’s enough” he tells the children. He sways slightly as Ethan confiscates the whiskey, but goes on, “We still have the matter of the Initiative to tackle.”

Anya asks, “Is that why you’ve been drinking all day?”

Xander tells her, “Well, it’s not like we can fight Adam; we might as well get wasted.”

“We can fight Adam.” Buffy tells him.

“How?” asks Willow, “How long are we going to be stuck here?”

Faith responds, “As long as it takes you to figure out what’s on those disks.”

“I’m trying! And it’s not like I’m getting any help!”

“Because what could we do, Will?” asks Xander.

“Maybe stop telling me I can’t be a witch and good computers?”

“I never said that!”

As their voices escalate, Rupert stares at them, groans and heads back into the kitchen, wrestling the whiskey back from Ethan on his way past, and saying, “If those lot keep this up, we’ll never stop Walsh!”

“Leading the charge were you?” Spike opens the fridge and helps himself to a beer.

“I had to wait for Buffy!” Rupert sits down at the table, completely misses the chair, and topples to the floor. Ethan rolls his eyes. “Right, that’s it – bedtime. Up you come, Rupert.” Rupert twists crossly out of reach as Ethan crouches beside him but doesn’t – or can’t – stand up. Over his shoulder, Ethan tells Spike, “Don’t rush to help or anything.” Spike grins.

Ethan glares at him and turns back to Rupert. “Sod it. Up you come, love.” Finally getting hold of Rupert, he pulls his partner to his feet. Rupert brushes him off and staggers to the door, slips past the rowing young people and heads up the stairs. “Ethan, get up here, it’s time for bed.” He begins to shed clothing as he ascends, tossing his t-shirt on the steps beside Anya, who wrinkles her nose at it. Ethan trails after him, muttering, “Yes, that’s what I said.” He hesitates before heading upstairs himself, doubling back past the warring scoobies to fetch Rupert a glass of water.

“Is he alright?” On the first floor landing, Tara emerges from the bathroom, staring after Rupert in concern as he blunders into the master bedroom. Judging by the book in her hand, she’s been hiding in there for a while. Ethan rather wishes he’d thought of that. “He’ll be fine” he tells her. “Well, grumpy.”

Tara nods. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

Wishing her goodnight, Ethan follows Rupert and find sprawled across the bed in the nude. As Ethan sits beside him, he stirs and groans, “I think I may have overdone it on the whiskey.”

“Yes, I thought you might have.” Ethan strokes Rupert’s hair and presses the water on him. As Rupert hauls himself up to drink it, Ethan asks, “What started all that anyway? Aside from me.”

Rupert waves a hand in a sweeping but not particularly illuminating gesture and tells him, “No-one takes me seriously anymore. I’m useless.”
“No you’re not. And I take you seriously.”

“I know you do.” Rupert leans sideways, resting his head on Ethan’s shoulder. “I’ll feel this in the morning” he comments, miserably.

“Try not to think about that. Anyway, I can make my hangover cure.”

“I don’t deserve your hangover cure.”

“You bloody masochist.”

“Hm.” Rupert shifts about, lifting his head. “I s’pose I should sleep somewhere else.”

“No, you’re sleeping right here” Ethan grabs his shoulder before he can get it into his head to go back downstairs, and eases him down to lie on his side.

“But I’ll snore.” Rupert tells him.

“Never mind, I’ll put up with it.” Honestly, if Ethan thought moving Rupert to the sofa would block the sound of the inevitable snoring, he might do it, but on the rare occasions that Rupert is drunk enough to snore, he snores for England. They’ll all be able to hear it from any part of the house.

Rolling on to his back, Rupert asks, “Why’d I do it, Eth?”

“I have no idea, love. You’d already done it by the time I noticed.”

“No, I don’t mean the drinking. I mean just being here. Watching. Why?”

“Masochist, like I said.” Ethan feels suddenly very weary. He’s spent decades telling Rupert the council don’t appreciate him and the sod couldn’t see it even after they fired him and here they still are. And now Rupert asks him to explain it?

“Well I shouldn’t” Rupert says, “I mean, it’s not as if Buffy needs me. Buffy’s never needed me.”

“She has.” Ethan very carefully avoids the present tense.

“Yes, but not now. And Faith’s…” Another expansive, dismissive gesture. “We should go home, love. I miss home.”

Ethan smiles. “I miss home too.” He starts undressing as Rupert adds, “I even miss grey skies. And I really miss decent pubs.”

“And decent beer” Ethan pulls the duvet out from under Rupert and lies down, covering them both in it.

“And Yorkshire pudding. Except we could make Yorkshire pudding here. We should do that in the morning.”

“Janus, but you’re wasted.” Ethan ruffles Rupert’s hair. “We can talk about this another time, alright?”

“About Yorkshire puddings?”

“About home. Just get some sleep now, love.”
“’m sorry, Eth.”

“It’s alright. Just sleep it off.”

Rupert does so, but not before he’s rolled drunkenly into Ethan and kissed his shoulder. “Iluoo.”

“What?”

Rupert shifts his face away enough to talk. “I love you”

“Oh. Good. I love you too.”
“Gods, I’m too old for this” Giles groans, coming reluctantly to full and miserable consciousness. Ethan doesn’t answer but reaches over to grip his arm, squeezing it a few times in pace with Giles’ breathing. It’s oddly soothing.

“Drink this.” Ethan holds out a steaming mug from which wafts the earthy scent of his infamous hangover cure, invented many years ago at a time of great need.

Giles doesn’t sit up to take it. “No. I’ve brought this on myself.”

“For gods’ sake, Rupert!”

Giles flinches. “Do you have to shout like that?”

“I’m not shouting.”

“Yes you are. Please, I just need a quiet day.”

At that moment, a triumphant shriek permeates the walls: “I did it! I did it!”

Groaning again, Giles reaches for the hangover cure. “On second thoughts…”

Ethan grins before climbing out of bed to see what Willow is yelling about.

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Feeling human enough to show his face afterdowning Ethan’s concoction, Giles joins the rest of the group in the living room. Willow’s laptop is the centre of attention, in part, Giles suspects, because it provides an excuse to avoid eye contact. Those not clustered around the screen are standing apart, arms folded. Faith has wedged herself against the window frame and eyes Willow disparagingly. “Well, if you’d done it sooner…” she says.

“I did it soon enough!” Willow retorts. “I mean it…sort of did itself soon enough.” To Buffy, she adds, “It was designed to unencrypt itself at a certain point.”

Buffy frowns. “A certain point when it hasn’t happened yet?”

“What hasn’t happened?” asks Giles.

An amused chuckle issues from a dark corner and Giles scowls: of course Spike would have to be here. “Look who’s up at last” says the vampire. “How’s the head?”

“I’m quite well, thank you.”

Ethan adds, “I made him a hangover cure.”
Frankly, Giles would rather his hungover status wasn’t common knowledge, but if his vague and embarrassing memories are anything to go by, the children know already anyway.

“Magic can do that?” asks Faith. “Wills, I take it all back.”

“Stop calling me Wills” says Willow. “And it was tech that got us the information.”

“And I’m guessing it will take magic to stop them” mutters Xander. “Cause I’m not keen on going up against Adam, Walsh and the spare parts army.”

“Specially not with the chipped soldiers” Spike agrees, his hand drifting unconsciously to his head. He catches himself and turns the motion into fixing his hair. Keen or not, Giles suspects he will use whatever is happening as a distraction while he tries to rid himself of his own chip.

“I can’t believe she’s doing this.” Riley shakes his head. “I’ve got to warn Forest and Graham.”

“No” says Buffy.

“But Buffy, they’re –”

“We can’t let it get back to Walsh that we know.” She steps away from the group, retreating to the far side of the room, apparently to think without their input.

“What do we know, exactly?” asks Giles.

Everyone glances at each other and the screen. Grudgingly, Anya tells him, “Walsh is going to turn the entire Initiative into one massive meat grinder and squish everyone back together in different shapes.”

“Anya” Xander shudders. “That’s…well, actually pretty accurate. But did you have to put it like that?”

“She’s going to open up the holding cells” Faith explains. “Set everything they’ve caught on the humans down there and use the leftovers to make an army of super soldiers. Fun times.”

A wave of nausea that has nothing to do with his hangover washes over Giles and he sinks into an armchair. “Good Lord.”

“That’s about what I said” says Faith.

“Yeah, except you said it in prison slang” mutters Willow. To the room in general, she adds, “What I don’t get is why be so brutal about it?”

“Yeah” says Xander faintly, “because what’s mass murder without a little decorum?”

Willow rolls her eyes. “I mean, even with the whole use everyone as a spare parts store, couldn’t she just drug everyone she wants to, um, use? Having them kill each other, it’s not just evil, it’s icky.”

“Survival of the fittest.” Faith shrugs, but her expression is troubled. “The ones that aren’t too bashed up are going to have the strongest parts, right?”

Spike chuckles again, but without humour. “I’ve got to hand it to you humans. When you try your breakable little hands at evil, you certainly give us monsters a run for our money.”

Ethan shudders and steps over to Giles’ armchair, perches on it beside him. Giles wraps an arm around his shoulder.
“She wants us there too” murmurs Buffy. She turns to Faith. “Doesn’t she? She knows we know – she planned for us to know. She wants us there to even the kill rate – that’s why Adam was holding back; she’d told him to let us get away with the disks!” Turning to Riley, she adds, “I told you – that whole thing was staged!”

“So…robot parts, monster parts and slayer parts?” Xander is all but hugging himself at the thought.

“And then what?” asks Tara. “What’s she g-going to do with an army of Adams?”

“It doesn’t say” replies Willow, scrolling through the computerised records. “With a big side of I don’t want to know.”

There is more silence then, an uncomfortable, contemplative one.

“So…” says Anya at last, “How are we going to stop it?” Looking around at their anxious faces, she adds, “We’re going to stop it, right? I’d really rather not be eaten by demonoid, humanoid robots with super strength please.”

“Agreed” says Ethan, “And I’m not sure what exactly we can do to stop it, but we could contain it: barrier spell.” “Yeah” mutters Faith, “because those are never broken.”

“They’re locking them in anyway” Buffy tells him. “At least until it’s over.”

“But I can keep them locked long after that” argues Ethan.

“Forever?” prompts Anya.

“Until I die” Ethan concedes.

“Which might be soon” concludes Buffy grimly. “Ethan, can you hear yourself? We can’t just let those people get slaughtered down there!”

“But we can’t warn them?” asks Riley.

“We’ll think of something” Buffy reassures him. Turning back to Ethan, she adds, “But that isn’t it. We need more than a containment strategy, we need to actually stop the massacre.”

“We could at least stop it spreading” points out Ethan.

“Not forever” points out Willow.

“But until whoever casts it dies” Ethan insists. “Maybe even a little longer with the right spell and a powerful caster.”

“Don’t look at me” Willow returns, “Buffy’s right – we can’t just leave those people to die.”

“Actually, pleasant as they were while trying to imprison me without trial, I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.” Ethan leans back against the armchair. “Certainly I don’t want any of us dying for them.”

“So don’t help” Riley tells him. “But I’m not about to let her do this to my friends.”

“So they’re your friends now? Do you remember being chipped?”

“Do you think the regular soldiers know about that stuff? It’s all Walsh.”
“And whoever she reports to. And whoever funds them.”

“Those chipped soldiers won’t listen if we warn them” muses Faith. “If we can even get to them. Actually, no-one will listen – who’s going to believe their boss is about to feed them to demons?”

“She’s not their boss” Riley corrects her. “They’re soldiers, remember? They work for the good of their country.”

Willow adds, “And remember how you worked for a guy who literally wanted to become a demon and feed on people that time?”

“That’s it” declares Faith, taking a step towards Willow. “I’m sick of Miss Goody Two Spells here acting like I’m about to go psycho on everyone – I’ll give you psycho!”

“What?” asks Willow. “That doesn’t even make sense!”

“Enough” Giles tells them, tiredly. “Ethan, I understand if you don’t want to help. Willow, do you know any spells that could be useful?”

Of course, Willow ignores him, telling Faith, “This really isn’t helping with the trust building, you know.”

“Oh, so you’re making an effort with the trust building?”

Beside Giles, Ethan announces, “I will help. Not for the government-sanctioned vivisectionists; I just don’t want any of you getting hurt. Besides, I rather owe it to those other guys from Willy’s Place that day.”

Buffy blinks at him. “You’re doing this for the demons? Seriously?”

“You know” says Spike, “If you want to help demons, I’d wager there’s a spell somewhere to shut down my chip…”

“Enough with the chip” Buffy tells him. “You help or you don’t, but you are not getting it out.”

“Alright.” Spike makes a show of considering a monumental decision. “I won’t help.”

“What? That’s the only reason I brought you here!”

“You sure it wasn’t the conversation?” mutters Riley.

Spike raises an eyebrow at Buffy. “Evil, remember?”

Buffy folds her arms. “Spike, you’re trapped in a house with two slayers in the middle of the day! You do what we tell you, and help us defeat Walsh.”

“You said it yourself, pet – it’s daylight. How am I supposed to get there?”

In answer, Buffy picks up a throw from the sofa, scrunches it into a ball and hits him in the chest with it. Spike doesn’t catch it but lets it pool at his feet. “Oh yeah?” He smirks. “Not exactly a comfortable way to travel with no cooling chiperecotomy waiting for me at the other end.”

“Think of the violence” Anya prompts.

“What violence? Not like I can hit the soldiers.”
“But you can hit the demons. A whole collection of them.”

“There is that” Spike muses. He brightens. “Place is gonna be a bloodbath, innit?”

Buffy rolls her eyes and turns to Faith and Willow, who are still bickering. “Guys, stop it. Willow, Ethan, do we have any spells that will help?”

Exactly what he had asked and been ignored for his trouble, thinks Giles, bitterly. But they have more than his irrelevance to worry about so he pushes it aside and considers spells he knows will be in the books they brought with them.

“Well” Ethan is saying. “Nothing really comes to mind aside from my barrier spell idea, and that seems to have been deemed a little controversial.”

“Maybe we should warn the Initiative” says Tara.

“Faith’s right” Buffy tells her. “They won’t listen.” Before Riley can disagree, she adds, “And we don’t know who’s chipped and who isn’t.”

Riley seems to swallow whatever he was about to say and changes it to, “What about shutting down Adam before it all kicks off? We at least know how he works, we could get rid of that threat.”

“We know he runs on uranium” Ethan agrees. “So I guess all we need is some sort of nuclear decontamination kit.” He smiles at Willow. “Shall we magic one up?”

Willow rolls her eyes. “Very funny. But there’s got to be some spells that will help. Tara?”

The witch shakes her head. “With all those different demon species, they’ll be something that’s immune to protection spells.”

“What about a paralysing spell?” suggests Giles. He selects a volume from pile dumped on the coffee table when they first moved in. “But this one needs to be performed by an experienced witch.”

Ethan wrinkles his nose. “A gender specific spell? I hate those.”

“Well I think it would be strong enough to affect Adam. For a short time at least.” Giles glances at the two witches. “But you would need to be within striking distance of Adam…”

“No way” says Buffy.

“…and speak Sumerian.”

“Oh” says Tara. “Well, I’m afraid I-I don’t. Willow?”

“If it was ancient Greek we’d be set, but Sumerian? Not so much.”

Ethan nudges Giles. “You speak it though. Maybe just think feminine thoughts or something?”

“Yes, because tricking primal forces always ends well” Giles replies.

“Doesn’t matter anyway” Buffy insists. “None of you guys are going anywhere near Adam; I am.”

“What?” Faith asks, “You get all the fun?”
“That would be you – or at least you get Spike’s idea of fun. You’re going to be fighting the demons.”

Faith scowls. “Can’t Spike do Spike’s idea of fun? B, taking down Adam’s going to take both of us.”

Buffy nods. “Which is why we can’t give him a chance to kill both of us at once. I fail, at least I can weaken him, and then it’s your turn. In the meantime, we are not trusting Spike to save the soldiers solo.”

“It’s like you know me” admits Spike.

Buffy continues, “It’s going to take three of you to help them: Riley to get any he can onside, Spike to help hold off the demons, and you’re going to have to fight the chipped soldiers without killing them as well as slaying whatever’s in those cells.”

Faith looks about to argue but makes an apparent effort to quash it. “Fine” she says, glancing at the man and vampire Buffy’s volunteered for her. “We’ll teamwork it. But if I hear you scream? I’ll come running.”

“Doubt she’s much of a screamer.” Spike smirks.

Riley looks about ready to stake him, but merely says, “I’d make myself very useful if I were you. No use for a chipped vampire once the facility’s shut down.”

Buffy tells him, “Let’s just concentrate on doing that without bloodshed.”

“Spoilsport” mutters Spike.

“So that the violence side sorted out” says Willow. “Maybe we need a different spell for the magic side?”

Giles hands her the book with the Sumerian spell. “If you were to quickly, um, brush up on your Sumerian, then this would work, Willow. I can’t ask you to put yourself in harm’s way, but perhaps with a protection spell or a barrier spell. Ethan?”

“I could seal off a space around her, but there’re no guarantee she’d be able to do a paralysing spell on something outside the barrier.”

“So we don’t use that spell” concludes Buffy. “I’ll just have to slay him the old fashioned way.”

“Plus” says Willow, reading through the spell, “This looks like I’d have to actually understand it, not just say it.”

“Well then what we need is a combo Buffy” jokes Xander. “Her with slayer strength, Giles’ multi-lingual know how, and Willow’s witchy power.”

Giles turns to stare at him.

“Don’t tell me” adds the boy, “I’m just full of helpful suggestions.”

“*****

“It’s kind of ironic really” comments Anya as they follow Rupert, Buffy, Willow and Xander up the hallway to the hidden lift. “They’re going to fight a monster who wants to mix everyone together by mixing themselves together.”
Tara whispers, “What if it goes wrong?”

Faith frowns. “Like if they can’t change back or something? Then I guess you guys’ sex life gets really weird really fast.” She glances at Spike. “Not counting vampires.”

“Bloody right” Spike grumbles. “None of them are my type.”

“Not insane?” asks Ethan, and ignores the look this earns him. Not able to hurt him in any case, Spike looks particularly unthreatening with the throw from Xander’s parents’ sofa bundled up under his arm.

Anya, meanwhile, carries Willow’s laptop, since she got the cushy job: following Willow’s careful instructions to try to override the Initiative’s computer system and prevent Adam from shutting the place down. Something she can do remotely, in fact, which makes Ethan a little jealous until he sees the look she is giving Xander and remembers what it’s like to wait helplessly.

“Here it is” murmurs Riley as, up ahead, Buffy stops by a mirror. “Do you really think this will work?”

“Course it’ll work” Faith tells him, “You’ve been bodied swapped; you know magic’s a thing.” The young man shifts a deep sigh. “I’m still not sure if it’s a thing I’m comfortable with.”

“Well it’s the best chance we’ve got” says Anya as Buffy, Rupert and Willow begin their descent. “Even if it means I might have to date a Xander-Willow-Buffy-Giles combo.”

“What makes you think you’d get to date it?” asks Ethan. “I’ve had Rupert longer than any of you’ve had yours.”

“We’ll draw straws” says Anya diplomatically, “or take it in turns.”

“C-can we not talk about this?” asks Tara. She steps aside to let Xander embrace Anya.

“Agreed” Riley steps forward to enter the lift shaft. “Well, it’s now or never, I guess.”

*****

The mood of the whole venture is boosted a little when Rupert and his children manage to sort out their differences in a lift shaft of all places. Then they spend a few minutes at the base of the thing, carefully casting a glamour to hide their entrance into the facility. The spell is well chosen, skilfully set and strong, and fails utterly to hide them from Adam, who is waiting, along with a dozen soldiers, when they open the doors.

“Crap” mutters Faith.

“You should learn not to enter that way” Adam tells them. “There are tunnels. I’ll show you them once you’re suitably evolved.” He indicates the soldiers around him, their guns trained on the newcomers. “They cannot see you, but they’ll fire on command. I suggest you lift the spell.”

Willow blows out the candle in her hands. The soldiers do not react beyond a subtle refocusing of their deadened gaze. Chipped, Ethan supposes.

Adam tells them, “Escort the prisoners to the restricted area. Mother will want to speak with them.”

Nothing to do but comply with that number of guns. Buffy and Faith relinquish their weapons when the soldiers come forward to take them, unaware that the slayers themselves are weapons. Ethan
feels less confident about letting go his magic supplies, but what can he do? Grateful for the reassuring nod Rupert slips him, he watches his herbs, gourd, crystals and candles being manhandled by a soldier who walks in front of them, the only one without his finger on a trigger.

They cross an open area, busy with soldiers who seem to have a little more life in them than their escort. Most turn to look as they are marched past and a few stop what they are doing to openly stare – not only at them, Ethan realises, but at Adam too. Understandable really; a patchwork demonbot can’t be the most likable of colleagues.

Glancing at the others, Ethan finds to his mingled relief and alarm that no-one seems about to make a grab for a gun or a rush for the exit. Everyone except the slayers (who are watching Adam the way the soldiers are watching them) look around at the facility. For Ethan – and presumably Spike – it is somewhat familiar. Not that he remembers this cavernous room but the atmosphere of the place is unmistakable. As they pass a silver-walled pit, Ethan notes demons of various types being studied less than gently and can’t help but feel a little smug at the approaching role reversal. He turns to Spike – the only one present likely to sympathise – but finds the vampire has his eyes trained on Buffy now, flawlessly alert. Beside them, Riley looks horrified and stares wildly about, his gaze finally snagging on, “Forest? Forest!”

A young man leaning against the railing around the pit straightens up at the sound of his voice and looks over, but makes no further response. Riley yells, “Forest, you’re in danger here, man, you’ve got to listen to –” Riley struggles as Adam’s big hand closes over his mouth and he is dragged along, Adam barely breaking his pace, Riley half-strangled by the embrace. Buffy takes a step toward him but is instantly surrounded by guns. Reluctantly, she falls back into step, following Adam across the facility. Over by the pit, Ethan notes Forest’s flinch when Riley is restrained, but the young man turns his back as the deserter is dragged away.

“So much for warning them” Xander mutters.

On the other side of the room, Adam leads them through a set of heavy doors into a non-descript darkened room, and then down a white corridor that they enter through a door so innocuous that Ethan wonders how many non-chipped soldiers even know it’s there.

Only chipped soldiers are visible now: they stare straight ahead, guns still ready, as they organise their prisoners into single file, a soldier each side of them. Ethan finds his breathing coming quicker than it should as the sounds from the main facility grow dim. In front of him, Rupert’s hands are steady at his sides. Ethan focuses on them, on the calluses on Rupert’s fingertips.

Finally, they reach a sterile room with medical equipment at one end. It is lined with what appear to be operating tables. Realising what these are intended to be used for shortly, Ethan takes an automatic step back and is immediately shoved forward by the soldier behind him. Rupert’s hand shoots out to grip his wrist.

At the far end of the room, Maggie Walsh turns around to greet them, her gaze resting on Riley. “Agent Finn, I was hoping you’d join us.” She moves forward to examine the supplies they brought with them, the soldier who hands them over stepping seamlessly back into the group, hoisting his gun.

“Mother” Adam begins, “All units are in the facility. Sub-Ts ten-three-twelve and six-oh-nine are in the main research area, and Doctor Angleman is dissecting a Type C in Laboratory Six.”

Walsh glances up. “In that case, I think we’re ready to begin. Make me proud, Adam.”

Grinning an unnerving grin, Adam moves off and disappears through a door behind her. Walsh
turns her attention to her prisoners. “So” she murmurs, “You knew you were facing a dangerous situation down here and you brought with you…” She examines their supplies “a collection of trinkets and a dried vegetable?”

“It’s a gourd” mutters Willow. Glancing sideways at the rest of the group she mouths, “Plan?” Ethan doesn’t dare answer, or dare look around to see if anyone else is looking optimistic. Certainly he doesn’t have plan beyond panic; he suspects that Rupert’s hand at his wrist is the only thing holding him up. What were they thinking, coming here? Of all the horrific situations the hellmouth has put him in, Ethan decides, this is by far the most horrific, this horror-story lab and the blank faced soldiers who are probably screaming inside, who know what’s about to happen and can’t stop it, like men possessed by demons they badly underestimated.

Riley steps closer to Walsh, or at least as close as the armed men around him with allow. “Professor Walsh, you can’t really want to do this.”

She studies him for a moment. “I’m sorry you think so. It seems I overestimated you.”

“This is evil!”

“This is part of a wider plan with a noble goal that I don’t need to explain to a deserter.” Walsh sets the magic supplies down and takes up a clipboard, studies the paper pressed against it. “But you’ll see for yourself soon enough. Kent, Vazquez, restrain him.”

“No!” Buffy kicks out at the soldier in front of her as Riley is dragged over to one of the tables, but, with guns immediately trained on her head – on all their heads, actually – she has no choice but to back off, hands raised. Ethan lets himself exhale; for a moment there, he’d thought she was about to get them all killed. Probable that they will all die, but please, Janus, not for Riley. Buffy tries, “Professor Walsh, this is murder!”

Walsh glances her way. “I’ve worked on this for a long time. I’m not especially concerned with how it looks from a civilian perspective.” As Riley is wrestled into restraints, she set her clipboard aside, checks her watch and announces, “It should be any minute now.”

Ethan prays that Anya has control of the computer system, but his prayers flounder in the face of Walsh’s smooth confidence. This is the final plan of a well-funded, highly-prepared military installation. No amount of hacking is going to cut it. Suddenly, Ethan wonders if Buffy suggested it would merely to keep at least one civilian out of harm’s way.

“You can’t do this!” insists Riley from the table.

“Riley” Walsh sounds fondly exasperated. “It will be alright. You’ll see.”

“No! No, I don’t want to be a part of this.”

“You can still stop this” Buffy tells the professor. “Call Adam back, call it off.”

“Miss Summers – Buffy. I can assure you that this is for a greater good. The part you’ll play is –”

“Oh, I’m not playing.”

“No-one but you can put an end to this” Rupert tells Walsh. “Whatever purpose you think you’re solving, nothing can be worth this. Please, we implore you –”

Walsh holds up a hand. “Enough of this. I won’t be lectured by you people.”
“Fine” decides Faith, “If you’re not going to listen to us, we’ll just have to stop you the hard way. Getting us down here? Big mistake.”

“It was part of the plan” Walsh tells her. “Of course, I hadn’t factored a slayer – let alone two – into our original strategy, but once I’d seen you in action, Buffy, I realised how useful you could be.”

Glancing at Buffy, Ethan, more to quash his panic than anything, murmurs, “Is this a good time to say I told you so?” Rupert’s grip tightens in warning on his wrist.

“No” Buffy glares at Walsh, but Ethan is sure that for just a moment it is meant for him.

“Save it for later” Faith tells him, “After we stop this.”

“There is no stopping it” Walsh says. She studies the rest of them, her gaze lingering on Ethan briefly to recognise and dismiss him. “I’m sorry about your friends. I had hoped you two girls would come alone.”

“We’re not just girls” Buffy replies. “You remember I said you’d find out what a slayer is? Get ready to learn.”

At that moment, the lights go out, plunging them into darkness for a frightening second until a reddish half-light kicks in. “Uh oh” Tara mutters. Ethan pulls his wrist from Rupert’s grip to grab his hand. So much for overriding the computer system. An alarm sounds down the hallway, closely followed by distant screams and growls. Buffy and Faith turn instinctively towards the sound, and are nudged back by the ends of the waiting guns. Walsh addresses the chipped soldiers: “Asimov Team, return these humans to the main research area. Put Hostile Seventeen by the entrance to containment area V where the other modified vampires should be making their way to the main facility. Then split into two groups and ensure an equal ratio among the fallen. Bring the fallen here to me.”

“Actually” Adam steps back through the door, “To me.”

Snatched at by the soldiers around him, Ethan finds himself released – but still surrounded by guns – as the soldiers pause when Adam enters the room. Beside him, Rupert brushes off his own assailant just enough to step imperceptibly closer.

Addressing the surrounding soldiers, Adam tells them, “Asimov Team: I am commencing phase B.” What follows in a list of numbers, reeled off Adam’s tongue faster than a human could speak, or follow. Briefly, it sounds like he is humming. Around the room, the soldiers flinch, shift on their feet, fix their attention more keenly on Adam.

Walsh also focuses on her creation, staring up at him blankly. “Adam?”

“Cerebral component three-two-oh-nine” announces Adam, turning to her, “Series eight, constructed offsite and delivered here when you were building my mind.”

“It’s in your frontal lobe” Walsh confirms. “But what –”

“It contains information on an aspect of the 314 project you are unaware of. It ensures that I knew my duty at this stage of the mission.”

Staring up at him, Walsh seems to think twice about asking what exactly that is. Ethan can’t really blame her though he can guess. Beside Rupert, Buffy glances quickly back the way they came, the way the screaming is coming from, and then over to Riley on the table. Like Faith, she adjusts her
stance ever so slightly, not enough to draw the soldiers’ attention, but enough to look like a predator to anyone who’s seen her fight.

“Adam” Walsh is saying, “Listen to me, I –” She flinches as Adam grabs her by the throat, forces out a command: “Asimov Team, stop him!”

Around the room, the soldiers remain still, guns still trained on their prisoners. They give no sign that they’ve heard her. Walsh manages, “Adam –”

“You have great intelligence, mother, but like any human you are prone to certain weakness. The world is as you have always said: humans are weak and emotional, demons, disordered and primitive. If we are to be delivered from this imperfection, we will need your mind free of its human weakness.”

“But Adam, I –”

“Goodbye, mother.”

Ultimately, Ethan supposes, Maggie Walsh does learn what a slayer is, because in the second before Adam slits her throat, Buffy and Faith do all they can to save her, breaking free by kicking out at the soldiers around them. Apparently, the chips have left the soldiers with just about enough free will to not pump the contents of those big guns into the confined space. Instead they reach for their tasers, and the air jumps with bursts of blue light.

Diving for the shelter of an operating table, Ethan yells out, “Rupert? Rupert!” He stares around wildly until he spots his partner disarming a nearby soldier with a roundhouse punch. Damn him – leave it to Rupert to get involved in a fight between two slayers and a load of soldiers in their prime and unable to slow down for pain. Even Spike is taking cover, pulling Tara with him to hide beneath the table opposite Ethan’s.

Before Ethan can call Rupert over and get him to shelter like a person who actually has survival instinct, Adam, of all people, puts a stop to the violence by calling out, “Leave them! Get to the main facility and proceed with the project!” Stepping back through the door at the end of the room, he adds, “There’s nowhere left to run.”

At his command the soldiers disengage, turning like clockwork parts toward the door they entered through and the screaming beyond it. Faith manages to knock out one more as they leave, and takes his gun from him, while Buffy hurries to help Xander free Riley.

Ethan climbs out from under his shelter and Rupert hurries over. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine” Ethan tells him, “I’m not the one who decided to take on a mind-controlled army.”

Tara, emerging with Spike from their own hiding place, asks, “Why did he send them away? Wouldn’t he want us, um, dealt with?”

“Nah” says Faith, “he’s counting on us to go kill some demons for his little project.” She indicates the handful of unconscious soldiers on the floor. “What do we do with these guys?”

Buffy answers, “We can’t leave them here: I don’t want Adam to get his hands on them.”

“We all really need to get out of here” Willow adds, “This is kind of spare parts central and the spell won’t work if we’re disturbed.”

“Yes” agrees Ethan. “Also we’ll all die.”
“We can’t let them bring anyone back here” Buffy tells them. “Faith, I know this is pretty much what Adam wants you to do, but –”

“I need to go and kill demons? On it.” Faith picks up her confiscated weapons and sets off the way they came.

Riley tells Buffy, “I’ll go with her. It’s a little late to warn anyone but I can still help get the men to safety.” He kisses Buffy, selects a gun from the floor and sets off to follow Faith. Buffy stares mournfully after him for a moment before she seems to recollect herself. “Spike – go with them.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” The vampire trails after Riley, hands in pockets. Buffy turns to Rupert. “Okay. I’ll get after Adam; you guys find a place to do the spell.”

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In the end they use the little room in-between the main facility and the snaking white corridor that leads to the grisly operating theatre. It is reasonably quiet (the competition is not strong) and erecting a barrier spell here means the chipped soldiers will be unable to drag the dead and wounded to Adam. They lay the unconscious men, sans weapons, along one wall, just outside of the barrier Ethan and Tara magic up to shield them should anything get in.

Beyond the door, battle sounds grind and scream and howl. Still gripping Tara’s hands to reinforce the magic, Ethan doesn’t dare glance at Rupert and the others least he disturb the enjoining spell. All he and Tara can do is wait.

Well, wait and try not to listen to the noises beyond.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Christmas and New Year everyone.
“Next time there’s an apocalypse” Anya decides, “I’m joining in.”

“Ugh” Faith throws herself onto the Summers’ sofa. “Please don’t talk about the next time.”

Anya tells them, “I couldn’t stand just waiting to see if you all got horribly slaughtered. I guess that means I’m growing.”

“Yay?” puts in Willow. She and Tara are curled up together in an armchair, and Tara adds, “You did try to help.”

This is true: On finally reaching the lift shaft they had been greeted by Anya on her way in, all set to rescue them with half the protective talismans from the Magic Box. As it turns out, she knows more about magic than she’s been letting on, though Giles supposes that’s not surprising given her age. Anyone would pick something up.

Then again, anyone, one would think, would develop better taste in men, and yet Anya is letting Xander paw at her and pull her into his lap on the sofa, even squeals gamely. Giles shakes his head despairingly but can’t help but smile too. This evening, even the annoying is touching given how easily they could have been a monstrous amalgamation of human, demon and – he shudders – computer by now. Beside him, Ethan nestles closer.

Entering the living room with snacks, Joyce is saying to Buffy, “Well he seemed nice. Maybe the next time you date someone I could meet him before you break up?”

“Sure, mom” replies Buffy, setting a tray of drinks down. “It’s just been a crazy year.”

“Yeah” Xander echoes, “What with the Frankenstein and all.”

Anya rolls her eyes. “Frankenstein’s monster” she reminds him.

Faith shrugs. “Frankenstein was scary enough on her own.”

As Joyce retreats to the kitchen and leaves Buffy with her friends, the various couples in the room shift away from each other tactfully. Before Giles can follow suit, Ethan tightens his embrace, holding him in place. Easy enough to shrug him off, but Giles doesn’t, stays where he is with Ethan wrapped around him, as Ethan asks Buffy, “So Riley’s set off?”

“Yeah. He said he’ll check and see how the unchipped guys are doing and then it’s back to Iowa until he figures out how not to be a soldier.”

“Sorry Buffy” says Willow. “Was it you or…”

“Kind of a joint decision” Buffy tells them, “He was still weirded about the supernatural after the whole mind-control thing and that’s really not something you’re going to get over dating me with the supernatural coming at you every day.” She sinks into an armchair. “I guess that’s it: I’ve officially burned through all the supernatural knowing-about guys I know.”

Faith helps herself to a snack from the selection on the coffee table. “You’ll just have to rescue someone cute next patrol.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll take a break from dating for now.”
Willow nods sagely. “Nothing like a secret government conspiracy to create an army of super soldiers to kill the mood.”

“At least we stopped them” says Tara. She looks around at the four people involved in the enjoining spell. “I’m tired just from running through the place; you guys must be exhausted.”

“You didn’t just run through the place, baby” Willow reminds her. “If it wasn’t for you and Ethan, something would have got in and eaten us.”

“And I’m not tired” Buffy muses. “You guys?”

“Nope” says Xander.

Remembering his London days, Giles admits, “Sometimes until the magic dissipates, people who’ve been involved in a significant ritual can be a little, um…”

“Hyper?”

“Well, yes.”

Ethan tightens his grip around him. “Poor hyper Rupert. We’ll just have to think of something to burn off that extra energy…”

Predictably, as Giles blushes and tries to keep Ethan’s hands from straying where they really shouldn’t in company, the children make their various ew-noises. Buffy exclaims, “Just not in front of us!”

“Oh please” says Ethan. “You’re all adults now.” He slips his hand under Giles’ shirt.

“Yeah” says Xander, “Traumatised adults.”

Anya, looking from Giles and Ethan to the rest of them, suggests, “We could have an orgy” and Xander amends, “Make that very traumatised.”

Blushing again – though at least it’s not because of Ethan now – Giles manages, “Anya, people generally don’t, um, well…do that sort of thing…um, with their friends.” Beside him, Ethan is seized by a coughing fit that sounds suspiciously like an address they used to frequent in their youth. Giles elbows him.

“What?” asks Anya. “It would get all the magically induced energy out of your systems so you can sleep.”

“I think I’ll just stay awake” says Buffy.

“Suit yourself, B” says Faith, standing. “Me, I don’t have extra energy from fighting the selection box of demons so I’ll get back to the motel. See you guys.”

“Oh” Joyce has walked in (hopefully not during the orgy part of the conversation, but Giles isn’t sure) “Faith, you’re going back on your own?”

“I can handle myself” Faith tells her cheerfully. “Super strength and all.”

“Well I suppose so. But you know if you’re not sure, you could always stay the night.” Joyce looks at Buffy. “Couldn’t she?”

Buffy grins. “Definitely.”
Joyce turns back to Faith and tells her, “The spare room is – well, your room is – pretty much the way you left it.”

Faith stares at her. “Really?”

Smiling, Joyce nods. “Come on, I’ll remind you where everything is.”

Watching them head up the stairs, Buffy mutters, “Well, looks like I’ve got a sister again. She’d better not hog the shower tomorrow.” Focusing again on her guests, she adds, “What about you guys – want me to walk you home?”

Xander shifts uncomfortably. “Thanks, Buff, but I’m not really in a hurry. Fun as I’ve always found visits from post-divorce Uncle Rory.”

“And he can’t stay with me” Anya tells them. “My landlord’s defumigating, The building, that is, not himself, but he’s part slime demon so really…”

Buffy frowns. “So you guys don’t have anywhere to go?”

“Oh I wouldn’t say that” explains Xander. “Just not, you know, anywhere comfortable. But it’s not like I’m ready to sleep.”

“I’ll say” Willow agrees. “I really could just stay up all night.”

“Well that makes one of us” says Tara. “I’m past ready for bed.”

“Well I could walk you guys back to campus” says Buffy. “Or, Will, if you want to hang with the hyper, I could take Tara and you could stay here.”

Willow smiles. “We could have a sleep over, with a traditional lack of sleep.”

Xander adds, “And midnight feasts.”

“That’s an idea” says Buffy. “We could rent some movies.”

“Will your mom be cool with it?”

“My mom has Faith back to smother. She’s on so much of a high we could probably get away with that orgy.”

Willow turns to Tara. “Sweetie, you sure you’re ready for bed? You could stay here too.”

“I-I’m sure” says Tara. “Maybe it’s just that I’m a novice at apocalypses – um, apocali? – but I’m completely wiped. You guys have fun though.” She looks at Anya and adds, “Hey, if these guys are going to be here, I’ll have half a bed free if you want it?”

“Thanks” Anya stands, shrugging on her coat. “But let’s not have sex. An orgy’s one thing, but I don’t want Xander to be left out.”

“Um” says Tara diplomatically, “Sure.” She and Willow exchange a knowing, loving look as Tara extracts herself.

Standing up too, Buffy asks, “Okay, so I’ll get you guys home and pick up some videos.”

“Oo” Xander gestures wildly. “Can you get Apocalypse Now?”
Giles says, “I’d have thought you’d have had enough of apocalypses.” To Tara, he adds, “Generally it is apocalypses, though apocali is also accepted.”

“Oh. G-good to know.”

“It’s a war movie” Xander is telling them. “Only the best ever, in fact.”

Willow pulls a face. “I think I’ve seen enough soldiers being massacred today.”

“Trust me this is one of the best movies ever made, and it’s about way more than the violence. Buffy, can you at least pick it up and we’ll decide when you get back?”

“Sure – I’ll get us a few. I bet we’ll have time for at least two movies before we crash.” Buffy turns to him. “Wanna join us, Giles?”

“Thank you” replies Giles, touched that she’d ask. “But I, err, I rather think Ethan has other ideas about what to do with my excess energy.”

Buffy raises an eyebrow and stares down at Ethan. “You sure about that?”

Giles turns to his partner and find that, at some point in the conversation, Ethan has quietly fallen asleep, his hand still under Giles’s shirt. “Ah. Um, in that case, a film night would be lovely.”

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“I thought you were staying the night?” Ethan asks blearily as Giles joins him in bed hours later.

“I was. But then the first slayer tried to kill us all in our dreams, so I thought I’d head home.”

“Honestly, Rupert. You can’t even have a sleepover without it being eventful.”
“So, have you ever tried shamanism?” Willow asks.

Ethan, standing amid piles of boxes at the other end of the Magic Box’s back room, looks over to catch her turning a page of the heavy book she’s holding.

“Now and then back in the seventies.” Ethan joins her and taps the book, breaking her focus. “Remember, you’re supposed to be packing the books, not reading them.”

“Yeah, says the guy who took half an hour to pack the last box.” Willow reluctantly puts the book in the basement-destined box. “It’s a shame to pack them all away.”

“Well, I’ll put them out in the actual shop as space appears on the shelves. I just need to sell more.” Ethan starts to page through an interesting volume on rituals for communing with the Norse Gods.

“And I need to buy more. Except not, because there’s also food.” Willow pauses, then, stepping forward, extracts the book from Ethan’s hands. “We should have found someone less bookwormy for this.”

“Where’s Xander when you need him?”

“At work.” Willow places the book in the box and piles a few strings of beads on top of it, then turns to survey the room. “We’re doing okay, though. Look, you can see the floor and everything.”

Ethan scowls at the surface. “I suppose I did let the place get a little cluttered” he admits.

“Well I think Giles is right: we can fit this stuff in the basement if we’re organised.”

“I’ll leave that to you” Ethan tells her.

“I can’t do it all – I need to help Giles with the books from the library this week.”

Willow has been coming over all summer to help Rupert scan his books into a computerised database, ready for the young people to use when Ethan and Rupert take the actual books away with them when they return to the UK.

Not that Willow knows that, which makes things awkward. Ethan keeps thinking he should tell her, but with Rupert determined that the slayers shouldn’t know yet, it would put her in a difficult situation with her friends. Better to wait until Rupert stops pussyfooting around.

It will seem real then, once they’ve finally told everyone. And once it’s real, Ethan will finally be able to look forward to it.

Willow sets the box down by the door aside and picks up another. Ethan, meanwhile, glances round the soon-to-be-training room. With their departure set for early autumn, he’ll have to find a manager for this place soon. Willow is the obvious candidate: she has grown up this summer even in comparison to all of last year, a new confidence settling around her like an aura. And her knowledge of magic is growing daily. But she has her university studies, not to mention there is the lure of the restricted section, and its proffered taste of magic’s knife edge. For all Willow has recovered from her dalliance with Rack’s brand of magic remarkably well, Ethan still isn’t sure he wants to hand her the keys and the accompanying unsupervised hours with those books and relics just sitting up there.
Maybe he should just take the contents of the restricted section with him? But then, anyone running the shop could get things just as bad from his suppliers. And even if Willow – Willow who casually rewrote the rules of an ancient spell to prove a point not long ago – ignores that temptation, there is still her education to consider. Not to mention the after-hours crowd. Willow doesn’t speak any demon languages, she could be left out of pocket at best and hoodwinked into helping with something apocalyptic at worse. Simply turning the less than human customers away wouldn’t be safe either.

No, it will have to be someone else. Someone who knows their way around basic spells, speaks a few demonic languages and who, ideally, knows a little of demon customs as well. “Hm.” Ethan frowns.

“What?” asks Willow.

“Is Anya busy these days?”

“*****

“I got a new job” announces Faith.

“I thought you were working at that bar on campus?” Giles pulls the new vaulting horse towards its allocated place in the newly cleared back room, huffing a little with the effort.

“Got fired.” Faith casually pushes the thing into place one handed. “Kept wanting me to turn up when I was busy slaying things.”

“I’m sorry, Faith. It’s not easy trying to balance a civilian life with…”

“Having actual fun? Yep, got that memo. But, hey, I figure if I stick to daytime shifts in the Espresso Pump, I can’t go wrong. Well, I could sleep in, but apart from that.”

The Espresso Pump? Gods, she’d better stick to daytime shifts or she’ll hear him sing. But not, Giles reminds himself, for long. Only a few more open mic nights to go before he and Ethan head home.

A part of Giles can’t wait, but another part is uneasy, especially in Faith’s presence. A few minor setbacks aside, Faith has trained diligently this summer: he will be leaving just as she is seemingly finally willing to accept some guidance. Her moving back into the Summers’ household has only improved her attitude.

Which, he tells himself, means she’ll be fine. She’ll still have Buffy and Joyce providing the stability that regular training sessions were her only source of when she first returned. Not to mention Buffy and her friends are experienced enough to offer all the support he would, and he’ll be only a phone call away. And it could be that Faith will benefit from the show of trust implicit in his leaving.

Leaving. Giles smiles. It’s been so long, and so endlessly dangerous, and he and Ethan are finally going home.
When Buffy starts with, “You haven’t been my watcher for a while”, Giles thinks for a wild moment that perhaps she – and Faith, who sits nodding in agreement every so often – have reached the same conclusion as him. But it turns out that an encounter with Dracula of all things has made Buffy decide, “I need you to be my watcher again.”

For a moment, he’s speechless. Buffy, gesturing to Faith, adds, “Well, we do.”

“It’s Buffy’s idea” Faith tells him. “She’s been all weird and hungry for patrol since that spell; I’m still just enjoying myself in cemeteries.”

“You weren’t a part of the enjoining spell” Giles notes absently.

“Nope. Kinda busy fighting on my lonesome. Well, and Spike and Riley were there, but really, I was doing the hard work.”

“Enjoining spell wasn’t easy” Buffy points out, her smile becoming a little fixed.

“Never said it was, B. Just way different to a standard fight or it wouldn’t have you on this know-your-slayer-roots trip.” To Giles, Faith adds, “But, hey, we can share. You and B can talk history during my training sessions. That way you’re not overloaded with time alone with hot chicks.”

Giles winces at the phrasing. “I see.”

“What Faith means is, you’re already watching her, so we can double up.” Buffy smiles at him, then prompts, “What about you – you had something you wanted to say?”

Tempted as he is to pretend it was nothing, Giles knows he owes it to Ethan to at least tell them, “Actually, Ethan and I have been talking about going back to England. Planning to, actually.”

The pain on Buffy’s face is reply enough. Beside her, Faith becomes very still, and asks, “What about watching me?”

“That was only on a voluntary basis” Giles reminds her, “which made it somewhat temporary. And over summer, you’ve proven that you don’t really need it.”

“What about all the weird stuff you’ve been going round town finding?” argues Faith. “Shouldn’t just be left for the demons.”

“I’ve typed up my notes on the artefacts I’m looking into at the moment” Giles explains. “I was thinking that between you, you could take over the search for the more potent ones.”

“I see. You got it all figured out.”
“But this changes everything in any case” Giles tells them. “I only considered it because neither of you have needed my help of late.”

“Neither meaning Buffy?” asks Faith. “’Cause I’ve been showing up for training.”

“Faith, there’s nothing I can teach you that Buffy can’t, but as I said, this changes matters: I’ll stay to help. I have a duty to support the two of you, if that’s what you want.”

“Yes” manages Buffy, seeming to wake up from her shock. “Yes, we do want. But you don’t have to…” She turns to Faith. “I mean, I know it kind of sucks but…” (turning back to Giles) “Well, we like having you around and all. But if you and Ethan want to go home, we’ll find a way to manage. Get the gang to help.”

“I want to help, Buffy. And you may well be right that knowing more about your heritage as a slayer could be to your advantage.”

“Giles, I don’t want you to stay here just for duty.”

“It won’t be just for duty.” Giles makes sure he locks eyes with her as he says it, tries to convey in that look what he could never say aloud. She seems to understand but still asks, “What about Ethan?”

“I’ll talk to him. He’ll understand.”

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“I don’t understand.”

“Ethan, Buffy wants me back. As her active watcher. You know I can’t just –”

“– oh, I understand that. What I don’t understand is what makes you think I’ll agree to this.” Ethan stands abruptly from the sofa and paces.

Giles tells him, “I can’t ask you to agree to anything. If you’ll be happier at home, then…” He trails off, not wanting to finish that thought, let alone voice it. Ethan has stopped pacing and is watching him intently. Giles manages, “I just mean, I know I’m asking a lot. I know you miss London and –”

“And Sunnydale’s bloody dangerous.” Ethan resumes pacing.

“Yes, and that.”

“With no decent pubs.”

“Agreed.”

“And boring people.”

“That’s a little unfair.”

“No, Rupert, what’s unfair is you want me to overturn a summer of planning on the whim of a teenage girl!”

“Buffy’s hardly a teenager anymore. And I believe she’s very committed to this new venture.”

“What, to find out about the old slayers? I’ll make it quick: they died!”
Giles flinches. Tells him, “If she and Faith research the slayer line, they’ll feel more ownership of their powers. I have to help them with that if it will make them better slayers.”

“Why can’t they do this research on their own?”

“Because Buffy asked for my help.”

“And your ego couldn’t resist?”

“As a watcher, I have a duty to –”

“You’re not a watcher! You’re not being paid! What’ll you live on if I go back to England without you?”

Giles actually hasn’t thought about that. Nor is he prepared for the surge of pure horror at the idea of Ethan returning alone; it’s one thing for him to say it, quite another to hear it from his partner. “You want to go back without me?”

“No, I want to go back with you.”

“But that’s not an option, Ethan, I’ve told you.”

“Right, so you’re turning this into me having to choose between you and living away from this literal hellhole, when really it’s about you choosing what Buffy wants over what I want.”

“It’s about me fulfilling my duty, Ethan.”

“You’re not a watcher anymore, Rupert!”

“I’m a watcher by training and heritage! Since when do you care what the council thinks?”

Ethan lets out a frustrated sigh and sits down again. “We were going home.”

“I know. I’m sorry: if I’d had any clue Buffy was about to ask for my assistance, I wouldn’t have got your hopes up.”

“Well of course you had no clue: She’s barely trained with you for a year.”

“I think she’s only recently come to realise it might be wise to resume. Something that Dracula said.”

“Oh, I see: this isn’t about Buffy’s whim after all, it’s Dracula’s mind games. That’s much better.” Ethan is still seated, quiet now and as far from Giles as he can get without falling off the sofa. His arms are folded. Reluctantly, Giles asks him, “You’re not going back without me, are you?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Of course not! But if you’d be happier…I mean…I could visit…”

“Oh, you could visit! We didn’t even go back for Christmas last year and it’s not like you were rushed off your feet watcher-wise. No, let’s face it, if I go back alone, I’d never see you again.”

“That’s not true, Ethan.” Giles takes off his glasses and rubs at them, pointlessly. “I won’t lie; I’d be devastated if you left without me. I’d miss you terribly. But I can’t force you to stay.”

“I’d miss you terribly too” replies Ethan grudgingly.
“I should think so.” Giles replaces his glasses.

“You owe me a back massage after a stunt like this, you know.”

“Oh certainly. Possibly several and a candlelit dinner.”

“And we go home for Christmas this year no matter how busy you are digging up past slayers.”

“Alright.” Hopefully the hellmouth won’t open. But then, knowing their luck…

“And if I get eaten by a demon” adds Ethan, “after we almost left, I retain the right to be supremely pissed off and come back to haunt you.”

“Don’t say that, Ethan.”

“Well, it’s worth saying.”

“I’d never forgive myself if something were to happen to you.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to miss me long: I’d be haunting you” Ethan shuffles closer, leans sideways against Giles. “Now. What were we saying about back massages?”
“You wanted to see me?” The shop bell jangles as Anya lets the door swing closed behind her, shutting out the warm Californian night.

“Anya! Um, yes. I did.” Ethan, pulling his coat on for the journey home, attempts an appeasing smile.

Anya sees straight through it, of course. “You don’t anymore?”

“Well, not really.” Ethan notes Anya’s expression and adds, “I was going to offer you a job as manager of this place. Rupert and I were going home, you see. But now Buffy has some little history project going on so I’m stuck here.”

Anya studies him. “Well, not really” she says, “You could just leave him.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh” Anya gives a puzzled little shrug and glances round the shop. “So you don’t need a manager?”

“Not anymore, I’m afraid.”

“That’s a shame. I’m starting to need money.”

“You are?” Ethan frowns. “If you don’t mind me asking, what have you been living on since you lost your powers?”

“Oh, I had some antiques and things. Not deliberately because anything I bought while I was looking for men to smite, I could just put on expenses, but you know how it is – you see a trinket you like, and five hundred years later the value’s gone up.”

Ethan nods. “Perk of immortality.”

Anya returns the nod and wanders over to a shelf. “Plenty of those. Still looking for some perks of mortality and now my money’s running out.” She picks up a statuette. “It’s too bad you’re not leaving; I’d be good at running this place. You’re aware you need to smear honey on this thing’s lips on solstice, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Ethan gently takes the statuette and sets it back on the shelf. “Listen, Anya, thank you for coming, but I’m off home now. Do you want a ride?”

Frowning over his shoulder, Anya steps towards another shelf. “Is that a Gemini urn next to dried marjoram? Are you trying to summon a Troloth?”

“Of course not! Do you see any polgara blood anywhere near it?”

In answer, Anya extracts a red-filled vial from behind the urn and holds it up. Ethan scowls at it. “Well that’s not supposed to be there. I keep blood under the counter unless it’s out on display.” Plucking the vial from Anya’s hand, he skirts around the counter and puts it in the fridge tucked underneath, explaining, “Dawn must have moved it.” The child was in earlier, putting her sticky fingers where they don’t belong until Buffy had saved his merchandise by letting her sister sit in on the slayer training in the backroom.
“Well, it’s a good job I found it” says Anya. “And the Gemini urn shouldn’t be on display anyway.”

“I can’t see why not. I wouldn’t sell it with anything for summoning and it wouldn’t be dangerous without that. Not unless the customer had a time machine to save the Hadian Index from the Library of Alexandria.”

Anya shakes her head. “The Hadian Index didn’t burn in Alexandria. The Shanleic Circle used the whole thing as a cover and got in there and stole it.”

Ethan stares at her. “They did? You’re sure?”

“Yes. Well, I should know; I was there. This librarian had cheated on his wife with his cousin – the whole incest equals icky thing is kind of new – and so she summoned me and –”

“– Wait, Anya…Are you telling me the most prestigious library in the ancient world burnt because you granted a wish?”

“Well it’s not my fault what she wished for.” Anya folds her arms. “Really, I was trying to steer her towards something more boils-based.”

“Never tell Rupert that, will you?”

“Why not? I’d thought you wouldn’t mind him getting upset if he’s making you stay here.”

“Well I’m not thrilled to be staying” admits Ethan, “but there is a limit.” He double-checks for his keys, patting his pockets. “I might tell him about the Hadian Index, though. Could be something to add to his list of old things to track down.”

“You’re so angry about staying you’d rather the Shanleic got him?” Anya shrugs. “I can’t blame you. Being human’s bad enough, but human in Sunnydale? I sometimes think me and Xander should leave, what with the disappearances and demons and” she glances to the window “hordes of vampires –”

“Well you’ve survived so far” replies Ethan, rather wishing she wouldn’t point out all of Sunnydale’s flaws right after he almost escaped.

“No, I mean, there’s a horde of vampires outside.” Anya gestures to the window. When the door opens, her nonchalance turns to anger and she smacks Ethan non-too-gently. “They can get in?!?” she exclaims in a muttered whisper, “I thought this place was warded?”

“It is! Nothing can get in that intends harm!” Ethan whispers back.

“Since when does something need a plan to turn dangerous?”

Ignoring her, Ethan turns a professional smile to the newcomers. “Welcome to the Magic Box. Anything in particular I can help you with?”

“You got anything on Slayers?” grunts a heavy-set male in what appears to be a Sunnydale High football shirt. Either he is an alumnus or he’s recently eaten one. Given the slight lisp – not used to the fangs yet, apparently – Ethan reassures himself that it’s the former. Reassurance that is welcome, actually, since he doesn’t like the way the vampire is looking at him. Or the way the others file around him and Anya, who steps closer, trying to keep them all in sight at once. The regulars from the bite-house usually come alone or in pairs: It’s not often Ethan has this number of bloodsuckers in the shop at once. And Ethan’s regulars know better than to ask about “Slayers?”
Ethan manages. “I wouldn’t go messing with them if I were you. Didn’t you hear what happened to Dracula?”

“Have you got anything on them or not?” is the reply. “Any books, I mean. She wants to turn the whole thing into study hall.” The vampire gestures to the one female in the group, who is admiring a ceramic unicorn in a case.

Turning with a huff, she tells him, “Mort, you don’t have to make out like I’m some loser nerd just because I want to do things properly.” To Ethan, she adds, “Hi by the way. You’re Mr Giles’ boyfriend, right?”

“He’s gay?” The other vampire – Mort – smirks.

“I am Mr Giles’ fiancé” Ethan replies. To Mort, he adds, “And a proud bisexual, actually.”

Beside him, Anya mutters, “Maybe don’t get out the pride flag? We’re outnumbered here.”

Reaching into his pocket without breaking eye contact with Mort, Ethan hands her the keys. “Anya, why don’t you go and wait in the car? I’m sure this transaction can be concluded swiftly.”

“You got that right.” Mort takes steps subtly closer, while the female vampire flounces over and snaps, “We’re not here to eat an old guy – oh, um, no offence, Mr Giles. Is it Mr Giles?”

“Mr Rayne”

“Oh, good. ’Cause that would be confusing.”

Glancing from vampire, to vampire, to Ethan, Anya takes the keys and moves to go past the newcomers. Immediately, Mort sidesteps into her path. “Who said you could leave?”

The female vampire scowls. “Mort, let her go.”

“She could be going to get the slayer.”

The female vampire frowns at Anya. “Are you?”

“What’s a slayer?” asks Anya, straight-faced.

“It’s okay, Mort, let her go.” The vampire steps back herself, and Anya skirts around Mort and past the two of them. The bell jingles a farewell as she leaves. Ethan hopes she’ll fetch Rupert. Mort, merely disgruntled and thuggish when he entered, is now watching him intently. He’s still standing too close. Ethan takes a step back and Mort grins. Ethan forces himself to look away from him and address the vampire girl. “You went to Sunnydale High, didn’t you? I think we met briefly at –”

“– At graduation! Yes!” She bounces up and down a little. “I’m Harmony.”

“Of course. I’m sorry you didn’t come through it, by the way.”

“Oh” Harmony makes a little flapping gesture. “I’m not. I mean, being sired’s not the end of the world, just kind of a learning curb.”

“I imagine so.”

“Right? I mean the fashion is completely different! We’re talking a whole new palette.”

“And no reflection. That’s got to be a bugger.”
“Oh, I just use this polaroid camera. Or I get Brad to be honest with me.” Harmony shoots a sultry look to one of the excess vampires still prowling round the shop, picking things up and putting them down in the wrong place.

“Well” Ethan concludes, “You seem to have settled into things.”

“Oh, you mean my minions?”

“Minions already? Congratulations.”

“Thanks! I’m trying something new.”

Mort puts in, “Which is why we need books about the slayer.”

Ethan considers this. As it happens, Rupert had him bring all those books to the flat last week. And this little gaggle of the undead are no real threat…to Buffy or Faith that is; Ethan has no desire to piss them off. Probably the best course of action is to say, “I’m afraid they’re not in stock. But I do have a supplier with a few titles that might interest you: History and Lore of the Slayer Line, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds great!” Harmony enthuses. “When can you get them in?”

Mort, though, shifts close again, all the better to loom. “He’s probably lying. Cyrus, Brad, stop messing around – search the place.”

“Hey!” Harmony protests, “I give the orders.” To Ethan, she asks, “Can I just have one of everything with slayer in the title?”

“Hey look!” A vampire who has wandered round the counter stoops and opens the fridge. “There’s blood in here.”

“Pass me some” demands Mort. He catches the vial that’s thrown in one hand without fumbling. Harmony rolls her eyes.

“Um” manages Ethan. “Behind the counter is really a staff only…” He trails off at the look Mort is giving him. “Err, you know what, never mind.” Focusing on Harmony again, Ethan says, “Books. Well, thinking about it, I think there are five about the history of the slayer. You really want them all?”

“Uh huh. Oh, and the unicorn.”

Ethan eyes the thing. “Happy to throw that in for free, to be honest.”

“Really?”

“Of course. But the books aren’t here right now. You’ll have to come back tomorrow.” Ethan glances at Mort, who finishes opening the vial and tosses the lid to the floor, glaring at Harmony’s crestfallen expression. “Don’t even start” the bigger vampire tells her. “This is supposed to be a raid, not a shopping trip.” “It is?” asks Ethan. He glances at the counter where the holy water is kept, but there is still a vampire there filling his pockets with blood from the fridge.

“Well yeah” says Harmony. “But it was open so we didn’t need to. You even agreed – we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves. Yet.” She gestures to Ethan. “Plus, I know the guy.”

“We fought the Mayor together” Ethan agrees hurriedly. “That’s not the sort of thing you just
forget.”

Shaking his head despairingly, Mort steps away from the pair of them and raises the vial to his lips. Turning back to Harmony, Ethan tells her. “I’ll have to insist you pay half now. That way –”

“Fuck!” bursts out Mort, spitting blood onto the floor. “What the hell is this?”

“Oh” stammers Ethan, “That’ll be the polgara blood.”

“ Fucking gross!” Mort spits again.

“Ew!” Harmony wrinkles her nose. “Mort, that’s disgusting.”

“This crap’s what’s disgusting!” Mort hurls the vial to the floor.

Managing not to flinch (good for him, really), Ethan tells him. “Since I’m going to have to restock anyway, there is hare blood, or –”

“Nah, that’s alright.” Mort grins.

Harmony asks, “You don’t want something to wash the taste out?”

“Oh, I do” Mort brings his big hand down on Ethan’s shoulder. “But I thought of something better.”

****

Bursting through the door, Giles barely has time to take in the scene – vampires clustered around Ethan, Ethan on the floor, oh God – before he lunges. Between holy water, fists and sheer bloody rage he drives them off, before kneeling beside his partner. “Ethan? Christ – Ethan?”

“I’ll call an ambulance” Anya tells him.

“Thank you. Ethan?”

“Yeah…” Ethan winces and turns his head without opening his eyes. His neck is red from the blood sucked toward it, leaving the rest of him chalky. A little black ooze pools beneath his head, stains his hair. Giles clamps a hand over the deepest wound. “Hold on, love. You’re safe now.”

****

“It was Harmony” Ethan tells him later in the hospital. “You remember Cordelia’s understudy? Spike’s ex?”

“She attacked you?”

“Actually, she didn’t join in. She was pissed off because we’d been reminiscing about graduation, and then the big guy decided he was hungry. I think she didn’t want to begrudge them though.” Turning his head as much as the stiches will allow, he asks, “You didn’t stake her, did you?”

“I’m not sure I even saw her” Giles admits. “I did see a rather well built one – I’m afraid he got away. With at least one other. I’ll send Buffy and Faith to look for them.”

“No need to bother with that” says Ethan. “No harm done.”
“You’ve been hospitalised, love.”

“But apart from that. Oh, she has minions now. Harmony I mean. I told her congratulations from both of us.”

Giles gives Ethan a sideways look, not sure if he’s joking or serious, or perhaps serious but only because he’s drugged to the tonsils. Ethan is, of course, completely unaware how dangerous his condition was half an hour ago. He’s had four pints of blood transfused, Lord knows how many stiches in his neck and now he’s strung out on some heavy-duty painkiller which is making him a little giddy and has him reaching out to absentmindedly twist Giles’ hair into knots. Giles gently guides his hand back towards the bed and holds it. Ethan tells him, “You’ll have to run the shop tomorrow.”

“I will.”

“It might need a bit of a tidy.”

“I know” The whole place had been in disarray.

“If we need to make an insurance claim, let Mrs Dumitru know in case it gets back to her.”

“Will do.”

“She worries.”

“I know, love. I’ll give her a ring.”

“She stole a unicorn figurine.”

“Mrs Dumitru?”

“No, Harmony.”

“Well, I’ll, err, I’ll pass that information on to Buffy and Faith. Just try to rest now, Eth.”

Watching Ethan sleep, Giles thanks every god he’s ever heard of that he got to the shop when he did and not just five minutes later.

*****

“What am I meant to do with those?” Ethan asks of the flowers Giles brings to his bedside.

Buffy frowns at him. “He’s not supposed to bring you flowers?”

“I’m going home tomorrow.” Ethan frowns at the bouquet and then a thought seems to occur to him. “I am going home tomorrow, aren’t I?”

“Yes” Giles looks around for something to put the flowers in, locating a dusty vase on the window sill.

“Good.” To Buffy, Ethan adds, “I told Rupert everything I remember if that’s why you’re here.”

“No” Buffy sits down in a rattly chair by the bed. “I just came to see how you are.”

“Oh. Well, that’s sweet.”
Buffy smiles. “And to tell you we dusted them. Well, not Harmony – she ran off – but the others.”

“The big guy?”

“Yeah. Impaled him on a unicorn actually.”

Ethan laughs uproariously and then flinches, puts a hand to his neck. “No, really?”

“Really” Buffy confirms. “Part of Harmony’s collection I guess.”

Joining them with vase in hand, Giles asks, “Ethan, are you sure home tomorrow is a good idea? You’ve barely had time to recuperate.”

“I can recuperate safer at home with the nasties needing an invite. I feel like I’m on a platter lying here.”

“Have you seen any demons?” Naïve to think nothing would wander in to prey on the sick.

“No but I’m not taking any chances.” Ethan surreptitiously taps the statuette of Janus by the bed, the first thing he’d asked for from home. Next to it is a large wooden cross and a collection of dove bones and feathers tied together to form a protection talisman. Giles shakes his head, “The staff must think you’re quite mad.”

“Actually, most of the staff wear crosses – I think they’re a little more aware than the average Sunnydale citizen.” Ethan pauses, then adds, “Or possibly just Christian.”

“Possibly” Giles rearranges the collection of talismans to make room for the vase. “Buffy, I don’t suppose you could find some water for these?”

“On it” Buffy stands up, adding to Ethan, “Gives me a chance for more cute doctor ogling.”

“Oh” says Ethan, “you’ve met Ben, then?”

“Mm-hm” Buffy grins. “Some perks to being injured, I guess.”

“He did almost die” Giles chides, while Ethan tells her, “I think we’re just borrowing him from ER, which is a waste when you think about it – half the people he treats are probably in no state to enjoy it.”

“I am standing right here, you know” Giles puts in.

“I know, love” says Ethan, “But you know I don’t mean anything by it.”

“Do I?”

Looking between the two of them, Buffy decides, “I’ll go track down that water.”

Giles is left alone with Ethan and his typically poor attempt at an innocent expression. Given recent events, all he can bring himself to say is, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine” Ethan tells him. “Or I will be when you stop fussing. How’s my shop, by the way?”

“Alright.” Giles wanders over to the end of the bed to examine the charts, hoping to get some insight into whether home tomorrow really is a good idea. “I’ve been sending your demon customers away under the circumstances. Except for one Hanol because it turns out Anya speaks Hanol. And drives a hard bargain, come to that.”
Ethan nods. “I knew it was a good idea to hire her after all.”

“Well it will give you some time to recover before you go back to the demon nest.”

“It’s not a demon nest, Rupert. Most of my customers are human. Look, sit down, will you.”

Giles sits down in the chair beside the bed and then, when Ethan rolls his eyes and pats the mattress, on the bed itself. Ethan shifts sideways to make room for him. Giles wraps an arm around Ethan’s shoulder, partly to avoid falling off the narrow bed and partly because Ethan is wonderfully warm and alive and it might have been otherwise.
Some dialogue in this chapter is from BtVS season 5, episode 3, The Replacement, written by Jane Espenson.

Having survived her brief encounter with Mort in the Magic Box, Anya had somehow encountered him again while Ethan was in hospital. Ethan isn’t sure how – something about Dawn running out the house. Either way, she is effectively minus one arm at the moment, and so has to work the till while Ethan does everything else. She’s enjoying it a little too much.

Unfortunately it does put her directly in the eyeline of the demon who sweeps in in broad daylight, ignoring Ethan who is tucked away in a corner and who quickly steps deeper into the shadows, hoping he hadn’t been seen. With some of them, you can just tell when they’re on a warpath. Anya seems to sense it too, and looks alarmed even before the thing comments, “The slayers are not here.”

“No” Anya manages, her good hand reaching for the shelf behind her.

Stepping out of the shadows, Ethan informs the demon, “They train Tuesday and Thursday evening, and Saturday morning.”

The demon studies him for a moment, nods gravely, and sweeps out again, robes swirling at his feet.

As soon as he is gone, Anya clonks Ethan on the shoulder with a statuette.

“Ow!”

“Are you insane?” she asks, “We’re supposed to be the good guys! You can’t set Buffy and Faith up to be attacked!”

“I’ll tell them to expect him! And in the meantime, we can enjoy the refreshing not being dead.”

“There is that.” Anya frowns, the sniffs. “Not that refreshing though. That guy stank.”

Ethan inhales deeply and scowls. “I think we’ve got some air freshener in the basement.”

“You realise this is my second time being attacked by a demon while working here?”

“No, it’s not; Mort didn’t attack you here and that thing just made a polite enquiry and left again.”

“Yeah – with a plan to come back later and kill our friends! And Mort almost attacked me here.”

“Still, it’s not your second time” Ethan insists. “It’s not even your first time.”

Anya frowns at him before turning to rearrange the items on the shelf behind her, a few of which had been knocked over as she felt behind her for a weapon. “I guess” she admits, “But the point still stands; this place is dangerous. I’m going to need to review the wards. Especially as we’ve got
such a short time anyway.”

“We have?” Ethan stares at her. Surely he’d have heard any rumour of an oncoming apocalypse?

“Just a handful of decades” Anya tells him, “before disease and death claim us.”

“Oh.” Ethan frowns. “What a cheerful thought.”

“It’s not just a thought; it’s the hard reality.” Anya turns back to face him. “Mortals get practically no time.”

From her perspective, Ethan realises, it must be so: Summers rush by these days, in contrast to the languishing eternities they were when he was a child. A human lifespan must seem like a long weekend to someone who is over a millennium old. From Anya’s perspective, she has found new purpose and true love at the very close of her time in this world. And there is nothing he can say to change this. So he says, “The demon customers bring us in a good profit. We can’t shut them all out.”

Anya eyes the till. “There is that, I suppose. By the way, I need a pay rise.”

“What?” Ethan splutters. “Anya, you’ve been working here for less than a fortnight!”

“But I need money! Xander and I are planning on getting an apartment.”

“Well, congratulations. But you’re not getting a pay rise.”

“But you pay yourself more than me. It’s not fair.”

“Capitalism, Anya. Look it up.”

“I will.” Anya frowns. “And in the meantime, you’d better call Buffy and Faith. You know, as you’ve sent a loose demon their way.”

“I will. But there’s no way that thing could hurt them. What could it possibly have that they haven’t faced before?”

*****

“He can split his opponents into their separate weaknesses and strengths” Willow tells the group in the Magic Box later that afternoon. “If he really is the last survivor of the Tothric clan, that is.” She glances at Buffy. “It’s um. It’s what I based the spell to split Angel and Angelus on.”

Buffy looks quickly down at the book in her lap. Setting aside his own book, Giles asks Ethan, “And you told him when to find Buffy and Faith here? It didn’t occur to you to lie?”

“Hm” Ethan leans against the counter. “Did it occur to me to have him come back sometime when no-one with super powers is around? Well, yes, but I decided I quite like my spinal cord where it is, on balance.”

Giles looks down at the book again, conceding the point. Gods know running a magic shop has proven itself dangerous enough for his partner recently. Apparently Faith agrees, because she says, “He’s got a point. I mean, it’s not like we can’t take Toth, right B?”

Buffy glances up. “I guess. As long as he doesn’t do this splitting spell, right?”

“Why does he even want to do that?” asks Xander. “Wouldn’t that just give us four slayers? I
mean, even on a bad day, you guys kill butt.”

Willow replies, “I’m guessing he wants to split them into a slayer half and a…non-slayer half, so he can kill the non-slayers and then the slayer halves die too.”

Giles nods, thinking over this plan. Without Willow’s familiarity with this curse, it could have been a real threat.

“I don’t have a non-slayer half” states Faith.

“I do.” Buffy looks down again.

Willow tells her, “But, hey, you’re forewarned. So even if he splits you guys, the slayers can protect the…”

“The normal girls” concludes Buffy quietly. Faith snorts.

“Yes, well” begins Giles, keen to turn the conversation from introspection that could border on hopeless wishing. If it were up to him, these two young girls would not be burdened with the responsibility of the Slayer, but they are. If Angel’s misadventure has taught them anything, it is that separating themselves from that would not be sustainable. “Luckily, you are forewarned” Giles concludes, “You know he’ll turn up here if we don’t find him first.”

“I’d rather you not do the actual fighting here” Ethan puts in.

“Yes” says Anya. “I’ve just done the inventory.”

Buffy glares at them both and, likewise irked, Giles asks, “Well, did he say anything that gave you any indication of where to find him?”

“The dump” Anya replies.

“He stank” clarifies Ethan.

Anya nods. “We had to open all the windows.”

“Great” Buffy concludes. “As well as the weirdness of maybe winding up in two bodies, we get a field trip to garbage central.”

“Back to the you in two bodies thing” Xander muses. “The slayer half would be…well, I love you, Buffy, but scary is the word.”

“Don’t worry, Xander, I’m not going to let…” Buffy trails off, frowns. Turning to Giles, she exclaims, “Or we are!” Looking over to Faith she adds, “We’re trying to learn about the slayer powers, right? Wouldn’t talking to a pure no-normal-here slayer be a good way to do that?”

“Beats reading about it” agrees Faith. But she crosses her arms defensively. “If we let him split you, that is. Like I said, I’m not up for ditching actually being able to fight.”

Buffy appears to have a lot to say to that. After a loaded pause, she limits her answer to, “So we could let him split me and then you take him out before he kills non-slayer me.” Looking to Giles, she asks, “What do you think?”

“It could be useful” Giles agrees, “but risky. We’d all need to be there ready to keep him from hurting your more vulnerable self.” Turning to Willow, he asks, “The curse would be easy to lift?”
She nods. “Really easy. Harder to make it last actually.” Apparently thinking of Angel, she adds, “But I guess we knew that already.”

Turning back to Buffy, Giles asks, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

She nods. “I’m up for it. Faith?”

“Yeah” Faith nods, clearly scared, and hiding it so well that Giles doubts the other children – who unlike him in his younger days have little need for bravado – can tell. “Let’s do this.”

****

“Why did I have to come?” Ethan asks, wrinkling his nose as they pick their way around one of the numerous piles of rubbish in the city dump later that night.

“Because we may need a barrier spell” Rupert replies without looking at him. Instead he eyes their surroundings, and Ethan, for all he feels neglected, is a little grateful for that. No telling what might be living here besides Toth.

Behind them, Willow is telling Buffy and Xander about some nose amputating spell that honestly wouldn’t be a bad idea right now. Well, except that Rupert’s glasses would fall off.

Up ahead of them, Faith turns a corner and greets, “Spike.”

“Sodding hell” The vampire comes into view as they follow Faith. “Can’t a fellow enjoy a slayer free night even in this stink-hole? Why aren’t you in the cemeteries?”

“Why are you climbing Mount Crap?” returns Faith.

Spike waves what looks like an old lamp. “Just getting a few supplies.”

“Recycling” Ethan realises.

“I suppose so” says Spike, “Yes. Being an upstanding citizen.” He eyes Faith. “And not expecting to be harassed for it.”

Buffy rolls her eyes. “Yeah. You’re an upstanding citizen and I’m Madonna.”

“In your dreams, slayer. Like you could pull off those high notes.” Spike adds something to his shopping trolley of rubbish and Ethan notices a shop mannequin, a plastic approximation of a human, amid the tat. He frowns. Is the vampire still dreaming of getting that chip out? Makes sense, but still. Ethan doesn’t like to picture the fantasies that must go on beneath the peroxide.

“Spike” begins Rupert. “We’re looking for a demon called Toth.”

Spike glances up, then freezes, points. “That him, or are you lot just really unlucky?”

Turning, they find an alarmingly tall, robed demon bearing down on them. Scattering as he blasts something – the spell, presumably – at them, they are quickly spread out, providing Toth with clearer targets. Above Spike cheering the damn thing on, Buffy yells, “Everyone, take cover! Faith, we need –”

At that moment, Xander shouts out a warning and dives in front of her. The next blast lifts him off his feet. Ethan shoots his hand out to his side to stop Rupert running into the line of fire to help the boy. Shaking him off, Rupert starts forward but then changes course and Ethan, seeing what he’s about to do, shouts, “Rupert, just let it go!” If the demon wants to leave, what on earth would
possess Rupert try and stop it? But of course, Rupert is too focused on this plan to actually let Toth curse one of the slayers to stop and think how rarely they are gifted with a demon in retreat. Ethan can only watch as his partner jumps into Toth’s path, grabbing a piece of bent piping from the ground and whacking the demon round the head with it. Toth staggers back a step or two, off balance before rounding on Rupert with a glare. Ethan yells, “Buffy!” and — mercifully — Faith responds, grabbing the demon and swinging it bodily around, the implement in its hand letting off another blast, which Buffy dives deliberately into.

“Buffy!” Willow yelps, rushing forward. Behind her, Xander takes an unsteady step or two. Behind him, Ethan spots another Xander, this one unconscious. Willow helps Buffy to her feet as Faith tackles Toth. “Buffy, are you alright?”

“I am” Buffy replies, turning to look at the other her, the one still on the ground. “I’m not sure about –” Before she can finish, the other Buffy leaps to her feet, shoves them both aside and lunges at Toth. He doesn’t last long.

“Wow, B” says Faith when it’s over. Her gaze travelling to the Buffy that stands with Willow, she amends, “Bs.”

*****

“She’s joking” one of the Xanders assures Ethan and Willow some time later.

“No she’s not!” realises the other, “She entirely wants to have sex with us together – which is wrong and… and it would be very confusing.”

“Wrong how?” asks Ethan. “You’d all be agreeing to it.”

“And it’s not like it would be cheating” points out Anya. “You’re both Xander.”

“You know” Willow, glancing up from the five-pointed star she’s drawing on the Magic Box floor, eyes Anya and Ethan. “I’m kind of worried about you guys working together. You’re a bad influence on each other.”

“No more than the Xanders” points out Ethan. Already the two have become indistinguishable in terms of maturity level.

“Well they’re the same person” Willow replies, “so I guess that’s not surprising.”

“Completely identical” one of the Xanders confirms. “We checked out some stuff in the car.” There is a pause before he hastily adds, “Fingerprints! Oh and, hey” turning to Anya, “we figure we could afford that apartment. Or at least, if they keep us – err, me – on for the next job.” He jerks his head at the other Xander. “And this guy thinks they will.”

“Really?” Anya beams.

“Well he is a pretty good carpenter” Willow says. She focuses again on readying the reversal spell, glancing every now and then to the closed door of the back room. Shadows moving under the door suggest someone inside is pacing, and Ethan wonders whether it is the pure-slayer version of Buffy (who, frankly, seems like a pacer) or Faith, Rupert or the non-slayer Buffy as they try to glean something useful from their conversation with her. What little he has overheard so far has seemed rather intense.

“I’m so glad” Anya is telling the Xanders, “And after we’ve lived there for a year, we can move into a two bedroom and have a baby. Or buy a boat.”
One of the Xanders is incoherently panicked, but the other manages, “Wait, what?”

“Well we don’t have much time” Anya reasons. “I’m dying.”

Quickly, Ethan asks, “In the sense that all mortals are dying?”

“Exactly” says Anya. “We’re all dying even before you factor in the demons.”

The more competent-seeming Xander gently puts his hand on her good shoulder. “I think we should talk about this later, okay?”

Anya looks a little mollified, and steps aside when Willow says, “Xanders, come stand in the circle.”

It is a simple spell to undo: at Willow’s command, the two Xanders merge seamlessly together, leaving the now-four of them to wait for the Buffys’ turn.

“What do you think’s happening in there?” the newly reformed Xander asks, eyeing the door to the backroom.

“They’re probably trying to convince the slayer-Buffy to not murder us all” replies Anya, casually. At Xander’s stare she adds, “What? That’s what slayers do. We only like Buffy because of the other half.”

“You just think that because you used to be a demon” Willow tells her.

“You think a slayer is all that different to a demon?” counters Anya. “Maybe you only don’t think that because you didn’t use to be a demon.”

“The non-slayer version did seem more like our Buffy” muses Ethan.

“Yeah, and the slayer version seemed a lot like Faith” says Xander. “Who in case you guys forgot, doesn’t try to kill us.” He looks briefly confused at his own words before Willow mutters, “Except for that one time.”

“Exactly” says Anya. At Willow and Xander’s renewed accusing stares, she adds, “Look, I’m not saying Buffy would usually try to murder us! I just don’t want to be alone with the pure slayer version.”

“She was a little intimidating” Ethan agrees. It had been something about the way she moved. Something predatory. He frowns, asks Anya, “Do you know anything about the slayer line?”

“Nothing that isn’t common knowledge” she replies. “One in each generation, strength and skill, blah blah blah. But I’ve been around long enough to know that sort of power doesn’t come from anywhere good.”

“Guys” Xander argues, “You’re just working yourselves up over nothing. Both of me were me, remember? So it’s only Buffy in there.”

“But that’s just the thing” Anya replies, “The Slayer isn’t just Buffy. There’s a whole line of them.”

*****

“It’s certainly given us some new avenues to explore” says Giles later, when he and Ethan are home. It is partly true; Buffy’s slayer form made several references that he plans to pursue in his
research. Of course, she didn’t know anything that Buffy in her intact form doesn’t know: It was more a matter of focus. Buffy minus, well, Buffy, was nothing but her awareness of her slayer heritage, her connection to slayers past. She remembered more of the slayer dreams, untangled, in her mind, from Buffy’s mundane dreams. Things that were usually in Buffy’s subconscious had come to the fore in her double’s mind.

Just as illuminating – and disturbing – was her general presence. Minus Buffy’s compassion, her personality, her loyalty to her friends, what was left was almost primal in her single-minded purpose.

Ethan sinks down in the sofa beside Giles and leans against him. Giles shifts to accommodate him, wraps an arm around him. Ethan comments, “You know, it was clever of Buffy to think of it, but I’m surprised you agreed – it rather strikes me as an example of using magic to solve a problem, which someone on this sofa has a history of being averse to.”

“Not solving a problem” Giles points out, “It was just a way of continuing the research.”

Ethan shrugs against him. “Well, I’m not complaining. If it helps get this whole History of the Slayers thing out the way, I’m all for it.”

Caught up as he is in Buffy’s quest, Giles hasn’t really considered what they’ll do when it’s over. Looking at Ethan, he realises suddenly that his partner is most likely expecting them to return home as they’d planned once the interruption of his being a watcher again is over.

But for Giles it is more than an interruption. Being a watcher was always his calling and watching Buffy again – and, to his surprise, watching Faith – has engrossed him past the point of thinking about what he’ll do once the two girls – inevitably – no longer need his help. “Well” he manages, “I think we’ve still got a way to go.”

Ethan glances at him and sighs. “Of course you do.” He shifts, snuggling into Giles’ side. “Has it occurred to you that you’re not going to find answers about this – just more questions?”

“Yes. It has. But we have to try.” Tonight’s events seem to have brought the true scope of their research home to Buffy and Faith as well. Faith, for all she’d seemed nervous about the idea of being split, seemed merely grimly resigned in the presence of Buffy’s slayer half. The non-slayer half of Buffy though – who was very much the Buffy they all knew and loved except for the lack of physical prowess – had seemed unnerved as she watched her slayer half prowl, and only relaxed once they were rejoined. At first, Giles had assumed that was because the pure slayer was rather intimidating. Only when Buffy had stretched her newly strengthened muscles and murmured, “That’s better” had he realised her unease had been down to wanting that prowling warrior within her once again. Because, much as the slayer is a consistent presence throughout history, protecting humanity from all the darkness out there time and time again, she is also Buffy. A part of Buffy. And much as they’d always known that it was a different matter to see it demonstrated, to pick Buffy apart and piece her back together like that. Perhaps Ethan is right. Perhaps magic is best avoided in this situation.

“By the way” murmurs Ethan. “That thing you did, going after Toth? Promise me you won’t do that again.”

“Given that that was the last surviving member of the Tothric Clan, I feel confident making that promise” replies Giles, though he tightens his hold on Ethan before his partner can protest, and adds, “Sorry. I know what you mean. But I can’t promise not to fight demons, Eth. You know that.”
“Could you at least not be quite so reckless, then? You could have been killed.”

“He wasn’t interested in hurting me. He was after Buffy and Faith.”

“He was a demon, Rupert, what did he care?”

“Says the man who has demon customers and drinks in a demon bar.”

“Well I wouldn’t drink at Willy’s if we were back in London, would I?”

“No, you’d drink at a different demon bar” Giles replies. “And when are you going to stop holding that against me?”

For a moment, Ethan looks as though he’s on the verge of saying a lot that Giles doesn’t want to hear, especially not after such a long night, but all he comes out with is, “Just be careful, love.”

Giles kisses him. “I will. I promise.”
“How is your mother?” Giles asks Buffy as she and Faith arrive in the backroom of the Magic Box for training.

“She seems better” Buffy tells him. “But we’ve got a strict no stress policy going on so we brought Dawn along – she’s hanging with Willow and Ethan.”

“Ah. Well, I’m sure she’ll enjoy that.”

Faith smirks. “And they’ll just have to deal, right?” She shrugs. “Better them than Joyce.”

“Faith” Buffy mutters, her face a warning. For all she rarely has a positive word to say about her younger sister, she is defensive when Faith oversteps the line in that department.

Faith looks unconcerned but says no more, heads over to the weapons stand and selects a few axes.

Giles tells Buffy, “I understand if you’d like to miss training to look after her.”

“Yeah” says Buffy, “The thing about moms is they suck at being looked after. I figure she’ll actually rest more if she doesn’t have us crowding her.”

“I still say we should make this quick” Faith adds, coming over to join them. She is swinging an axe absentmindedly, and Giles takes a quick step back. Faith raises her eyebrows but sets it aside. She tells him, “And by the way, if you’ve got any old stuff you want us to dig up, maybe put it on hold for now.”

“Actually, I’ve put all my investigations into Sunnydale’s hidden artefacts on hold for now; your research into the slayer line takes priority.”

“Yeah” says Faith, glancing at Buffy, “About that. We’re going to need to take turns if Joyce gets worse. Separate training, solo patrols, all that.”

“But only if she gets worse” Buffy hastily adds. “Which she won’t. We’re just hypotheticalising.”

Faith offers her an appeasing nod before returning the axe to its case, but not before Giles has seen the solemn expression that she hides from Buffy.

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“Joyce had better be actually ill” mutters Ethan, “or why are we putting up with this?”

“She is” Willow whispers back, leaning across the table so he can hear her without Dawn overhearing. “I mean, she collapsed and everything. It must have been really scary for Dawn.”

A little chastened, Ethan says nothing and returns to keeping an eye on his stock, a necessity when Dawn is here. The child is incorrigibly curious about magic and has a horrible habit of picking things up and moving them around. Inevitably, she heads over to the table and leans over Willow’s shoulder to read the book in her hands. “What’s that?”

Willow glances worriedly at her. “The illustration? Um, that’s…that’s nothing.” She snaps the book shut.

Dawn glares, and folds her arms in a decidedly settling-in-for-an-argument sort of way. “I’m
fourteen now, Willow. I’m old enough learn about magic.”

Willow shakes her head. “Not this sort of magic.”

“It’s just history” Dawn reasons, “Buffy said you and Ethan only study history now.”

“Really? She said that?”

“Well not to me” Dawn admits. “But she said it and I can’t help it if I heard.” She reaches for the book. “So what is it?”

Willow places her hand on the book, pinning it to the table. “Sorry Dawn, it’s just not for kids.”

Ethan can’t help but grin as Willow realises her mistake a fraction of a second before Dawn, in that grating warning tone, replies, “I’m not a kid.” Nevertheless, he helps Willow out with, “You’re fourteen, Dawn. Which, last time I checked, makes you legally a child.”

She turns her sulky glare his way. “I bet you did magic when you were fourteen.”

“Well, I…”

“Did you?”

“Well. Not good magic, if that makes you feel any better.”

“You mean, like, black magic?”

“I mean like crap magic. I was too young to control it so it always went wrong. I couldn’t even levitate anything without it crashing back down and breaking.” Admittedly, that had been part of the attraction at the time.

“You should have floated feathers” supplies Dawn. “Like Willow did when she first started.”

“Which was when I was sixteen” Willow points out.

“Exactly” rejoins Ethan. “Dawn, we’ve been through this before: When you turn sixteen, I’ll start teaching you if you’re still interested and I sense any power worth honing.”

“How do you sense it?”

“I just will.” Ethan nods across the table. “So will Willow.”

“Absolutely” says Willow. “And you know, Dawnie, even if you’ve only got a little magic, we can build on it. If you still want to, I mean.”

“Obviously I’ll still want to” replies Dawn, “The sixth Harry Potter book will be out by then.”

“Oh Gods” mutters Ethan.

Dawn turns to him. “Is there at least a spell we can do to see if I have power?”

“Quite possibly” says Ethan, “but with your sister in the next room, I’d rather not incur her wrath by performing it.”

Dawn casts a grumpy look towards the closed backroom door. “She always ruins everything.” She turns away to examine a jar of newt eyes, which at least allows Willow to open the book again.
“Hello, love” Ethan kisses Rupert when he appears unexpectedly in the Magic Box, carrying, “What’s that?”

Rupert hands him a glowing orb. “That’s what I was hoping you could tell me. Buffy found it in a derelict factory last night and brought it over.”

Ethan turns the sphere over. “Well it’s pretty. We could probably invent a name for it and sell it as a decorative item.”

Rupert takes it back. “Do be serious, dear. Do you know what it is?”

“No a clue. Was it in a vamp nest?”

“No, apparently a security guard found it on the ground. Buffy had been slaying a vampire beforehand, so I suppose it might have dropped it.” Rupert looks up as Anya comes into view.

“Anya, I don’t suppose you have any idea what this is?”

Anya examines the orb. “Should I?”

“Ah” Rupert turns to Ethan. “In that case, I’ll stay here and research it. It could be something significant.”

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Whatever the orb is, something significant is apparently going on, if Buffy’s urgency when she enters later, followed by Faith, is anything to go by. By this time, Willow has arrived for her magic lesson and been roped into Rupert and Anya’s impromptu research party instead. Ethan has been left to deal with customers alone, and is seeing the last one out when the slayers enter. Joining them at the table, he lifts the orb – still glowing – and considers it while Buffy speaks. Fortunate that the place is empty since what she is speaking about is some new idea that her mother’s recent illness is supernatural. Not exactly a great advertisement for a magic shop, that. Not to mention, “It’s very rare for magic and sickness to be connected” Ethan tells her. Glancing at Willow, he adds, “Physical sickness, I mean. Other than bloodstone curses and few misadventures here and there, we’re talking two separate realms.”

“But he said they’d come at me through my family” Buffy tells him.

“Who?” asks Rupert.

“Some crazy guy she met at the hospital” Faith replies.

“I met him before that” says Buffy. She gestures to the orb in Ethan’s hands. “He’s the one who found this and he went crazy overnight.”
Ethan throws the orb. It hits Anya who jumps up with a defensive “Hey!”, letting it tumble onto the floor. It rolls to Buffy’s feet and she picks it up. “Guys” she says impatiently, “I had it on me all night and I’m fine.”

“So it’s not that that’s making your mom sick” Willow concludes, “But you think it’s something?”

“Exactly” says Buffy. She sets the orb on the table. “Whatever touched this guy, it made him see through what the rest of us are seeing.”

“A spell, you mean?” asks Ethan.

Willow frowns. “We’re under a spell?”

“We could be” Buffy argues. “Something that’s stopping any of us from noticing whatever’s hurting my mom.”

“She could just be sick” mutters Faith.

Buffy asks, “But what if she’s not?”

Faith straightens up a little. “Then we kill whatever’s doing it, use magic to bring it back and kill it again more slowly. But, B, she could just actually be sick with something with no ass to kick.”

“You don’t want to check?”

Faith turns to Rupert. “Is there a way to check?”

Rupert looks at Ethan. “A spell, perhaps?”

“Oh” says Willow, “What about that spell we used to find Parker when he was a weasel?”

“That could work” agrees Ethan.

“Or” says Anya, “If you want something stronger there’s that spell Cloutier invented.”

“Cloutier?” asks Rupert. “That would be the tirer la couverture, yes? It’s rather advanced.”

“I’ll manage” decides Buffy. “It’s for mom.”

“If you’re sure” Rupert stands up and heads to the bookshelf. “It will take a bit of preparation. You’ll have to go into quite a deep trance.” He glances at Buffy. “For an amateur to attempt it, it’s…”

“I can help her” Faith tells him. “Make sure she doesn’t sleepwalk out the house or anything. She’d have to do it in the house, right?”

“Yes” Rupert retrieves a book and begins to look up the spell. “But as for you helping, I’m afraid the ritual has to be done alone.” “Okay” says Buffy. She turns to Faith. “And one of us should patrol – it might be dark by the time I’m doing it if it takes a while to prepare.”

“You want us to try the other spell in the meantime?” asks Willow.

“Maybe” says Buffy, and Rupert, glancing up, adds, “Yes, that might be an idea. Buffy, assuming the trance works, you’ll be looking for any trace of the magic that’s affecting your mother. It could be, say a pair of hands choking her…’
“Or a mist around her” suggest Anya.

“Yes” Rupert continues. “So if you’re only able to make the trance last a short time, if Willow and Ethan have had look with this other spell…um, what’s it called, Ethan?”

“Quaerentibus lucem” Ethan supplies.

“Snappy” mutters Faith.

“Yes – well, Buffy, that could give you an idea of what to look for if the trance doesn’t work or time is short.”

“Absolutely” Buffy replies, “Whatever helps.”

“Definitely” adds Faith. “Listen, I got to get to work, but if this thing does have an ass? I’m first in line to kick it.”

“Second” corrects Buffy, but she smiles at the other slayer as she leaves, before turning back to Rupert. “Let’s get started. What do we need to do?”


“So…Who’s going to actually eat the pellet?” asks Willow as they approach the Summers’ front door.

Ethan and Buffy pause. Ethan asks, “Um, rock, paper, scissors?”

“Okay” Willow closes her fist and turns to face him. After three beats, Ethan’s scissors cut Willow’s paper. Willow asks, “Okay, but were we playing to eat the pellet or not eat the pellet?”

“Guys” Buffy asks, “Can we just hurry?”

“Sorry Buffy” says Willow.

“Here” Ethan takes the pellet from his pocket. “I don’t mind.”

Willow and Buffy watch as he forces the thing down. It is not more than a moment or two before the world goes grey, illuminated only by Willow’s luminescence. Her power has grown since they last did this. It’s like standing next to a bonfire that gives off, not heat exactly, but the tingling sensation of having just touched scalding water, that second before the pain hits.

“Ready?” asks Buffy, as he turns to find she is as blurred as any other person would be, albeit slightly green.

Beyond her, the Summers’ home is shrouded in green light. Ethan frowns at it, takes a moment to compare it to the neighbouring buildings. Looking closely, he can see the faintest green shimmer on them, too, but it’s nothing like the forest shades lingering on Buffy’s home.

“What is it?” Buffy asks.

“Ethan?” adds Willow, “Is it in there?”

“Yes” Ethan murmurs. He takes a step towards the house, but Buffy overtakes him, hurries to the front door with green still around her head, like glitter in her hair. Ethan draws closer to it, stumbling slightly on the path, which is faded enough to be practically invisible. Willow catches his arm and supports him as he steps closer to Buffy.
Yes, it is the same green light as whatever is making the house look more like a barrow. All around her like a halo. How had he missed this before? Is whatever spell this is so strong that it repels even a subtle reveal?

“Ethan?” Buffy’s voice. “You’re getting a little up close and personal there.”

“Sorry” Ethan draws back.

“What is it?” Buffy asks again.

“I’m not sure. But there’s something there.”

Buffy opens the front door and leads them inside. Here the green is stronger than ever, like they’ve stepped into a jungle. Before now, Ethan had associated this spell with grey, interrupted here and there with bursts of magic. Now, the world is emerald. He doesn’t move because the magic is so overwhelming, he knows he’d crash into something.

Somewhere off to the side, Buffy is talking to Joyce. Ethan peers among the green, but can’t make her out.

“Ethan?” murmurs Willow. She tugs him deeper into the forest and he hears the door shut behind them.

“Take me to Joyce” he whispers.

Willow guides him, haltingly, to what he estimates to be the living room.

“Ethan?” Joyce’s voice drifts up from what could be the sofa. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine” he tells her, finally locating her. “Just waiting for a spell to wear off.”

“A spell? Nothing’s happening, I hope?”

“It’s nothing to worry about” Willow reassures her. “Just a mix up in the shop; it’ll wear off soon.”

Her own radiance competes with the green. Ethan suspects the latter would otherwise be beautiful, but the sunlight-sphere that is Willow renders it dank, almost swamp like, in comparison. Ethan thinks of serpents and crocodiles, and other green things he wouldn’t want to come across, as Willow steers him into a chair.

“Well, if you’re sure” Joyce is saying. “Can I get you anything? Coffee, tea?”

“I’ll do that” says Buffy. “You’re resting, remember?” She may or may not get up and leave the room and Joyce and Willow may or may not make polite conversation in her absence or presence: With the spell intensifying, Ethan can’t tell. Whatever magic is infecting the house, it is powerful, and as his own spell reveals more and more of it, everyone other than Willow is blending in with the overwhelming colour of the magic. His own hands, when he looks down, trail tendrils of green light, the same light that snakes its way around his shoulders, around his legs… Ethan runs his hands through his hair, hoping to keep it from claiming his head, even though, of course, it doesn’t work like that. His own red magic isn’t even visible: he is as deep under the spell as anyone or the green light wouldn’t coat him like this. Even Willow, presumably, is under it, though with her power visible, it is hard to tell. Except…

Gods, except that, as Ethan stares, even Willow’s white light starts to take on a greenish tint. When his own revealing spell reaches its peak, he realises, he won’t be able to see anything but green. The world will be a block of it.
“Ethan?” Joyce’s hand is on his. He can tell it’s her hand because it is rougher than Willow’s, the nail that brushes his knuckle slightly longer, varnished. He can’t see her. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

From somewhere to the side of her, Buffy’s voice speaks: “Maybe you need some air.”

Ethan finds himself hoisted upright in that unceremonial way that only slayer-strength can achieve.

“What is it?” Buffy asks, as soon as they are in what Ethan estimates to be the hallway. “Tell me.”

Ethan turns back towards Willow’s magic, still visible through what must be the doorway. It is definitely greenish now, as though her power has been covered in moss. Or started to decay. “Is Joyce in there?”

“Yeah” Buffy keeps her voice low. “She’s on the couch.”

Ethan can’t see the couch. He can’t see Joyce. She is no more or less visible than Buffy or – he notes, looking down – his own body. But there is something… Ethan turns around, looks up. Above him, the green is deeper. Or rather, there are sparkling dots, twinkling like emeralds on green velvet. He takes a step towards one and crashes into the stairs.

“Ethan!” Buffy manages to sound simultaneously annoyed and concerned as she lifts him back to his feet.

“What is that?” Ethan asks, pointing at the gem in what he realises now is the wall.

“That’s just a photo” Buffy tells him. “Ethan, you’re supposed to be focusing on my mom.”

“It’s not your mum.” Ethan reaches for the banister, finds it after a few attempts. Starts to climb.

Upstairs, he can make out a rectangle. Vertical, a little more than man height. A door, then. Apparently open, it lets out a steady stream of sparkling green light that flows like enchanted seawater from some unseen point and on, to the rest of the house, its inhabitants, the wider world. Whatever is in there, it is emitting a magic more ancient than Ethan – or possibly anyone – has ever known. So Ethan is cautious as he steps inside.

Inside, Ethan thinks, must be what the centre of the sun looks like, if the sun was green. Distantly, it occurs to him that he may or may not be blind when this is done, but it honestly doesn’t seem to be his most pressing concern. In front of him is something that is beyond form or age, or any other such human limitations. Even Janus, deep in Ethan’s mind, recoils from its power.

“Ethan?” it asks in Dawn’s voice. “Who said you could come in my room?”

Ethan faints.

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“Ethan?” Buffy is shaking him, none too gently. For a moment, Ethan is annoyed, but then he remembers what he was doing before this unscheduled loss of consciousness, and the terror kicks in. His eyes snap open.

Above him peer Joyce, Buffy, Willow…and Dawn. Ethan sits up and scrambles away from her.

Dawn’s features shift into what could only be called worry if it was on a human face. “Are you okay?”
“Yes” Whatever she wants to hear, he decides. Probably best to treat the child the way one would treat an A-bomb if it was prone to teenage mood swings. Or are the teenage mood swings part of some act?

“Has the spell worn off?” Buffy asks.

“Yes. Um.” Ethan glances at Dawn. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Are you sure?” Willow frowns. “Because it seemed like it was working.”

“Working?” asks Joyce, “I thought it was just a mix up?”

“Oh” says Buffy, “Yeah. A mix up.” To Ethan, she tries, “How about you just describe what happened?”

“Do you know why you fainted?” asks Willow.

Joyce asks, “Should I call Rupert?”

“Yes” answers Ethan automatically, because right now he needs Rupert the way Dawn needs – or pretends to need – the teddy that he can now see through the open doorway, on her bed, in her viscously mundane bedroom. But then he remembers that if Rupert comes here, he’ll be in the same building as Dawn. Much as the spell has already got to all of them, Ethan really doesn’t want Rupert closer to…to it, than he already has been. “I mean…Um. Excuse me.” Getting to his feet, he makes his way down the stairs and out the house.

“Whoa!” Buffy catches up with him because of course she does. “Ethan, what is it? What did you see?”

Glancing back at the house (it had been so smothered in green, like a crouching rock covered with seaweed) Ethan checks that Willow, Joyce and, most importantly, Dawn didn’t follow. Finding they are alone, he admits, “Your mother’s fine. Or at least, it’s not magic. Not centred on her, at least.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s Dawn.”

Buffy stares. “It’s after Dawn now too?”

“I” Ethan pauses. How to say this? What is this, even? And how will Buffy take it? “I’m not sure” he admits. “But the magic was centred on her.”

Buffy’s frown deepens. “So it’s infected Dawn too? She’s going to get sick?”

“No, that’s not what it was.”

“Then what is it?”

“She… It’s coming from her.”

Buffy grips his arm. “Dawn’s casting a spell? To hurt our mother?”

“No!” Ethan frees himself from her grasp. “You don’t understand. She’s not casting the spell. She is the spell.”
“I don’t understand” states Buffy sometime later, once she, Ethan, Giles and Faith are gathered in Giles and Ethan’s flat.

“Nor do I” admits Giles. “All this time and no-one realised she was such a powerful witch? Even without training, you’d think it would come out eventually.”

“It’s not like that.” Ethan sits apart from the others, staring down at his hands. Whatever he saw, it scared him. Giles goes over and wraps an arm around him. “Then what is it?”

“It’s not her power” Ethan explains. “She didn’t cast the spell –”

“– she is the spell” cuts in Buffy. “Yeah, you said. And it didn’t make sense then either.” At their blank stares, she reasons, “She’s my sister. She’s not a spell or a witch, or…She’s just Dawn.” Looking at Ethan, she concludes, “Your spell probably just went wrong.”

“Yeah” says Faith. “Or you just didn’t know what the vision or whatever meant. Like Giles said, we’d know if Dawn was some mystic power thing.”

“That isn’t quite what I said” says Giles, though he can see the girl’s point. Dawn has always been a perfectly ordinary child. For all Ethan seems convinced otherwise, something affecting her would seem to make more sense than her affecting everything else. “I need to research this orb” he decides. “If it’s connected to all this, it could give us some clues. Meanwhile, Buffy, you should try the tirer la couverture, see if it gives us a new perspective.”

“What about me?” asks Faith. “And if you say patrol, I’ll kill you.”

“You stay with mom” Buffy replies, before Giles can reprimand the second slayer. “Don’t let her out of your sight. Not until we figure this thing out.”

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“Here” Giles hands the book he’s been reading to Ethan, who reads over the indicated passage with a frown. “Ancient primordial evil? Any idea which ancient primordial evil?”

“No idea, but it seems to be nameless. Which never bodes well.”

Ethan shudders. Then, a thought apparently occurring, he asks, “Could it be Dawn?”

“She has a name” Giles points out. “And a birth certificate.” Clearly, Ethan saw something overwhelming when he entered the Summers’ home, but Giles isn’t sure they should all blithely assume that Dawn is anything other than human just yet. At the very least, they need more proof than spell-induced green light.

“I suppose so” says Ethan, looking unconvinced. “It wouldn’t be the first time something ancient’s reinvented itself though, would it?”

“You’ve known her since she was ten years old, love.”

“I’m not saying I know what’s going on, Rupert, just that Dawn’s something…” Ethan’s eyes widen. “Could she be something this evil is after?”

Giles considers this with growing concern, then reaches for the phone.

It rings quite a few times before Buffy answers. “What?”
“Buffy” Giles says, “I’m glad I caught you. We’ve found out what this orb is.” He describes the Dagon Sphere as succinctly as he can, before asking, “How did the trance go?”

“Ethan was right” Buffy replies grimly. “There’s nothing on mom. It’s all centred on Dawn.”

“Where is she now?”

“With Faith.” Buffy pauses, before saying, “She kept zoning in and out, Giles. Like she wasn’t really there.”


“Dawn’s an illusion?” Buffy’s voice masks fear with incredulity.

“Well, no” replies Giles, because it is beyond him why anyone would seek to trick the world into thinking a teenage girl who isn’t there is. “But possibly…” He draws a deep breath, realising how much this idea will horrify her “But it could possibly be that something – this ancient evil perhaps – has, um…taken Dawn off somewhere and replaced her with this spell.”

From the clatter on the other end, it seems Buffy almost drops the phone. “What? Giles – what is this thing? Where will it have taken her?”

“I’m not sure, but –”

“How long has it had her?!”

“Buffy, we’ll find her. Ethan is doing a location spell right now.” Giles glances at Ethan, who takes the hint, and stands up, heads over to the bookshelf for a map.

“Tell him to hurry” Buffy replies. “And call Faith the minute you find anything. In the meantime, I’m going to check out this factory. Whoever planted the Dagon Sphere must have answers.”

“Alright. But be careful, won’t you? It could be dangerous.”

“Giles, the only thing in danger is whatever’s taken my sister.” Buffy hangs up. Putting the phone down in his turn, Giles watches Ethan spread the map on the hastily cleared coffee table, along with a few other items. Ethan asks, “Who are we looking for?”

“Dawn” Giles tells him. Ethan looks up sharply, so he adds, “We could be dealing with a doppelgänger.”

Nodding, Ethan focuses on the magic. Giles waits quietly, knowing better than to disturb him. Soon, a little dot – green – appears on the map. “I don’t understand” says Giles, leaning forward to study it, “It says she’s at home.”

“So the Dawn at home is the real one?” Ethan stares at the dot as it fades.

“She’s what the spell recognises as Dawn” Giles tells him. “Whether that’s the real one depends rather on exactly how strong this illusion is.”

“Or if there is a real one” adds Ethan grimly.
Giles can barely admit it even to himself, but it does cross his mind that if someone were to go upstairs and smother the child – the energy, the key – in her sleep, some great and as yet unspecified danger will never descend. Just as quickly as the thought arrives, it passes. The monks have done their job well: this is an innocent, wherever she has come from.

Though there is a limit to that. If he didn’t believe that even innocence must make way at times for the greater good, he wouldn’t be a watcher.

“…and not Faith either” Buffy is saying. At Giles’ stare, she elaborates, “I told her your theory was right and the real Dawn was a hostage somewhere and it’s all better now except this demon gal wants her back.”

“You don’t think Faith might pick up on Dawn not remembering being captured?”

“I told her the magic wiped Dawn’s memory and I didn’t want her told.” Buffy smiles sadly. “See? I thought of everything.”

“Except the possibility of trusting Faith with the truth, apparently” Giles points out gently.

Buffy looks down at her interlocked hands. “I know. It’s not that I don’t trust her, Giles, it’s just… This is Dawn, you know? It’s a family thing.”

“It will get bigger than that.”

“I know.”

“Would you like me to tell Faith? Or be there when you do?”

Buffy draws back a little. “I don’t know.”

“Buffy, Faith is a slayer too. She has the same duty to –”

“No, she doesn’t. Dawn’s my sister.”

Giles nods, not in agreement (or perhaps partly in agreement because until tonight that seemed so transparently true) but in understanding. “What about Ethan?” he asks. The idea of keeping such a secret from his lover is daunting.

Buffy seems to consider this. “I guess I can’t tell you to lie to him.”

“Aside from anything else, Buffy, it seems a rather complex lie to keep track of. The whole charade could collapse if he and Faith compared notes.”

“Plus he’s never needed a how not to be evil intervention” Buffy replies.

“Faith has proved herself a changed person since her return.”

“I know. But this is different. This is Dawn. And Dawn’s not her sister, and if it comes down to it… I just need time, Giles, okay?”

“Alright.” Giles promises. “But in the meantime, I can tell Ethan?”
“Sure. Just don’t let him tell the others. I need to get my own head around it first.”

Giles leaves the Summers’ house feeling the weight of his responsibilities as never before. And if he feels like that, Lord knows how Buffy feels.

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Ethan, who had reassured Giles that he would stay awake until he returned, is sound asleep on the sofa. Reluctantly waking him, Giles puts off the inevitable by making cocoa. Then, sitting down and with Ethan clearly waiting for him to speak, Giles finds himself asking, “That Halloween that they all came to your shop, what was Dawn?”

Ethan frowns. “What on earth makes you ask that?”

“Oh just…a conversation today, made me wonder.”

“She was a superhero. A generic one, cape and mask, not something from a comic book.”

That makes sense, Giles decides. Understandable that Dawn should want to be the hero for a change.

Except that it doesn’t make sense at all because Dawn hadn’t existed then.

Such awesomely powerful magic, to change the way so many countless people perceive reality. Buffy, her parents, her friends, Dawn’s friends and teachers. Someone somewhere must remember recording the birth. A paediatrician must recall treating the child at some point. The man who comes to the school to take the photos for the year books, he must believe he’s met Dawn. Every neighbour on her street must be under the impression they’ve known her for years. This is magic on such a monstrous scale that Giles shudders to think why it should be necessary. What is that thing hidden like a cuckoo in Buffy’s home?

“Rupert?” Ethan cuts through alarm that rises like a mist if Giles concentrates on it. “What’s going on?”

Giles tells him everything. When he’s finished, Ethan’s face has taken on an expression of awe. “The key? Dawn?”

“You know about it?”

Ethan shakes his head. “Only that it’s holy. Its existence is a catalyst for chaos.”

“That would explain the amount Dawn’s broken in your shop over the years.” As he says it, Giles realises Dawn hasn’t even existed for years. Constantly baffling, this whole thing. “Do you know what this key is for, who created it?” he asks Ethan before an unpalatable thought occurs. “It wasn’t Janus, was it?”

“Wouldn’t put it past him.” Ethan shrugs, before catching Giles’ expression and saying, “Oh come on, Rupert – with a million Gods creating a trillion miracles a millennia, how do you expect me to know?” He smiles appeasingly and sips his cocoa. He is, Giles notes, remarkably calm about the whole thing. Giles supposes Ethan has had more experience than any of them, given his line of work, especially back in London, of magic bending the very fabric of reality. Now that they know Dawn herself isn’t dangerous (Do they know that, a part of Giles thinks), Ethan seems almost cheerful. “It’s quite some magic, isn’t it?” he comments. “They changed practically everything.”

Giles glares at him. “I’m not sure that’s the part to focus on.”
“How can we not?” asks Ethan. “It’ll be worse for the children, you know – we’ve had just a fraction of our memories meddled with, but they’re younger. Buffy can’t trust anything she remembers since she’s – what, six – to be unaffected.”

It is true, Giles realises with a fresh wave of, not horror, exactly, because this is Dawn. Perhaps the demise of the monks, much as it leaves them with unanswered questions, at least saves Buffy from having to protect men who used her entire experience of the world as a mere screen to hide their secrets behind. Entirely possible, he realises, that Buffy’s personality was partly shaped by being an only child, that her relationship with her parents was different before to how it is now. She could be an entirely different person, whoever she was before the monks’ spell effectively murdered unremembered. The Buffy they are left with seems not to have fully comprehended the enormity of the monks’ violation and he has no plans to tell her.

Ethan is saying, “What I’d like to know is how did these holy men manage to cook up such a convincing teenage girl? That’s rather worrying in itself when one thinks about it.”

“Rather less worrying than the fact that a ferociously powerful demon is after Dawn” Giles tells him. “We’re going to need to reinforce all the wards.”

“Of course”

“Including the ones at the shop: I’d like for no demons to be able to enter.”

“Oh, come on Rupert! Nothing that intends harm can enter. But I’d quite like for the ones who intend to make purchases to be able to get in.”

“What if this demon woman intends no harm in the shop? What if she just wants a look at Dawn?” Ethan shrugs. “I could bar Dawn.”

“That’s hardly fair, Ethan.”

“Well, she’s broken enough!” Ethan takes in the look Giles is giving him and relents. “Alright, fine. I’ll punish all my demon customers. But you realise this means I’ll have to go to them more?”

“I hope you won’t.”

“Do you? Because the way I see it, I can’t burn all my bridges. You’ll be needing information on this demon woman sooner or later.”

*****

If only Rupert hadn’t been in the shop, researching this demon woman with Buffy, Faith and Xander when the brutish young man mocked the idea of turning people into frogs, Ethan might have provided a demonstration. As it is, he catches Rupert’s eye at the last moment and takes a reluctant step away, instead asking the youth, “Are you actually intending to buy anything? Because hilarious as I’m sure this for you, we’re a little busy” To Rupert, stepping fractionally closer, he adds, “You realise my demon customers are all polite, yes?”

“But are they all barred yet?” asks Rupert in an undertone.

“As of this morning” Ethan confirms, heavy hearted. He watches the young representative from the human race continue to not take the hint that the scoobies don’t want to talk to him. Only the entrance of Willow and Tara refocuses his attention.
It seems Tara got the brains of the family. Well, and the looks. Ethan would feel a little sorry for her brother receiving such a genetic short straw were it not for the fact that Tara is plainly terrified of him.

Willow and her young friends don’t seem to notice. But Faith does. When old man Maclay enters with some miscellaneous but pretty cousin, Ethan sees the second slayer’s glare intensify. Carefully, he tugs a few extra books from a nearby shelf and sets them on the table next to Faith. They are not relevant to the research but their appearance distracts her a little.

“This is Mr Rayne” Tara tells her father as Ethan turns around. “He runs the shop, and this is Mr Giles, his – err – his friend.”

Ethan flinches. Rupert, with a deliberate deafness born of many a council gathering, smiles politely and greets Mr Maclay.

The greeting is returned, curtly. As Mr Maclay conducts an oddly formal exchange with his daughter, Ethan toys with the idea of stepping over to Rupert and giving him an all-out snog. He only holds back out of some vague fear of somehow inadvertently outing a clearly closeted Tara, not to mention an awareness that Rupert might not co-operate for the same reason.

Expertly brushing aside any conversation about her relatives – one might assume this isn’t her first time deflecting questions – Tara sits down once her family have left to help with the research. Willow, clearly a little hurt, puts a brave face on it, and Buffy and Xander follow her lead. Ethan follows Faith’s lead by asking and saying nothing, and Rupert is his usual, quiet, reassuring self. Tara is restless, and when Ethan goes into the backroom to make them all tea, she follows.

“I’m sorry” she says, hovering out of arm’s reach (how, Ethan wonders, has he never noticed before that she always stands just a little out of arm’s reach?) “About, um, I mean, about calling Mr Giles y-your –”

“Oh don’t worry about that” Ethan replies, turning back to the tea preparation. “We’re all friends here.”

“I-I am worried. Because you’re upset.”

Ethan decides against trying to hide it (never a strength of his) but finally replies, “You know why I’m upset? Because it’s so rare now. It never used to bother me: it just meant we were safe. No-one beats you up for having a friend, do they?”

It is Tara’s turn to flinch. Forcing his tone into something gentler, Ethan asks, “You don’t think they’d take it well?” She actually smiles, like he’s asked whether they’d be happy with her breeding dragons in the living room instead of whether they’d accept her for who she is. “It’s n-not an option” she tells him.

Ethan considers the girl. Perhaps her nerves around the brother and – differently but still there – the father were merely a panic about trying to hide something she then seemed to successfully hide. But what if there’s more to it than that? Not sure that he wants an answer (what would he say? This is really something Rupert would be better at), Ethan asks, “What else don’t they take well?”

Tara looks sharply at him for a moment, before stepping away (two arms’ lengths now, out of lunging range) and says, “Um, actually I, um… I need to g-go. I just remembered I h-have an assignment.” She hurries out the room and, after some garbled explanation to Willow, the shop as well. Ethan sighs and tips one of the mugs of tea down the sink.
“What I don’t get” says Faith, “is how come this chick’s still after Dawn.”

Giles and Buffy look at her uneasily. They are alone now, Willow having taken herself off unhappily quite soon after Tara, and Xander having accompanied her, Giles suspects, to escape the research. This had apparently upset Anya, who elected not to stay after her shift had ended, and Ethan, somewhat pointedly, had left for Willy’s Place to deliver an order to a demon who can no longer pick it up. That leaves only Giles and the slayers to carry out the inevitably fruitless research and hear Faith’s musings. “Faith” Giles begins awkwardly, “This demon woman threatened Dawn directly.”

“Yeah” says Faith, “But why?” Turning to Buffy she adds, “Cause you said it was a trap to get you over there, so isn’t she really after you? Using Dawn didn’t work, so she’ll probably just leave her alone now.”

“She said she’d get Dawn back” Buffy replies, not meeting the other slayer’s eyes.

“What, that whole revenge threat? Buffy, she’ll probably just come after you; you don’t need to worry about Dawnie. I mean, you kinda do, but not specifically.”

Giles carefully sets aside the book in front of him. “Buffy” he says, hoping that will be hint enough. Buffy looks at him, fear and resignation in her eyes. It is Faith who answers: “What’s going on?”

Reluctantly, Buffy turns to her. “Faith, she is very specifically after Dawn. She said so.”

“Yeah, okay. But why? Why Dawn? If her whole plan of kidnapping the kid was to get you to her, she’ll probably just go with whatever plan B works. It might not involve Dawn.” Seeing Buffy’s expression, Faith adds, “Don’t just worry about Dawn, okay? Worry about whoever this bitch is and how come she she’s so strong.”

“Faith” Buffy sighs and selects another book. “Can you just trust me on this?”

“Sure” Faith shrugs. “Just don’t be a big sister when you kind of need to be a slayer is all I’m saying.”

“Right.” Buffy continues to stare at her book, but her eyes aren’t moving.

“Buffy” Giles stands. “A word?”

“What’s going on?” demands Faith, as Buffy rises to follow Giles into the training room at the back.

“Just one moment” Giles tells her.

As soon as they are alone, he says, “We need to tell her, Buffy.”

For a moment, it looks as though Buffy will disagree outright. But then she wilts a little and says, “I’m not sure, Giles.”

“Not sure about what, exactly?” Giles asks. “We agreed to trust Faith when we welcomed her back.”

“With slaying, yeah! But this is a family thing.”
“One that happens to intersect with both your duties as slayers” Giles points out. “Not to mention, you already trust her with Dawn: She lives in your house.”

“But this is different! This could be life or death!”

“Life or death, huh?” A hollow voice sounds from the doorway. Faith adds, “Then maybe you better tell me about it.”

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Faith is calm as Buffy, haltingly, unfolds the real story of her encounter at the factory. When the truth is laid out like a glass wall between them, Faith concludes, “So you just decided not to trust me? I can be the muscle but I can’t be told what the hell’s going on?”

“No-one knows except the three of us” Buffy tells her. “Well, and Ethan. I haven’t even told mom and you can’t either.”

“Right” says Faith, drawing back a little, “because she’s got enough going on, and not the others because who cares. But I’m a slayer too – this is my business. When were you planning on telling me? Right before I went up against demon gal? Never?” Faith turns her glare on Giles. “And you – you’re supposed to be my watcher! Where’d you get off not even telling me what we’re up against?”

“Faith, he wanted to tell you” Buffy interjects, “I wouldn’t let him because I needed time to get my head around my sister being –”

“But she’s not your sister” states Faith.

Buffy makes a there-you-go gesture. “See, this is what I was afraid of.”

Faith retorts, “Or maybe it was what you needed to hear!”

“Faith” Giles tries, “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you right away, but now that you know –”

“What? Now I know we can be all paly? Yeah, I don’t think so. You either trust me or you don’t.”

“Faith” says Buffy, “It wasn’t like that. It’s just, this is Dawn. She is my sister, wherever she’s come from and –”

“And she’s also a mean piece of primal energy mojo that some shit-strong demon psycho wants to get hold of, and you’re happy throwing me at that, but actually telling me the truth, that’s going too far, am I right?”

“No” Buffy doesn’t break eye contact. “Definitely not right about that. I just needed time to get my head around the family stuff.”

“And if you needed me to fight demon-lady in the meantime before I even knew what’s what, so be it?”

“No”

“Faith” Giles puts in, “The important thing is you know now.” He risks stepping slightly between the two slayers. “Now we can face this threat together.”

Faith steps back, looking him up and down. “Oh, so now there’s a together.”
Buffy snaps, “If you’re not going to help, there’s no point you knowing!”

“I’d be happier about helping if you’d just told me the truth from the start!”

Giles tries, “This isn’t an ideal situation, Faith – for any of us. But as you’ve said, you are a slayer. Your duty is to –”

“And now you’re going to tell me about my duty! It was your duty to tell me!” Faith snorts out a bitter laugh. “I guess you never really did leave the council, did you?”

“Faith” Buffy steps around Giles, closer to the other slayer. “I’m sorry: I should have told you.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t.” Faith takes a step back. “I’ll help you stop this demon chick. But don’t expect me to act along with this whole Dawn’s still your sister shit. You can’t cut me out of this ‘family stuff’ and expect me to hop back into it when it suits you.”

“Will you tell her?” Buffy looks aghast, as well she might.

Faith replies, “No, but only because that’ll just add to the mind fuckery.”

“None of this is Dawn’s fault” Giles tells her. “One thing that is clear, is that she’s an innocent.”

Buffy adds, “And it’s our duty to keep her safe.”

“No” says Faith, “It’s our duty to stop demon lady getting hold of the key. Dawn’s just the packaging.”

Buffy flinches. “Faith, don’t.”

“What? She’s not my sister. Hell, she’s not even your sister, but I’m not going to lose sleep over that, am I? I’m just some stranger who lives in your house.” Faith exits, slamming the door behind her with enough force to rattle a few daggers from their hooks.

“Well” says Buffy into the silence. “That could have gone better.”

*****

Ethan finds it easier to interact with Dawn post-revelation about the nature of her existence than he’d envisioned. It stands to reason that an instrument of Chaos would make a likable child, and her ignorance of the matter forces their interactions into a semblance of normality. She badgers him with questions about magic just as she always has (except not really) and eventually follows Buffy’s instruction that she sit down and help with research with an eye roll that is just as typical of her now as it is in all Ethan’s false memories.

Faith is cold towards her, but then, she is cold towards Buffy too. Ethan judges it best to speak to the slayers as little as possible tonight.

Rupert opens the meeting, which is essentially a summary of the nothing they know about the demon woman Buffy encountered, and Ethan tries to school his face into neutral when Rupert describes the key as mystical energy that has been hidden, without mentioning that, by the way, it’s Dawn. In particular, he is careful not to look at Dawn throughout, a task that is made more difficult when she nudges him and slides a scrap of paper with a noughts and crosses grid his way. She has already filled the central square with a little O and he wonders again at the power of the monks’ spell: she is so human, right down to noughts and crosses. He adds his own X to a corner square.
Then, briefly, there is a moment of confusion, and Rupert stops talking. Everyone blinks at each other. Thinking they’ve been caught not giving their full attention, Ethan covers the scrap of paper and smiles appeasingly. But it’s not that. It is, he realises, magic. The taste of magic, recently cast, in the air. Probably some of his stock is reacting to whatever it’s next to, or responding to some alignment in the stars. No harm done, though – Ethan looks around to find everything still in its place and nothing nasty seems to have been summoned. Rupert has found his lost thread and resumed. Dawn places an O next to the X.

Meeting concluded, they resume research. The books stacked on the table have been mined for information and found lacking, so there is much scrapping of chairs and toing and throwing as everyone searches for other volumes that may offer insight. There is some noise outside and Willow goes to answer it, is greeted by nothing. Perhaps they’re all a little paranoid. Willow returns to the bookshelf and continues stacking relevant tomes in Ethan’s waiting arms. She nods to the table, where Faith is uncharacteristically studious, using her book as a shield against conversation with Buffy and ignoring Dawn’s prattle as the latter flits about. “You know if something’s happened between them?”

“No” says Ethan, though he happens to know that the second slayer was initiated into the elite circle of Those In The Know this afternoon, and didn’t accept the dubious honour graciously. “Probably some slayer thing.”

Willow scowls. “Something I’m not a part of then.”

“You wouldn’t want to be.”

“I guess not. I guess I’m just a little off today because of the whole it turns out Tara’s still in the closet with her family thing.”

“She’ll have her reasons, you know.”

“I know. And I’m trying to be supportive but it still kind of sucks that they don’t know about me.”

“Seeing her face when they walked in, I’d say you should be happy they don’t know about you in the same way you’re happy this demon woman doesn’t know about you.”

Willow frowns. “What do you mean?”

And that is the moment the wards are activated by something trying to get inside. Willow and Ethan both feel it; a skin-crawling sensation of a magical barrier resisting a breech. Something screams just the wrong side of the range of human hearing. Across the room, Rupert gasps. Willow yelps, “What the jeepers is that?”

“The wards.” Ethan finds he has dropped all the books. He bends to gather them up, as Buffy and Faith spring into action. Buffy pulls Dawn aside and, after a moment of confusion, has her climb the stairs to the restricted section. Ethan feels obliged to call up, “Dawn, don’t touch anything up there, I mean it!”

Rupert, emerging from the backroom and handing something complicated and pointy to Faith, asks, “How long will the barrier hold?”

“Depends if they have counter spells” Ethan tells him.

“Well, we can counter the counter spells” reasons Willow. She joins Anya behind the till, starts to select items from the shelves while Anya creates a little barricade of protective talismans. Ethan chooses one himself and heads for the ladder with it. Behind him, Xander says, “I don’t see
Well it can’t get in” replies Ethan, turning at the base of the ladder. He finds Xander is peering outside, and adds, “Oh. Maybe it was just one of my regulars.”

“A demon” concludes Buffy.

“Well, yes, but hardly a ferocious one if it’s just buggered off.”

Rupert joins Xander at the window, but pulls the boy back as a rather threatening noise permeates the room.

“Do your regulars all growl like that?” asks Xander,

“Well, no” Ethan frowns and climbs the ladder, leaving the others to decide what to do.

Dawn is moving things around up here, which makes whatever is lurking outside the second least dangerous thing in play. Ethan tells her, “Don’t do that. There’s things up here that could melt your hand off.”

Dawn’s hand snaps back from the shelf, closes around the talisman that Ethan places in her hand. “What is it?”

“Something to keep you safe” Ethan pulls a chalk from his pocket. “Unless whatever’s out there is too strong for it or happens to be a gnarl. But really, what are chances?” He kneels and draws a circle around the girl. “I don’t think another barrier will sit well with all the energies up here, but stay inside the circle and you should be alright.” He adds runes to the curving chalk line.

Dawn asks, “It can’t get in anyway, right?”

“Not technically. I’m just covering our bases.” Something old, was all they’d found out. Too old to be subject to a barrier spell? Almost certainly not, not unless this demon woman views the Master as an infant. But knowing their luck, and knowing that the key is unlikely to open the door to the land of kittens, Ethan is taking no chances.

Dawn asks, “Shouldn’t the others get a circle too? Why’s it only big enough for me?”

“Because you’re the only child. Now, just…sit tight, I suppose.” Ethan retreats, as Dawn calls after him, “Don’t you at least want to hide up here?”, a question he can’t answer because the answer is, I’m not hiding with you because it’s probably you they’re after.

Downstairs, the slayers are at the open doorway, weapons raised, apparently trying to locate the source of the growling out in the street. Anya greets Ethan with, “We’ve got invisible demons.”

“Oh, joy.”

“I tried a reveal spell, but it wouldn’t work. Something’s blocking it.”

Rupert adds, “Probably whatever’s made them invisible in the first place.” To the slayers, he asks, “Any idea yet how many there are?”

“More than three” answers Buffy, and Faith says, “I’m getting out there.”

“Faith, wait –” Buffy begins, but Faith is already charging the invisible enemy with an impromptu battle cry. Buffy mutters, “Or not” Turning to Rupert and Ethan, she says, “Guard Dawn” before running after Faith. The growling beyond the wards intensify. Everyone flinches as Buffy and
Faith are thrown into the air in quick succession, hit the pavement hard. They right themselves quickly, but there is only so well anyone can do in a fight when their opponent is invisible. Those remaining in the shop eye each other nervously.

“Why just Dawn?” wonders Anya.

“Dawn’s a kid, Ahn” murmurs Xander, but he looks puzzled. Puzzlement is mirrored on Willow’s face as she says, “But we’ve got the wards. Dawn will be fine.”

Ethan sends a knowing glance Rupert’s way but his partner doesn’t return it – because he is halfway to the door and the fighting beyond.

“Rupert, get back here!”

“I have to help them, Ethan” Rupert picks up an enchanted axe from a display case as he passes it. “They’re outnumbered.” He pauses and meets Ethan’s eyes, glances subtly but meaningfully to the ladder up to the restricted section.

Ethan shakes his head. “No. No, you stay here.”

“They need help, Eth” Rupert turns away and steps out the door.

“He’s right” says Xander as Rupert disappears from sight. He heads for the backroom. “I’ll go round the alleyway – element of surprise.”

Anya tries to grab at him. “What do you think they’ll be surprised by? How breakable you are?”

He shrugs her off. “I have to try, Anya.”

Willow nods. “Absolutely. I’ll…oh, the reykhalishu hex!” Grabbing a few items from a shelf, she runs out into the night.

“Great!” Anya exclaims as Xander also disappears. “Now they’re going to die and we’re going to be trapped here unless the wards wear out and if they do, we get to be eaten by invisible demons!”

“They won’t get in, will they?” pipes up Dawn from above.

“Dawn” Ethan calls up, because her voice is far too close, “Stay inside the circle!” He and Anya both flinch as a particularly loud crash sounds outside. Dawn asks, “What’s happening out there?”

“They’re probably all being killed” Anya steps in and out of her own ring of talismans, twists her hands. Dawn shouts down, “Then we have to fight too, right?”

“No” Ethan hurries to the base of the ladder. “Us defenceless types are better off staying put.”

“Half the defenceless types are outside!” whispers Anya. Twirling around, she picks up a vial of powder, and then sets it down again in favour of a heavy statuette. “I need to save Xander – you stay here and guard the kid.”

“I’m not a kid!” Dawn snaps, her face appearing above them. “And I don’t need guarding!”

“Stay inside the circle” Ethan reiterates. “Anya, can’t you –” The shop bell rings as Anya runs out. “Oh wonderful. Dawn, you and I are the only ones in this little circle of idiots with any sensible degree survival instinct.”

“Speak for yourself.” Dawn lands beside him with a thud, skimming down the handrails and
skipping the last few steps. Ethan throws up his hands in frustration. “That wasn’t supposed to be an insult! Get back up there!”

“Why? There are wards up.” Dawn holds up the talisman he gave her. “Plus I’ve got this.”

“That will work better inside the circle.”

“I don’t need to be inside the circle.” Dawn nods to the window. “What’s happening out there?”

Stepping closer to the window, Ethan peers through the blinds. Apparently still outnumbered, Rupert and his children are taking a beating. Willow has retreated behind a car and is casting the hex, but it seems to be having little impact except the keep whatever it is from approaching her specifically, if how free whatever-the-demons-are seem to be able to toss Rupert and Xander around is anything to go by. Spike has appeared from somewhere and seems to be holding his own, but he is the only one. Buffy is pinned down by at least one of the unseen adversaries on the other side of the street. Ethan has half a mind to get out there himself, but without time to prepare a stronger defensive spell, what can he do, exactly? Not to mention, he is now the only person making sure no-one inserts Dawn into any sort of lock.

Not that he’d be able to prevent that anyway. “Believe me, we’re better off in here. So let’s –” He turns back to the room. “Oh shit.”

Dawn is gone.

A clatter in the backroom dispersions Ethan’s brief confusion. Running at his top speed (which is a not bad getaway sprint) he hurries to catch the child, but all he catches is the slam of the back exit as Dawn runs out the shop, and outside the protection of the wards. “Buggeration, child!” Ethan dithers for a moment, before reaching for something that fills the niche between dagger and sword from the weapons cabinet, and running after her.

Outside, the alleyway is empty, Dawn having apparently already raced round the side of the building. Ethan follows, not sure if he’s more afraid of the invisible demons, or of how angry the slayers will be to see Dawn outside. Then, as he reaches Main Street, something formless lifts him off his feet and throws him back through the Magic Box window, and he decides, no, he is definitely more afraid of the invisible demons.

“Fuck” Ethan staggers to his feet, brushes broken glass off his torso, and promptly slips off the window display and onto the floor. Getting to his feet, he calls, “Dawn?” The fight is still going strong and he can’t even see the child amid the struggling scoobies. Not that he’ll admit it later, but Ethan tries briefly to climb back through the broken window before he remembers, oh wait the door. Doubling back and pulling it open, he ducks as Faith flies past, flung by one of the aggressive patches of air that are thrashing everybody.

“Ethan?” She gets to her feet quicker than he did. “What the hell are you doing out here? Where’s – Dawn!” Pushing Ethan aside, Faith leaps back into the half-visible fray and pulls something unseen off the child. Apparently there was more than one of them, because Dawn is then pushed over, screaming, as Faith fights the other whatever-they-are. Ethan raises his weapon and hurries over just as Dawn brandishes the talisman where she must estimate the demon’s face to be. It works: Ethan can tell the demon recoils, because it steps backwards and into him. He feels it turn a second before it yanks the blade from his hand and pushes him over, holding it to his neck and pressing down. Ethan pushes back, trying, as soon as his windpipe is clear enough, to form the words of a defensive spell. It is a last resort one, next to useless, and it keeps getting mixed up with another, equally impractical hex in his panic.
“Ethan!” Dawn is suddenly above him and Ethan realises that she has her arms around the invisible demon’s neck, trying to pull it off him. “Dawn!” he manages. “Get back in –” Dawn screams again as the demon throws her off, knocks her to the floor. It must turn its attention to her, because Ethan is suddenly no longer held at blade point. Where the blade goes is less promising: it floats in mid-air a few feet away, above Dawn, and rising…

“Dawn!” Faith leaps in from the side, sending the blade – and, presumably, the demon – toppling. Grabbing the weapon, she hacks at the invisible mass beneath her. Ethan flinches as something wet hits his face. Then he crawls around the mass of slayer and yowling space to reach Dawn. “Are you alright?”

“Ethan, I – yes.” Dawn’s voice wobbles and her eyes are wide, glazed in the shock of what must be her first fight, even without her memories being fake.

“Good” says Ethan, “Let’s get – oh!” In that moment, the demon beneath Faith becomes visible. This is a technically welcome development, but also puzzling and disturbing. At the sight of the newly-visible demon blood hitting them from Faith’s efforts, Dawn begins to cry. Ethan pats her ineffectually, and looks around to check no more are coming but, now that they can be seen, the remaining attackers are quickly succumbing to Buffy and Spike. Rupert – thank the Gods – is on his feet, and Willow, Xander and Anya don’t look too worse for wear.

Tara has joined them. And her family. Her brother and cousin cower in a car that apparently hit a demon as it pulled up, and her father is frozen halfway out the door and staring about. Tara stands in the middle of the fray, having apparently cast a spell. Or, Ethan realises, lifted one. She is crying too.

Faith seems to see none of this. Finally inflicting the mercy of death on the demon beneath her, she turns to Dawn and engulfs her in her arms, pulls her close. “It’s okay, Dawnie.” Pulling the child closer, she rocks her. “You’re safe now, it’s okay.”

*****

One family breakdown and a lot of sweeping up of glass later, and they are all in the Bronze. Dawn, having turned down Ethan’s offer of illicit alcohol, is chatting on the other side of the room with her sister and pseudo-sister, though really, Ethan reflects, Buffy and Faith are both pseudo-sisters to the child, aren’t they?

Or perhaps both sisters. He decides it doesn’t matter much and turns to an approaching Tara with a smile. And a cherry martini, which he hands to her. “Happy Birthday.”

She accepts it with her own sweet lopsided smile. “Thank you. And th-thank you for the present. I’ve been meaning to find a protective amulet.” Her hand ghosts over her new and powerful necklace, adorned with a token of Hephaestus.

“Just remember, it’s only good against metal” Ethan warns her. “If something comes at you with only its teeth, run away.”

“Planning to anyway.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get anything more general, but a lot of demons do use weapons. Or use your own against you, apparently.”

“I-I’m sorry about the spell. I had no idea it would –”

“I know. And no harm done.” Except to his shop window, that is, but the witch clearly feels guilty
enough already, so Ethan doesn’t mention it. Instead he changes the subject with, “I noticed the levitating earlier, by the way. I take it all your guests are in the know about magic?”

“Um. To, um, to one degree or another.” Tara nods. “I, I know we should have been more careful but –”

“Oh, screw careful. The more who know about magic the merrier as far as I’m concerned. And” Ethan takes a sip of his own drink, “that’s only partly because it increases my customer base.”

Tara giggles. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s had more than a few cherry martinis himself, but Ethan decides to say, “Incidentally, congratulations on losing the clan.” Seeing her expression sober he adds, “Sorry. I know that’s not a happy topic, but, really, cutting your ties with them will be the best thing you ever did. Well short of meeting your match that is.” He nods to Willow who is across the room talking to Rupert. Tara follows his gaze. Hesitantly, she asks, “Did, um, did you and your family…”

“Part ways? Yes.” As Tara is watching him, asking without actually speaking, Ethan explains, “They didn’t approve of magic. Or of young man they came home to find me in bed with one day. They were tediously conventional people.”

“Do you ever miss them?”

Ethan chooses an easy lie. “Never once.” Slipping into the truth, he adds, “Especially not after a met Rupert: now he’s my family.”

Tara sends a smile across the room to Willow. “I get that.”
Fool for Love

After Buffy leaves, Giles gathers up the Watcher diaries and puts them neatly away. Studying them, he'd always found the final few pages before the last entry, no matter how mundane, terribly poignant. Sometimes the final battle was impressive and dreaded, preceded by weeks of waiting, and training and knowing. In other cases, it really was very ordinary: scuffles with lesser demons, a vampire here and there, potential threats that turned out not to amount to much. And then the last battle, the brief, insufficient praise, and the watcher would have then have begun training his next charge, taken up a quiet post in the Council or retired. Or died with the slayer, of course. (Perhaps that was easier). In that case it would be left to others to make a final, formal note at the back of the diary before it was added to the Council’s library.

His own final entry, had Buffy’s near-miss gone worse, would have fallen somewhere between the epic and cruelly typical, the ominous arrival of the Key recorded amidst more routine reports of vampire dustings. Had Faith not been there to intervene, Giles might have concluded his own journal with a report of a mere vampire, an ordinary patrol, finally getting the better of the relatively long-lived Buffy Summers. It would have been rather less dramatic than the fate of twenty-one year old Neske van der Heide, whose prophesised death, willingly embraced, had been the catalyst for magic that had felled an army from a demon dimension, yet rather less pitiable than the quick and predictable death of Ceridwen Moss, who, at eleven, holds the dubious double title of youngest called and shortest lived slayer in recorded history. Like theirs, Buffy’s end would have been passed down for future watchers and slayers to read and – if they were anything like Buffy – lament the brevity of. And it would have destroyed him to write it.

*****

“I lost my job” announces Faith, when she turns up in the cemetery that night.

Giles looks at her sharply. “Why was that?”

“CCTV caught me fighting those Lei-Ach demons out the front. “Of course the boss figured they were just guys in really weird outfits but still, now I’m one job down.”

“I’m sorry, Faith.” Giles truly is; Like Buffy, Faith benefits from having ties to the world, and with Dawn, and, by extension the Summers household, becoming entwined with her duties as a slayer, the Espresso Pump had been Faith’s final piece of ordinary to have just for her own. “Perhaps if I, um, had a word?”

“Maybe” Faith considers the idea. “Don’t think it will work though. They love your singing and all so maybe if I’d called you instead of swearing a bunch and punching the coffee machine…”

“Ah. Perhaps not then.”

Faith shrugs. “Anyway, with everything going on with Joyce and Dawn, it might be an idea for one of us to not be out in the daytime, and Buffy’s got her college stuff. And I’m not sure all that’s for me anyway.”

“What, employment?”

“Exactly” Faith leads the way through the newer graves towards the crypts, coming to a stop near a particularly vine-clad monument and looking around. “He ran off this way. I should have just dusted him.”
“You were a little busy saving Buffy’s life, I gather.”

“I should have found a way to do both.”

“Buffy’s still alive, so I say you did the right thing.” Giles looks around. “The question now is where did he go?”

Faith takes off again, stopping and starting, searching. “Could be any of these.”

“Why don’t we stop and listen for a moment? See if your slayer senses pick anything up.”

“Sure” Faith stands quietly for a moment. Then she asks, “You think Spike will even tell her the truth?”

“I think he might provide some useful insight” Giles replies, “Of course, that’s not quite the same thing. History is written by the victor, and all that.” “Who’s Victor? Hey, listen.” Faith gestures to a crypt to their right. Stepping closer, Giles is just about able to pick out a few jubilant voices starting to sound within.

Faith twists her features in disgust. “They’re fucking celebrating it.”

“Yes” Giles sounds calm, he notices, but anger is waking up like a sleeping beast within him. Had Buffy really died, these vampires really would have considered that a victory, a happy occurrence. Well, of course they would. He knows that. But it is one thing to know it, and another to hear the laughter.

Faith steps past him, leading the way. “Let’s get this done so I can get back to Dawn duty.”

Pulling his own stake from his pocket, Giles follows.

*****

It is over quickly. The vampire who Giles estimates to be the one to injure Buffy is the first to succumb to Faith’s stake and the others follow without any notable fight because, at the sight of them, Faith transmutes into something openly deadly. Officially only there to advise Faith on technique, Giles had hoped to get his personal revenge for Buffy’s injury on one or two but everything in Faith’s radius becomes so much settling dust before he can act on the impulse.

Once it’s over, all Giles can manage is, “Very good. You did let a few get behind you, but…”

“But it didn’t do them much good.”

“Well, I suppose not.”

“Slayer senses, Giles. They might as well have been playing the drums behind me with how loud they were coming.”

“Still, slayer senses don’t give you eyes on the back of your head. Best not to let them take that advantage.”

“Not really an advance with how fast I can spin round on them.”

“Still.”

“Alright, alright.” Faith heads for the door. “Can we make it a short patrol? I don’t want to leave Joyce and Dawn on their own.”
“If you think that’s best.” Giles will, he decides, see to the cemeteries they miss himself.

“Yes, I think that’s best” Faith replies. Pausing to glance at him, she adds. “I don’t just mean for Dawn. Joyce is really sick, Giles.”

“I know. But you need to remember that the doctors are looking into it and –”

“And at least it’s not Kakistos” Faith concludes. “That was slower. I mean, it didn’t take as long, but it was slower, you know?”

“Faith” Giles stops walking, forcing her to turn and face him. “There’s no reason to think Joyce will be killed by this or anything else any time soon. And she isn’t…” About to say that Joyce isn’t Faith’s watcher, he trails off: it would sound petulant and besides, Joyce has become a guardian of sorts to the girl. “She’s strong” he amends. “Determined.”

Faith takes off again, picking her way through the gravestones. “See, I don’t get that, all that they’re strong crap. You can be all ready for a fight and if it’s a bad enough illness, it doesn’t give a fuck. It’s not all positive thoughts and everything’s fine, that’s just a con people use on themselves.”

“Well as I understand it, there’s research that…” Giles trails off, uncertain suddenly. Rallies with, “It doesn’t hurt to try it.”

“Yeah. That’s right. Hey, maybe we could split patrol? That way all the vamps get dusted, I get home quick and I get to kill something in a meaner way than you like watching.”

*****

Returning home after a bracing patrol, Giles is greeted by Ethan, who glances up from his book with a casual, “Still alive then?” and a relieved expression that doesn’t match his tone.

Giles shrugs his coat off. “Just about.” He hangs it up. “I don’t suppose Buffy’s called?”

“Well” Giles sits down, shifting Ethan’s feet to make room for himself. “I wondered if she’d call if Spike had anything insightful to offer.” He runs a tired hand across tired eyes until Ethan, leaning over, stills the motion. “She’s alright, Rupert.”

“She’s hardly alright – she’s been stabbed in the torso.”

“But she’s alive.” Ethan frowns thoughtfully before adding, “She’s hellmouth alright.”

“Thank you, dear, that’s most comforting.”

“Well, you’re the one who insisted we live here.” Seeing Giles’ expression, Ethan adds “Slayers heal fast, you know that. She’ll be doing flying kicks and decapitating demons again before you know it.”

“I hope so.” It is an odd hope to have, Giles notes, but this is their lives. He puts on a smile for Ethan and takes his hand. “Thank you.”
Faith is business-like and mostly silent throughout training and Giles doesn’t pry. The poor girl is, he realises, in the grip of a double loss: She is as scared for Joyce as Buffy and Dawn, but with this discovery of serious illness comes a tightening of familial bonds that somewhat squeeze out a young woman who sees Joyce as something of a mother figure but who is, in practise, arguably more of a lodger. The dummy takes something of a beating.

“I take it you’ll be going back to the hospital?” Giles risks asking as they exit the training room.

“Later” Faith replies. “Thought I’d do a sweep of a few vamp nests first, give them a daylight wake-up call.”

“Do be careful. If you’re worried, it could distract you or –”

“– Or make me good and ready for a fight with something that hits back” Faith retorts. “And that can’t run away because of the all the fun sunlight.”

“I suppose so” Giles concedes. “But nevertheless, take care, won’t you? And give my love to Buffy and Dawn when you do reach the hospital.”

Faith offers a curt nod in response and marches out with a purposefulness that would make Giles feel a little sorry for the vampires if he ever allowed his thoughts to stray in that direction. With the brilliant daylight outside, they will be like so many trapped insects.

Willow is here for her history lesson, but it has apparently turned into a research party with Anya into the still-unidentified demon woman who bested Buffy and seeks the Key. Ethan stands at the counter looking thoughtfully at the sunlight streaming through the window. When Giles joins him, he comments, “It’s a little jarring, isn’t it? Having such nice weather when something awful’s going on. At least back home we’d get rain.”

“It may turn out to be treatable” Giles reminds him.

“What’s the opposite of pathetic fallacy? Heroic fallacy? Pathetic truth?”

“You make tea and we can apply ourselves to the research” Giles replies firmly. “Do something useful to distract ourselves.” How useful it will be, given the very little they have to go on, is dubious. But Giles is more interested in the distraction part of the equation right now.

*****

How Rupert, or any of the others, think they can identify this demon woman with no more to go on than that she looks like an attractive young human is beyond Ethan, but over the course of the day, they are joined by the full set of scoobies, sans Buffy and Faith. Tara turns up around lunchtime with snacks and, after reading for half and hour or so, her own grim theory that perhaps this demon is older than any word written. “Well so are dinosaurs” Ethan points out. “But people write about
“them all the time.”

“Not always accurately” reasons Tara. “There’s prob-probably a lot we don’t know about them.”

“The fact that many of them were actually pure demons for one” points out Rupert.

“And whole species we haven’t heard of” adds Tara. “Maybe no-one’s heard of this demon lady to write about her.”

“Giles” says Willow, “The Dagon Sphere: You said that was created to repel…”

“…that which cannot be named” finishes Rupert.

“Older than language” Ethan concludes grimly. He considers the phrasing to distract himself from horror. “That which cannot be named? You’re saying we’re fighting fucking Voldemort?”

Willow looks briefly sympathetic. “Dawn made you read them too?”

“Wait” puts in Xander. “Does this mean we don’t have to read anymore?” He flips his book closed triumphantly.

“It means we’re up against something fairly terrible” says Ethan. But then again, he realises, what less than terrible would consider itself entitled to the Key? Ordinary demons wouldn’t dare.

“If Tara’s right” Rupert is saying, “We’re blind…”

Ethan turns around at a tap on his shoulder. He finds a striking customer waiting to be served. “Oh, hello.”

She gives a quick, fake smile. “I want these.”

Not for the first time, Ethan finds himself a little thrown by the directness of a certain class of American. Matching the lack of basic pleases and thank yous, he gestures to the counter, and steps behind the till. The woman says no more as he tallies up her purchases. Apparently she isn’t aware that the Sobekian transmogrification spells are lost to the annals of time, which is a little surprising given that she has the self-possession of a young sorceress who actually has more than a little magic at her disposal and who is used to success more generally. Probably her looks are responsible for the latter. With full lips, curled hair and sculpturally curved figure, she looks not unlike a Sindy doll, if one were brought to life and dipped in a vat of conventional sex appeal.

As she saunters off, Ethan rejoins the others in time to listen to them realise just how doomed they might be and how this demon could be just about anywhere.

*****

“You sold someone a Khul’s amulet and a Sobekian bloodstone!” accuses Anya some hours later.

“Well yes” Ethan glances guiltily at Rupert, who has come over to the till along with the other scoobies at Anya’s growing litany of exclamations.

Anya asks, “Are you stupid in some way?”

“Stupid to make some money selling something that’s been completely harmless for thousands of years?” retorts Ethan. “Unless the customer happens to be more ancient than the…” Brain racing towards an unwelcome conclusion, he trails off quickly.
“Ethan” says Rupert slowly, “Tell me this customer wasn’t a young woman.”

“Well” manages Ethan, “Yes. But. Well, it can’t have been her! No demon can get in here since I strengthened the wards!” Nevertheless, he feels a twisting revulsion at the memory of his half-hearted attraction to the woman, the way he’d feel if he saw a handsome face in the paper, only to read that it belonged to someone wanted for homicide.

“If she’s really as old as we think” Willow is saying, “Maybe she’s older than the wards recognise?”

“Nothing’s older than those wards” Ethan tells her. Thinking of Willow’s casual throwing over of the ancient cloaking spell, he adds, “Only you could do it”

“Then maybe she’s not a demon” Tara concludes. “What if she’s a witch?”

“One so powerful she’s found a way to live past five thousand or so” says Xander.

Rupert shakes his head. “Far longer than that, if she’s older than language.” He turns to Ethan. “Perhaps given that we knew that we’re up against a powerful enemy, you might have restrained yourself from selling the more powerful items?”

“There’s nothing powerful about a Khul’s amulet or a Sobekian bloodstone!” argues Ethan. “Not unless…”

“Unless you sell it to a really old demon” finishes Xander. Ethan glares at him. “Not a demon” he reiterates. “A demon couldn’t get through the wards. And we don’t even know that it was her.” Seeing the doubt on their faces, he adds, “And if it was, what was I supposed to do, say no? She thrashed Buffy, what do you think my chances would be?”

“That’s true” Rupert concedes. “But I think we can assume this was our, um, unidentified foe. The question now is, what is she planning?”

What she is planning results in rather a mess at the Magic Box before the close of the day. Thankfully, no-one is hurt and Buffy and Faith stop the transmogrified snake from reaching the now-identified Glory. Identified, that is, in that they know her name. Who she is or why she wants the Key remain a mystery.

After dropping Buffy and Dawn – Buffy with bleeding knuckles, Dawn tearful but smiling – back at home, Giles returns to the shop. Faith insisted on walking home via a few unlucky vampires and – Giles suspects – a not very discerning bar. Given everything, he doesn’t begrudge her that.

Entering the shop, Giles finds Ethan, broom in hand, cleaning up the mess left by the serpent. “Are you alright?” he asks.

Ethan glances up. “Yes. I sent the others home. Though I suspect they’ll find their way to Buffy’s before long.”

“I imagine so” Giles finds a dustpan and brush on the counter and picks it up, sets about helping. “Unfortunate that the wards don’t work on magically-altered animals.”

“Or ageless witches. If that is what she is.”

“Glory. Apparently that’s what her minion called her.”
“She has minions? Oh, goodo.”

“Does ‘Glory’ ring a bell?”

“No” Ethan shakes his head. “I’ll ask next time I’m in Willy’s or the bite house.”

“Just so long as you’re careful.”

“You know me.”

“I mean it, Ethan. If she’s powerful enough to hurt Buffy…”

“…I’ll be sure to get nowhere near her, you know that.”

“You were just the other side of the counter from her earlier” Giles points out.

“And if I’d known who she was?” says Ethan, “I’d have still served her. I’m not picking a fight with that.”

Giles is a little reassured, though he doesn’t say so. What he does say is, “Just be aware of the loyalty demons might have to her, given her age.”

Ethan shakes his head again. “If she were a demon, then yes. But if she’s a human – or close enough – with that much power? They’ll probably resent her for it.”

“I can’t imagine she could actually be human” Giles argues. “She didn’t fight Buffy with magic, and how else could a human threaten a slayer?”

“Maybe by doing a strengthening spell before Buffy arrived?” Ethan guesses.

“You’re certain no demon can get through the wards? Not even a very old one?”

“Rupert, there’s no way any demon would get through these wards – these are Janus’ strongest barriers. Whatever she is, she’s not a demon, I’ll tell you that for free.” Ethan sets the broom aside. “How is Buffy?”

“Don’t worry about her – it didn’t hurt her. And it didn’t get a chance to tell Glory about the Key.”

“That’s not what I mean” says Ethan. “I mean, now she’s cleaned up my mess and there’s only Joyce to worry about.”

Which is worse, Giles knows. It’s a problem that cannot be punched. “She’ll be alright. We’re all here for her, and she’s stronger than she realises. In more ways than one.” Still, he feels a fresh flood of worry wash over him thinking about what could be ahead of his slayer.
“Joyce?” Ethan approaches the bed.

She turns and smiles up at him, looking tired. “Oh – hello, Ethan. Where’re Buffy and Dawn?”

“Rupert’s taking them to dinner. But they’re only over the road if you want me to go and fetch them?”

“Goodness, no.” She sits up, with some apparent effort. “I’m glad they’re getting something decent to eat.” She frowns, then asks, “What about Faith?”

Ethan gestures to the door. “Finished patrolling about half an hour ago, now chatting up some hapless but handsome doctor.” The same hapless but handsome doctor that had caught his eye during his brief stay in fact. Thinking of that reminds Ethan, “I got you those, by the way.”

Joyce looks where he’s pointing to examine the collection of talismans. “Oh. Thank you. They’re, um…”

“A few protective charms in case…” It occurs to Ethan that knowing what might visit won’t help her rest. “Just good luck charms really.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it.”

“No you won’t” Ethan puts on a smile. “With the doctor as confident as he seems, who needs luck?”

She smiles herself, pasting it over her worry. “How’s the gallery doing?”

“It’s fine. I sold that rather garish abstract thing.”

“You did? I’ve had some trouble shifting that.”

“Magic may or may not have been involved.”

She laughs. “And is Karen taking over tomorrow? Because I don’t want you to neglect your own store.”

“Don’t worry about that. Anya’s enjoying running the place herself. Rather too much in fact.”

Joyce’s smile is genuine now, but she flinches. “Sorry. Listen, do you mind sending Faith in? I’m thinking sleep’s not a bad plan but I’d like to talk to her first.”

Ethan stands. “Of course. ’Night, Joyce.”

“Goodnight, Ethan. Give my love to Rupert, won’t you? Tell him thank you for looking after my girls.”

“It’s what he does.” Ethan quietly shuts the door.

*****

“Glory?” Marvin takes a deep swig from of his beer an hour or so later at Willy’s Place. “What do you want to know about her for?”
“Professional curiosity” Ethan replies. “She got some of my stock to work in a way it shouldn’t have been able to without the caster knowing rather a lot that’s been lost to mankind for the last thousand years or so.”

“Well that checks out” Marvin confirms. “She’s scary-powerful.”

“What is she?” Ethan moves to pour his own beer into a glass, then thinks better of it and drinks from the bottle. “What species?”

“Fuck if I know. Something strong is all.”

“You’ve seen her in action then?”

“No and I don’t want to. I’m staying out the way.”

“She can’t be all that bad” counters Ethan, testing.

“She is and then some. Even most of the ones who usually get hyped to serve whoever’s new and strong, they’re keeping their distance. ’Specially after what happened to the Lei Ach.”

“I wondered about them. Thought they didn’t bother with politics so long as there’s bone marrow to leech?”

“Yeah, me too, but Glory must have said something to persuade them. Or not left them with much choice.”

So, Ethan mused, they were up against something powerful enough that the usual nasties didn’t want to get involved, but persuasive enough that demons who usually didn’t interact with outsiders anyway are recruited to whatever her cause is. “Is she even a demon?” he wonders, trying to sound like the idea is just now occurring to him. “She waltzes into my shop for supplies, how can we be sure she’s not a witch?”

Marvin pulls a face. “A witch couldn’t get everyone scared of her like this. But I though demons couldn’t get into your shop now?”

“Well, so did I.”

“What’s that about anyway? Fucking specist.”

“Sorry, but almost being drained makes one cautious.”

“You know we’re not all like that. Being attack’s no excuse to get prejudiced, you know.”

“I know, I’m just…” He could, Ethan realises, lift the wards now they know that Glory can breeze in whenever she wants anyway. “Look, I’m pretty close to readjusting the wards anyway.”

“Good. ’Bout fucking time.”

“But before I do” Ethan adds, “I’m going to need to find out more about Glory. Find a way of keeping her out while letting you in.”

“I doubt you’ll keep her out” says Marvin. “But I’m all in favour being allowed back in soon.” He takes another swig of his drink.

“If someone were to ask around for me it would help” points out Ethan.
“About Glory?” Marvin looks apprehensive.

“Just subtly” Ethan reassures him. “Anything you happen to pick up. It’d help me adjust the ward.”

“I guess I’ll do it then.”

“Would you? Thanks.”

“Anytime” Marvin shrugs. “But once you know, I say sort your wards and stay away from Glory. You don’t want to go messing with someone like that.”

“Believe me” says Ethan, “I won’t –” He pauses as someone screams on the street outside. “What was that?”

Marvin stands as the noise increases, setting his drink aside. Ethan – and a collection of horned and scaly regulars – follow him out in time to see the sky light up with an impact that shakes the distant woods and the ground beneath their feet.

******

“So we’re saying Glory decided to summon this queller demon to get rid of all the mad people” muses Ethan after some discussion in the university library about whether or not this is a two slayer level of emergency, “But why would she? What does someone as powerful as that care if there are more or less unstable people around?”

The group consider this. “Random cruelty?” Xander guess after a while.

Willow shakes her head. “Someone like her always has a plan. Hey, what if one of these people saw something Glory didn’t want them to see?”

“Maybe even went crazy because of it” adds Anya.

“Whatever the case” says Rupert, standing. “We’d better get over to the hospital.”

“Yeah” Faith rises too. “Stop anyone from being quelled first, whys later.” She freezes suddenly. “Hey, what about Joyce?” At Rupert’s frown, she adds, “The tumour’s got her doing a pretty good crazy person impression.”

Willow stands too. “I’ll call Buffy. What’s the hospital’s number?”

“No” Faith backs away from the table. “She’s home. Hey, look, you guys get to the hospital, I’ll take Joyce watch.” She leaves before anyone can reply.

******

The demon beats them to the hospital and Ethan finds himself, some time later, in a mental ward, surrounded by corpses and thanking multiple gods that Joyce was allowed home overnight.

All the poor sods here were suffocated by something unspeakable, their bodies left without visible injuries, just horror-struck expressions. Lingering after the hospital security have left and before the police move in, Ethan notices with a shudder that all the victims were restrained. All sick with the same thing, perhaps? But what? There are usually more humane ways now, surely, to keep someone in bed than there were the last time the queller visited. Or perhaps, Ethan tells himself, that’s just what he wants to think.

And why are there so many of them?
Putting it from his mind, Ethan hurries to rejoin the others in the hospital’s anonymous network of corridors.

*****

The palm sized, double-faced carving that Ethan hands Joyce before she says goodbye to her daughters and is wheeled away to the OR isn’t part of a protection spell. It won’t ward away queller demons or anything else Glory can summon, or anything that lurks here anyway. It really is just for luck. For all he pretends otherwise, Ethan thinks Joyce might just need it.
“So while I’ve been camping out at the hospital, you guys have been finding out...pretty much nothing?” concludes Buffy. She, Faith and Giles are at Giles and Ethan’s flat having a combined toast to Joyce’s newly restored health/recap of what has been uncovered about Glory. The two occasions aren’t natural cohabiters and Buffy seems grimly resigned as she looks from the limited selection of books that contain any information whatsoever about the Dagon Sphere to Faith and Giles seated on the sofa.

“Pretty much” confirms Faith. “But, hey, we know her name now.”

“Because we both heard the scabby guy call her that” says Buffy. “That doesn’t even count.”

Faith indicates Giles. “And Giles got a good look at her when he watched Ethan sell her stuff.”

“Still doesn’t count” says Buffy.

“And I’m not sure I’d call it a good look” admits Giles. He’d been a little too busy summing up why Glory is dangerous to notice his partner serving her at the till.

“Okay” says Faith, “then we found out pretty much nothing.”

“At this point” Giles tells them, “we’ve exhausted the books here and at the Magic Box.” Carefully meeting Buffy’s eyes, he says, “I think it’s time we contact the Council.”

Buffy’s expression tightens but it is Faith who answers: “No. No way. They’ll cart Dawnie away and work all that sick mojo on her.”

“I wasn’t planning on telling them about Dawn” Giles reassures her. To Buffy, he adds, “They have a vast library. If anyone has anything on record about who or what Glory is, it will be them. We can’t defeat her until we know more about her.”

“So we’ll find out about her some other way” argues Faith. “Look, Buffy’s out of the Council and unless you count them being all Keep an eye on her for us when I rocked up here, so am I. Ran away and everything. I’m not about to go crawling back just because the latest big bad seems bigger and badder than we’re used to.”

“I am” says Buffy.

“Exactly” says Faith. “Wait, what?”

“I am.” Buffy looks Faith in the eye. “It’s Dawn at stake. Not much I wouldn’t team up with if that’s who it took to save her.” To Giles, she adds, “But you won’t tell them about her, will you? Promise me.”

“I won’t” Giles offers one of what he suspects will be many reassurances. “I’ll be sure to keep them focused on Glory.”

“They’ll definitely have something useful on her?”

“I can’t guarantee it. But they have kept detailed records of most of mankind’s adversaries. If anyone encountered Glory in times past, they’ll probably know about it.”

Faith asks, “Couldn’t you just get them to send more books without saying what it’s for?”
“With over twelve million books at their disposal?” Giles replies, “The chances of them sending the right ones with no information would be small even if they did just blithely hand them over. Which they won’t: I’ll have to go there.”

For just a moment, Faith looks panicked. “You’re leaving?”

“Just for a week at most. And that’s even if they agree to see me.”

“They’ve got to, right?” asks Buffy. “I mean, they made you Faith’s watcher.”

“Only unofficially. And as this pertains to you as well, and you’re, um –”

“– Out the Council –”

“– Yes. I, um, I’m not sure they’ll have the same sense of urgency as they might have if things were more, well, conventional.” “Uh huh” says Faith. “Well, it was good plan. But if that’s how they’ll see it –”

“– On the other hand,” continues Giles, “They have made it their business to safeguard the world. If the threat posed by Glory is on an apocalyptic scale – which it very well might be – I think they’ll help us.” Noting Buffy’s torn expression, he adds, “You said it yourself, Buffy, we’ve got nothing. If they can give us the information we need…”

“Then almost anything’s worth it” Buffy concludes. “Anything except telling them about Dawn.”

“I won’t.”

“And you’ll go to them, right?” asks Faith. “You won’t ask them here? Or take me there?”

“Why would I take you there?”

“I’m just checking.”

“There won’t be any need for you to go to England, Faith.”

“Good, ’cause I’m not in a hurry for to go back there. No offence.”

“That’s agreed then.” Buffy stands up. “You’ll make the call?”

Giles nods. “I’ll speak to Travers tonight.”

“Right. Faith, come on. We should go relieve Spike from Dawn duty before she gives him a makeover. I hate the guy, but I’m not that cruel.”

“You had Spike guarding Dawn?” Giles asks in surprise.

“Well when both of us are out the house, what are we supposed to do? He’s the only one even possibly strong enough to hold Glory off for a few seconds of escape time. Plus mom and Dawn don’t seem to find him as repulsive as we do.” Leading Faith – who has gone very quiet – out the door, Buffy turns to hug Giles briefly and ask, “You really won’t tell them?”

“I won’t tell them anything about Dawn, Buffy. I promise.”

*****

The bite house is in a part of town that tends towards narrow alleyways and poorly lit areas. Ethan
always carries holy water or a defensive potion here, and keeps a hand in his pocket, closed around the neck of the small bottle. When something lithe leaps from a low wall into his path, Ethan shrieks and wields it, only to find himself on the receiving end of a sardonic look from Faith. He asks, “What are you doing here?”

“Patrolling. Vamps don’t just live in cemeteries, you know. Seems like plenty of them live round here. Or unlive.”

“That’ll be the bus station” Ethan gestures in the vague direction of the road that leads up to the depot. “People arriving at all hours who don’t know to carry this.” He holds up the bottle again before slipping it into his pocket. “Plus there’s the bite house.”

“The what house?”

For a moment, Ethan’s instinct is to lie or change the subject but bugger it – the children aren’t really children anymore, and Faith hasn’t been a child in all the years he’s known her. “A brothel but without the fun stuff” he explains. “Though I suppose that depends on your idea of fun.”

“Wait, there’s a brothel in town? Then how come all that screwing happens at the motel?”

“Vampire brothel” Ethan clarifies. “People pay to get bitten.” Realising that he might be endangering certain useful informants, he adds, “The vampires don’t kill anyone: They get cash and get to avoid the inconvenience of corpse disposal, and a few fetishists get a high. It’s win-win.”

“Huh” Faith digests this. “People really are freaks, aren’t they? Where is this place?”

“Just round the corner. It so happens I’m heading there myself but I can’t exactly show you: They wouldn’t thank me for bringing a slayer in.” Or rather, they would, just not in a way he’d like.

“You’re into that shit?” Faith asks, “Does Giles know?”

“What? No! I mean, no I’m not into that shit, yes Giles knows I’m heading there. I’m just going to catch up on the gossip.”

“Alright.” Faith frowns. “Couldn’t you do magic so they don’t notice me? I kinda want to see this.”

Ethan issues a put upon sigh and searches his pockets, handing her chalk, a small jar of sand and a bundle of dried herbs as he finds them. Faith asks, “You ever been searched by a cop? ‘Cause this crap would be hard to explain.”

“Hard to explain but probably enough for a quick glamour” Ethan tells her. “If you really want to see the bite house, that is.”

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“And you promise not to stake anyone?” Ethan glances around, in case of others headed the same way, and steps closer to add, in an undertone, “Because they can’t give us any information on Glory if they’re dust.”

“Wait, you’re going for that? Then I’m definitely in. If we get the info on her from a load of vamps it’ll really freak out the Council.”

“That would be a bonus, yes. Now” Ethan sets about putting things in place for the spell, “hold still.”
As it turns out, all Marvin has to offer on the information about Glory front is a long list of things that are scared of her. Some of them are scary themselves, even to other demons.

“They’re actually leaving town?” asks Ethan.

“Some are.” Marvin glances away as a young man staggers past, but another vampire stands to intercept the visitor. Turning back, he adds, “The Sluugorthian demons all went back to their home dimension when she arrived.”

“Wait – their home dimension where that civil war’s going on?”

“The same.” Marvin shudders. “Nothing would go back there unless they thought whatever’s about to happen here is going to be hellish. Literally, and then some. And Rack’s left town.”

“Has he now?” Ethan frowns, then explains to Faith, “That old bastard always knows when something big is about to happen.”

“Well we know it’s big” says Faith, “But what about what she actually is? Witch or what?”

“Not a witch” says Marvin decisively. “Humans don’t scare Sluugorthians like that. Well, I mean” he laughs “unless they were the slayer or something, right?”

“Right” Faith offers a falsely sweet smile.

“What are people calling her?” Ethan asks. “Just Glory?”

“Glory mainly. Couple of the guys down at Willy’s were calling her Glorificus. The interdimensional types are freaking out.”

“So she’s travelled? Or from somewhere else?”

“Something like that. Something like her has probably been all over. Probably done a lot of damage to other places and now she’s turned up here.”

From across the room, a scruffy vampire calls out, “Marvin – you’re up” and indicates an even scruffier human. Marvin moves to stand and Ethan shoots an arm out to stall him. “Keep an ear out, won’t you?” He slips a few twenties into Marvin’s jacket pocket.

Marvin shakes his head sadly and pulls the money out again, hands it back. “Sorry, Ethan. I want to keep out of this thing’s way. Whatever she’s got planned, it’s big, and I’m not going to be the guy who was passing information on to humans right before she took the town.” With an apologetic shrug, he is gone, submitting to the lecherous embrace of the waiting human before leading him out of sight.

“Classy place, ain’t it?” Faith settles back in her chair and frowns thoughtfully. “Whatever Glory wants to take, I’m guessing it’ll be more than the town.”

“The Key I suppose.” Ethan is careful, very careful, not to use Dawn’s name here. “But then, to do what with it?”

“Fuck if I know.” Faith shudders. “Maybe Giles is right: time to get the watchers involved.”

“You sound thrilled at the prospect.”
“What, while you’re dancing a happy jig at the thought of them?”

“Touché.” Ethan grins. “Though I must say, I am looking forward to going home for a few days.”

“Just don’t go bringing any tweedy types back with you. Except Giles.”

“Not if I can help it” Ethan agrees. “Best leave the watchers where they’re useful: surrounded by books and very far away.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Faith pauses, looks around. “Or I would if I trusted the drinks in this place. Wanna go somewhere else?”

Ethan, noting that a few suspicious glances are being directed their way, nods and rises. “I think we’re about to outstay our welcome here in any case, so by all means. I take it I’m paying?”

“Hell yeah” Faith stands and leads the way out into the night.
“So you won’t tell me anything?” Giles asks, catching himself rubbing at a temple and lowering his hand hastily. Truth be told, he’s horribly jetlagged.

“I didn’t say that” reiterates the young man opposite him (some apprentice of Travers’. After a day of meetings, they’re all blurring together into a tweedy, bureaucratic mass.) “The Council simply feels that the situation needs further assessment before important information can be handed over.”

“Further assessment? We could be facing an apocalypse before further assessment is done!”

The young man hastily checks some notes. “Nothing you’ve told us suggests that Glory intends to do that, only that she’s after this key. You really have no idea where that is?”

“No” Giles wonders what Dawn is up to right now. What time is it in the U.S.?

“Well” concludes the young man, “While whatever she wants with the key is likely to be far from pleasant, we see no apocalyptic urgency. No, Mr Giles, I sense that your urgency is more personal than that: you’re scared for your charges.”

Well of course he is. But Giles, in deference to why he was fired, manages to say, “I have no doubt that Buffy and Faith are capable of defeating Glory. But they need information to do so.”

“Which they will receive if our assessment concludes they can be trusted with it. Now, as to your other request, I’m afraid we can’t help you: The Council told you all that is known of the origin of the Slayer Line when you became the active watcher of Buffy Summers. You already know as much as we do on the subject.”

Virtually nothing then.

“I wouldn’t say nothing” says the young man, and Giles realises that jetlag has him griping out loud. Travers’ trainee, puffing himself up like the self-important prefect he probably was at one point, continues, “One thousand years of history culminating in the largest society of benevolent mages and occult scholars in the world is hardly nothing.”

“But that’s the history of the Council” Giles tells him. “I asked for information on the Slayer Line.”

“Is this something to do with the fight against Glory?”

“You tell me: You’re the ones with information on her. Is she something to do with the Slayer Line?” Given that she is beautiful, strong and unlikely to take kindly orders she would certainly fit the bill in Giles’ experience.

Travers’ young man is shaking his head. “What little is known about the origin of the Slayer was shared with you years ago. There’s no further secret pertaining to the subject.”

“So far as you know.” Giles sighs. “Look, I made the second request just on the off chance of uncovering something that might be useful one day. Really it’s the information about Glory that I’m here for. We don’t have time for further assessments.”

“Mr Giles, you said yourself that you don’t know what Glory’s plan are or if we are working against the clock. Her quest for the key may take many more years.”
Many more years of Dawn being hunted. Giles shudders. “She’s determined. She’ll find it before long or do something catastrophic to try to uncover it, and Buffy and Faith will need to know all they can about her to put a stop to whatever she’ll do with it.” Hard to call Dawn “it” but he manages, his promise to Buffy trumping the jetlag.

The young man ignores him, writes a note. Giles sighs again. “When is Quentin getting here?” The use of Travers’ first name is deliberate, a reminder to this pup of their respective places on the hierarchy.

The young man doesn’t even look up. “Mr Travers has you pencilled in for this afternoon. In the meantime, Mr Honeycutt needs to speak to you regarding…”

Inwardly, Giles groans as the list of people he needs to get through to speak directly to the top brass grows. It’s going to be a long day.

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“So, do you want the good news or the bad news?” asks Willow, her apologetic tone familiar even from across the ocean.

“The good news” Ethan replies, deciding to cushion the bad in advance.

“Okay, well the good news is, no-one got hurt. Well, apart from Xander, but not life-threatening hurt.”

“Ah” says Ethan. “This means my shop is trashed, doesn’t it?”

“Kinda” confirms Willow.

“What happened?”

“Well, you know that big crystal on the counter?”

“The Troll Crystal?”

“You knew it had a troll in it?! Ethan, couldn’t you have put that on the label or something?”

“Well I didn’t know you were going to release it, did I?” retorts Ethan. Then he curses, remembering, “And it’s a troll god! Is the place even still standing?”

“Well the counter’s a bit – Wait, Olaf was a god?”

“Oh, you got to first name terms then!”

“Anya knew him from her pre-pre-human days. So, god?”

“Well it doesn’t take much to be a troll god. You just need to be bigger and hairier than the other trolls.”

“Huh. Kind of like with high school guys.”

“Essentially, yes. But the building’s still standing?”

“Yeah. And a massive clean-up operation’s under way.”

“Much obliged. And Xander’s not badly hurt?”
“Well, his arm’s broken, but it’s nothing a cast won’t fix. And me and Anya made peace. Sort of.”

“And Olaf’s slain?”

“Teleported.”

“Oh. Close enough.”

“I thought so. So, how’s England?”

“Well, it’s –” Ethan catches sight of Rupert, across the room, looking pointedly at the clock. “It’s lovely, Willow, but I’ll tell you about it when we get back. Rupert’s expecting a call.” Putting the phone down after a mutual exchange of platitudes and farewells, Ethan hands the cordless device to Rupert, who sets it down beside him and asks, “Something happened to Xander?”

“Broken arm. Troll.” Ethan lifts his drink, abandoned when the phone rang. So many wonderful beers just haven’t made it to the new world yet. “Standard Sunnydale really.”

“Was it sent by Glory?” Rupert asks.

“Escaped from a crystal in the shop.”

“You had a Troll Crystal in the shop?!”

“A conversation piece! I wasn’t going to sell it!”

“Ethan, why –” The phone rings. Rupert scowls at it then scoops it up and retreats to the bedroom, leaving Ethan alone in their living area section of their hotel suite. Ethan isn’t sure if his partner is really in a huff over one little troll god, or if the call is likely to be confidential. Probably the latter; at some point in their childhoods, the Council higher ups seem to have read too many Boy’s Own Papers, and nothing that could possibly be coded and flanked by secret handshakes isn’t.

Ethan drinks his beer and watches the rain make a smeared mural of the Christmas lights across the streets. It’s turned out to be a wise move, booking a complex of B and B style rooms complete with a utility area, rather than just a double bed: it’s miserable outside and they’ve stayed in more than they’d originally planned, only venturing out twice between Rupert’s Council meetings to catch up with friends.

It’s a little disorientating, having to think about hotels in London, when it still feels like the home they shared here is waiting for them. Ethan has found himself thinking of that little, now-sold terraced house with its magnolia tree in the front garden more during this visit than he has for years in Sunnydale.

“You’re taking phone calls from the bedroom” Ethan comments as Rupert returns. “Should I be worried?”

“That was Quinten Travers.”

“I’m not worried.”

Rupert leans over Ethan’s chair, wrapping his arms around him. “How would you feel about extending our trip? Just by a few days.”

Ethan twists to look at him. “They’ve found something?”

“They’ve moved my meeting with the research department, so I assume so” Rupert explains. “I’m
not sure if they’ll actually share anything helpful with me, of course, or if this will just be more quizzing.”

Ethan scowls and asks, “Well, when are they ever helpful?”

“More than you give them credit for” replies Rupert wearily. “They do rather have a vested interest in the world not ending.” Pulling away and taking his seat again, he admits, “Not that they’ll tell us everything they know until after they’ve followed us back to Sunnydale.”

“Oh gods, Rupert, please tell me they won’t be on the same flight.”

Rupert waves a dismissive hand. “They’ll use the Gamayun.”

“How flattering.” Ethan is surprised: The Council don’t use their largest private jet unless the matter is of highest importance. “What will they do in Sunnydale?”

“An assessment, apparently” Rupert grinds out.

“Well, if that’s the hoop they want to wave before they help us, I suppose the best thing to do is let them.” Ethan frowns. “I won’t have to talk to them, will I?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“Good. Even better.”
“Arrive?” Buffy repeats as soon as Giles breaks the news to the children. “They’re coming here? Now?”

“You said they wouldn’t” chimes in Faith. “You said you’d go to them and we’d stay out of it.”

“I assumed they’d give me the information in person while I was there” Giles tells her. “But they decided to do more research first.” And see for themselves what two slayers and an unofficial watcher get up to without the support of the wider Council, of course, but he refrains from mentioning that just yet.

“Don’t they have phones?” Xander is asking.

Giles lets the group react to the news for a moment or so, working through shock and concern before arriving at…well, just concern really. Perhaps it will be a useful wakeup call for the delegation to see the reaction the Council inspires in those at the business end of the fight against evil. But who is he kidding with that hope?

Ethan, meanwhile, is sitting back and letting the conversation flow around him. Enjoying the freely-voiced opposition to the Council, no doubt. He catches Giles’ eye and smirks. Giles glares at him.

Then Dawn’s voice sounds in the hallway, and Buffy’s worry – ever present these days, poor girl – briefly shifts its focus from the watchers to her sister.

“Does it matter?” asks Willow. “I mean, is she really gonna set the junior high school buzzing with Ooh, there’s a delegation a-coming?”

“Exactly” Ethan puts in. “We weren’t talking about anything, um, nightmare-inducing.”

Buffy seems reassured, but the room has, nonetheless, been seamlessly divided into the half who know and the half who don’t. Giles finds himself mentally checking over what has been said – Did they mention the Key while Dawn was listening? – until Buffy prompts him to return to the topic of the incoming delegation. The lack of horror from upstairs reassures him that Dawn continues to assume she is a human child the same as any other, for now at least.

“Faith…Faith, I think that’s…Faith, stop!” Giles takes a hasty step back as the punches register through the padding.

“Sorry” Faith offers grudgingly, backing off herself and pacing. In this mood, she is like a big cat on the prowl.
Giles sheds the padding. “Well, I think they’ll be impressed with your hand to hand.”

“What, do they want to know about my hand to hand? They’re here to freak us all out a bit, tell us what they know and leave again, right?”

“So far as I know.” Giles stacks the protective gear in a cupboard. Beyond the door, the shop sounds busy; he hopes the sound of their training session didn’t disturb any customers. “I know they’ll conduct an assessment – presumably of our research so far – and I imagine they plan to formalise my role somewhat before they trust me to oversee whatever you and Buffy need to do with the information they have.”

“Yeah, if they give it.” Faith stops pacing, hops up on to the vaulting horse and crosses her legs. “You think they’ll start paying you again?”

“I don’t have high hopes of that” Giles admits.

“Well, what about…What’s that?” Faith hops down from her perch.

Frowning as he registers the commotion her slayer senses picked up on before it grew, Giles follows her into the shop.

“— no need to do this” Ethan is telling Quentin Travers as a group of people in suits herd the customers out the door. “Rupert!” Ethan abandons Travers and hurries over. “Rupert, tell them!”

From behind the counter, Anya adds, “They’re scaring away the customers, Giles!”

“Quentin” Giles asks, “What’s going on?”

“They’re shutting down the shop, is what!” Ethan leaves Giles’ side to slide closer to the ladder to the restricted section. “Travers, in case you hadn’t noticed, you’re a long way from London! You don’t get to snap your fingers and get your way here.”

In answer, Travers glances round the shop, now empty but for the regiment of watchers, some of whom are now taking items from the shelves and examining them. Ethan sighs his frustration and inches closer to the ladder.

Hastily sidestepping himself and taking Ethan’s arm, Giles tries, “Quentin, other than the training room in the back, the slayers and I have nothing to do with the shop. And even if we did, I fail to see why closing it is necessary.”

“We need use of your training area for our review, Rupert” replies Travers, “And we’ll doubtless be discussing matters that aren’t for public ears.” To Ethan, he adds, “It’s just for the duration of our stay. There’s no need to make fuss.”

“A fuss?” Ethan tugs a little but Giles maintains his grip on his partner’s arm. “You come into my shop and clear out my customers, what did you think would happen?”

“You can leave Ethan out of this” Giles adds, “You can use the back room but you’ve no right to shut his business down.”

“As I said, just for the duration of our review.”

“Review?” asks Faith. She has, Giles noticed, slunk behind the counter and is now standing next to Anya with her arms folded. “What review?”
“Miss Lehane, lovely to see you” greets Travers. Turning back to Giles, he asks, “Why don’t we sit down?”

“Because it’s not your shop” says Ethan.

Travers ignores him and takes a seat at the table. Around them, the nameless watchers busy themselves making tea and digging out papers from briefcases.

Before Ethan can inch any closer to the restricted section, Giles steps around him, baring his way, and murmurs, “I am sorry about this, Ethan. Look, how about you and Anya go and get an early lunch and I’ll see if I can talk them round?”

Ethan casts a final, pointed glance at the restricted section before responding: “Ah, yes, because the watchers’ council is famous for its responsiveness and flexibility. Did you know they were coming here, to the shop?”

“No. I promise.”

Ethan studies him for a moment and, apparently reassured, steps back. “Right. See you later, Rupert. Anya, come on – we’re going to Willy’s.”

“We are?” Anya scurries around the counter, talking loudly. “Because I was thinking the Doublemeat Palace. Growing up in south eastern Indiana, I used to go there all the time with my mother and my father, because, you see, we all lived in the same house and –”

“Yes” mutters Ethan, “Most convincing, but even the council aren’t enough to drive me to that dive.” To Giles, he says, “Don’t let them steal my stock.”

Travers chuckles as they leave. “Your friend seems to think we’re petty criminals, Rupert.”

“Fiancé” says Giles. “Are you telling me you don’t plan to confiscate anything?”

“Not unless we find anything dangerous. Take a seat. Faith – come join us.”

Faith responds with all the promptness of one who spent half a year learning Council protocol. Halfway to the table, she stops and flinches, catching herself at it. Giles offers the smallest of nods and she continues, reluctantly now, to the table.

As she sits down opposite Travers, Giles tells the other watchers, “You all stand around and look sombre.” He takes a seat, gratified at Faith’s small smile. “Good job.”

“You used to respect us, Giles.” Travers reminds him.

“Yeah” says Faith, “Maybe until you called his fiancé his friend. What’s with that? You guys have a problem with two guys fu –”

“Thank you, Faith” cuts in Giles. “Now, about this review?” “Yes” Travers accepts a cup of tea from a tweed-clad young woman. They still have the ladies on tea duty then, Giles notes. Some things never change. He wonders if this woman is a potential who was never called, but on further glance notices the broach at her collar, a family coat of arms – she’s a Hobson-Post, and brave to wear the family crest in view of Gwendolyn’s actions.

“Lovely” Travers murmurs, setting the tea aside. Finally, he explains, “We have information on Glory, some of it vital. The rest, merely extremely disturbing. And it won’t be handed over until we’re convinced that you and your slayers are prepared for it. Thus, the review.”
“Not another test” Giles tells him, reigning in anger for Faith’s sake. “You’re not putting them through anything like the cruciamentum.”

“It’s not a test.” Travers insists, “We simply need to know that this information, if handed over, would be safe.”

“Safe?” repeats Faith. She glances at Giles. “Look, I am safe. I’ve been fighting with Buffy ever since I got back. Side by side with, I mean. And you guys can trust B – you’re crazy if you think you can’t!”

“I don’t mean merely safe from deliberate misuse, Miss Lehane, though that is an aspect of the review –”

“Nonsense” cuts in Giles, “If you thought Faith was working for Glory, you’d have been here weeks ago.”

“Service to Glory isn’t the only temptation in Sunnydale for those who’ve proven themselves inclined to give in to the lure of supernatural powers, Giles, and you well know it. But that isn’t the main focus of the review: We’re mainly here to look at both slayers’ methods. In your voluntary position, you’ve been less than prompt with your reports, and of course these have only pertained to Miss Lehane.”

“Because Buffy quit the Council” says Faith. “But this isn’t about who’s in and who’s not, it’s about how we defeat the Queen of the Skanks.”

“Quite” agrees Giles. “Glory poses a real threat and we need to know how to stop her, regardless of what you think about how I’ve trained the girls.”

“We are talking about the fruits of weeks of research using the Council’s most valuable books. It can’t be handed over to just anyone.”

“It won’t be” Giles argues. “It will be handed over to the people on the front line of the fight!”

“Yeah” adds Faith, “The ones who need it.”

“Hm. People.” Travers sets down his tea and pulls a pen from his jacket pocket, makes a note. “The people who so regularly join you in the fight will be another thing we look into. Civilians in the slayers’ inner circle; it’s most unorthodox, Rupert.”

Ignoring the undermining intended in that slip into cosy first name terms, Giles asks, “Look into them how?”

“Nothing drastic.” Travers smiles. “We’ll talk to them.”

“Talk to Anya?” Faith asks with a frown.

“And Ethan?” asks Giles.

“Naturally.”

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“What?”

“Ethan, I know I said –”
“You said I wouldn’t have to talk to them, and now they’re going to interview me from the shop they invaded?!”

“They haven’t invaded it, Eth.”

“Well they’re there and I’m not, correct? That seems like an invasion to me!”

“It’s temporary. But I am sorry.”

Ethan fixes him with a scowl that isn’t entirely free of suspicion, and mutters something about his demon customers.

“The wards are still in place” Giles reminds him. “And stay in place at least until they leave.”

“And when is that?”

“After they’ve done this blasted review.” Giles sits down on the sofa, breaking eye contact so that Ethan can’t see the full extent of his anger. The last thing Buffy and Faith need now is for him to inadvertently give Ethan licence to misbehave.

Licence, apparently, is not needed, because Ethan, sitting down beside him, asks, “How about a truth spell? Make them tell us everything they know about Glory?” He smiles thoughtfully and adds, “And possibly one or two national scandals as well.”

“They’ve already threatened to deport me” Giles replies, still not meeting his partner’s eye, as though the matter is of no importance, as though it is a routine thing to be threatened with deportation by the organisation that has enabled one’s entire career. “Do you think they won’t be able to tell they’ve been put under a spell?”

“Not if we change their memories.”

“We’re talking about the Council of Watchers. They’ll have wards.”

“Something to counter the wards then?”

“Ethan”

“Alright, I know. That does all smack of control rather. Besides” He pats Giles on the back “your slayers will dazzle them, I’m sure.”

There is a knock on the door and Ethan, rising and peering out the window before opening it, says, “Speak of the devils. Or one of them.”

“Who’s the other devil?” Buffy wanders in.

“Faith.”

“Oh. So you’re already on the slayer talk.”

“I was just telling Ethan about the review” Giles explains.

Heading into the kitchen, Ethan says, “I have to talk to them. I hate doing that. Tea?”

“Think how I feel” murmurs Buffy. “And no thanks to the tea. It’s kind of reminding me of a certain tweedy guy who isn’t my watcher at the moment.”
“Dear Quentin?” Ethan leans back through the internal window “Try going to his niece’s wedding with all his tweedy relations and then coming home and shagging Rupert.”

“I’ll pass.” Buffy sits down, and tells Giles, “Faith’s freaking.”

“Oh” Giles sits up a little straighter. “Um. Freaking as in…?”

“Not joining forces with Glory, skipping town freaking, but there’s definite freak-out vibes. She keeps going from scared she won’t be able to do what they say to really not wanting to do what they say. I kind of feel bad for the vampires we met on patrol.”

“Should I talk to her?”

“And tell her your master plan for making them just tell us what they know and then go away?” Noting Giles’ resigned expression, Buffy concludes, “No, I didn’t think so. Giles, why are they even doing this? It’s not like they can fight Glory themselves if they decide not to trust us.”

Ethan mutters, “But I’d like to see them try.”

“Me too” admits Buffy. “Sort of. But they can’t, so what if we fail? They just don’t tell us anything and go home – what’s the point in that?”

“I have some theories” says Ethan darkly, and then moves off back into the kitchen without sharing them. Giles watches him emerge with three beers and accepts one gratefully. He takes a swig and then wishes it were stronger.

“Care to share?” Buffy accepts her own beer and sets it firmly away from her on the coffee table.

“Not especially” Ethan sits down with his own drink.

“So being annoyingly unforthcoming is an English thing?”

“Gods, don’t compare me to them” Ethan mutters. When Buffy continues to stare at him, he explains, “I was just going to go into what prats they are.”

“Already got that memo.” Buffy turns back to Giles. “I’m guessing they can have you deported? Like they did with Ethan.”

“Well I came back, didn’t I?” Ethan points out. “If they deport us both, it could be like a holiday.”

“Not a great time for you guys to take one” Buffy points out.

“No” agrees Giles. “And as for what they did to Ethan, they could have done it again if they wanted to. The only reason they didn’t retaliate when you came back, Eth, is because they’d already achieved what they wanted – you were inconvenience and I was put in my place. It was a power play, just like this review is.” He holds his bottle in one fist and channels his rage into the other, feeling it tremble at his side.

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Of course it’s Quentin-bloody-Travers who interviews him. Everyone else gets Philip or one of the other lackeys, but Ethan has to sit down – in his own shop – and answer inane questions from this puffed up, pompous, narrow-minded git.

“Rayne?”
“Hm? Sorry, I was distracted by” (how much of an idiot you are) “something”

“I asked you how often the slayers require you to do magic for them?”

“Oh, not often. The very occasional ward or reveal. Really it’s –” Ethan stops himself. Best not to draw the attention of these self-important twits to Willow. The prospect of another young woman with power might well put them in early graves but, tempting as that is, it will also inconvenience Willow no end.

“Have you ever performed chaos magic for them?”

“No. Sunnydale has chaos aplenty without my intervention.” Ethan studiously ignores the raised eyebrow this provokes from Rupert, who is seated over by the bookshelf and continues, “But really, what would it matter if I had? If you’re trying to work out how good Buffy and Faith are, I’d have thought the answer can be found in the fact that they’re still alive and the hellmouth is still closed.”

Rupert nods slightly while pretending to read and utters a small, “Quite.”

Travers glowers. “Our intentions are none of your concern. But you feel confident in the slayers’ abilities?”

Ethan shrugs. Travers and Rupert both scowl at that and he grins. You can’t fault neutrality when it comes to winding people up. Travers tries, “You’ve seen them in battle?”

“In all their glory. Not that ‘glory’s the right word these days, I suppose. Tell me, if you do end up deeming the girls wanting, what then? Fight Glory yourself?”

“That’s not your concern. Now –”

“Send the special ops team, perhaps?” Ethan goes on, grinning slowly as Travers tenses. “Take the current pawns off the chess board and wait for a new one to rise. Someone well behaved this time. That’s it, isn’t it? Because it will take a slayer to stop Glory, but there’s always more of them waiting in the wings, isn’t there?”

Rupert is staring openly now, not at him, but at Travers. Ethan honestly doesn’t know if he’s hit on the truth or just wound the old git up: The Council would kill two slayers without even cancelling the annual croquet match out of respect, but whether Travers would be directly involved, Ethan is less certain.

And Travers is giving nothing away, of course. He regards Ethan coldly. “If you’re in doubt that the Council has resources at its disposal besides the slayers, Rayne, I could always arrange a demonstration.”

“Could you now?”

Rupert switches his gaze sharply. “Ethan”

Ethan rolls his eyes: trust Rupert to worry. Much as they might posture, the council would never kill him. A slayer, maybe, but they’ve practically trained themselves not to think of slayers as human. A human, maybe, but someone who is both living with one of their own and not a direct threat, well, they are a little too squeamish for that. Or most of them are.

Not to mention, having him around makes them feel so morally superior. And probably secretly tantalises them, come to think of it. Or perhaps it is fear of how much of a scene he’d kick up if
they fail on the first attempt: the stories he could tell about old Quentin’s nephew…

Not that they would fail the first attempt if it did come down to it, not really. So if he’s gone too far, Ethan thinks, he might as well tell those stories now. He smiles at the thought, but then realises that Quentin does look rather angry right this moment, and so does Rupert.

Perhaps safest to leave that reminiscing for another time.

*****

Faith is quiet as Travers explains – as though to five year olds, Giles notes – that the two slayers are to take it in turns to protect the dummy, which has been dragged from a corner of the training room for the job. Buffy is to go first, and Faith watches impassively as a blindfold is placed over her sister-slayer’s eyes. Giles wonders if this was how she was in England; respect conveyed through a self-preserving silence which hid her true thoughts safely away and which she hasn’t needed to use since her return.

That theory seems a little less likely when Travers mentions the Japanese instructions, and Faith bursts out, “Oh come on! Japanese?! If we wanted to speak Japanese we’d go to Japanesia!”

“…And begin” says one of the junior watchers who line the room, starting a stopwatch. Buffy’s polite protestations are cancelled out by Faith’s “Giles, come on! Tell them!” Stepping forward, she intercepts Philip’s bow, gently but firmly levering him upright as he glares at her. Next, she peels the blindfold off Buffy’s face. “What is this a language class?”

“Evidently not” murmurs Travers.

“Faith” whispers Buffy, “We have studied –”

“Yeah, but not languages!”

Travers turns to Giles. “You’ve not taught them Japanese?”

“I didn’t need to” Giles replies. “As Faith says, the hellmouth isn’t in Japan” (Faith rolls her eyes) “and a second human language wouldn’t be any use to two people bound to protect this small corner of California.”

“Demon languages then?” Travers turns to Buffy and Faith. “You are familiar with Sloguthrian? Or Nu’ahik?” At their blank stares, he turns back to Giles. Giles wishes he could feel the indignant anger that has flavoured the world since the Council’s arrival, but some long-buried academy-tinged memory has him floundering to justify his performance as though he has just received a bad grade for a Sumerian paper. “Well, hundreds of demon species are drawn to the hellmouth! I could teach them Nu’ahik and they’ll meet something that speaks Fluuvosian, or visa versa. Besides” regaining some of the familiar rage “I’ve taught them to fight! Not to jump through hoops in some artificial controlled test!”

“So, the slayers are lacking in basic language skills” concludes Travers.

“Um” says Buffy, “Standing right here. Talking and everything.”

Ignoring her, Travers asks Giles, “Are there any other parts of the curriculum you’ve decided to do away with?”

“Oh, fuck this” mutters Faith. Picking up an axe, she slices the dummy’s straw filled bowels open on the way out the room.
“Faith!” Buffy takes a step towards the slammed door.

“Buffy” Giles intercedes quickly – it wouldn’t do for Travers to think that Faith can be controlled only by another slayer – “Stay here. Take your turn defending, um” He eyes the mangled dummy “that.”

Heading into the main shop – mercifully not followed – he spots Faith pacing on the pavement outside. Hurrying out, he quickly hides his hurry when she turns to look at him, leans in the doorway and greets her with, “Officially, I should reprimand you for your attitude in there. Unofficially, bravo.”

Faith turns away. “You getting sick of them too?”

“I’ve been getting sick of them since the seventies.” Giles comes to stand beside her. They watch a handful of midday shoppers wind their way from the bookshop to the hardware store. Giles comments, “They’re not just testing your physical prowess, you know. It’s also your ability to, um…”

“To not make a scene?”

“Well, yes.”

“I’m gonna fail, then. I’m a scene maker.”

“Faith, in the past year, you’ve proven yourself capable of self-control. Show them that.”

Faith’s fingers twitch. Giles wonders if she is craving a cigarette – he hasn’t seen her smoke, but thinking about it, she is bound to – or something to punch. Wonders if he ought to take a step back, but knows that that is the last thing she needs and stays exactly where he is, at her side.

After flexing her fingers out into claws, then back into fists, and chewing ferociously at her lip for a moment, Faith declares, “I’m not going to do the self-control thing for them. I’m sorry and all but they’re just not worth it.”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy” Giles murmurs.

“What now?”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy – they think you’re unable to control your temper so you take offence and lose control of your temper.” He looks at her. “Or you could prove them wrong.”

“Imagine that’d piss them off” Faith admits, grudgingly.

Sensing an advantage, Giles glances back inside to check for eavesdroppers before saying, “This is for Dawn, you know. And, by extension, Joyce.”

“Yeah” says Faith, with a heavy sigh. She watches the passing cars and people for a moment longer before sighing again and turning back to the shop. “Then let’s go prove them wrong, I guess.”

*****

“At least they’ve left this section alone” Ethan whispers when, seated in the restricted section with their legs hanging down into the shop, the scoobies commiserate with him over his manhandled shop. “Rupert managed to convince them it’s just extra storage up here.”
“There is that” Xander agrees.

“An-and at least it’s nearly over” says Tara.

“Yes” says Anya, “But nearly over and they give us the information, or nearly over and we’re all about to be eaten by Glory?”

“Be fair” Ethan tells her. “We’ve no proof she eats people. She might just eviscerate us or turn us to vapour.”

Tara flinches. “I-I’m usually all for having an inquiring mind, b-but I’d really rather not think about that.”

“It’s okay, baby” says Willow. Slipping into a whisper, she says, “They’ll give us the information. I mean, we all answered their questions and Buffy said the physical tests went okay after they agreed to speak English.”

“I bet they were all judgmental about that though” says Anya quietly. “Academic occultists love their demonic languages.” A little louder, she adds, “Not that I’d know anything about demon languages. We don’t hold with that demon nonsense in Indiana.”

“Ahn” murmurs Xander, “You ever heard of overkill?”

“When someone wishes their ex could be killed but then resurrected and killed again a different way? Ye – ah – nope. Never heard of it.” Anya watches the watchers below them, swinging one leg nervously.

The slayers are getting late, Ethan notes. Travers is fidgeting irritably, and Rupert looks worried.

“It will be fine” Tara is saying, her voice dropping further still. “The-they want to stop Glory, don’t they? They can’t fight her, but Buffy and Faith can.”

“Yeah” says Xander, “and failing that, Buffy and Faith can fight them.”

“Except not really” Anya says. “Human morality clause.”

“Right, that.”

“Bugger of a thing” agrees Ethan.

“Or” says Willow quietly, “We could use magic.” Glancing down at the watchers, she whispers, “I mean, it would be for the common good, right?”

“Sweetie” whispers Tara, “If you’re thinking mind control –”

“Well, what are the options?” Willow glances behind her at the books of darker magic, and Ethan wonders if she’s ready to be up here, after all. “If they don’t tell us what we need to know to stop Glory –”

“Let’s give them a chance, Will” murmurs Xander. “They might be shop invaders but they kind of are the good guys. The snobby but good guys.”

“Yeah” mutters Anya, “On paper and if you squint.”

“But mind control is never the answer” insists Tara.
“Not ever?” Willow whispers, “Not even to defeat Glory?”

“We’d get the information another way” says Tara.

Willow turns to Ethan. “You’re with me, right? It would be for the greater good.”

“It’s not really my style” Ethan reminds her.

“Come on, you’re not even a little bit tempted?”

“No” lies Ethan. “Not even a little bit.”

Before Willow can reply, Buffy walks in, carrying a sword of all things, and without Faith. Faith, it transpires, is at home guarding Buffy’s family after a visit from Glory. Buffy is, if anything, invigorated by this latest encounter with death in a red dress, and manages to explain Faith’s task without hinting at Dawn’s nature effortlessly, before launching into a speech about exactly what role in her life the council should play. Watching her assert herself, Ethan has to admit the girl has her moments. It’s an admittance made easier by the fact that he’s had to compete with the council for Rupert’s attention much longer than he’s had to compete with her. And everything Buffy has to say to old Quentin is perfectly true, of course. Sometimes the girl really is every bit as brilliant as Rupert always insists she is. Ethan tries not to grin too obviously.
“So it won’t actually keep her out?” Ethan asks, watching the young witches prepare something not dissimilar to a barrier spell.

“No” admits Willow. “As far as I know, there isn’t a barrier spell that will work on a god, but this will give us some warning.”

“And we’ll keep researching something stronger” adds Tara. “Will any of the books in the shop have anything for that?”

Ethan shakes his head. “We can look, but I don’t think we have any handy anti-god hexes.”

“Then we’ll just have to invent some” says Willow, pouring the last of her sand.

Tara looks a little alarmed by that, but says nothing besides, “How’s the revised protection spell going?”

“Fine” replies Ethan, kneeling to light a candle. “But again, nothing that will stop Glory.”

“I’m still not sure letting demons back in is the best move” says Willow with a frown.

“Some of my best customers are demons” Ethan reasons. “Plus it’ll mean Spike can get in if we need extra muscle to protect Da – err – the Key. Hello, Dawn.” The girl is approaching from across the street, greeting them with a remarkably normal smile. Ethan returns it and does his best not to let Willow and Tara’s nerves affect him: Buffy chose last night to tell her friends who Dawn really is, and the news is still raw and has the witches stammering until Dawn heads inside. Ethan can’t really blame them, so he says nothing and concentrates on his spell as they complete their own, various protection spells and warning systems thrown up to the sky like so many futile prayers.

*****

“She’s even less entertaining than we thought” Ethan glances over the sample of the reams of notes the council handed over that are currently scattered across Giles’ desk.

“Yes” Giles rubs at his forehead. “She’s certainly…one of the worst things Buffy has faced. And the worst thing Faith has faced, though don’t tell either of them I said that. It wouldn’t do them any good.”

“I suspect they may have worked it out in any case.” Ethan offers a smile that doesn’t quite take, and adds, “Come on, off you go. Hell gods can wait but Buffy’s birthday can’t.”

Giles smiles. “Yes. Thank you for, err, for picking out a present.”

Ethan shrugs. “I’m good at gift buying and crap at wrapping, you’re crap at buying and good at wrapping. It’s one way to tell we’re made for each other.”

“Now you’re just being sentimental.”

“We’ve a hell god after us: I’ll be as sentimental as I please.”

Giles frowns. Tempted as he is to try to reassure Ethan, he doubts he’ll manage. “Yes, well. Perhaps not the best statement, from a morale perspective.”
Ethan hands him his coat. “There’s no-one here but us, love. Say happy birthday from me.”

“You’d be welcome to come, you know.”

“I know. But – things to do.”

Giles nods. He knows what Ethan’s planning, and he doesn’t like it. Especially not here. But best to say nothing and let his partner get on with it, unless it actively causes trouble. Which it might. “Alright. I’ll see you later.”

*****

When Giles returns, Ethan is still in the sacred circle he’s drawn on the living room floor, deep into the trance and surrounded by an aura of magic. He gives no sign that he’s noticed Giles’ presence. He sits very still, the calm, black-eyed centre of magic that has the room trembling, shifting the paper on the desk and humming round the rims of the glasses on the sideboard in the kitchen. A book on the coffee table flips open, pages riffled by a non-existent breeze. Giles takes a cautious step closer, aware that it is unwise to interrupt and judging that quietly sitting down is probably the best course, not to mention what he actually wants to do after the way Buffy’s party ended. Poor Buffy.

Easing himself into an armchair, thoughts still on his slayer, Giles flinches when Ethan suddenly grabs his arm. Ethan’s blank-eyed gaze swings his way and a decidedly menacing smile lights his lover’s face. Giles whispers, “Ethan?” Ethan’s grin widens. “Hello, killer.” The voice is not Ethan’s own, but something ancient and flowing.

Giles recoils. It is as if something – whatever is in Ethan – has reached into his soul and pulled out the very worst thing, the very thing he would least want to be defined by. Excuses, explanations, gather on his tongue – he was young, scared, foolish, Eyghon would have killed them all – and die unsaid. What would this creature care?

What is this creature? Cautiously, flinching as Ethan’s grip on his arm tightens, Giles hazards, “Janus?”

Ethan laughs, or rather, something laughs. A disarmingly innocent sound. The hand on Giles’ arm heats rapidly to an unbearable point and Giles gasps, tries to pull away before –

And the spell breaks. Suddenly the magic crawling the room is gone and Ethan slumps back, raises a hand to rub his brow. Giles finds his arm is unburnt and takes Ethan’s hand, pulls it closer to examine it. Ethan frowns. “Rupert. Hello.”

“You’re alright.” Giles releases the hand.

“Well yes.” Ethan looks puzzled. “I wasn’t expecting you back so soon.”

“Nor was I” Giles replies. He pauses, unsure what to say about what just transpired, and settling on nothing. It would just drag up unpleasant memories, and since Ethan is unharmed, it is best not to dwell. Instead he says, “Dawn found out that she’s the Key. She’s very upset, understandably.” He runs a hand over his face. “She’s with Buffy and Joyce now.”

“Oh.” Ethan picks himself up off the floor and joins him on the sofa. “Well that would put a dampener on the celebrations.”

“Yes. I suppose she was going to find out eventually.” Glancing at Ethan, Giles adds, “She found my notes – I left them in the shop.”
“Ah. Still, as you say, she had to find out eventually. Better to hear about it from your notes than from Glory showing up to claim her.”

“I suppose so. But still…” Better to hear about it from someone being honest with her. But how could they be? How does one tell a child her existence is a lie? Forcing himself not to think about that (It does no good), Giles says, “Buffy says thank you for the locket, by the way.”

“I thought she’d like it” says Ethan. “I have a great talent for picking out jewellery, you know.”

Giles smiles, thinking of but not mentioning that cursed ring Ethan gave him for his ill-fated birthday of ’86. It is a welcome distraction after the events of the night, but he is dragged back to the most recent of these when Ethan crouches and begins to clean up the remnants of the sacred circle. Watching, Giles asks, “What did Janus have to say for himself?”

Ethan gives him an uh-oh-caught-out sort of look. “How’d you know I consulting Janus? I could have been casting anything.”

“I know that look you get. I do wish you’d done it at the shop – you could have intercepted Dawn aside from anything else.”

“And she’d have interrupted us. Or anyone else could have.”

“Especially now that demons can wander in again” Giles supposes.

“Look, this is my home too, you know” Ethan gripes. “I can pray here if I want.”

“It’s more than a prayer” Giles counters, but lets the matter of location drop to ask, “So. Where does he stand on Glory? If they’re allies…” Giles doesn’t want to finish that thought. Much as he feels more or less assured that Ethan would pick him over Janus, it would be so much better if…

“Oh, he never likes the scarier demon-dimension divas or I’d have asked him sooner. This was just good manners really; checking in.”

“And it was definitely him that you, err, checked in with?”

“Obviously it was him, Rupert. Hard person to mistake.”

A killer in the eyes of Janus, then. Giles relaxes a little. Janus is not an entity whose opinion he particularly values. “Good. So you won’t be aligning yourself against Chaos if you use magic against her?”

“Nope. No chaos demons coming to get me – I even earn myself brownie points, what with the Key really being chaotic rather than evil. Glory’s got no rights over it.” Ethan sighs. “On the other hand, if I help you fight her, I might be, say, murdered horribly.”

“Welcome to Sunnydale.”

“I know, but this feels worse.”

“I don’t suppose Janus told you how it ends?”

“He doesn’t really go in for premonitions and forewarnings, love.”

“No, that’d be far too convenient and organised. What about weaknesses? Any way to fight Glory?”
Ethan gives him an odd look. “You think Gods go around just casually telling people how to kill them, love?”

“I thought they weren’t allies?”

“No, but they are both Gods.” Ethan frowns.

“So, nothing useful at all, then?”

Ethan looks a little put out. “Oh, give over. I’d like to see your Church of England deity riding in to save us. At least mine picks up the phone. Metaphorically speaking.”

There’s a lot Giles could say to that, but he leaves it for now. Keeping the conversation civil he says, “Well, I’m glad you can use your magic against her at least.”

“Me too. Though I suspect I’ll be playing second fiddle to Willow.”

Giles frowns. “Well, however it works out. The more of you to share that burden the better, so far as I can see.” Yet he still shudders to think of the potential cost to all of them.

*****

“We should have told her sooner” declares Faith the following day in the Magic Box. “Could have avoided all this drama.”

“I think there was always going to be drama” says Ethan.

“Yeah” says Willow. “It’s a lot for her to get her head around.”

“I was going to tell her when she was older” Buffy tells Faith, with just the slightest hint of an emphasis on the I – this is still her sister, for all Faith has a not dissimilar honorary role. Addressing the group, she adds, “We need to know more about the Key. Something that’ll give Dawn answers about who she is.”

“Or was” says Anya, “before the monks came along and squished her into a human shape.”

“And maybe don’t put it like that around her” says Ethan, noting Buffy’s troubled expression. Xander sees it too, and looks a little shamefaced on behalf of his girlfriend, but Anya, busy rearranging things on a shelf behind the counter, doesn’t see it.

“I’m not sure we can offer further answers just yet” Rupert tells Buffy. “If we thought there was limited information on Glory, we’ve even less about the Key.”

Anya makes a disgusted noise, and Rupert adds, “I know it’s frustrating.”

“Not that” Anya is focused on something on the shelf that has her wrinkle her nose as she lifts it. “Someone’s been using the Urn of Ishtar as an ashtray.” She holds out the offending item.

“It wasn’t me” says Faith.

“No” says Rupert. “I think we all know who it was.”

Buffy is already looking murderous. Ethan just has time to feel sorry for Spike before the look is turned his way. “Ethan, if you hadn’t lifted the demon-barrier…”

“…Then Spike would have just waited outside” finishes Rupert gently.
There is a tense pause before Buffy admits, “I guess.” She stands abruptly. “He is so going to pay.”

As she heads out the door, Anya asks, “Pay for the urn, right? Because it won’t be able to channel anything now.”

“You might just have to be happy nothing else is broken, mood B’s in” Faith tells her. “Are you guys okay to research? ’Cause I mainly just tagged along to use the training room. Way Dawn’s been acting since this all went down, I’m about ready to work off some tension.”

“You’re not going to follow Buffy and hit Spike?” Xander asks.

“Nah, B will hit him enough for both of us.”

Understandably, but also very recklessly, Dawn goes missing that evening. Giles, aware that he himself ran away at a slightly less tender age for a much less devastating reason, feels nothing but concern for the child, along with a desperate need to find her. It is a need shared by all of them, even, apparently, by Spike, whom Buffy dragged to the Magic Box to join the search, but who doesn’t complain about the dragging.

Before Buffy can divide the town into portions for them all to search, Ethan produces a rolled-up map from under the counter. “Or” he says, “We do a location spell.”

“Or that” says Buffy, and helps him clear the counter, lay the map flat.

After a few moments of concentration on Ethan’s part and silent impatience on everyone else’s, a green pinpoint of light appears amid the paler green of the map that denotes the park.

“Great” mutters Buffy, her tone a mixture of annoyance and fear. “Couldn’t she pick a less vampy place?”

“In this town?” says Anya.

“There are vampires everywhere” Faith states. “What, did you think she’d be in a church?”

“She’ll be on the move” Willow says, “I don’t think she’s going to want to sit down on a park bench by herself at night.”

“Yeah” says Tara, “She’s heading somewhere.”

“I guess” Buffy murmurs, eyes still on the green dot. When it vanishes, she gasps, and demands, “What does that mean?”

“Just the spell wearing off” Ethan reassures her.

“Right.” Buffy nods, still looking at where the green light was. “Right, let’s get to the park. If she’s moved on by the time we get there, Spike can track her scent.” She heads for the door. “Let’s get her home.”

“What I want to know” says Faith the next day, “is how come Glory was at the hospital?” She feints to the left and knocks the dummy into Buffy’s path, as her sister slayer advances on her, club in hand. Giles, leaning against the vaulting horse to observe a training session that has somewhat escaped his authority, replies, “It must be a coincidence.”
“Yep” Buffy steps neatly over the dummy and swings the club at Faith, who knocks the blow aside with her own. “That or she was reading to sick people.”

Giles comments, “We’d be naïve to think she doesn’t have a watch on your home.”

Buffy swings the club in a killing sweep, pulls it back at the last moment. Faith, looking somewhat put out at her untimely death, drops her weapon to the ground and hoists herself on to the vaulting horse, crosses her legs. “We should get Spike to spy on her spies while he spying on you, B.”

Giles glances from slayer to slayer. “Spying on you?”

Buffy has picked up the fallen club and puts both weapons away in the cabinet. “Some weird Spike thing. And, Faith, how do you know he’s not spying on you?”

Faith shrugs. “Whichever. All I know is he’s got a slayer fixation and your tree out the front’s growing out an ashtray these days.”

Buffy joins them, leaning against the wall to say, “I so don’t have time for Spike’s issues right now. If he wants to hang around, fine: it gives us a bloodhound if Dawn takes off again.” Her expression sobers. “Which she better not.”

“She seems to be over the worst of the shock” Giles tells her.

“Yeah” rejoins Faith, “Now she’s on to the shock of hanging out with Glory and watching Willow teleport her.”

In all honesty, Giles was still processing some shock over the latter himself. Not so much the teleportation – though that was a monstrously ambitious spell – but the chill he had felt when Willow had collapsed as Glory vanished. “Yes, well” he finds himself saying, “it was necessary under the circumstances.” And would he, he asks himself, accept the same necessity if it were Ethan doing the magic?

Possibly Buffy is thinking along the same lines, because she meets his eyes for a moment before looking away, stares pensively at the prone dummy.

Faith looks from one to the other of them and declares, “Look, she’ll be fine. Kids are like…putty or something. In a tough way.”

“Resilient?” Giles supplies.

“Yeah. So don’t worry, B. She won’t take off again.”

“I hope not” says Buffy quietly. Apparently catching herself looking tired, she straightens up. “At least she went to the hospital. Phones, security guards, minimal vampires.”

“And Ben” adds Faith. Buffy gives her look, but Faith ignores it and nudges Giles. “Giles, tell her she has to call him.”

“Um” Giles manages, “Call…?”

“The doctor who looked after Dawnie before Glory showed up” Faith explains. “I got his number ages back.”

“Back when mom was sick” mutters Buffy.

“What, I’m not allowed to score for you when life’s a bitch? You’ll be in a nursing home before
“I don’t need you to score for me!” Buffy looks, if anything, as mortified as Giles feels. It’s a welcome change from seeing her so worried, but Giles still straightens up and heads for the weapons cabinet, busies himself checking that the clubs are properly secured and that everything is facing the right way.

Behind him, Buffy says, “Anyway, I thought you liked him?”

“Well yeah” replies Faith, “But I can find someone else with a face and a butt. You want someone who’s actually looking to stick around come hell or hell gods.”

“Faith, you realise you are allowed to find a nice guy to date long term. You can have romance.”

“Nah, I’ve seen how that goes. I’m just in it for the grunt and grind.”

Coughing instinctively, Giles fumbles for a dropped dagger. “Right” he says, turning back to his slayers. “V-very good technique today, but I think we’ve done enough. More than enough.”

Faith grins at him. “What’s wrong Giles – you scared of a little girl talk?”

“Like you’re not” mutters Buffy.

Faith rounds on her. “What?”

“You’re scared to call him yourself because he’s the kind of guy who might actually want to stick around come hell or hell gods.”

Faith snorts out a note of laughter. “I’ve got better things to be scared of than some guy.”

“You won’t have a problem calling him, then.”

“Buffy” Giles attempts, “If Faith doesn’t wan –”

“You’re on, B” Faith interrupts. “If you’re sure you don’t want him.”

“Like I said” Buffy tells her, “I don’t need your help finding a guy.”

“Okay.” Faith hops off the vaulting horse and heads for the door. “I guess if you’re really desperate, there’s always Spike.”

Buffy is still frozen in disgust when the door slams. “I don’t think ‘ew’ is a strong enough word.”

“Agreed” says Giles. He may be back on the Council’s payroll, but they are really not paying him enough to contemplate that.
Crush

Never an easy thing to persuade a generally animated young woman to undertake, meditation has become a harder activity to insist upon since Buffy and Faith started training together. Neither are naturally inclined to embrace the benefits of the various meditative techniques, and the limited progress they made in utilising the practice in their early days of exploring the slayer line was swept aside with Glory’s arrival. These days, both slayers are keen to prioritise fighting techniques. Setting a crystal on each of a pair of yoga mats, Giles frowns when he hears his slayers approach through the shop: they seem to be chatting cheerfully, all the better to distract each other.

“…Seriously” Faith is saying as they enter the back room, “it’s been two days. Isn’t there, like, a rule or something?”

“But if you call him back, he’ll know you’re keen” Buffy argues.

“I don’t want him to know I’m keen.”

“Oh, so you are keen?”

Faith punches Buffy on the arm, then examines the mats. “Meditation?”

“Yes” Giles confirms, and the younger slayer takes a small restless step back, folding her arms. Buffy smirks at her, “Don’t change the subject.” To Giles, she adds, “Faith had a date.”

“Wonderful” responds Giles without enthusiasm. “Now if you could –”

“It wasn’t a date.” Faith hurriedly retraces her steps and sits down cross legged on one of the mats. “We didn’t even screw.”

“Well no” says Buffy, “Not on a first date.”

Faith glances up at her, an interested-despite-herself expression on her face. “Seriously? You actually just hang out screw-free every single time with every guy before you get to the flip n’ grunt?”

“Right” says Giles, in what he hopes is a decisive voice, “Buffy, if you could sit down, we can begin.”

Buffy eyes the empty mat doubtfully. “Begin meditating? Can’t we practise with the clubs again, what with the hell god situation?”

“Meditation with improve your focus and strengthen your connection to your power” Giles reminds her, “thus increasing the benefit you derive from combat training.”

“Yep” says Faith, “Plus this we can all shut up about my date with Ben.”

“That too” agrees Giles wholeheartedly.

“So it was a date” says Buffy. Catching Giles’ eye, she relents and sits down, but tells Faith, “I knew it was or you wouldn’t have done the whole coffee and him phoning you up thing.”

“I know” replies Faith in the tone of one acknowledging a significant flaw, “This whole thing’s wicked weird. It’s like I’m turning into you.”
“Or any other normal person.”

“It’s if you start getting straight to the screwing, that’s when we know we’ve done a personality swap.” Faith looks up at Giles. “Are we starting yet?”

“Yes” Giles confirms, and talks them through the process of sinking into the reverie, grateful for an end to the conversation. It is not that he is generally squeamish about sex talk, but listening to Buffy and Faith engage in it is uncomfortable to say the least. Hearing people so much younger than himself speak so casually on the subject is an unwelcome reminder that he is entering middle age – if not, as Buffy and Faith themselves would see it, fully immersed in that time of life. Given that he didn’t actually have significantly younger friends in London, it is an unfamiliar sensation.

But, more crucially, it is also a reminder that the children are no longer children. School students not so very long ago, they are now undeniably adults whom he cannot protect simply by issuing good advice. They are free to make their own mistakes now, and, much as that is only right, it is also worrying.

And most slayers, Giles reflects, would be dead before they were old enough to have the conversation Buffy and Faith just had. As a watcher, he is incalculably lucky to still have the slayer he was assigned to when she was sixteen sitting across from him, trying to meditate while clearly itching to do some weapons training. How much longer, these adult conversations make him ask, can he be so lucky? Clearly he will never hear Buffy and Faith talk about childcare, or about which retirement home to consign him to. Clearly he won’t hear them bemoan their greying hair. Nor will he attend either of their weddings unless it is a shotgun affair.

Well there’s always that: Only once both slayers are serene and statue-still does Giles think to wonder whether Faith’s bravado during these sorts of conversations is merely a front or something he ought to worry about. The last thing they need now is a pregnant slayer. Years ago, long before anyone imagined that the returned but disgraced younger Giles would be entrusted with a slayer of his own, Giles’ father had told him a little of the turmoil the Council had been thrown into when Nikki Wood became, as his father put it, “in the family way”. Older Council members were still bitter at having to send a task force to take over slayer duties during the third trimester. Mandatory sterilisation for all future slayers had been openly suggested. Giles did not want to be the one who had to tell them it had happened again. Good advice may not always work on his slayers, but some sort of conversation is in order.

Fortunately – from a practical standpoint that is, this not being a conversation Giles relishes the thought of having – Buffy leaves the training room as soon as her meditation is done, keen to get back home to Dawn. Left alone with Faith, Giles asks, “So your date with this Ben chap went well?”

“Even you’re interested now?” Faith, rather disconcertingly, picks up an axe and spins it. “You and B need to get yourselves a life.”

“I don’t suppose Joyce has already spoken to you about, well…”

“What?”

“You will be careful, won’t you? You are careful?”

Faith puts the axe down again. “Giles, don’t worry: Ben isn’t a demon. I think he wouldn’t know a demon if it came up to him and offered to buy him a drink.” She frowns. “Maybe I should warn him?” She does a little gesture then, a flip of her hand to signal an idea discarded. “Nah, I don’t want him to think I’m crazy.”
“Actually, that’s not the sort of careful I meant.”

Faith considers him. “This a secret identity thing? You let Buffy date.”

“Let isn’t exactly how I’d put it.” Giles removes his glasses to avoid her puzzled stare. “I meant, are you being careful with yourself? Personally.”

“Huh?”

Enough of this prudishness, Giles decides. “Faith, if you do…If things progress, do you know about protection?”

“Like weapons and stuff?” Faith asks blankly.

Giles forces himself to say, “Like condoms and, err, stuff.” With any luck, she won’t ask him about the stuff part of that equation: he is in no way qualified to tell her about all that.

Faith’s stare wavers into incredulity and she bursts out laughing. “Oh fuck! Is this The Talk?”

“I need to know you’ll be safe” Giles reasons. “Able to fight and not incumbered with…”

“With a brat?”

“Well, yes” Giles insists. “The last thing I want is to tell the Council that you can’t join the coming battle with Glory because you’re…”

“Because Ben didn’t wear a raincoat?” Faith can barely contain herself. “You should call them up and tell them that anyway, just hear them drop their tea!”

“Faith, be serious!”

“Oh, I am!” But Faith calms herself down.

“Well?” Giles asks once she is quiet.

She looks a little surprised. “You’re actually asking me if I can put a condom on a guy? It’s not degree-level stuff, Giles. And I popped the cherry long before Sunnydale.”

Giles isn’t sure if he is imagining her amused tone becoming just a little forced. He asks, “So you don’t have any, um, questions, or, or anything, in that regard?”

“Giles, I think if I was going to get myself pregnant, it would have happened already. Besides” Faith shrugs, taking a step towards the door “it’s not like I just got engaged or anything. I’ll probably be done with the guy soon.”

Or he’ll be done with her. Belatedly, Giles realises he may have been focusing on entirely the wrong risks: For Faith, commitment and affection are new and frightening. “Or” he says gently, “he may like you and you may like him. Stranger things do happen.”

Faith pauses halfway to the door and pulls a face. “Not much stranger” she says.

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Pregnancy risks aside, Faith dating also comes with the downside of there being no-one to guard Joyce and Dawn when Buffy has a well earned night out with her friends, and so it falls to Giles and Ethan.
“As if we’d be any match for a hell god” gripes Ethan as they make their way over to the Summers’ house.

“We could buy some time” reasons Giles. “You might be able to slow her down with magic while I distract her.”

“By letting her kill you?”

“I’d think of something” Giles replies, because Ethan would do what Buffy calls freaking out if he said yes.

Existential fears notwithstanding, the evening is a pleasant one. Joyce and Ethan quickly fall to talking about art and Giles is left to talk books with Dawn. They may read very different books, but Giles likes simply knowing that at least one teenager in this world still enjoys reading. Possibly, he supposes, the monks did too, but the thought is so strange that he puts it out of his mind.

When the front door opens and closes, it is too mundane a sound to signal Glory’s arrival, and Ethan confirms this, glancing over to say, “Hello, Buffy. Oh, and Faith – date moved on to the Bronze?”

“Nah” replies Faith, stepping awkwardly into the room. “Just ran into B on the way back here.”

“But it went okay?” asks Joyce.

“We just hung out a bit.”

“At his place?” asks Dawn, apparently unaware of the implications of that question.

“He doesn’t have a place” Faith tells them. “Lives with his sister so we just went to a bar.”

“Did you drink?” asks Joyce.


Giles actually believes her. She seems both sober and a little surprised at herself for it. He asks, “What about you, Buffy – good evening?”

“Yeah. Fun was had.” Buffy looks at Faith with a knowing smile. “So you got into the whole family stuff? Know his life story already?”

“Hardly. Just that he has a sister.”

“Older, younger?”

“He just said he lives with her is all.”

“She’s probably older” says Dawn, “if she’s too annoying to talk about.” Buffy scowls at her. Faith replies, “He probably just mentioned it to explain why he didn’t invite me back to his.”

“Where’d he grow up?” asks Buffy. “Did he come here for college?”

“Did you kiss?” interjects Dawn.

“Jeez, if you guys want his life story, go ask him! I’m not gonna stand here and recap the whole thing kiss by kiss.”
“So there were kisses?” asks Ethan.

“Hey” Faith manages to inject the hint of a threat into the syllable, the way a rattle snake might shudder its tail just slightly. “How were things here?”

“Fine” Joyce replies, “No epic battles.” She smiles at the two slayers. “So, it seems like everyone had a nice, normal evening.”


Giles notices Dawn take interest at that, but before she can say anything to explain said interest, Buffy is turning to Faith again and adding, “Or unless you count Faith actually having a date with a non-vampire, non-secret agent guy.”

“A Sunnydale slayer first” Ethan agrees.

Faith glances round at them all. “Okay, enough of the vicarious Ben-dating, I don’t even know if he likes me.”

“Of course he likes you” states Buffy. “You just had a second date, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, and it didn’t exactly go anywhere. We mostly just talked.”

“So, he’s obviously interested, and wants to get to know you” Joyce tells her.

Faith gives a dismissive laugh, but she seems to like the idea. She offers a confused smile and heads upstairs, leaving Giles and Ethan to witness some minor drama about a missing sweater before making their own way home.

*****

“Ethan, I need a location spell – Dawn didn’t come home.” Buffy enters the shop and steps behind the counter in one fluid movement before Ethan can respond. She retrieves a map stashed in a drawer and spreads it out.

Ethan and Anya hurry over. “I’m sure she’s fine” reassures Anya.

“I hope so” says Buffy. “Faith’s checking around where we caught that giant snake.” She watches as Ethan lays out the spell and sinks into the trance. “And mom’s at home in case she turns up there, but she must have left school hours ago. If Glory found has her…”

“She won’t” insists Anya. “She is still a teenage girl, remember. She’s probably off doing teenage girl things like shopping, or sneaking into the movie theatre, or –”

“Or hanging out with Spike” finishes Ethan.

“Exactly” says Anya. “Wait – is that a teenage thing?”

“Apparently for Dawn” Ethan nods to the green bead of light on the map, nestled in a very particular corner of the cemetery.

Buffy sighs heavily. “I really should beat him up more often.” She heads for the door. “Could you guys call my mom? Just let her know Dawn’s safe and Spike really isn’t.”

“On it.” Anya heads for the phone. Ethan is left to roll up the map, feeling, not for the first time in recent weeks, a little sorry for a certain chipped vampire.
“How many?” asks Giles, looking over the newspaper article that first alerted Buffy to the massacre.

“Not more than three” Buffy replies. “It could even have been one especially nasty one. Obviously, a moving train, not like anyone could escape.”

They are in the courtyard outside Giles and Ethan’s flat, sipping coffee and studying reports of the bloody final moments of the train’s passengers. Giles comments, “Definitely vampires – this is the third article that mentions neck wounds.” He looks over at Buffy, who is subdued, seemingly troubled. “So, nothing to do with Glory at least.”

“Right” she murmurs. She came here straight from the crime scene, and it occurs to Giles that she may simply be shaken by the loss of human life on this particular scale; a scale large enough to be shocking, but small enough to be personal. Giles begins, “Buffy, I know what you and Xander saw in that carriage must have been harrowing –”

“No. I mean, it was horrible, and I am totally going to kill what did it, but I was actually thinking about something else.”

“Do you mind me asking what?”

Buffy looks a little hesitant. Finally, she says, “Spike.”

Giles blinks. “You were thinking about Spike?”

“Dawn thinks he’s…well she says he’s in love with me. Xander thinks it’s nothing, and God, I want to believe him, but I just keep thinking…Why he does always seem to be around? There’s that whole standing outside my house thing and when you think about it, he’s never actually tried to get other vamps to kill me…Probably because the other vamps hate him now” She puts a hand to her head. “Look, just ignore me: weird life stuff. We were talking massacres?”

Giles stares at her, not sure how to mentally unpack all that. He sets the papers aside – they’ve learnt what they can from them really, and a chipped vampire with an obsession seems the sort of thing a watcher should offer guidance on. Except he isn’t all that clear what he should say, other than, “Buffy, a soulless being simply isn’t capable of love.”

“I know that” Buffy replies. She lifts one of the papers and shows him its photograph of the cordoned off train. “Kind of got a reminder of that today complete with body outlines. But they can get fixated on people, right?”

“Yes, I would say so. Spike, in a way, was fixated on you before he met you: he was determined to kill a third slayer.”

Buffy folds the paper again. “I’m his one that got away.” She looks up, seemingly struck with sudden insight. “And now he’s had time to actually get to know me, he’s not just fixated on the slayer anymore; he’s fixated on me!”

“Possibly.” Giles removes his glasses as the implications sink in. Without them, his worried expression can be taken to be merely a response to blurring vision, and therefore not worry Buffy in turn. She asks, “Could he think it’s love? Like, do they think they feel it?”

Entire hours of Giles’ training went into the psychology of vampirism and yet the question has Giles think of Drusilla, and of the disarmingly human distress Spike had apparently displayed at
her leaving him. “I haven’t the faintest idea.” Focusing on Buffy, he adds, “But obsession isn’t love, or even whatever passes for it in a vampire’s mind. He may have an unhealthy fixation on you, but I can’t imagine he’s envisioning actually dating you.”

“Oh God, I hadn’t even thought of that!” Buffy groans. “I was just thinking how icky it would be if he actually said the words!”

“Well, I doubt he will if that’s any comfort. He used to be a feared creature of the night and now he’s unable to kill and obsessed with a slayer who is so beyond too good for him she’s essentially on another plane of existence. He’s probably too embarrassed to bring it up.”

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“He’s not embarrassed” Buffy tells Rupert when she marches into the Magic Box the following morning. “Really not embarrassed. Like, tie-me-up-and-kill-his-ex not embarrassed.” Behind her, a customer hurriedly leaves.

“Are you alright?” Rupert asks, standing up from his research.

“She’s alright enough to scare away the customers” points out Anya.

“I’m alright” says Buffy.

“Who’s not embarrassed?” Ethan asks.

“Spike” Buffy spits the word. “I need you to de-invite him from here.”

Rupert seems to be piecing something together. “He dusted Drusilla?”

“He tried to” Buffy clarifies. “Some demonstration of love but if I didn’t go gooey for him, he was going to set her on me. Luckily there was option three – punch a lot of things and get the hell out of there.”

“Wait” Ethan is struggling to follow all this, “Spike wanted you to go what for him?”

“Gooey” Buffy repeats, “lovey-dovey, ga-ga. Well, I’d have to be ga-ga to sweet talk Spike – I’d rather Drusilla ate me.” To Rupert, she adds, “I’m thinking she killed the people on the train, and I’m also thinking she’s left town now, but Faith and I are going to check tonight.” She throws herself into a chair. “So it looks like I don’t even get to kill anyone for that.”

“I’m still confused” states Anya. “Spike wants you to love him? What’s wrong with him?” Seeing Buffy’s expression, she adds, “I mean, not that you’re not attractive – to humans, I mean – but he’s supposed to want to kill you.”

“And he can’t, so it’s evolved into lust” muses Ethan.

Rupert nods. “A complete perversion of the predator instinct.”

Buffy shrugs. “Well, complete perversion pretty much sums up Spike. At least he unchained me when Drusilla broke out, or it could have been really nasty.”

“So he actually does love you?” asks Anya.

Rupert shakes his head. “Love doesn’t generally involve chains.”

There is a lot Ethan could say to that, but he manages to hold it in. Rupert sees his growing smirk
nonetheless, and adds in a tight voice, “Ethan, do grow up.”

Buffy follows his gaze and pulls a disgusted face. “I don’t want to know so much I’d actually rather go back to Spike’s than know. At least there it’s okay to punch things.”

“Indeed” says Rupert hurriedly. “Well, obviously things will have to change in terms of how we deal with Spike. Given that he did threaten you with a non-chipped vampire, I wonder if staking would be justifiable.”

“No” Buffy shakes her head wearily. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m tempted, but he can be a useful informant. Plus, with him not able to fight back, it would feel ooky.” She asks Ethan, “So, can you disinvite him?”

“No really” Ethan replies. “He doesn’t need an invite for a public place so I’d have to change the barriers all over again and keep out demons in general.”

“And they do make surprisingly regular purchases” adds Anya. “Some of our best customers – isn’t that right?”

“Absolutely” says Ethan.

Buffy looks from one to the other of them. “So, I just have to put up with a creepy vampire stalker so you guys can sell some extra healing crystals?”

“Oh no” reassures Anya, “The demons don’t buy healing crystals. It’s more hare blood, virgin tears and –”

“– and we could bar Spike nonmagically” puts in Ethan, aware that Rupert is looking unimpressed, and Buffy, murderous. “Make it clear he’s not welcome here, refuse to serve him and so forth.”

“And throw him out into the sunlight if he doesn’t leave of his own accord” mutters Rupert.

Buffy looks placated. “Good. You guys do that, and with him already disinvited at home, I think we’re good to let his weird crush just wither. With staking being plan B, if Faith has her way: She’s all set to kill him.”

“Sensible girl” Rupert joins her at the table.

Buffy offers him a small smile. “So, you’re just going to go over there and take him on with him all chipped?”

“I suppose not” admits Rupert. “But after what he tried to do…”

“Yeah” Buffy looks down at the table. “Well, he’s out of our lives now.”

Rupert says, “Possibly we let him in a little too freely. Underestimated his potential to cause harm.”

“Yeah, and to be really weird.”

“Not weird for a vampire” Ethan tells her, “Twisted love is rather their thing.” You’d think the girl would know that after Angel, but Ethan values his looks too highly to be the one to draw that analogy.

“It isn’t love” Rupert tells him.
“Nope” Buffy agrees, “Just twisted.” “Of the people here, who actually socialises with vampires?” asks Ethan. “Trust me, vampire break ups are too big a drama for it not to be love. You don’t get that worked up over someone you just shag now and then.”

“It’s not love” Buffy reiterates with deliberates slowly and clearly. “Just Spike finding a way to be even more of a creep than usual.” Obviously after a change of topic, she gestures to the research Rupert abandoned when she came in. “Is this about Glory?”

“Yes” Rupert tells her. “I’m just doing some cross referencing from the books the Council supplied. Nothing useful yet, I’m afraid.”

Buffy scans a page of notes, nods. “Well, Faith’s with Dawn so I can stay and help. Since I can’t kill Spike, I’m all the keener to kill Glory. I can just pretend she’s him with a perm.”
Generally, Ethan tries to avoid entering the shop’s backroom when the slayers are training, the better to avoid flying axes and excess sarcasm, but when Rupert emerges asking for ice, he is curious enough to go in.

He finds Faith causally doing flips while Buffy hugs a padding-clad Xander. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah” says Faith. “Buffy just beat up Xander.”

“Only a little!” squeaks Buffy.

“She was thinking about Spike” Xander explains. “I can relate.”

“Here” Rupert re-enters with an ice pack and sets about helping Buffy peel Xander out of his suit.

“I keep telling you, B” Faith stretches, her legs sliding in two different directions on the mat. “Stake him or ignore him, but don’t go having a freak out over it. Who cares what that creep thinks?”

“Easy for Ms Third Date to say” retorts Buffy, helping Xander sit down. “You’ve got a regular human guy admiring you. All I’ve got is Spike.”

“Third date?” asks Ethan.

“Yep” Faith finally leaps to her feet. “But don’t start or Buffy will start reading loads into it again.” She smiles a small, unbidden smile before turning away.

Buffy sighs. “Right now, the only thing I’m reading into it is everyone has a guy in their life except me.”

“And me” adds Xander.

“Buffy” Rupert begins, “I understand this thing with Spike has phased you, but please don’t go thinking it’s a reflection on you as a person. As I said, you’re not responsible for what goes on in his sordid mind.”

Buffy shudders. “Don’t make me think about what goes on in his sordid mind.”

Faith heads over. “B, relax. You just need to go out tonight and get good and trashed.” She catches Rupert’s eye and amends, “Or something responsible.”

“I will” Buffy replies. “The going out part, I mean. And speaking of responsible, you’ll finish your date before mom starts hers?”

“Joyce has a date too?” asks Ethan.

“Like I said” Buffy tells him, “Everyone has a guy except me. Faith?”

“Sure” Faith nods. “I’ll be back in time for Dawn-watch. I could even bring Ben so me and Dawn aren’t on our lonesome. I mean, he’s a doctor – you don’t get more responsible than that.”

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“Joyce, nice to see you. Especially here.” Ethan heads round the counter and smiles at her. “You know, I’m not sure you’ve been in a shop of mine since I got back into the magic business.”

“It’s not really my scene” she confirms, glancing round at the stock. “But I need a spell. Or something. Just for peace of mind, really.”

“Is this about your date?”

“Buffy told you?”

“She may have waxed lyrical about everyone having a man in their life except for her. With any luck she’ll hook up with someone tonight.”

“Yes – well, except for the hook up part. I’d rather she meet the man for her when he’s doing something kind and helpful, not having a night out. But I guess that’s how people meet these days.” She pauses, adds, “And in my day too, actually.”

“I have to admit, me and Rupert didn’t meet volunteering at a food bank.”

“And I didn’t first clap eyes on Hank when he was rescuing kittens. But you’d think in Buffy’s line of work, she’d have plenty of opportunity to meet a lovely fireman or police officer.”

“Give it time.”

“That’s what I tell her. So” Joyce seems to brace herself “I need a spell to check that someone’s human.”

Ethan frowns. “Who do you suspect’s not?”

“It’s not a suspicion, really, I just…Well, I want to be sure. I know it’s crazy, but ever since Ted, I haven’t dated a whole lot. Or at all.”

“And you don’t want to start with lots of What Ifs?”

Joyce nods gamely. “What if I say the wrong thing, what if we have nothing to talk about, what if he’s a robotic serial killer…”

“Standard Sunnydale dating worries.” Ethan comes back around the counter and heads for a shelf. “Try this.” He hands her an amulet. “It won’t specify if something’s human, but give it a little blood before you put it on, and it’ll let you know if someone in the immediate vicinity doesn’t have a soul.” He doesn’t add that it was Buffy’s love life that initially inspired him to purchase the thing a couple of years ago.

Joyce studies it. “How?”

“It’s supposed to glow.”

“And I have to dip it in blood?” Joyce sounds uncertain, so Ethan takes the amulet back, and uses a sharp edge at its base to prick his finger. The blood flows up the metal, settling against the stone for a moment before sinking in with a shiver. “That should do it.” He heads back over to the till.

“Thank you.” Joyce follows. “How much do I owe you?”

“Let’s call it ten dollars, if you give me a review. I haven’t actually seen one in action before.”

“Deal.” She pays. “I’d better get home and find something that matches this.”
“Or you could just keep it in your purse and keep an eye on it.”

“No” Joyce holds it up, considering. “I like it – Thank you, Ethan.” She steps away from the till. “Well, wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it” says Ethan, and then, as Joyce heads for the door, “Just stay away from the Kahlua, yes?” and she laughs, glancing back over her shoulder as she leaves.

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“Hi, Giles” Buffy steps through the front door of the flat just as Giles is finishing a late breakfast.

“Buffy, hello. Is everything alright?”

“Kinda. Faith’s date hit some sort of weird blip, so she’s upset, but I got to watch Spike being thrown through a window by a teeny lady robot, so it’s not all bad.”

Giles sets his tea aside. “Robot?”

“Oh huh” Buffy sits down and recounts her strange encounter, finishing with, “So we figure we should find out who made it and…well, get him to switch it off, I guess.”

“Him? You’re assuming it’s this Warren character?”

“Yes. Plus only a guy would make a robot instead of just going out and meeting someone. Um, no offence.”

“No, it, um. It makes sense. Warren, whoever he is, has committed the ultimate objectification of women when you think about it.”

“Ew. Well, that makes me want to find him even more. Not that I can do anything to him – I’m guessing he’s human.”

“And probably very lonely and misguided.” Giles nods. “Now, is Faith okay?”

Buffy shakes her head. “Not really. She doesn’t even know what went wrong. Apparently, it all seemed like it was going well, she even brought him back home to help her Dawn-sit, but as soon as they got through the door, he got jumpy and made some lame excuse and left again. And now he’s not even returning her calls.”

“How strange.”

“Yeah, I mean, I know Dawn’s scary but not leave-the-house scary.” Buffy shrugs. “Maybe he’s commitment shy and the whole meet the family thing was too much.”

“Possibly” Giles concedes. “In which case, he’s not worth getting upset about. Faith deserves someone who truly wants to be a part of her life.”

Buffy nods. “That’s what I said. I wish I hadn’t made a big deal of all this – I let her get her hopes up.”

“You weren’t to know.”

“I guess not. I’d better get back to her. I’ll um, keep you in the loop on the robot situation.” And with that, Buffy is gone. Giles shakes his head at the thought that other people simply don’t have to worry about robots and slayer-dating woes, and resumes his breakfast.
“He should come in more often” says Ethan, “You looked wonderfully manly kicking him out, Rupert.”

Giles pulls himself from the research that still takes up an entire table in the Magic Box to regard Ethan and Anya blankly. “Hm?”

“When you kicked Spike out” supplies Anya. “We’re thinking there might be some way to keep him out without shutting all the other demons out.”

“Alternatively, we could just have you around more often” adds Ethan.

“Alternatively” says Giles, “You could just change the wards so no demons can enter.”

“No” decides Anya. “There’s regular demon evil and there’s chaining up Buffy evil.”

“True, I suppose.” Giles returns to his book. It is mainly supposition, based on references to what seems to be common knowledge about demon dimensions if one happens to be a demon, pieced together for the human reader from apocalyptic prophesies and demonic texts. None of it is particularly reassuring.

“Anything useful?” Ethan has come over.

“Nothing much” Giles replies. “Just theories about what her home dimension might be like.”

“Cosy yet stylish?” asks Ethan mock-hopefully.

“Unimaginably hellish.”

“Ah. Well maybe – oh, hello, Faith.” Ethan turns with a smile as the bell jangles, but Faith marches past without returning the greeting, and enters the backroom. She doesn’t actually slam the door in her wake – with her strength, that could cause structural damage – but she shuts it hard enough that the floorboards seem to quiver and the couple perusing the merchandise by the window leave rather quickly. The bell jingles anew as they exit, competing with a rhythmic pounding that implies the punchbag is being put to good use.

“What was that about?” wonders Anya.

“I’d better talk to her” murmurs Giles, getting to his feet.

In the backroom, he finds Faith offering the poor punchbag no mercy. The dummy watches uselessly, not robust enough to accept the pounding Faith is in the mood to dole out. “Faith?” Giles crosses to the utility unit in the corner and puts the kettle on.

Faith ignores him, so he tries again: “I’m sorry. Buffy told me your date ended abruptly.”

“Everyone knows, huh? Great.” Faith adjusts her pace, punching harder still, but slower, giving herself time in-between each blow to gather her full strength behind the impact. “He just called. Broke up with me. Coward couldn’t even do it face to face.” She throws another punch. “My own stupid fault.”

Giles risks stepping closer to lean against the vaulting horse. “How could this be your fault?”

Faith gives the punchbag another jab, rattling the chain it dangles from. “Let myself get stupid.”
The kettle boils and Giles goes over to it. “Faith, trusting a person is not stupidity.” “And you’re basing that on what, exactly?”

Giles spoons instant coffee into two mugs and pours. “You trust me and Buffy, don’t you?” He pauses, waits for the answer.

Faith mutters, “Maybe you guys are the stupid ones, trusting me.” She resumes her relentless punching, giving Giles no time to follow up on the comment.

Really, he isn’t sure he wants to. He doesn’t want this to be a confrontation, especially with her more likely just angry than actually inclined to render anyone’s trust in her foolish. Instead he asks, “What happened, exactly?”

“She had family stuff on and it wasn’t a great time to be dating anyone.” Faith delivers another vicious punch and the chain trembles. “Anyway, he’s history.”

Giles bites back a query about Ben’s welfare at that comment. Thankfully, Faith uses the present tense when she comments, “Maybe he’s boning his sister. Or she’s actually his wife or something and I was just meant to be his bit on the side. Either way, there was something going on there.”

Giles judges it best to draw out the poison. “Oh?”

“Yeah. He didn’t talk about her much ’cept to say she existed. Only he said it like how I say chlamydia exists, you know?”

“No” says Giles, “and please don’t explain.” He does know, though: It sounds like how Ethan talks about his family on the rare occasions that he does. That reluctance, that measured statement of bare facts with all the weight hiding behind it. Giles glances over to Faith and finds her watching him. He asks, “Is that all he said?”

Faith’s lip twitches and she turns to the punchbag again, but doesn’t hit it, merely picks at a seam. “Yeah. Just family pressures.” She tries out the phrase with the same game caution with which Giles’ older relatives might try an exotic dish. She abandons the punchbag and adds, “So screw him.”

“Yes. Well, I mean –”

“Yeah, yeah, you’d never suggest such thing.” Faith hops up on the vaulting horse and crosses her legs. Giles hands her a coffee and she reaches to take it without so much as a hint of a wobble. He tells her, “I am sorry that it didn’t work out. If it’s any comfort, these things do get easier.”

“Right” Faith murmurs. “Reasons.” And she sets her coffee aside, slips off the vaulting horse and resumes her punishment of the punchbag.

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Ethan keeps his distance from Faith while she works out her disappointment on the unsuspecting
punchbag that morning, in much the same way that he’d give an angry bear a bit of space. She leaves without lingering for conversation, but when she returns, after Rupert has headed home and Anya is off on her break, he has little choice but to talk to her. “Any luck on the robot front?”

“It’s dead” she states, sitting down at a table. “Or powered down, whatever. Probably felt like dying.”

“I’m not sure they feel an awful lot, if that’s any comfort.”

She shrugs. “I sat with it, anyway. Weren’t sure what to do with it after that, so we hid it in some bushes in case anyone thinks there’s a dead girl on the swings. Willow around?”

“Not today.” Ethan busies himself rearranging the display of chicken feet by the till.

“Well that’s my idea out, then – I thought she could do something with it.”

“I’ll mention it if I see her. But she’s not as taken with robotics as she used to be.”

“I just don’t want that creep to come back and scrap her for parts.”

“Creep?”

“Warren.”

“Ah, I see. But Willow would just scrap her for parts too.” Ethan notices his sympathetic switch from her to it and pulls things back to normal with, “It won’t know anything about it either way.”

“At least Willow won’t fuck it” Faith mutters. Then, decisively, “Guys just suck. Maybe I should get a robot. Wouldn’t have to bother with them anymore.”

There’s only so much rearranging one can do with chicken feet. Ethan turns round to give the girl his full attention. “You shouldn’t let one bad experience put you off, you know. He was just some arse.”

“Yeah, like all guys. Never met one who wasn’t, except…” Faith twists her hands in her lap, catches herself and slaps them on the table, opens a book. “Never met one who wasn’t.”

“You are aware I’m a guy, yes?”

“You don’t count. You’re old.”

“I’m only forty-five!” Ethan bristles.

“What, and you can be just as much of an ass as the rest of them? Just be glad you’re old and wise and all.”

“Forty-five is not old and wise! Trust me, when you get to forty…” Ethan trails off, realisation hitting without mercy. Faith smiles coldly and tilts her head. “What?” she prompts.

Ethan flails for a moment, before his mind settles on reassuring flippancy. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! There’s two of you, you’ll probably be staking vampires when you’re little old ladies with dentures. And by then, you’ll have both had plenty of human boyfriends, some of whom will have proven not to be cretins.”

“Well, I won’t hold my breath.” Faith examines the book she’s opened for a moment, shuts it again with a shrug.
“No, I wouldn’t either. But it will happen one day.”

“Or not. I don’t even care.”

“You care that you let myself care” Ethan realises. He sits down, pulling out a chair.

Faith shrugs defensively. “I just liked the idea, I guess. Haven’t ever really had a guy who didn’t act like a jerk before we even hooked up. Seemed like the sort of thing Buffy gets.” Faith glances up quickly and bites her lip, as though she wishes she could have caught the words before they were out. “It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid to want to be with someone” Ethan tells her. Really, he doesn’t mind what Faith does so long as she doesn’t keep bringing it here, but she seems almost forlorn suddenly, and it’s possible to feel some concern, innate toughness and slayer strength aside.

“It is for me” she says. “I mean, I’ve seen what people do. It’s all kisses and sweetness at first and then you’re just someone they can send out to get stuff they don’t want to be caught with. That or they just go off you, go screw someone else. Usually someone thinner and blonder.” She coughs out a bitter laugh. “Ben will be with Buffy next.”

“Buffy wouldn’t do that” Ethan chides gently. “And much as Ben is clearly a pillock, he didn’t cheat so much as break up with you rather suddenly. Unfair, but hardly part of a pattern.”

“Yeah, because he’s more her pattern. People like him don’t date people like me.”

“Except he did.”

“Like three times and then he wants out. Can’t exactly blame him. I mean, he’s going to be a doctor, and I don’t even have a job.”

Ethan shakes his head. “Faith, you’re better than that. And if he’s not, you’re well shot of him. Anyway, you do have a job.”

“What, slaying? That’s not a job.”

“No, but – Oh” Ethan stands up when the phone rings. “I’d better get that. It could be Willy saying he’s found a griffin feather supplier at last.” He heads over to the phone. “Hello?”

“Ethan. Is Giles there?” Buffy’s voice is flat and hollow.

“No, he’s at home” Ethan tells her. “Is everything okay?”

“Get him here.”

“Here, as in your house? Faith’s with me, by the way, do you want to talk to her…?” Faith stands up as Ethan says this and comes over.

“Bring her too” says Buffy “And Giles. Get them here now.” The line goes dead. Ethan replaces the receiver and finds Faith staring at him. “What’s happened?” she asks.
That night, Giles holds Ethan so close that he can feel every bone in his partner’s body pressed against him. Ethan doesn’t seem to mind.

Much as Giles doesn’t like to think about it, there’s no avoiding the fact that one of them will go first. Tonight, he lets himself wonder things he usually avoids dwelling on: Who will be left alone? And for how long? No way of knowing. Perhaps mortal men aren’t meant to know such things, but it seems a cruel trick of the heavens, to make humans mortal but not able to accept it, to surround them with ageless, infallible monsters and the only sentient creatures with a lifespan of a mere eighty or so years are also the only creatures that can love.

“She was going to give me a review for that amulet” Ethan says, more to himself than to Giles.

“That hardly matters now” Giles chides. He doesn’t ask what amulet. It isn’t important.

“No, but I keep thinking, she needs to come back to the shop and give me that review. So she can’t really be dead. Because she hasn’t given me the review yet.” Ethan frowns. “It must be horribly annoying, aside from anything else. There you are one minute thinking about your new exhibition, or if you should call your fancy man, or what to cook for dinner, and then suddenly you’re called off to another plane of existence when actually you were in the middle of doing something else.” He snuggles closer to Giles. “Or maybe it just feels inconvenient for a moment. Like when you dream and you hear the alarm go off by the bed, so you say to the people in your dream oh, I’ll just get that, I’ll be right back, but then of course, you’re awake and you can’t go back, and before it starts to fade, you’re annoyed you can’t. Maybe that’s what life looks like from the other side. Like a dream you forget about after a while.”

“I have to believe it matters more than a dream, even in hindsight” says Giles. “And we need to remember, Joyce led full life.” Except she didn’t, he thinks privately; she was too young. There was more she could have done. With him still able to do those things, saying that she, who can’t now, had a full life, seems uncharitable somehow, even hypocritical. He wouldn’t be happy to be called off to another plane of existence right now.

Ethan asks, “I wonder where she is?”

The question is unanswerable, and serves only to emphasise that Joyce is gone. Giles replies, “Somewhere she’d like to be, I imagine.”

“Hm. Yes, birthing a slayer has to be worth a few ticks in the plus column.” Ethan swallows thickly. “I wonder what the chances are of us seeing her again?”

“What review was she supposed to give you?”

“Feedback about this amulet she bought to check her date was human.” Ethan’s voice regains some briefly-lost steadiness, but he frowns. “I wonder if anyone’s told him?”

Giles honestly doubts it. Only the merest beginnings of all the necessary arrangements have been tackled so far. “I’ll tell him. I’ll be going over there tomorrow to, well, to help. Obviously Buffy hasn’t ever had to make these sorts of arrangements before.” He sighs. “There’ll be a phone book to go through to start with. And I imagine she had made some arrangements when she became ill.”

“Hm” Ethan shifts against him. “I hate that you do know what do. We both used to not.”
“True.” They had known nothing of it with Randall. In the case of that first and most brutal loss, the deceased was simply suddenly gone, and his remains cleaned up by, Giles presumes, members of the Council’s task force. But that had been a mystical death. More generally, Giles has discovered since, human life never ends cleanly. Instead there is always a great deal of phone calls, and sortings through of possessions and co-ordinating of catering for the wake. Formalities and legalities. It just goes to show the hold that humanity has on this realm, that no one individual will leave without a fuss. “I suppose it happens by our time in life. If we didn’t know what to do, we’d be the ones other people were making arrangements for.”

“Please, Rupert, don’t talk about our time in life – We’re still young. We’ve still got a lot to do before we go off to another plane ourselves.”

“We have” Giles agrees. They are silent for a while then, each of them cocooned in their thoughts. Then Ethan comments, “For one thing, if something like this happens to one of us before we can get married, I really will be cross.”

Giles blinks at him. Odd that Ethan should care about marriage, all things considered, but he does. Easy much of the time to think that Ethan just wants the party, the presents, the attention, and doubtless he does, but he also wants the commitment. Except, “We virtually are married already, Eth. We may as well be.” Unnecessary, really, to promise a lifetime of loyalty to someone to whom he has already been loyal for a lifetime. “Besides, it’s not legal. At least not yet.”

“So why don’t we do a pagan ceremony? Be married in the eyes of Janus, if not church and state.”

“I rather prefer church and state to Janus.”

“Well, that’s a rare cause of intelligence-failure on your part.”

Giles sighs but says nothing. He doesn’t want a row. Not tonight. “I was raised an Anglican, Eth.”

“So was I. I out-grew it.” Ethan pulls away a little, just enough to trace a finger over Giles’ chest through his shirt. “Besides, the church doesn’t want you. So sod it. Don’t want them right back.”

If only it were so simple. And for Ethan, of course, it has been. Finding no acceptance of anything he naturally was in the Christian deity, Ethan simply chose a god more to his tastes. Giles rather envies that cat-like sense of entitlement.

“So what do you say?” purrs Ethan.

Giles considers, but admits, “I’m sorry, Ethan: put it down to upbringing, but I just won’t feel married unless it’s under British law.”

Ethan pulls away. “Damn it, Rupert! You’re actually rejecting my marriage proposal?”

“It wouldn’t feel like marriage to me” Giles explains, reaching for him. “Besides, we don’t need to make promises in front of anyone to be committed to each other. We don’t need a piece of paper. We already have been committed, so the main advantage of marriage is the legal side, which we won’t get from rams’ skulls and nudity in the wilderness, or whatever a pagan ceremony would involve.”

Ethan seems to fight a grin for a moment. “I wasn’t exactly picturing rams’ skulls and nudity, dear, but now you mention it…” Ethan settles back down into Giles’ embrace.

They lie quietly for a moment. “I’m sorry” Giles murmurs eventually.
“I know.” Ethan shifts, making himself fit more snugly against Giles. “You’re just determined for me to have single written on my death certificate, aren’t you?”

“Much as that thought fills me with dread, Eth, marital status isn’t listed on death certificates.”

“Obituary, then.”

“I’d set them right.”

“Only if I die first.”

“Keep nagging at me and I’m sure it could be arranged.”

“Wonderful. A rejected marriage proposal and a death threat, and all between cocoa and sleep. Some people are spared this sort of drama once they’ve got their pyjamas on, you know.”

Giles sighs heavily. “It just wouldn’t feel right. If we ever get married, I want to do it properly in a licenced venue.”

“Even though it’s only about the legal side?”

“Especially when it comes to the legal side – we won’t be legally recognised as married otherwise.”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “Honestly, Rupert, where’s your romance? It isn’t about the legal side; it’s about sanctifying our union.”

“Well, being someone’s next of kin isn’t especially romantic” Giles agrees. He finds Ethan’s hand and plants a kiss on it. “Just terribly dull, and important and practical. Besides, our union is already fairly sacred to me” And he pulls Ethan closer, doesn’t let him go until morning.
The funeral is unspeakable. A simple service, the standard dreary committal, and then, one by one and in small groups, everyone walks away. Ethan doesn't want to know how long Buffy, Dawn, Willow and Tara lingered after everyone else had left. Faith was the first to go, though not in the direction of the cemetery gates. Ethan pities any vampires lurking in the crypts at the graveyard’s far perimeter.

Xander, it transpires, needs to return to work, which leaves Ethan, Rupert and Anya to have dinner at the Espresso Pump. No-one eats much.

“I don’t understand why Joyce didn’t want a get together afterwards” muses Ethan. “That’s usually the only good part.”

“There is no good part” chides Rupert.

“You know what I mean” says Ethan. “People remember together. They comfort each other.”

“That or get horribly drunk if Xander’s family anecdotes are anything to go by” puts in Anya. “Still, must be better than that depressing ashes to ashes speech.”

“It’s circular” Rupert tells her. “It’s supposed to be comforting.”

“Well I for one wasn’t very comforted.” Anya shakes her head and gazes across the road to the Magic Box. “We should be getting over there soon to make up for being closed all day. Joyce wouldn’t want us to be closed all evening too.”

Ethan nods even though Anya is basing that on nothing at all. Joyce probably wouldn’t have an opinion on whether they took a day off or not.

“I mean” adds Anya, “she wouldn’t want us sitting around brooding, or she would have wanted a wake.”

Rupert sets aside his half finished drink and stands up. “I should head back to the cemetery. Double check that Faith finished her patrol okay.”

“See you later” Ethan tells him. He watches Rupert until he is out of sight, then realises, “We should have done a toast – to Joyce.”

“It doesn’t feel right to do that with coffee” Anya points out.

“Well then…Willy’s Place?”

“Alright.”

By the time Giles arrives at the cemetery, the sky has slipped from navy to darkness, and he realises he ought to have brought a stake. Usually he is never without one, but of course he is wearing his funeral suit. He relaxes when he spots Faith stalking up. “Are you alright?” he asks.

“Great” she retorts flatly.

“I just meant a-after the patrol.”
“You should see the other guys. I’d have stayed longer but I wanted to give B some space.”

“Good Lord!” Giles takes an automatic step towards the cemetery gate. “Buffy’s still there?”

Faith takes his arm and pulls him away. “It’s okay, watcher-man; Angel’s with her.” Seeing Giles’ expression at that, she adds, “It’s just for one night.”

One night is all it takes, Giles reflects, but it would sound crude said out loud, and wouldn’t change the situation. Besides, it seems unlikely that anyone would feel perfect happiness tonight. Reluctantly, he follows Faith.

They take their time walking back to Revello Drive and it occurs to Giles that Faith may be hoping something jumps out at them. She is palpably tense, her mood almost a physical presence. It reminds Giles uncomfortably of the days immediately following Alan Finch’s death. So it is only partly out of concern – with the other part motivated by disaster prevention – that he asks, “How are you bearing up now the funeral’s over?”

“Well, B’s kinda…What’s the word? Comatose? But I think she’ll get it together tomorrow once she’s done her vamp themed vigil. And Dawn’s really quiet but she’ll get there. Probably be less of a kid by the time she arrives, but we all have to grow up.”

“I didn’t mean ‘you’ as a group” Giles tells her. “I meant ‘you’ as in Faith. How are you bearing up?”

“Oh. Well. She wasn’t my mom.”

“She may as well have been.”

Faith throws a bitter smile sideways; Giles sees it in flashes as they step in and out of pools of street light. “Come on, Giles, I’m not stupid. I know she only wanted me to move in because I was the one who could fight evil instead of Buffy one day.”

For a moment, Giles isn’t sure what to say. It is just a moment, but it is long enough that anything he does say will feel forced. He manages, “That doesn’t mean she didn’t care about you deeply.”

Too late, he wonders whether Faith perhaps wasn’t sure of Joyce’s motivations for offering her a home, and was just testing her worst suspicion.

Faith’s expression is inscrutable. “I guess” she says. Then, “I’m not saying it isn’t shit. It’s just, what am I supposed to do?”

Again too late, Giles realises that may not be rhetorical.

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“Hi Ethan.”

“Hello, Willow. I’ll make us some tea.”

“Thanks.” Willow trails after him into the empty training room. Faith was in here pulverising the dummy earlier and the air is dusty with fallen straw. Ethan makes tea in silence and they sit side by side on the couch. After a few sips, Willow says, “I came to give you a heads up about Dawn: She was asking about resurrection spells this morning.”

“Ah.” Unsurprising really. “Well there’s not much here on that. Except for the Macaria Ritus Mortem manuscript.”
“Doesn’t mean this won’t be the first place she comes.”

“But it does need to be the last” Ethan agrees.

“Exactly.” Willow frowns. “And there’s Air Aiseirigh upstairs. Not to mention some of the books in demon languages.”

“Half of those, she couldn’t get the ingredients to start” points out Ethan.

“And the other half?”

“…Point taken.”

“And that’s even before she tries somewhere else” says Willow. “You don’t think Rack…I mean, Buffy wasn’t home a lot while that was going on, but it’s not impossible Dawn’s heard one of us mention him.”

Ethan shakes his head. “He doesn’t have that sort of power. Plus she could never find his place on her own.”

“I’m more worried about him finding her. A grieving little girl ready to hand over all the money she has and do anything else besides? He’ll think Beltane’s come early.”

Ethan shudders. “We won’t let him near her.”

“Easier to do if she isn’t trying to find people like him. Will you talk to her?”

“Alright.”

“I’ve tried, and Tara, but I’m not sure if she took it in. She just wants her mom back.” Willow bites her lip anxiously. “Which can’t happen I guess.”

Ethan stares at her. “Don’t tell me I need to give you that talk too.”

“You don’t” Willow replies quickly.

“You didn’t tell her anything?”

“No! I mean. I was tempted. But I didn’t, Ethan, I swear. I know it’s wrong. And dangerous. I just… I wish it wasn’t, you know?”

Ethan nods, allowing himself to relax. “Everyone’s got someone they’d bring back if they could.” (Randall flickers across his mind, face fuzzy because Ethan has never allowed himself to recall the details.) “But you know what happens when people try.”

“Right.” Willow nods. “Not an easy lesson to forget. You won’t show Dawn those illustrations, will you? I don’t want to give her nightmares.”

“Nothing like the nightmares she’d get if she tried the spell” Ethan tells her.

“Well, yeah” says Willow resignedly. “Let’s just make sure she doesn’t.”

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“I’ll get these.” Giles notices the cashier give him and Buffy an odd look and wonders what she makes of them, Buffy with her trolley full of items that imply a household of young women, with
him, decidedly not a young woman, hovering anxiously and helping her pack.

Buffy glances at him. “You don’t have to, Giles.”

“Yes I do” says Giles decisively, and she argues no further, lets him pay and help her with her bags. Outside, they load up the boot of his waiting car.

“I’m gonna need to learn to drive” Buffy muses as they pull out of the supermarket car park.

“I don’t mind giving you a lift for your groceries” Giles tells her. “Ethan and I shop here anyway.” It’s the only place in town that sells anything resembling real cheese.

“Thanks. But now I’m Dawn’s grown up, I’m going to have to do the dropping off and picking up thing that…” she swallows. “That mom used to complain about.”

“Dawn’s main grown up?” Giles asks gently.

“We heard from dad at last” Buffy explains. “He’s happy for Dawn to stay with me.”

Giles fumbles the gear change, distracted by his sudden anger, and they jolt in their seats. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It would be awful if she had to go away” says Buffy, apparently under the impression that he means sorry about her shiftless father rather than the briefly bumpy ride. Actually, Giles doesn’t feel sorry about Hank Summers so much as righteously indignant. Buffy adds, “Not to mention it would turn keeping her safe from Glory into this huge long distance slaying extravaganza. As opposed to this huge here in Sunnydale slayer extravaganza” She closes her eyes briefly, opens them. There are pale blue shadows beneath them, Giles notes. Buffy asks, “I guess we could do it, though? Faith could guard the hellmouth and I could take Dawn to Spain.” She frowns. “Only Glory would notice, and wonder why am I skipping town with this one person. And he didn’t ask.”

“He’s a fool” Giles tells her. At Buffy’s sharp glance, he explains, “To have not one but two daughters who’d make any man proud, and choose to live on the other side of the world from them? You couldn’t pay me to do it. I mean, if I had…I-I mean…”

Buffy smiles. “I know what you mean.” She settles back in her seat and watches the bonnet eat up the road. “Hey, Giles? Do you wonder if…I mean, I’ve been thinking: Dad was on the other side of the planet when the monks cast their spell. Do you think maybe it didn’t quite take right from that far away?”

“Does your father know that Dawn isn’t his daughter in the traditional sense, you mean?”

“Kinda. I mean, not consciously. But could that be why he’s making with the absenteeism? Some sort of subconscious weirdedness?”

“I doubt the spell would fail just because of distance, Buffy” Giles tells her, because she deserves the truth. “It changed so much of everyone’s perceptions of our personal history, after all; I doubt it would be phased by the other dimension.”

He senses Buffy process this, can almost feel the answer turning over in her mind before settling cold. “Just him then” she says.

“He may come round” Giles reasons.

“And I’m guessing I’ll need to get you out the room before he does?”
“I’ll behave myself.” They share a rare smile before Buffy’s expression slips back into melancholy. Giles hopes she knows that it is okay to smile again, to let happiness mark her mood now and then as she grieves, but he suspects she does. She was never afraid of her feelings. Thoughts turning to practicalities, he asks, “Can Faith drive?”

“No. Cost issues, I think. Plus, can you imagine Faith with a car?”

Privately, Giles reflects that it couldn’t be any more frightening than Buffy with a car. “I’m sure she’ll cope” he says. “I’ll see if she wants lessons. That way, you can take your time if you want to give driving another go, but you will have a driver in your house.”

“Uh huh” decides Buffy, thinking this over. “I guess that could work. Unless the sucky driving is a slayer thing and not a Buffy thing.” She sighs. “Probably a Buffy thing.”

“We can’t be good at everything.”

“Yeah, but I had to choose the basic life skill to be bad at. I couldn’t just suck at French? I mean, not that I don’t.” Buffy shrugs. “We should have got post-Toth pure-slayer me to borrow your car.”

“No we shouldn’t have” replies Giles. He turns his underappreciated vehicle in the direction of Buffy’s home, and adds, “You wouldn’t need to drive in most of Europe.”

“Yeah, but I would need to speak French. Anyway, run away to Europe is off. I’ll have to stick with the original plan of staying and fighting evil.”

“For now. But one day. As you said, Faith can guard the hellmouth.” As he says it, Giles feels a flicker of guilt, and wonders if Joyce ever felt it too. To be fair to his second slayer, he adds, “She owes you a few months, at least. Once the threat from Glory has passed, you and Dawn might benefit from a change of scene.”

“Maybe” Buffy shrugs. “It has been literal years since I got further than L.A. But maybe don’t mention it to Faith just yet? She’s in this feel nothing power on mode since mom…And it hurts to watch because you’d think she’d care a bit, you know? But in case it is just a front, let’s not find out. Because as fronts go, kinda useful.” She flinches. “Okay, that made me sound like a crappy person.”

“I think it made you sound like a person trying to cope with far too much.”

“I don’t mean I don’t want Faith to be able to grieve. Kinda wish she would, actually. I just mean, she’s keeping it all in at the moment, which means at least one of us is functional.”

“You’re functioning” Giles points out.

“Yep. Functioning Buffy. Getting groceries and everything. But I’m just play acting, Giles. I don’t know how to be mom.”

“Then try being Buffy. I always find she’s more than capable of any challenge.”

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When Dawn comes into the shop, Ethan lets her slip up to the restricted section before following her up. “No” he says, making her jump, “you don’t want that one.” He replaces the book in her hand. “Take a look at this one. You’ll get a zombie either way but at least with this, that will be all you’ll get. Well, probably.”
Dawn shoves the book back at him like it’s contaminated. “I don’t want a zombie! I’m trying to get mom back!”

Ethan piles the second book on top of the first, reaches for a yellowed scroll. “I’m afraid that simply can’t be done, Dawn. Like Willow told you.”

Dawn pulls a resolute expression. “Well I’m going to find a way. All this magic in the world, it’s got to be possible.”

“That’s not how it works. If magic made everything possible, we’d turn Glory into a little umbrella and stick her in a cocktail.”

“This is different. People die all the time; someone must have done something about it by now.”

“Exactly: If it was possible, someone would have come up with something better than this before now.” Ethan nods at the discarded books and hands her the scroll. “What about this one? If you get everything exactly right, you might have a few seconds to talk to something that looks just like your mum before it turns into a vessel for the God Aita. Who isn’t on the top of anyone’s dinner guest list, to put it politely.” He risks a glance at Dawn, who looks stricken, before powering on, reaching for a third book. “Of course, it is hard to get everything just right, so chances are Aita would just send Vanth instead, and at that point, having a tea party with Glory would seem fairly pleasant in light of what would start happening.” He hands Dawn the next book. “Or if you decide against that, there’s always Mephistopheles. Sickeningly traditional, in my opinion, but it might work. Word the deal right, and you might even have time to see your mum before you’re sucked into hell. Just be sure to think through all the ways your words could be interpreted before you start, though, or Joyce might end up joining you there. Old Harry is a tricky bastard and he couldn’t care less about how much you’re hurting right now. And nor could anyone else who tells you any of this will end well.”

Dawn is crying now, not the sobs of a child, but the quietly flowing tears of someone who is not quite a child anymore. Ethan reaches for her across the books but she bats him away. “I just want her back!” she gasps. “What’s wrong with that?”


“Someone has to get this right one day! Why can’t it be me?”

“Aside from anything else, because you’re not a witch. Do you really think you can do what generations of sorcerers couldn’t?”

“Yes! Because I want it more!”

Ethan shakes his head. “So said everyone who lost anyone ever. Look, Dawn, your mother loved you. Loves you, wherever she is. She wouldn’t want you putting yourself in this sort of danger. You don’t want to put her in this sort of danger, do you?”

Dawn shakes her head miserably. Her fingers find the spine of one of the books and she strokes it gently, as though it is a furry animal rather than a book of darkness written by a demon prince. “No.”

“Okay then.” Ethan relaxes. “So, um. Tea?”

Dawn looks up at him with something dangerous in her gaze. “I get it now: I’ll have to learn magic if I’m going to do this right.”
Ethan deflates. “You won’t do it. I’ve done magic all my life and I couldn’t.”

“So I’ll have to get better than you. Like Willow.”

Ethan refuses to show the flicker of resentment that echoes through him at that. He says, “Willow couldn’t do this.” And therefore, no-one can.

Dawn shrugs. “Then I’ll have to get better than her. Ethan, someone has to pull this off eventually – I’m going to make sure it’s me. Because you’re right, I do love mom. I don’t care how hard it is, or how long it takes, I am getting her back.”

“Dawn: No. You’re not. Look, sweetheart, I wish I could tell you something else.”

“So, you say I can’t do it but you won’t teach me magic? If I can’t do it, why does it matter?”

“But you might try. But I didn’t say I won’t teach you magic, did I?”

“Right. When I’m sixteen.” Dawn pushes the pile of books and they tumble, dark incantation over ancient curse. Dawn looks a little shamefaced – perhaps she hadn’t intended for them to fall, and just wanted them away from her. Ethan gathers them up before they can do any damage. Really, these are not books one wants to piss off. Dawn adds, “I might not live that long anyway. Not if Glory…” She sighs, looking up at the ceiling so that fresh tears catch the light. “There’s nothing good left, is there? Even Buffy’s acting like... It’s all ruined, Ethan.”

Ethan considers telling her it isn’t. It would only be the truth after all. And what Joyce would want him to say. But Joyce, with her superior knowledge of this tempestuous child, is not here, and it seems better to say, “I know. So, how about that tea? And your first magic lesson.”

Dawn blinks up at him. “What?”

Ethan gestures to the restacked pile of books. “I’m not saying I’ll help you with a resurrection spell. I’m saying that if I’m going to go into more detail about why you can’t do something, it’s only fair I show you what you can do.”

“What if I do a resurrection spell anyway?”

“Then enjoy hell. But we’ve established you’ll need to be a witch to even try, and if I’m going to teach you, I’m trusting that you won’t try anything that dangerous for at least a few years.” By which time, the edge will be off her grief and he’ll have filled her with every shred of knowledge he has about why she shouldn’t try. Illustrations and all.

Dawn considers him. “Okay.”

*****

“Check in your wing mirror” Giles cautions as Faith wrestles with the gear stick before swinging the car around with alarming force. Perhaps it is a slayer thing.

“Giles, relax, there’s no-one else here.” They are in the surprisingly large car park that flanks the mall. It being midnight, the place is deserted.

“But if there were” Giles points out, “you’d need to check your wing mirror.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Faith accelerates sickeningly before arresting the movement with a jolting brake. “I don’t see why I have to do this anyway. Sunnydale’s teeny. We can just walk and save some cash.”
“It’s a useful skill to have if you can manage it.”

“’Course I can manage it – check this out.”

“Faith…F-Faith, don’t –” Giles grits his teeth through the skidding spin Faith sends them on. “Faith, pull over!”

“Alright!” Faith seems to make an effort to rein in her laughter with mixed results. Giles allows himself to glare as they swap over, settling himself back into the driver’s seat to announce, “Right. Concentrate this time.”

He goes over the basics again, throwing in several pointed references to road safety. For all she responds with sarcasm and a pretence of somehow knowing it all already, Faith seems interested. Once they are back in tutorial position, Faith in the driver’s seat, Giles on the passenger side, Faith remarks, “You can’t tell me you’ve never stolen a car either, so you can’t judge me for having some fun.”

“Not with my car” replies Giles through gritted teeth. “Switch to third.”

Faith tugs experimentally at the gear stick. “You know they do this amazing thing called automatic nowadays, right?”

“If I wanted to drive a bumper car, I’d go to the fair.”

“Well, Joyce’s car is automatic, and that’s the one I’ll be driving right? Maybe we should be using that.” Faith breaks off to swear as the car stalls. Stamping on the pedal, she adds, “I don’t think Buffy would like that though. Me practicing on her mom’s car.”

“Perhaps not yet, but give it time. Depress the clutch.”

Faith wrestles the car back into motion and comments, “Well I’m going to have to drive it eventually. Not like we can afford a new one.”

“Oh?” Giles feels a shiver of concern, but doesn’t let it show in his voice.

“Come on, Giles, you’ve got Buffy in college, Dawn in school and me being my ever-employable self. Buffy’s acting like all she needs to do is learn how to cook and we’ll be like the Waltons if they staked vampires, but I know better. We’re gonna need money.”

“Joyce will have made arrangements. And there’s Buffy and Dawn’s father – he has to play his part.”

“He’s a guy. He played his part and then he put his pants back on. ’S’how it works.”

“Legally, he’s financially responsible for Dawn while she’s a minor” Giles argues, setting aside, with some effort, Faith’s depressingly jaded outlook. “Park here.”

“Here?” Faith eases off the pedal and frowns at the parking space. Backing up after a few attempts to approach it nose first, she says, “Maybe he will send some money but don’t hold your breath is all I’m saying. It’s wicked easy for guys to not pay here, you think anyone’s going to try and chase him down in Spain? He’s got two whole systems to play before we see any green out of him. There.”

“You’re not in the lines.”
“Doesn’t matter: no other cars about.”

“Try again, Faith.”


“Check the mirror.”

“I look fine.”

“For obstructions.”

“There’s no-one else here, Giles.”

“You need to get into the habit of checking before you reverse.”

Faith sighs dramatically and makes an exaggerated show of checking, before reversing and then sliding haltingly into the space.

The lesson, such as it was, concluded, they swap back and Giles drives her home. Staring out the window, Faith wonders, “Maybe I should move out? One less mouth to feed.”

“I think that’s the last thing Buffy needs right now.”

“Yeah? Seems to me like she might want it to be her and Dawn now. She doesn’t want some stranger around.”

“You’re hardly a stranger.”

“Not in the family, I mean.”

“Joyce chose to make you a part of her family.”

“Only so I could fight monsters instead of Buffy.”

“Not only. You became a part of that family.”

“Yeah, right. Giles, I’m like the lodger and not a paying one, so now they need money, most useful thing I can probably do is move out.”

“I think you’re underestimating how useful you could be if you stay. And if Joyce only saw you as a lodger, she wouldn’t have taken you back after you worked for the Mayor.”

He senses Faith’s flinch. She retorts, “Doesn’t matter now anyway. Not sure if you’ve noticed, Giles, but Joyce is dead. ’S’what Buffy needs now that counts.”

“Faith” Giles glances over to her, despite his earlier protestations that she keep her eyes on the road, and notes the pain showing through the carefully composed expression before turning back.

“After the funeral, you asked me what you’re supposed to do. The answer is, it’s not for me to tell you. It’s your decision. But if you decide to help Buffy, I suggest continuing to live with her and Dawn, and allowing yourself to grieve with them. Scary as that may be, and I’m not saying it won’t be. Buffy has lost a mother and she may as well have lost a father. Don’t let her lose you too.”

Faith is quiet for so long that it seems she won’t answer. When she does speak, it is in a nonchalant tone that Giles isn’t fooled by. “Okay” she says.
“I’m still not sure how exactly you got from *Don’t raise the dead* to *Hey, let me teach you magic*” Willow states, frowning at Ethan from across the Magic Box’s central table.

“It, it might not be the best time for her to learn, Mr Rayne” adds Tara. “Even with you to guide her, sh-she is grieving.”

“Technically” says Ethan, “it won’t be just me guiding her.”

“Only if we agree” Willow retorts.

“Willow, you’re more than ready to teach someone else. And I thought you liked tutoring what’s-his-face.”

“Percy. But that was school stuff. This is powerful mystical forces that I haven’t had a safe relationship with in the past stuff.”

“You’ve got things under control now” Tara tells her, which is not how Ethan would choose to phrase it, but he sets his own issues with control aside to add, “Exactly. You know how dangerous magic can be, which makes you the ideal teacher. If you do some lessons and I do some lessons, and Tara does some, it will be three people to keep an eye on Dawn and make sure she doesn’t do something we wouldn’t.”

“It w-would be better than her trying magic unsupervised” Tara acknowledges. “If Buffy says it’s okay…”

“She won’t” says Willow. To Ethan, she adds, “You know that, right?”

“Bugger.” Buffy’s views on the matter had slipped Ethan’s mind. Really, it’s none of her business if Dawn learns magic or not, but she doesn’t see it that way, and she has super strength. Not that she’d really use it against him, but Ethan likes to keep the slayer on side. “She’d probably be alright with it if we focus on defensive spells” he muses. “Last line of defence against Glory.”

“Defensive spells that work on gods?” Willow repeats. “That’s some high level stuff to throw at Dawnie.”

“We’d best start soon then.”

“Maybe. If Buffy says it’s okay. But even then, we’d better really watch her, Ethan.”

“I think I scared her off resurrection spells, if that’s what you’re worried about” Ethan tells her.

“It’s not just that” Tara reminds him. “The grief affects everything – her energies are unstable.”

“I guess you remember how it feels” Willow says. “You could help her through that side of it.”
“I could do that without teaching her magic” points out Tara. “I-I was thinking I should offer to spend some time with her.”

“Well you can” says Ethan. “And teach her magic.”

“It could be dangerous for her.”

“She lives in Sunnydale” replies Ethan. “Everything’s dangerous. At least this way, we can teach her to protect herself.”

“I’m in if Buffy’s okay with it” Willow decides. “But we need to be careful.”

“Of course” agrees Ethan. “When are we not?”

*****

“No”

“It’s what she wants, Buffy.”

“Ethan, she’s fourteen. She doesn’t know what she wants.”

She already has a grasp of parenting then, Ethan concludes from that comment. Cruel to point it out, so instead he says, “Fourteen year olds know what they want.”

“When I was fourteen, I wanted to win the World Figure Skating Championship and go to prom with Billy Fordham.”

“Well I didn’t say they all want sensible things.”

“You want sensible?” Buffy brushes past him and opens the training room cabinet, starts wrapping her knuckles in protective bandages. “Try not teaching magic to a fourteen year old. Especially Dawn.”

“I could teach her defensive spells.”

“Oh no” Buffy swivels, holding up a pre-emptive finger. “That’s what you said when Willow started learning – it was supposed to be all protective spells and before we knew it, it was addiction and accidental demon summoning and me getting engaged to Spike.”

“Well, alright, so the remit grew a little in Willow’s case” admits Ethan. “But it will be different with Dawn – For one thing, what are the chances of Dawn turning out to have Willow’s ability? There can only be so many geniuses in one small town.”

“Ah, yes, what are the chances of a girl who’s really the Key having special powers?” Buffy frowns. “Wait, are you saying Dawn isn’t a genius?”

“Not when it comes to magic. Probably. What I’m saying is Willow’s a special case. Usually magic isn’t particularly dangerous.” Ethan notes the knowing look emitting from Buffy and repeats, “Usually” before powering on with, “Look, all I know is Dawn could stand to learn some protection spells. And I doubt being the Key will make much difference to anything.”

Buffy seems to be at least considering the idea. “And Willow and Tara will teach her too?”

“Yes. Not that I wouldn’t be capable on my own, by the way.”
Buffy sighs. “I suppose she could do with the distraction. You won’t be teaching her anything that could make Glory back off, will you? Not that you’re Mr Reliable, but even you would have told me if you had something that would work on her. Right?”

“Buffy, dear, your faith in me is so touching. And yes, fighting-Glory-level magic is a whole other league I wouldn’t try to catapult Dawn to even if it was a league in my sights. But she could at least learn something that would buy her a minute or two, if she applies herself.” More like a second or two. But sometimes that’s all that is needed. Ethan adds, “And it’s not like there aren’t other nasties in this town.”

“I suppose” Buffy allows. “And it’s not like she’s never run off and hung out with a peroxided example of them before. I guess defensive magic might be of the good.” She snaps the roll of bandages off her knuckles with a brutal wrench and faces him intently. “That and the history and ethics stuff you should have done with Willow from the start. That’s it, okay Ethan? Teach her to defend herself and why she shouldn’t mess around with dark forces. I hear that you’re teaching her anything else and they’ll be hell to pay. She doesn’t even read books that mention anything else.”

This seems a little draconian, but it’s not as though Ethan’s original aim of steering Dawn away from resurrection magic doesn’t fit the brief. “Alright” he agrees. “You have my word.”

“I’d better. ’Cause I think Giles would be with me on this one.”

Ethan agrees, so he offers a bland smile and says nothing.

*****

“I agree with Buffy: It could be very dangerous.”

Ethan sets his magazine aside to scowl at Rupert from across the living room. “To be fair, love, you always think what I want to do could be very dangerous.”

“It usually is.” Giles takes off his glasses and polishes them. For a moment, Ethan is concerned at this reluctance to meet his eyes, but then he notices Rupert’s concentration and relaxes: sometimes Rupert really is just cleaning his glasses. Without looking up, Rupert points out, “She’s only fourteen, Ethan. And grieving. When you think about what we got up to at a less tender age…”

“…We need to remind ourselves that we were idiots back then” Ethan tells him. “Besides, Dawn’s so young, there’s a chance she might do what she’s told.”

“I think you’re being a little naïve about the typical obedience of fourteen year olds, dear” says Rupert. “And of the two of us, I’m the one who has worked in a high school.” He slides his glasses back on to his nose. “And you’re the one with a history of inspiring acts of rebellion in potential slayers.”

“Getting them to have fun for an hour or so is hardly inspiring acts of rebellion, Rupert” Ethan dismisses.

“I don’t think their watchers saw it that way.”

“This isn’t rebellion” Ethan insists. “This is teaching Dawn to defend herself.”

“Something you very suddenly want to do” Rupert points out.

Ethan opens his magazine again. “Well, we do have a hell god after us.”
Rupert isn’t persuaded. “We’ve been dealing with the threat from Glory for sometime now. Why does it occur to you to teach Dawn magic now?”

Ethan studies a picture of something very pretentious at the Tate Modern.

“Ethan?”

“Maybe I just wasn’t very quick with the idea.”

“What are you not telling me?”

“Have you seen this?” Ethan waves the magazine. “Since when is –”

“Ethan.”

“Alright” Ethan tosses the magazine to the coffee table. Truth be told, he’s a little relived to have to share this. “I caught her skulking around in the restricted section. She was planning to raise Joyce.”

“Good Lord.” Rupert sits back with an unnerved expression.

“She wouldn’t have managed it.”

“She might have come close. Too bloody close.” Rupert stares at him. “And you took this to mean she needed more access to magic?”

“She needs to know how dangerous it can be. And I need to know what she can and can’t do.”

“What she can do and what she should do are very different things. What she should not do in these circumstances is spend hours at a time in a magic shop.”

“If I didn’t have her in the shop, she’d go somewhere else – to someone who won’t enlighten her on what resurrection magic actually involves.” Sensing Rupert waver, Ethan continues, “Look, this is like when kids drink in a pub, and at least in the pub, the adults know where they are.”

“Not an especially reassuring analogy” Rupert points out.

“Well, no.”

“Does Buffy know about this?”

“No” Ethan admits.

Rupert seems to weigh something up. “How likely do you think Dawn is to try a resurrection spell now?”

“I think I’ve put her off. Or if I haven’t, she seems to want to wait until she’s properly tapped into her power, which gives me plenty of time to show her what a bad idea it is.”

“History and ethics?”

“Yes, and protection spells. Nothing else, I promise. I promised Buffy.” Ethan studies his partner. “Are you going to tell her about the resurrection plan?”

“No” Rupert murmurs, “I don’t thing so. She’s had more than enough to worry about lately.” He looks at Ethan. “And you’re certain that Dawn won’t try anything reckless before you have a chance to show her why she shouldn’t?”
“Virtually certain.”

“If that changes…”

“You’ll be the first to know. You and Buffy.”

“Good. Because for all it’s something of a cover story, it wouldn’t be a bad idea for Dawn to have access to some defensive magic, given everything that’s happening.”

“**”

“So” Dawn regards the waiting crystal “is this like the troll thing?”

“No” says Anya, abandoning the window display before Tara has a chance to reply and coming over to watch the magic lesson. “That was a lot more complicated. Trolls are pretty thick skinned so it takes a lot of magic to trap one. Actually, a whole range of things can be trapped in a crystal.”

Dawn eyes the crystals on a far shelf. “Like demons and things?”

“Yes” says Tara. “B-but there are no demons in these. Right, Ethan?”

“No so far as I know” Ethan glances up from the till.

“But it’s not just demons” adds Anya. “You can put almost anything in a crystal – a spell, an emotion…”

“Sunlight” puts in Tara. “Willow’s been working on that to fight vampires.”

Dawn asks, “Could we stick Glory in one?”

“We wish” mutters Anya.

“Let’s just try this feather first.” Tara produces a feather and sets it down next to the crystal. “You remember the spell?”

Dawn nods. “I’m still not sure how it’s supposed to work with no words.”

“Not all spells require words” Anya explains. “Just concentration and innate talent.”

Dawn bites her lower lip. “Just being real here, I’m not sure my teachers at school would say I have either. At least not these days.”

“Well we’re your teachers here” Tara tells her. “And we say you can do this.”

Dawn closes her eyes. “I just do the appeal? In my head?”

“Yes, silently.” Ethan heads round from the counter and comes over.

“Are you guys all watching?” asks Dawn, her eyes still closed.

“No, no” Ethan reassures her. He and Aya watch the now-trembling feather with professional interest, while Tara looks away and out the window.

“I can’t do it if you’re all watching.”

“Just concentrate, Dawn” Ethan urges. He studies the dark circles under the child’s closed eyes and senses the disturbance in the growing magical energy surrounding her. Tara wasn’t wrong to say
grief affects magic. It affects it the way impurities render a crystal flawed, creation skipping a beat
to lose an atom in a gemstone here or drop new meaning into a spell there. Dawn’s magic is
latticed with pain.

The feather is starting to blur a little now, not from speed of trembling but something else. The
sunlight hitting the table around it starts to look a little green, as though it’s been filtered through
sea glass.

Suddenly, the lightbulb over the table explodes. Everyone jumps back with exclamations and
scrapings of chairs. Smoke rises around the table, and Ethan would worry about an electrical fire
were it not bright pink.

“I’m sorry!” gasps Dawn.

“It happens.” Ethan flaps a hand, dispelling the smoke. “Oh, look, and you almost did it.”

“I did?” Dawn lifts the crystal, which now appears to have half a feather sticking out the side of it.

“You were thinking too literally” Anya tells her. “It’s about the energies of the crystal
symbolically trapping the object in a pocket dimension, not actually cramming something in there.
Otherwise Olaf would never have fitted.”

“W-well it’s still good for a beginner” says Tara.

“Well” says Dawn “I’m still sorry about the bulb.”

“Not to worry” says Ethan, “but, ah, best not mention it Buffy, okay?”

“…and then the light bulb exploded” finishes Dawn at dinner. At Ethan’s pointed cough, she adds
a guilty, “Oops.”

Buffy sets her fork down. “What did we say, Ethan?”

“It is defensive magic” Ethan quickly explains. “One day she could trap an attacking demon in a
crystal.”

“Or a feeling or a feather” puts in Dawn.

“Ethan” Rupert glances up from his food, “I’m not sure crystal magic is entirely –”

“– related to self defence?” Ethan finishes. “Arguably so, but it involves all sorts of basics that she
needs before we go on to more practical defensive spells.”

Buffy nods to an invisible audience. “Exactly how it started with Willow.”

“What’s the big?” asks Faith from across the table. “If she learns how to squish something nasty or
annoying into a stone, I don’t see the harm in it.”

“I could practise on Spike” adds Dawn.

Buffy seems to consider this suggestion with some revision of opinion, but all she says is, “Just be
careful.”

“I will” says Dawn, even though Ethan is fairly sure the warning was for him. He says, “Anyway,
“It’s not as though Willow is an irredeemable dark sorceress.”

“I know that” says Buffy. “It’s just that she’s been through a lot of danger thanks to spells going wrong, and it’s not as though we’re not swimming in danger as it is.”

Dawn looks a little apprehensive.

“Well” says Rupert, “That’s in the past and Willow seems to have things under control now.”

“Yes” says Buffy, “which is why I don’t want a new wave of teenage magic mishaps.”

“You said I could study magic” points out Dawn.

“Yes, for protection. Hence me not wanting it to turn into something I have to protect you from.”

“Right” says Dawn, “Because there’s plenty of those.”

“Exactly.”

“Are we all done?” Rupert stands to clear the plates, looking, Ethan notes, a little worried. Gods, but one would think he was entitled to a little trust! Then again, magic and trust haven’t gone together according to Rupert’s worldview for years now. Ethan is simply the exception. As Rupert collects his cutlery, Ethan smiles appeasingly at him. Rupert smiles back but there is something reflexive about it; Rupert’s mind elsewhere behind his gaze.

“Talking of studying” says Faith, as Rupert leaves the room, “How about a full day of school tomorrow?”

“I don’t know” says Dawn.

“You should give it a try, Dawnie” says Buffy.

“Full day?” asks Ethan.

“I’ve been coming home at lunch time” Dawn explains. “Ever since mom…”

“Ahh, I see.”

“It’s to ease me back into it.”

“What do you think?” Buffy asks her.

“I…I guess. Then you can go back to college.” Dawn’s smile is so thin that Ethan can see through it to the flaw at its centre.

Buffy smiles proudly. “Thanks, Dawn. And hey, if it’s too much –”

“No, no – it’s fine.”

“Good.” Buffy stands up. “I’d better go help Giles. He shouldn’t wash up when he cooked.”

“I’ll help” Faith rises too, grabbing what remains of the cutlery.

Dawn and Ethan are left sitting across the table from one another. Ethan asks, “Are you alright?”

“Sure.” Dawn nods.
"I’m sure you could still go home at lunch if it’s too much."

"It’s not that. It’s just…it’s like some of the kids at school think I’m cursed or something. No-one knows what to say. So some people don’t say anything."

"That will pass” Ethan tells her. He doesn’t know that it will, but he manages to sound sure of it. “But I’m sure no-one will mind if you need more time.”

"That’s just it: They won’t mind, but they will worry about it. It’s not like Buffy doesn’t spend enough time worrying about me. Or Faith, what with Glory."

"Worrying is what big sisters are meant to do."

"It sucks all the same. Hey, Ethan?"

"Yes?"

"When things are trapped in crystals, can they be unleashed? Like, set on something?"

"I suppose, theoretically. But the sorts of things that would be useful in a fight aren’t easily trained, and being trapped inside a crystal tends to piss them off."

"Could emotions be unleashed? Like, could you make everyone really happy for a party if you had a crystal with some happy trapped inside?"

"I like the way you think.” Ethan raises his glass to her. “But one thing at a time, yes? Buffy wants us to concentrate on protection spells, and so we shall.”

"Right” Dawn’s eyes glaze. “Me being the source of the stress again.”

Once the washing up is done, Ethan and Dawn dry up and tidy it all away, leaving Giles to talk to his slayers in the living room. Or rather, listen to them, as Buffy convinces herself that her understandable numbness is somehow related to her being a slayer, and Faith tries to dissuade her of the notion.

"B, this is BS!” Faith exclaims at last. “Tell her, Giles.”

"It is” Giles agrees, before noting Faith’s crude phrasing. “Um, that is, I don’t think you’re right, Buffy. Being a slayer must have had an impact on some girls’ emotional stability” (he carefully doesn’t so much as glance at Faith) “but you’ve always been a very empathetic person.”

"Well I don’t feel like one now” Buffy tells him. “I feel like the space between me and everyone else just keeps on getting bigger.” “Because you’re grieving” says Faith.

Buffy shakes her head. “It doesn’t feel like an individualised thing. Maybe this is just what happens if you’re a slayer as long as I’ve been.”

“I’ve been a slayer almost as long” Faith points out.

“And you always play well with others?” Buffy responds.

Faith folds her arms with a grunt of acknowledgement. “Well, I’m different from you.”

“Not so much. Not anymore.”
“Is being me that bad?”

“No” Buffy tells her. “You’re exactly what a slayer is supposed to be.”

“Well so are you. There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Well I need to find my way” says Buffy, and then pauses, wrinkles her nose. “I mean to balance the slayer thing with the sister thing, not the cat thing, which, by the way, ew.” Noticing Faith’s confusion, she explains, “I just feel cut off from people—”

Faith shrugs. “Helps with the hunt.”

“But it doesn’t help me raise Dawn.” Buffy wraps her arms around herself. “Which is maybe not something the Slayer Power planned on anyway.”

“Buffy” Giles tries, “If this is really something you want to look into, there is something we could try.” He tells her briefly about the spiritual journeys he has read of in the Watchers’ Diaries, and of the sacred place in the desert that might be suitable for summoning a spirit guide. When he is finished, Buffy looks doubtful. “I’m not sure I could leave Dawn that long.”

“You don’t need to, B. You’re talking crap anyway.”

“Yes” says Giles. “Um, that is, you’re mistaken. You’re perfectly capable of love.”

“Not that it’s all it’s cracked up to be anyway” Faith mutters. At Buffy’s sharp look, she adds, “Oh, come on! You had Riley, I had Ben: The only guy who even wants to stick around for either of us is Spike. We’re better off without the whole love thing.”

“I shouldn’t have mentioned Riley” Buffy concedes.

“Yeah, that’s ancient history.”

“But it shows that romance isn’t exactly compatible with being a slayer” argues Buffy. “That’s got to have an effect.”

“Nonsense” says Giles. “There are lots of people who set aside a robust love life to focus on the calling without being emotional dysfunctional. Where it not for Ethan, I could have been one of them.”

“It’s not romance so much” Buffy admits. “Not that that wouldn’t be nice. But I’m thinking more about everything else. How I treat my friends, how I treat Dawn.”

“You’re fine with Dawnie.”

“Buffy, you’ve been through a lot of late. It’s natural that you should feel this way.” Giles sighs. “Nonetheless, if it would put your mind at rest, I’m happy to take you to the desert. Given our research into the slayer power, it could be useful in any case.”

“I can stay with Dawn” Faith reminds her.

“Okay.” Buffy thinks it over. “Okay, we’ll give it a go.”

*****

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” asks Ethan as he watches Giles pack.
Giles glances up at him. “We’ll be away from the hellmouth, Eth. Not to mention Glory. I should be the one telling you to be careful.”

“All the same.” Ethan hands over his horrifically modern mobile phone, and adds, “Take this, in case you get into trouble.”

Giles takes the thing reluctantly. Really, can’t anywhere be unreachable anymore? Not even a sacred place in the desert? “I don’t see how we could get into trouble” he argues.

“I know you and Buffy, Rupert: You’ll find a way.”

“You’re one to talk.”

*****

“Maybe we could try another crystal thing” says Dawn after another futile attempt to float a feather. “At least I could do that.”

“Not really” says Anya from the counter.

“We just have a few more basics to get through” Ethan tells her. Frankly, he suspects the girl didn’t sleep last night. She’s in no state for successful casting: if she doesn’t manage something soon, they may as well stop for the day.

“What, and then I’m fine to fight Glory?” Dawn is asking, tiredness crumbling to sarcasm.

“It will never be a good idea to fight Glory” Ethan replies. “Only a last resort.”

“Right” Dawn sounds almost bored. She focuses on the feather again but it doesn’t budge. After a while she asks, “So what else can you squish into a crystal? Could someone put a house in one and just carry it around?”

Ethan considers this. “Possibly” he concludes. “If they were powerful enough.” Maybe he could ask Willow to give it a try. Ethan takes a moment to reflect that Willow has become his marker for the concept of power. If can’t attain something, it is not for mortals to attain.

Dawn asks, “But you guys don’t even want to try to trap Glory in one?”

“It’s not something you can try without being noticed” Ethan explains.

“Plus, it would never work.” Anya comes over. “We’d just have a really angry hell god on our hands.”

“We already have” Dawn points out.

“Really angry” Anya reiterates. “And don’t forget the it would never work part.”

Dawn sighs, and reaches for the feather, lifts it and studies it. “I wish it would.” She frowns thoughtfully. “Hey, maybe I could trap my fear in a crystal? Then I’d still have an angry hell god after me, but at least I could be brave about it.”

“Well” says Anya, “soldiers in the thirteenth century used to do that before they rode into battle. Left their fear behind so they’d be more useful to whatever cause they were fighting for. Usually a religious thing, back then, but one time, this girl wished –”

“For a coffee break” Ethan interrupts. He smiles meaningfully at Anya. “And her boss said yes.”
“Okay” Anya takes the hint and heads for the door. “But she has to learn about vengeance sooner or later, you know.”

“It’s okay” Dawn tells Ethan as the bell jangles in Anya’s wake. “Between Buffy and Faith, I’m used to scary stories.” She frowns. “And Spike that one time.”

“Dawn, Rupert and Buffy are already worried enough that I’m going to corrupt or traumatise you, without you coming home with stories about Anya starting the Dernbach Feud.”

“The what now?”

“Soldiers back then only set their fear aside, for the record.” Ethan stands to tidy away the books they used for the lesson. The magic doesn’t seem to want to happen today. “They didn’t throw it away, they just saved it for a more convenient time. Because generally, fear is useful. It keeps you alive.”

“Good” mutters Dawn, “Because being scared is about the one thing I’m good at.”

“Dawn, that’s nonsense. You’re good at a lot of things.”

Dawn waves the feather. “Not this.”

“You’re having an off day. It happens.”

“I’m having an off life.”

Ethan abandons the clear up and sits down again. “Dawn, I know things are tough now, what with Glory and –”

“It’s not her” Dawn emphasises the denial by dropping the feather with an eloquent little flick. “She’s nothing.”

“Joyce” Ethan realises.

“Nothing’s been right since…” The tears are back, lined up along Dawn’s eyelids like little glass beads in a case. She doesn’t blink, keeps them where they are.

Ethan wonders if he should tell her it will get better. It is true, but it sounds facetious when he tries it out in his head. Instead he says, “I’ll make tea.”

Dawn lets out a bitter laugh. “That’s really your answer to everything, huh?”

“Honestly? It’s just something to do when there’s nothing to say.”

Dawn nods her understanding as he leaves.

*****

“Rupert?” Ethan waits as a scuffling series of noises issue down the phone, until Rupert says, “Ethan?”

“Yes, it’s me.” Ethan relaxes against the Magic Box counter and surveys the empty shop. “You worked out how to answer the mobile then?”

“Just about.”
“Buffy with you?”

“No, she’s just left me actually. Headed for the sacred place under the guardianship of the spirit guide.”

Ethan doesn’t like the idea of Rupert alone in the desert. “Did she take the car?”

“She can’t drive” Rupert points out. “Besides, I’m not sure a vehicle wouldn’t ruin the spiritual experience. Or if the sacred place can be reached by road, for that matter.”

“So you have the car? For when it gets cold?”

“Yes, Ethan, I have the car. Don’t worry.” There is whistling at the other end, signal lost and found. “Ethan?”

“Still here.” Ethan starts closing up for the night as best he can while attached to the phone, reaching for potent items that are stored out of sight overnight and tucking them under the counter and into boxes on the floor.

“How are things going there?” Rupert asks.

“Oh, it’s been fine.” Ethan reaches absently for a recently acquired dolorem comedenti manuscript, a compact carving etched onto oak wood and imbued with the blood of a sorrow-feeder. His hand encounters an empty space. He glances round, looking. “No hell gods or unexpected demons.”

“Good. I was wondering if you could patrol with Faith tonight?” asks Rupert. “I don’t want her to feel that Buffy and I have abandoned her entirely.”

“What?” Ethan stares up and down the length of the nearest shelves. Has Anya moved the carving up to restricted section? That would arguably be the best place for it.

“Patrol” Rupert repeats. “With Faith. Just to let her know there’s still a, well a more experienced adult around, willing to help.”

“But there isn’t” argues Ethan. He crouches down to check he didn’t pack the carving away already. “I’m not remotely useful on patrol. You know that.”

“Really, Ethan, I’m only asking you accompany her there. You can bring protection charms.” Rupert pauses. “I take it someone will wait with Dawn?”


“We’ll be fine, Eth. Have you got something for dinner tonight?”

“What? Um, yes, yes. Will you be back tomorrow, do you think?”

“That really depends on the spirit guide, but I can’t imagine it will take more than a day.”

“Right. Um, good.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes. I just remembered I need to go and meet a customer. To, err, sort something out.” Ideally before Rupert and Buffy get home.
“Be careful, won’t you.”

“You know me, dear. See you tomorrow.” Ethan puts the phone down and grabs his coat, hurrying out the shop to see exactly what Dawn thinks she’s going to do with a dolorem comedenti manuscript.

*****

“Hey” says Faith as soon as she opens the door. “I’ve been trying to call you but you were on the phone.”

“Is something wrong?” Ethan steps through the Summers’ front door.

“Yeah” says Faith, at the same time as Dawn, from the living room, answers, “No”. Leaning forward to wave at him in the hallway, Dawn adds a chirpy, “Hi, Ethan.” She is at least in one piece. Ethan relaxes a little. There is only so much damage she could have done with the carving: Certainly, it wouldn’t be suitable for a resurrection spell.

Taking his arm and drawing him away from the living room doorway, Faith whispers, “There’s something wrong with Dawn.”

“Really?” Ethan stares at the child, who is still visible, seated in an armchair and smiling contentedly.

“Yeah, she’s smiling!”

Ethan feels a pinch of sadness. “Is that really so unusual?”

“Recently, yeah. And it was a freaky-sudden switch – one minute she’s all quiet and serious and then she pops upstairs, comes back down with this creepy smile all over her face,” Faith frowns. “You think she’s got drugs up there?”

“I doubt it. I could look.” Best to find any evidence of a spell before Faith does.

As though reading his mind, Faith asks, “What happened in her magic lesson today?”

“We floated feathers. Or tried to.”

“Oh yeah, that’ll scare Glory off.”

Ethan sighs his frustration. “Look, when are people going to understand, there are some basics we need to cover before we can start on protection spells?”

“Basics like getting high?”

“No” Ethan glances again through the living room doorway. Dawn is still sitting there, still smiling. “I’ll talk to her.”

“You do that. And then you tell me what she said. I’m not patrolling ’til this is fixed.” Faith marches off towards the kitchen, leaving Ethan to approach a still-grinning Dawn. “Hi Ethan. Again” she greets.

“Hello, Dawn.” Ethan sits down on the coach. “So. What did you do?”

“Nothing” Dawn replies. “I didn’t do anything.” She continues to beam, bounces a little as though unable to contain some childish excitement.
“Alright” says Ethan, “then try not smiling.”

Dawn’s expression falls swiftly, wavers, then with a twitch of her lips she is grinning again. She giggles and puts a hand over her mouth.

“Dawn” Ethan warns.

“What?” asks Dawn, lowering her hand. “I can’t be in a good mood?” Her hand drums on the arm of the chair, the other reaching for a pendant at her throat, tugging it free of her collar and encasing it in her fist.

“This ‘good mood’ seems to have happened suspiciously quickly” Ethan tells her. Glancing to the door, to check Faith hasn’t snuck in, he adds in an undertone, “And my dolorem comedenti manuscript is missing from the Magic Box.”

Dawn’s smile falters and then recovers. “Sorry to hear that” she says.

Ethan reaches for the hand at her front, uncurls it gently from her necklace. On seeing it, he sits back, frowning. It is the amulet that he gave Joyce, the one that supposedly glows in the presence of a being without a soul.

Dawn glances down at it. “I didn’t steal it. It was mom’s.”

“Yes, it was.” Ethan sighs. “It’s also a crystal.”


Ethan nods slowly, thinking back over the child’s handful of lessons. “I should have wondered why you were so interested in what can be trapped in them.”

“Just the feelings part” Dawn tells him cheerfully. “You know, trapping fear, or anger, say –”

“– or grief –”

“– and letting it out again” Dawn powers on. “Not losing it, just keeping it safe, because it’s important. Keeping it for a more convenient time.”

Ethan flinches at his words. “I didn’t mean…”

“You didn’t mean” agrees Dawn. “But it is kind of an inconvenient time to be grieving.”

“My, no. There’s no convenient or inconvenient with loss. It just happens when it happens and you have to cope as best you can, and process how you feel about it.”

“And I will” Dawn explains, still smiling away, like a teacher explaining something unfortunate but hypothetical to a child. “I will grieve. Just not right now. Because right now I’m being hunted by a hell god and Buffy has enough to worry about with that, without me being all…” She waves a hand in a flippant gesture that doesn’t remotely sum up what she was being.

Ethan tells her, ‘But, Dawn – aside from anything else – that amulet already has mystical properties. It’s for identifying what has a soul and what doesn’t. You can’t just take something that’s already being used for magic and use it for different magic at the same time; it’s like building a house on top of another house. You’re going to end up with some structural issues.”

Dawn nods grudgingly. “I think I did it wrong anyway. I just wanted to take the grief out, but I think I ended up taking out any bad feeling.”
“Well, grief is too complicated to just ‘take out’” Ethan explains. “And there’s no such thing as a bad emotion. Emotions just are.”

“Look” Dawn giggles a little, her mind apparently reaching for frustration or annoyance and finding no suitable substitute. “I didn’t say my grief isn’t important, did I? I’ve got it safe. It’s right here.” She closes her fist around Joyce’s amulet.

“You’d best not lose that” Ethan tells her. “And you’d best show me where you did the spell. The sooner we undo it –”

“Wait – undo it?”

“Yes, Dawn. You can’t just not grieve.”

“I’m not not grieving” Dawn’s smile is manic now: she would be angry, but it’s just not in her – it’s being sucked into the crystal instead. “I told you, I’m going to grieve as soon as Glory is dealt with. Once she’s gone, I can grieve without it being more stuff for Buffy to worry about.”

“Buffy’s grieving” Ethan points out.

“Exactly, and it’s killing her, and she’s got Glory to fight too – she needs me to be strong. It’s the least I can do.” Dawn sighs. It would be a sign of sorrow, ordinarily, but it comes out contented. “Can I at least wait until tomorrow before we break it?”

“No. We undo this now.”

“What, before Faith kills you?” Dawn asks cheerfully. “Ethan, if she realises something’s up –”

“– Oh, she realises –”

“– I can just tell her it’s because I haven’t been sleeping. Because I haven’t been. It’s been maybe fives hours a night if I’m really lucky, usually less. Ever since mom died.”

This is indisputable, Ethan accepts: Those shadows under her eyes can’t lie, for all Dawn might have a stab at it. He tells her, “Show me what you did.”

“Why, so you can undo it? Ethan, I’m just asking for one night, so I can sleep.”

Ethan considers this. On one hand, the sooner this spell – made unstable by the use of the amulet – is broken, the better. On the other hand, he can’t sense any imminent magical implosion and it could be that talking Dawn into undoing the spell will be easier if she has a good night’s sleep. Of course he could just undo it himself, and he will, if needs be, but it would be better coming from her. If he’s going to avoid her messing around with spells above her level again, he needs to know how far she’ll go now. “Fine” he decides. “One more night, and we undo it in the morning.”

It would be that Dawn grins at him, except that this has been her expression the entire conversation. “Great” she says.

“And show me what you did” he tells her. “I can show you how to undo it earlier if you need to.”

*****

Dawn’s room is a teenage mess, and Ethan wonders if it has always been this untidy, or if Joyce was the one who used to clean it. Dawn indicates a cleared patch of carpet and Ethan’s sympathy sours just a little at the sight of not only the dolorem comedenti manuscript, but several bunches of
herbs, charms and an open book, all from the Magic Box. “You’re good” he tells her. “I can usually tell when someone plans to shoplift.” Not that he usually looks at those entitled to the friends and family discount with the same suspicion he reserves for local teens, that said. Maybe he should. Ethan glances at Dawn and finds that the good cheer that is all her current emotional spectrum seems to currently contain doesn’t know how to substitute embarrassment or remorse: She simply smiles blankly at him.

Picking up the book, Ethan examines the ingredients Dawn used and concludes, “Alright. I know what to do.” He talks her through the reversal spell, should she need it before morning, concluding with, “And first thing tomorrow I’m getting over here and you’re going to undo it whether it’s going wrong or not. Wringer than it inherently is, that is.” He glances at the smiling teen. “And I’ll take all this away with me unless you want to pay for it.”

“No thanks.”

“Well then. We can talk about it once you’ve got the full human range of emotion back.”

“Thanks for not telling, Ethan.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t tell; I said I won’t tell tonight.” Hearing the front door open downstairs, and Faith’s greeting, Ethan adds, “That will be Willow and Tara. Say hello, act sad, and then put yourself to bed. Since you’re getting a grief-free night, you may as well make the most of it.”

“Okay.” Dawn follows him out into the upstairs corridor and pauses halfway down the stairs while Ethan descends to join Faith, Willow and Tara in the hallway.

Faith asks, “You fix her?”

“Nothing to fix” replies Ethan. “Just your standard teenage mood swing.”

Faith eyes Dawn, who smiles, then bites her lip. “You sure?”

“Has something happened?” asks Willow.

“Nothing” says Ethan.

“I just haven’t been sleeping” Dawn explains. The grin beams out again and she covers it by saying, “Hi Willow, Tara.” She waves at them.

“Hi, Dawnie” replies Tara, before turning to Ethan. “A-are you sure everything’s alright?”

“It’s fine” Ethan repeats, growing uncomfortable with the lie.

“No it’s not” argues Faith. “Dawn’s been acting weird all evening.”

“I’m really okay, Faith.” Dawn smiles down at her, managing to make it look reassuring. “I just haven’t been sleeping, with the stress, and there’s hormones all over the place.” Catching Ethan’s eye, she concludes, “So I’m going to bed now. Goodnight.” She turns and heads back up the stairs.

Before anyone can comment, Ethan turns to Faith. “Rupert asked me to come with you on patrol.”

“Right” she replies, “We’ll make it quick so I can get back to Dawn and see why she’s so not fine.”

“She says she’s okay” Willow points out, but she glances at Ethan with a frown. Ethan doesn’t meet her eye. Maybe he should have just undone the damn spell.
“Yeah” Tara is saying, “And sh-she doesn’t seem hurt or anything.”

“She’s all hyped and chirpy all of a sudden” Faith tells them. “And I mean all of a sudden.”

“Maybe she’s trying to bury her feelings about everything that’s been going on” reasons Willow.

“Something like that” Ethan can’t resist saying.

“Whatever” mutters Faith. To Ethan she says, “Let’s just get this over with.” She pulls him out the door, telling Willow and Tara, “Keep an eye on her.”

****

“There’s something you’re not telling me” Faith complains as she marches through a night time graveyard that would unnerve almost anyone else a few minutes later.

Ethan hurries to keep up. “Dawn is okay” he says evasively.

“No she’s not. A few magic lessons from you and you manage to get her high as a fucking kite.”

“I did not get her high” retorts Ethan, adding in an undertone, “Arguably she got herself high.”

Faith immediately turns on him. “Oh, so you admit she’s high?”

Damn slayer hearing. “It’s just a…It’s just a minor thing.” Ethan decides to come clean with, “We’re going to fix it in the morning, but in the meantime, she really could use a decent night’s sleep.”

Before Faith can reply, a third voice rings out: “Faith, Ethan.” Buffy steps into view, wearing a pleated skirt that doesn’t look particularly practical for either patrolling or the spirit quest she has presumably returned early from. She stops in front of them, smiling expectantly. “Hi.”

“Great” says Faith, “You’re high too.”

Buffy looks slightly perplexed by this, but continues to smile. “It’s time to kill evil things. Are you here to help?”

“Um” manages Faith. “Yeah. See, thing is, B, I thought I was going to do all the killing tonight.”

“I think it’s better to share, Faith. You’re my friend. You used to be evil.”

“Oh, you’re kidding me! After all this time, you’re still going to throw that back in my face?!”

“I don’t understand that question, but thank you for asking.”


Buffy turns to Ethan, “Did I do something wrong?”

“Well you did call her evil” Ethan points out. He wonders if Buffy could actually be under the influence of some sort of confusion hex, but dismisses the idea: If whatever they cast in the desert could cause that, there’s no way Rupert would let her out of his sight.

Buffy asks him, “How’s your shop?”
“It’s good, thank you” and no thanks to your sister “Listen, did everything go to plan with the spirit guide?”

Before Buffy can answer, Spike comes running up, jabbering some story about there being a lot of vampires around tonight, which turns out to be not entirely false. Ethan misses most of the ensuing fight, being kicked behind a gravestone early on and judging it best to stay there. He is aware of Faith returning at some point, summoned by the sounds of violence as only a slayer can be.

Once it’s all over, he stands up. “Right” he announces, “That’s me done for the night. Buffy, I take it Rupert’s at home?”

“Maybe” replies Buffy. She skirts around Faith to stand next to Spike. Faith glares. “That or he’ll be at ours” she says to Ethan. “And we’re both going back there anyway. I think we’ve reached our dust quota; now it’s time to fix whatever Dawn’s done to herself.”

“Something wrong with Nibblet?” asks Spike, frowning.

“Shove off, Spike” Faith stalks away from him in the direction of the gates. “Now, Ethan. Buffy, you coming or what?”

“No thank you, Faith. I’m going to stay here with Spike.”

Faith turns. “You’re kidding me? I tell you something’s up with Dawn and you’re not going to come home?”

“Nothing’s really ‘up’ with Dawn” Ethan puts in. “At least nothing unfixable.”

“Shut up” snaps Faith.

“I’m sure you can handle it” Buffy tells her. “You’re a slayer.”

“Yeah. So at least one of us is.” Faith turns around and trudges off. Ethan hurries after her. “You really don’t need to worry about Dawn” he tells her.

“Is that code for Don’t tell Giles about Dawn?”

“Well…possibly. I’m not saying I won’t tell him, just all in good time, yes? Look, this time tomorrow, she’ll be back to normal.”

“Will Buffy? I mean, what was up with her?”

“She’s probably just having an off day. I imagine trekking through the desert with a spirit guide could put anyone out of sorts.”

“Maybe” Faith stops. “Weird she didn’t come back with us though.” Apparently deciding something, she tells Ethan, “Wait here” and turns, doubles back. Noticing Ethan following her, she reiterates, “I said, wait there.”

“Alone in the cemetery at night? I don’t think so, Faith. I could –”

“Shh!” Faith holds up a hand.

Ethan frowns, listening. “What is tha...um.” Realising what that is, he shuts up quickly. Faith is creeping round some shrubbery, and Ethan follows. He can’t move as soundlessly as Faith, but that doesn’t matter; Buffy and Spike are making too much noise to notice them. Faith takes in the scene and then stomps away with a noise of disgust. Ethan pauses just to check he isn’t imaging things.
No, he has to admit to himself, Buffy really is...Well, doing what she’s doing. With Spike. “Ah.” He hurries after Faith.

****

“I don’t believe it” says Faith as they walk home. “She’s actually doing it. Him, I mean. Doing him.” Glancing at Ethan, she adds, “I mean, I’ve joked about it, but she’s always acted grossed out. Who does she think she is anyway? If you want to screw a guy, just screw a guy, don’t make all this noise about how you’re too good for him and do it in secret.”

“She is too good for him” Ethan points out. “She has a soul.”

“Yeah, well, it’s just a grind-off among the gravestones. Not like they’re getting married.”

“I suppose so. Here we are.”

Faith speeds up and heads into Summers’ house ahead of him. Ethan follows and is surprised to find, “Anya, Xander. Hello.”

“Hi” Xander looks up as Ethan and Faith enter. Willow is sitting beside him while Tara and Anya are opposite, all of them clustered around steaming mugs on the coffee table. Willow explains, “I invited them round. We’re kind of worried about Dawnie.”

“Yeah, that makes all of us except Buffy” mutters Faith. “Well, and Ethan.”

“I didn’t quite say that” Ethan tells her.

“You saw Buffy?” asks Willow.

“She’s back early” Ethan explains. “Has Rupert been round?”

“No” Tara tells him. Xander asks, “So where’s Buffy now? She’s the best one to talk to Dawn.”

“So Dawn’s still acting weird?” asks Faith.

“She seems a little, um, hyped” says Tara.

“And she’s all cheerful and awake, and refusing to come downstairs” adds Anya. “It’s creepy.”

“And I can sense magic” puts in Willow, “Ethan, I’m worried she’s been up to something without us knowing. Is anything...” She pauses, glances at the door, and frowns. “Wait, where did you say Buffy was?”

Ethan replies, “She’s with —” and gets no further, since Faith grabs his wrist none too gently and pulls him away, telling Willow, “We didn’t. You guys wait here a moment.”

In the kitchen, she rounds on Ethan. “Okay, Willow senses magic, which means something is definitely up and I need you to tell me what.”

Ethan sighs, unsure how much to share. All this worry isn’t helping anyone, but he did promise Dawn one grief-free night. Stalling for time, he asks, “You’re not going to tell them about Buffy and Spike?”

Faith draws back a little. “No” she says, “It’s wicked fucked, but it’s not like he can bite anyone. ‘Sides, they’d freak. And it kinda seems like B’s business to me.”
“Yes, I suppose so. There were at it outside though – they’re hardly keeping it secret.”

“Look, whatever B’s up to is her business. All I know is we’re on our own here, so whatever’s going on, you need to tell me.”

“Agreed.” Willow has appeared in the doorway. Coming into the kitchen, she asks, “What’s going on?”

Faith swears. “Could one person tonight stay where they are when I tell them to?”

“Sorry, Faith, best friend thing. Where’s Buffy?”

“She’s in the cemetery with Spike” Ethan tells her. “Doing, um, something.”

“Sorting something out” amends Faith.

“Something we should all know about?” asks Willow.

“Really not.”

“Oh. Well okay, then what’s going on with Dawn? And don’t tell me you don’t know, Ethan, because I can tell you do.”

Ethan looks from her, to Faith, and sighs. “Alright, I’ll tell you. But I did tell Dawn we could wait until morning to undo it.”

“Sure” says Willow. “If it isn’t dangerous.”

“It’s not dangerous” confirms Ethan. “It’s –” And at that moment, the house shakes. Ethan falls sideways just as Willow grabs him, and they both go down. A rumble bursts from the upper floor and something rushes down the stairs, bursting lightbulbs into tinkling showers as it goes, and cutting through the front door with a crunch. It leaves in its wake the sense that someone has screamed. No-one has screamed, but a scream seems to hang in the air.

Willow scrambles to her feet. “What in the name of Hecate was that?!”

“That” says Ethan heavily, “would be Dawn’s grief.”

Faith leaps up and heads for the stairs. “Dawnie?”

Willow and Ethan follow, just as Dawn appears at the top of the stairs. Her easy smile is still in place. “Oops” she says.

The rest of the scoobies emerge, a little dishevelled, from the living room. “Are you okay?” Willow asks Tara, who nods. “I’m fine but what was that?”

Willow shoots Ethan a look. “I’m guessing long story.”

Faith clambers up the stairs and grabs Dawn by the shoulders. “Did that thing hurt you?”


“What is it?” asks Anya. “A demon?”

Xander, meanwhile, is stepping over what is left of the door to watch the thing disappear down the street. “Looks like smoke.” He slaps the gaping doorframe. “But surprisingly solid.”
Ethan steps outside to look. Something between a dust storm and a writhing grey river is barrelling down the street. As it passes, car alarms shriek and streetlights burst into showers of glass. As it turns the corner, a woman screams and grabs her boyfriend’s arm. They turn to watch it stream out of sight.

“Where’d it go?” Faith leans out the door.

“It won’t hurt anyone” Ethan tells her.

“What is it?” asks Xander.

“Dawn’s grief” Ethan tells him.

“Dawn turned her grief into a monster?” asks Willow.

“I didn’t mean to” Dawn repeats. She is, Ethan notices, still wearing the amulet, but it has cracked now, a grainy gash cutting through the stone. The colour has changed subtly and it is duller. Nodding to it, he says, “You tried to change the spell.”

Dawn’s fingers find the amulet and she twists it in a way that might indicate guilt of self-consciousness were she not still smiling. “I just wanted to try and get it right” she tells him.

“Get it right how? We were going to undo it in the morning!”

“Get what right?” asks Faith, “What’s going on?”

“Dawn trapped her grief in a crystal” Anya realises.

Dawn’s shoulders slump, but whatever she feels at being caught seems to seep away quickly enough into the immutable cheerfulness that now reigns unchallenged over all her mood. “Yeah” she admits. “But it went wrong.”

“It took all her negative emotions” Ethan explains. “And a fair bit of common sense too, it seems.” He glares at Dawn who grins right back.

“And you thought you’d wait until tomorrow to fix this?” Willow sounds incredulous.

Ethan waves a hand at the grief’s trail of destruction. “Well, I didn’t know this would happen!” He gestures at Dawn. “I thought she could have one grief free night to catch up on some sleep, and then in the morning we could undo it together. We agreed.” He stares at Dawn pointedly. “And the way I see it, this is a situation where it’s far better for Dawn to make the decision herself.”

“I did already” argues Dawn. “I decided to wait until we stopped Glory.” She smiles around at them, eyes wide. “So I thought if I just adjusted the spell, I could make it so I was acting more normal and you’d think I’d undone it.”

Tara wraps an arm around her. “You needed to actually undo it, Dawnie. Denying your emotions, it, it never leads anywhere good.”

“You don’t say” mutters Faith. To Ethan, she asks, “How’d I kill this thing?”

“You can’t kill it” he tells her. “It’s Dawn’s grief; it’s part of her.”

“True” echoes Anya. “We need to find a way of cramming it back into her or she’ll be stuck like a mini Stepford wife.”
“I wasn’t denying anything” Dawn is reassuring Tara. “I just didn’t want it to be in everyone’s way – Buffy has to be strong.”

“Yeah” says Faith, “so you don’t have to, Dawnie.”

“But I want to. I want to help instead of being someone everyone worries about.”

Xander turns to Ethan. “You let her do magic in this state?”

“I didn’t let her do anything! I was only planning on teaching her protection spells!”

Xander waves a hand in the direction the grief disappeared. “Yeah? Good job!”

“I-it’s not Ethan’s fault” says Tara. She indicates Willow. “We were all teaching her magic, we should have known she wasn’t ready.” Quieter, she adds, “I should have realised. I know what it’s like to grieve.”

“It’s okay, sweetie.” Willow takes her arm. When she looks at Ethan, it is with an expression that doesn’t quite accord with Tara’s equal apportioning of blame, but all she asks is, “Okay, we know Dawn’s grief was trapped in a crystal, so how did it get out?”

“Yeah” adds Faith, “And what’s with the rampage?”

“Well” says Ethan, “Dawn seems to have unleashed it and, um, accidentally weaponised it.”

“Weaponised it?” repeats Faith.

“I did say oops” says Dawn.

“It wasn’t your fault, Dawn.” Tara tightens her grip on the girl.

Judging it best to stick to practicalities, Ethan powers on with, “It could be because of Dawn being a teenager – emotional instability and all that” (Dawn, he notices, shrugs and grins at that) “or it could be due to her subconscious guilt about cutting herself off from her feelings for her mother.”

“I don’t feel guilty” says Dawn with a playful frown. “I don’t think I can feel guilty.”

“Subconscious guilt” Ethan reiterates. “You’ve still got a subconscious, it’s just that some of it is, well, elsewhere.”

“Yeah, where elsewhere is what I want to know” decides Faith. She heads back into the house. “I’ll get the weapons.”

Ethan indicates Dawn’s amulet. “Using that didn’t help either.” At Willow’s questioning stare, he explains, “It’s already bewitched to show if someone has a soul or not.”

“Great” mutters Xander, “So there wasn’t much that could go wrong!” He raises a hand. “All in favour of fetching Buffy?”

“We’ll call in at the cemetery” agrees Faith, reappearing with an armful of weapons. “But if we can’t see her, I’m not hanging about. The main thing is to catch this thing and, well…”

“Squish it back into Dawn” finishes Anya.

“Yeah” says Faith, “Any idea how we do that?”
“Well, you’ll need Dawn” says Ethan.

“No way – I’m not dragging her into danger!”

“You don’t need to drag me” says Dawn. “I’ll come. But I don’t really want it back in me.” At their concerned frowns, she adds, “Well you guys saw the size of it! You try having that in your head.”

“Let’s just try and contain it” says Willow. “Faith, me, Tara and Ethan can come along and try some magic.”

“Uh huh” Xander sounds a little hysterical. “Because that’s always complication free!”

“Well…And you guys can wait with Dawn.”

“These guys and Ethan” Faith decides. She glares at him. “We need someone who can do magic in case Glory decides to use all this as cover. And anyway, I am so not ready to stop you getting eaten by Dawn’s grief.”

“It won’t eat people” Ethan tells her. “It’s grief, not a Ghora. Anyway, you’ll need Dawn to lure it back.”

“I don’t want to lure it back” Dawn tells him pleasantly. “I’m happy without it.”

“You have to have it back” Ethan tells her, “or it will be gone.”

“Good. I want it gone.”

“Not permanently, you don’t.” Ethan adds to Faith, “You could try to coax it back into her.”

“I’m not putting her in danger – I just told you so!”

“It won’t hurt her in danger – I just told you so!”

Faith points in the direction the personified mass in question left. “I’m not letting that thing near Dawn!”

“It’s not dangerous, it’s only grief: It’s a perfectly normal thing.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah I see things like that go down the street every day!”

“It won’t hurt her – it’s a part of her”

“Not gonna risk it on your say so, Eth – the wiccas can fix it.”

“Well” murmurs Willow, “Try to fix it.”

“There’ll be stuff at the Magic Box” says Anya, pulling her keys out her pocket. “Here – let yourselves in.”

“Thanks.” Willow turns to Ethan. “You can talk to Dawn about all this. Get her to us when she’s ready to help reign it in.” To Faith she adds, “And in the meantime we can pacify it somehow.”

“Oh yes” mutters Anya. “Because grief is an easy thing to pacify.”

Faith ignores that. “Okay then. Let’s go.” She ushers the witches to Joyce’s car and they speed off.
in the direction the personified grief went, leaving Ethan, Dawn, Xander and Anya staring after them.

“Well” says Anya heavily, “Anyone hungry? I for one don’t want to educate Dawn on the importance of the grieving process on an empty stomach.”

“Nah” says Xander. “I’m going to head to the cemetry. Those guys won’t have time to look for Buffy properly, but she needs to know what’s going on.”

“She was with Spike last time I saw her” supplies Ethan. He makes an on the spot decision to not antagonise the boy with the details.

“Well she’ll have moved on then. She won’t want to be near that creep.”

“Oh, I think you’d be surprised.” Ethan sighs, then trudges back inside the house. “I’m going to phone Rupert.”

*****

Rupert doesn’t answer the phone at the flat, or the mobile. Ethan hopes he didn’t leave the latter in the desert. When Xander shows up without Buffy (“But I did see Spike: He’s acting shifter than usual if you can picture it”), Ethan wonders if perhaps Rupert has gone in search of her. He isn’t worried. Really. If something had happened to Rupert out in the desert, Buffy would have told him.

Then again, she was acting strangely. You don’t get stranger than sex with Spike.

But, Ethan tells himself, Rupert can handle himself and – assuming he hasn’t lost the mobile – it is not as though he’s without means of communication. And surely, no matter what’s gotten into Buffy, she wouldn’t leave him in danger? He’s bound to show up soon.

For the next few hours, Ethan, Xander and Anya alternate between trying to persuade an aggressively cheerful Dawn to help them break the spell, and watching the course of Dawn’s grief on television. After tearing through the town, smashing windows and overturning parked cars as it goes, it races through the woods plucking up trees, and slamming them down again in twisted splinters. Every now and then, the local news crew pick up Joyce’s car in pursuit but amid all the chaos of people rushing around to avoid the “freak storm” (“See?” asks Dawn happily, “Even the news people think I’m a freak!”) no-one takes notice of one vehicle. Finally, after rattling the ruins of the school (“It must be drawn to the hellmouth” muses Anya, and Ethan repeats yet again, “It isn’t dangerous!”) it heads out to sea where it stops on the horizon and, for want of a better word, howls (“It’s grief, Ethan, of course it’s dangerous!”).

Eventually, Xander stands up. “Dawn, come on.”

“I’m not going” Dawn tells him calmly, and with the same indifferent smile she’s worn all night.

Xander indicates the TV. “It hasn’t hurt anyone” (“See?” mutters Ethan) “so I’m sure Buffy won’t mind me taking you to the beach so Willow and Tara can reverse the spell and…”

“And what?” Dawn asks with a giggle, “get it back into me?”

“Dawn” says Ethan wearily. “If you don’t get it back into you soon, it could disappear out to sea.”

“So, let’s trap it in a crystal again.”

“We’ve been over this. It’s already been uprooted enough. More magic could be dangerous.”
Xander glares at him. “You couldn’t have thought that oh, say, yesterday?”

“I didn’t know she was going to do this!”

“But you helped her cover it up!” Xander argues. “Man, Buffy is so going to kill you.”

Anya asks, “Where is Buffy anyway?”

Xander gestures again to the TV, to the little clump of people gathered along the shore. When the camera swings in a certain way to take in the scene, they can make out a flash Willow’s red hair as she readies a spell. “Probably already on the case. Come on, Dawn, you know this is the right thing to do.”

Dawn seems to waver, biting her lip to hold the smile down. Finally, she says, “Well…”

The remnants of the front door clatter to the floor as Buffy enters none too carefully. She is still in her impractical skirt and doesn’t strike Ethan as being fresh from the battle. He gets to his feet. “Buffy, I can explain –”

“You know where Spike is?”

“Well no, but –”

Buffy addresses the room. “Spike’s gone.”

“Buffy” Dawn sounds almost shy, her smile wavering very briefly, then recovering as she scrambles up. “I didn’t do it to forget mom, Buffy, I just wanted to be strong like you. And I couldn’t stand having all that mess inside my head anymore.”

Buffy frowns at her. “Hello, Dawn. You’re my sister.”

“Um. Yeah.” Dawn hugs her. “Always.” Then, mid-hug, she flinches. “Oh” She pulls away. “Buffy!” For just a moment, there is horror in her voice. Then it is whipped away by the spell and when she turns to Ethan the cheerful, childish smile is back. “Look” she says, holding up the amulet.

Ethan looks the amulet, telling himself that that can’t be right. It can’t be glowing. Buffy has a soul. He lets out a frightened giggle. “That must be something to do with it being used for your spell.” He looks at Buffy whose smile, he suddenly realises, has nothing behind it. He shoots out a hand, grabs Dawn’s wrist and pulls her back.

“What?” asks Xander.

“Spike’s gone” Buffy tells him. “We have to find him.”

“The amulet” Ethan explains. “It glows when someone doesn’t have a soul.”

Xander and Anya stare at the amulet that Dawn presents with a grin. The room pulsates with magic as whatever she really feels about this development is swallowed up, joins the massing grief that’s currently blurring the horizon. From the TV, weather reporters remark that the storm is growing.

“Oh, God, Buffy” murmurs Xander. He stares at Buffy, who smiles sweetly back.

“Is this to do with the grief spell?” asks Anya. She slips in-between Xander and Buffy and steps deliberately backwards, forcing him to do the same.

“No” says Ethan, “No, this must have happened in the desert. Buffy, what’s going on? Did something attack you?”

“I don’t think so. But when I woke up, Spike was gone.”

“Spike attacked them” Anya concludes grimly. “He’s sired her.”

“I wish” says Buffy.

“But” Xander manages, “the chip.”

“Well, yes, but how else do explain it?”

Ethan nods, stepping away from Buffy and towards the weapons chest. Then he stops, catching himself. He can’t fight Spike on Spike’s terms. He needs to get to the Magic Box. He needs a location spell. Find Rupert. Know the worst. “If he’s hurt Rupert, I’ll kill him.”

The next thing he knows, Buffy’s fist is connecting with his skull.

*****

“Ethan?”

Ethan opens his eyes to find himself on the sofa, with Dawn smiling at him. She is pale, he notes, and the magic in her aura is stronger than ever. Not much left of the poor child but grief, and that is – he turns his face to the TV – still tossing the ocean about while Willow’s magic (or lightening, as the presenters put it) flashes futilely from the beach. “Rupert?”

Dawn shakes her head. “We can’t get hold of him” she says cheerfully. The magic flares again, she pales, and the writhing shape on the TV swells.

“The good news” says Anya, coming into view, “is Buffy isn’t a vampire.”

“Xander waved a cross at her” Dawn explains.

“Yeah” says Xander from across the room, “but the bad news is Buffy still doesn’t have a soul.”

“Maybe the amulet’s broken” suggests Dawn, hope colouring her cheeks for a moment and causing a lull in the storm on the TV.

“It’s more like Buffy’s broken” says Anya.

Sitting up carefully, Ethan finds the slayer in question sitting across from him. “Hi Ethan” she greets. “You’re my friend. And a shop keeper.”

“Yes” Ethan confirms. “A shop keeper you just threw across the room.”

“I’m sorry about that but I can’t let you kill Spike. I love him.”

“You do?” Apparently Dawn is still able to feel confusion.

“Yes” declares Buffy. “I know he’s evil, but you should see him naked.”
“Ew, Buffy!” Xander, who is rooting around in the weapons chest, rounds on her. To the others, he adds, “Let’s get out here. Whatever’s going on, it has to be a spell Spike’s done.”

“More spells?” asks Ethan. This is getting to be a little too much magic even for him.

“Yes” explains Anya. “We figured if Buffy has no soul and likes Spike, there has to be dark magic involved and he’s the one who’s got a vested interest in a loved up soulless Buffy.”

“It’s true” says Buffy, “He is very evil. And we do need to find him.”

“Oh” Xander lets out a bitter laugh, “We will!”

“We will?” Buffy jumps to her feet. “Great!”

“And Rupert” Ethan stands up too.

“We tried calling him” says Anya apologetically. “No answer.”

“Let me try again.”

“Yes” says Buffy, “and then you can do a location spell to find Spike.”

“Not a bad idea” concedes Xander. “We can beat – err” (He eyes Buffy nervously) “get him to undo whatever he’s done to you and then we can join the others on the beach and get Dawn’s grief back into her.”

“But first we find Rupert” Ethan picks up the phone.

“Giles can handle himself” says Xander, “He’s probably on Spike’s trail right now.”

“I don’t want my grief back in me” Dawn tells them. “Not if I’ve lost Buffy too. I don’t want to feel that.”

“You haven’t lost me, Dawnie. You’re my sister.”

Making an effort to tune them all out, Ethan dials his mobile number. It rings grainily, signal dipping and swerving as though Rupert is in the car. Ethan feels a thrill of relief: If Rupert’s driving a car, he can’t be dead.

Then, finally, someone answers. There is a scrambling sound, as though the phone is being dug out a bag with some difficulty, and then a voice: “Hello?” It is a familiar voice, but it isn’t Rupert. Ethan’s relief melts into fear and he can’t stop himself from saying, “Buffy?”

“Yeah, hi Ethan. Listen, me and Giles just got back into town and there’s something going on down at the beach, so we’re heading over there. Is Dawn safe?”

“Dawn?” Ethan’s mind is racing. “Yes, she’s right here” As are you “Um. Is Rupert alright?”

“Yeah, he’s fine, he’s driving. Listen, Ethan, do you know what’s going on? I leave town for one day and when I get back it’s all chao –” Buffy breaks off with a sudden sigh. “What did you do?”

Offence cuts through Ethan’s nerves. “What makes you think it was me?!?”

“Is it a spell?”

“Well – yes – but – Look, Buf –” Ethan breaks off, catching himself, and stares at the Buffy-
double in the living room, but she doesn’t seem angry at being discovered. She and Dawn are both smiling benignly, while Xander and Anya exchange a puzzled glance.

“Ethan?” Buffy – the Buffy on the phone – asks.

“I’m here. As are you, actually.”

“Wait, what?”

“There’s another you here. And I promise that isn’t a part of the grief spell.”

“Grief spell?”

“Long story. Look, get over to your house, could you? The worst the grief’s going to do is run off and knock things over. It’s just angry and lashing out” Ethan glances at Dawn “Anyone would think it was made by a teenage girl.”

“Dawn” Buffy breathes. Ethan hears her say something to Rupert, followed by the screech of tyres. Into the phone, Buffy says, “We’re on our way.”

“Good.” Ethan hangs up and turns to the Buffy-double. “So…Who are you?”

“I’m Buffy” the thing grins.

“Really? Because I’ve just been chatting to Buffy on the phone.”

“You have?” Dawn’s beam is natural now, and beside her, Xander huffs out a sigh of relief and asks, “So Buffy’s okay?”

“Yes, so is Rupert, and they’re on their way here.” “I’m already here” says the Buffy-double. “But I can’t stay – I need to go find Spike.”

“We should still do that” points out Anya. “It still has to be him who made this copy.”

“I don’t think I’m a copy” says the Buffy-double.

“I’m going to go with evil-Buffy-clone” says Xander.

The Buffy-double shakes her head. “Spike’s the one who’s evil. But sexy. And Anya’s right – we do need to find him. Ethan can do a spell to find him because he’s a chaos mage.”

Ethan turns to Dawn. “Dawn, I don’t suppose you’ve stolen something I can use for a location spell?”

“Um, maybe” The girl hurries off to get it.

“Stolen?” repeats Anya, and Ethan shakes his head: “Really, the least of our worries right now.”

“****

“There” says Ethan sometime later, once a location spell has been cobbled together using Dawn’s loot, Joyce’s candles and a map Anya printed off the home PC. “He seems to have gone up in the world.” The light that represents Spike is glowing from a section of upmarket housing.

“Where is that?” asks the Buffy-double.
At that moment, a voice sounds in the hallway: “Oh, God! Dawn?”

“Buffy!” Dawn hurries out. “I’m okay.”

“What happened to our door?” Buffy embraces her. Dawn hugs back hard, pulls away to check the amulet and grins when she finds it has stopped glowing. “You have a soul.”

“She usually does, yes.” Rupert steps in through the hanging shards of the door. Ethan gets up to embrace him, and Rupert returns the hug after a moment of confusion. “You missed me?” he murmurs, before asking, in a harder tone, “Ethan, what precisely is going on at the beach?”

“I can explain everything. But later. First you need to see –”

From over his shoulder, Buffy, now in the living room exclaims, “Oh my God! What is this?”

“She’s an evil clone” says Xander.

Ethan takes Rupert’s hand and tugs him into the living room, where he stares at the two Buffys, who stare at each other, one smiling and the other horrified.

“We think Spike did a spell” Anya is saying.

“No” says Buffy in a voice universally reserved for slow children, “Spike built a robot. Or more likely, he made Warren do it. You guys couldn’t tell me apart from a robot?!”

“Well we have had a lot on our minds” says Anya defensively, “Dawn’s grief’s gone on a rampage.”

Rupert and Buffy turn coldly to Ethan, who manages, “I did say I was going to explain!”

“It was my fault” puts in Dawn helpfully.

“People” says the Buffy-bot, “We’re forgetting the most important thing: We know where Spike is now.”

“Good” says Buffy, “I’ll make a mental note so I can kill him later.”

“I won’t let you kill him, me. I can’t. But can you tell me where this place is?” The Buffy-bot points to the formerly glowing part of map, which is no longer glowing, but does have a little burn mark in it.

Buffy frowns. “He was there?”

The Buffy-bot nods happily. “If you tell me where it is, I can go and get him.”

Rupert is studying Buffy as she draws back, suddenly solemn. “What is it?”

“The snake demon” she tells him. She pushes past Ethan, and gathers up the weapons from the chair Xander dumped them in. “That’s where the snake demon was heading when Faith and I had to stop it reaching Glory.”

“Glory?” Dawn’s fear flares briefly, interrupting her smile before it is whisks away by her spell and she beams again. Buffy’s frown deepens but she makes no comment. To Rupert, she adds, “If Glory has him…”

“He knows about Dawn” Rupert murmurs.
“Exactly. And there’s no way he’s not telling.” Turning to the others, Buffy says, “Xander, go and get Faith and the others. Whatever mess Ethan’s spell is making can wait – it won’t even matter if Glory comes for Dawn.”

“It’s not my spell” Ethan gripes. “But Dawn’s grief has been flying about for ages now – they obviously can’t catch it.”

Buffy silences him with a look and instructs, “You and Anya take Dawn to the Magic Box. You’ll have a more supplies there for a barrier spell. Seal yourselves in.”

“I’ll drop them there” says Xander.

“Good. Giles, come with me.”

“Right you are” Rupert relieves her of some of the weapons and Ethan watches, horribly aware that nothing he can say will dissuade Rupert from running off to fight a god.

“I’ll come with you” announces the Buffy-bot. “We can’t let her hurt Spike.”

“It can fight” Ethan tells Buffy. “It was slaying in the cemetery when Faith and I saw it.” He frowns. “Um, you may want to patch things over with Faith.” If either of them survive, that is, but Ethan doesn’t want to say that in front of Dawn, even if she can’t feel fear right now.

“Okay” says Buffy, “Then robogirl, you’re with us.”

*****

“The crucial thing with barrier spells, Dawn” says Ethan sometime later, “Is the more faith you put in Janus, the stronger they are. So barriers you’re inside of are the strongest.”

“We’re hiding from a hell god in the shop basement” points out Anya. “I don’t think we can turn this into a teaching moment.”

“Well. I suppose not.” Really, Ethan had been trying to reassure the girl, but it’s not as though she’s actually scared. All her fear is out at sea with her other negative emotions, stirring up storm waves and hopefully not sailing off for good.

When the barrier spell encases them, he feels a snatch of relief, but only a snatch: Janus may be powerful, but Glory is a god too.

A compromised god, Ethan reminds himself, a banished god.

Who could trap them in here. Ethan curses inwardly: Why didn’t they do this upstairs, by the back exit?

Because it doesn’t matter how many exits you have when a god is after you, he reminds himself. What matters is trusting the spell, trusting Janus.

Dawn, he notices, is fiddling with the broken amulet. More to distract himself than anything, Ethan says, “It suits you, you know.”

Dawn smiles and shrugs. “It’s broken.”

“Adds to its character.”

“I didn’t mean to break it – it was mom’s. It’s a shame.” Dawn uses the same cheerful tone she’s
employed all the way here and the magic around her twists and churns, stealing whatever she’d really feel at this juncture.

“It was only your mum’s for one night” points out Ethan. “And I’m sure she’d want you to have it.”

Anya nods. “Whether she’d want you to use it for magic is more debatable.”

“It was already magic” Ethan reminds her. “For her date.”

Dawn nods happily. “With Brian. I didn’t meet him.” She glances down at the amulet again, smile slipping and reforming as feelings flicker away, add to the mass of grief wherever it is now. She is horribly pale. She asks, “I wonder what life would have been like if mom hadn’t died and that had lasted?” Her tone is detached, but the magic swells around them.

“Your mom would still love you” says Anya.

Dawn nods casually. “Of course. It wouldn’t make much difference for me and Buffy. Mom would always put us first.” She frowns and it lasts a moment this time, fighting the spell before it is whipped away and replaced by a yet another smile. “I wonder where my grief is now?”

“Making landfall in Tokyo for all we know” mutters Anya.

“Will we be able to get it back? For later, I mean.” Another frown, another struggle, another smile, a thoughtful one this time. Dawn turns to Ethan. “Because I didn’t mean to lose it, you know. I didn’t want to, because it’s what I have left of her.”

Carefully, Ethan replies, “I suppose it was.”

She nods. “I think it’s what my love turned into. It’s the love I would have given her if she hadn’t died.”

At that moment, the building shakes. “Oh God!” yelps Anya. “Glory!” She reaches for Dawn and pulls the child tight to her. For a moment, Ethan feels nothing but blind panic, but then he realises, “No, it’s not her, it’s –” And then a smoky mass comes pouring down the stairs. Grief, it turns out, does not even notice barrier spells, or chaos mages for that matter – it passes through Ethan like a ghost and he experiences a wordless longing, and a flash of Joyce’s smiling face in his mind as it goes. Dawn gasps as it pours seamlessly back into her, and Ethan, reeling from his brief taste of it, knows to hug her as she bursts into tears.

*****

“The best thing to do” says Giles as they speed towards the row of expensive villas, “would be to burst in, stake him with the crossbow and leave as quickly as possible” He remembers the infatuated robot just in time to flinch, but it doesn’t reprimand him or, worse, hit him: It is leaning out the window shouting, “Spike!” and doesn’t actually have slayer hearing for all it looks just like a gormless version of Buffy.

“Good plan” says the real Buffy.

“Which one is it?” asks Xander as they approach, “Which mansion?”

“Hell if I know” replies Faith, staring at the burnt map the location spell was done on. “Burn mark’s too big.”
“Give it here” says Willow, reaching for it. Once she has it, magic tingles in the air. Glancing back in the rear view mirror, Giles sees her perform an anagnóstis token before pressing her fingertips to the map, effectively plugging herself into the document. “Careful Willow” he says, because she has been casting for hours.

“Not the time, Giles” puts in Faith.

Willow’s eyes flash black and her head swerves unnaturally fast to face a nearby building. “That one!”

Giles brings the car to a halt and they all tumble out, slayers, witches, himself, Xander and the robot, weapons raised.

They lower them briefly in puzzlement as a cracking sound issues from an upstairs window. “There he is!” yells Faith, and she raises her axe, darts forwards, followed by Buffy. They are almost at the building when Spike breaks the glass he’s hammering his fists against and topples forwards, tumbling several floors. Presumably he had planned to crawl out the sunlight, but on hitting the ground with a sickening thud, he doesn’t move, and it is left to Buffy to cover him with her coat and drag him to the shade.

They gather around him. “Did you talk?” demand Faith.

“Of course he talked” says Buffy. She prods the semi-conscious vampire. “Let’s get him in the car before Glory gets here.” She pulls her coat over Spike’s head. He groans drowsily. Buffy wedges herself under his shoulder and Giles takes the other shoulder, while Xander scoots round to lift the vampire’s feet. “Uh, Buffy, I think he’s broken his leg.”

“Too bad for him” Faith nudges Xander aside and helps them carry Spike to the car. Sliding him in, she tugs the coat off his face, but he is still unconscious. Glancing round, Faith nods to the robot. “What’s with that?”

Giles turns to find the robot staring down at Spike in puzzlement, or at least a robotic approximation of puzzlement.

Willow says, “Maybe the facial recognition technology is stumped by the bruising.”

“Yes” says Giles, looking down at the vampire himself as a worrying thought occurs. “For it to be this bad, she’s obviously had him some time.” He meets Buffy’s eyes as a grim resignation settles. Faith puts in, “Let’s find out what she knows at least – get in the car.”

“I think someone’s coming” says Tara turning to the mansion.

Xander readies his weapon. “I guess gods can get down stairs pretty speedily.”

Thankfully, though, what appears at the building’s entrance is not Glory but a group of her robed worshippers. Giles drops Spike and joins the fight, which, between Faith lifting the robot and throwing it at the demons, and Willow’s quick casting, doesn’t last long. As soon as they get a chance, they all retreat to the car and speed away, the robot jerking and smoking a little, eyes glazing as it settles back in the seat.

“Is she coming?” asks Buffy from the back seat, twisting around to look.

“I can’t see her” says Faith.

Willow and Tara have joined hands, Willow leaning forward, over Spike who lies across the laps
of the backseat passengers, to reach Tara in the front passenger seat. Giles can hear their low murmurs but can’t make out their words. He hopes it is a spell that is both strong enough to cover their tracks, but not strong enough to strain them after all the spells they cast to try to recapture Dawn’s grief. Speaking of: “Done?” asks Giles. At Tara’s nod, he switches the radio on.

“I’m not sure we need get away music” pipes up Xander.

“I want to know where Dawn’s grief is” Giles explains. If it has become damaged or lost somehow, he doesn’t want to think about the implications for Dawn.

Giles’ stress levels are high enough that he takes a moment to register that the news reader is talking about the “storm” in the past tense.

“It’s gone?” asks Buffy, “Is that a good thing?”

“If it’s found it’s way back to Dawn, then yes.” “Right” replies Buffy, “I guess we’ll know when we see her.”

“Buffy?” comes a hoarse sound from her lap. Buffy rolls her eyes and looks down at Spike. “What?”

“Is you” Spike mumbles through broken teeth. “I thought…”

“Spike, what did you tell Glory?”

“I tried to get ’way earlier…caught me in the lift…bloody arse lickers…”

“Spike, what did you tell her?” Buffy jostles the vampire, then sighs, sits back. “He’s passed out.”

“We’ll get it out of him when he wakes” Giles reassures her.

“I hope so. Let’s just go find Dawn.”

*****

Only when they reach the Magic Box to find Dawn’s emotions intact and no-one following them, do they really consider where to put Spike.

“We can’t dump him back in the crypt” Faith points out. “Not with a broken leg. Something will come along and stake him and then we’ll never know what he said.”

“I was planning to know before I stake him” says Buffy darkly. Catching Dawn’s eye she relents with, “I guess you’re right. Giles, could he stay with you?”

Ethan answers for him: “We’ve only got one bed.”

Buffy’s issues a withering glare. “He stayed with you before.”

“Yes” argues Ethan, foolishly or bravely depending on whether he’s noticed the glare, “but now he’s injured. He’ll need somewhere to lie down.”

“He’s a vampire” Buffy shrugs. “If they broke easily, my job would be a lot simpler.”

“Your job right now is to find out what he told Glory” reasons Anya. “It’s probably more convenient to do that from home.”
“We do have the basement, B.”

“It saves him bleeding on our sofa” puts in Ethan, earning himself another glare.

Buffy considers for a moment, before saying, “Fine. Fine – we’ll invite him in again. Let’s get him back in the car.”

*****

Whatever passes between Buffy and Dawn once everyone is back at their house safely, Giles isn’t sure, but when he glances through the doorway at them on his way to the kitchen, the two of them are embracing.

Ethan is in the kitchen, mixing something lurid blue and strange smelling in a clay bowl. Watching dully from a corner, the broken and now powered-down robot adds something unnerving to what would otherwise be a scene of harmless sorcery. Giles taps the edge of the bowl. “What’s this?”

“Something for Spike’s teeth. I think if they weren’t so smashed, he’d be able to at least speak coherently.”

“Not that that means he’ll tell the truth” Giles concludes.

“Well, quite.” Ethan adds a sprinkle of herbs to the mixture. “Though I can’t help but think that if he had told Glory about Dawn, she’d be here by now.”

He has a point, Giles reflects. Unless of course Glory is now plotting something subtler than simply showing up a grabbing Dawn, which seems uncomfortably more likely.

Apparently that thought hasn’t occurred to Ethan, because he changes the subject with, “You’re annoyed with me, aren’t you?”

“Not really” Giles replies. That Glory may know Dawn’s secret is too frightening a prospect to leave much space for concern about Ethan’s tutoring exploits. “Though you might want to rethink your habit of teaching magic to volatile teenage girls.”

“Rupert, I really had no idea she was planning that.”

“Which is rather the problem, isn’t it?”

Ethan folds his arms defensively. “I still say it’s better than her trying resurrection magic.”

Again, he has a point, but Giles isn’t sure he wants to tell him so. When it comes to expectations they have of Dawn, that she avoids raising the dead really ought to be a given. Before he can say anything, Buffy enters. Ethan pushes the clay bowl towards her. “Here. Just give him half to start with.” To Giles, he adds, “I’m not entirely sure that more won’t turn him blue.”

Buffy takes the bowl, pointedly not looking at Ethan. “He’ll be able to talk after this?”

“Should be.”

Giles adds, “Physically able to, yes. But it won’t make him any more reliable a source than he currently is.”

“Well I have to try” replies Buffy. “I need to know what he told her. If he talked, we’re running out of head start.” She frowns. “Where’re the guys?”
“Still outside, I think.” Faith, last Giles saw her, was prowling the garden’s perimeter with a sword like a medieval sentry, while Willow and Tara were testing their magic early warning system, watched by Xander and Anya from the porch. Anya, Giles suspects, is following some instinct, born of Viking raids, that outside is safer when danger may be heading their way.

“Good.” Buffy nods, apparently thinking something over. She sets the bowl down again. “Don’t let them back in for a moment, okay? I don’t really want an audience for this.”

“For what?” asks Giles.

In answer, Buffy heads over to the slumped robot and hoists it up into her arms, carries it out the room.

*****

“Don’t say anything” Buffy warns them sternly when she reappears, dressed in the robot’s clothes. “And don’t go into my bedroom – I left a naked robot in there and it’s scary realistic.”

“Right you are” murmurs Giles. He seethes inwardly at the thought of Spike and Warren constructing such a thing.

As Buffy disappears down the stairs to the basement, Ethan comments, “He’ll be able to smell her.”

Giles shakes his head. “Not with his face as bashed up as it is.”

“I suppose not. You realise even if he did talk, it must have taken a while if she got him into this state first?”

“That’s assuming she didn’t just torture him gratuitously” Giles points out. He feels a flicker of painful recollection at the idea of anyone – even Spike – bound and senselessly abused, but he quashes it. They have bigger things to worry about now than the welfare of a soulless vampire.

Giles watches the basement door, waiting for Buffy to return. Doubtless this trickery will take a while, but he finds himself restless, impatient. “I’ll go down there myself” he decides at last. “If I stay on the stairs, I doubt Spike will notice me, the state he’s in, and I want to hear what he has to say for himself.”

“Alright” Ethan hands him the bowl. “Take this. It really might help.”

Pushing the door soundlessly open, Giles heads down carefully, aware that Spike’s hearing may still be passably functional for all he’s confused and concussed. Buffy is, of course, too professional to let her act falter if she hears him coming.

Which she usually would, except that she is a little distracted. Giles finds his grip on the bowl tightening reflexively and he has to make a conscious effort not to drop it: Buffy is bent over the fold-out bed Spike was dumped on. He is awake and they are engrossed in a kiss.

Before Giles can decide what to do – Clear his throat? Head back upstairs and pretend he never saw this? – Spike breaks the kiss with a start and stares hard at Buffy. Buffy stares back. Then, straightening up and turning wordlessly away, she catches sight of Giles and her calm expression breaks into horrified.

“Buffy…” Spike twists as she steps guiltily away from him, trying to keep her in his compromised sight.
Buffy glances from him to Giles and heads for the stairs. “I was just grateful” she explains as she sweeps past. Giles isn’t entirely sure who she is addressing.
“Dawn, don’t do that at the table.” Buffy’s reprimand rings out down the hallway.

Faith, letting herself and Giles in following a driving lesson-turned-patrol, rolls her eyes and explains, “Dawn’ll be levitating things again.”

Sure enough, coming into the dining room they find Dawn doing just that to a mug that Spike, seated at one end of the table, tries and fails to catch hold of, grinning as Dawn giggles. At the other end of the table, Buffy looks exasperated. “Dawn, what did I just say? And Spike, stop encouraging her.”

Spike lets his hands drop. “Sorry, pet.”

“Not a pet” Buffy mutters, rising, but she looks nowhere near as angry as she might, and smiles as she turns to the newcomers. “How was driving?”

“A lot like slaying” Faith sits herself down “’cause I aced it.”

“It’s great that you’re so modest about it. Dawn, what did I say?”

“What?” asks Dawn, letting the mug sink unsteadily to the table top. “I’m just practising.”

“You’ve practised that one enough. Hi, Giles.”

“Hello, Buffy.”

“Hey” Faith asks, “We got any food?”

“No, Faith, we’re completely out” Buffy retorts sarcastically. “Yeah, there’s food, I’m about to cook.”

“I mean like a snack – I’m starved.”

“Try getting a chip in your brain” mutters Spike. “You’d know what starved is then.”

Buffy gives him a look. “We fed you.”

“Yeah – gravy. Hardly counts.”

“You’ve got blood now” Dawn points out.

“Maybe he misses the gravy” supposes Faith.

“Maybe” Buffy agrees. “This could be his way of hinting.”

Spike mimes zipping his lips and drinks from the mug. Buffy smiles with some satisfaction before heading into the kitchen. Giles follows. Once they are out of what he judges to be earshot, he asks, “He’s well enough to be back in his crypt now, surely?”

“Almost” agrees Buffy. Seeing Giles’ expression, she adds, “As soon as his leg is completely healed.”

“Well he can walk on it now, can’t he?”
“Yeah, but in a limpy kind of way. He might as well stay until he’s fight ready.” She shrugs. “And he’s good with Dawn.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” One of the things. Giles carefully doesn’t mention the kiss he witnessed. He has to believe it was what Buffy said it was – a one off reward for not telling.

Exactly why Spike didn’t tell Glory about Dawn, Giles still isn’t entirely clear. Most likely he wanted exactly what he’s getting now – Buffy’s gratitude, a place at her table, her smiles. A harmless enough desire for soulless, innately self-serving creature to harbour, but he still is just that. “It’s not a good idea for Dawn to be growing so attached to a vampire.”

“I know” Buffy concedes. “I will turf him out. Just in week or so, okay?” She opens a cupboard and started getting utensils out. Willing to let the subject drop for now, Giles asks, “Would you like help cooking? Ethan isn’t expecting me back until late.”

“No, that’s okay.” Buffy glances round with a smile. “If I need help, I can get Faith and Spike to pull their weight for once.”

Giles nods wearily, struck by the odd mix that now inhabit this house: two warriors, one of them with a history of unwarranted violence, and a sadistic, soulless killer. It would be uncharitably to think that Dawn may as well be growing up on a pirate ship, but not entirely inaccurate. Until he remembers how devoted and fundamentally decent Buffy is, of course.

Interrupting his thoughts, Buffy tells him, “I dropped out of college today.”

Giles feels a rush of pity. “I am sorry, Buffy.”

“It’s okay” she replies. “I’ll go back one day.” She doesn’t meet his eyes.

Unable to fix the relentless lack of her mother and the growing infringement of new parental duties, Giles says, “I do wish you’d let me cook.”

“Nah.” She offers a brave smile. “I could use the distraction.”

Giles nods his understanding. “Well, I’ll be off then. Perhaps some other time.”

“Absolutely. Goodnight, Giles.”

****

On arrival in the Magic Box, Buffy shuts herself away with Rupert, leaving Ethan and the rest of the scoobies to half-hearted research (they haven’t found a spell to stop Glory yet, they won’t now) while Dawn does her homework.

“Oh, by the way, Dawnie” says Willow, “I won’t be able to do your magic lesson tomorrow: Tara and I are going to the World Culture Fair.” She turns to Ethan. “I don’t suppose you could do it? We were just going to go over the history of equilibrium theory.”

“Sounds thrilling” says Ethan drily. “I’m in.”

“Thanks, Ethan” says Dawn.

“I’m surprised Buffy’s still letting you learn magic, Dawn” puts in Xander, mildly enough, but with a telling glance at Ethan.

“I didn’t think she would” admits Dawn. “But then she said I could have one more chance.” To
Willow, she adds, “I think maybe it was seeing you use magic against Glory’s minions: She saw how it could keep me safe.”

“Only if you get freakishly good at it” mutters Anya. Seeing Dawn’s hurt she adds an insincere, “Not that you won’t.” She smiles fixedly. “Keep it up and you’ll be freakish in no time.”

Willow scowls. Xander looks uneasily from her to his girlfriend. When Dawn gets stuck on her homework, everyone seizes on it as a welcome distraction.

*****

“I don’t suppose Dawn has ever turned up at the shop during school hours?” Giles asks that night.

“No” replies Ethan. “Should she have?”

“No.” Giles sighs. “But she’s been truanting. Really, Eth, much as I wouldn’t be impressed if you were letting her hide out in the shop, at least we’d know she was safe there.”

“Well, relatively” Ethan agrees. “But she hasn’t been round.”

“She’s terribly reckless, to not let anyone know where she is in this town. Even before you consider Glory.”

“I imagine that’s part of the problem” supposes Ethan. “This place is all she knows. Well, other than whatever the Key knows.” He frowns. “Perhaps she should try meditation? See if she can tap into something mystical.”

“Best not to try just yet, dear. Between Glory and her learning magic, I think the last thing she needs is to be in touch with her Key side.”

Ethan considers this. “You may be right, Rupert.”

“I usually am. How are Dawn’s magic lessons going, by the way?”

“Alright. I want to teach her the dissiungo hex next. It would probably just bounce off Glory, but it’s worth a try.”

Giles nods, and prays it doesn’t come to that.

*****

Anya doesn’t see what Rupert does to the minion he caught loitering outside the shop, but Ethan does. For a moment, Ethan isn’t sure who’s standing in front of him – the act has a flavour of London street fights of old about it but even Ripper would never be so brutal – and then the minion starts babbling about Glory finding the witch, and questions about Rupert’s capacity for violence are suddenly the least of their worries.

For one world-crunching moment, Ethan thinks Glory is after Willow, but then it turns out she has got it into her permed head that Tara is the Key. Which is just as bad actually.

Leaving Anya to call Buffy and Faith, Rupert and Ethan head to the culture fair, Rupert breaking the speed limit, Ethan frantically preparing untested spells using ingredients grabbed on the way out. Whether any of it would be remotely effective against Glory is debatable at best, but they don’t get to find out.

They are too late.
Willow is discharged from hospital within hours. She is really very lucky, thrown aside by Glory against a tree and knocked out until it was over. Luck, Giles reflects, has new parameters now that Glory is in their lives.

After some emotionally charged discussion with Buffy, Willow leaves alone, not wanting any of them with her. Faith, too, declines a lift, wanting to “go kill some things”. Xander and Anya, for all they encouraged Willow to let the doctors wheel Tara away to the psych ward, linger as if hoping she will come back, and Giles is left to drop Ethan off at the shop to lock up, before driving Buffy home.

“This is my fault” Buffy says, once they are alone in the car.

“You know that’s not true” Giles chides.

“If I could kill her…”

“We’ll find a way to do just that. But we haven’t yet, and that’s hardly your fault.”

“Then if I hadn’t been the slayer” says Buffy plaintively, “if I had just been a normal girl who moved to Sunnydale, my friends wouldn’t be in danger just from knowing me.”

“Becoming the slayer was beyond your control, Buffy.” “I know that. I just wish it wasn’t.”

“I know.” So does he.

Initially on returning to the shop, Ethan distracts himself effectively by packing away the potent items for closing time. It’s not closing time, technically, but the theft of Tara’s sanity has thrown everything, including the concept of time, into a sort of fog, where nothing is clear or makes sense in any way. Staying open would be impossible.

Ethan finds he has stopped packing things away and is standing aimlessly, tears threatening. He stares hard at the shop counter until the prickling behind his eyes lessens. Shiny till, scissors left out from haphazard gift-wrapping, all very ordinary. Ethan pinches up a little powdered garnet from a pot by the till, smears it on his finger tips and clicks them, creates a crimson flame. Watches it.

He’s still at it when Willow bursts in. Ignoring him, she rushes upstairs to the restricted section. Ethan dithers for just a moment, unsure what to do and partly hoping that someone more qualified in the empathy department will show up to handle this. Then, snapping the flame into nothingness, he clambers up the stairs after her.

Willow is demolishing the dark magics library, pulling books off the shelves without troubling to read the titles. And why bother with reading, when she can probably sense the power of volumes like these? Ethan’s skin always prickles up here. “Willow?”

“Ethan, I need a paralysing spell.” She grabs the Dagger of Vijaya and shoves it into a hexed bag. She must already know, Ethan realises, that anything that goes into that bag comes out multiplied. She’d been snooping about up here more than he’d realised, back in the day.

Not that that feels in any way relevant right now. “Willow, are you sure this is a good idea?”
“If you’re not going to help me, get out of my way!”

“Sorry, let me rephrase that: Willow, this isn’t a good idea.”

“She’ll pay for this! I’m not letting her get away with it!” More books tumble to the floor.

“She’s a god.”

“And I’ve got nothing to lose!”

“That’s not true.”

“Ethan, help me or not; I’m doing this! She doesn’t get to hurt Tara and face nothing in return.”

Ethan crouches, trying to look her in the eyes, but her gaze is swinging wildly from curse to curse.

“I can’t let you go and get yourself killed” he tells her.

“You’re as bad as Buffy.” She grabs another armful of books, glances at one, tosses it aside. “This is my choice.”

“What about Tara? What happens to her if you die?”

Willow actually looks at him now. “You’ll look after her” she tells him. The confidence in her voice allows for no argument. It simply doesn’t occur to her that he wouldn’t. Would he, Ethan wonders.

Best not find out. “Listen, Willow –”

“Ethan, I have to do this. What would you do if it was Giles?”

Just the thought is painful. Ethan tries, “Willow –” and pauses. Gods know the girl has power. What gods don’t know, so far as Ethan can tell, is what it feels like to be human and angry and helpless.

Or maybe not so helpless, not in Willow’s case. He sighs. “Fuck it. If you live, I didn’t see you.”

“Fine.”

Ethan nods and turns to a low shelf, pulls the books away to reveal the heavy, leather bound volume pressed against the wall. “Pass me the axe.”

*****

Ethan is restless, putting his book down at intervals to pace, glancing at the phone, before returning to the sofa, lifting the book again. He doesn’t turn the pages.

Giles rather wishes he’d go to bed, since he’s clearly not in the right frame of mind to focus on anything, but he lets him be. It could be Ethan wants to be near him, and he knows he couldn’t sleep if he took them both upstairs now.

Finally, Giles gets up from the desk and draws Ethan into a hug.

“Sorry” Ethan mumbles into his shoulder. “I’m disturbing your research.”

“It hardly counts as research” Giles replies. They have by now read every book that could possibly be useful on the subject of Glory. Giles is simply re-reading the more complex volumes in search
of some detail or interpretation he missed.

Ethan’s arms snake around his back, one gripping him tightly, the other stroking him, straying closer and closer to his belt with each sweep.

“Ethan” Giles mutters, “this is hardly the time for sex.”

“Then what is it time for?” asks Ethan. He seems to genuinely want to know. And he has a point, Giles supposes: There is nothing they can do right now for Tara, who is forever hopelessly beyond reach, or for Willow who is understandably devastated. Nor can they focus on research or other practicalities after a day like this. Nothing left but to comfort one another. Giles finds himself returning Ethan’s embrace more earnestly. Ethan, speaking into his neck, adds, “Maybe I just want you naked to check you’re real. Nothing seems real today.” “I know” Giles murmurs. He plants a gentle kiss on the side of Ethan’s head.

The phone rings and they break apart a little reluctantly despite knowing that any call today is likely to be urgent.

Giles answers, “Hello?”

“Giles, it’s Buffy.”

“Are you alright? Has something happened?” Not more, please.

“No, nothing’s…Well, something’s happened but it’s all okay now.” Buffy draws a deep breath and lets it out with, “Willow went after Glory. Fought with her, actually. But I got her out – She’s staying at mine tonight, and then we’ll go together to the hospital in the morning.”

“She’s not hurt?” Giles asks.

“Amazingly, no. Close thing though.”

A close thing, undoubtedly, but simply that Willow survived a fight with Glory unharmed feels like a victory. As if sensing this line of thought, Buffy adds, “She slowed Glory down too.”

“Oh? That’s, well, that’s promising, isn’t it?” But a thought for another time. “Thank you for letting me know, Buffy.”

“Sure. Are you guys okay?”

“We’re fine. We’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

“Oh. Bye, Giles.”

Putting the phone down, Giles senses Ethan watching. Realising that his restlessness may not have been entirely down to horror over Tara’s condition, he watches his fiancé closely as he tells him, “That was Buffy. It seems Willow went up against Glory and escaped unscathed.”

“Oh?” Ethan’s posture relaxes just a little. “Good for her.”

“It was an incredibly reckless thing to do.”

“You’d do it for me.”

Giles draws him back into a hug. “That’s different” he says into his shoulder. “Willow is still young. She’s still got things to live for without Tara the way she was – we’ll make sure of that.”
Ethan says nothing, but holds on to him tightly.

*****

That night, it seems they are as they were in their earliest days, when one another’s bodies were still something new to explore and each caress was shy. Giles doesn’t think about the threat of Glory again until the phone jars him awake. Sitting up and scrambling for it, Giles says, “Hello?”

“Giles” Buffy’s voice is tight with some badly suppressed dread.

“Buffy, what’s happened?”

“She knows Giles.”

“What?”

“Glory. She knows about Dawn. Pack a bag and meet me at Xander’s.”
The atmosphere in the motor coach is of that quietly strained variety that threatens to boil over into blazing rows. Everyone hates the whole situation and everyone’s trying not to show it. A truth spell right now would be truly diabolical.

And truly unhelpful. Ethan mentally shakes himself: with a god at their heels, now isn’t the time for fun. He’s standing up and gripping the back of the driver’s seat, having surrendered the passenger seat to a slightly green Xander. From the driver’s seat, Rupert is speaking quietly, so that only Ethan and Xander can hear him: “Buffy just needs some time, a chance to plan. Things have been more than difficult of late.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining.” Ethan tells him. “Personally, I think we should have tried the running away approach to battling evil much sooner.”

“We can’t stay away” Xander tells him. “There is the whole hellmouth being unguarded thing. Plus, I’m not in favour of living in this pile of junk forever.”

“I’m with you there” Ethan admits. To Rupert, he asks, “Maybe we should find a hotel?”

“Do try to take this seriously for a moment, dear.”

“Actually, I take us staying alive very seriously. If we get ourselves a few hotel rooms, we could actually sit down and start planning. I could help Willow look through the books for spells without getting car sick. We can shroud our location once we’re stationary. And we’d still be within a day’s drive of Sunnydale if we do need to go back.”

Xander nods. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Yes” agrees Rupert, “The small flaw being that we’re nowhere near a hotel.”

“Well where’s the nearest one?” Ethan reaches for the road map. “Preferably the nearest one with a minibar.”

“The nearest one without a minibar will be closer.”

“Bugger!”

“You can survive without a minibar, Eth.”

“No – I mean – horses!” Ethan points to the vehicle’s side mirror.

So much for running away.

*****

The last horseman appears out of dusty nowhere, heading right for them, just as they think they’re safe. Ethan gets just the briefest glimpse of him in the clear square in the foil covered windshield as the vehicle tumbles sideways: hooves and armour, like something from a history book.

Rupert’s blood hits his face.

*****
“I thought healing magic’s a dud?” Faith eyes Ethan as he stands over Rupert.

“Worth a try” Ethan grinds out before continuing his spell.

The patch of blood on Rupert’s side is bigger than the width and length of two hands now, and a pile of bloodied pieces of cloth – t-shirts, rags, bandages from the uselessly understocked first aid kit – are crumpled on the floor around the table he’s lying on. Ethan has been sat here holding Rupert’s twitching hand and muttering this half-remembered spell ever since they barricaded themselves up in this gutted mess of a building. An old petrol station of all places, and they’ve got thugs with flaming arrows outside.

“Oh huh” Faith sounds doubtful but lets him keep trying. Ethan can sense her pacing behind him, never straying too far away.

Finally, he stops, the rest of the spell forgotten. It was only ever supposed to be for the worst a pub brawl could do in any case, an abandoned experiment from more reckless days. Free to focus on his fiancé now, Ethan clasps Rupert’s hand in both of his.

Rupert seems more peaceful now, but Ethan doubts this is down to his attempts so much as the fact that the bleeding has slowed and they are no longer trekking through the desert. Really, Ethan isn’t sure if his spell made things barely perceptively better, achieved nothing at all or almost summoned a blood imp.

“Ethan?” Rupert’s voice is a shaky whisper.

Ethan plasters on a smile. “Hello, Rupert. How do you feel, aside from speared?”

“Speared?”

“Um. Best not worry too much about it.”

“Alright then.” Rupert grimaces. “I’m sure Buffy has it under control.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Possibly their last conversation and he’s talking about bloody Buffy. If Rupert dies here, Ethan will never forgive him. He can’t hold back a sob, presses Rupert’s hand to his face partly to hide the tears.

Rupert’s fingers stroke his eyes. “Shh. It will be okay Ethan.”

“Oh yes” Ethan manages another manic smile, lowering Rupert’s hand. “Of course it will.”

“Yes. I’m just…I’ll just rest my eyes, alright?”

“Alright Rupert.” Ethan watches as Rupert slips back into something that looks like sleep but probably isn’t.

The sounds of the knights outside has grown distant, and it takes Ethan a while to realise that this is down to a barrier spell rather than them retreating. No, they are still trapped, hence Faith pacing like a caged, well, slayer, and the others, scattered around the room, looking various shades of fear. Wait. Ethan turns without relinquishing Rupert’s hand, and looks around the room again. Half their party are missing. “Where is everyone?”

Faith gives him an odd look and gestures to a door. “In the backroom with the chainmail chief. Where’ve you been?”
“Trying not to let Rupert die is where I’ve been. Chainmail chief?”

“Some top brass knight of the round face tattoo. We’ve got him tied up in there.”

Ethan nods his understanding and finally sets Rupert’s hand down. “Stay with him, could you?”

Faith moves closer. “Sure.”

Ethan moves to go, hesitates, plants a kiss on Rupert’s head and then leaves him with Faith. If Willow’s barrier doesn’t hold, Ethan wants a slayer near Rupert.

But of course Willow’s barrier will hold. It is the sum of the joint efforts of Ethan’s second and third favourite people – Willow and Janus. Unfortunately, if he is to save his first favourite person, Ethan needs to get them both on the other side of it.

Stepping into the backroom, Ethan finds Buffy standing in front of a muscular, middle aged man wearing an outfit that went out of style several centuries ago. Xander and Spike stand to either side, each trying to look menacing, which doesn’t suit Xander and which Spike manages all too well. Dawn lingers to the side despite probably being better off out the room. Ethan knocks on the wall as he enters. “I hope I’m not interrupting something unconstitutional?” Then, taking in the armour and remembering the horseman, “No, wait; I don’t really care.”

Buffy asks, “Is there a problem, Ethan?”

“Well you might have noticed that Rupert’s lost rather a lot of blood.”

Buffy flinches, but asks, “Is he any worse?”

“How should I know? I’m not a doctor.”

Spike asks, “Heart beating, is it? He’s breathing? Just give him time, mage.” To Buffy, “Humans are tougher than you give them credit for.”

Xander shifts his weight uncomfortably and mutters, “You’d know.”

Ethan begins, “We need to –”

At that moment, there is a cry, and Buffy rushes out, followed by Dawn and the two men (well, boy and vampire). Ethan starts to follow, but, realising that it’s only Tara in some distress, stays where he is. Nothing he can do for the poor child, and Willow is with her. Besides this leaves him alone with the knight. Ethan smiles in what he hopes is a reassuring way, though really, the day he’s having, he’s not sure it hits the mark. The man responds with a blank stare.

“So” Ethan tries. “You chaps are human?”

“We are” the man replies. “A group of human warriors sworn to protect our fellow man from the evil of the beast.”

“Oh. Well, you’ve plenty in common with Buffy then. Or would, if only you’d try to stop murdering her –” Ethan stops short, unsure how much these men know.

The knight tells him, “One murder to save millions. Responsibility for the Key’s current form lies with the monks. I don’t relish the task, but the girl must die.”

Oh good, thinks Ethan, so they already know about Dawn and he hasn’t given it away. Also, these men seem to have priorities that could mesh with theirs. Well, except for the murder and
chainmail. “That’s a conversation you’ll need to have with Buffy” he says. “All I need to know right now is, will I be attacked or captured if I go out there?” He thinks for a moment. “And do you have a first aid kit?”

“One of you is hurt” It is hard to tell from the man’s tone if he knew that already.

“That tends to happen when people mess around with spears.” A spear, thinks Ethan, sharp and aerodynamic, designed to find its target, sink its teeth in and kill. “Will you let me take him to a hospital?”

“Perhaps. In return for the girl.”

Ethan sighs, steps back. Considers. He knows he should care about all these mystical happenings – for the Key’s sake and Dawn’s – but – honestly? – he doesn’t. Not right now. These knights can have the Key, for all he cares right at this moment, and right at this moment, with Rupert in this state, all he cares is only just enough not to bundle Dawn out of the building himself. Gods help him, it’s the truth. Because Rupert could die here, and it’s hard to care about anything besides that.

Hard, but not impossible. “Sorry, I’m not really in the business of child murder.” Except Dawn isn’t a child, is she? She is a spell. Spells break.

A spell he’s seen squeal in delight when she gets a spell right. A spell who’s talked his ear off about children’s books and appalling music. No, he can’t.

“You wouldn’t need to do it” the man tells him calmly. “Just untie me.”

Ah, and now they are back in the safety zone of practicalities. “You wouldn’t get near her” Ethan points out. “We have two slayers.”

“Slayers who’ve sworn to protect humanity. Surely they must see that our interests align?”

“They’re not in the business of child murder either.”

“And nor was I until I found out the monks have fashioned the Key into a child. A child so dangerous, she could end the world – and all the real children in it.”

For just a moment, Ethan is shocked. But then, he thinks, was all of this ever building towards anything else? Glory was never going to be a minor threat, something containable that affected only their little group. This always had the skin-crawling sense of an apocalypse.

The knight asks, “You didn’t know?”

“No” says a voice from the doorway. Buffy steps into the room. “Tell me.”

*****

“So, let me get this straight” says Faith, once Gregor has finished explaining Glory’s odd living arrangements, “Some guy is born, what sixty, seventy years ago at most, with Glory wedged in him, and you guys band together to stop Glory, and you just decide to do it in a sort of crusadery way?”

“Our brethren formed in 1106.” The knight draws himself up as best he can while tied to a post. “The beast is but the latest threat we’ve faced.” He stares at the slayers and adds, “And the worst. Since she entered our realm, scores of my men have fallen, not even counting those you slaughtered today.”
Buffy flinches and glances away from the group. Faith stares at her for a moment, but says nothing. Keen to refocus the discussion on the little matter of the still-living, still-armed men preventing them from leaving, Ethan asks, “Why not just go find this poor bloke with a god inside him and leave us to go to the hospital?”

“Because we don’t know who or where he is” is the answer. “Finally, though, we have a chance to destroy the Key and prevent the beast from wielding it.”

“Why?” Another voice from the doorway. Dawn has entered without anyone noticing.

Buffy says, “Dawnie, go back in the main room” just as Ethan says, “You probably don’t want to know.”

“I do” insists Dawn. Looking past them, to their prisoner, she asks, “What does Glory even want with me?”

Gregor tells her.

It isn’t long before Ethan gives up on negotiating with the knight. Next, he runs a series of half-baked schemes through his mind, considering and then dismissing each one. Release the man and use some sort of mind control spell to make him think he has Dawn and call off the troops? Too risky, if it fails, and it would with most of the magic supplies sitting in an upturned camper van in the desert. Play on Dawn’s guilt and have her pretend to give herself up to the man for as long as it takes to get past the knights? Well, then there’s the little matter of two slayers who would never allow it. With Dawn already in a state over her new world-ending status, Buffy has barely left her side. Open up a doorway and hope for the best? Desperate, and destined to end in bloodshed.

No, for all trickery of some sort might be an option if anyone else had been speared, this is Rupert. It has to be guaranteed to work, or Ethan won’t take the risk. And nothing he can think of would work: Even if he somehow got Rupert on the right side of the barrier without killing Dawn, Ethan can’t see how they’d get through the waiting army to the taxi that probably wouldn’t come this far anyway and probably wouldn’t wait once the driver caught sight of the army.

In the end it is Faith who comes up with a solution, phoning Ben, who agrees to drive out to the petrol station. What he must think of the crusade re-enactment when he arrives is anyone’s guess, but he patches Rupert up as best he can, watched by Ethan and assisted by Dawn, who is keen to do something other than get them all hurt or killed.

Poor child. It’s rather a lot for her to get her head around.

A lot for any of them to get their head around, thinks Ethan as he grips Rupert’s hand and watches the doctor work. Gregor’s view is that Dawn must die to save humanity. So far, the alternative offered by Buffy has amounted to a day of carsickness followed by a siege. And running forever isn’t an option, not with Rupert like this. Ben is helping, but he’s not a miracle worker.

“At least we know the truth now” Willow says some time later. “Just another apocalypse.” She wasn’t in the room for all the knight had to say, but the pain behind her light tone reveals that she has worked out for herself how likely they are to emerge from this unscathed.

“Yes, nothing we haven’t seen before” says Ethan, willing to play along now that Rupert is out of immediate danger. Across the room, Ben is still with him, but he’s just tidying things up now, and monitoring the wound. Ethan shifts in his seat to watch more closely.
“It’s okay” Willow tells him, following his gaze. “Faith will make sure he does the best for Giles.”

Faith, it is true, is standing beside the young doctor, also watching intently, as only a scorned slayer can. Perhaps that’s why Ben seems nervous.

Well, that and the army outside. Finally trusting that he can turn his back on Rupert, Ethan comments, “Your barrier’s held nicely. Janus clearly likes you.”

Willow smiles. “Well, that or he hates Glory.”

“That too, but I try to stay away from divine politics. It doesn’t end anywhere good.”

“Huh, I hadn’t noticed.” Willow grins. “So how –” She breaks off, stares as a shriek issues from Ben. Ethan spins round, gets to his feet. The young doctor is now openly panicking. And changing, pretty rapidly, into…

No. Gods, no.
“You don’t need to stay out here” Spike, focused on the innards of Ben’s car, tells Ethan, “I know what I’m doing.”

“I know you do. But can you do it with your fingers bandaged is the question.” Ethan doesn’t look at the vampire as he talks, but around them at the tangled and contorted bodies of the fallen Knights of Byzantium. He’s never seen so many dead people at once. Actually, he doubts most vampires have seen this many dead people at once, not unless they worked for the master or some other ancient and feared legend.

Graduation day wasn’t nearly as bad as this. And at least then, the fallen had had a chance to fight back, some comfort, however futile, in a sense of control over their fates. Glory had simply ploughed through these men, dragging Dawn in her wake. The poor child must have seen it all happen.

And where had Glory come from? Where has she taken Dawn?

Come to think of it, where has Ben gone? Why are they hotwiring his car instead of just asking him for the keys? Perhaps he was slaughtered with all these other strangers – It’s all a bit of a blur. Ethan glances around to try and spot the doctor amid the limbs, the torsos, thinks better of it.

“What happened to Ben?” he asks. Spike, still hunched over in the car and focused on the wires, glances up, looking puzzled. Ethan explains, “I can’t remember. Must be the shock.”

“Well yeah” says Spike. “Watching a hulking bloke magic into a petite little hell god right in our midst? New meaning of shock.” He nods to the dead men. “Brassy of him to walk past this lot. Then again, you share your body with Glory, you probably need to get some balls. Hypothetical ones, I mean, once she’s in the driver’s seat.” Spike shrugs, resumes his work.

Ethan stares at him. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Ben” Spike glances up again, then gives Ethan his full attention, looking at him as though he’s being rather stupid. When Ethan stares blankly back, Spike prompts, “You know – he’s the bloke, the poor sod with Glory living inside of him.”

“Since when?”

Spike sighs in frustration. “Since we watched her burst out of him just now inside! Don’t tell me you’d nipped to the loo or something.”

“No, I was right there. Ben came to treat Rupert and then…” Ethan trails off suddenly confused. “And then Glory got in somehow.”

“Yes” Spike uses his best talking-to-a-slow-child voice, “because she’d hitched a ride in on Ben.”

“He snuck her in?” Ethan is aghast. “He’s working for her?”

“No, he is her. And she’s him.”

“So…They aren’t working together? But…Are they connected in some way?”

Spike stares at him a moment, and shakes his head. “Right then, looks like I’m the only one
immune to whatever forgetting spell she’s wrapped the whole thing up in. Also the only one with a chip that stops him killing humans, very fucking useful.”

“You’d never kill Dawn anyway” Ethan tells him. He’s actually almost certain of it: Soulless or not, vampires are social animals, and Spike seems to like the child.

“Course I bloody wouldn’t. I was talking about Ben.”

“Ben? What’s he got to do with any of this?”

“Go inside, Ethan.”

*****

Stepping inside, Ethan tells the assembled scoobies, “Spike doesn’t need help out there. How is she?”

Willow shakes her head mutely and continues her examination of Buffy, who sits, unnaturally still and quiet, and allows it. Had he not known better, Ethan would think this was the robot.

“No sign of it being anything physical” Willow announces, “But I guess Glory could have hit her without us seeing. It all happened so fast.” She buries her fingertips gently in Buffy’s hair, withdraws them, checks for blood, moves on to a different section of her friend’s head.

“It’s nothing physical” Faith decides. “Just all got too much for her.”

“Yes” says Rupert, sitting up gingerly with Anya’s help. Ethan hurries over to him and chides, “Lie back down, you prat.”

“Yes dear, it’s good to see you too.”

“I mean it – You should save your strength.” Ethan places a hand on Rupert’s good shoulder and tries to steer his partner back to a horizontal position but Rupert, ever the martyr, is having none of it, telling him, “We’ll be off soon anyway. Spike has few talents, but I suspect hotwiring a car is one of them.” On cue, they hear the engine, and the vampire appears to summon them. Spike being Spike has a go at reviving Buffy too, and is almost punched by Xander for his efforts before Willow separates them and takes charge. Then they all have a brief bicker about Ben working with Glory, or possibly shagging Glory – Ethan isn’t really following. Really, it’s all just time wasted before they pile in the car.

Ben’s car is small for an American model, so not small, but not comfortable for nine adults, one of whom has had recent encounter with the business end of a spear. Ethan spends the journey with a rapidly numbing arm wrapped around Rupert, who flinches as they go over bumps and keeps his eyes closed for much of the time. Next to them is Buffy, who remains still and silent. Perhaps Rupert was hoping she’d revive in her own time if they let her be, because it is only as they near Sunnydale that he tries talking to her, rousing himself to reach across Ethan for his slayer’s hand, which he holds lax in his own as he makes occasional remarks along the lines of, “I know you’ll get through this, Buffy” and “I’m so proud of you.” Ethan wishes he’d save his breath: Buffy clearly can’t hear him.

*****

Ethan has various cover stories prepared, but no-one at the hospital asks questions. Perhaps not everyone in Sunnydale is as oblivious as they seem, especially not if one of their colleagues happens to have a hell god living inside of him. Ethan blinks. “Oh!”
Rupert, prone on the bed, turns to him. “What is it?”

“Ben’s Glory!”

The nurse gives Ethan an odd look. Ethan returns his gaze to Rupert’s wound and waits quietly for her to finish her work and move on to other patients. As soon as she has, Rupert asks, “What was that about?”

“Glory’s Ben – He’s the human boy she was tethered to.” Ethan thinks back over the horrible moment the god had materialised. “Why did I not realise before?”

“Probably because some spell prevented us from seeing it” Rupert supposes. He lies still but his eyes are moving as ideas flitter behind them, brighter now, less dulled by pain. “I remember it now too.”

Ethan nods. “Spike was talking about it, but I thought he was just being an idiot.”

“Well, Spike can do more than one thing at once.” Rupert frowns suddenly. “Good Lord, and we took Glory straight to Dawn when we contacted Ben! And that was for me.”

Ethan takes his hand, relinquished briefly so the nurse could check his stitches, and warns him, “Don’t you dare go feeling guilty, Rupert. You’d been impaled and Ben is the only doctor we know. And there was no ‘we’ – Faith made the call, and you just lay there.”

Rupert nods, though Ethan isn’t sure that he’s really absolving himself so much as setting guilt aside for when an apocalypse isn’t looming. He murmurs, “This explains why he broke things off with Faith so suddenly.”

“Well, yes. Hosting a banished god must do all sorts of unwelcome things to one’s love life.”

“Faith said he left suddenly when he saw Dawn, mentioned some complication involving a sister.” Rupert’s frown deepens. “Which implies he’s known about Dawn for some time, doesn’t it? And kept it from Glory.”

“I suppose” says Ethan. “If they can even communicate.”

Rupert sits up stiffly. “Do we have any leads at all on where Glory is now? Anything you can remember now the veil between her and Ben has lifted?”

Ethan shakes his head. Rupert sighs and concludes, “We’d best get searching, then. I’ve lounged around here long enough.”

“You weren’t lounging, Rupert – You were recovering from a spear wound. There is a difference, you know.”

“Just help me up, Ethan.”

*****

“Okay” says Xander as they leave Willy’s Place, “so not only was that a bust, but we’ve probably all got tetanus.”

“I can’t get tetanus” says Spike.

“To be fair” adds Ethan, “that’s the cleanest I’ve seen the place look for a while.” He glances back to the bar to see a hand inside flip the sign at the front to closed. There is a rattle of locks hurriedly
reinforced. “We could try the bite house but I don’t think they’ll know anything.”

“That’s if they haven’t left town already” mutters Spike. “Bloody wimps and weirdos in that place; they’re not fighters.”

“Yes” says Ethan, “because you came off so well against Glory.”

“I was tied up!” The vampire retorts. “And I didn’t talk, did I? I’d like to see your blood-for-rent crowd stand up to her!”

“We don’t need them to stand up to her” puts in Xander, “We just need them to tell us how to. Will they?”

“No” Ethan admits. “Even if they knew. But other than them, I’m out of ideas.”

“There is someone else” says Spike slowly, “Not sure how useful he’d be, but it could be worth a try.”

“Who?” asks Ethan.

“Bloke called Doc. Into dark magics and the like. You know him?”

“Only by reputation.” Ethan frowns. “I can’t picture someone like that wanting to stop the apocalypse.”

“Oh great” says Xander. “So we’re down to someone who’s all for it?”

“Might be” replies Spike, “But he might know something, unlike that sorry lot at the bite house.”

“And we could always try there afterwards” concedes Ethan, “if Doc won’t help.”

“If he won’t, I’ll make him.” Spike sets off. Ethan and Xander exchange a glance and follow.
“He is dead, isn’t he?” asks Ethan.

Xander glances back at the door that conceals what is left of Doc. “Definitely.”

Ethan follows his gaze. “He was a demon.”

“Well, yeah” Xander sounds faintly scandalised. “I wouldn’t kill him if he wasn’t.”

“I just mean they’re hard to kill.”

Spike, loitering a little way off of where Ethan stopped, clutching the box and waiting, comments, “He looked dead enough.”

Xander agrees, “I’m guessing impalement kills most things.” To Ethan, “You wanna go back and check?”

Ethan looks again back the way they came, to the dark room, the entrance in shadow, and shudders. “Not especially.”

“Well then.”

*****

They reach the Magic Box to find Faith back just before them, returned from stalking Glory. “She’s moved out the mansion” she reports. “Got the crazies to build her some tower – like a massive diving board? With a platform sticking out into the sky.”

“Is she going to throw Dawn off?” Xander guesses, paling.

Faith shivers and turns to Rupert. “I wanted to make a dash for her. But if I didn’t make it…”

“We’d be one slayer down and Glory would probably make things worse for Dawn in retaliation” Rupert finishes for her. “You did the right thing.”

Faith looks briefly about to argue, but turns suddenly to Spike. “What’s that?”

“Something one of Glory’s lowlife worshipers had hidden for her.” Spike places it on the table in front of Rupert, who pulls it towards him. Spike asks, “Where’s Buffy?”

“Still, um, unreachable” Rupert informs him. To Ethan he adds, “Willow’s doing a spell to enter her mind.”

“Oh” says Ethan, “Nothing that could go wrong there then.” For just a second, he feels guilty for pointing out the danger – it will scare Dawn – but then he remembers that Dawn isn’t here. Shaking the thought, he asks, “Now we know it’s Ben, is there a spell we could do? Something that will bring him to the surface?”

Spike replies, “Even if we do, he’ll be surrounded by minions. You think they’ll let him just run off with the bit? Even if he would – might prefer to save his own skin.”

“Seems to me his own skin is as doomed as ours if Glory gets her way. It might be worth a try.”
Xander asks, “Have you ever affected her with magic? Even once?”

“No” Faith answers for him, “but Willow has. We could find something for her to do when she’s done yanking Buffy out her own brain.”

Pushing aside a brief, unnerving professional jealousy – they could all die, this is hardly the time for competition – Ethan agrees, “Yes. I’ll have a look.” He turns to step towards a bookshelf.

“Have a look for what, exactly?” asks Rupert, glancing up from the box’s contents, now laid out on the table. “The magic used to bind Ben and Glory was created in another dimension and is unique in any. Therefore, I can’t imagine anyone has ever tried to counter it.”

Ethan pauses. “There is that, I suppose.”

Spike nods. “And if there was a spell for it, the Knights of Byzantidumb would have used it by now and saved us the hassle.”

Faith nods reluctantly, takes a seat and lifts an aged scroll of paper for examination. “So it’s down to this then?”

“I think so” confirms Rupert. “If there are any answers, we’ll find it here.”

*****

Interrupting him as he rereads a page, Ethan asks, “Are you sure you’re fit for this, love?”

Giles sighs heavily, not meeting Ethan’s eyes, and tries for sarcasm. “No, actually, you have a point. The twinge in my side really is bad enough to throw the towel in and just let the world end.”

“Twinge?! Rupert, you were speared!”

“Just a little taster of what we’ll all suffer if the key is activated.” Giles turns his attention back to the back to the text. Rereading it doesn’t change the words, alas. It still means what is meant before. “If those wretched monks hadn’t…” he begins, and then stops. Glances around the shop to check the others haven’t heard. They haven’t: Spike, not one for research, is in the backroom readying the weapons and Faith and Xander are reading through some scrolls they’ve flattened against the counter. Besides, he and Ethan are hissing at each other in undertones, as they’re wont to do when under stress.

But Ethan’s heard, obviously. He frowns and asks, “You wish Dawn hadn’t been created?”

“She wasn’t always Dawn.” Giles winces to hear himself say it. “She was – is – a powerful mystical force that could destroy us all.”

Ethan has nothing to say to that. They return to their reading. And rereading, hoping, only to be horrified anew.

Finally, Giles has to tell the others his conclusions about blood and rituals and little girls who weren’t always little girls.

“Oh God” mutters Xander, taking a hasty seat.

Spike nods mutely and plucks a cigarette from his pocket, goes to lean against the steps to the restricted section.

“No” says Faith simply.
“Faith, if it isn’t done, everyone on this planet will die” Giles tells her.

Faith shakes her head and repeats, “No. No way, Giles. I’m not going to do it.”

Hating himself, Giles forces himself to ask, “Would you rather let Buffy do it?”

“Do what?” asks a voice from the door. Buffy has returned.

After he leaves Buffy slumped on the sofa, Giles finds Faith in the alley with Spike, sharing a smoke. At his approach, the vampire backs off with suspicious glance and heads inside, leaving Giles alone with his second slayer. “No” she tells him again.

“You didn’t hear what I was going to say.”

“You were going to ask me to kill Dawn. No. Not going to happen.”

Giles stands beside her, studying the brickwork on the opposite building and inhaling her second-hand smoke. He tries, “Faith, we’re talking about the end of the world here. I know we’ve always found a way, but every apocalypse we face could be the last one. The one where they win.”

“It won’t happen Giles. We’ll get to her before the ritual starts.”

“I hope so, and I know we’ll all do everything in our power to make it so. But we need to ask ourselves, what if we don’t?”

She glances at him. “We will.”

“But if we don’t? Faith, I know it’s a horrible thought, but a slayer has to –”

“To what? Do what no-one else can? Newsflash, Giles, it doesn’t take a slayer to kill a kid, it just takes some guy. Happens all the time.”

Giles lets that sink in, feeling it filter through his thoughts and into his soul. She is right, of course. In this instance, averting the end of the world doesn’t take slayer strength. Just an adult man. “I was going to say that the Slayer has to make choices no-one else can.” But then, so do watchers.

“Yeah?” Faith retorts, “well I’ve made mine. Answer’s no.” She drops her cigarette and stamps it out with a twist of her foot. “I can’t do that again.”

“Faith, what happened to Alan Finch was a horrible mistake. The circumstances here –”

“– don’t mean jack. It all feels the same.” Another glance at him, a searching expression.

Does she know, Giles wonders, about Randall? He has the impression that Buffy, exposed to the whole thing when Eyghon made his reappearance, told the other children, but Faith came along later. Did anyone ever tell her what he found himself capable of? Eyghon wearing Randall’s face and forcing Randall’s feet to carry him step by staggering step closer until Giles swung the sword… Returning Faith’s gaze before they break eye contact, stare at the wall again, Giles wonders if he should share his shame. It might help the girl process her own fears and reach the same grim conclusion about what their duty will be if the ritual begins that he has.

But he stays silent. Tells himself that now is not the time for navel-gazing or for scraping raw old wounds.
“You know what I wonder?” asks Faith after a while, “I wonder why the monks didn’t make Dawn my sister? Why did Buffy get a sister when she already had a mom?”

“They wanted to ensure everyone had a wealth of memories about her, I suppose, and placing her with the slayer who’d been in Sunnydale the longest was the way to do that.”

“I’d have loved a kid sister.” Faith finally steps away, back towards the shop. She pauses to add, “Buffy’s got it screwed up, you know. If you’re not going to kill humans, you’re not going to kill humans. It’s when you start picking and choosing that things get fucked.” At Giles’ questioning stare, she elaborates, “I won’t kill you, is what I mean. She will, if you try to take out Dawn, but I won’t, even to stop you. I won’t stop you but I won’t help either.” She frowns. “I guess I’m just a coward when it comes down to it.”

“I don’t believe that’s cowardice.”

“Whatever. See you inside, Giles.”

*****

“There, baby.” Willow eases a necklace around Tara’s throat. Stepping closer, Ethan realises it is the protective amulet he got Tara for her birthday, the token of Hephaestus. The poor girl tugs at it, threatening to snap it off, as Willow strokes her hair. Ethan tells them, “That’s only effective against weapons made of metal. If you want her safe, best leave her here.”

“I can’t” replies Willow. “I’ve made a spell that could undo what Glory did to her, or at least reverse it a bit, but I’ll need her with me.” She glances at him, abandoning her attempts to soothe Tara. “Besides, if we don’t stop the ritual, I don’t want her to be alone. If anything came at her, then, then it’s better if I…”

She returns her attention to Tara, pulling her into an embrace. Ethan takes a step back. He doesn’t want to consider what Willow might be prepared to do to Tara rather than let a demon do worse. What, he wonders, would he do for Rupert?

Rupert meets his eyes meaningfully from across the room, and steps into the backroom. Ethan glances about, wanting, instinctively to not be too obvious about following. He needn’t worry: Willow is distracted by Tara, Buffy’s gone with Spike to fetch weapons, and Anya and Xander are down in the basement, so there is only Faith, leaning against the counter with her back to the room, sharpening a blade with quick, brutal strokes.

Stepping into the backroom, Ethan shuts the door before he says, “Either you want a pre-apocalypse quickie or I’m about to be recruited into a plot to kill Dawn.” He keeps his voice light, but it still hurts to say it. Rupert’s pained expression echoes the feeling. Ethan says, “Oh.”

“Yes.” Rupert sits down heavily on the battered sofa.

Ethan stays by the door for a moment before stepping over to the punch bag. It still has little dents in it from Buffy’s earlier work out.

Really, he’s very fond of Dawn. She always seems to him to greatly resemble the child he and Rupert would have had together if such a thing were either biologically possible or remotely interesting. She has Rupert’s determination and bookishness and talent for languages, his interest in magic and tendency to cause trouble without even meaning to. Her drawings aren’t all that bad either. Really, the monks couldn’t have made a child he’d be keener to protect if they’d tried. Which of course they bloody had.
Rupert says, “Ethan, if we can’t stop the ritual, Dawn will… If that happens, nothing will save her. You know that. It’s Dawn or all of humanity, including Dawn.”

Ethan sits down beside him, and sets fondness aside with less effort than he feels it should take. “I know. I’m not saying I can do it, but…I know.” He wasn’t wrong back at the gas station: Dawn is a spell. Spells break. The Key will live on either way, probably reverting to its true form just like the subject of any transmogrification.

Quietly, Rupert tells him, “We can’t allow the world to fall.”

“I know that. You’re preaching to the converted, love.” Ethan glances at Rupert and realises his partner is speaking to more to himself, falls silent.

Ethan hopes Rupert realises he’s not being entirely selfish. Because much as self-preservation is a big factor here, Ethan also thinks that Buffy is the one being selfish, in a way. Ethan has a sister himself. He hasn’t seen her for decades and doesn’t want to but she’s out there somewhere. Probably living in suburban Nothington-on-Thames and married to some office-working, golf playing twit. Has children, for all Ethan knows. It’s not just his own life Buffy’s telling him to sacrifice: it’s Buffy’s sister or his. Or rather, everyone’s sister, and his, and Rupert, and all because she can’t bring herself to kill Dawn, and Ethan understands that, he does, only, “What do you want me to do?”

Rupert looks heavy-hearted. “Hold Buffy back with your magics. Trap her, confuse her, just don’t hurt her seriously. Or at all if you can help it.”

“Fine. I’ll do that. And what will you be doing?”

“You know what I’ll be doing.”

Ethan nods. Reaches across the small space between them to grasp Rupert’s hand. He wonders what sort of monster it makes him that what he feels is relief, but he does: The world won’t end. If Buffy can’t save it, Rupert will. “Do what you need to do, love. I’ll be here for you afterward.” Just like he was after Randall.

*****

As they leave, Tara suddenly turns to him and calls him a killer, and Giles, for one bewildered moment, wants to deny it but can’t. He glances at Spike and wonders if he knows – he spent a century with an insane psychic, after all, if anyone is going to give credence to Tara’s ramblings, it is him – but the vampire stares past him to Buffy, and follows as she leads them out the door.

*****

Really, a part of Ethan, on agreeing to help Rupert, hadn’t thought it would actually come to this. He hadn’t realised it at the time, but a part of him had assumed that they would stop the ritual before it began because of course they would. They always did. Apocalypse after apocalypse and the slayer of the time always stopped it, and they have two slayers, and a robot for distraction, and a brilliantly powerful witch – two, now Tara is cured – and a vampire with pent up aggression and a seemingly unquenchable surely-more-than-crush-at-this-point. And a wrecking ball. How can they lose?

But they are losing. Because, “There’s someone up there” says Willow.

Ethan and Tara, huddled in the shelter of some rubble now that Glory’s minions have beat them all back, peer up at the platform. Stark against the sky, a figure makes its way calmly towards Dawn.
Tara asks, “Who is that?”

“Can’t tell from here” Ethan admits. “Not one of us.”

Willow goes very still, and it takes the other two a moment to realise she is holding a telepathic conversation. Tara, impressively with it considering how disorientating sudden sanity amid a life or death battle must be, catches on in time to help her part the crowd of demons at the base of the tower. Ethan watches Faith and Spike run up, before the minions, enraged by the infringement, throw bricks and fire a fresh wave of medieval artilleries, forcing him to cower.

From his position pressed against the rubble, all he can see is the top of the tower, and how menacing the figure becomes the closer it stalks to Dawn. When Spike and Faith reach them, they are greeted by a comically long tongue, lashing out at them like a whip. “Nunguul demon” Ethan realises.

“What?” asks Willow.

“That’s a Nunguul demon. They look human but they’re strong, reptilian. Tongues are their main weapon. And venom, I think.”

“Do you know how to kill one?”

Ethan shakes his head, helplessly. “I’m not sure they can be killed. Hurt, maybe. Pushing him off the edge might put him out of action, but I think they got that message.” As he speaks, a figure does indeed fall from the tower, and for an elated moment, Ethan thinks it is the demon, but then he takes in the coat, the flash of platinum.

“Spike!” realises Tara. She moves as if to run and help him, but something sharp shoots past from the minions – an arrow? – and she is forced to press herself against their almost-barricade again.

Reaching for her girlfriend, Willow is still focused on the platform, as Faith, silhouetted above them, stands between the Nunguul and Dawn. “I’m out of spells” she tells them, turning to Ethan. “You?”

“I don’t know what I can do” admits Ethan. “A barrier maybe? Seal Dawn off? I’d need to be up there to do it, but you wouldn’t.”

Willow nods and takes his hand. Together, they focus on the magic, gathering the last of their strength to attempt to combine a barrier spell with anything that will carry it up the tower. Combining spell isn’t easy at the best of times, and they are both exhausted. Ethan’s appeal to Janus is frantic, a child reaching for a parent at a time of great fear. Janus responds, magnificently calm amidst all this violence, letting the magic swell up until –

“No!” shrieks Tara. The spell is broken as the witches’ pure horror, laced with magic released accidently out of sheer panic, cuts through it. Opening his eyes, Ethan realises it is too late anyway: the demon is standing in front of Dawn, raising a knife that is already dark with blood. Above them, the sky shivers open.

“Oh Goddess!” Willow gasps, and clutches at Tara. Above them, Dawn’s body jolts and for a horrible moment, Ethan thinks she is fatally hurt (not that it makes a difference, a part of him, stunned into detachment, notes. Nothing will save her now) but then she writhes, twisting against her bonds as the demon slashes again, methodical.

It’s over then. Where is Rupert? Wanting Rupert because they are all about to die, so of course he wants Rupert, Ethan stares around before remembering that oh yes, Rupert was going to stop this.
So where is Rupert? He risks standing, and the minions, bowing as the sky breaks apart, do nothing to stop him. Ethan yells, “Rupert?”

Still crouched down, Willow asks, “Where’s Faith?” and Tara points to a crumpled form at the base of the tower. Instinctively, Ethan steps towards her, and is sent reeling as the ground shakes. A crack splinters the earth and Ethan darts sideways, dives to avoid crashing down into the darkness. Looking back, he can’t see Willow and Tara but the fracture in the ground has mercifully swerved jaggedly away from where they were hiding.

Not that it makes any difference. They are all dead, unless, “Rupert!”

Hold Buffy back, Rupert had said. Ethan looks around. Can’t see Buffy anyway. He crawls to where Faith is now groaning, turning herself painfully over to watch the sky bleed. “Fuck…”

“Faith?”

“Ethan? I’m sorry.” She grips a wound at her side, and Ethan notes that her dark clothes are darker than they should be, wet. He tells her, “It’s okay” because that’s what you say to little girls who are about to die.

“Tell B, okay? I’m sorry.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll tell her.” Ethan watches Faith pass out and moves to go past her, grabbing a beam of the tower as the earthquake continues.

But he can’t just leave Faith. Looking back at the unconscious slayer, Ethan debates sliding her under the tower to shield her from the lighting that seems to be streaming from the opening in the sky (except when was lightening red?) but that wouldn’t protect her from the crevasses opening at random on the ground.

He steps back to Faith, scoops her up. It’s a stupid thing to do. They are all doomed anyway and this slows him down – he has to find Rupert, Rupert will stop this – but he can’t bring himself to drop her.

The lightening hits the ground in front of him, forcing him to change direction. Somewhere up above, there is a howl, and Ethan twists to see a dragon circle with a swift beat of massive wings. Squealing erupts to his left as a patch of rubble is suddenly coated with something alive, so Ethan swerves to the right, comes up against the minions. They are still too busy praising Glory’s victory to notice him. Falling – falling lava? – spilling from the lips of the portal has him ducking sideways again, searching for somewhere safe despite knowing there isn’t anywhere. This is what insects under a lifted rock must feel like. “Rupert!” A half-standing wall creaks, and Ethan pulls away from it, almost dropping Faith. Something – something scaly – barges past him, and he has a brief impression of snapping jaws before a flash of light from the void in the sky transforms it to stinking, smouldering meat that would have been him if he’d run just a few paces further. Ethan finds his legs giving way, landing in a heap on top of Faith. “Rupert!”

Where is Rupert? Where is he? Ethan doesn’t realise he’s praying, until Janus answers with a surge of awareness that slices through Ethan’s fear and has him picking up Faith, and navigating a path through the lightening and chasms that he wouldn’t have found on his own.

“Ethan?” Rupert is suddenly in front of him, and darts forward to pull him and Faith to the relative safety of a pillar. Ducking behind it, Rupert props Faith up and examines her, lifting her top to find a deep, oozing wound.
Ethan, meanwhile, stares around them, his gaze snagging on, “Is that Ben?”

“Yes” replies Rupert, still focused on Faith, He peels his coat off, presses it to her abdomen.

*Killer* Janus breathes, and Ethan understands. “That means Glory’s dead, doesn’t it? So we can stop this?”

Rupert pulls his jumper off and places it behind Faith’s head. “She’ll live” he breathes to himself. “At least, she would have. At least she’s unconscious.”

“But we can stop this, can’t we?” begs Ethan. “We can get up there and –” He stops, looking up at the tower, and the destruction waging around it. How can they get up there?

“We’re too late, Ethan.” Rupert straightens and steps around Faith. Reaches for Ethan and envelops him in a hug. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” Ethan finds he is crying. He closes his eyes, buries his face in Rupert’s neck and breathes in his smell. Hopes Rupert will show him the mercy he showed Ben but can’t bring himself to ask for it. Hears the dragon shriek and tells himself to find somewhere else to be, in his mind. He doesn’t want to stay here. His thoughts skim over memories but in his panic, he can’t grasp at them. Finally, he finds an image of Rupert’s smiling face that he can cling to. It’s getting too hot. He holds Rupert tighter.

Silence. The heat drains rapidly and the sounds behind them change, the triumph of the demons shrivelling into despair. A human-sounding shout from somewhere. Xander?

“Ethan” murmurs Rupert, breaking their hug.

It is over. Ethan looks around to find the sky unbroken and daylight reigning. He isn’t sure how much time has passed but doesn’t think it was long. It must have been daytime already, but the sun couldn’t penetrate the portal.

The portal is gone now. So is the dragon, though Ethan doesn’t want to think about where. Distant, scattering footsteps as the surviving minions retreat. A little way away, lies Ben, still very much dead. Rupert, Ethan realises, just killed a god. He giggles, then shuts up quickly.

“What’s going on?” Faith is stirring. “What happened?”

Rupert crouches to steady her as she tries to rise, his jumper slipping from her shoulders. “The ritual ended.”

Horror floods Faith’s face. “So Dawn’s dead?”

“No. That is, I don’t know. They wouldn’t have intended to do it so quickly – Glory wanted time to get back to her own dimension.”

“So how is it over?” asks Ethan.

“I’m not sure” replies Rupert, but his grim expression suggests he has some theories. He stands, and Faith tries to follow suit, wobbles. Rupert slips his arms around her. “Let me help.” He lifts her.

“Oh, this isn’t embarrassing” mutters Faith, but she lets it happen. As they step into the welcome sunlight, she suddenly asks, “Where’s B?”
Staring down at Buffy’s body, Ethan thinks about the girl she was when they first met, so
delightfully vibrant and witty, with a not-quite-done-growing look about her. That bright smile at
the thought of her watcher having someone in his life.

Sometimes he wonders what Randall would have looked like if he’d gotten old, or about how his
interests and character would have changed as middle age settled around him. He wonders if he’ll
have similar thoughts about Buffy but he doubts it. She was always going to go out like this, in a
storm of magic and fate and – quite literally – glory.

She was never going to grow old. Unlike him and Rupert.
“So she’s not here anymore?” Faith, small in the hospital bed with her legs drawn up, asks.

“No” admits Giles. Glancing around, he explains, “With a bit of magic, we were able to, well to carry her out. We’d have told you, but we had to do it before she was identified, you see.” She had been light in his arms. Just a child really. Her eyes peacefully closed. She had almost seemed to be smiling.

“I kind of liked knowing she was in the same building” Faith admits. “But I guess bodies go missing all the time in this town.”

“Yes.”

“Seems kind of an overreaction. It’s not like someone’s going to swoop in and take Dawn into care. Trust me, you need to practically be coming at your kid with an axe before they get taken off you.”

“I think it’s more complicated than that, and Dawn doesn’t want to risk the authorities being involved. Besides, until you’re better, it’s probably best the underworld believes that Buffy is alive.” It is painful to say it: believes she is alive. Because she is not.

“So she doesn’t even get a funeral?”

“She will” Giles assures her. “We’ll give her a proper memorial when we bury her.” Feeling a need to defend choices made quickly and in the midst of crippling grief, he tells her, “She wouldn’t have wanted Dawn’s life to be any more disrupted than it already has been. She’d tell us to prioritise that.”

Faith frowns. “So her body’s not identified and all the neighbours and stuff just assume she’s around, but what about the demons? They’ll notice no-one’s patrolling.”

Giles pulls off his glasses. “That’s where the robot comes in.” Unnerving, that side of things. Well, the whole situation is unnerving. A world without Buffy is unnerving.

“Robot?” Faith’s frown deepens. “Wait, the Buffybot? What about it?”

“Willow’s going to, err, fix it and alter it, so that it can, well, stand in for…Be a decoy. So demons will still see Buffy patrolling.”

Faith shudders. “Oh, that is fucked up.”

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“That thing isn’t Buffy!”

“I know.”

Faith stares at him for a moment, then sits back, sighs. “Soon as I get out of here, it’s trash.”

“We need the humans in Buffy’s wider circle to believe she’s still alive” Giles reminds her, “or Dawn will have to go and live with her father.” When Faith doesn’t answer, he puts his glasses back on and examines the charts by her bed. The hospital won’t cure her, of course. Hit directly by a Nungul demon’s tongue, she could have been killed were it not for her slayer strength. All there is to do is wait until the venom wears off and let the doctors – who are baffled as to the cause of
Faith’s ailment – treat the symptoms. So far, Faith is still hurt enough to be unable to stand, prone to occasional, frightening episodes of breathing paralysis, and well enough to feel frustrated by all of it.

After a moment, she says, “I won’t be able to come, will I? To the memorial.”

“I’m not sure it would be wise” Giles admits. “Unless you improve over the next few days…I’m sorry.”

“’S okay. I’ll remember her anyway. I don’t need some funeral play acting.” Rousing herself, she asks, “How’s Dawn?”

“Eating, at last. Her stiches will be out in a few days.”

“You’ve just been in and out of the hospital, huh? Between me and her and Buffy. All the Revello Drive chicks keeping you on your toes with the damseling.”

Giles smiles. “I couldn’t think of three less likely damsels.” Buffy is no damsel. Buffy will never keep him on his toes again. “I’d best get back. I’ll see you tomorrow, Faith.”

“Uh huh. You don’t need to come every day, you know.”

“Yes I do; I’m your watcher.”

*****

“She’s in her room” says Willow, of Buffy, which sounds cruelly as though Buffy is alive. Less so when Willow adds, “I changed the atmosphere to, well you know. To keep things cool. Actually, it’s snowing a bit up there. Like around a frozen lake. Buffy loved ice skating.” She blinks rapidly and bends over the robot, which is rent open to reveal inhuman innards. Above these, the plastic face beams manically.

“That sounds sensible” Giles tells her. So far, Willow has been the sensible one. He has been the one who itches to lose himself in a bottle, and only doesn’t because the children seem to want to be around him all the time, the one who is constantly blinking back his own tears. Eyghon once mocked him for crying. Eyghon knows nothing of love.

“Hey, Giles” asks Willow, “I’ve been wondering…”

“Yes?”

She keeps her gaze focused on a string of blue wire. “How do we…Well, can we be sure about…about where Buffy’s gone?”

“Which dimension, do you mean?”

“Yes. Well, not specifically. Just generally. It will be a heavenly one, right? Because I’ve read that with mystical deaths, it can send people to some places they wouldn’t want to go.”

Inwardly, Giles shudders. Pushes past horror with, “Mystical forces can complicate a spirit’s journey, yes. But Buffy died saving us all, and I have to believe she will be rewarded for that.”

“Believe? Not know?”

“No-one can know for sure, Willow. Sometimes we just have to trust that the good we fight for will reach us.”
Willow’s mouth twitches a little, and Giles isn’t sure if she is about to argue or almost offering a brave smile. “I guess you’re right” she says.

*****

They bury Buffy in an unmarked grave, in a leafy corner of the cemetery her mother rests in, on such a brutally sunny day it feels as though the heavens are mocking them.

Afterwards, Willow and Tara take Dawn home, and Anya takes Xander to the Magic Box, telling him it will be a distraction. He doesn’t look convinced but follows all the same. Ethan and Rupert are left to drive home, and Rupert doesn’t comment when Ethan drives the wrong way.

“Bugger” says Ethan, when they clamber out the car at the beach.

Rupert glances around questioningly, and Ethan explains: “I didn’t think it would be so full of kids. I was sort of imaging just you, me and the eternity of the ocean. Thought it would be soothing.”

Rupert studies the scene. “It still is” he decides, which means little coming from a man who’s given no indication over the last week of having any opinion about where he wants to be or what he wants to be doing whatsoever. He has simply done what is required, even training the robot, before the surrealness of that sent him scurrying off to the bedside of his remaining slayer.

Ethan points out, “It doesn’t seem right though, does it? All these teenagers having fun when she’s…” He trails off: He doesn’t know what Buffy is doing. He finishes, “Well, not here.”

“It’s alright” Rupert replies. “It’s what she died for: So these children wouldn’t have to.” Put that way, it’s rather striking. Ethan looks around: a girl wading into the waves squeals as cold water smacks her stomach, a boy yells to a friend as he tosses a beachball, a baby struggling in its mother’s arms, cries stickily. None of them in hell.

He’ll never see Buffy again, Ethan realises. Little chance of her reward having anything to do with wherever he winds up. He breathes deeply around the pain of it, gets a lungful of sea air, tear-scented. “She did well, Rupert. You gave her more time than slayers usually get, you realise that?”

“Yes, and then I sent her off to her grave like a good watcher should.” Rupert’s fists clench, and for a moment, Ethan is in the company of twenty-year-old Ripper, seething for a fight. Then the energy seems to drain out of him, and his middle aged partner is back, looking weary.

Ethan tells him, “She couldn’t have asked for better than you. You let her have friends, Rupert. She was lucky. Relatively.” All things are relative. Somewhere, some parallel Buffy is happily getting on with her life, with no idea vampires exist. Winning the World Figure Skating Championship and going to prom with Billy Fordham.

Rupert nods slowly, but Ethan isn’t really sure he’s taken in what he said. Then he glances at his watch. “Thank you for bringing me here, Ethan, but we should go. I told Faith I’d visit.”

“Alright then.” Ethan sighs and turns back to the car.

Driving back into town, he risks asking the question that has been occurring now and then all week but which he hasn’t judged safe to ask so far: “We’re not going home, are we?”

“I still have a slayer, Ethan.”

Ethan glances at him, then watches the road. He can’t exactly say We agreed we’d go home when Buffy died. Faith wasn’t in the picture when they agreed that. And Buffy was still a novel idea, not
an actual person they’d met. Besides, “It wouldn’t feel right anyway, I suppose. The rest of them still need us. They are all annoyingly lovable, in their way. And there’s a lot I still want to teach Dawn.”

“Protection spells only, Eth. You promised Buffy.”

“Yes, dear, of course.” Trust Buffy to spoil his fun even from beyond the grave. Ethan feels a rush of mingled annoyance, fondness and sorrow, like a swallowed handful of pick and mix.

Quietly, Rupert says, “I wish we could take them all home with us. Get them on a plane to London and away from the hellmouth. If only Faith wasn’t a slayer too.”

“Still battles to go” Ethan agrees grimly. Hard to face that just yet. But one day they’ll have to.

“If only she’d just been another one of Buffy’s friends, we could take them all away from this.”

“Well, possibly. But I’m not sure I can imagine us all just moving into a cosy flat share in London together.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do when Faith dies. I can’t lose another one, Eth.”

“Rupert, that could be years.”

“Could it be seventy?”

Ethan stays silent at that, concentrates on driving. After a while, Rupert says, “Sod it, maybe we should leave. Let them send another watcher for Faith.” He shakes his head. “Not that she’d allow it. No. And Buffy would want me to be the one to watch her.”

Frankly, Ethan decides, Buffy can keep her opinions to herself now that she’s dead. How long is she going to linger, whispering in Rupert’s ear? Mixed as his feeling about returning home are, it’s still home, and he’d still felt elated for a moment when Rupert said it. He sighs heavily. “You want me to drop you off at the hospital?”

“Yes please.”

*****

“I’m not sure I can do this, Giles.”

“Faith, you’re a perfectly capable slayer, and there isn’t a major threat at present. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ve never been the only slayer before. There was always B there too. Never just this it’s up to me alone crap.”

“It’s not you alone. We’re all still here.”

Faith gives him a quick, searching glance, and Giles remembers that the remaining children are, really, more Buffy’s friends than Faith’s. He adds, “I’m still here.”

“Yeah, I know you are. Man, is this how Buffy felt when I screwed up and went off to Richa – The Mayor?”

“I think she was disappointed” Giles replies honestly, “and delighted when you came back. But she’d already been the only slayer before that.”
Faith looks away despondently. “I haven’t.”

Giles leans forwards in his seat, and hazards, “Perhaps a part of you has wondered what it would be like?” Certainly a part of him has always theorised that that wonder played a part in Faith’s decision to join the Mayor; all the power a slayer has, doubled, was bound to leave one feeling surplus and restless, wanting to channel her strength elsewhere.

Faith replies, “Maybe. Not in a wishing Buffy dead way – just what if she’d stayed dead after the master, you know? And then it’d be Kendra, and then it’d be me, on my own, like my real – uh, like my first watcher always said.” She glances guiltily at him. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright” Giles soothes. Truthfully he is a little hurt. Being Faith’s watcher matters a lot more in the wake of Buffy’s death than it ever has before, but Giles is aware that that very fact means Faith doesn’t owe him the esteem she holds her first watcher in. Sophia Chadwick was assigned to Faith when she was just entering her teens and only left her via bloody death. No-one else in Faith’s life has shown her such consistent support and loyalty.

Well, he realises, except for Buffy. Buffy never gave up on Faith. To her, Faith was never irredeemable; she was always “deemable”.

“Faith, you’re a competent slayer. You’re more than up to the challenge of being the only one.”

“Yeah? G-man, if I was the only one, we’d have been sucked into hell by now – I fell off that tower.”

“I’m not sure fell is the right way to put it. You were thrown off by a formidable demon.”

“Yeah, who Buffy defeated!”

“Just the way the fight played out” Giles assures her. He stops short of saying Buffy simply got lucky where Faith didn’t: Of the two of them, Faith is still alive and Buffy isn’t, making it an odd sort of luck. A slayer sort of luck. Giles insists, “Faith, if Buffy were here, she’d tell you you can do this. And she’d tell me to help.”

*****

“I guess we’d better get her room ready” says Willow a week later, when Faith has been given the all clear to leave the hospital. Standing at the sink in Revello Drive, she glances guiltily at Giles as he takes a freshly cleaned mug from her, dries it. These days, everyone seems to spend a lot of time looking guilty. Survivors’ guilt, Giles supposes. Willow adds, “I’ve been sort of using her bed so the books don’t take up floor space.”

“I suppose you’ll have to find space for the in Joyce’s old room” Giles comments, putting the mug away in what he hopes is the correct place. “If you’re staying, that is?”

Willow frowns. “Actually, I was thinking we should move back to campus. Faith can take care of Dawnie.”

“It is a bit of a commute for your classes” Giles acknowledges. “But I’m not sure that Faith is ready to care for Dawn alone on top of being the only slayer left.” Really, he is a little disappointed that Willow would think so, given the ample evidence that parental role models have been thin on the ground for Faith. Willow and Tara, on the other hand, have managed admirably. But then again, they do have their own lives to pursue.

Perhaps Willow is thinking along the same lines, because she says, “Well, why don’t you and
Ethan move in? I mean, Faith’s more likely to listen to you than to me, with how close you’ve been getting.” Her voice trails into something that is almost a question, as though she hopes he will deny being closer to Faith since they lost Buffy. As though such a thing would be disrespectful rather than a survival mechanism, which it isn’t. Even if it feels like it is. Pushing past that, Giles manages, “Well, I suppose…I hadn’t really considered... All I know is, Dawn could use more support than Faith is able to give alone.”

Willow nods to the basement door. “I guess. Well, her and Spike.”

Giles finds his expression souring as he follows her gaze. He hopes the allegedly sleeping vampire is indeed sleeping, and not eavesdropping. “Spike will have to move out soon. He’s recovered from his injuries.”

“Yeah, but, what about Dawnie? She likes having him around.” Willow lets the water drain and peels off her rubber gloves, takes a seat.

“But she shouldn’t” argues Giles, pulling out a chair for himself. “It shouldn’t be encouraged.”

Willow looks apologetic as she tells him gently, “Probably best to leave that to the people actually living with him.”

“Which could include you and Tara” counters Giles “Faith has enough to contend with, and Dawn needs people who are, well, perhaps more dependable than Faith has ever learnt to be.”

“Well, you know who’s dependable? You and Ethan.”

“Willow…”

“Okay, so you. And Ethan has his moments.”

“I’m not sure living with her magic tutor will be conducive to Dawn taking things slowly on that front. Besides, I’m sure she can relate better to you and Tara than she can to us.” And Willow and Tara are still young, he thinks, still adaptable enough to live in a shared house with other young people. For him, it would be a hellish shock to the system.

But then, this is for Buffy. If Willow won’t do it, he will simply have to manage.

“I don’t know” Willow is saying, “I was just reading this paper about research into intergenerational bonds that showed...um, that I’m channelling my mother. Sorry.”

Giles returns her smile. Admits, “I haven’t lived with teenagers since I was one. But I do see that that’s not to say it isn’t a big ask for you.”

“I did think about not moving back to campus. But I have a lot of research” Willow looks briefly evasive. “You know, for college and stuff. New modules this year.”

“Well, yes, you do have every right to get on with that. I’ll talk to Ethan.”

*****

“Hey, Ethan?” Willow speaks from the book she’s poring over. Ethan, closing the till up as a customer leaves, turns to her. “Yes?”

“Do you know any spell to...well.”

Ethan comes over, examining the book properly. “That from upstairs?”
“Downstairs – it’s from this little basement level shop across town.”

“Willow, I’m hurt. You want magic books, you come here, you know that.” Ethan takes the volume, flips through a few pages. “Though if I did stock this, it would be kept in the restricted section.”

“I know.” Willow reaches for it.

“New project, or do we have a new demon come to town?”

“No demon. No project really, I’m just wondering.”

“About…?”

“Is there any spell to tell where a dead person’s gone?”

Ethan takes a seat, and gently explains, “Willow, if it were as easy as doing a location spell, we’d never let anyone go.”

“It’s not like I’m asking to speak to her. I just want to make sure she didn’t end up anywhere bad.”

“Why would she? She’s a slayer.” Was.

“But that’s not a guarantee, is it? Especially not with a mystical death.”

“Not a guarantee, but sometimes the gods do show mercy. I know you’ve not met any that would give you that impression, but it is so.”

“Great, so instead of guarantees, I get a lecture about Janus.”

“If I had guarantees, I’d give them, sweet thing. But I do have hope.” Ethan stands up again, as a new customer enters. “Don’t you?”

“I don’t know” Willow admits. She slides a hand over the spine of the book. “It’s like you said – I haven’t met any god that makes me think we can just blindly hope like that.”

“I’m afraid in this case, we don’t have any choice, do we?”

Willow is still frowning down at the book. “No” she says, “I suppose we don’t have a choice.”

*****

“It’s not staying down here.”

Faith shoots Spike a dirty look. “Spike, you had the thing made as your glorified vibrator. Don’t tell me now you’re scared of it watching you sleep.”

Spike eyes the robot unhappily. “It’s different now” he argues. “Put it in the attic.”

“You want to stay here, you let me chose where we keep our decoy robots.” Faith turns to Giles. “Right, Giles?”

“Well…” Honestly, Giles had just been expecting to drive her home from hospital, maybe make her and Dawn dinner. He is a little taken aback at how quickly she switched the robot off and bundled it into the basement. “Shouldn’t we keep it switched on in case someone comes round?”
“Someone comes round, we’ll tell them Buffy’s out and get it out in case they come back. Same if Hank calls.”

“I’m with you there, pet” rejoins Spike, “It’s no good for the bit having it hanging around. But that doesn’t mean we need to keep it –”

“Spike, I’m not dragging it up to the attic, okay? Pain in the ass to get it back down again.” Faith eyes the thing. “You want to, you can throw a blanket over it or something. I don’t want it here smiling at me every time I come down here to do laundry.”

*****

“Willow’s taking it hard” Ethan tells Giles as they lay in bed at night, not sleeping because they don’t do much of that these days.

“They all are” Giles reminds him. “We all are.”

“You don’t think…”

“What?”

In the darkness, Ethan seems to be pondering something, turning it over in his mind. “I’m not sure” he says at last. “I just worry about them all.”

“So do I.” For a brief moment, a part of Giles makes a mental note to call Buffy in the morning, his subconscious’ reflex response to distress. How long, he wonders, before that wears off? “Try to sleep, Ethan.”

Ethan reaches for him; Giles doesn’t see the movement but feels Ethan’s hand close around his own. “Only if you try too.”

*****

He visits Buffy’s grave only when the weather is warm. He doesn’t like to think of her lying alone in the cold. Fortunately (or not – perhaps he’d torture himself less with memories then), it is virtually always warm in Sunnydale. Occasionally, Ethan comes with him, but more usually, Giles goes alone. When Ethan does come, he tends to stand back, as though this is Buffy’s bedside and she might desire some privacy. Or perhaps as though he, unlike Giles, is able to detach himself completely from the practicalities of things and view the grave for what it truly is – a storage for a body discarded like an old coat, shrugged off and abandoned. Not Buffy herself, but something she has finished with.

Somehow, Giles’ visits rarely coincide with the children’s, though he is aware of Willow’s little cairn growing, and of Anya’s flowers, medieval in their carefully chosen symbolism. Dawn brings letters that she clears away with each visit, so that there might now and then be a sealed envelope, dew-soaked, weeping inky tears, that vanishes before the next visit. Spike leaves other people’s flowers, which Giles feels obliged to return (he’s getting to know the layout of the cemetery rather well) and the occasional bottle, empty but for a daisy-stopper. Faith’s bottles are full, pagan-like grave goods that Ethan might say Buffy is able to enjoy in the beyond. Perhaps Ethan and Faith’s idea of heaven involves a range of alcoholic beverages, but Giles prefers to picture Buffy at peace, finally free of duty to focus on something beyond mere material concerns and hedonistic pleasures.

So far as he is aware, Xander hasn’t brought anything until today. Giles greets the young man with, “That seems a little noticeable.”
Xander looks up guiltily (They all seem guilty these days) and responds, “I know. But I couldn’t just leave it unmarked.” Turning back to the headstone, he explains, “I ordered it from a stone mason who’s worked on a few builds with me. He didn’t know Buffy, so he’s not going to suspect. And when people see it, well I figure there’s more than one person called Buffy in the world. Not that people stop and read all the stones anyway.”

“I suppose not.” The stone even has the dates on it, which is a little risky in Giles’ opinion, but he says nothing. Gods know he can relate to not wanting Buffy’s grave to remain unmarked, letting her be entirely lost to history when the rest of them die or move away. Reading the words, he tells Xander, “Thank you. It’s how she’d want to be remembered.”

Xander doesn’t respond beyond a little nod, and Giles looks tactfully away, lets the boy wipe his eyes. Finally, Xander says, “It doesn’t stop hurting, does it?” in an almost accusatory tone, as though he had expected Giles to have some way of fixing everything that he’s been falsely promising them.

“No” Giles admits. “No, I don’t believe it does.”
“You ready?” Faith ambushes Giles as soon as he is out the bathroom.

“Yes, Faith, I’m ready.” Giles holds up a stake as proof, then glances down the stairs. “I thought we’d agreed we’d bring the robot?”

Faith rolls her eyes. “I changed my mind. Thing creeps me out.”

“I know the likeness is, well, bewildering, but given all the local demons seem keen to test you…”

“Giles, unless we’re going to keep dragging the bot out forever, we’re going to have to let the demons notice B isn’t around anymore eventually.”

“Eventually, yes. But if we just let you take over gradually…”

“– Then I’ll still need to patrol on my own every night eventually and they’ll still be trying it on when they see that.”

“Well, perhaps, but I still think if they get used to Buffy’s absence gradually…”

“Then they’ll stick attack me.” Faith shrugs. “They’re demons.” She turns and heads down the stairs. “It’ll be fine. C’mon.”

“One moment.” Giles doubles back for extra weapons. Rumours of Buffy’s fate have, over the last few months, gradually taken hold, leaving the more aggressive portion of the demon population keen to challenge the remaining slayer. Each time they patrol with the robot, they are rewarded with a few quiet nights as hearsay is reassessed and debated, and each time they leave the robot behind, Faith is subject to more and worse attacks until “Buffy” is sighted again.

She is right though. Buffy’s neighbours and Dawn’s teachers may have been taken in by the robot, but the demon world will eventually find out that there is only one slayer left. The robot fights well enough but it is not a slayer. From a vampire’s perspective, it doesn’t smell like one.

It doesn’t talk like one. Isn’t one.

One way or another, Giles knows, the situation will resolve itself. Before Buffy’s fight with the master, after all, there was always one slayer at a time. Demons have long memories; according to Ethan, those who are making it their business to challenge Faith are mainly reckless youngsters, the older ones well aware that one slayer is danger enough. But it is one thing to know that the underworld will inevitably find out that Buffy is really gone and that the ensuing violence will settle down, and another to actually encourage Faith to open herself up to all that violence at once by never patrolling with the robot again. Giles can’t face seeing his remaining slayer in any more danger than she has to be, not so soon after Buffy died.

Ethan, he knows, spends evenings at Willy’s hedging and evading, casting memory charms here and confusion hexes there. He hasn’t confirmed any celebrations on the part of those demons who do suspect Buffy is gone, but Giles knows there must be some. The thought turns his stomach.

His own weapons are still kept separately from the ones in the chest downstairs, in a box in Joyce’s old room, which now contains much of the contents of Giles and Ethan’s old flat. To Ethan, when he suggests they just keep all the weapons together because they have enough boxes to trip over in here, Giles points out that some of his are family heirlooms that he doesn’t want to chuck into a
chests of similar-looking crossbows and swords. To himself, he admits that it is more that he doesn’t want to see Buffy’s weapons gleaming up at him whenever he gets ready for patrol.

Selecting a dagger and heading downstairs, Giles finds Faith in the kitchen with Dawn, Ethan and Spike. Ethan is simultaneously reading a book and playing cards with Spike, who is also overseeing Dawn’s homework. Giles feels a little pang: Poker with a master vampire and a warlock is not the home life Buffy would have wanted for her sister. At the very least, Spike is far from a suitable role model, and should have moved out in summer, yet somehow, he’s still here. A soulless monster at the kitchen table.

Then again, reflects Giles as he watches Dawn smile at the vampire, there are those who say animals don’t have souls and yet they keep big vicious dogs about. Usually for protection. Gods know, Dawn use that.

Gods, what’s happened to him? Giles doesn’t want to know what his father would think about him having such thoughts about a vampire bad enough to feature in some of the Council’s literature.

Then again, the Council are not here. They were not here when Buffy was buried. They were not here when Faith left hospital. There have not been here throughout this period of adjustment, this uptick in supernatural activity as the demon world debates why Buffy is being seen less and less and acting so strangely when she is.

Automatically, Giles reaches out and closes his fist over Spike’s hand, as the vampire slips out a hidden ace. “That would be cheating, I believe?”

Spike scowls at him. “I’m just teaching the niblet how it’s done.” Dawn grins over the top of her school report. “Don’t bring me into this.”

“You were teaching her to cheat?”

“To be fair” says Faith, turning the tap on, filling a glass and downing it, “she might need to know one day.”

Dawn giggles. “What, if I ever run away to Vegas and get drawn in to some high stakes gambling ring?”

“Well I said might.” As Ethan glances up from his book, Giles tells him, “You might want to give the game your full attention, dear.”

Ethan glares at Spike. “Am I going to have to start using magic?”

“If it’s as unsubtle as your usual brand, mage, I don’t mind.”

Giles interjects, “Tell me you’re not playing for money.”

“Oh of course we’re not playing for money, love” Ethan replies.

Dawn puts in, “They’re playing for brandy.”

At Giles’ stare, Ethan asks, “What? You like brandy – I’m trying to win you some.”

Ethan, somewhat to Giles’ annoyance, has adjusted to life in a shared house as only a chaos worshiper can. Giles has had to contend with dissatisfaction over the state of the bathroom, the kitchen rota no-one sticks to and the tendency of Faith to not do any laundry unless Giles wants the machine without the comfort of a partner who also cares about these things. Choosing to ignore
this latest irritation, Giles decides, “Come on, Faith, it’s time for patrol.”

*****

“What about that one?” asks Giles.

Faith examines the crypt. “Nah, I think that’s the one with that family of loose-skinned demons, ”

“That one?”

“Oo, that’s a cushy one – a lot of competition for that.”

“I’m sure Spike can handle himself.”

“Giles, Dawn would never forgive you if he got hurt.”

“I suppose not. What about that one over there?”

“Pretty much always flooded.”

“So, he can get wet! It’s not as though vampires can catch a chill.”

“Again, G-man, remember Dawnie. She cares about him.”

Giles casts his eyes heavenwards. “And again, I say, that’s not something we should encourage!”

Faith shakes her head, scans the graves. “Way I see it, there’s plenty we shouldn’t encourage, and having Spike around like a big useful idiot isn’t exactly up there with keeping her away from drugs.”

“Spike will probably give her drugs one of these days.”

Faith gives him an odd look. “No. He wouldn’t do that to Buffy.” Stepping past the crypts towards the perimeters of the cemetery, she explains, “Say what you want about how weird and fucked up it is, but whatever he felt for her was real. Or he wouldn’t still be here.”

Giles hurries after her. “Vampires are social animals and he’s isolated from other vampires by the chip. It’s not loyalty to Buffy, it’s simply that he has nowhere else to go.”

“He could go to Angel. For all you bitch about him, I notice you’re not shipping him off to LA. Anyway, since when are vampires social animals? You’re, what, telling me they have tea parties and football teams and stuff?”

“They have social hierarchies and the ability to work together. And Spike is a Manchester United fan. Which is, frankly, all the more reason we should just ship him to LA, but then there’s Dawn again. He’d never agree to leave town, but we might persuade him to leave Revello Drive.”

“I don’t like your chances, G. He’s got his big, booted feet under the table now.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Relax. It’s not like he’d ever hurt Dawn – He literally couldn’t. Anyway, it’s more muscle to guard Dawn when we’re out. You want Ethan to be left in charge?”

“Ethan would be perfectly capable.” Willing would be another matter. With Spike around to babysit, Ethan can still head out to meet his demon customers while Faith patrols, something he
would be loath to give up. Left to his own devices, Giles can picture him bringing Dawn along all too easily. But he points out, “I could stay with Dawn, once the local demons settle down.”

“Yeah, well no sign of that yet.”

“And what if the chip ever stops working?”

“Then like I said – he wouldn’t hurt Dawn.”

“I think you’re being a little naïve there.”

“Oh, says the guy who thinks vampires are social animals – if they can have friends and Dawnie’s his friend, we don’t have a problem, do we?”

“Vampires have some very twisted ideas about how to treat their friends. He might decide the biggest compliment he can pay her is to turn her.”

Faith considers this. “Nah, he’d never do that.”

“Yes he – ah” Spotting a looming figure in the darkness, Giles addresses it: “Perhaps you could settle this: If you had feelings of affection for a human, would you sire them?”

The puzzled vampire looks from Giles, to Faith, and back. “Well…yeah, I guess. Todd?”

Another vampire steps from the shadows. “Probably” he confirms. “But who’d, like, like a human? It’d have to be one twisted dude, right?”

“Hey” Faith pulls her expression into a mock-pout. “We’re standing right here.”

The first vampire leers. “Yeah, you and no back-up. What happened to the real slayer?”

Faith’s pout slides into a glare. “You wanna taste of a real slayer? Come a step closer.”

Slowly, deliberately, the vampire takes a step forward. Faith’s eyes glint. But before she can do anything, Todd pipes up, “I heard she’s dead” and Faith turns to him.

Noncommittal statements, they have agreed. Use the robot to counter the rumours if the unrest intensifies, but otherwise, let the idea that Buffy is absent gradually sink in. Keep them guessing. True to this plan, Faith replies, “Do I look dead to you?”

“No, but the blonde one –”

“– Taught me everything I know. You want a demo?”

Giles finds he can no longer focus on the banter. The hint of glee in these monsters’ voices at the idea of a dead Buffy makes the world go hazy for a moment.

He wouldn’t be a watcher if he couldn’t take his feelings and force them back into the recesses of his mind. He does so now, risking looking away least they see momentary hurt in his face. It is a risk, but Faith is here.

And so are several other vampires. Giles freezes as he spots them scattered around in a loose circle. “Faith.”

Faith looks around. “Damn. Just when I was thinking we’d get a quiet night.”
The nearest vampire lunges and the quickly join in. Giles experiences what follows as a series of thuds and flashes of pain, clouds of dust until, “That’s the last one” announces Faith. She dusts herself down and tucks her stake back into her jacket. “Ready for the next cemetery?”

“Alright.” Giles adjusts his glasses, knocked askew in the fray. “Well done, incidentally.”

Faith shrugs. “I learned from the best.”

*****

“This came for you.” Ethan holds the package up as Willow hurries over, turning it over in his hand. Through the parcel paper, his fingers encounter bubble wrap and, beneath that, something harder.

“Thanks” Willow takes it from him, using both hands as though the thing is fragile. “Sorry about using the shop, it’s just it was one of your suppliers who found it, and I didn’t want it turning up on campus while I was at a lecture.”

“What is it?” asks Anya, peering round Willow at the package.

“Nothing important” replies Willow, carefully tucking the thing out of sight in her bag. “Just something I’m trying.”

“Something we’ll get to see?” asks Ethan.

For a moment, Willow’s expression mixes hope, fear and a certain triumph. Then she slips all that under a modest smile. “Soon. If it works.”

*****

Time was, Giles read for pleasure. Now, he reads to escape the chaos of living with a teenager, a slayer, a vampire and, well, a chaos worshiper. As always, he varies his reading material, never without a novel on the go alongside nonfiction on a range of topics. Shifting all their possessions from their beautifully quiet flat to the Summers’ residence involved uncovering books temporarily mislaid or ignored from behind shelves and at the bottom of piles, and today Giles finds himself reading about the Daidalos Chest in an encyclopaedia of ancient weapons he had all but forgotten he owned. The number of ancient sects who took possession of the object over the centuries is quite extraordinary, especially considering that the fate of the previous sects might have warned the later groups off it. Then again, armies and cults have a tendency to think that they can wield any weapon competently until they can’t. No-one knows where the thing ended up after its path through various massacres and wars was last recorded: *Taken by the daemon warrior Serphanion*, the text reads, *on a pilgrimage across the western seas*. On a standard map at that time, of course, the Atlantic was to the west of Europe and Africa and there the world simply stopped, few guessing at the continent beyond it. Presumably, though Serphanion had known of what is now called America, and the smattering of hellmouths it contains…

Giles sets the book aside, pulls his glasses off. Sleep still eludes him most nights, and his concentration skills have taken the brunt of it. Especially as he suddenly remembers being interested in locating the Daidalos Chest back in the interlude between being fired as watcher and Buffy asking him to be one again regardless. Then her quest to find answers took precedence over all his own little missions. Well, she found answers, didn’t she? And look where it got her.

There is a knock at the door. From somewhere in the house, Dawn yells, “I’ll get it!” and there is a hammering of footsteps as she hurries to do just that. Following the sound, Giles descends to the
ground floor to find, “Oh, good evening, Anya.”

“Hello, Giles” Anya grins widely, and it strikes Giles that she’s going to enjoy this. Grateful as he is for her help, the thought tires him. Ethan evidently feels the same, because he wanders in from the kitchen with an expression of resignation. Only Dawn, unaware of why Anya is here, greets her brightly: “Hi Anya. Is Xander coming too?”

“Oh no” dismisses Anya, “He’s no good with money.”

“Money?” asks Dawn.

“Dawn” Giles intervenes, “We’ve got a few financial matters to attend to that won’t be at all interesting for you.”

“Or us” adds Ethan.

Giles finishes, “Do you know where Faith is?”

“Smoking in the garden with Spike” Dawn replies. She looks a little hurt at the implication that she’s too young for money talk, but not so much that she asks to join in. “I’ll go get her.”

As Dawn heads off, Anya turns her smile on Ethan. “This is just like when I sorted out the Magic Box’s accounts.”

“Yes” he agrees with a badly suppressed shudder, “but this is a little worse than that, I think.”

“Oh pfft, you were indebted to the Order of Aamon. How bad can this be?”

*****

“Well” says Anya a few hours later, setting aside a stack of bills, letters and bank statements, “this is bad.” To Ethan, she adds, “Turns out the Order of Aamon have nothing on UnitedHealth Group.”

Faith asks, “So what do we do?”

“For starters? We sell this house.”

“We can’t” replies Giles. “It’s still in Buffy’s name.”

“We have the robot, don’t we?”

“Anya, selling a house requires a lot of interaction with a wide range of people. I’m not sure the robot is up to the task, even if it were entirely ethical to use it for something like this.”

“Is it ethical to let Dawn grow up with more debt than crossbows?” Anya turns to Ethan. “You could use magic to make the estate agents and so on forget if the robot acts strange.”

“Dawn doesn’t want to leave” Faith interjects. “She’s asked me a couple of times if we’re going to have to leave here like it would be a bad thing.”

“To be fair” says Ethan, “That doesn’t mean it would be. A little flat closer to the centre would leave enough cash to pay off the debts –”

“– almost –” mutters Anya.

“– And it could be a new start for her.”
Faith shakes her head. “She doesn’t want it. Anyway, are we talking little flat near the Bronze where the vampires hunt or a little flat near the docks where the dark arts stuff gets smuggled in?”

“Well there is that I suppose.” Ethan sits back. “Rupert?”

Giles considers the idea briefly. It would certainly ease the financial strain seeping into this house like damp, but, if they managed – through magically assisted con artistry no less – to sell up, where would they go? The money needed for a flat big enough for all of them wouldn’t leave enough disposable income to pay off the mounting debts, and a smaller one would only have room for Dawn and Faith. If Giles thought Faith could cope with Dawn alone, he wouldn’t be living here.

And Buffy wouldn’t want her sister’s life disrupted yet again. “No” decides Giles, “we’ll have to keep the house.”

Anya stares at him. “Well then we’re going to have to start thinking laterally because that was the only sensible idea.”

Giles leans forwards to reach for the paperwork. “Let’s have another look at those bills.” He studies them as the conversation flows around him.

“You’ll have to charge for slaying for starters” Anya tells Faith.

“I dunno” Faith considers. “I guess Angel does, though.”

“Ah yes” says Ethan, “because there’s a paragon of virtue.”

“Well, if he’s allowed to –”

“I think” Giles glances up “that the Council would have something to say about that.”

“Yeah” retorts Faith, “because that’s the impression I got in England – poor. Yes, I thought, these are people making no money at all from the fight against evil.”

“She has a point there, Rupert” Ethan puts in, “We could do it in a better way than Angel.”

“How, exactly?” Giles turns to Faith. “I don’t know how things work in LA, but you have a sacred duty to protect the innocent. You can’t commercialise it.”

“Why not?” asks Anya. She waves a headed letter. “Doctors have a sacred duty to heal the sick but no-one said they can’t charge.”

Faith nods. “Girl’s got a point, Giles.”

“Faith, think about it. Are you really going to rescue people being attacked by vampires and then turn around and hand over an invoice?”

“I guess not…”

“What if she actually had a wage?” suggests Ethan.

Giles stares at his partner. “Love, you’ve met the Council, yes? What do you think my chances are of convincing them to give the Slayer a wage?”

“Could you try?” asks Anya, just as Faith snorts and mutters, “Figures.”

Ethan acknowledges the point with a nod, and admits, “Well I wouldn’t bet much on it, but it’s
worth a try.” Then his eyes widen and he turns to Faith. “There is always that of course.”

“What?”

“Gambling!”

“You got a spell to make sure we win?”

“No” interjects Giles, “He doesn’t. At least nothing that doesn’t carry serious risks.”

“I don’t mean that, Rupert, I mean we could host poker nights – Virtually every demon in the town plays.”

“Yeah” says Anya, “I’m sure they’ll all be falling over themselves to come to the Slayer’s house.”

Ethan gestures at Faith. “She could make herself scarce.”

“What” asks Faith, “and leave Dawnie with the demons?”

“She does live with Spike” Anya concedes. “And I suppose some of the lesser demons wouldn’t mind you being around.”

“Enough of this” decides Giles. “Ethan, we are not turning this house into an illegal gambling parlour.”

“Dawn would be upset about the kittens” says Anya. To Giles, she adds, “But unless you can get Faith a wage, I don’t know what else we can do.”

“I’ll talk to the Council” Giles agrees. “And in the meantime, we can cover these.” He sets down just a few of the bills on a separate pile.

Anya eyes them. “How can we?”

“Not we collectively” Giles clarifies, “We as in Ethan and I. We can pay these.”

Faith smiles. “Thanks, Giles.”

“Yes” rejoins Ethan, “Thank you for discussing it with me in advance.” At Faith’s pleading look, he admits, “But yes, I suppose we can.”

*****

“We will go home eventually, you know” says Ethan that night. Some of Joyce’s art collection is still on the walls, casting odd shadows in the light of the bedside table.

“Home to England?” asks Giles.

“Yes, bloody home to England – Where else is home?” When Giles doesn’t answer, Ethan elaborates, “Home to England where a man’s home is his castle and is valued accordingly.” “We’ll manage, Ethan.”

“I just don’t want us to have to retire to some grotty council flat because you spent all our savings on trying to keep the good ship Summers HQ afloat. It’s not like we haven’t scarified enough.”

“I thought you didn’t mind living here?”
“I don’t mind living here now. I’d like to be able to leave eventually.”

Giles reaches out and draws him closer. “I’m sorry. I should have asked. But gambling parlours aside, there’s only so much we can do for Dawn unless we’re prepared offer some financial help.”

“Just check I am prepared, next time” mutters Ethan, but he argues no further.

*****

“I was thinking” says Willow, “We should have a scooby night out with the old high school gang and Dawn.”

Any frowns. “I wasn’t in the high school gang” she points out.

“Well you kind of were. You were Xander’s prom date.” Willow calls to Ethan, who is restocking the shelves at the other end of the shop. “What do you think, Ethan? It would give Dawnie something nice to do, and you and Giles will get the house to yourself. Um, unless you want to join them. Us. Do you?”

“Much as I have fond memories of your high school dances” Ethan tells her, “A night to ourselves is a rare and precious thing these days.”

Willow smiles. She has shadows around her eyes. Anya says, “I don’t think Xander would like it. When we’re all together, it’s just more obvious that, well, that there’s someone missing.”

Willow’s smile slips. “Buffy wouldn’t want us to never hang out. Could you talk to him?”

Perhaps pleased that Willow The Childhood Friend is recognising her role in Xander’s life, Anya seems to forget her own hesitancy. “Okay.”

Willow regains her smile. “Thanks.”

“When were you thinking?”

“Thursday night.”

“Not Friday?”

“No. I have a study group on Friday.” Ethan frowns. “There’s a hunter’s moon that night, isn’t there? With that and Mars in Capricorn, that’s a lot of mystical energy flying about.”

“I know – um – I mean, I thought about that” replies Willow. “But this is Sunnydale: If we stayed inside every time it wasn’t safe, we’d never go out.”

“There is that” echoes Anya. “And it’s not like the Bronze is the most mystical place in this town.”

“Low bar, there” returns Ethan, but he says no more. Willow is right; Sunnydale is no place to be hiding just because the general background magic of the place is a little more potent than usual, or they’d never get anything done. Besides, he and Rupert could really use a night just the two of them.

*****

“It’s a shame Willow couldn’t go” comments Rupert, when Tara has picked Dawn up. “Did Tara say what was wrong with her?”
“Only that she said she feels all floopy” replies Ethan. “She has been looking tired.”

Rupert sits down beside him on the sofa. “Yes, I’ve noticed too. Not that I’ve seen all that much of her of late.”

“I haven’t either, really.” Rare to see Willow in the shop these days unless she’s waiting for Dawn to arrive for a lesson. “I think she’s been channelling everything into college.”

Just then, Spike appears in the doorway, saying, “Think I’ll head out, leave you lovebirds to your night in.” He strolls out the front door before Rupert, clearly about to speak, can reply. As the door closes behind him, Rupert mutters, “I hope he’s going to catch Faith up.”

“Honestly? He’s probably headed to the Bronze. I don’t think he wants Dawn out there with only the scoobies to protect her.”

“Well, and Faith, once she joins them.” Rupert settles back. “Or is she a scooby these days?” He is still watching the door. “I hope she’s alright out there on her own.”

“Gods, Rupert, Buffy used to patrol how often on her own? She’ll be fine.”

“Things have been unsettled since…You know the demons are keen to challenge Faith now she’s the sole Slayer.”

“Yes” soothes Ethan, “but she can handle it. Anyway, I thought she said she’d only do a short patrol and meet them at the Bronze?”

“Yes” admits Rupert. He relaxes a little, but keeps glancing at the door. Ethan warns him, “I’ll not have you abandon me when we finally have the place to ourselves, Rupert.”

Rupert offers a smile. “How did we manage back when we lived with Diedre?”

“I don’t know.” Ethan shuffles closer. “And to think I used to get all nostalgic about that flat share. Now I realise sharing a bathroom with four other people is nothing to be nostalgic about.”

Rupert puts an arm around him. “I think you’ve been coping rather well.”

“Better than you isn’t well, love.” Ethan snuggles closer. “Now, as we’ve actually got an entire house to ourselves, what shall we do with the luxury? Shag on every surface? Get high? Or shall we just fall asleep in front of the TV with no-one pinching the remote?”

He feels Rupert smile against him. “I think making the most of having the television to ourselves sounds the most appealing of those options.” “When did we get old, eh?”

“Must have happened when we were busy doing other things.”

“Hm. Like saving the world.”

“Yes.”

*****

A few pleasant hours pass. Finding nothing worth watching on TV after all, Giles rescues his guitar from the box-jungle of their bedroom and sings for Ethan, moving from rousing songs of their youth to soothing ballads, until Ethan does indeed fall asleep as promised. Setting the guitar aside, Giles studies his lover’s face. Ethan has been sleeping no better than him lately, or indeed Willow, if the shadows on her face are anything to go by. Poor Willow. Giles hopes whatever
Willow has won’t make its way through the group. It’s the last thing they need.

Just as he’s considering sliding out from under Ethan, who is slumped against him, Ethan wakes with a yelp.

“Ethan?” Giles reaches out, and Ethan flinches. Giles ignores that, and tries to pull him into a hug, but Ethan is rigid in his arms. “It’s alright, Eth. You were dreaming.”

“Did you feel that?” Ethan turns to him, seemingly dazed.

“Feel what?” Giles runs a soothing hand up his arm and this time Ethan leans into him.

“Something. Magic. Were you doing magic?”

“No, love; you just had a bad dream.”

“No. That’s not it.” Ethan scrubs at his eyes before snapping, “Janus’ sake, Rupert: answer the phone, can’t you?”

“The phone’s not ringi –” And then the phone rings. “Oh” Hoping for pure coincidence, Giles reaches for it. “Hello?”

“Mr Giles?” It is Tara. “Is Willow there? Have you heard from her?”

“No. Isn’t she in your dorm room?”

“No” Tara sounds panicked, “I left the Bronze early to check on her, and she’s gone. I already tried a location spell b-but I think she’s on the move. Oh Goddess, if something happens to her –”

“Tara, calm down.” Beside him, Ethan sits up straighter, listens. “Is there any sign of a struggle?”

“No.”

“Then she’s probably left of her own volition. Maybe she felt better, decided to meet you at the Bronze and you just missed each other?”

“M-maybe. Or maybe she needed some air.” Tara draws in a deep breath herself and adds, “There’s a spell she taught me – a, a way of finding each other. I’m going to cast it. But could you come over too? Just in case…”

“Just in case, yes. I’m going to fetch Faith from the Bronze and then we’ll be over.”

“Thank you, Mr Giles.”

“She will be alright, Tara.”

Tara hangs up.

*****

“What if she did get taken?” Ethan asks in the car.

“There were no signs of a struggle, Eth.”

“So what? They might have had a weapon, threatened her so she’d come quietly.”

“Or she decided to make tea and there was no milk so she popped to the campus shop. Chances are,
Tara will have found her by the time we arrive.” He should have told Tara to wait for them, Giles
thinks. But what would be the point? Would he wait for back up before going to look for Ethan?

At the Bronze, a part of Giles is convinced enough that Willow is not in danger to feel annoyed
that Spike did indeed follow Dawn to the club and is now cosied up at a table with Faith, both of
them watching Dawn dance with Anya and Xander. It is Xander who spots them first and comes
over, drawing the others’ attention. “I’ll come with you” he says as soon as Giles explains the
situation.

“What, so we all have to squash up in the car?” asks Spike. “You and demon-girl can take the bit
home.”

“I’m coming too” Dawn tells him.

“No, Dawnie” says Faith. “Spike’s right, you go home with the Harrises.”

Anya, Giles notices, looks a little pleased to be described as the Harrises. She shoots Xander a
look, but he is busy arguing, “Ahn can take Dawn home. Giles has room in his car for three of us –
come on.” He leads the way out before anyone can argue further.

*****

At the UC Sunnydale campus, they find that Tara has indeed gone off to search for Willow alone,
taking with her, Giles hopes, plenty of protective talismans and some weapons. Unfortunately it’s
hard to spot something that isn’t there, so Giles can’t be sure. Perhaps Ethan is trying the same
trick, because he says, “Hm. No tissues on the floor.”

“What?” asks Xander.

“She said she was ill but there are no tissues on the floor.”

“Perhaps it’s not that kind of ill” says Xander.

“Yes” says Giles, “or perhaps she isn’t quite as uncivilised as you are when you’re ill.”

“Or she wasn’t sick to begin with” says Faith.

Spike nods. “I’d go with that one – Place doesn’t smell like sick humans.”

Xander looks a little panicked at that, so Giles powers past his own concern about what on earth
Willow could be up to and says, “Perhaps we should split up and see if we can catch Tara up. Let’s
head out in separate directions to the edge of campus and back again, see if we can spot either of
them.”

“Good thinking” says Faith. “You and Ethan stick together and Xander, you’re with me. Plenty of
vamps about. Spike, you can handle being on your lonesome, right?”

“Way I like it these days, pet.”

“Okay then. We meet back here.”

*****

“I’m going to have to get Willow to teach me that spell of hers and Tara’s” decides Ethan later, as
he and Rupert trudge miserably through the night-time campus. In the distance, there are hoots and
shrieks as a party disgorges its guests. “That way next time one goes off after the other, we can find
them both.”

“I think a sexual bond is required for that one” Rupert tells him. He nods towards the partygoers. “People are heading home; must be late.”

“Oh early” Ethan absently takes his phone from his pocket, checks the time. “Early.” “We should head back – I can see the perimeter fence from here, and no sign of them.”

In that case, if she did come this way, Willow left campus. Why? Why be out alone at this time of night unless it’s unwillingly? Concern shivers through Ethan, whispering to him about coffins and gravesides and other depressingly familiar things.

It must show on his face, because Rupert reaches for his hand. “She’ll be okay, Ethan.”

“Yes” replies Ethan mechanically. Actually, he realises, Rupert can’t see his face: It’s too dark. He just knows. Ethan gives the hand in his own a little squeeze.

Then lets it go as his phone rings. Flipping it open he answers, “Hello?”

“Ethan.” “Willow!” Ethan feels himself wilt with relief. Beside him, Rupert relaxes too, tilts his head to the sky. “Where on earth are you? What were you thinking? Please tell me you’re alright.”

“I’m alright. At least I think I’m alright.”

“What do you mean?”

“I did it, Ethan. I wasn’t sure if I could, but I did it.” Willow sounds calm in a surreal sort of way, the sort of calm that accompanies carnage.

“Did what?”

“I raised Buffy.”

Ethan fumbles the phone, almost dropping it before pressing it to his ear again, just in time to hear Willow say, “You can come home now.”
After Life

Chapter Notes

Recognisable dialogue is from BtVS season 6 episode 3, written by Jane Espenson.

They are all quiet for much of the journey back. Giles does his best to concentrate on driving, aware that if there ever was a time he was dangerously distracted, it is now.

Oh God, Buffy. What has Willow done?

Beside him, Ethan fidgets in the passenger seat, sometimes looking over at him, sometimes out the window. Worried about Willow, no doubt. But Willow is at least conscious, talking, able to make a phone call. What about Buffy?

Better perhaps, if Buffy is not really here at all. Of all the possible, terrible outcomes of such a spell, a soulless zombie, a demon that mimics the subject’s form or a malevolent copy shaped of magic are all things that Willow might mistake for her friend but which would at least not disturb Buffy’s rest. Desperate outcomes to hope for but the others would be worse…

Behind him, Faith stares despondently out of the window. Xander, beside her, is restless, his gaze shifting about. Spike is not here: On hearing Willow’s news, he simply took off running.

Finally, Xander speaks up: “Guys…Why are you all being like this? This is a happy thing, right? If Buffy’s back?”

Faith turns to study him for a moment, then turns wordlessly back to the passing view of the town.

Giles tries, “Xander, spells like this, they…” He can’t bring himself to go on. Might it be best to drop Xander at home? Or at least park a little way from the house to give the boy a chance to prepare himself?

Xander asks, “What!?”

Giles tries again: “These spells go wrong.” He wishes Ethan would help him explain, but his fiancé is silent, still staring out the window.

“But Willow said it worked” points out Xander.

“She said that, yes. She must be mistaken.”

“Mistaken how? How bad can it be if Buffy seems okay?”

Ethan finally steps in with, “There’ll be a price. There’s always a price.”

Silence resumes for a while. Then Faith asks, in a small voice unlike her usual bluster, “Will I have to kill her?”

Xander gasps, “What are you talking about!?”

Faith ignores him, addresses Giles: “If Buffy’s not herself…If she’s…If she’s something bad now.
Will I have to kill her?”

Giles grips the steering wheel hard to keep his hands from shaking. “No” he tells her, “I’ll kill her.” Nothing in this world will convince him to leave task to anyone else, or to send his remaining slayer down a path of trauma.

“Giles!” Xander is spiralling, staring around like someone who finds everyone he knows is suddenly speaking a new, unknown language. “What are you talking about – no-one will have to kill anyone! Willow wouldn’t do this if she wasn’t sure it would be okay!”

“She was sure” argues Faith, “Just like when she did her will-be-done spell – dead sure she could do it even though spells like that screw people over.”

“You weren’t even here for that!”

“No, I was in England being controlled with magic! I know the stuff can be bad news!”

“So does Willow!”

“Yeah, because she abused the stuff! And even then, she survived and carried on getting better and better at it until she thinks there’s nothing she can’t pull off, even if no-one’s done it before! Well we’ll see what that looks like when we get back!”

Xander falls silent at last, rubs a hand across his mouth and mutters, “Oh, God.”

They drive on.

*****

When they pull up in the driveway, Ethan jumps a little when he spots Willow standing in the shadow of the tree. She has her arms wrapped round her torso and is staring flatly ahead, not at them but through them. Inside the house, one light is on, in the living room. Not the main light, but one of the lamps perhaps – the result is an orangy dusk seeping through the curtains.

Xander runs up to her. “Willow!” He pulls her into a hug. She doesn’t return it, but Ethan sees one hand reach up, almost of its own accord, to rest on the back of his head. Xander pulls back and stares at her, giving Rupert room to approach her cautiously. “Willow?”

“Giles” Willow begins, “I know it was…” She stops, taking in his expression. “She’s inside.”

Xander makes a soft sound, almost a squeak, and rushes in. Faith follows, glowering at Willow as she goes. Rupert stands for another moment or to, glaring at Willow who simply stands passively, as though neither of them are really there. Only once Rupert has turned and walked into the house does Ethan step forward.

Willow’s blank gaze shifts to him. She looks, Ethan realises in the faint light, beyond exhausted. She is somehow almost transparent. Her energies are all over the place. Ethan asks, “What did you do?”

“I started with the Macaria Ritus Mortem manuscript. Then the Grimwell’s Compendium. I combined the most powerful resurrection spells in each of them with a balancing charm that I adapted from something mentioned in Witchcraft Through The Ages. I had to recreate it first, of course, before I adapted it, but it held okay. Osiris did most of the work.”

“Osiris!” Ethan steps carefully closer. “You could have been killed.”
She offers another level stare. “I hid letters in the Magic Box in case that happened. Under the crate of hexed mirrors. I didn’t want to leave them somewhere obvious in case someone found them and tried to stop me.”

“No, we couldn’t have a concerned friend interrupting the apocalypse!”

“It’s not an apocalypse.” Willow frowns, looking away down the length of the street. “At least not yet. And are you really saying that if I hadn’t done this, there’d never be an apocalypse again?”

“Oh, well, by that logic, lets all summon Eyghon and have a good time – someone somewhere’s bound to do it anyway, after all!”

She looks at him gravelly. “Eyghon’s small fry.” Ethan stares for a moment, then deflates. Asks, “Who have you been talking to, then?”

“Not talking. Not directly. There were some appeals. There was going to be a sacrifice, but I got around it.”

“Oh no, you didn’t. It’ll come.”

“ Probably.” She hugs herself tighter. “There’s still work to do. Some spells and negotiations that could mitigate the worst of it.”

“More bargaining.”

“I know.”

“Bother those things and they could drag you to hell.” They might anyway.

“I know that, Ethan.”

“Do you? You realise those sort of forces, they don’t play nicely with little girls.”

“I’m not a little girl.”

“To the likes of Kherty, you are.” Ethan shudders. “Tell me he isn’t involved.”

“Not directly. Osiris is the only god I spoke to directly. Well, and Hecate, but I’m not as scared of her.”

“You should be scared of all of them. They could all punish you for this.”

“I know.”

“And then there’s the demon world, the magical side effects of this –”

“I know, Ethan!” Briefly allowing a little emotion to taint her words for the first time tonight, Willow looks at him sternly. “You don’t seem to get it – I knew I could die, or go to hell or get punished some other way. I know I still could. I decided to do it anyway.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“Not a fool. A friend.” Willow finally allows herself to sink back against the trunk of the tree, and Ethan, realising how shaky she’s been this whole time, helps her sit down on the grass. Willow adds, “That is, if she was somewhere she didn’t want to be. She hasn’t been clear about that. She hasn’t said much.”
Ethan turns to the window, to the creeping orange light. “How bad is it?”

“She seems okay. Intact, physically I mean. Quiet.” Before Ethan can ask, Willow elaborates, “And I did Volac’s Entreaty and the Periculo Revelari Ritual to check it’s really her and that nothing’s come in with her. It is her, but the spells were hazy about whether she’s alone. We’ll have to be ready for that. I am ready, I mean, I’ve got some spells.”

“Well of course you have” says Ethan lightly. “ Couldn’t be without a spell to counter the side effects of the spell that you forged with the dark gods out of a load of ancient, powerful spells.”

“I’m not saying any of this is healthy. But Buffy is here.”

Ethan studies her. She is not mad, he realises. Whatever this magic has taken from her, it hasn’t claimed her reason. So far. And whatever she has seen, it hasn’t been what she – who has evidently planned for a range of outcomes – views as a failure.

*I’m not a little girl,* she had said. Power, Ethan realises, doesn’t only come from age, from how ancient an entity is. It is also a force in its own right, something that can inhabit and embolden the young. Young and powerful witches, for instance, who might, not long ago have casually demonstrated just how powerful they are by lifting a cloaking spell. Cloaking spells are old magic, as straightforwardly simple as old stories and as strong as old buildings. Might as well try lifting the stones at Stonehenge. But Willow had, and she’d done it.

Buffy really is inside that house.

*****

Willow doesn’t follow Ethan when he goes inside. It is almost as though she as quarantined herself. Letting himself in, Ethan is aware of several voices talking at once, quiet but urgent, as though a dangerous but frightened animal is in the room. Which of course she is.

“Just tell us what you need, Buff” says Xander, and Anya adds, “Yes, anything. Unless it’s a hell thing – Probably best to just leave any habits you picked up there behind.”

“Hell?” gasps Dawn.

“Well yeah” replies Anya, “Why else would Willow bring her back?”

As Ethan enters, Xander adds to Buffy, “That is where you were, right? And Willow pulled you out. God, Buffy, I’m so sorry.”

Buffy is sat on the sofa, a black-gowned anomaly in the otherwise normal living room. A part of Ethan had expected something gory – blood and decay – but her intactness, as Willow put it, extends to her aesthetics as well. Even with only the table lamp on, Ethan can see she is clean and unbandaged, hair shiny. Only the dress, he notes, is mouldering a bit. It is the sombre dress they buried her in. Ethan had been against that idea. Personally, he’d prefer to be buried in a favourite outfit, and he’d never seen Buffy wear this when she was alive. Rupert had stuck with it, though, saying it was traditional. When, Ethan had wanted to ask, had Buffy been one for tradition? But Buffy hadn’t been present then, and tradition has always comforted Rupert.

Now, as Xander speaks of hell, Buffy slowly turns a blank gaze on him and then, still slowly, around the rest of the group. “Yeah” she says at last. Her voice sounds normal. “Yeah, that’s um….that’s where I was.”

The people immediately around her – Rupert, crouched down and grasping her hand, Faith with an
arm around her and Dawn on her other side – exchange horrified glances at that.

“Enough talking” says a voice from the far corner of the room, and Ethan realises Spike has been there the whole time. Presumably, he ran ahead of the car, but now the scoobies are here, he is forced to the side lines. Nodding to the dress, the vampire instructs, “Get her out of that and into something clean. Can’t be comfortable.”

Buffy looks down at the dress as though noticing it for the first time. Dawn says, “Oh. I’m on it.” Wrapping an arm around her sister, she murmurs, “C’mon, Buffy.”

Guided up and to the door by Dawn, Buffy’s roving gaze snags on Ethan. “Ethan” she says. Then, absently, “Everyone’s here.”

“Yes” Ethan replies. Carefully, more to show he’s unafraid and still has his manners than anything, he steps forward and hugs her. She returns it lightly after a beat, like one recalling how to hug. Ethan is taken aback by a realisation of just how much he has missed her.

Once Buffy has been guided upstairs, there is a moment of silence. Spike breaks it with a muttered, “Where’s the witch” and strides to the door.

“No, you don’t” Ethan steps neatly in front of him. Then he remembers that this is William the Bloody, who, chip or none, can still throw him pretty hard. And if Willow can handle Osiris, she can manage a master vampire. Ethan steps back again and Spike passes with a glower. Faith springs up from the sofa and follows.

“Poor Buffy” says Anya into the ensuing silence. Ethan nods, and meets Rupert’s bewildered stare. Wonders if he’s thinking the same grim thought: If even a slayer who dies saving the world can end up in hell, there is very little hope for the rest of them.

“She’ll be okay though, right?” asks Xander, and Rupert turns an incredulous look his way.

Tara replies, “She will be. We’ll all help her.”

“Yes” says Anya, sounding less convinced but just as determined. “She might even start to forget the place after a while. Sometimes memories of other dimensions can go hazy.”

“Good” says Xander, “Good. So she’ll be the same old Buffy?”

Rupert seems about to argue, but Anya cuts in, “More or less. I mean, it’ll affect her, but she’s still Buffy.”

“That’s right” says Tara. Then, to Rupert, “People r-recover from all sorts of things, don’t they?”

Rupert studies her hopeful face a moment, before admitting, “I suppose if anyone could recover from something like this, it would be Buffy.”

Anya and Xander smile, taking this for the affirmative that it isn’t, but Tara still looks solemn. Rupert asks her, “Did you know Willow was planning this?”

“No” she replies sincerely.

“No way” echoes Xander. “Willow kept this completely under wraps.” “That or we were all too distracted to notice” says Anya. Turning to Ethan, she adds, “She was reading some pretty hardcore books a few times in the shop.”
As Rupert’s gaze swings to him, Ethan hurriedly explains, “Rupert, I had no idea she was planning this!”

“I know.” Rupert nods. “You may be a prat sometimes, but you wouldn’t raise the dead.” “Um. Thank you.”

Rupert murmurs, “So Willow did this all by herself.”

Xander nods thoughtfully. Tara seems to shrink into herself, slipping into the shadows that edge the room with only the table lamp on, unable to stretch the full force of its beam to the far side of the room from the window. Ethan hears her pad into the kitchen, shutting the door gently behind her.

“Looks like she’s actually pulled it off” says Anya admiringly. To Xander, she explains, “It takes truly powerful magic to do something like this.”

“Yes” agrees Rupert, with less enthusiasm. At that moment, raised voices outside startle them and Rupert hurries out.

*****

“I wouldn’t do that!” Willow is telling Spike as Giles steps outside. “I wouldn’t have tried it if I didn’t know I could pull it off!”

“No-one could know!” the vampire insists. “You just gambled with her for your little power trip!”

“It’s not like that!”

Faith, standing between vampire and witch, rounds on her with, “So what is it like, Willow? You just thought you’d mess with the forces of life and death and we’d still all still treat you like Miss Goody Two Shoes?” At Willow’s glare, she takes a casual step back with a snort of understanding. “Or maybe you didn’t want to be the class geek anymore. Thought you’d try being a dark sorceress instead?”

Willow looks murderous. Which would, Giles thinks absently, balance the powers a bit. She insists, “This isn’t about me. This is about pulling Buffy out of hell.”

Faith looks a little chagrined, but Spike asks, “At what cost? You still don’t know what your magic will do to her!”

Willow gestures to the house. “She’s okay.”

“Oh, bullshit is she okay! There’s always a price!”

“And I’ll pay it. It’ll be on me.”

“Yeah, or all of us!”

“You care about that?”

“I care that you risked her!”

“Risked her? She was in hell!” As Giles approaches, Willow adds, quieter, “She was in hell, right? Has she said anything?”

“See?” exclaims Spike, “You didn’t even know!”
Willow retorts, “No-one could!” Then, to Giles, “I tried to find a spell to double check where she was, and when I couldn’t, I tried to make one. But it just wouldn’t work, and the best chance to do it was tonight, with the stars aligned. If she was in hell, I couldn’t risk leaving her there.”

Giles asks, “And if she wasn’t?”

Willow shudders. “Then it was all for nothing.”

Faith, grudgingly, offers, “She was in hell. Told us inside.”

Willow seems briefly relieved, and then seems to come up against the strangeness of being relieved about that. She says, “Oh” and then, to Spike, “See?”

Spike shakes his head. “Whatever the consequences of your magic, they might still send her back there.”

“I won’t let that happen” says Faith.

Spike eyes her. “You might not be able to stop it.” Turning to walk away from them, he mutters, “The thing about magic? There’s always consequences. Always.”

“Where are you going?” calls Faith.

“Got to find something to kill.” Spike shoots a dirty look over his shoulder at Willow.

Turning back to them, Faith asks Giles, “Will she still be a slayer? Or has the power, like, moved on now?”

“I assume she still is” replies Giles, carefully not reading hope or resignation into her tone. “She was after the Master, though that was a shorter time…”

“She is” states Willow with confidence. At their questioning looks, she explains, “It was part of some stuff. Balance.”

“Right” Faith sounds deliberately doubtful, making a show of how little she trusts Willow now. Giles can hardly blame her, but he says, “Faith, perhaps you could go and see if Dawn needs help.”

Reluctantly, Faith turns back to the house. “Okay.”

Left alone, Giles and Willow stare at each other unhappily. Finally she says, “If you’re going to tell me how reckless it was, and how much danger I put us in, I’ve already heard it from Ethan.”

Giles nods. “Well, I think in light of what you’ve done, you might have to put up with more than one person telling you it was stupid and wrong.”

“I get that. I get that I might not be able to have anything to do with you guys any more. But I couldn’t risk just leaving her in hell.”

Giles finds his manner softening a little. “You’ve still got very much to do with us, Willow.” If nothing else, they will need her to face whatever unfolds in the wake of such magic.

“Giles, I get that it was dark magic. The darkest. And I know it was wrong. It’s just, I’d rather do something wrong than abandon Buffy.”

“Do you think that’s what the rest of us did? Abandon Buffy?”
“It’s different for you guys: You couldn’t change things. I could, so I had a choice to make.”

“You didn’t just choose for yourself. You chose for Buffy and for anyone who gets caught up in whatever the consequences are.”

“I know that.”

Willow looks, Giles realises, terribly unwell. Taking her arm, he guides her back to the house.

“Come on. We can carry on this conversation inside.”

Allowing herself to be guided towards the house, Willow states: “When the price comes, I really hope it doesn’t even affect you guys. I hope it’s just me that pays it.”

“So do I” It could, after all, be the whole world.

Inside, they find Ethan in the living room with Xander and Anya, nodding along as they talk about how wonderful this is and how fine everything will be. Buffy must still be upstairs, but Giles still asks, “Where’s Buffy?” not ready yet to not know her exact location. He’ll have to watch out for that, he thinks: The last thing she needs is to be smothered by his attention.

“Upstairs” Anya replies, “Faith and Dawn are putting her to bed.”

In the kitchen, they find Tara. She is making coffee, but Giles gets the impression that this is due more to her wanting to be alone than to anyone especially wanting coffee. “Hi” she says.

“Hi” replies Willow.

Looking between them, Giles realises, “Your spell worked, Tara? You, err, you caught up with Willow after you called us?”

“Yes” she confirms. “It led me here. Th-the spell, the, um, the resurrection… It had already happened.” She studies Willow. Willow drops her gaze, looks at the floor tiles, and then up at Giles to say, “But we had Anya and Dawnie all happy because Buffy’s back, and Buffy was… And, and I needed to do some casting to check some stuff, so we haven’t really had a chance to talk, properly I mean. Giles, do you mind?”

“Of course not.” Giles gives them some privacy.

Any and Xander leave after a few hours of near hysteria, during which time Faith slinks down from Buffy’s bedroom but Dawn does not. Willow and Tara remain cloistered. They don’t reappear until after Anya and Xander have left, Spike has returned and stomped moodily to the basement and Faith has left in his wake (“You might need to beat the sunrise but I can kill things in the daylight just fine”).

Giles and Ethan are left alone for a moment, and Ethan asks him, “Are you alright?”

Giles finds himself glancing up at the ceiling, tempted, ridiculously, to go and check on Buffy, as though she were a small child. “Yes” he hears himself reply, unconvincingly.

At that moment, Willow and Tara emerge. They stand close together but don’t touch, as Willow asks Giles, “So, you said I’m still to do with you guys?”

“What?” Ethan looks between them.
“Willow was wondering if we’d ostracise her, or something of that sort” Giles explains. “I reassured her that she’s still a part of our lives.”

“Well, yes” replies Ethan in the tone of one who hadn’t had thoughts of distancing himself from the girl cross his mind. To Willow, he adds, “It wouldn’t only be up to him anyway.” “I know” she says. Lord, but the girl seems to know a lot all of a sudden. Except it isn’t sudden, is it, Giles reminds himself. If knowledge is power, Willow has always been a tinderbox waiting to explode. She tells him, “Giles, you should know some of the spells I did to check for side effects showed we can probably expect some demony arrivals.”

“At the very least” he agrees.

Willow nods. “So I’ll stay to help with that and in case there’s any other immediate consequences.” She pauses, frowns. “Spike was right about that part.” She goes on, “But after that’s dealt with, I get that I might need to go away for a while, even if I’m not going to have a red letter W to wear and be sent off into the wilderness.”

“Go where?” asks Ethan.

“To the watchers or something like that. Or if you and Giles don’t send me somewhere, I think I’ll just take myself off. That was a whole lot of power I let in, and I kind of need to process it all, or it’ll tip me into the deep end again. I can feel it.”

Ethan looks scared, but when he turns to Giles, he states very calmly, “No watchers. They’re not going to get her.”

“Agreed” says Giles, because they’d never let her go again.

“So she stays here, yes? Or” Ethan turns to Willow, “you go off and meditate in the desert and come back. Tara, will you be going with her? You shouldn’t be alone, Willow.”

“I can handle alone” says Willow. “I’ve been alone all summer.” She exchanges a knowing look with Tara and Giles realises she is right: They may have been sharing a bed, but Tara is not the one Willow has been sharing her secrets with. Giles doesn’t want to know who, or what, was.

Ethan, catching on, studies the pair of them questioningly. He is right to worry, Giles notes. A break up on top of prying open hell is sure to send Willow spiralling. But Tara explains, “I-I’ll wait for her here.” To Willow, “We can t-talk more then.”

Willow nods, and turns back to Giles. “So. Any suggestions?”

“Well there is the Devon Coven” Giles replies. “They’re probably the most powerful benevolent coven I know, the best equipped to handle this.”

“No” says Ethan, “No, no, you are not handing her over to those order-driven twerps, Rupert.”

“Ethan, this is hardly the time for professional jealousy!”

“And he’s not sending me” Willow interjects. “I want to go. Giles, will you call them for me? I can sort things out with college, and ask my parents to pay for the ticket, tell them it’s for an exchange or something. And I’ll deal with the uninvited guests when they turn up.”

“Yes. Good. I’ll call them.” Giles is relieved to at least have a plan.

*****
Finally able to turn in for the night (for what little is left of the night), Giles allows himself to look in on Buffy. She is sleeping peacefully, alone in her bed, Dawn having apparently gone to her own room. Giles shuts the door gently and heads down the hallway. In their room, Ethan has already got into bed. As Giles slides in beside him, he worries briefly that Ethan will want to talk about all that’s unfolded, but Ethan only asks, “You called the coven?”

“Yes” Giles confirms. “I know you don’t much like them, but I think it is for the best.”

“I suppose it’s better than her going off on her own somewhere if she insists on going.” Ethan reaches for Giles and pulls him into a loose embrace. Settled like that, lightly tangled together, he adds, “It is okay to be happy about this, you know. Buffy’s back.”

“Yes” Giles agrees. Indeed, a part of him is happy. Delirious happy, in fact, delirious being the operative word – a noun for disturbed or intoxicated. Buffy she shouldn’t be back. The whole situation is wrong. And yet it is also undeniably wonderful.

Giles is grateful when Ethan comments no further, but simply holds him as they drift off, both keenly aware of Buffy’s sleeping presence beyond the door.

They are woken by the phone ringing an hour or so later. Remarkably, it is still dark. Odd that this much disturbance can fit into one short night.

“Giles?” Willow sounds calm on the other end, but it is a thin calmness, a sheen on top of fear. “Is Buffy there?”

“I won’t wake her up, Willow. She needs to sleep.”

“No, I mean, can you just check she’s still there? We got woken up by her – or something that looked like her.”

“Hold on” Giles tells her and, handing the phone to a sleepy Ethan, gets out of bed. Stepping out into the corridor, he barely has time to register the dark shape lingering in Buffy’s open doorway, before he lunges at it with a strangled cry.

It goes down like a tonne of leather and peroxide. “Oi!” yelps Spike, untangling himself from underneath Giles. “What the bloody hell are you playing at?”

“Spike?!” Giles clambers to his feet. “What are you playing at watching Buffy sleep?”

“Nothing. Just…Peaceful is all.”

“Hello?” a small, childlike voice calls from the bed. Immediately abandoning their struggle, the two males approach her.

“It’s alright pet, just having a rough and tumble with your watcher here.”

“I’m sorry, Buffy. I saw Spike in the corridor and thought it was….um, burglars.”

Buffy takes a second to process this. “Oh.”

“The fuck?” Faith is behind them in the doorway. Behind her, Dawn switches the hallway light on and stands tensely. Giles tells them her, “It’s alright – a misunderstanding. Faith, can I have a quick word?”

With a reluctant glance at Buffy, Faith follows him back into his room. As does Spike, who asks,
once they are out of immediate earshot, “What did you really think I was?”

Ignoring him, Giles takes the phone from Ethan – who is blinking up at the newcomers – and tells Willow, “Buffy’s here. Whatever you saw must have been something else.”

*****

As early light starts to finger the closed curtains, they start the emergency meeting. Faith, now dressed and armed, paces and Spike leans in the doorway, while Xander and Anya – shaken by an encounter of their own – huddle on the sofa opposite Giles and Ethan. Tara takes the armchair, and Dawn perches on the arm, leans unconsciously into her. Buffy has gone back to sleep upstairs. Or at least, Giles hopes she has.

Willow has the grace to look apologetic as she tells them: “It looks like a demon the spell made, not a hitchhiker – not something that came in with Buffy.”

“So you made a demon?” asks Anya.

“To save Buffy” Xander reminds her.

“Right” says Willow, “I knew it was a possibility, so I researched some counter-spells.”

More spells. Giles takes his glasses off and cleans them, the better to hide his disapproval. Not that disapproval is an inappropriate response, but not now, not with more pressing matters to deal with. Tara voices part of what he leaves unsaid: “Willow, you’ve done enough magic. You’re exhausted.”

“I might need some help” Willow concedes, looking at her, and then at Ethan.

Ethan asks, “What would we need to do?”

“We need to give the demon a corporeal form so it can be killed.”

“So I can kill it, you mean” says Faith.

“Um. Yeah.”

“Cool, I guess. I mean, I screw up, I get shipped off to England. You screw up, you get to decide what to point me at. Makes sense.”

Xander twists round to look at her. “Bringing Buffy back isn’t screwing up.”

“And I am being shipped off to England” Willow adds. At the surprise of everyone other than Giles, Ethan and Tara, she says, “I’ll explain later. But first, Ethan, could you go and put a barrier up in Buffy’s room? Something that will keep non-corporeal things out?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure. Keeping corporeal things out is really what a barrier is designed to do.”

“Oh. In that case, we’ll just have to be really careful what we say – If it possessed Anya it could be using any of us to spy on us. At least if it’s the type of thing I’ve read about, it could be.”

Everyone eyes one another warily. Willow adds, “So I can’t really tell you guys much. I just need you to trust me.”

Faith snorts and exchanges a bitter smile with Spike. Xander says, “Sure” and though Anya and Tara don’t give affirmatives, they don’t protest either.
“Good” says Willow. “So what we need to do is…”

****

It is only once the thing is killed, by Faith though Buffy, attacked in her bedroom by the thing, gets a few punches in, that Willow allows her worry to show. Approaching Buffy, who stands in her doorway looking down at the dead demon, she asks, “Buffy, are you okay?”

Faith answers, “Yeah, I’m sure she’s great. Only back a few hours and you’ve already made demons to attack her.”

Studying Willow, Buffy asks, “Made?”

Willow explains, “It was made by the spell I used to bring you back. Sort of a price.”

Anya adds, “But really a gift with purchase.”

Buffy resumes staring at the demon. “Oh.”

“You should go back to bed, Buffy” says Rupert, who seems to view resurrection as some sort of physical ailment that sleep will heal. Buffy stares at him a moment, and then at her bed. “Okay.”

Dawn steps forward. “I could make you some hot chocolate if you like?”

“Oh. Um. No. Thank you.” Buffy withdraws, closing her bedroom door behind her. She slams it a little, but it seems accidental, as though she is simply unused now to using doors. Dawn still looks hurt. Hoping to cheer her, Ethan says, “I could use some hot chocolate.” Spike tells him, “Get it yourself. Go on, bit – off to bed with you.”

Dawn scowls at him, but goes. Xander nods and says, “Okay. We’d better be going too, Ahn.” To Willow, he adds, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Sure”

Xander stares at her a moment longer, glances round at them all, and leaves with Anya following. Willow watches them, unconcerned. It could be that the boy will try to talk her out of going to the coven but, Ethan thinks, it is highly unlikely he’ll succeed. Willow has stood up to more significant beings in recent months than Xander Harris. And yet he notices a little pain creep into her expression as the door closes.

Tara says, “We should go too.” “No” says Willow. “I mean, you can if you like, but I want to talk to Buffy tomorrow and, well, it is tomorrow now.”

“Not up to you” Faith tells her. “Buffy can call you if she wants to talk.”

Willow glares at her. “She’s my friend too. I’ll stay.”

“In her house, without her say so?”

“It is our house too” Rupert points out. “In that we live here, at least. And I don’t mind Willow staying. We’ll need to go over travel arrangements. You won’t need a visa but you’ll need to apply for a waiver. I can help with that and you can square things with the college.”

Willow nods. “Alright. How soon will…”

“You could be off by the end of the week at the latest.”
Tara murmurs, “But it’s Tuesday” and then falls silent, heads downstairs.

Faith, looking from Giles to Willow, rolls her eyes, mutters, “Whatever” and heads back to her own room. Spike, after a quiet, “Couldn’t agree more, ducks” pushes past Willow for the basement.

Left alone with Rupert and Willow, Ethan finds himself in need of something to occupy his time, since there’s little chance of sleep now. “Maybe I will make that hot chocolate.”

Willow nods. “I’ll help.”

*****

Alone together in the kitchen, Willow helps Ethan make hot chocolate like someone who didn’t recently change the foundations of reality. As he heats the milk, she spoons cocoa powder into mugs and comments, “It’s not a good sign, it being one I made.”

“Never generally a good sign when you find you’ve accidently created a demon, no.”

“I mean that it wasn’t a hitchhiker – that’s the bad sign. It didn’t jump in from wherever Buffy was. Does that mean there were no demons where she was?”

“Well she was in hell, so I’m sure there were a few.”

“How did she seem, when she told you guys that?”

“Like someone traumatised from being tormented in hell and then resurrected, honestly.”

Willow gazes at him unhappily. “She’ll be okay. I know she will. She’s Buffy.”

“I suppose she will. Everyone seems keen to help. Which must be rather overwhelming for her when you think about it.” “They’ll be okay too. They just need time.”

“At least Rupert isn’t crowding her. Almost the opposite.” Like he thinks Buffy will vanish like smoke if he touches her. “He’s just telling her to sleep.”

“Sleeping’s good. Sleeping helps with trauma. I’ve read about it.”

“Is there anything you haven’t read about?”

“I don’t know. Maybe in England, I’ll find out.”

A whole new world of magic to explore. Ethan nods mutely.

Hot chocolate sorted, Willow carries the tray through to the living room and their respective partners (Or is that what Tara is, any more?) and Ethan washes out the pan.

“Mr Rayne?”

“Hello, Tara. How are you holding up?” Gods, this is like when Buffy had just died; everyone checking how one another are.

“I’m okay. I wanted to talk to you. A-about Willow.”

Wearily, Ethan abandons scrubbing the pan and turns to her. This will keep happening, of course – conversations about Willow – but it is to be expected. Shockwaves.
Tara says, “You were right, you know – she shouldn’t be alone. But I can’t go with her. I need a little time to, to think about everything that’s happened. But she could do with a friend.”

“I’m not sure Xander’s ready for the Devon Coven” Ethan tells her. “And he has work.”

“I w-was thinking you. You could go with her.”

“Me? Sweet child, the coven won’t let me cross their threshold: I’m a chaos mage. Dirt in their eyes.”

“Oh. W-well maybe Mr Giles could talk to them? At least they might let you visit her there. That way she can see a familiar face and she’s more likely to come safely home.”

“To you?” guesses Ethan gently.

Tara nods. “It won’t be easy, what with…I-I mean it was dark magic, it’s bound to have some effect. And she didn’t tell me. I know she was trying to protect me but it still…B-but I do want us to work it out. She needs to do this first. Will you help her?”

“I can try” Ethan hedges. “Coven depending. Rupert depending too.”

“Thank you.”

*****

Over the next few days, Buffy remains quiet and solemn, seeming to feel no need to speak unless directly addressed. She finds odd things fascinating, staring at water flowing from the tap, following the flight of a bird in the garden. She drifts from room to room. She is a little more confident one to one. Giles finds he can draw something resembling conversation from her when they are alone together, and she seems to feel calmer alone with him than in a group. Or perhaps he just wants to think so.

She will have to cope alone eventually though, or her resurrection has come at the cost of complete infantilisation. But not yet, not yet. Her suffering is still so raw.

When her friends are all around, as they often are, basking in her presence, she withdraws into some secret place behind a smile she seems to achieve with some conscious practise. With Faith and, oddly, Spike, she seems to at least know what to say in the way an actress relearning a once-familiar script might know what to say. On the few occasions that Giles finds her alone with Dawn, their conversation is comparatively stilted.

It is Faith who suggests patrolling, and Giles bows to her superior knowledge of what a slayer might need. But if Buffy did need the “hunt” as Faith put it, she shows no relish in it. She simply stakes a few vampires and then follows them home.

She is alone with Willow only once that Giles is aware of. Returning from an errand (Buffy hasn’t resumed the running of the household and he hasn’t yet asked) he finds Willow has come over, uninvited and unaccompanied. The two of them are sitting on the back porch, Willow insisting in pleading tones, “Thinking of you in a place like that, I just couldn’t leave you there. I did the right thing, didn’t I? Didn’t I, Buffy?”

Silently, Buffy takes her hand. Giles waits a moment to see if she’ll answer, and when she doesn’t, he clears his throat to let them know he’s there, and the moment is broken. With his own interactions with Willow, he focuses on practicalities, on flight times and tickets.
Two tickets. When he isn’t fussing around Buffy, Giles is savouring the time he has left with Ethan.

“I will be back, you know” Ethan tells him one night in bed.

“You could be a few months” Giles points out. “But you’re right – we’ll manage. And I know you miss home.”

“Home, London” Ethan replies, “Not Devon. And definitely not the bloody coven.”

“Just try not to wind them up. You won’t be having much contact with them and you’ll all be trying to help Willow.”

“I suppose.” Ethan kisses him, and they set aside talk for the night, make the most of this latest of their dwindling number of nights in the same bed.

Finally, the day comes that they see Willow and Ethan off. There are tears, of course, and much hugging, though Giles notices that Ethan is offered the lion’s share of Dawn’s regret at their parting. With Willow, she is more subdued. Once Ethan and Giles have shared their last, lingering embrace and his partner has exited with Willow bound for the other side of the Atlantic, Giles turns to find the others waiting for him, including Buffy.

Buffy. Giles smiles. For all that her resurrection is bewildering and Ethan leaving is a wrench, they do at least have Buffy. Troubled, damaged even, but they have her. The awful months they didn’t have redefined Giles’ definition of loss and he manages a smile despite it all.

*****

“I’m sorry” says Willow on the plane.

Ethan is busy watching Sunnydale retreat. From here the sea a shifting turquoise and the houses are a toyscape of creams and terracotta. It is the first time the hellmouth has looked beautiful. “For what?” he asks.

“Dragging you away. If I was strong, I’d go on my own.”

“Sometimes the strongest you can be is to ask for help. Or something else I read from a fortune cookie.” Ethan offers a smile. “And I’m sorry too.”

“What for?”

“I taught you magic. I encouraged it. Don’t tell Rupert I said so, but I’m well aware of my part in this.”

“No – Ethan, I would have learnt even if you hadn’t been here.”

“So you’re telling me not to give myself so much credit?”

Willow returns his grin. “Kinda. What I mean is, magic isn’t something I do, it’s something I am.”

She is right, he supposes. Willow is magic the way the Christian God is said to be love. Not that Willow is a god, of course. But give the girl time.

*****

“Is it always this cold?” asks Willow as they make their way from the taxi down the winding path to the coven’s manor house.
“Sweet child, this is only October. You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Eep.”

Ethan relents with, “They’ll probably have a fire and a hot water bottle waiting in your bedroom.”

“Good.” Willow navigates her way around the stray tendrils of a bramble. “You think they’ll let me go straight there? Or will there be rituals and stuff?”

“I’m not sure, I’m afraid.”

On reaching the front door, they are greeted by, “Edgar!?” exclaims Ethan. “How’d they succour you in?”

The once perfectly interesting freelance warlock replies, “I needed help and the coven were there. You should give them a chance, Ethan. Chaos isn’t kind to the lost.”

“Oh really? Maybe you haven’t given it enough of a chance, mate. Anyway” Ethan indicates Willow. “Edgar, Willow, Willow, Edgar. He used to be fun.”

Ignoring that, Edgar tells Willow, “Come in, child.”

Glancing at Ethan, Willow steps inside. Before Ethan can follow, the way is blocked and Edgar is asking, “Do you renounce the ways of chaos?”

Ethan looks him up and down sourly. “That depends. Do you renounce that haircut?”

Edgar glares. “You’ll be staying at the inn, then?”

“Looks like it.” To Willow, Ethan adds, “I’ll only be in the village.”

Willow nods bravely “Okay.” And then the door closes, sealing her in.
“Morning all.” Spike pauses in a shadow in the entrance to the kitchen and eyes the daylight warily.

“Yes, it is” agrees Giles, “Which begs the question, why are you not lurking in the basement?” Behind him, the room slides into semi-darkness. Glancing round, Giles sees that Buffy has pulled the blinds down.

“Can’t sleep” Spike tells them, stepping closer, “Pipe’s dripping.”

“You laid waste to Europe” Giles retorts, “with, I’m sure, accompanying screams. And a dripping pipe stops you sleeping?”

Spike nods seriously. “’S like when a clock’s ticking right by your ear. ’Sides, I was getting wet. Had to drag the bloody bed across the room, still didn’t help – could still hear the sodding thing.”

“You could always move out.”

Before Spike can reply, Buffy asks, “Wait, which pipe?”

Spike gestures to the basement. “One of the ones down there.”

“You can’t be more specific?”

“Well I haven’t named them.”

Giles resumes his tea, muttering, “Despite living here long enough.”

Spike adds, “If you show me where your tool kit is, I could try fixing it.”

“The tool kit is probably somewhere in the basement” Giles points out, “You could go back down there.”

Buffy asks, “You think you could fix it?”

“Well possibly. I’ve lived in enough abandoned houses and wanted a shower.”

When Faith enters, Buffy asks her, “Do we have a tool kit?”

*****

“Okay” says Faith, emerging with Spike from the basement some time later, “There’s good news and bad news.”

Buffy eyes their unpromisingly soaked clothing. “Uh oh.”

“The bad news?” asks Giles.

“We’ve got an indoor swimming pool.”

Buffy asks, “And the good news?”

“We’ve got an indoor swimming pool. Also, all Spike’s stuff got drenched, which was kind of funny.” Glaring at her, Spike takes a seat across from Buffy. “Sorry, Slayer: We gave it our all but I
He never, Giles realises, addresses Faith as Slayer. It is a title reserved only for the slayer he claims to love. Which, given his history, hints at a world of entrenched psychological issues.

Faith asks, “So, should I phone Xander? He might know someone who could do it discounted. Otherwise we’re in some major trouble.”

“I’ll give him a ring” Giles agrees.

“Why’d we be in trouble?” Buffy asks.

*****

Outside the bank, Buffy stops. “I don’t know how I’m going to deal with this, Giles.”

Giles looks at her, not sure for a moment whether she means the financial side of life or all of it more generally. “It’s only an appointment at the bank” he tells her at last, trying to keep her focused on the present. Unlikely, really, that she’ll be granted a loan but she may as well try.

“Exactly” says Buffy, “scary grown up stuff.”

“Not scary in comparison to the things you’ve faced.”

“That’s different. I know how to handle that stuff. This money stuff though…”

“We’ll find a way” Giles tells her.

“I’m just not ready to…It’s all too much, you know?”

He doesn’t. He has no idea what it is like to be plucked from hell only to have to face mundane but serious problems like crumbling finances. “I’ll go over the bills with you later” he offers, “And as for the plumbing, it’s one of those things that will just have to be dealt with. If the bank isn’t helpful, we’ll have another look through your home insurance policy.”

Buffy smiles. “Thanks, Giles.” She offers a brief, sideways hug, a rare gift, especially since her resurrection. Pulls away too soon. “Are you sure you can’t come in with me? You know how to talk about this stuff.”

“Only because I’ve had practice” he reminds her, “You’re just as capable.”

Buffy looks doubtful. “You’ll be nearby?”

“I’ll be in Espresso Pump” Giles reassures her, trying to ignore how childlike she suddenly seems, “When you’re done here, you can come meet me and I’ll treat you to a coffee and some cake.”

Buffy smiles. “Sure. That’d be nice.” She straightens her shoulders, adjusts the skirt suit. “Wish me luck.” She heads inside.

Slayer luck being what it is, she ends up fighting off a demonic bank robber, and still can’t a loan.

*****

“Hello, Ethan.” Willow is looking a little less corpse-like but immeasurably tired. Slumped against a tree, she blinks languidly at him. “Are you giving me my next lesson?”
“Ha. No” Ethan sits down beside her and gestures around the coven’s herb garden. “As you’ll have
noticed, I’m not exactly an honoured guest round here, let alone a visiting prof. Actually, no-one
knows I’m here – I know they agreed to it, but I still wasn’t sure they’d let me in if I knocked on
the door.”

“Chaos magic?”

“Mixes with earth magic like, well…”

“Chaos and earth? All volcanoey?”

“Yep.”

“That’s a lot of trouble to go to, to get in and see me.”

“How’d you know I want to see you? Maybe I just wanted to pinch some rosemary.”

Willow laughs. It improves her colour a little. Ethan asks, “How is it going so far?”

“I’m not sure. Except the missing Tara part – that bit I am sure of.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“Not yet. She wants space, so I thought, okay space. But then, I am on the other side of the
Atlantic! Maybe I should call?”

“I would.”

“Have you spoken to Giles? Did he say how she is?”

“Not specifically.” Really, Rupert seems to focused on how Buffy is to notice what any of the
others might be thinking. Perhaps Willow isn’t so different because her next question is, “How’s
Buffy?”

“Coming to a bit, I think. Rupert says she’s acting a bit more like herself.” And that Faith had had
to go and pull her out of the shower the other day when she seemed to forget the getting out, drying
and dressing part of the process, but Ethan doesn’t mention that. If slipping down the shower wall
and staring for an hour into the steam is the worst side effect Buffy will experience, they should
consider themselves fortunate.

“Good” says Willow. She seems to be trying to work out what he hasn’t said. Ethan hopes that’s
just general suspicion and not all the magic she poured through herself leaving a trace of psychic
ability. He asks, “What have the lessons been like?”

“Just a lot of tests at the moment and some meditation. I think they’re still trying to work me out.”

They sit in silence for a while. It starts to drizzle, a brief autumn shower that scatters noisily against
the paving stones of a nearby path. Ethan half expects Willow to want to go inside, but she seems
oblivious to the change. She adds, “I think something big’s happening later this week – Miss
Harkness is going to call you.”

“Oh – that big.”

“Yep. I’m not sure what it is yet.” Willow smiles gamely. “Nerves, sort of becoming an issue.”

“Good grief, child, you’ve had dealing with Osiris! How bad can Miss Harkness be?”
“It’s different – She’s a teacher.”

Ethan grins despite himself. “I knew there was some Willow still in there.”

Willow nods fervently. “I hope so.”

*****

“There’s no word on it” Faith tells them when she shows up for dinner. It is only the humans of the household present, and she asks, taking a seat, “Where’s Spike?”

“In the basement I presume” says Giles.

“Basement’s still flooded” Dawn reminds him. “He’s sleeping the sleep of the nocturnal undead in my room. You guys should go and look at him up there, snuggled down under the pink covers.”

Buffy catches Giles worried expression and asks, “So no M’Fashnik conveniently hanging out at Willy’s Place?”

Helping herself to food, Faith replies, “Nope. I called the shop too: Anya hasn’t heard anything from Ethan’s demon customers. Probably finding whoever hired it is a better bet.”

“I guess.” Buffy glances around, apparently aware that everyone is looking to her for further instruction. Rather than decide as to whether they search for the demon or its employer, she turns to Dawn. “Anyway. Um. How was school?”

Dawn stares. “It’s Saturday.”

Again Buffy glances round at the tableful of concerned faces. “Oh. Um, so how was…”

“Magic lesson with Tara? It was fine.” Dawn smiles and tells Giles, “Anya’s enjoying running the shop on her own way too much.” To Buffy, she adds, “But she helped Tara show me this really cool protection spell. Baliara’s Circle. I’m getting pretty good at it.”

“That’s nice” Buffy is focused on her food.

Dawn adds, “We’re still only doing protection spells. Because that’s what you said.”

Buffy doesn’t answer and a silence stretches. Eventually, glancing at Buffy, Faith breaks it with, “That’s cool, Dawnster.” She studies Buffy again, the hint more obvious this time, but Buffy doesn’t seem to notice. Faith turns back to Dawn smoothly and adds, “If I was you, I’d leave the other spells alone. Wicked dangerous even when they give you what you want. Plus there’s only so many hardcore wiccas one town can take.”

Dawn studies Buffy’s closed face and agrees, “I’m with you there.”

*****

“I don’t like this” says Willow. She eyes the jagged teeth of the waiting Merrivale stones.

“It will be fine” Ethan tells her.

“You don’t know that.”

Ethan doesn’t reply because of course he doesn’t. A part of him thinks it unlikely, after all she has survived, that she’ll be claimed now. But the rest of him knows there’s a price looming and she
Miss Harkness, completes her preparations and looks down the row of stones as though she knows what awaits Willow at the end of it. Perhaps she does. But if so, she hasn’t said, or at least not to Ethan. Ethan is, of course, only here to offer moral support – he is not to take part in the ritual, which the rest of the coven, pacing and chanting across the moorland, are in the process of concluding. He asks, “You haven’t been told anything else about what to expect?”

Willow shakes her head. “Only that I’ll go to a sacred place. Cool as those stone look, I’m thinking somewhere else. Somewhere past them.” She stares across the moorland. “Anyway, I think expect isn’t the right word. I don’t think there’s any expect with stuff like this. They don’t know what will happen.”

Chaos then. Ethan almost rallies. But then he remembers that something – whatever waits among the stones – does know what will happen. It’s just that they don’t.

“Not long now” whispers Willow, watching the preparations. Then, “I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can, Willow. You’ve raised the dead – This will be a doddle.”

Straightening from a final prostration to the powers, Miss Harkness calls over, “Willow: It’s time.” Willow whispers, “What do you think will happen if I just run?” Ethan pushes her forward gently. “Right” Willow murmurs as she walks away. “I’ve got to do this. I said I’d pay. I can do this…” Her voice fades away and so – once she is a little way down the line of stones, does she. Ethan lets out an involuntary shout and steps forwards, but Edgar holds him back. “Don’t go any closer, Rayne, you’ll disrupt things.”

“Where’s she gone?” Ethan is panicked. It is one thing to know Willow would likely leave this realm and another to see it.

“We let you come to support her, that doesn’t mean we entrusted you with the secrets of the ritual.”

“You didn’t answer my question!”

“It’s not for you to know where she’s gone.” Relenting, Edgar adds, “She won’t be long. At least from our perspective.”

Ethan turns back and stares at the spot where Willow vanished. Everyone waits. Someone towards the back shuffles their feet. A crow flies past and Ethan tries not to read dread premonition into it. Fog thickens, obscuring the point of vanishment and dampening their clothes, chilling the surrounding moorland.

Eventually, Edgar’s grip on his arm releases and Ethan is able to step back and away from the people who saw fit to put Willow through this when surely there was another way?

Except there wasn’t, was there?

Everyone is infuriatingly calm. They don’t know Willow. From their perspective, she is just another foolish young sorcerer who went too far. More powerful than they’ve come across before, perhaps, but distinguished only by that. A puzzle, a problem. So they don’t panic and pace like Ethan does, they simply wait to see if she will come back and in what state, with no strong feelings one way or the other about it now that the threat that she represents – that she is – is safely contained elsewhere.
Even the stones seem to be waiting. They are emotionless too, of course, but they would be. They have seen four thousand years’ worth of witches and warlocks pilgrimage here, they must have seen someone with Willow’s power before. Surely?

Willow is still gone. Ethan paces some more but all he can see in every direction is impassive countryside, nothing to help. Willow is beyond any help they can give. If she doesn’t come back, what will they do? Will the Coven members start checking their watches and sighing, and gradually concluding that the powerful witch who passed briefly through their ranks won’t be back in their lifetimes? Will they eventually give up and go home and make dinner? And how will Ethan break the news to Buffy and the others? What will they tell Willow’s parents?

But these are hysterical imaginings. Willow will be back. She has to be.

Then – finally – through the mist, Willow does walk back towards them. Staggers back towards them. Ethan feels a wave of mingled relief and concern sweep through him and steps towards her, but again Edgar holds him back. Fine, fine – he can wait now. Willow is safe now.

Willow, meanwhile, doesn’t look his way. Stumbling, she heads first for Miss Harkness, who waits by the tallest stone at the end of the row. They speak in low voices and Ethan can’t make out what they are saying. Through the fog, he tries to gauge how hurt Willow is. No blood or gore, but Miss Harkness’s hand on her arm is only part reassurance, and part holding her up. Her hair is bedraggled, limp, her clothes torn. Her expression, at least, is serious but not scared. Also, she looks no older than she did a moment ago, so it’s not like she’ll have been wherever she was for longer than they waited here. Is it?

Helping Willow lean against the tall stone, Miss Harkness turns away from her and throws a handful of herbs into the air. The fog vanishes. Or at least, it disperses a lot – evidently it would have been a somewhat foggy day even without the magic. Sensing the power of the moment slip into mundane reality, Ethan hurries over to Willow at last. She offers him a bright smile. “Hi.”

He hugs her, peeling her off the stone. She is limp in his arms. “You scared me. I’d hoped you wouldn’t disappear.”

“Me too. It wasn’t too bad though.”

“Where did you go?”

“Nowhere awful. No fire or brimstone. And the smell was less sulphur, more…Well, actually I don’t know what it was. A plant smell, but nothing that grows here.”

“Nothing interesting grows here – that’s rather the point of moors.”

“No, I mean on earth.”

“Ah”

Willow is helped back to the waiting car then, carried by Edgar and another man locking hands in a knot that Willow then sits on, wrapping her arms round their shoulders as they walk either side of her. Children at school used to call it a queen’s carriage lift, and that is fitting, since there is something of conquering royalty about Willow now. Around her, coven members stare in awe or glance and look away, as though she is not for the likes of them to see. Miss Harkness, though, treats her very much the way one would treat a child hurt in a foolish accident, and gradually her fellow sorcerers follow her example, and mute their awe into something less likely to go to Willow’s head. By the time they get back to the crumbling farmhouse the coven call home,
Willow’s queenly aura has worn off, and she is simply tired and surrounded by people who are under no illusions about the implications of her power, but are still willing to make her something warm to drink and see she gets some rest. Ethan says goodbye to her at the door. “I’ll come back tomorrow. If you’re well enough to meet me in the garden, that is.”

“I will be. But I’ll see if they can let you inside just this once.”

“Alright. We’ll talk then.” Ethan leaves reluctantly, heading back into the village, questions rattling in his head.

*****

“You’re back.”

Buffy sighs. “Yeah, I know, everyone’s big dealing it.” She turns from the vampire who spoke to stare around at the rest of the gathering undead and asks Giles, “Isn’t this more that usual?” To Faith, she adds, “You have been keeping up with patrol, right?”

“I’ve been out here every night!” Faith retorts. “They’ve just been all excited that there was only one slayer again.”

“It’s true” echoes Giles, “They’ve been challenging Faith the way they might a new slayer.” Then he wishes he hadn’t said that, because Faith is not a new slayer; her power began before Buffy died and is not compromised by her return. Faith, thankfully, is focused on the approaching vampires, and doesn’t read into the remark.

As the vampires proceed to be slain, Giles takes the opportunity to watch Buffy fight. She is as adept as she has always been, but he notices that she seems to feel each blow from her opponent more keenly than she would have done before her death. Punches that she would have laughed off before send her reeling now, not from loss of balance, but as though she is no longer used to the pain. But surely, in hell, she must have been in pain much of the time? Her pain threshold should have increased if anything. Giles shudders: He doesn’t want to think about this.

But he has to, for her. Perhaps it wasn’t that sort of hell: Less fire and agony, more isolation and fear. Psychologically even worse than what they initially thought, and what they initially thought was already unquantifiable because how do those who’ve never died comprehend what Buffy must be going through? It’s like trying to picture a colour the human eye can’t perceive. He wishes she would talk to him, at least try to explain what it was like where she was, but so far, she hasn’t. Perhaps it is not something that can be described in mere human words. Perhaps she is right to fall back on the routine of day to day life, smiling on cue and doing her best to act as though nothing is wrong, as she seems to be doing. Routine is a more powerful balm than it’s generally given credit for, especially here in America, where the talking cure is elevated above all else.

Not that Buffy’s friends seem all that keen to talk about this. Tara, when she visited today, at least tried to start a conversation about the glaring hole in the laws of life and death that her girlfriend opened up, but Faith, perhaps thinking she was protecting Buffy, shut it down. Xander, meanwhile, seems scared by the whole thing, and keen to pretend that Buffy’s death never happened. Despite surely knowing just how enormous the implications, the possible price, will be, Anya is following suit. Possibly she simply wants to protect Xander, but Giles wonders if she is protecting some pretence of her own too. For all she jokes about her demon days, it must be a heavy thing to carry at times. Better, perhaps, to leave the past where it is and embrace being human, and humans do not know about such matters.

Or possibly she and Xander are dealing with problems of their own: Giles has picked up on some
considerable tension between them whenever they have come over to visit Buffy, smiling a little manically and leaping on her every hollow echo of her old routine as though this is proof that she’s going to be alright. Buffy for her part, seems keen to get the act right, to do as they all hope and return to normal.

And so it continues. A routine of pretence and skimming the surface of the lurking horror. Buffy was in hell, and no-one knows what to say. Sleep, eat, repeat. And if Buffy is taking comfort in routine, it is the wrong one, one from years before she died. Gone is the capable young woman, and the girl who is left looks to him for reassurance, like she might have done when they first met. Understandable that Buffy would regress in the face of unspeakable trauma, less so that he should allow it.

“Hey Mr Lost In Thought While The Slayers Do The Hard Stuff” Buffy comes up to him. Giles finds the last vampire has been dusted. Faith, a little way off, is scanning the horizon for more. Buffy asks, “What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing in particular” replies Giles. Damn it, now he’s doing it too.

*****

“She hasn’t told you what happened wherever she was?” Giles asks. He glances at the bedroom door, presses the phone tighter to his ear. Buffy has asked about Willow only once since she left, looking around when Xander, Anya and Tara were visiting with a sudden, “Where’s Willow?” as though she had forgotten being told anything about where her friend was or why. Alarming as that was, it could be it is best for her to continue to put Willow from her mind, given how much she already has to cope with.

“No” Ethan is saying from across the ocean, “but I’m going back later. We’ll talk properly without the entire Coven listening in.”

“I hope you’re behaving yourself.”

“Obviously I am, Rupert. I know they’re twerps, but they are trying to help Willow. Sending her off to unknown dimensions notwithstanding.”

“It would have been worse if she hadn’t gone.”

“I suppose. How are things over there?”

“Well…” Giles glances to the door again and sighs. “Buffy seems as well as she can be under the circumstances. She is a little…reliant, I’m afraid. Depending on Faith and myself to make decisions and manage practicalities.”

“Well I can’t blame her. If I’d been in hell, I’d want my Rupert.”

Giles smiles. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too. It’s boring here without you.”

“I’m sure Willow appreciates you being there.”

“I suppose someone has to appreciate me being in Devon. I certainly don’t. Why couldn’t the bloody Coven set up shop in London or Manchester? Or even Plymouth would be better than this place.”
“It won’t be forever. Listen, Ethan, I was thinking that when you get back, we should move out. The house is crowded now, and really, I think Buffy could do with some space. If she has to cope by herself, she’ll believe that she can.”

Ethan breathes a long sigh of relief into the receiver. “So when I get back, I won’t have to wait for a shower while Spike bleaches his hair? Thank Janus, Rupert, that was getting old!”

“I thought you didn’t mind living here?”

“Not minding’s not the same as embracing! Especially with you weird about sex when Dawn’s in the next room.”

“Yes, well, it will be nice to have some space for ourselves. We’re a little old for shared living.”

“That’s what Buffy will be doing, though, isn’t it? She’ll still have Spike and Faith around to be dependent on.”

“Spike will, I hope, move out soon. And much as Faith is more capable than she realises, she’s not older than Buffy, so it will hopefully be a more mutually supportive relationship.”

“Well, I suppose so” says Ethan. “I’m not complaining if it means a flat of our own. I’ve still no idea when I’ll be back though.”

“The Coven will know when Willow’s ready. Hopefully, so will sh –” Giles frowns as a noise issues from downstairs, a sort of rattle.

“I think we’ve got the worst part done” says Ethan optimistically.

“I hope so” replies Giles, “but I’m not sure –” At that moment, a great crash and a scream echo through the house. “Ethan, I’ve got to go!” Not waiting for an answer, Giles drops the phone and races towards the sound, but before he even reaches the top of the stairs, Dawn has stopped screaming and his slayers have the M’Fashnik under control.

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Some hours later, after the scoobies have repaired the damage to Buffy’s home as best they can (or tried to) and Giles has called Ethan back and listened to him work through his panic over the phone, Giles steps outside to find Buffy, who, according to Dawn, is sitting on the porch. “I think she wants to be alone” Dawn had said, “But then she always does since, well, you know.”

Buffy may well want to be alone, but Giles doesn’t want to delay telling her that he is moving out; he doesn’t want more secrets and tensions simmering beneath the surface of the group. As well as everyone’s conflicted response to Buffy’s return, Xander and Anya, while attempting to fix the coffee table, were still sniping at each other over some unknown disagreement. He would worry, but with Buffy struggling as she is, Giles doesn’t really have time for it.

Buffy is not on the porch, but he spots her standing a little way away with…oh, wonderful. Well, Spike may as well hear this: perhaps it could provide an opportunity for Buffy to ask him to move out too.

As Giles moves closer, he hears Spike say, in a low voice, “You could tell them, you know.” His tone is the neutral one Giles has noticed he often uses around Buffy: stopping short of advice or stating a preference, because he’ll follow regardless.

“No” Buffy tells him, “They’d only worry more; they can’t know.”
Concerned, Giles makes his presence known with, “Can’t know what?”

Buffy spins round and yelps, “Giles! Um, know that…know that Spike, um…” She looks to Spike for help. He pitches in with, “That, err, well, that I’ll be paying rent.” He looks at Buffy as he adds, “Bout time I helped out.”

“But only if they money’s not coming from anything evil” Buffy tells him, catching on immediately “like we agreed.”

Clearly, they didn’t agree anything. But there is no use in prying. Giles responds, “I’m sure that’s not necessary. There are ways to make money other than rent accommodation to the underworld, Buffy.”

Spike puts in, “I don’t see you offering rent.”

Stung, Giles manages, “Actually, I was going to say I’m moving out.” Ignoring Spike, he tells Buffy, “You don’t need me hanging around when you’re trying to get back to normal.”

Buffy looks stricken. Spike looks from her, to Giles, and leaves them to it.

“Giles” Buffy stammers, “There isn’t a normal. And I need you. All of this, being back, it’s so much to cope with. I can’t take not having you around.”

“I’ll still be around” he hurriedly reassures her, “I’ll still be in town; I’ll still be watching you and Faith.”

“Yeah, but, moving out? If anything happens here, I’ll have to deal with it…”

“Which you are perfectly capable of doing” Giles reminds her. “And you’ll have Faith.” And Spike, Lord help them. “And Dawn will benefit from you taking a lead on running the household.”

Buffy looks unconvinced. Before Giles can say more though, Dawn calls from the back door: “Buffy? Angel’s on the phone!”

Buffy gasps, “Angel!” and hurries inside. Giles sighs and follows. Her newly reclaimed life would be so much simpler if it involved vampires only in a staking capacity.

Within minutes, Buffy is leaving for a reunion with Angel, somewhere between Sunnydale and LA. She doesn’t ask that Giles and Faith will care for Dawn so much as assume, but Faith makes no comment, only rolls her eyes and follows suit with, “I could use an extra hunt: You’ll watch the kid, right, G?” and then she is gone to, ignoring Dawn’s indignant, “I’m not a kid!”

Left alone, Dawn turns to him, “I guess it’s just the three of us. You want to make milkshakes? I bet we could invent a pig’s blood one for Spike.”

“Nauseating as that sounds, Dawn, I think I’ll finish up sweeping the kitchen.”

“Sure. If you find anything else broken, maybe just don’t mention it to Buffy and hope she never notices. She’s stressed enough.”

In the kitchen, Giles finds Spike adding a fair amount of whiskey to a mug of blood. He looks, if possible, less enthusiastic about being abandoned in favour of Angel than Giles feels. Giles greets him with, “I know you and Buffy weren’t talking about rent, incidentally.”

Spike looks up sharply. “None of your business what we were talking about.”
“I agree.”

Spike eyes him suspiciously. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Buffy can tell me whatever she needs to in her own time.” Giles reaches for the whiskey and pours some into a clean glass. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you took advantage of the situation in a way that gives Buffy a financial incentive to keep you in her home.”

“I’m just trying to help” Spike argues. “Want to be there for the girl, unlike some people.”

Giles glares. “I’ll still be around. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, Spike. As will Faith.” He drinks the whiskey, savouring the burn. “And, much as your offer to pay rent was self-serving, now that you’ve made it, you’d better honour it. And you’d better get the money from an ethical source.”

Spike frowns, and Giles thinks he is just quietly taking offence, but when he speaks it seems he is genuinely considering the matter: “I could sell some weed or something.”

“A legal source” Giles amends. Ethical was an unhelpful word, he realises. Spike doesn’t understand what ethical means.

Spike tries, “Scaring people outside the Bronze then. Unreliable, but I could get lucky.”

“That’s not legal.”

“Well, what would you have me do? Not like I can do the nine to sun-glaring bloody five, is it?”

Giles thinks. “What about the bite house?”

“Oh, come on, even I have some pride!” Spike looks away, mutters, “‘Sides, I couldn’t” and, when Giles issues a questioning look, he explains in a resentful tone, “The chip.”

“Surely if they were willing and you didn’t intend to harm them…?”

“No” Spike sounds so certain that Giles wonders if he has actually tried it “Doesn’t work.” “Well, you’ll have to find something. Plenty of places offer nightshifts.” At Spike’s glare, Giles adds, “You promised Buffy rent.” Oddly, he feels a flicker of guilt at using Spike’s supposed love against him, but it works: Spike’s glare wavers into a grudging frown and the vampire replies, “Suppose I did. I’ll see what I can find.”

On returning to the former the coven, Ethan is allowed as far as the kitchen, though only once he’s been searched for magical paraphernalia. Once he and Willow are alone there, seated at the vast and scratch-laced oak table with steaming cups of tea, he asks, “So what happened in this thankfully fire and brimstone free place with interesting plant life?”

“Well, first I spoke to a glowing lady” Willow tells him.

“Glowing as in halo?” Surely she can’t have entered a heavenly dimension? They are strictly off limits to the living, even more so than hell dimensions.

“No” Willow replies, “Just all over really, like she had luminescent body butter, only not. And beetles crawling all over her but so tiny I thought it was a dress at first, like little beads.”

“What did she say?”
“Well, first she wanted me to make a sacrifice. To kill this dove, actually, but it wasn’t a dove. Obviously, it wasn’t a dove because you don’t swap just a little dove for Buffy, that’s not how it works.” “It was something more in dove form.”

“Exactly, or a symbol of some entity or something. But I said no, so there were trials instead.”

“Trials? Fighting?”

“No. Because no, with my gym record, if it had come down to wrestling? I’d have never come back. No, it was magic stuff. Pushing at the limits of my powers, being tempted with dark magic, that sort of thing.”

“What were you tempted with?”

Willow lists it, counting on her fingers. “Power over then known realms, knowledge beyond measure, immortality and wealth beyond compare. Nothing worth having.”

“Um. No. Of course not.”

Willow grins. “Well, what would be the fun of knowing everything? You’d never have any reason to go online or read a book! And I don’t need money when Buffy’s alive and Tara’s maybe waiting for me and at least safe. And I definitely don’t want to live forever and watch all my friends die. I told her so. The infinite power thing was probably the most tempting, but I was getting the impression it would come with a big old side of losing all my humanity.”

“Infinite power usually does.”

“I think it all would have come with a price. That’s even if it was even a genuine offer. I might just have fallen into hell if I said yes to any of it.” Willow frowns. “I got a taste of all of it though. Just for a moment.” She shakes herself, shrugs. “And then there was more trials and more talking.”

“How long were you there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there was a how long there.” Willow wraps her hands around her mug and breathes in the steam. “She did say one thing when I left. She said it was justice that I should be told it.”

“Told what?”

“From beneath you, it devours.” Willow shrugs though her frown stays in place. “That was it, then I came back.”

“Hm”

“Not exactly the worst punishment I could get, is it? Unless something is actually going to come and devour me.”

“Nothing’s coming” Ethan reassures her. “The wards they have in this place, you’d know by now if something was coming for you.”

“I guess. I guess if the resurrection spell had called something to come after me, I’d sense it. And setting something on me didn’t really seem like this lady’s style. So I’m guessing not the style of whoever she was representing either, because she was just a spokesperson really. I think. Whoever they are could have just squished me as soon as I got in there and they didn’t.”
Ethan nods. “So it’s just a riddle then?”

“I’m being punished with a riddle? Have they met me?” Willow issues a shaky laugh. “I get Buffy back and I knew I’d have to pay. Is this really it – I’m safe, she’s safe, and I get a riddle for punishment?”

“It is an ominous riddle, if that helps.”

Willow laughs. “I’m really lucky, huh?”

“You are indeed.” And powerful beyond measure, perhaps too powerful for whatever entity Willow met today to kill or want to kill, but Ethan doesn’t point that out. They’ve already had a resurrection spell: Best not to encourage anything else.
Willow is meditating in the summerhouse. Usually, this little painted hut is closed up for winter, and it does look disused: cobwebs finger the ceiling and, over in a far corner, industrious mice have stacked a supply of plum stones, chewing a neat hole in each to get to the kernel. But despite the air of neglect, it is peaceful. Ethan waits while Willow finishes, sensing the strength and depth of the energies settling about her like clouds overhead. Finally, she says, “Hello, Ethan” and then she opens her eyes.

“Hello, Willow. Meditation helping, is it?”

“It’s calming. Makes me less freak-prone.”

“I just spoke to Edgar. He mentioned some spirit guide journey?”

“Yep, just like Buffy in the desert. Only, hopefully with less pure Slayer doomy prophesies.”

“Wasn’t the ritual at Merrivale that sort of thing?”

“I think that was more Being Sent to the Principal’s Office because I’d broken the laws of nature. This will be more What I Should Do Now type stuff.” Willow frowns. “Whoever the guide is, I’m going to ask her about From Beneath You it Devours.”

“Her?”

Willow nods. “It is a her – I can sense her coming.” Willow considers this a moment and then seems to pull herself from her thoughts with some effort. “Anyway, how are you? Have you spoken to Giles?”

“Yes. They had some demon attack at the house, just to terrify me.”

“Demon?”

“An M’Fashnik. Think vampire minion without the brains. Buffy and Faith killed it but they still have no idea who sent it.”

“Oh.”

“Does this mean you still haven’t spoken to Tara?”

“I’ve sent a postcard. To let her know I’m thinking about her.”

“I think she knows that. You really should call, you know, or it will fester.”

“I guess. But. But what if she’s thought about everything I did and she doesn’t want to be around anyone that dangerous?”

“Only one way to find out, I’m afraid.”

*****

“Hello, Giles”

“Hello, Anya. I came over to see if you’re managing on your own, but I see you have helpers.”
Anya glances over at Xander and Tara, seated at the table, and dismisses, “Oh, they’re not serving the customers, they’re just finding out ways of controlling an M’Fashnik.”

“Which basically amount to Give It Money” Xander closes a book and sits back in his chair.

“We could use some of that work ethic around here” Anya mutters, heading over to a customer near the door.

“I-I should go help” Tara excuses herself, getting up to approach a second customer.

Xander asks, “Is Buffy back yet?”

“No.” Giles sits down. “I’m not sure when she will be, I’m afraid.”

Anya waves as her customer leaves with a bag of purchases, then comes over from the till, saying, “Well it’s not like she’s got any reason to hurry back.”

Xander shifts uncomfortably. “She’s got her sister, Anh.”

“Well apart from that. She’s not enrolled in college anymore, she stopped going to lectures and missed registration.”

Xander’s stifled annoyance seeps into the open. “I’m guessing that happens when you’re dead!”

“Well she’s not dead now. She could re-enrol if she wanted, but she hasn’t, so she has plenty of time to spend with Angel.” Angel. Yet another person for her to cling to, Giles reflects grimly, and with the potential consequences so dire. He hopes Jenny is keeping a careful eye on the two of them.

Tara rejoins the group, leaving the customer she was talking to perusing a set of books. “She can’t register yet, but she could always audit and sign up again next semester.”

Anya shrugs. “Or she could get a job. She should really, what with her money-eating house.”

“There are other things, Anh.”

Anya frowns at Xander. “I thought you wanted her to look after Dawn? She needs a house to do that!”

“That is a point” says Tara, ever the peacekeeper.

“Yes” says Giles, “but in the long term, she could earn more with a degree.”

“Not always” points out Xander. “I’m earning more with my non-degree than any of my bookwormy friends.”

“I was born before school was invented” echoes Anya, “and I’m managing a successful business.”

“Yes” says Giles, “point taken. But whatever she chooses, Buffy will have to choose now she’s back. It will give her something to focus on.”

Buffy, in the end, doesn’t choose so much as give the impression that she takes the choice seriously, while looking to him for guidance. It is decided that she will sit in on Tara’s classes until early registration next term, but, looking back, Giles isn’t entirely sure who decided it: Buffy, with
some hesitancy, or himself, with her going along with the course he steered her in.

Still, at least this is a plan. And Buffy has always done better academically than she gives herself credit for – she deserves to be in college re-embracing life.

If she can, that is. Giles washes up, taking his feeling out on the dishes while Buffy, Faith and Dawn pick through Buffy’s well-meaning but unnecessary offering of fried chicken in the other room. Sometimes, everything seems so normal, and then the shock of where she was, what she must have been through, washes over him again. Is it possible to spend untold ages in hell, and then go back to college as though nothing happened? Surely some sort of delayed reaction will hit Buffy eventually?

“Oh – don’t worry Giles, I’ll do that.” Buffy has entered the kitchen.

Giles refuses to relinquish the washing up. “I don’t mind.”

“I bet you cooked, right? Let me dry at least.” She takes up a tea towel. Giles allows himself a moment of simply delighting in the fact that she is here.

Which of course means Spike wanders up from the basement. “Oh” The vampire pauses at the sight of Buffy. “You’re back then?”

“Yeah” Buffy lowers the tea towel. “I’m back.”

“The great Batman-wannabe okay, is he?”

“He is. And don’t call him that.”

“Plenty of other things I could call him. You want to stick to the superhero theme, we could go with The Sulk.”

“Spike” Buffy reprimands, though a smile plays at the corner of her lips.

“Alright” Spike relents. “You up for some patrolling later?”

Giles cuts in, “Faith already went” but Buffy still responds, “I guess” and follows Spike when he steps outside.

*****

“How did it go?” Giles asks, when Buffy returns from her first day of shadowing Tara at college.

Tara tells him, “We h-hit some snags.”

“Time snags” Buffy elaborates, “As in, time speeding up but me not.”

Giles sets aside his half-hearted research – a book with a chapter dedicated to the history of the Daidalos Chest – and asks her, “Something supernatural?”

Buffy stares at him despondently. “I really hope so. Only other explanation is I’m losing it.”

“I-I’m sure that isn’t what it is” Tara tells her, “Can I use your kitchen? I’ll make us some coffee.”

Buffy smiles. “Sure. Thanks.” As Tara exits, she explains to Giles, “There was this weird lint on me, and when I picked it off, it vanished and everything went back to normal. Only I’d missed the whole day.”
“How strange” Giles picks up a note pad. “Some residue of a spell perhaps? One that changed your perception of time?”

“Oh, it did way more than that – It kicked me out of time! Everyone else was still in it, but I was crawling to keep up.”

“That sounds disquieting.”

“Is that British for freaky?”

“Essentially, yes.” Giles makes a few notes, asking questions to draw the story from Buffy, and later from Tara when she rejoins them. Finally, he says, “I’ll look into this, Buffy. How did everything go other than that?”

“I dunno” The despondency is back. “I’m not sure I’m ready. I felt kind of lost in Theology.”

“You would have liked Art History” Tara tells her.

“I don’t know” Buffy repeats. “I’m kind of thinking if I’m not keeping up even without the time melts, I shouldn’t be wasting money on it. Not like I’ve got much money to waste.” She pulls herself up from the slouch she’s slipped into and tells them, unenthusiastically, “I think it’s time for me to get a job.”

*****

“Son of a bitch!” Faith, returning from some errand or other, slams the door as she re-enters the house.

“Problem?” calls Giles, setting his research aside again.

“Yeah, there’ll be one once I get hold of whoever set those demons on me!”

“Demons? Are you hurt?”

A clearly unhurt Faith slouches into the living room and sinks into the couch. “No but I was in the middle of something wicked important that they completely screwed up!”

“Important in a slayer sense?” Giles asks, “And what did these demons look like?”

“Slimy roby things like all the other creeps. Disappeared when they died but the mess we made fighting sure didn’t, so there’s no way I’ll get the job now!”

“You were at a job interview?”

“Well I live here, don’t I? If the house is bleeding money, I should help out.”

Giles smiles his approval. “Where was the job?”

“Only the Doublemeat Palace. Nothing to have a parade about but it pays okay, it’s steady.” Faith puts her feet up on the new coffee table. “But there’s no way I’ll get it now because everyone else acted like they hadn’t even seen the demons, just me tearing the place apart! Stupid, fucking underworld!”

“There’ll be other jobs.”

“I guess. Hey, maybe I could try construction like Buffy?”
At that moment, Buffy enters, trailed by Xander. For a moment, Giles is alarmed by the anger on Buffy’s face, but then he realises it is not as extreme as he thought – it is just that she rarely shows strong emotion these days. “Xander” she is saying, “What was I supposed to do? If your foreman’s such a jerk –”

“No-one’s disputing that Vince is a jerk” replies Xander, hands raised in appeasement, “But did you really need to break his wrist?”

Faith asks, “You broke a guy’s wrist?”

“It was an accident” Buffy tells them. Then, glaring at Xander, “He tried to touch my butt so I swiped him away. I can’t help it if I have slayer strength.”

“He deserved it” Faith concludes.

“I…” Xander looks from slayer to slayer “okay, yeah, he deserved it, but I’ve still got to work with him every day.”

Buffy sits down beside Faith. “I don’t” she tells him. And then, to Faith and Giles, “I got fired.”

“That’s completely unfair!” Giles turns to Xander. “Who’s this man’s supervisor? He can’t fire Buffy for acting in self-defence!”

“Giles, she broke his wrist!” says Xander, “We’re lucky he’s not suing.” Glancing at Buffy, he adds, “And he’s only not because I said I saw what happened which – much as I believe you, Buff – kind of a lie. Best to let it go.”

“Definitely” agrees Buffy, “Because no way am I going back there.” Leaning back, she tells the ceiling, “I can’t believe I died saving those creeps from hell.”

Giles, Faith and Xander exchange a nervous glance. Faith tries, “Well if you want some actual hell beasts to cheer you up, I got attacked at the Doublemeat Palace.”

Xander takes a seat. “Yeah, I hear staff morale is really low at the moment.”

“By demons” Faith glares. “But I think some human summoned them – There was a van outside that sped off real quick when I got out there.”

“The same human who hired the M’Fashnik?” Giles guesses.

Buffy adds, “And the same human who made time go loopy – That didn’t feel like a demon thing.”

“So we’ve got some dark warlock running around?” asks Xander.

“Great” Buffy mutters. “Just what I need.”

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“I liked the second one better” Ethan tells Giles.

“Second one?” Balancing the phone on his shoulder, Giles flips back through pages in the brochure the estate agent gave him, asking, “Isn’t that a little close to the road up to the mall? Traffic could be an issue.”

“Yes, but we could get a bigger bed in there…Oh, or there’s this one off Main Street.”
“Which one?” Giles flips a few pages forward. “I can’t see any off Main Street.”

“Rupert, if you’d just get online, we could see the same thing!” Ethan is in an internet café in Exeter, and talking on his mobile for good measure, if good is measured by being aggressively modern.

Tersely, Giles replies, “The brochure is perfectly adequate.”

“Fine, fine.” Ethan huffs. “Of course, I am still in favour of the one with the hot tub.”

“Of course you are, dear.”

“No need to sound so dismissive, Rupert. Think of all the fun we could have with a hot tub.”

This may be as good an opening as he’s going to get, so Giles sets aside longings of Ethan being with him, hot tub or none, to say, “Actually I was thinking we should lend some money to Buffy. Or perhaps not lend so much as, err, grant. Give.”

He can hear Ethan scowl, even before his partner says, “Well. I prefer my fantasy. You realise it has hydromassage jets?”

Giles takes a deep breath for patience and adds, “Just tell me what you think?”

“How much money are we talking about?”

Giles tells him. And then, at Ethan’s hiss, asks, “Remember when you paid your deposit on the costume shop from the joint account? Or that time I came home to find the most the house full of silver-secreting unicorns that turned out not to secrete? Or the surprise holiday to Malta in which the price was the most surprising part?

“All right, alright! Point taken!” There is a sulky silence. “The unicorns weren’t that bad, you know.”

Giles lets that slide. “So, what do you think? I’m sure it will help her get back on her feet a little. Rely on herself more in the long run.”

“Well, you’re her watcher. Forward slash father-figure.”

“I’m not sure the latter is particularly helpful to her right now.” Giles replies with a frown. “She’s been a little over-reliant on me. On the others too, but…”

“Anyone would think she’s been in hell.”

“Well, she has been coping remarkably well in the circumstances. But a little financial assistance might give her the breathing space to manage even better, hopefully on her own. A slayer always is alone, when it really comes down to it.”

Ethan makes a little noncommittal noise, but Giles isn’t sure whether he is actually withholding his opinion or whether someone is walking past in the internet café. Ethan says, “I suppose it will mean she doesn’t have to make all these decisions about what to do with her life right away.”

“Making decisions is helpful, Ethan. She needs to reclaim her life.”
“It seems a little soon, dear. If I’d been in hell, I’d want some time off. And intensive therapy.”

“The latter sadly isn’t possible” Giles replies. “And time spent dwelling can quickly become a quagmire.”

“Well, it still seems soon” Ethan argues, “And a lot to ask in any case: No-one has a plan for their life. Life just happens while you go along.”

“I’m not asking her to plan her entire life; only to choose her next steps, and having some money will make that easier. Ensure that staying in college remains an option, for example. So what do you think?”

A sigh hisses down the phone, and Ethan says, “Alright, I’m in.”

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

“Oh, and Anya and I were wondering – Could Buffy work in the shop if she decides against college? Just as something to occupy herself unless she takes to it. Anya ran the figures and you could pay another employee.”

“This is on top of the grant?” Ethan’s voice holds doubt, but he audibly shakes it from his tone as he adds, “Well, yes, I suppose so. Just don’t work her too hard, Rupert. She’s been through the wringer.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Giles can think of little else these days but what Buffy is going through. Hopefully a job among friends will help.

*****

Buffy seems keen enough to learn on her first day. Seems is perhaps the operative word, but even a pretence can be healing if one sticks at it, so Giles smiles encouragingly before settling into his research. The Daidalos Chest earns a mention in a few books from the restricted section but details on how exactly it worked are vague. Certainly with the right spell, it could be used to create a demon army, but there were other, subtler tricks as well, and how any of it could be done seems to have been lost. Or perhaps deemed best not recorded.

As to where it is, there is no word, and Giles starts to wonder if some advice from those more practiced at finding darker mystical items wouldn’t go amiss. He rises to fetch the register of the shop’s suppliers and finds Buffy is completing a sale, organising the shipping of a Mummy’s Hand. Pleased for her, Giles is ready with his praise as soon as the customer exits, but she still hands Anya her name badge, and tears the bell off the wall as she leaves.

*****

“I was wondering” says Giles as he, Buffy and Faith head back homewards after patrol, “if either of you could come with me to the docks – I want to meet with one of Ethan’s suppliers.”

“At night?” asks Buffy, “You couldn’t just get him over to the shop in the day?”

“I’m not sure he’s that sort of supplier. He’s only provided a few of the more potent items.”

“Maybe he’ll know about whoever’s been messing with us.”
“Yeah” agrees Faith. “It’s a witch or a warlock, whoever it is. Especially with the time mojo.” She shakes her head. “Pretty creepy.”

“Yep” Buffy agrees. “Not that you being sent demons wasn’t creepy too. Just, you know, the regular kind of creep factor.”

Giles concludes, “Either way, incredibly dangerous.”

“Mine didn’t matter in the end” Faith announces, “I still got the job.”

Buffy stares. “They think you trashed the place up and you still got the job?”

“B, it’s the Doublemeat Palace, it’s not like you have to be the queen! ’Sides, they’re short staffed.”

“Congratulations, Faith” Giles tells her.

Faith shrugs again. “It’s not many hours. I couldn’t fit much in what with the slaying and the sleeping in the morning. But it’ll be some money coming in. So you don’t need to run out and get a job, B.”

“Yes” Giles adds, “you could go back to college if, if you wanted.” It is out his mouth before he can stop himself.


Faith says, “It might go better with no time crap.”

“I guess” says Buffy again. To Giles, she adds, “You think that would be the best option?”

“It’s not for me to say, Buffy.”

“But you did say. You said I could go back. So that’s what you think would work, right?”

Reluctantly, Giles admits, “I do think you deserve an education.”

“Sure. Okay.”

There is a pause then, while Giles and Faith each seem to process the oddness of the uncertainty in Buffy’s tone and she does not. To break it, as well as genuinely wanting some back up, Giles asks, “So are either of you able to accompany me to the docks?”

“Sure” says Faith, “I’m up for more action. B?”

“Um” Buffy glances at Giles apologetically. “Actually, if Faith can go with you, I might head home. I could do with an early night. Or as early as we get.”

*****

“He shouldn’t be here. His presence taints us.”

“The child wants her friend present, Agatha.”

Agatha, a stately witch of mature years, grumbles something in response that Ethan is rather glad he doesn’t catch. Beside him, Willow murmurs, “Just ignore them.”
“I don’t have much choice, do I?” he whispers back. For all the Coven are laughable in some ways, their power certainly isn’t, even if there is just the three of them here on this night-time beach – Miss Harkness, Agatha and an ethereal looking person referred to only as “The Seer”.

Besides, what does Willow think he’s going to do? Start a magical duel? Ethan would rather stick to being sullen and snarky. Safer and less effort. Really, standing on a freezing cold beach in the middle of the night is taking up all the effort he cares to summon right now. “Couldn’t your guide have picked a better place? A nice, cosy pub perhaps?”

“Sorry Ethan – I know this is the place. I dreamed it.”

“So I heard.” Ethan hasn’t completely woken up from the phone call that shattered his own, more ordinary dreams and summoned him here, to this straggly little beach and its black, lapping waves, visible only by the moonlight bouncing off them. “How long will we have to wait?”

“Not long. I can feel her.”

Ethan glances around, wonders if this her will be corporeal, or if she will be obliged to possess one of them. “Look, Willow –”

Suddenly, Willow grips his wrist, tenses. Following her gaze out across the Celtic Sea, Ethan becomes aware of a wave a little different from the general moon-dappled mass. It is self-contained, not strung across the coast but swelling to a crest the height and width of a door – and then opening inwards, water tucking itself against water to create folds not unlike the petals of a fanning bud. Light shines from within it, just touching the humans waiting on the beach. There is a hint of a breeze, somehow simultaneously warm and cold, sweet scented. The wave – the door – stops before the normal waves on either side of it rush to meet the shore, the water flowing around itself unnaturally to disgorge a figure. A woman. For want of a better word. She appears to be dressed in nothing but waves and light, and holds some sphere of deep, swirling darkness in front of her, untouched by the strange light. At first it seems she has no face, but then the light swells enough that they can see that the blankness across her head is in fact a mass of feathers. Two orange-orbed slits appear in these as her eyes open. Owl’s eyes. She calls across to Willow, in a voice that somehow sounds exactly like darkness would sound if it spoke. “You are the knife that split the world, the mother of the new order, the summoner of armies, the weaver of the future, the giver of death and life?”

“Err, well, I just go by Willow really.”

“Come. I have much to show you.”

There is an almost awkward pause then, in which Willow seems to wait for the woman’s wave-door to come closer. When it doesn’t, she says “Oh” and steps forwards herself. Ethan whispers, “You don’t have to go with her.”

Willow pauses. “Yes, I do.” And with that, she heads towards the waiting figure, pausing at the shoreline to slip off her shoes, and winching as her feet encounter the cold water. Ethan wants to call her back, but he knows it is pointless. So he stays quiet and watches Willow wade out into the sea.

*****

“I don’t know how much you could see” says Willow the following morning. “Actually, I don’t know how much I could see – I think most of that place, you get through a sense I don’t have.”
“All I saw was that wave come crashing down on you” Ethan tells her. “You’ve got to stop disappearing off this plane, you know. I’ve got enough grey hairs as it is.”

They are in a little study, the warmest of the rooms on the edges of the ground floor, the Coven being unwilling to admit Ethan deeper into their sanctum. There is a little electric fire going, incongruous amid the Victorian furniture and leaded windows. Ethan asks, “So what did you see?”

“Just darkness and some other things kind of related but without names. And I could hear a lot of feathers rustling. I think maybe birds can get into that place. At least, I hope it was birds.” She pulls the blanket around her shoulders tighter about her. Wherever she was, it wasn’t a place that has ever had cause to worry about hypothermia. Expression sobering, she adds, “It’s old. The devouring thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked what was coming and she showed me. I didn’t see it or anything, but I felt it. It’s big power, ancient.”

“The hellmouth?”

“Maybe. I mean, maybe that’s its way in. But that thing that came out of there that time? I think what’s coming could make that its pet.” Willow sighs deeply. “I let it in, Ethan.”

Ethan takes his own turn to sigh. This is Willow, the sweet child, and a part of him wants to tell her everything will be alright. But they don’t know that it will be, so he says, “Well, you knew there’d be a price.”

“I really hoped it would be just me that pays it. But it will be Buffy too, won’t it?”

It won’t just be Buffy, Ethan thinks: It will be everyone standing in this thing’s way. Rupert, stupid, brilliant hero that he is, will pay, and so, no doubt, will some random, hapless innocents in the wrong place at the wrong time. But perhaps all that is too big for Willow to face right now. He asks, “What else did she say?”

“She said I need the essence. I’m still not clear what that means, but Miss Harkness seemed to. And she said I have to stand by the hand wields the gift. That will be Buffy, I guess. She said I have to stand by her no matter what, which, no problem, because she’s my best friend. If she’ll still have me. And she’ll have to fight it.”

“Maybe that’s how it balances out: Raise a slayer, and she can fight whatever else rises.”

Willow frowns. “Giver of death and life” she muses.

*****

“I shouldn’t have told her to go back to college. It should be her choice.”

Faith glances at Giles and replies, “Well it is. You didn’t tell her – You just said what you think.”

“I’m worried she’s depending too much on my help since she…came back. And then I go and interfere in a decision like this!”

Faith holds up a hand and checks the way is clear before they cross an open stretch of the docks. “You were just trying to help.”
They make their way in and out of pools of floodlit concrete. Watching Faith, Giles feels a little pang – She should be continuing her education too, not condemned to the low wages and low rewards offered by the fast food industry, and yet he had congratulated her on the Doublemeat Palace job. For Buffy he wants more, but why not for Faith?

Because Faith is content as she is, he tells himself, and because Faith’s history of a life outside her calling is far less promising than Buffy’s. Really, they are lucky she is here at all, fighting on their side. Or, not fighting, not tonight with any luck.

Ethan’s supplier has arrived by car, which he parked well away from the floodlights, in an area walled in on two sides by shipping containers to create a long passage way, fragmented here and there on one side like a row of broken teeth. Approaching, Giles asks, “Bleddyn? I’m from the Magic Box.”

The man – or not man, Giles realises, not quite – looks him up and down. “You’re not Rayne” he grunts. He is standing by the open door of his vehicle, as though ready to leave in a hurry. Giles hopes this is at least a sign that he is more likely to pick retreat over violence.

“Nope” says Faith, coming forward. “He’s in England, so sucks to be him. But we’re here to do business.”

“You’re not the only one. I wait for another tonight” Bleddyn tells her.

Faith tilts her head. “Really? Who?”

“I advise we make this fast. It tends to end badly when my clients meet.”

Stepping forward, Giles can’t help glancing at the open car door, but he can’t see what is within, senses no dark power. Then again, he is less in tune with such things as he used to be. He says, “We appreciate you agreeing to meet at short notice.”

Bleddyn shrugs. “I was here anyway.” His horns, Giles notes, are visible even in this poor light when one looks for them.

Faith adds, “To meet this guy you don’t want to tell us about?”

“I don’t tell any of my clients about each other. I’m a professional.”

A professional moving in what circles, Giles wonders, to make such a rule necessary. He doesn’t like to think about Ethan having dealings with this person, alone and without back up. Or at all.

Faith asks, “I guess you wouldn’t tell us if you’ve been selling anything that could make time play on repeat, then?”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Not even if a slayer was the target?”

Bleddyn examines Faith more closely and takes a small step closer to the car. He says, “I don’t sell time magic. When was this? I arrived in town yesterday after a month away.”

“Says you.”

“Says my credit card history too.” Turning his attention to Giles, Bleddyn grunts, “What is it you want?”
“Information really. I’m trying to trace the Daidalos Chest.”

Giles half-expects Bleddyn to laugh, but he – or perhaps it – merely shrugs. “Best leave that where it is.”

“Do you know where it is?” asks Giles, just as Faith asks, “How come?”

Bleddyn answers her question first: “It has a tendency to end badly for those who wield it.” He pauses, then concedes, “Worse for those it’s used against.”

“But it hasn’t been used by anyone for a while” Giles prompts. “According to my research, it disappeared long ago.”

“Your research has told you what humans know” replies the dealer, confirming what Giles hoped might be so – the chest isn’t as lost as it seems. He asks, “And what do demons know?”

Bleddyn nods meaningfully. “It’s out there.” For a moment, it seems he is speaking figuratively, but then it hits Giles that the phrasing is literal; the chest is hidden somewhere in the direction the supplier nodded – back towards Sunnydale.

Faith has caught on too. “In a grave?” she asks. “That’s usually where old crap turns up.”

“It was last held by one not low enough for a human grave. The great Serphanion had it hidden until he rises once more to reclaim these lands.”

“Yeah” mutters Faith, “Good luck with that.”

“Hidden where?” asks Giles.

“In the earth, guarded by mystical barriers and curses. It would take skill to lift them. Many have tried.”

Giles nods, digesting this. If all human information stops long ago, then those seeking the chest now must be demons. Best to beat them to it. “I don’t suppose any of these questers thought to draw maps?”

“I don’t know” admits Bleddyn. “If I found one, the price would reflect the rarity.”

“Name your price.”

Bleddyn names it. Giles bites back a curse. After all, he doesn’t have much choice, if the weapon is to remain out of demonic hands. “Very well. And I’ll be wanting information about these curses too.”

“Fuck” says Faith, “Screw the pipes – we could have had the whole kitchen refitted for that!”

“The Watchers’ Council will pay” Giles says, as much to her as Bleddyn. “They’ll be keen that this thing stays out of demon hands.”

Demon though he may be, Bleddyn takes a mercenary approach to this. “I’ll expect expenses paid too.”

“As you wish.”

“And a down payment: Five hundred, cash.”
Faith shakes her head. “All that green just sitting in the Council’s bank account waiting for you to find some fancy box, but when Buffy needs help, no, sorry, it can’t be done! Sons of bitches!”

Giles pulls out his wallet. Lucky that he thought to go to the bank today, in readiness for such a request. “I quite agree” He frowns, and tells Faith, “With the first sentence, that is. My mother was a lovely woman.”

“I didn’t mean literally. It’s an expression.”

Bleddyn nods. “Like I’ll cream your head if you don’t hand it over.”

“Exactly” Faith rejoins, “Or I’ll kick the shit out of you. It’s just something you say.”

“Not in polite society” Giles chides.

Faith shrugs. “I’m not in polite society. I’m standing next to a demon in the docks at night.” To Bleddyn, she adds, “No offence.”

He simply nods and heads to his car. “You’d best clear out” he tells them. “Next one’s on his way.”

“The Daidalos Chest is hardly some box, to be fair” Giles comments as they turn to go. “It’s an incredibly dangerous vessel for dark magic.”

“Dark enough that they can spend that money on it but me and B have to work for nothing?”

“You don’t work for nothing, Faith, you work to keep things like the Daidalos Chest from the wrong hands.”

“No, I work to slay demons.” Again, Faith glances at Bleddyn and adds, “No offence.”

“It’s rumoured to have the power to create a demon army” Giles points out. “As well as other tricks we’d be happier knowing nothing about.”

“So wh – Wait” Faith slips into a predatory stance and to a gap among the shipping containers. “Who’s that?”

“My next client” Bleddyn tells her. “You best leave.”

Faith peers into the darkness. “Doesn’t sound like a demon.”

“Neither is Rayne. I sell to all sorts.”

Faith ignores him, breaking into a curse as the figure emerges. “What the hell! Warren?”

The young man stops short and glares at Faith, and then at Bleddyn. He asks the dealer, “I thought you said we’d be alone?”

“We will be” is the reply. “They’re just leaving.”

“Yes” says Giles. “Come along, Faith.”

Faith follows as Giles leaves, but not before she snarls over her shoulder, “This had better not be about another robot! I catch you doing that again, you won’t have the right parts to play with it!”

The young man looks shaken, but retorts, “Maybe you’re just jealous I didn’t make one of you! I
could you know!”

Faith makes a crude but admittedly eloquent gesture and spits on the ground at his feet. Following Giles away, she mutters, “Sorry assed little freak!”

Once he is sure they are out of earshot, Giles asks, “I take it that was the chap who built the robots?”

“Yep. Not sure I want to know what he could get up to with the stuff that demon guy probably sells.”

“I’m not sure I do either” Giles admits. “But he is human. Unless he threatens anyone directly, we don’t have any right to use violence against him.”

“Yeah, because I bet what he’s buying right now is a spell to summon kittens!”

“Sadly, dark magic has its draw for certain people.”

“But we can’t send everyone to a fancy retreat in Devon, can we? So what do we do?”

“We keep an eye on it. Not much else we can do, I’m afraid.”

Faith rolls her eyes. Giles asks, “It couldn’t be him testing you and Buffy, could it?”

Faith shakes her head. “Nah, even Warren’s got better things to do. And wouldn’t he send robots? Or robot demons or something. He’s a one trick spineless pony.”

“You’re certain of that?”

“Pretty much. He’d have to know we’d kick his ass.”

“Yes” Giles murmurs, but he feels himself frown as he remembers himself at that young man’s age, how convinced he was that magic would give him power over any imaginable foe. Of course, he’d have never taken a slayer on, but he had grown up knowing their strength. Perhaps this Warren, in his ignorance, views things differently. Yes, they’ll have to keep an eye on him. Ow is another matter. When it comes to human enemies, things can get distressingly complicated, and that is the last thing Buffy needs right now.

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Returning home, they find, “Tara, what brings you here so late?”

“I’m b-babysitting” Tara replies, rising from the sofa to meet them. “Dawn sitting. She’s asleep.”

“Buffy is?” asks Giles.

“N-no, Dawn is. Buffy went out.”

Faith frowns. “Is there trouble?”

“No” Tara wrings her hands nervously. “Sh-she went out with Spike. To um, to unwind, she said. She said she was feeling like a night out after all her nights in, um, in a coffin.”

Faith shudders. “She’s really got to get over this whole creepy jokes thing.”

Privately, Giles agrees that the gallows humour is unnerving, but he says, “She’s just processing
everything she’s been through of late. Tara, thank you for coming, but Faith and I can take over now. Could I drive you home?”

*****

That night, someone inserts a key into the front door with a fumbling sound that takes Giles right back to London in the seventies and Randall rolling in drunk after days of being missing in action. He goes to open the door just as Buffy manages by herself, only to fall against him. “Oh. Giles.” She pushes off from his chest and stumbles, shoots a hand out to grab at him for balance.

“Hello, Buffy” Giles steadies her, glares over her shoulder at her escort. “Spike.”

“’Lo, watcher.” Spike slides into the house behind Buffy. He is visibly drunk too, but nothing like as bad as Buffy.

Buffy twists awkwardly to tell him, “Spike, shut the door. We have to keep it closed…” She draws a shaky breath, “…because demons. There’s always those. Heh – rhymes. Closed, those. That rhymes, right?”

Spike shuts the door. Buffy swings her wavering gaze to Giles to add, “Oh – we found the demon that did the time thing, and the demons in the Doublemeat Palace!”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I slew him.” Buffy pulls away from Giles’ grasp and staggers back a few steps, colliding with Spike, who catches her before she can fall forward. “Hi Spike.” To Giles, she adds, “Kicked him actually, but it slew him.”

“So while Buffy was fighting while under the influence, what were you doing, Spike? Buying the next round?”

“No” says Buffy, “We just took the bottle with us. No rounds. Which is good, because dizzy.”

“The girl needed a night out” says Spike defensively. “Just a chance to forget about everything for a bit. And we found the demon, didn’t we?”

“We did” says Buffy, disentangling herself from him. “And there’s always demons. And. Sorry. Not…not feeling so great…” Buffy makes a hasty and mostly in-a-straight-line dash up the stairs and Giles hears the bathroom door slam. He rounds on Spike angrily, only to find the vampire has moved as fast as vampires can in an emergency – which is very fast – and is now halfway up the stairs himself. “Spike, leave her!”

“Just bring some water, watcher.”

*****

“I thought slayers had a stronger constitution than the rest of us?” Spike pushes a stray strand of hair from Buffy’s face as she lolls unhappily against the side of the bath.

“That depends how much she drank” Giles replies. “Spike, get off her.” He swipes the vampire’s hand away.

“What?” Spike retorts. “Can’t have her getting her hair in it!”
“He’s right, Giles” Buffy sits up straighter, seeming to come back to herself. “There’s been enough gross here tonight.” Eyes widening suddenly, she asks, “You think Dawn heard?”

“Sweet bit’s asleep, love. I can hear her heartbeat from here.”

“Good.”

Handing her the glass, Giles asks, “Do you think you could move now?”

Buffy considers this. “Yep. Definitely not motivated to stay here.” She is steady enough on her feet now, but she lets Spike hold her as he did throughout her bout of vomiting. Only when they are at her door does she say, “You should get back to the basement. Giles looks like he’s about to take your head off.” She stares at Giles. “Or is that me?”

Giles shakes his head. “I’m not angry with you Buffy.”

Spike adds, “Rupert can’t judge, what with his glory days.”

Giles tells him, “I’ll speak to you downstairs. There’s something I need to give Buffy first.”

*****

“What did you give her?” Spike is waiting for him at the kitchen table.

“A cheque” Giles replies. “So she doesn’t have to worry about money at least.”

“Bout time you did something on that front. Some of us are looking for honest employment, you know.”

“Yes. How is that going?”

“Not that well” admits Spike after drunken beat. “Don’t know that many honest people.”

“What about the Magic Box?” Giles suggests. “Now Buffy has quit, there’s an opening. Of course, we’d have to rejig hours to avoid sunlight, but it’s doable. That way you can pull your weight while you insist on living here, and with Faith’s income and the cheque, that should be a weight off Buffy’s mind.” And off his, Giles reasons: With Spike around, he’ll worry less about Ethan dealing with his demon clients and suppliers late at night.

Spike might have made more of a show of resistance had he been sober, but he is not. “Alright” he says, “You’re on.”

“I expect you to take it seriously, Spike. Show up on time, and do whatever Anya asks. And Ethan, once he’s back.”

“Obviously I will” Spike grumbles. Then, when he finds Giles is still watching him, “It’s for Buffy, isn’t it?”
As she enters the house after her first shift at the Doublemeat Palace, Faith announces: “Starting today, I’m a vegetarian.” She eyes her waiting dinner speculatively. “Except maybe for pizza.”

Dawn pipes up, “A pizzatarian.”

Buffy asks, “Is it that bad?”

“The training video was like a really intense patrol” Faith replies. “But the rest was okay.” Sitting down and biting into her pepperoni pizza, she tells Giles. “Kind of creepy though.”

“Creepy how?” he asks.

“Just kind of…I dunno. Like people are having the life sucked out of them.” She shrugs. “Then again, it is a fast food joint.” Turning to Buffy, she adds, “And I got overtime already – Halloween.”

“What? But…That’s our night off.”

“I don’t mind.” Faith shrugs again. “Never really one for the whole night off deal, and this’ll give me a chance to snoop around, check there’s no literal soul-sucking. You could stop by though” Faith indicates the three of them “Check I’m not being paranoid.”

“You think there really is something supernatural afoot?” asks Giles.

“Dunno. Probably am just being paranoid.” To Buffy, Faith adds, “But it’d help with the boreds. Plus, I can give you free food. You know, if Manny isn’t looking.”

“Sorry Faith” Buffy offers a rare smile “I’d kinda like for my one night off this year to be spent somewhere that’s not the place that almost made you vegetarian.”


“Not a kid” replies Dawn, forcing a smile, “And I’m going over to Janice’s.”

“Ah, yeah, for a sleepover. Definitely not a kid.” Ignoring, or perhaps not seeing, Dawn’s frown, Faith turns to Giles, who replies, “I’m viewing a few flats tomorrow. I could come over afterwards if there really is something occult going on, but otherwise, I’m not sure having me turn up will help with the boredom.”

Faith considers this. “I think you don’t see how boring it can get” she concludes. “’Sides I don’t know for sure there’s nothing evil. It’s your job to find them, my job to squish em.”

“I thought you were being paranoid?” Dawn seems to be trying to inject disapproval into her tone.

Faith is immune to it. “Don’t know for sure, do I? Might as well check it out, something to do.”

Buffy, meanwhile, is staring thoughtfully at Giles, finally coming out with, “You’re missing Halloween at the Magic Box?”

“I am sorry to” says Giles, who isn’t, “but Spike will be there in the more shaded section and I really do need to start viewing some flats eventually.” This, at least, is true. Even without Ethan. It will be strange, organising their move without him, but Giles doesn’t want to be a crutch Buffy
doesn’t need any longer, or for Ethan to have to come back to yet more house sharing.

“No you don’t” Buffy tells him glumly. “There’s no hurry.”

“You’ll be better off without me under your feet.”

Buffy doesn’t look convinced, but she changes topic with, “Can I at least come with you? Be a second pair of eyes, make sure you don’t get some terrible place with mould or poltergeists.”

It crosses Giles’ mind to say no – that she is so keen to spend time with him is further proof of her insecurity – but a slayer’s instincts may genuinely be useful in scoping out the Sunnydale housing market. Besides, the prospect of a day with Buffy all to himself is too much to resist. “Thank you, Buffy, that would be lovely.”

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None of the flats turn out to be quite right. One does indeed have some lesser demon lingering in a communal storage area, one has windows that fail to mute the drone of the traffic outside and one has an unreliable air-conditioning system. Where the other two are wanting is harder to pinpoint – possibly it is the lack of Ethan to help Giles decide.

Buffy, for her part, is quiet and uncharacteristically meek, but she smiles at the right points in the mostly one sided conversation, like a well-rehearsed actor play. It is better, far better, than the hollow-eyed stare she has been sporting when she thinks Giles isn’t looking.

“I guess we can’t fight it any more” she admits as they reach the centre of town.”

“No” agrees Giles, “I don’t believe we can.”

“It’s horrible though. Can’t we avoid it somehow?”

“I’m sorry Buffy – We did tell Anya we’d help if we finished in time.” With that, Giles leads the way to the Magic Box and they brace themselves for the melee within.

The rest of the day passes in a till-trilling, gift-wrapping frenzy. Spike is sent down to the basement soon after their arrival and Buffy spends much of the time traipsing between him and Giles, who is on till duty, fetching items that are not kept on the shop floor and which Spike has helped her locate. Giles is aware of no small amount of conversation passing between slayer and vampire while he waits for these deliveries, and envies them a cushy job.

The one time that Buffy is briefly roped into helping with customers in the shop proper, she returns to the counter to tell Giles, “Slayer senses are super-awkward sometimes.”

“Oh?” Giles hands over a paper bag of candles to a departing customer and tallies up a selection of ointments and talismans for the next.

“Oh?” Giles hands over a paper bag of candles to a departing customer and tallies up a selection of ointments and talismans for the next.

“Yeah.” Buffy is leaning with her back to the queue, doing nothing to help. Much as he wants her to get back to her old self, Giles can’t bring himself to reprimand her. Besides, Buffy’s old self was not famous for doing anything she didn’t want to do. She tells him, “I don’t mean to eavesdrop, I just hear. Awkward, freaky things like Xander and Anya fighting.”

Giles scans the shop as he wraps a glass talisman in bubble wrap. No sign of the couple in question, though they may simply be lost in the crowd. “They do bicker” he says, and thinks fondly of Ethan.
“No” says Buffy, “This was a row.”

“That is awkward, then” Giles commiserates. For some reason he finds himself thinking of how awkward it has been for him recently walking into any room that already contains Buffy and Spike, but of course the comparison is ridiculous.

With the air of one who has to offload, Buffy tells him, “Anya’s angry that Xander wants to wait until Willow and Ethan are back to announce something.”

“I see. Well, it’s um, it’s none of our business, but that does sound like the sort of thing that could be taken out of context.”

“I guess.” Buffy watches Giles open the till, retrieve change, snap it shut again. “You think she’s pregnant?”

“Buffy.”

“Sorry. Do you?”

“Who’s pregnant?” Anya joins them.


Anya shrugs. “Rather her than me. I can’t imagine wanting to be stuck with a brat when I could be doing this.” She glides off happily towards a group of customers perusing a display of rather expensive items.

“Okay” says Buffy, “So, not pregnant. At least, I hope not. Also roller-skates? Probably not recommended by Dr Spock.”

Giles accepts a fistful of notes for a large book. “Passions?” he asks, frowning at how quickly she reached the excuse. “Are you sure you wouldn’t be better off going to classes with Tara than spending your days watching rot with Spike?”

“I don’t always watch rot with Spike. I hung out with you today.” Buffy glances away briefly and adds, quietly, “Anyway, Passions kind of reminds me of mom.”

“Buffy, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know I need to get me a life now I’ve, well, got me a life.”

“There’s no hurry. There’s no right way to do this.”

“Thanks.” Buffy glances around at the crowded shop and is quiet for a while. Then she asks, “So… Does that mean I can go off and find that life now while you guys man the shop?”

“Don’t push it.”

*****

“They’re going to do a spell on me” Willow tells Ethan. “A blessing.”

Ethan sighs. The Coven is known for its blessings, which aren’t as benign a process as they sound. “Do you know what it will involve?”

“Not really, except that they’ll do a spell on me. Or, not on me, but for me. Into me. Kinda.”
“Wonderfully specific.”

Willow issues a look that is one part exasperated and two parts lost. “It’s hard to explain. Even Miss Harkness struggled. Something about the true essence of magic. That’s what the spirit guide meant according to the seer. Or at least, that’s the closest they can say. It’s not really something that fits into words, but apparently that’s the nearest translation.”

“Translation from what, exactly?”

“Magic from before language, I guess.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. Scary big. And right before Halloween.”

“That’s promising really” Ethan reassures her. “Halloween is safer than other nights unless you’re in a horror movie.”

“I sometimes feel like I am.”

Ethan doesn’t like the nerves in her voice so he ignores them, focuses on practicalities. “What are they doing with it, exactly?”

“Giving it to me.” Willow’s nervous voice picks up just the faintest flicker of excitement. “Making it a part of me.”

Not unlike having a dragon or a phoenix sewn into one’s soul. Powerful and vicious and forever to be a part of Willow. “Why?” This can’t be the only way. Surely there is some other way to save the girl than to weld her to this?

“I’m not sure. Only that this seems to be what the spirit guide was saying I needed to stop…Well, you know, whatever I let in.” Willow swallows, frowns. “Will I still be me after? Or will it swallow me up?” Before Ethan can reassure her, she adds, “I guess it doesn’t matter really. I knew there’d be a price. And Buffy’s okay – that’s what matters.”

*****

“You okay, B?”

“Yeah” Buffy, tired from the afternoon in the shop, seems to make an effort to focus in on the atmosphere of the Doublemeat Palace. An atmosphere which, in Giles’ opinion, no-one should have to suffer. Not that there is anything supernatural about it so far as he can tell – more’s the pity, honestly. It would lend the place some character.

Buffy concurs. “I don’t think there’s anything weird here. Just subsistencey.”

“Sub whaty?” asks Faith, leaning across the counter.

“Sistence. According to Anya.”

Faith hums a puzzled hum and turns to Giles. “Watcher man?”

“There’s nothing so far as I can tell” Giles admits, “but I don’t have your senses. You say the place is having an adverse effect on the employees?”

“Yup. Making them mindless drones. And this guy Michael didn’t show up for his shift today.
Seems like that’s a pattern.”

“People are disappearing?” asks Buffy, “Why didn’t you tell us people are disappearing?”

“Because it’s a fast food place, B. Back in MacDonald’s in Boston, I was lucky to see the same face two weeks running.” Faith frowns, then concedes, “I guess it was sudden though. Even for a burger joint.” She checks over her shoulder, but no-one else seems to be around. “Thing I keep thinking, though, is what’s in the secret ingredient? Chicken place I worked at way back had this whole secret ingredient line, but really, if you worked there, you knew it was just yesterday’s grease they tipped in –”

“– Ew –”

“– But here it’s like it’s actually a secret.”

Giles suggests, “It could turn out to be a consumer protection issue rather than something a slayer needs to concern herself with. There’s bound to be a regulatory body you could contact if it turns out to be something untoward. Yesterday’s grease, for example.”

Faith nods, considering. The phone rings behind her and there is the sound of a co-worker answering. This person – who certainly does look as though her soul is being sapped by the place – appears presently to call over, “Faith? Call for you” As Faith exchanges a puzzled glace with Buffy and saunters over, the woman adds, “Manny won’t like it: You’re not supposed to take personal calls here.”

“I’m sure it’s business” Faith replies, taking the phone. “What?” she greets. Then, “Spike? Yeah, she’s here. What is it?...Oh, shit. Yeah, but it’s Halloween...Okay, hold on.” Faith puts her hand over the receiver and bellows, “Hey, Buffy? Dawn’s out being a teenager – Janice told her mom they’d be at yours!”

“What?!” Buffy stares at her, and then at Giles. Faith asks, “Yeah, Janice’s mom gave Spike an earful about not checking but I don’t think it’s playing on his lack-of-conscience.”

“I better go find her.”

Into the receiver, Faith says, “She’s on her way.” Putting the phone down, she yells, “Spike says he’ll meet you outside the shop, but, B, it’s Halloween – try not to freak.”

“I’ll help” Giles reassures Buffy. “She’s probably found some party to sneak into. Or perhaps the Bronze?”

“Okay” Buffy nods. “Yes. The Bronze. I’ll go there, and you can call the gang?”

Behind them, Faith’s co-worker is saying, “Manny won’t like you taking calls here” and Faith is replying, “Yeah, well Manny’s not going to find out.”

Buffy says, “Or maybe I should go round the cemeteries? Kids might think that’s a Halloweeny place to go and I’m the one who can fight the things they might disturb on their night off.”

“I’m just saying” the co-worker is saying. Faith replies, “Well don’t.”

Giles says, “Alright, though I’m sure Dawn’s too sensible to...” He trails off. Buffy finishes, “…Go out in Sunnydale without telling us where she’ll be? Yeah, I figure that too.”

“Fuck!” Faith suddenly yells.
Giles looks over. “Really, Faith, just apologise for using the phone! It won’t happen again.”

But then Faith’s co-worker starts screaming and Faith, abandoning her, comes back over to the counter, holding out some grisly item she has apparently uncovered near one of the unpleasant machines back there. Giles and Buffy draw nearer and then recoil: It is an ear.

“Ah” manages Giles after a moment of horrified blankness. “I’ll um… I’ll stay here then and…”

“And I need to find Dawn” finishes Buffy. To Faith, she promises, “I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah” says Faith, still holding the ear away from herself. “Hurry, B. Don’t want to miss the fun.”

*****

Fun, in the end, is had by all. Or rather, by Spike and Faith, the former always enjoying a fight and the latter seeming to take no small amount of satisfaction in slaying a rather prim Shell-dweller demon who returns to the Doublemeat Palace not long into Faith and Giles’ enquiries with the express purpose of ridding the place of the “rude girl who served me earlier; No, that won’t do at all.”

On returning to the house, they find Xander, Anya and Tara just leaving, apparently keen to get out the way of the tension within. Dawn, it transpires, has spent the evening with a group of vampires and only narrowly escaped being turned by using one of the defensive spells Ethan taught her. Buffy states: “It only took six years for one of those to be useful” but Giles reads the relief on her face.

Beyond that, Buffy does not say much, leaving discipling Dawn up to Giles while she gets Faith to fill her in on events at the Doublemeat Palace. Giles knows he shouldn’t be the one to dole out punishment, but he goes through the necessary scolding nonetheless, ensuring – he hopes – that Dawn won’t be so foolish again. Then he hurries upstairs to phone Ethan, who will be just waking up by now.

*****

“You woke me up” Ethan accuses.

“Ethan, it must be well into morning over there.”

“Yes, on a Saturday” Ethan grumbles. Giles can practically hear him rubbing his eyes, stretching, sitting up a little more in bed. He longs to touch him. Ethan adds, “Anyway, I was up late – Willow was blessed by the Coven last night.”

“Oh? With what?”

“The Essence of Magic” Ethan intones, mock-grandly, though Giles can hear the awe he tries to hide. More seriously, his partner adds, “Whatever that means. I know what it means on paper, but what it means in practice is something we’ll have to wait to find out, I suppose.”

“Good Lord. How is she?”

“Still very much herself” Ethan reassures him. “A little calmer, perhaps, but I think that’s just relief.”

“Good. That’s something.” That’s something for now, at least. Giles hasn’t yet told Buffy – or Faith, for that matter – about the malevolence that seems to be headed their way. Willow’s
descriptions, conveyed by Ethan, are too vague, too distant. Buffy need not have her recovery disturbed by it yet. And for all her new life is a wonderful thing, it is a precarious as ever, and as precarious as Faith’s. Giles will let them enjoy the time they have before this new threat arrives, at least until they have a more solid basis for preparation.

“Do we have a flat yet?” asks Ethan.

“No. I’m not sure I’m confident about choosing one without you.”

“Well, you won’t need to worry about that anymore.”

“What?” Hope blooms before Giles has a chance to temper it.

Ethan’s answering smile seeps into his reply: “We’re done here. We’re coming home.”
“What if they’re not happy to see me?” Willow stops in the middle of the walkway between the luggage collection and the arrivals gate. Tired travellers sidestep, flow around her. Ethan stares at her: She has been relatively upbeat all the way through the tearful goodbyes with the Coven, the journey to London, the gruelling flight, the long changeover and the second flight. “You ask this now?”

Willow looks apologetic. “I wasn’t nervous ’til now. I thought maybe I couldn’t get nervous anymore.”

Ethan, who had been starting to think the same thing, feels a little relieved. “They’ll want to see you” he reassures her, and, taking over the dragging of her suitcase on wheels, leads the way down the aisle.

“But” asks Willow, trailing, “what if they’re still weirded out about me messing with the laws of nature?”

“They’re mostly just happy Buffy’s back. You’ve got to bear in mind, they don’t know as much about all the risks you took as you do.”

“Not yet” says Willow unhappily.

“You remember what Rupert said? You’re not to mention anyone being devoured from beneath just yet. Let things settle.”

“And then say Oh, by the way guys, I let something evil into our dimension and now we have to fight it? Yeah, that should go fine!”

“It’s not like your friends haven’t been fighting evil things for a good few years now. If it wasn’t this, it would be something else. Anyway, we don’t know how long it will take to arrive: You’ve probably got plenty of time to reintegrate yourself.”

“And…that should go brilliantly because it’s not like I tore a hole in reality and messed with life and death in a way that could have killed us all?”

It will be fine.” Ethan rounds a corner ahead of her. “They’ll forgive you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because they’re all standing over there holding a Welcome Home sign.”

*****

“Gods, I’ve missed this” murmurs Ethan between kisses. Distantly, they hear Dawn yell something down the stairs and Faith’s bellowed reply. They ignore it, focus on their little patch of this busy house: the bed, and their possessions in boxes all around. How, Giles wonders, was he ever content to lie next to Ethan without touching him? They have been touching since they got out the car last night, holding hands up the stairs like teenagers from a time it safe to hold hands in front of people. Like the children with their paramours. He replies, “I’ve missed this too.”

“Never send me away again.”
“I didn’t send you anywhere, Ethan: You wanted to go. It was your idea.”

“Which you agreed with! Rupert, I depend on you to tell me when I’m about to do something stupid like strand myself if Devon.”

They share a smile and kisses devolve into hugging, then, to cuddling. Giles isn’t entirely surprised: Three times in one morning would be getting a little excessive at their age, and it’s becoming tiresome trying to keep quiet about it so as not to disturb the house’s other occupants.

Ethan smiles at him. “Thank you for bringing the others last night. It made a big difference to Willow, that they all came.”

“It was not problem. They mostly behaved themselves in the car. Why – Was Willow worried?”

“A little, at the last minute.”

“Well it seems that everyone is prepared to give her a chance.” Though Buffy and Dawn were both subdued through Xander’s noisy greeting and Tara’s embrace. As, Giles has to admit, were Anya and Faith. But then, Faith never was especially close to Willow, and Anya understands just what was done. Buffy has been a little distant with everyone since her return from hell – Lord knows the poor girl can’t help that – and Dawn may have simply been following her lead. Since Halloween, she has been keen to please Buffy in an attempt to gain a level of attention that is still lacking. Perhaps when they move out, Buffy will feel an obligation to her sister that she doesn’t seem to feel with Giles in the house. Giles says, “Now that you’re back, we can start looking at flats more easily.”

“It was easy before” says Ethan, “All you needed to do was take photos and put them online.”

“Ah, yes, and once I’d accomplished that mere feat, I could have sprouted wings and popped over the Atlantic to tell you all about it.”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “There’s no reason you couldn’t learn it, Rupert. Now Willow’s back, she could teach you.”

“Now Willow’s back, there’s no need.”

“We do have friends back home, remember? We could send them pictures.”

Giles nods grudgingly, more in acknowledgement that yes, they do have friends at home, whom Ethan – thanks to a few day trips to London – has had the luxury of seeing recently, than in agreement that yes, he’ll learn to send photos online. Whatever happened to a straightforward description in a letter or on the back of a postcard?

It is odd thinking about home now. Losing Buffy had been the worst experience of his life – which, if Giles thinks back to a certain night, a certain spell, a certain swing of a sword, which he never does, is a title with some competition – but it had also planted dimly in his mind the idea that their time in Sunnydale is finite. That idea, with Buffy gone and Faith still under his care, had been horrific – he couldn’t lose another one – but now, with both his slayers safe and Ethan so recently in London, he can’t help but feel a little nostalgic for home. The events that would lead to it are safely theoretical again.

He ignores it. Perhaps if things were different, they could go back, and leave the children to support one another since they are not children anymore, not really. But as things stand, Willow – the one best placed to take charge of research and support the slayers – needs support herself. And much as Buffy might benefit from the reminder that she can indeed look after herself (and Dawn),
she and Faith will both need to prepare for the coming danger.

“What are you thinking about?” asks Ethan, snuggling closer.

“Nothing particularly important” replies Giles. He surrenders to the cuddle.

*****

Willow and Tara visit the following day. Seeing them together is promising, though they sit apart and are polite rather than warm with one another, like a couple on their first or second date rather than lovers reunited. Giles wishes he could tell them how much simply giving it time and not rushing themselves will help, but he feels he can’t with Buffy present.

Perhaps it would be easier if Ethan or Dawn were here too, but Anya has requested a rare day off (“To plan something, she said” Ethan had explained, “I really hope it’s not a sale”) and so Ethan is manning the shop. Dawn was offered a day off school but she muttered something about science revision and went anyway.

As it is, it is strained. Buffy is polite to Willow, Willow is polite to Buffy and Giles and Tara watch. No-one speaks about the hard, glaring truths at the heart of the situation, but what could they say? Buffy is clearly not ready to talk about hell and Willow is in the strange situation of seeing the miraculous thing she has accomplished – Buffy, sitting here on the sofa – while being well aware that it came at a price they still don’t see the full implications of. And so they make small talk and pretend things don’t feel strained. At least everyone is trying.

Xander and Anya turn up after Xander finishes his morning shift, briefly alleviating the uncomfortable atmosphere before Anya announces, “Actually we have something to tell you” and Xander interrupts, “Yeah, we’re having a, um, a dinner party.”

“A dinner party?” Willow sounds surprised, and well she might – This is a level of sophistication Xander hasn’t reached before.

“That sounds nice” says Tara.

“Yeah” In the face of Anya’s sudden glare, Xander powers on with, “We, err, we thought it would be nice to” and here he seems to address Anya more than their prospective guests, “to talk with everyone together.” To the wider group, he adds, “Um. Dawn and Faith and Ethan too. The whole gang. Now that Willow’s back.”

Willow smiles gratefully. Anya gets up and leaves. After a stunned pause, Xander hurries after her, the front door swinging shut behind him, muffling his cry of, “Anya, wait!”

“Well” says Buffy into the ensuing silence, “That was a thing.”

“I, I wonder if they’re okay” says Tara.

“I think perhaps the dinner party was news to Anya” replies Giles with some sympathy – He knows what it is to have a partner invite people over without prior consultation.

Willow frowns. “Then what was Anya going to tell us?”

*****

“I’m not sure when it is” Buffy tells Dawn later in the kitchen, “Or if it is. I think Xander just invited us on the spot.”
Rupert, Ethan notices, looks a little troubled as he chops vegetables and lets the conversation flow around him. And well he might – If Anya isn’t on board with the idea, it might be Xander cooking. Which will at least mean someone is. Tonight, the little matter of dinner was almost abandoned, with Buffy forgetting it was her turn to cook and Rupert reluctantly stepping in. Even more reluctantly once Spike offered to help.

“How’s Willow?” asks Faith. It would be good of her to ask, but she asks in the same tone she might use to ask how patrol went or what the latest adversary is up to.

“She seems okay” replies Buffy. She looks lost for a second, then flinches when Faith pursues, “She talk about the spell?”

“No” Buffy manages. “We just talked about normal stuff.”

“Give her time” Ethan advises, “She’s been through a lot.” Faith raises an eyebrow. “We talking about Willow, or Buffy?”

“Well – Willow, but –”

Spike interrupts, “Buffy doesn’t need to tiptoe round the witch’s feelings.”

“Exactly” says Faith, “Not after what she did.”

“It’s not like she could have asked Buffy first” Ethan points out.

“Standing right here” says Buffy.

Dawn asks, “Was it weird? Seeing her?”

“Kinda” Buffy admits. “I mean, we’ve talked a bit since…But you’re right, Ethan: We just need to give it time.”

Dawn adds, “And maybe talk about it. I mean, I know she rescued you but she still put you through a lot. It’s okay to tell her that.”

Buffy’s face looks like fine china that second before it hits the floor and smashes. “Yeah” she says. “Um. Giles, you’ve got this right – you’re okay to cook?” She asks as though she’s been helping with the cooking rather than dithering next to it.

Rupert takes in her expression and seems to set aside whatever he was going to say in favour of, “Yes, of course. Where are you going?”

“I should really patrol.”

Faith interjects, “I done it already, remember? Staked a load on my way home from work.”

“Well” Buffy thinks for a moment “I could try around the campus.”

Spike abandons the sauce he’s stirring. “I can come with you if you’d like company.”

Buffy hesitates for a moment before replying, “Okay.”

Faith stands up. “Me too, then. I could use more action.”

Buffy replies, “Yeah, but you’ve also got to eat.”
“We can keep some for both of you” says Rupert.

Spike and Buffy exchange a brief, almost unconscious glance, and Buffy tells Faith, “Really, I don’t want you to have to go out again. It’s my turn.”

Clearly, Faith doesn’t care about whose turn it is or having to go out again, but she takes the hint, sits back down.

Buffy glances round the kitchen. “See you guys later.”

“Be careful” Rupert tells her.

Dawn asks, “How much later?” but Buffy and Spike are already gone. Tucking her hurt away, Dawn turns back to the papers in front of her. Her homework, Ethan realises with a jolt, which she has been attempting while they casually discuss resurrection spells and slaying. In a small voice, she comments, “She never wants to be here now.”

Faith and Rupert share a troubled look. Faith tries, “It’s been tough for her. And sticking things in vampires is better than therapy. Cheaper too.”

Dawn shakes her head. “I don’t think there’s a therapy for this.” She looks at Ethan. “Are we doing magic lessons now you’re back?”

“Definitely. As soon as Willow’s ready.”

“I don’t want them from Willow. Just from you and Tara.”

Ethan frowns. “But Willow’s the best of all of us.”

“The most powerful” Dawn clarifies, “That doesn’t mean the best.”

“Kid’s got a point” says Faith.

Dawn doesn’t correct her on the term kid, which just goes to show how serious she is. She simply adds, “I’m never going to mess with life and death. So I don’t need to know anything you and Tara can’t teach me.”

“Preach” mutters Faith. Rupert glances up sharply, but doesn’t reprimand her.

As gently as he can, Ethan states, “She did rescue your sister from hell, Dawn.”

“And I’m grateful” Dawn says, “But that doesn’t mean I’m ready to hang out with her. You don’t just hang out with someone who’s done a spell like that.”

This is a valid reaction, Ethan reminds himself. A violation of the principles of magic for a just cause is still a violation. Perhaps he was wrong to encourage Willow to think everyone would welcome her back eventually.

And if they don’t all accept her now, what will it be like when they see whatever her spell let in?

*****

“Meditating?” Dawn repeats when Ethan presents her with the activity for their lesson, “Isn’t that a slayer thing?”

“A witch thing too” he tells her. He doesn’t tell her how useful Willow found it in Devon. Nor
does he tell her that having her do it leaves him to catch up with everything in the shop.

“I’m not sure how” Dawn admits.

“I’ll show you. Shall we use the backroom?”

“Sure” says Dawn, “I don’t really want people watching.” As they move off, she murmurs, “Oh” and pauses to extract a necklace that has become unhooked from under her jumper.

“Problem?” asks Ethan.

Dawn shrugs, closes her hand around the necklace. “Just the clasp being broken.” She sets it down on the counter. Then, as the bell rings and a customer enters, she glances at Ethan, but he waves her into the backroom anyway: The customer can wait. Ideally not long, but it won’t take long to get Dawn started.

Once Dawn is cross-legged and silent on a mat in the backroom, he returns to the shop proper to find Xander has arrived and is perusing a book while the customer examines a few items on a nearby shelf.

“Can I help you?” Ethan asks the customer.

“Oh!” The young man fumbles, nearly drops a skull. “Um, no-no thank you. Just, err, looking.” He says the last word in a suddenly meaningful tone, like a character from a B movie about spies.

Ethan blinks. “Alright. Let me know if you need help.” He joins Xander, who is conspicuously alone, given that it is Anya’s day off. Xander glances over at the young man and exclaims, “Tucker?”

The young man emerges fully from behind a shelf, but not before setting the skull down carefully at the back of the display, exactly where it was before and nudging everything back into place around it. “No, I’m his brother. Andrew?”

“Oh. Hi.” Xander returns to his book. This, Ethan realises, is another sign something is wrong – Xander is reading when he has a choice in the matter.

It’s not one from the shelves either: Xander must have fetched it from the restricted section.

“Hi” says Andrew. To Ethan, he adds, “Cool shop. Do you, err have any offering bowls?”

Ethan indicates the obvious display of offering bowls on the other side of the room, but Andrew is already heading over. Apparently, the question was simply an awkward excuse to duck out of any further exchange with Xander. It takes all sorts, Ethan reminds himself.

To Xander, he asks, “Everything okay?”

“Hm?” Xander doesn’t look up from his book. “Yeah, fine.”

Recognising the book, Ethan reaches over.

“Hey” says Xander as he relinquishes it, but without venom. He watches guiltily as Ethan scans the page he was on.

“Demon summoning?” asks Ethan dryly.

“Well it’s not like it’s a bad demon.”
“Simple rule, Xander: If you need to summon them, they’re bad.”

“But he just makes people sing! What’s wrong with that? Plus, you have the talisman right here.” He points to a bit of jewellery on the counter. Ethan follows the gesture. “I do?”

“Yeah” Xander leans over the book and points to an illustration. Ethan studies it, then stares at the counter again. “But that’s Dawn’s necklace.”

“It’s the same as this” Xander insists.

Ethan gets up and examines the necklace, checks it against the illustration. “Well that’s….” He trails off, realisation hitting. “I’ll ask her about this. But the summoning isn’t a good idea even if we have the equipment.” He sets the talisman down on a shelf. Without the book, it is harmless. He’ll just have to sell them separately. His gaze trails to a second illustration, one of the demon in question. “Sweet” he muses. “I almost summoned him myself once.”

“Yeah?” asks Xander.

“Yes. Luckily, Rupert had the foresight to read to the end of the page.” Ethan holds out the book, pointing to the passage in question.

Xander reads it. “Oh. See, that’s the sort of thing they should put at the top. In big font and highlighted.”

“Why’d you want to summon him anyway? I didn’t have you pegged as a hardcore Grease fan.”

“Well, who doesn’t like musicals?” At Ethan’s continued stare, Xander wilts a little and explains, “Look, it says people sing about what they’re really feeling, right? So I figured it was a good way to, you know, get a few tricksome conversations out the way.”

“I suppose it might be, but given the cost is bystanders – or bydancers – spontaneously combusting…”

“…Maybe try something else? Got it.”

“Something else like actual conversation, perhaps?”

“Got it.” Xander nods, doesn’t meet his eyes. When Tucker’s brother goes past to peruse the nearest shelf, he shuffles his chair aside, seemingly grateful for the distraction. Ethan asks, “Are you sure everything’s alright?”

“Yeah. I just thought Willow and Buffy could use some help reconnecting. And it might help clear up, well, a few things.”

“Things with Anya?” Ethan risks asking. He stands up as Tucker’s brother goes past again, hoping the boy will buy something, but he doesn’t approach the till.

Xander draws a deep breath and stands up too. “I guess. Try the actual talking thing; got ‘ya. I mean, how hard can it be?” He moves to the door.

“Good luck” Ethan calls, as Xander hurries out. Tucker’s brother leaves too, leaving Ethan alone in the shop but for Dawn still silent in the backroom. Sighing, he puts the book back in the restricted section where it belongs.
“Good” Ethan says, as Dawn draws a protective symbol on a piece of blank receipt paper, then lights it up with an utterance.

“I think the meditation helped” she admits. “It focused me.” “Good. Look, Dawn, before you go, I need to ask you about this” He turns to the shelf. The talisman is gone. He turns to Dawn. “Did you take something from here?”

“No!” Dawn’s anger is instant and demonstrative. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you were wearing it on a necklace when you came in – A talisman for a summoning spell!”

“A summoning spell?” Dawn looks concerned. Ethan waits. She adds, “I didn’t know it was for anything like that! I just found it – at, at home, I looked in your room because I was wondering what happened to some of mom’s jewellery and I thought it might be in there. Sorry, I should have asked.”

“That’s okay” says Ethan. It does explain how she found the thing, but not, “Why did you have it round your neck?”

“I couldn’t remember what all mom’s jewellery looked like.” Dawn shifts uncomfortably. “It didn’t look like anything you or Giles would wear so I just assumed.”

“Oh. Well, no, it’s a talisman. The question is, where is it now?”

Dawn looks a little relieved at the shift in focus. She suggests, “Did it fall down the side?”

They look for it for a while, but don’t find it. Ethan checks the book in the restricted section – still in place – and concludes, “Well I suppose if the book’s still here, there’s no reason to worry.”

“Unless there’s more than one copy of that book” points out Dawn.

“I suppose.” Ethan is uneasy. Did Xander take the talisman? But he wouldn’t, surely? “Well” he reassures himself, “If it doesn’t show up, I’ll pull the shelf out and check properly.”

“Okay”

“No” The anger is back. “I told you – I found it in your room. I know I should have asked, but it was mom’s room first.”

“I know. I also know how much fun shoplifting can be until you get caught.”

Dawn looks stunned. Ethan adds, “But if you take anything from here, you could be worse than caught. Not that I recommend that either, by the way.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about” she tells him coldly. She heads for the door. “I have to go.”

“Ethan” Marvin greets, when Ethan stops by Willy’s Place the following evening. “It’s good to see you back.”

“It’s good to be back” Ethan tells him. Then he finds himself singing a song about it.
Sensing magic by the time the rest of the bar join in, Ethan decides to just go with it. It doesn’t really feel strange until it is over. “Shit” mutters Ethan.

“Nah” Marvin tells him, “You’ve got a pretty good voice.”

“No, I mean…I have to go.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. We’re all friends here.” Marvin starts to sing a song about how they are all friends here.

This, Ethan realises as he finds himself joining in, is going to be a long night.

*****

“Sorry” Rupert tells him later, after berating Ethan for his lateness through song, “I don’t know where that came from.”

“I do” Ethan moves past him to the phone.

“What?”

“It’s magic” Ethan explains.

“I gathered that much. Magic from where?”

“That’s what I was going to tell you before – never mind.” Ethan grabs the phone. “Where are your slayers?”

“Patrolling.” Rupert frowns. “And possibly singing. Ethan, what’s going on?”

“Xander’s summoned Sweet.”

*****

“It wasn’t me!” Xander insists sometime later, when everyone is assembled. “Okay, so I was thinking about it, but then Ethan told me it sets people on fire, so I thought okay, maybe don’t do that.”

“That sounds like you” Anya tells him, “Saying you’ll do something and then having all these doubts.”

“And no sense of fun” Spike adds. Anya nods.

Xander glares at them both. “I don’t think there’s much doubt about setting people on fire being a bad idea!”

“Always best to err on the side of not setting people on fire” Willow agrees.

Faith asks her, “Was it you?” and Willow gasps indignanty and retorts, “Oh, yeah, after almost dying a few times having the true essence of magic merged with my soul and being back with my friends trying to convince everyone I’m not dangerous, I thought, hey, I know what will make this more interesting, I’ll summon a demon who sets people on fire!”

Faith stares at her. “You are.”

“What?” Willow glares.
“Dangerous.”

Willow flinches a little and gratefully grips the hand Tara slips into hers. “I didn’t do this” she tells them.

“We know” says Dawn, but she says it so grudgingly that Willow’s hurt expression deepens.

“Obviously it wasn’t Willow” Ethan echoes. He looks at Rupert – who looks convinced, good – and then at Buffy. “Buffy, you can’t think it was Willow – she’s just spent weeks making her magic safer, you think she’d just come back and try a spot of summoning?”

Buffy ignores the question. “What I want to know” she says, turning to Ethan, “Is if it sets people on fire why did you have everything needed to summon it at the Magic Box?”

“Book and talisman sold separately!” Ethan retorts. “Anyway, the talisman only arrived in the shop courtesy of Dawn.”


Dawn scowls at Ethan but it mellows into meekness under everyone’s gazes. “I…found it here” Dawn explains. “I thought it was ordinary necklace so I wore it to the Magic Box. But then it got lost.”

“Well then” says Rupert interjects. “Anyone could have taken it. It could have been a customer.”

Buffy is staring at Ethan speculatively. “So, it was in your room and you know all about it because you nearly summoned it before?”

“Yes” agrees Ethan, “But I didn’t summon it before because it sets people on fire! Why would I now?”

“Well it sounds chaosy, what with the unexplained singing.”

“Our patrol was pretty chaotic when the synchronised dancing kicked in” agrees Faith.

“Well, yes” agrees Ethan, “It would be a good way to worship Chaos except it sets people on fire. Which is really something I draw the line at!”

Rupert puts an arm around him. “You can’t really think it was Ethan” he tells Buffy.

“No” she admits after a beat. “It’s just weird this talisman was in your room and now this demon’s running around, and we all know how dangerous magic can be.”

Willow, looks at Ethan apologetically. He feels a little like a mirror, in which Buffy is addressing her, reflected over her shoulder. Beside Willow, Tara answers, “We a-all do, so it probably wasn’t any of us. Mr Giles is right: Couldn’t someone else have read the book in the shop and used the talisman when no-one was looking?”

“The book’s in the restricted section” Ethan replies.

Spike asks Xander, “You leave it alone when you were reading it?”

“No, I had it the whole time.” “But someone else could have a copy of the book” Dawn points out.

“Or just research the spell another way” adds Willow.
Faith asks, “Anyone shifty in the shop when you put the talisman down?”

Xander replies, “Well there was Tucker’s brother.”

“Tucker has a brother?” asks Willow.

“If he’s anything like Tucker” Buffy muses, “I think we’ve found our shoplifting demon summoner.”

“Except not” says Faith, “Because we don’t know where he is. Or where the demon is.”

“Sweet won’t be manifest yet” Ethan explains, “He’s powerful – He won’t show himself unless he wants to.”

“Will he want to?” asks Willow.

Rupert says, “Traditionally, he’d go to whoever summoned him.”

Buffy nods. “So, find Tucker’s brother, find the demon. Then let’s get started.”

*****

They spend two long days and the night that links them in the Magic Box, pouring over books, leaving only to try and find out where Tucker’s brother is.

They at least know his name now: Andrew Wells. They know too that Tucker is away at college and Mrs Wells is too taken up with a new boyfriend to keep track of where her younger son goes when he is not at home, which he hasn’t been for a few days now. Staying with a friend, apparently. Which friend, they don’t know, since Mrs Wells seems as surprised as them that the boy has any.

His bedroom, all spaceships and superheroes, could be mistaken for a ten year old’s were it not for the magic books. This at least gave them a lead, but enquires put to the town’s magic dealers and casters turn up nothing – Andrew appears to be self-taught (“And self-raised” Rupert mutters darkly as soon as they were out of earshot of the mother). Tucker, speaking over the phone from his dorm room, is no more helpful or likable than could be expected of someone who had tried to have prom attendees massacred.

Location spells come to nothing too. Apparently, Andrew’s talents extend to cloaking spells.

In the meantime, Sunnydale is a musical minefield. Every aspect of every citizen’s daily life is playing out with accompanying orchestra and back-up dancers. It is hard to walk down the street without being dragged into strutting the Charleston over someone’s clamped car.

At least their research has uncovered one crucial thing – people are more likely to burn if they run out of topics to sing about, so in-between researching Sweet and looking for Andrew, they provide topics. Or rather, Ethan does, by summoning up a few creatures of his own. The good people of Sunnydale certainly have something to sing about when a dozen smoke imps run amok in the mall, and when a dragon – rendered harmless by not being fully in this dimension – is spotted hovering menacingly over the old high school.

Whether Sweet is aware of the interference or not is unclear, but the singing incidents seem to be happening more and more often, to the point that it is hard to get through a conversation without bursting into song. Which naturally makes research difficult. Aside from singing their theories, Willow and Tara end up working through their lingering issues with a sweet duet, Rupert sings
about how he doesn’t want to crowd Buffy, Buffy sings about how disconnected she feels from the
world and Spike sings about how in love with Buffy he is. Faith, meanwhile belts out a rock song
about what they should feed Andrew to when they find him and Ethan sings a sort of hymn to
Chaos in honour of some interesting magic at least being afforded by the need to keep people from
combusting.

There is one frightening moment, when Willow starts singing about how worried she is about
fitting back in. Describing – through catchy, on-the-spot lyrics – her spirit journey, she seems
about to tell everyone about the approaching, devouring evil and seems at the last moment (or last
note) to realise this, tries to shut herself up, and starts smoking. Everyone panics except for
Xander, who thinks to join in the song, absorbing some of the magical energies. Initially, all he has
to sing about are his ideas about where Andrew might be hiding, but it morphs, pulling Anya in,
and the scoobies are forced to provide a chorus to a sniping, relationship-dissecting duet that ends
with an announcement.

The music stops, and Xander and Anya take their seats, panting. Willow is already released and
Tara, still shaken by the now-vanished smoke, is cooling her with a clump of wet tissues. There
seems no danger of Willow igniting now, but Willow doesn’t ask her to stop. Instead she asks,
“Wait – is this for real? You guys are engaged?”

Buffy is grinning. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Yeah” Faith realises, “This is a musical truth spell – you can’t lie while you’re singing!”

“We wouldn’t lie about it anyway.” Anya is beaming. “He asked me right before the last
apocalypse.”

“Oh my God!” Buffy squeaks, hugging the pair of them. Everyone joins in with a flurry of
congratulations.

And then they sing a song about it.

*****

Finally, after a blessed half hour of quiet research, Willow announces, “Okay. I think I can create a
spell to bring Sweet here.”

“Good” Buffy replies, “I am so ready for this to end.”

She sings a song about how ready she is for this to end.

*****

“Who summoned you?” pants Faith a few hours later, before Sweet can saunter off. After
extracting the truth from Buffy – She was in heaven – he seems content to take his leave of the
town.

At Faith’s question, he pauses and issues a showman’s smile, flamboyant and empty. Faith tries,
“Was it Andrew? Young guy, dweeby.”

“That would be telling.” Sweet smiles insincerely the slayers. Faith folds her arms, clearly trying to
restrain herself from trying to slay the demon. Every attempt so far has just ended in a lot of
dancing and not a little smouldering.

Buffy stands beside Spike, whose intervention only narrowly stopped her burning. She is silent.
She was in heaven.

Rupert asks Sweet, “What do you do to those that summon you? Serve them? Kill them?”

“Make them your partner for the waltz?” Xander guesses. Perhaps he is trying to paste over horror with humour, or perhaps he doesn’t see the horror. (Buffy was in heaven).

“Wed them” Sweet replies. “Traditionally. But I found the gentleman in question not entirely to my tastes.”

“So you killed him?” Faith guesses.

“No” Sweet spreads his hands in a who, moi gesture. “No, that would lack a certain entertainment value. He lives. Perhaps you’ll meet him one day. Now, since your little band have upstaged me, I’ll be on my way.” He vanishes with some sparkle and fanfare.

The magic doesn’t quite fade straight away. There is more singing, into the silence Sweet leaves. Ethan is aware of Buffy running out, followed by Spike, but he isn’t able to react until Willow breaks away from the group and runs out the front door, not the way Buffy went. Finally, Ethan is able to shut himself up, disentangle his hand from Rupert’s, and follow.

“Willow?”

Willow’s tear streaked face is illuminated by the streetlight. “It was all for nothing, Ethan!”

“No” he tells her. “You still got Buffy back.” What else can he say?

“Yeah, from heaven! I pulled her out of heaven! How could I do that? Why didn’t I think?”

“You thought you were saving her from hell” Ethan reminds her.

“Did I? Or is that just what I wanted to think because I missed her so much?”

“You weren’t to know.”

“I knew that! I knew that I didn’t know and I did it anyway!”

“Willow –”

“What if I just wanted to see if I could? What if some part of me just wanted to see if I could? And now there’s this big evil coming and it’s all my fault!”

“You didn’t know” Ethan repeats, “And with this evil coming, Buffy needs you to not fall apart.”

“I don’t think I can not fall apart! I don’t think I can!”

The door opens behind them. “Willow?” Tara stands a little way off, her face full of compassion.

Willow’s tears renew. “Tara, what have I done to her?”

Tara crosses the space between them in a few purposeful strides and engulfs Willow into a hug.

“You didn’t know” she murmurs. This time, Willow doesn’t argue and merely weeps.

*****

“I don’t suppose we’ll find that Andrew chap now, will we?” Rupert comments as they slip into
bed that night. “There’s always something else to deal with, and if we do find him, the question remains as to what to do with him. We can’t slay him.” “We could send him to Devon” Ethan points out. “That’s harsher, in my opinion.”

“You know, there was another young man Faith and I saw with one of your suppliers. Warren, I think.” Rupert looks sternly across at Ethan. “If dark magic is gaining popularity, might want to start being more careful about who you sell to.”

“I didn’t sell to the kid!” Ethan protests. “He stole from me, remember?”

“Yes. The locket but not the book. Which means he has at least one book of his own that was powerful enough to do the job.” Rupert seems to think for a moment, before sighing and turning the bedside light off. “What a day” he says into the ensuing twilight. “My throat’s going to be sore for a week.”

“Poor Rupert. You sang beautifully” Ethan tells him. “And at least no-one died.”

“True. As far as we know, of course.”

“And thanks to my Chaos magic giving them plenty of song topics” Ethan points out proudly. It is rare for Rupert to be unable to deny the inherent worth of Chaos, and he’s going to make the most of this occasion.

“I suppose so” says Rupert, who is clearly on to him. He reaches for Ethan, pulls him into a cuddle that Ethan decides to categorise as unspoken praise. Rupert comments, “Of course, you only had one song that you were made lead singer off to contend with.”

“Yes” says Ethan evasively, “Just the one song.”

“One song and it was rather good” Rupert kisses Ethan. “Much like a Disney villain.”

“Well” Ethan stretches and cuddles closer “I always have thought Disney villains come in for too much criticism.” They are speaking, he realises suddenly, in that deliberately light tone that they sometimes slip into to avoid discussing what actually matters. “I mean, show me one Disney villain who wasn’t just being sensible when it really comes down to it.”

Rupert shifts into a more comfortable position for cuddling. Absently he responds, “Ursula. The stepmother in Snow White. Really, any Disney villain.”

“Well, Ursula’s just taking advantage a decent business opportunity. If the Little Mermaid’s stupid enough to sell her own voice, she deserves what she gets.”

Rupert sighs. “And the stepmother? She wants to kill Snow White because she’s jealous of her good looks.”

“So she finds it difficult to accept the aging process; happens to the best of us.”

“We don’t all resort to murder over it.”

“True. But she’d still make a more interesting dinner party guest than Snow White.” Ethan waits a moment and then adds, “See? I’m right, aren’t I?” Taking Rupert’s silence to be agreement, he goes on, “I wonder if Anya and Xander will still have a dinner party now they’ve actually told us what they were going to say?” Ethan is actually very excited about the upcoming wedding. He’s always loved a good wedding, but the prospect of Xander and Anya throwing one isn’t just exciting because of that: he also happens to care about both of them, which will make theirs’ the first
wedding he’s been to in a while in which he’s actually happy for the bride and groom. The last one was Diedre’s, after all. Since then – with the notable exception of a Miquot Clan nuptial dance – it’s just been Rupert’s colleagues or their offspring, wedding mostly pleasant-but-dim matches others have pointed them in the direction of, who generally have about them an air of upper class in-breeding. This will be different. This will be an actual happy occasion, not just a big party coated in too much tradition.

Rupert still hasn’t replied. “Rupert?”

“Buffy was in heaven.”

“Yes” Ethan hasn’t really thought much about that besides what it means for Willow. He refuted the idea that it had all been for nothing, but isn’t she right? The outrage of a resurrection spell, all the penance the transgression demanded, and now it turns out Buffy hadn’t wanted to be resurrected anyway. And that’s even before one factors in What Is Coming, whatever is coming.

But now he allows himself to think about Buffy, and what this must mean for her. Except he can’t. Not out of any desire not to, it’s just that he simply doesn’t understand it. He doesn’t know what heaven is like. What she’s lost or if she’ll ever get it back and how soon she wants to. At least, “She wasn’t in hell, though – That’s always a plus. She’s not traumatised.”

“She is. It’s just more ongoing than we’ve realised.”

“She’ll be alright, Rupert” Ethan tells him, basing the assertion on nothing at all.

“Yes. She’ll have to be. I just don’t see how.”

“You’ll see soon, and then you can show her.”

“No. It can’t work like that. It has to be something she discovers for herself.”

“Well, whatever works I suppose.” Something has to. Buffy won’t be broken and lost forever. Surely?
Buffy and Spike are both in the kitchen when Giles comes down for breakfast, and Giles gets the impression that they were talking until the moment he opened the door.

After an awkward pause, Buffy looks meaningfully at Spike and then at the basement door. Spike, with a show of exasperation, heads down. Once he’s closed the door, Buffy mutters, “Well, it is his bedtime. I don’t see why he gets to be all huffy.”

“Is there a problem?” Giles asks. He heads for the toaster and slots bread into it.

“Only a loan shark.”

“More debts? Medical debts?”

“No: Literal loan shark. So, a lot less scary.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Spike got one night off from the shop and he managed to end up owing a load of kittens to some demon” Buffy explains.

“Where on earth is he going to get kit –”

Buffy holds up a hand. “Really don’t want to know. Anyway, it’s not my problem. Spike’s not my problem.”

“Absolutely.” Giles catches the leaping toast and sets about buttering it, only noticing her say-it-enough-and-I’ll-convince-myself tone.

Buffy asks, “So. You’re all set for a day of packing?”

“Not even a day, I fear: A lot of things were never unpacked.”

“It’s like you were never planning to stay.” Buffy sounds resigned. It might be better if she sounded provocative, accusing even, but she just sounds resigned.

Gently, Giles tells her, “I never did once you were back: You can manage things here. With Faith’s help.”

“It’s further away from here than the last flat.”

“Barely. And only by coincidence.” This is true.

Buffy states: “It just seems like you’re moving in to the first place you’ve looked at that will possibly do.”

This is also true. Giles reiterates, “I’ll still be around if you need me. But you may find you don’t.”

Buffy looks unconvinced.

*****

“Y-you know” says Tara, “It’s Willow who’s really good at this spell. I just know the basics.”
From across the table in the Magic Box, Dawn replies, “I told you guys, don’t want lessons from her.”

From behind the counter, Ethan ventures, “She could teach you more than the two of us.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Dawn taps her pen hopelessly against the open book in front of her, an angry, erratic pat-pat that risks splattering ink over the pages. “Not after what she did to Buffy.”

“Sh-she didn’t know” Tara manages (a much-used mantra of the past few days, that) “If she had known that Buffy was in, um, in heaven then…”

“But she didn’t know” Dawn finishes bitterly. “She just assumed. And now Buffy is here but not wanting to be and that’s almost worse than…” She shakes her head. “I’m not having lessons from her.”

Tara looks pained but says changes the subject with, “W-well we could start with chapter six. I want you to give it a read and-and let me know if you have questions.”

Dawn carefully turns a few pages of the book. After a moment, she announces, “I have a question. What was it like? Heaven, I mean.”

“I-I’ve never been there.”

“Neither have I” echoes Ethan, mentally sidestepping the temptation to reminisce about non-child-friendly occasions when he felt he’d come close. Really, he knows, heaven can’t be like that. Or even like possession by Eyghon, for all that can invoke dazzling elation. Joy in heaven is not of the Eyghon-induced variety. It must be real and deep and lasting.

Until one is plucked out.

Dawn asks, “Well, are there books about it?”

“I’m not sure” says Tara, “Maybe a few mentions of heavenly dimensions but there are so many…”

“Do you think I should ask Buffy? Or maybe not. I want to understand what it’s like for her, but maybe it’s better for her to forget.”

“I’m not sure it’s the sort of thing people just forget” Ethan offers.

“I know.” Dawn pulls the book towards herself and buries herself in it. Perhaps, Ethan realises, the problem is not the effect the question would have on Buffy, but Dawn’s own worry that Buffy wouldn’t answer.

As she continues reading, Dawn shoots a few increasingly displeased glances his way, clearly annoyed that he doesn’t take the hint to get on with something besides watching her.

Fat chance of that. She has probably learnt her lesson about stealing magic supplies, but, on the off chance she hasn’t, Ethan is going to watch her carefully.

He has considered telling someone, but in his (in this case, quite extensive) experience, shoplifters rarely benefit from people finding out. Worst case scenario, if he told anyone who had any inclination to encourage Dawn to confess her petty, harmless crime to any other shopkeeper, it might come to police involvement, and Sunnydale’s finest have always struck Ethan as heavy-handed, even by American standards. It is not as though any child ever blossomed as a result of
time behind bars. The best Ethan could hope for by voicing his suspicions would be that Buffy, who gods know has been through enough, would be worried.

As well she should: Ethan had been a teenage runaway and shoplifting was simply necessary if he’d wanted luxuries like deodorant, but Dawn lacks for nothing. At least, nothing material. So why she is suddenly light-fingered is doubtless down to something deeply psychological, something which, in different circumstances, might improve if Dawn were to be carted off to some school counsellor or child psychologist. As circumstances actually are, such professionals would presumably be unaware of the supernatural and so wouldn’t be able to treat Dawn properly. Not to mention, what if they called the police? Ethan has no idea what the law is with regards to that. What he does know is that deep psychological issues are unlikely to improve with application of the law. So he is stumped. Unless…

“When you’re done with that” he tells Dawn, “I’d like to show you something.”

“I thought you had to be in moving mode soon?”

“Just quickly” Ethan insists, “I think we should work on glamours.” If she is going to be a shoplifter, she may as well be a good one.

*****

“There is still unpacking to do you know” chides Ethan, “And Anya won’t want to be stuck in the shop forever – I promised I’d take over at five.”

Rupert looks up from his desk, wedged indifferently in a corner of their new place until a better spot can be found for it. All around him, boxes wait, half-unpacked. “Sorry – I got a little distracted.”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “I shouldn’t have left you alone with the books, to be fair.” He kneels in front of the nearest box and sets about unpacking it, placing things on the floor around him to see what they are before he decides where to put them. At least with Rupert distracted, he can make the final decision about what goes where.

Their new flat is smaller than the last, all on one level, but it has the perk of a balcony with a view over the woods. Given the things that live there, putting up wards was job number one, even before getting furniture in from the rented van.

A slayer would have been useful for that part, but Faith is at work, and Buffy seems reluctant to contemplate the move, so they didn’t ask.

Moving on to the next box, Ethan asks, “What are you reading, anyway?”

“An account of a halfling’s exploration of Sunnydale’s cave system. I wonder if that might be where the Daidalos Chest is. Your supplier said it’s in the earth.”

“Which supplier?”

“Bleddyn.”

“Ah, yes – he generally knows his stuff.” Which is not, it occurs to Ethan, a good thing when it comes to the Daidalos Chest. “Rupert, maybe it’s better to let sleeping catastrophe-causing boxes lie.”

“For demons to find? Not likely.”
“I thought this finding Sunnydale’s buried treasure thing was something to tide you through unemployment? You’ve been a watcher again for ages now, and there’s a new threat coming.”

“Coming, but not here yet, so it may be wise to get one of Sunnydale’s more potent lost artefacts safely away from the demon population before whatever it is does arrive.” Rupert frowns down at him. “Ethan, when you said unpacking, I assumed you’d be putting things away, not laying them out on the floor.”

Ethan looks around at the increasingly crowded floorspace. “Well, I need to get it all out to decide where it goes.”

Rupert issues a put-upon sigh. “Fine. Just don’t touch the records or the books – I’ll organise those.”

“Rupert, there’s only the two of us – We don’t need to alphabetically order the best things in the flat!”

“You can sort everything else into as much mess as you like, Eth, but leave books and records to me. I just need to phone Buffy and Faith first – I expect Faith’s home by now.”

“Scooby meeting?” Ethan guesses. “We’re not telling them about the whole From Beneath It Devours thing, are we?”

“No, just the Daidalos Chest. It would be good to research the magics likely guarding so we’re ready once we have more of an idea where it is. And Buffy could do with something to focus on besides…Well.” Rupert reaches sideways to where they kept the phone before the desk went into storage and they went into Revello Drive. It is not there, of course – the landline isn’t connected yet. Rupert’s hand paws at the desk for a moment before he seems to realise this and notice the mobile that Ethan is holding out. “Thank you.” He dials Buffy’s number from memory.

*****

Distraction may well be called for, but it certainly isn’t seized upon: Buffy spends the meeting isolated among her friends, barely seeming to listen as Giles tells the group about the Daidalos Chest, the magical barriers around it, the possibility of spirit guards. Nor does she respond to Anya’s wedding themed interruptions (The meeting delayed important planning, apparently) or when Faith wastes time mocking Spike for the odd outfit he’s shown up to work in, though she does murmur, “Faith, leave him be” when it goes on too long.

Willow listens well enough for both of them, clearly keen to be useful now that her resurrection spell has been revealed to be anything but. “Absolutely, we can research it” she tells Giles when he has laid out what he knows. “It sounds scooberific. Definitely something we should do.”

“Except that it hasn’t been found for centuries” Anya reminds her. “And it’s not likely to be, before the wedding.”

“There are demons who have tried to find it” Giles tells her. “One might succeed eventually. Besides, if we are going to find it before someone uses it to do harm, we ought to do that while we, um” He can’t help glancing at Willow “while we have a lull in supernatural activities.”

“We don’t have that much of a lull” Faith points out. “Vamps are still antsy.”

“Maybe because you keep winding us up about our fashion choices” snipes Spike.

“That’s not a fashion choice. That’s desperation.”
“It’s a disguise.”

“Why’d you need one again?” asks Xander.

“Yeah” echoes Dawn, “No-one’s going to find you here, are they?” She glances to the door.

“That’s a point” says Ethan. “Spike, if anyone attacks you here, the damage is going to have to come out of your wage.”

“Oh, that’s not fair! Everyone else gets attacked here too!”

“Let’s not be distracted” says Giles, firmly.

“Right” manages Buffy, “We need to focus on the Daddy-O’s Chest.”

“Daidalos Chest.”

“Right.”

“Wait” says Faith, “Shouldn’t we focus on finding Andrew? I mean, dude’s still walking around after hitting us with that bad case of the singing. It doesn’t seem right.”

“But he’s human” Tara points out. “What could we do?”

Faith gives a sideways nod, conceding the point.

Anya points out, “We could at least keep an eye on him.”

“I have tried lifting the cloaking spell he’s got on wherever he is” Willow admits, “But I think I need more of a clue about where that is first. I mean, it’s one thing to lift a spell on a place when you know which place, but otherwise? It’s like pulling open all the drawers in the world one at a time looking for one little Andrew shaped needle.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out” says Buffy, “You’re our wicca expert.”

There is a pause then, as everyone glances nervously from Willow’s frown to Buffy’s closed face. Dawn looks at her sister with concern and tries to move the conversation on with, “We shouldn’t go looking for needles anyway. At school they said we should leave them alone if we see them.”

“That’s hypodermic needles” Anya explains, “The ones that get into haystacks are sewing needles.” She frowns and turns to Xander. “Should we find a tailor for the wedding? In case the dress needs adjustments?” “I would” says Ethan, when Xander seems thrown by the conversational turnaround. “You might have gone up or down a size by the time the big day comes round.”

“Exactly” agrees Anya, “and then –”

Beside Giles, Dawn slips something green glowing out of her pocket, inspects it, and tucks it away again. Tempted as he is to ask what it is, he knows it is probably something to do with the latest spell she’s learning, and he rather wants the focus to be on something other than magic just now. Doubtless Willow feels the same.

“Can we maybe focus on the world-ending chest?” Xander cuts through Anya and Ethan’s wedding ramblings.

“Quite” Giles manages to hide his surprise at Xander being the responsible one. “Thank you, Xander.” Faith asks, “Can it end the world? I thought it was just demon summoning hijinks.”
“I’m not sure” admits Giles,

“Demon summoning is bad enough” states Buffy heavily.

“Yes” Giles agrees. “The implications of any adversary getting hold of this –”

“– Are more than I can think about right now” Buffy finishes.

Everyone looks at her. Spike asks, “You okay, pet?”

“No” says Buffy. “I’m sorry, guys, I just need a moment.” She pushes her chair from the table, stands up.

So does Willow. “Buffy, wait.”

Buffy turns. Willow goes on, “I know this must be terrible for you – A-actually, no, I don’t, do I? I can’t understand what it’s like, but maybe you should tell us? I mean, maybe we should talk about this.”

At the table, Faith rolls her eyes. “What is there to say?” Dawn nods, shifts closer to Faith.

Willow and Buffy share a glare at the second slayer, before turning it on each other. Buffy tells her, “I can’t talk about it. None of you would understand.”

“You could try us, Buff” Xander gets up and goes to join his two best friends, standing next to Willow. “We can’t help you unless you talk to us.”

“Help me? Some of you have done enough!”

Willow flinches. Ethan leaves Giles’ side to say, “She didn’t know.”

Buffy offers a bitter, unfriendly smile. “Really don’t need your help either, Ethan.” Anya shifts sideways into Ethan’s vacated spot, to whisper, “We should stop them. We don’t want –”

A wave of magic sweeps the room, obliterating everything.

*****

He knows his name. He knows little else, which is overwhelming enough without vampires – vampires! – after them.

Them, a collection of people all suffering the same strange amnesia. At least Rupert Giles does know his name. He’s not sure he thinks much of it, but at least he’s not called Randy.

Randy may or may not be his son, but Rupert suspects he is. Ethan, the other older Brit in the group, doesn’t seem inclined towards anything so conventional as a family. He was the only one of them excited by the contents of the shop at first, though Willow and Tara quickly joined in. He has also been eyeing Rupert since this whole debacle began. Rupert can’t pretend he isn’t flattered. The man is really quite intriguing, but everything is bewildering enough, without contemplating the possibility of an affair with his fiancé’s boss.

Anya had been leaning tellingly against him as they all came round, a rather showy ring on her finger and no more memory than he has. Between them, they have been able to piece a few facts together. The magic shop has paperwork detailing an Ethan, an Anya and a Spike, and made mention of a Mrs Dumitru. There was some debate as to who was Anya, given that a handful of the young women didn’t have a student cards or a purse about their person, but a quick perusal of the
website advertised by the till took them to a photograph of Anya behind that same till. Who Spike and Mrs Dumitru are remains a mystery. Neither name fits the remaining women who didn’t have ID: A young blonde woman and a dark-haired young woman with dark red lipstick. “Can’t see why I need a name” the latter had shrugged, while the former christened herself Joan.

After some confusion, they had also worked out based on how everyone had been laying when they woke up, that Alexander and Willow are likely dating and that the nameless girl is probably the older sister of Dawn, the teen whose shoulders she woke with her arm protectively around.

“You should have a name” Dawn had told her sister. “If you don’t have a name, it’s like you’re not real.” She seemed quite worried by the prospect. Her sister had shrugged and suggested, “Name me, then.”

“Me?”

“Yeah”

Dawn had considered a moment. “Joyce” she’d decided. Then, “What? I like the name.”

“Joyce it is, then.”

“If no-one’s claiming it” Randy had decided, “I’ll be Spike. Better name than Randy.”

“You might be Mrs Dumitru” sniped Joan.

“Actually” Anya had pointed out, “It makes sense he’d work here – Maybe that’s how Rupert and I met.”

“Right” Randy had agreed with a annoyed glance between his presumed boss and his presumed father, “And I’m not sodding Mrs Dumitru, am I?”

Joan had pouted playfully at that. She and Randy had quickly fallen into a pattern of riling each other up. As, Rupert realises, have he and Ethan. He tries not to read too much into that.

Unsuccessfully, that is, given that they are now under attack by vampires and he’s still worrying about it. Between Anya, Ethan and Willow – who proved a natural at magic (Magic is real too but there isn’t time to worry about that between vampires and amnesia) – the shop has been in turn a mess of rabbits, what appeared to be pixies, and sword wielding skeletons (Rupert turns out to be good with a sword but there isn’t time to worry about that between vampires, amnesia, rabbits and sword wielding skeletons).

Randy – or Spike – is outside with the vampires. Really, Rupert thinks, he ought to be frightened for him, but he isn’t, really. Clearly, he is not much of a father. Or perhaps the young man is Ethan’s son after all.

In which case, Ethan is not much of a father either, given that his son is out there facing monsters (admittedly alongside two superheroes – it has turned out superheroes are real, but there is no time between vampires and amnesia to worry about it) and his hand is under Rupert’s shirt. Rupert decides that if he is going to have an affair with his fiancé’s boss, it will be when he has all the facts and has let Anya down gently, and he shifts away from the caress.

They are crouched behind the till while something – something toothy and huge – growls at them from the middle of the shop floor. Four of them: Rupert, Anya, Ethan and Willow. Joan and Joyce, their convenient superheroes, are with Randy, and Tara and Alexander have taken Dawn down into what seems to be the relative safety of the sewers. Both were reluctant to leave Willow, but she
insisted she could be useful staying behind.

Useful would, frankly, be stretching it, but she does seem to have some innate understanding of magic that eludes Anya with her rabbits and Ethan with his pixies. She was the one who set all that and the skeletons right, though she admittedly also let in the huge, toothy thing.

Now, though, she seems out of ideas. “Should we try to run for the tunnels?” she asks.

“You first” replies Ethan grimly.

They look at the impossible seeming distance from their little hiding place to the basement entrance.

“It’s going to eat us up, isn’t it?” realises Anya. “And then we’ll never get to know who we are!”

“I won’t let it hurt you” Rupert reassures her. And he does intend to fight, if it comes to it, but his sword is gone now and he doesn’t fancy his chances. So when the thing stalks oozes, smoky breath seeking them out, and Willow and Ethan shrink back, Rupert judges it is time to distract Anya from impending doom with a kiss.

And then something – something that he could identify as magic under different circumstances – happens.

*****

It is like waking from a dream. Ethan blinks away his confusion while Willow leaps to her feet, and banishes whatever was coming at them with a sweeping, instinctive, wordless spell that only someone imbued with the essence of magic could pull off.

Looking away from the ensuing mess, Ethan finds Rupert and Anya breaking apart rather hastily. Ethan stares at them. “What are you…Oh.” Memories of a recent lack of memory flood in.

Rupert reaches for him. “Ethan – Gods – that…what you saw, it was only –”

“A spell. I know.”

Willow drops to her knees beside them, and Ethan realises the growling beyond the counter is gone, along with the smoky smell. Banishment complete then. “Thank you” he murmurs.

Willow nods. “Are you three alright?”

“Fine” replies Anya. She glances at Rupert in a way that Ethan tries not to read anything into.

Rupert asks, “Willow. I have to ask –”

“I know” interrupts Willow quickly, “But Giles, this wasn’t me, I swear.”

Ethan believes her. He does. But he also remembers how the spell broke: The way the force that shattered it seemed to ripple out of her. He says nothing. He is, he finds, gripping Rupert’s hand.

Rupert asks, “If not you, then wh…” He goes quiet.

“What?” asks Anya.

“Dawn” Rupert breathes in apparent realisation.
Dawn? Ethan is puzzled. Yes, the girl is learning magic, but she… She is also is the sewers right now, along with Xander, Tara and all the vampires of Sunnydale. “Shit!” He scrambles to his feet and the others, remembering in turn, follow.

*****

“It was an accident” Dawn tells them later. They are still in the shop. All of them, Faith and Spike clearing up, Buffy, Giles, Ethan, Willow and Tara seated at the table with Dawn. Anya and Xander are having some reunion in the backroom that Giles would rather not think about. Ethan is sitting rather closer than is decent in company, cuddling up, but Giles doesn’t have the heart to pull away.

“Dawn” Willow tells the child, “Magic isn’t something to mess around with.”

“You’d know.”

Willow glances away guiltily, catches Buffy’s own guarded glance and looks at her lap. “I don’t want you to end up like me” she murmurs.

Tara makes a pained sound and wraps an arm around her.

Giles looks at Buffy, hoping she will say something to Dawn. When she doesn’t, he asks, “What did you use?”

“Lethe’s bramble” Dawn admits. “And this” She pulls a damaged crystal from her pocket. “It broke when the spell wore off, or” She glances uneasily at Willow “or whatever happened. Look, guys, I really didn’t mean to do it! I was just trying to fix things!”

“Fix things?” asks Buffy.

Dawn issues a pleading look and reaches across the table to grip her sister’s hand. “I thought if you forgot what heaven was like, you’d be happier here. You’d want to be here.”

Buffy looks stricken, and looks away.

“Dawnie” Tara’s voice trembles with compassion, “It’s not your place to decide what Buffy remembers. Or any of us.”

“I only wanted to make things better!”

“Magic isn’t for that” Ethan tells her. “You can’t use it to control what other people think. Or at least, not without consequences.”

Dawn nods miserably. “I’m getting that now.” Ethan asks, “Did you, err, borrow the brambles and the crystal from the shop?”

Another miserable nod.

“Right then” says Ethan. “No more unsupervised time here.”

“Wasn’t getting much anyway” Dawn mutters.

Ethan narrows his eyes. “Was the spell for that too? You wanted me to forget the talisman mix up?”

“No” says Dawn, far too quickly.
“Dawn –” Willow begins,

“I don’t need a lecture from you!”

“But I know what it’s like.”

“No, you know what going too far on purpose is like! This was an accident!”

Willow falls silent. She turns imploringly to Buffy. For a moment, Giles assumes she is waiting, like him, for the discipline Dawn clearly needs, but what she says is: “Buffy, I know this must be hard. Forgetting and then remembering again.”

Buffy studies her for a moment, then looks down at the table. “Will, maybe we should just leave it for now.”

Willow’s expression flickers from compassionate to lost. Tara nods, stands up, gently tugging on Willow. “W-we should go. Buffy and Dawn need some time to talk things through.”

Dawn flashes a wobbly, grateful smile at Tara as she leads Willow away, then turns expectantly to Buffy. Giles is about to suggest to Ethan that they join the clean-up, when Buffy rises from the table, telling Dawn, “I’ll see you at home.” “What?” asks Dawn.

Buffy turns to call across the room to Spike and Faith: “Dawn’s going home with you guys once you’re done here.” Quietly, to Giles, she adds, “Sorry I’m not helping clean up. I just need some time to think.”

“Of course” Giles manages, “But Buffy –” Seeing Dawn watching them, Giles leads Buffy aside, leaving Ethan to drop into a chair next to the child “You should talk to Dawn about this. You are her sister.”

Buffy glances over to Dawn, who is now apparently getting an earful from Ethan. “You guys know the score with magic better than me. Anyway, she was trying to help.”

“In a very dangerous and intrusive way.”

“Giles, I just can’t do this right now, okay? Please talk to her?” And with that, Buffy is gone.

*****

Dawn watches Buffy leave as Ethan concludes, “…And I want you to pay for the Lethe’s bramble.” He studies her, following her gaze to the door that just closed on Buffy. “Dawn?”

“I’m listening. You going to ground me, too?”

“Hardly my place.”

“I’m not grounded, then.” Dawn sighs, turning back to him. “I made things worse, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

Dawn scowls. “Kind of hoping you’d be nice about it.”

“I don’t like being cursed.”

“You seemed to like it at the time. You were all excited about magic. More than I’ve seen in a while.”
“Well, between Willow and now you, I’ve been thinking about the darker side of magic a lot lately. Forgetting that, I suppose I could enjoy the possibilities a bit.”

“Not between me too: It wasn’t supposed to happen like that.”

“But it did.”

“Yeah.” Dawn looks around at the aftermath, the mess on the floor. “I am sorry, Ethan.” Ethan doesn’t tell her it’s okay; he doesn’t want to let her off that lightly. “I’m going to come over tomorrow” he informs her, “and collect everything you’ve pinched from here –”

“– I haven’t –”

“– And we’ll say no more about it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

They sit in uneasy silence until Dawn gets up to help Spike and Faith clear up.

*****

“Giles, hi” Buffy stands aside to let him in.

“Hello, Buffy, Faith.”

From the living room, Faith raises a hand in greeting. “Couldn’t stay away, huh, G?”

“Actually” says Giles, sitting down, “That’s what I plan to do. That’s what I wanted to talk to the two of you about.”

“Huh?”

Giles waits until Buffy has joined Faith on the sofa before explaining, “Buffy, since you’ve been back, I think you know that you’ve been depending on me far too much.”

“Because I need you” she states, clearly hurt. “After being pulled out… I’ve needed you. It’s not a crime.”

“It’s not” he agrees. “And it’s also completely understandable. But it’s no good for you, Buffy. You need to relearn how to rely on yourself if you’re going to have the life you deserve.” Or if Dawn is.

“What if I can’t? Giles, you know where I’ve been now.”

Giles nods. “And it’s all the more important now that you don’t give in to the temptation to surrender to the pain. You need to rely on yourself, regain your confidence. You can’t do that with me so involved.”

“I can’t just go back to normal like nothing happened.”

“Yeah, Giles” echoes Faith, “Give the girl a break.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do” Giles insists. “Buffy, I’m trying to give you the space you need to heal without becoming overly reliant on me.” Meeting blank slayer-gazes, Giles powers on with, “If circumstances were different, I’d consider taking Ethan back to England –”
Buffy makes a pained noise, a sort of whimper. Giles goes on, “– But that wouldn’t be fair on you, Faith, and besides” And besides there is a deadly, devouring evil headed their way “there is always the threat of the supernatural to consider. You don’t really need training, but I should stick around in case, ah, something shows up.”

“How kind” says Buffy hollowly.

“I know this seems harsh” he concedes.

“So what are we talking here, G?” asks Faith. “You and Ethan going to move to LA for weekends or something?”

“Nothing so drastic. But I did think we could use a new training schedule” Giles hands it over “and perhaps limit seeing one another outside of that.” It seems so cruel. He will struggle with it himself, never mind how it will seem to Buffy. “Only until you’ve had a little time, Buffy, to process what, err, what happened to you.” He flounders for a moment, before concluding, “Try to see this as a new start. A chance to heal without my interference.”

Buffy folds the schedule without looking at it. “So no more me bothering you with non-slayer things. No talking about how awful being here feels and how hard everything is. No personal stuff.”

“It’s not a matter of me being bothered” Giles says firmly. “And you can talk to me about anything you like. I just want to make sure you have the opportunity to solve your own problems without turning to me when you don’t need to. When you’re perfectly able to take care of yourself.”

Faith, glaring mutinously, points out, “You know I’ll just help her if you won’t.”

“That’s not the same” Giles replies, “Your friendship is more equal, it’s not, um…”

Buffy finishes for him, “It’s not like having a parent.”

“I’m not your parent, Buffy” Giles reminds her gently.

“No” Buffy stands up and stalks to the door. “I guess you’re not.”

*****

Ethan carefully times his visit to avoid Rupert’s. Dawn is in enough trouble without his well-meaning partner knowing about her recent thieving ways. Having thought of all manner of excuses to palm Buffy off with, Ethan comes and goes without the slayer asking what he needs to see Dawn about or why he leaves with a bag full of crystals and candles. Dawn, for her part, seems as disappointed by her sister’s silence as he is relieved.

On the way out, he runs into, “Willow, hello.”

“Hi, Ethan. What you got there?”

“Nothing important.”

Willow nods vaguely. No-one seems especially concerned about what Dawn had stashed away in her bedroom. Ethan steps aside to let her approach the front door, but Willow wavers, then steps aside too, turns to look across the patch of front lawn to an ugly garden gnome Ethan hadn’t noticed before. She asks, “How does Buffy seem?”
“Quiet” Ethan hedges. Distracted. More interested in what Spike had to say than what Dawn and he were up to.

“Uh huh. I wanted to talk to her about, well, everything, but now I’m thinking maybe I should just say hi and see if Dawnie will talk to me. If me and Buffy are going to talk about everything, maybe it’s better to wait until she wants to.”

“Probably wise” Ethan agrees. “By the way, how did you break the spell yesterday? You wouldn’t remember how to.”

“I didn’t need to. It just happened. I think maybe all the magic in me just righted the situation automatically.”

Ethan takes a moment to marvel at the idea of power strong enough to take over like that. Impressive, wonderous even, but also frightening, also not unlike being possessed. “That must have been…”

“Yeah.”

“It must have been as hard for you as it was for Buffy” Ethan realises, “To forget and then suddenly remember.”

“And then some. Ethan, for this wonderful moment, I forgot all the darkness I touched and magic was just fun and consequence-free again.”

“Well, except for the pixies and skeletons and things.”

“Yeah. But not scary, world-edy stuff.” Willow sighs. “But in real life, it doesn’t work like that. I can’t just wave a magic wand and get a fresh start like nothing happened. In real life, you have to face consequences.”

“You mean…”

“I have to tell them, Ethan. I have to tell Buffy and everyone that something bad is coming and it’s my fault.”
“Everyone’s here, Willow. We’re ready to start.”

“Oh” The likely most powerful witch on earth stares up at Giles from a cross-legged position, nery and wide-eyed. He asks, “You were meditating?”

“Yeah. Hoping to find out more about the whole upcoming evil, but I couldn’t sense it. It’s just, from beneath you, it devours isn’t much to go on, research wise. Plus it helps me feel all calm and in control. The meditating, that is, not the evil. That would be the opposite.”

“I see. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Willow stands up. “I have to do it some time. Might as well be now.”

They head out into the shop where the rest of the group is waiting. Ethan is closing the blinds and switching the sign on the door to closed, while Anya is behind the counter, talking with Xander who stands on the customer side. Buffy, Faith, Dawn and Tara are at the table. Giles wonders if Tara already knows but of course he can’t ask now.

“Hey Will” says Xander as they enter. “What’s with the top-secret meeting?”

“Yes” says Anya, “We’re missing our afternoon trade.”

“Sorry.” Willow takes a seat at the table as Anya, Xander and Ethan come over to join them. Her gaze flitters unhappily around the room. “Actually, that’s something I’m going to be saying a lot – sorry.”

“What do you mean?” asks Buffy.

Willow looks imploringly at her. “Buffy, I screwed up twice. I brought you back when you were in heaven, and I let something else in at the same time.”

“Something like the non-corporeal demon?” asks Anya.

Willow shakes her head. “Something much worse.”

“Uh huh” says Faith, “Thanks for that.” She stares at Willow expectantly. “Well, what is it? Where is it?”

“It’s not here yet. But it’s coming. Buffy, are you okay?”

Buffy has become very still. “Um” she manages, “Yeah. Wait, what do you mean it’s not here yet? Where’s it coming from?”

“My guess? From another dimension. But the spell I did gave it a way in.” Stiltedly, she takes them through her various revelations and encounters during her time in Devon. The sense of incoming doom, the cryptic warnings about things that devour. “I don’t know what it is” she concludes, “but it’s big. Bad. Worse than anything we’ve faced, I think.”

Buffy’s head, which had lowered in quiet despair as Willow spoke, jolts up. “Worse than Glory?”

Willow nods. “Or as bad.”
Dawn seems to shrink in on herself a little. Faith reaches mechanically for her shoulder, squeezes it. Tara, who, judging by the look on her face, knew no more about this than anyone else, asks Willow, “Are you sure it’s as bad as that? Or, or is it your guilt making it seem worse than it is?”

“It’s bad, sweetie. I’m not just guilt gal. Well, I am, but I should be.”

“Because you might have gone and screwed us all with this thing” accuses Faith.

“No” says Willow, too quickly. “We will stop it. I know that.”

Xander asks, “More visions and stuff?”

“Well, no. Just hope.”

“Oh.”

Willow looks around at them, at Buffy’s closed off horror, Dawn’s more ordinary horror, Faith’s grim and quiet rage and at the various degrees of shocked, scared and sad that Xander, Anya and Tara are displaying. “Guys” she says, “I know this is bad. I know this will probably change how you all feel about me. And if Buffy had been in hell, I’d say it was worth it but it’s not and I know you might hate me now. But really? We’ve got bigger things to think about right now.”

“Like stopping an apocalypse you’ve caused” Faith agrees, just as Xander says, “We don’t hate you, Will.” He pulls Willow into a sideways hug and turns to the group. “Right?”

“No” Buffy says slowly, “Not hate. Never that, but…but…God, Willow.”

“I know. Buffy, I know it doesn’t mean anything, but I am sorry.”

“You’re right” says Dawn, “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Not on its own” Tara admits. She reaches for Willow’s hand. “But you can make amends by helping to set things right.”

Willow nods. “I will. I want to help.”

Faith states, “You’ve helped enough.”

“Hey” Xander cautions, “Could we maybe have a little less judgement from the Mayor’s right-hand slayer?”

“You think that’s comparable?” Faith retorts, “If this thing’s as bad as she says it is –”

“Then we’ll need a witch as powerful as Willow to fight it” points out Ethan.

Anya eyes Willow speculatively. “True” she agrees. And, to Willow, “Not to mention, you are Xander’s best man.”

Willow blinks, smiles a small smile. “I am?”

Xander repeats his sideways hug. “Well, who else was I gonna ask?”

“What do we know about this thing?” Buffy asks. As the sudden reorientation towards darkness registers around the room, she adds, “We should start researching, right?”

“There’s not much to go on just yet” Giles tells her. “I do plan to speak to the Council” He glances
at Willow “without going into detail about how this dark power came into our realm, of course.”

“No, you should” Willow tells him, “In case it’s relevant.”

Ethan asks, “But what if they come after you?”

Willow doesn’t look especially worried by the prospect. Buffy answers for her: “We won’t let them.”

Faith glances sharply up at that, but tells Willow, “I guess you have done the whole post-evil-trip-to-England thing. No use you being in cell when you could be helping us.”

Willow nods. “Thanks.”

Faith shrugs. “I didn’t say I’m all up for hanging out or anything. Just that Ethan might have a point – If someone’s got to fight this thing, better you than me.”

“Right.” Willow looks from her to Buffy. Buffy studies the table.

“We’ll all have to fight it” Giles tells them. “Or rather, those of us with a calling will have to –”

(“Or a conscience” mutters Dawn)

“– And I’m sure the rest of you will want to help if you can” Giles goes on. He is heartened by the nods around the room. To Buffy and Faith, he adds, “Given the lack of researching leads, I think our focus should be on training.”


“And you’re both to let me know if you experience any slayer dreams that could give us information” Giles instructs “Not to mention, ears to the ground, everyone: If any of you hear anything that tells us anything at all, share it.”

“Got you” says Xander, “Any of the guys at down at the construction site start talking about dark powers rising, you’ll be the first to know.”

“I’ll keep my ears open in Willy’s Place” Ethan offers, “Maybe start visiting the bite house more often.”

“Just be careful.”

“We can get the suppliers talking” suggests Anya, “And some of the customers.”

“There’s Rack” says Ethan, but Willow shakes her head. “I wouldn’t trust him to tell us the truth about anything.” “Well” says Faith, “I guess you’d be the one to judge if creepy magic folk are trustworthy.”

“Enough, Faith” puts in Buffy, wearily. Looking at Willow, she adds, “Look, none of us are thrilled about all this, but I know you wanted to help me. I forgive you.”

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“I’m not sure I can forgive her, Giles.”

Giles turns to Buffy, who is pacing the otherwise empty training room, filling it up with her agitation. “But, you said…”
“Yeah, I said. Because I can’t deal with everyone laying into each other on top of…everything.” She sighs. “But then, maybe forgiveness doesn’t have to be an it doesn’t matter thing. Maybe it can be a let’s not talk about it ever thing?”

“I think it’s a matter of allowing yourself peace. Not to mention, ensuring Willow is able to put right what she’s done.”

“Maybe. I hope. It’s just…” Buffy catches his eye, studies him for a moment and sighs. “Sorry Giles: I know we said no personal stuff.”

“That wasn’t what I mea –”

“I’ll see you next time, okay?” Buffy leaves.

*****

The following evening, they are in the Magic Box again, this time without Dawn, who is being cared for by Tara, and with the addition of Spike, who, though he’s supposed to be working, keeps sharing glances with Buffy in way Giles doesn’t like at all.

Nor does he like how frustratingly bizarre the hellmouth’s latest offering is. He sums it up: “So we have diamond missing and a museum guard frozen. No mystical properties to the diamond so far as we can tell and yet something was prepared to put this poor man in coma for it.”

“That’s assuming the two are connected” says Xander. “I mean, maybe some sort of ice monster got in, attacked the guard, and then someone else wandered in and took the diamond.” At their blank looks, he insists, “Well we don’t know the two are connected! Not for sure. Okay, I’m reaching here.”

“Maybe the diamond was cursed” says Anya, “to turn anyone who tried to steal it into an ice statue. Maybe the guard took it.”

“And did what?” asks Ethan, “Shove it down his pants before he iced over? Remember, the diamond’s missing.”

“Maybe the diamond turned into ice and coated him” Anya defends. “Maybe that’s part of the curse.”

Willow shakes her head. “The newspaper report said he had his hand up, like he was defending himself from something. There was definitely something in the room with him.”

Faith sighs and tosses her book aside. “We need more intel on this” she decides. “I’m going to go hit things.”

“Have fun” says Buffy vaguely.

Xander asks, “What can diamonds be used for apart from curses?”

“Wedding rings” replies Anya.

“Magic-wise.”

“Trapping demons” Ethan answers. His eyes widen. “Something was trapped in the diamond, perhaps? Gets free and ices the chap?”

Giles frowns. “I’d still expect the diamond to be present but damaged.”
“Maybe the thing was really hungry when it got out?” tries Xander.

“Waste of a good diamond” says Anya.

Spike joins them. “Most demons would rather eat the guard than the rock” he points out.

Willow asks him, “Do you know any ice breathing demons?”

“Can’t say I do. Far as I can see, you’ve hit a dead end.”

Giles hates to admit that Spike may be right, so he doesn’t. The vampire goes on, “Ethan, if I could take my break now, I reckon Buffy and I would be better off catching up with Faith, helping with the clobbering.”

“Go ahead” says Ethan.

Buffy takes a moment to notice Spike’s expectant stare. “Catching up with Faith?” she repeats, standing up. “Yes, absolutely, we should do that.” They leave together.

*****

“Quite a mess, Giles” states Quentin Travers. He is, presumably, at his vast mahogany desk, the Council’s seal gleaming above him. Giles, seated on his bed in Sunnydale, because there is nothing to be gained from Ethan overhearing half the conversation and being sarcastic about it later, feels very small, and very annoyed. He points out, “We have at least been warned of the danger in good time.”

“By the witch who brought the thing about. What else can you tell me about her?”

“You met her yourself last year” Giles points out.

“She wasn’t the focus of appraisal. And no-one could have predicted she’d manage a resurrection spell.”

“I suppose not.”

“She ought to be in our custody.”

“No” Giles tries to force his tone into just the right blend of reassuring trustworthiness and steely authority. “She is on the side of good, and the Devon Coven have seen to it that no traces of dark magic linger.”

“Until she casts dark magic again, Giles. You of all people know its lure.”

Damn the man for bringing that up. “I also know what it is to learn one’s lesson” Giles manages to sound polite “and believe me, Willow has learnt hers. She’s better off with us where we can fight this thing.”

“This thing” repeats Travers. “There’s nothing much to go on.”

“I’m aware. Obviously I’ll let you know more if we learn anything further.”

“As will we. Let’s just hope we don’t have to wait until the thing starts devouring.”

For once, Giles is inclined to agree.
“I’ve just thought” says Willow, looking up from her book during their second day of research, “We’re just assuming it’s a demon. What if it’s a human?”

“A spell, you mean?” asks Ethan. Before he can speculate on what a freezing hex might take, Dawn – seated on the steps away from the table – has set her own book aside to say, “I guess humans with magic can be as bad as demons.”

“Any humans can be as bad as demons” Ethan corrects.

“What do you mean, Dawnie?” asks Willow.

“You know what I mean.”

“Right” Ethan says hastily, “I think we’ve probably done enough for now. We don’t really have enough to go on.” Not enough for answers that is. More than enough for a row, these days. Normally Ethan isn’t fazed by rows but the last thing Willow needs is more guilt and Dawn should probably be off doing normal teenage things somewhere, not stuck here.


“I’ve never heard of a freezing spell” Ethan admits.

Dawn says, “Maybe someone made one up. People can do that, right? Make up a spell like making up a recipe?”

“Is that something you’ve tried?” asks Willow.

“You’re saying I did this!?"

“Of course not. I just mean…We haven’t really talked about the whole forgetathon.” Willow glances at Ethan and he shrugs to indicate that no, the girl hasn’t really had the comeuppance she could have faced for that. Willow goes on, “Maybe we should talk about what you’ve tried besides Lethe’s Bramble.”

Dawn folds her arms. “Ethan and Tara are my tutors.”

“I know, but, well, I know what it’s like to be drawn to things that don’t work out.”

“I noticed.”

“I just mean, you can talk to me too.” Willow glances at Ethan again, and he backs her up with a nod.

Dawn glances between the two of them, before standing up. “Willow, I’m not you.” She gathers her bag. “If Buffy calls, tell her I’m at Janice’s.” She slams the door as she leaves.

Willow turns to Ethan unhappily. “Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s just, someone has to.”

“Someone being code for Buffy?” asks Ethan, aware that, as the one who suggested the girl learn magic, it should perhaps be him too.

“Buffy won’t” Willow replies. “And that’s kinda on me.” She looks down at the book in front of her and closes it decisively. “I think you’re right – not enough to go on.”
When Ethan’s mobile phone rings that evening and Ethan hands it to him with, “Someone asking for you”, Giles is puzzled. Confusion gives way to a brief excitement when it turns out to be Bleddyn. But what the supplier says is, “I’m going to send you a cheque to return the five hundred dollar down payment.”

“Oh.” Giles frowns, causing Ethan, watching from the sofa, to follow suit questioningly. “Has something happened? I thought you had leads to follow?”

“My inquiries indicated that the Daidalos Chest is better not found. It’s too dangerous.”

“It will be too dangerous when some demon finds it instead! And you knew this was dangerous at the outset!”

“I’ve had time to think. I’m sending the money back. And I would avoid searching for it any longer, if I were you.”

“You’re not me. Not that I’ll have much chance of finding it without a map or information.”

“That’s just as well.”

“What did you find out that changed your mind?”

“I simply had time to think. You’ll get the cheque in the next few days.”

Giles ignores that. He doesn’t care about the money. For one thing, it is the Council’s. He asks, “Time to think, or time to find another employer?”

“I have to go now.”

Hearing the flat dial tone, Giles attempts to hang up, and then – never sure how to hang up Ethan’s mobile – passes the thing back to Ethan with the line still open. “Your supplier is a spineless demon.”

Ethan hangs up and shuts the phone with a snap. “I’m not going to argue with that. Which supplier?”

“Bleddyn.”

“Ah. What happened?”

“He’s reneged on his agreement to help me track the Daidalos Chest. Probably his search for information on the damn thing lead him straight to someone willing to pay more.” He shakes his head. “Perhaps I should see if the Council would be willing to up their price, but given that they’ve only just agreed to leave Willow alone, I’d rather avoid contact with them for a while and let things cool down.”

“Probably wise. And it’s not as though we’re not busy here without cursed chests – Ice demons and all.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Reassuring himself that the Daidalos Chest has remained hidden for centuries and will likely remain so even if Bleddyn is working for someone else, Giles forces the matter from his mind.
Patrol might be a time to get frustrations like the spineless nature of Ethan’s suppliers out of his system, but any enjoyment Giles might get out of it is ruined by, “Spike. I hadn’t realised you’d be joining us.”

“Not us” Buffy reassures him, “Just me. I figured you and Faith could take Restfield and me and Spike will take Shady Hill.”

“I suppose, if you think that’s –”

“Great” Buffy turns to Spike. “Come on.” They head off together.

Going the other way with Faith, Giles comments, “I know she’s not happy about our new arrangement, but there’s really no need to avoid me for patrol – that comes under training.”

“What?” says Faith, “You’re all professional distance this and rely on yourself that and you expect her to be fine with it?”

“No, but I don’t see that patrol should be affected.”

“It won’t be much” Faith pulls a stake from her pocket as the enter the cemetery. “She’ll still patrol, just with Spike skulking around.” She pulls a disgusted expression and adds, “Anyway, I don’t think the part with Spike is all about you being Mr Professional Distance – I think they’re screwing.”

Giles stops dead. Faith keeps walking, notices his absence, and turns around. “What?”

“Faith, do get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Why?”

“They are not…doing that. Buffy would never lower herself to considering Spike as a lover.”

“Who said lover? I was thinking more fuckvamp. Anyway, she wouldn’t before, but now? Sometimes when life gives you shit you need to lower yourself for a good wallow.”

“No” Giles decides after some consideration, “Buffy might be having a hard time but she still has standards.”

Faith shrugs. “Well, he is conveniently located, in our basement and all. And there’s only so sneaky two people can be when you’re living with them and you have slayer senses.”

“Good Lord! You’ve heard them?”

“No” Faith admits. “Well, I haven’t heard them fucking. But I’ve heard her pulse speed up around him and seen her pupils do that thing.” She gestures to her eyes. “You know, that thing Dawn’s tweeptastic magazines go on about?”

“Oddly, I don’t make it my business to read Dawn’s magazines.”

“Oh. Well, me neither.”

“What thing with her eyes?”

“Something with the pupils, where they change when a guy’s into you? All I know is, when those two look at each other, their pupils change.”
“Sounds like pseudoscience to me.”

“Sue who? Anyway, I’m just sayin’. Dawn’s noticed it too, and that kid doesn’t miss much.”

“Perhaps she’s just been reading too many magazines.”

Faith shrugs again. “Whatever. I’m just saying don’t take it personally that B went off with Spike.”

Giles considers this further, and concludes, “If he is taking advantage, I’ll –”

“You’ll what? Stake him? Giles, B would kill you dead. Actually, Dawn would kill you dead, and Buffy wouldn’t save you.”

Her use of Buffy’s full name gives Giles pause. However mercenary Spike may be, there is no denying he has become a fixture in the Summers sisters’ lives. “I wouldn’t stake him” he admits. “I’d simply…”

“Give him a good telling off? Giles, hate to say it, ’cause god knows B can do better, but I think this one’s outta our hands.”

Inclined to agree, Giles consoles himself with, “You may be mistaken.”

“Maybe.” Faith doesn’t sound convinced. She switches topic with, “So, are we going to slay or what? Got to be some vamps around here, or – oh, hey, a demon.” She gestures, and Giles follows the gesture to, “Ah”

“Yup” confirms Faith, “Looks like it’s our lucky night.”

“Or not.” The demon is large and unpleasant looking even for a monster, its blue-speckled skin stretched thinly over a bulging, luminescent muscular system. In place of hands it has… “Watch the needles” Giles advises.

“Yeah, ’cause I was planning to head straight for ’em.”

“Faith, this is no time to –” and Giles can say no more, as Faith leaps forward. She kicks the demon in the chest and it staggers back, the stagger becoming more pronounced as Faith sinks the stake into its chest. Then it regroups, swings a needle-tipped stump which she dodges. “Faith!” Giles throws her an axe and she catches it, swings it and –

“There.” Faith watches in satisfaction as the decapitated demon melts. “There’s nothing an axe won’t fix.” She frowns. “Except maybe fire. Oh” She twists, tugs at a torn sleeve “fucker scratched me.”

“Let me see” urges Giles.

“Nah, I’m fine, it is literally just a scra – oh shit” Faith slumps, unconscious, into Giles’ arms.

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“It’s poison” Giles concludes apologetically.

“No shit” manages Faith from her nest of blankets on the sofa, “I thought it was a party drug.”

Giles ignores that, continues to read. “The good news is, it won’t kill you.”

“And I’m getting a hunch I’m just gonna love the bad news?”
“The bad news is, it will turn you into a Smulgoor demon – that’s the species that attacked you – unless we locate and kill the demon that delivered the poison.”

“Huh.”

“We will find it, Faith.”

“How quickly you got to do that?” Faith is remarkably calm.

“Within…” Giles scans the page. “Within a few hours, I’m afraid.”

“Not as afraid as you’re going to be of demon-me if you fail. What’s with the afraid? Send B to get this thing and it’s problem solved, right?”

“Absolutely. I’ll fetch Buffy and get everyone working on where this thing has gone and it will all, err, be fine.”

“Hey, Giles, if all’s going to be fine? You don’t usually have to say it.”

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Over the next half hour, Faith’s skin goes from pale to actively shining as her muscles light up unnaturally beneath her surface. She doesn’t comment on the change and, following the less than subtle hint of her death-glare, no-one else does either. As she paces the Summers’ living room, the rest of the group consult books and – in Willow’s case – a rather odd website (not that Giles has much to compare it to). Buffy keeps glancing anxiously at Faith, and Spike (Giles tries not to read anything into the fact they arrived together; they were patrolling together after all), keeps glancing anxiously at Buffy. Dawn sits tensely, not looking at anyone.

“Oh! I got it!” Anya exclaims. As everyone turns to her, she reads proudly, “The Smulgoor demon enters the human realm only by invitation and stays only so long as its contract lasts.”

“Contract?” asks Xander, “It’s like Rob from work – self-employed?”

“It needs to be summoned” explains Ethan.

Buffy asks, “So who summoned it?”

“Probably whoever stole the diamond” Giles replies, “and if it’s still working for them – err, on contract, as it were – we won’t have much luck summoning it ourselves.”

“We could try though, right?” asks Tara. She casts a worried look Dawn’s way, clearly keen for the child’s sake to save Faith fast. It is Faith who replies, with a shake of her head, “If the diamond snatching ice demon set it on me, they’ll be wanting the slayers out the way. We got a one down situation.”

Everyone turns to Buffy. “Great” she mutters.

“Well” Giles rallies, “at least if it’s coming for you, we won’t need to waste time looking for it.”

Everyone looks at Faith and her pearly skin, aware there is only so much time to waste. Dawn asks, “If we don’t find it in time… If Faith…you know, actually turns into a demon, we can reverse it, right?”

A few unhappy glances are shared by those with the more useful books. Willow explains, “Actually, Dawnie, the venom’s effect can only be reversed while it’s, well, still taking effect. Not,
Dawn’s eyes widen. Behind her, Faith resumes pacing. Dawn asks, “So if we don’t stop this before Faith turns into a demon then –”

“Yeah” interrupts Faith, “Then you’re stuck with another demon housemate.”

“Except not really” states Anya, “Because the Smulgoor venom will get to your mind too, and you won’t remember being human. You’ll just, well, eat us and then run off into a hell dimension.”

Dawn’s mouth drops open in horror. Faith considers this possibility with a small nod and a flexing of her fingers, luminous muscles opening and closing. Xander says, “Honey. Remember when we talked about sugar coating?”

Anya blinks at him. “Like on cereal?”

“Okay” Xander shifts to face her “That one’s probably on me for having that talk so early in the morning. What I mean is –”

“Doesn’t matter” interrupts Spike without rancour. He nods to Dawn’s stricken face. “Damage is done.” Reaching for Dawn, he tells her, “Sweet bit, there’s nothing to worry about. This thing will come for Buffy and she’ll slay it. ’Swhat she does.”

“Yes” says Giles, struck by how odd it is to be agreeing with Spike, “There’s nothing to worry about.” He doesn’t believe what he says. The possibility – however small – of losing another slayer is a chilling one.

Dawn looks to Buffy for confirmation. When Buffy, watching Faith pace, says nothing, Tara echoes, “A-absolutely. We can fix this.”

“Yes” says Giles again, “Buffy, you can resume patrol and give this demon a chance to attack you. Given how strong it is, it may be an idea for a few of us to follow you at a distance for back up.”

Buffy finally engages with the conversation. “Follow me at a distance, huh?” She turns to Spike. “You up for that?”

“It’s what I do, love.”

Thrown by that intimacy, Giles powers on with, “And those of us who remain can attempt to summon the demon. If it was only called upon to attack one slayer, it will be a free agent again and may respond to us. Faith, you can stay with us and slay it yourself if we’re successful.”

“Uh huh” says Faith. “One problem though.”

“What?”

She parts her hair. “I’ve just grown horns.”
Wrecked

Buffy takes an emotional leave of Faith, hugging her firmly before she heads out to make herself both bait and bane to the Smulgoor demon. “We’ll get it” she reassures her sister slayer. “It’s going to be fine.”

Faith nods, tucking worry away behind a brave grin. From the living room, Ethan notices, Willow can’t as easily hide the jealousy that flickers over her features at Buffy’s warmth with the other girl, but, while Faith and Buffy might be closer than ever these days, that jealousy seeps from an old wound and Willow ignores it, focuses on the matter at hand. “I’ve found a summoning spell.”

“Good” says Faith. “I hope it comes: I want to kill it myself.”

“Whoever kills it” says Buffy, “the important thing is, once it’s dead, you’re back to humanness.”

Faith’s hand steals subconsciously to her new horns. A few blue scales have appeared on her wrist. Buffy pats her reassuringly, then leaves with Rupert, Xander and Spike in tow.

Rupert’s exit leaves Ethan the only experienced demon summoner in the group, and he sets about organising the ritual in order to break the atmosphere, which is not tense so much as nervous – it seems every time they look at Faith, she is looking more likely to attack them. Perhaps because of the nervous glances thrown her way in addition to the little matter of slowly transforming beyond recognition, her mood is sour. Perhaps. Or perhaps it is her mind that is next to change.

No, Ethan tells himself: Faith is generally in a bad mood. They should worry if she turns cheerful. “Right” he announces, as he finishes chalking the ritual circle onto the dining room floorboards. “Now we need a candle at the northern edge of the symbol.”

Anya places the candle with a confidence in her awareness of where north is that eludes the modern humans in the room. Ethan nods. “Thanks. Now we need the raven bones set in the Hell’s Folly position to the right of that.”

Willow sets the bones down in a precise pattern and asks, “And the thorns to the south?”

Ethan checks the book. “Yes.” The thorns are laid down. “Dawn, you can do the crystals.”

Dawn sets the crystals down in a hexagon pattern around the edges of the chalk circle. “This is magic” she points out.

Faith raises an eyebrow (and everyone politely refrains from pointing out it has turned blue). “I can see those lessons are really paying off.”

Dawn mock-scowls, the harshest she’s going to be to her pseudo-sister in the circumstances. “I mean, it doesn’t seem like a demon who steals diamonds and freezes people would do this. They’d just attack you themselves, right? But a human who steals diamonds and freezes people, they might summon something to go after you.”

“That’s true” says Tara uneasily.

“So it was a witch who did this” concludes Dawn.

“Or a warlock” says Ethan, not to be left out.
Dawn shrugs, her expression darkening. “But it was a human who did this. With magic.” She looks at Willow.

“Well” Willow manages, “Probably. But we knew it could be. And it’s not really news that some people use magic to do bad things.”

“Not news to you” mutters Faith. Seeing Willow’s expression, she amends, “But, Dawn, it obviously wasn’t Willow this time, so how about we focus on undemoning me?”

“Right. Sorry.” Dawn finishes putting the crystals into position.

Willow lights the candle, then adds, “Not everyone who does magic is bad.”

“Exactly” Ethan agrees. Looking at Dawn, he points out, “You do magic, for one.”

Dawn stares sadly back at him. “Who says I’m good?”

They have the ritual correct – that much is clear from the magic swimming the room, suffusing the atmosphere with an unplaceable charge, like the atoms in the air have all stepped briefly into another realm and come back changed. The climax of the spell has everyone’s hair standing on end.

But nothing happens. After a moment, the magic dims and the candle sputters out.

“That was disappointing” says Anya.

Dawn glances worriedly at Faith, whose (yellow) eyes are fixed on the extinguished candle, and asks, “So it’s still working for whoever summoned it?”

“Looks like it” admits Ethan.

“Maybe they’ll just kept it on the payroll” manages Faith, “so we won’t be able to summon it until after I’ve changed.”

“Or” Willow reminds her, “it’s busy being slain by Buffy right now.”

Faith nods slightly, then turns away, heads into the kitchen.

“It figures, huh?” Faith looks up from the sink as Ethan enters.

“What does?” Really, Ethan would rather not be alone with the distressed and almost-demonic slayer, but there is no-one else, of the remaining group. Willow might be helping, but that is out of penance, not love for Faith, of which she clearly is clearly in short supply. Dawn is too distressed, and Tara and Anya are busy calming Dawn. That leaves Ethan.

He leans against the counter beside her and, when she doesn’t speak, nods to the washing up. “I think you could get away with leaving that, in the circumstances.”

“I don’t mind. It’s distracting.”

“What figures?”
“That it’d be me that turns into a demon.” Faith gives a dish a vicious scrub.

“What, you’ve secretly always fancied blue skin?”

“No, but I have secretly worked for a guy who wanted to be a giant snake demon before. And then not so secretly.”

“Faith, that has nothing to do with it. The Smulgoor was probably set after you and Buffy and it just happened to find you first.”

“Except things don’t just happen” Faith scrubs harder at the dish “We’ve got a world filled with fate and karma and all that crap, might be it found me first because I deserved it more. Or even it could smell the bad in me.”

“There’s no bad in you.”

Faith glances doubtfully at him (there are blue scales at her temples now) and Ethan amends, “Well, alright, there is, but there’s bad in everyone.”

“You remember what I said about the giant snake demon I worked for?”

“That was years ago. You need to forgive yourself.”

“But I can’t” Faith continues to work at the dish, scrubbing it up into a pristine shimmer.

“Why not?”

“Because I miss him!” Faith drops the dish back into the water. “It’s been years, but I still miss him. And I keep thinking, he could fix this. I mean, how messed up is it that I still think of him when there’s a problem?”

“Not particularly. He was your friend.”

“The thing all the motivational posters at work say you get to choose?”

“That hasn’t been my experience” Ethan admits, “I’ve just been friends with whoever happened to be around and who could put up with me. I was friends with Randall for years and, between you and me, he was a prat, for Rupert’s saintified him now.”

“Canonised”

“What?”

“When you make someone a saint, you canonise them.” Seeing his confusion, Faith explains, “I lived in a place run by nuns once while my mom was in rehab.”

“Oh.” Ethan can’t think of anything to say to that. Except to ask, “They treat you okay?”

Faith shrugs. “They were nuns.” As if that answered the question. With a I’m steering this conversation firmly away from the wreckage of my past and into yours tone, she asks, “Did this Randall want to be a giant snake demon?”

“Not to my knowledge” Ethan is happy to drop talk of nuns, “but he was just the sort of idiot who’d think it was a good idea.” Leaning back in an attempt to meet her eyes as she turns to the unfortunate dish again, he tells her, “Faith, you’re not being punished. This isn’t fate. It’s just bad luck, so –”
“Son of a bitch!” The dish shatters in the sink as Faith’s hand jerks.

“What?” Ethan takes a step back.

In answer, Faith hold up her arms. One hand has receded, fingers to stubs, among which protrudes a long, thin needle.

“Any luck?” asks Buffy when the hunting party return to her house. “Did you summon it?”

Faith, on the sofa, simply holds her arms out. Two needles protrude from her wrists. One hand has receded into a sump and the other is on its way to gone. Buffy stares. “Oh God.”

Faith asks, “Take it you didn’t find it?”

“No. If it is after me too, it’s taking its time.”

Giles steps around her to examine Faith’s needles. “Time we don’t have, apparently.”

Faith’s frightened yellow eyes meet his own, and then she turns to Buffy. “You’re going to have to stake me, B.”

“What?” Buffy manages, “No!”

“You’re right” concedes Faith, “Staking doesn’t work on these things. How’d we…Oh, that axe. You’re going to have to decapitate me.”

Buffy is aghast. “Faith, stop it. There’s no way I’m going to decapitate you!”

Assailed by memories of what decapitating a friend is like, Giles steps abruptly away. Alone in understanding, Ethan steps closer, slinks an arm around his waist. Asks the group, “Surely there must be something we can do?”

“We can find whoever summoned this thing” suggests Xander, “Get them to call it up so we can kill it.”

“Yes” Buffy turns to him gratefully. “Exactly. We’ll do that.”

Faith points out, “Except we don’t know who stole that diamond. Or even if it’s them who summoned the Smulgoor.”

“Do you want me to decapitate you?” returns Buffy. “This is a plan.”

“Yes” rallies Giles, “We’ll ask in the demon haunts, see if anyone’s been after ingredients for summoning spells. Ethan, why don’t you go with them and introduce Buffy to your informants? And, Spike, you go with them, to –”

“No” interrupts Faith, still tense on the sofa. At their questioning looks, she says, “Spike stays. I’m about to change past stopping it, I can feel it. If Buffy’s out, you guys will need someone who’ll have a chance to fight me off. Or, not me. It. What I’ll be by then.”

Dawn whimpers softly and Tara pulls her into an embrace. Buffy shakes her head. “Someone who’ll kill you, you mean. No. It won’t happen.”

“You wanna take Dawn with you then? ’Cause if you’re not going to kill me, B, you won’t want
her around me.”

Dawn breaks away from Tara. “I can’t stand this!” She rushes upstairs.

“Dawn!” Buffy reaches for her sister, half-heartedly as she passes, then turns back to Faith. “Faith, I’m not leaving Spike here to kill you.”

Anya speaks into the tense silence. “Well, in that case, I’m thinking chains? Because I know my plans for tonight didn’t involve being eaten.”

“Good idea” says Giles. “But where will we get –”

Spike puts in, “We – err, I – have some chains in the basement.” To Faith, “We can secure you to the wall down there.”

“Okay then” says Buffy. “See? There’s no need to kill you.”

Faith doesn’t look convinced.

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“This is getting annoying” says Buffy, as Ethan leads them down yet another dark alley.

Spike cautions, “We’re getting somewhere now, pet.”

Ethan feels what the vampire has picked up on: the pernicious tingle of a concealed doorway. “Yes, this is it.”

“And the creeps here are going to be more useful than the creeps in Willy’s Place?” asks Buffy.

“No-one knowing in Willy’s Place means it’s more likely to be a human than a demon” Ethan reasons, “And these creeps are human.” As they step through the door into Rack’s waiting room and spot a slumped Hanol, he adds, “Well, mostly.” “Who’s next?” Rack’s door opens. Buffy lunges.

“Smulgoor demon” she tells him, backing him into his private quarters with a hand around his throat. “Someone set one on the other slayer. Who?”

Behind her, Spike and Ethan slink in. Ethan is about to shut the door when he notices a dead-eyed youth staring up at the commotion and pauses, keeps it open.

“I don’t sell summoning spells” gasps Rack around Buffy’s grip. “Too much that can come back to bite you.” With a spark of magic, he releases Buffy’s hold on him and steps back, smirking.

“Right” snaps Buffy, “You just trick kids into summoning things by accident.”

Rack shrugs expansively, the universal gesture of dealers everywhere who are baffled by the exploits of their customers. No-one made them do those things. Really.

Buffy grabs him again and this time he merely laughs, leans in to her suggestively. Buffy recoils, and suddenly Spike has grabbed Rack, slammed him against the far wall. “Talk fast” he advises.

“I don’t sell summoning spells” Rack repeats, wincing.

“Has anyone talked about summoning spells?” Buffy asks.
“They talk about all sorts of things when they’re under.”

“Anyone new showed up?” tries Ethan.

Rack shrugs, smirks. “These young people, they all look the same after a while.”

“Or at least they do when you’re through with them” concludes Ethan grimly. He glances back to the dazed youth waiting his turn in the next room. He is still peering through the door way, while none of the others have looked up. Rack follows his gaze. Asks, “Daniel, you heard anything?”

“Me?” The youth shrinks into himself a little as Spike and Buffy turn his way too, Spike briefly relaxing his grip on Rack and then reinforcing it again with an unnecessary little jolt that neither Buffy or Ethan begrudge him. Buffy steps towards Daniel. For all the rancour she had for Rack, she is gentle as she crouches beside him to ask, “Do you know anyone who talked about summoning a Smulgoor?”

“No, I…” Daniel glances at Rack, who nods stiffly, still pinned in place by Spike. Daniel goes on, “I don’t… I don’t know him exactly. I don’t know his name. I’ve just seen him around.”

“Around where?”

“Places like this. Not this place, just… There are some places in this town where the sort of demons go who give off magic. Just a bit of energy, just from being in this dimension. Good to hang around them if you can’t score a hit.”

Buffy looks grimly up at Ethan. “And you want my little sister to learn magic.”

“Never this magic” Ethan insists.

Turning back to Daniel, Buffy asks, “So this guy’s hooked on the dark arts and he wants me and Faith out the way. Why?”

“Oh, he’s not hooked” Daniel replies, “He goes to those places but it’s to learn stuff. Trade stuff. Sometimes he talks to the demons but more often he talks to us groupies. Kind of a wannabe, I thought, but he can do magic. Sometimes trades it with us for info.”

“Info?”

“Just anything we’ve heard. Says he’s about to make a big impression in this town.”

Ethan thinks of Faith, chained to a wall and slowly turning into a monster. An impression, it seems, has been made.

“What does he look like?” asks Buffy.

“Dark hair” Daniel scrunches up his face, apparently trying to picture the man “My sorta age. Has two friends who come with him sometimes. Acts kind of arrogant. And not a bad caster really.”

Focusing again on Buffy, he adds, “But I don’t think he’s after you, if that helps. He’s only mentioned the other one.”

“The other slayer?” “Yeah. Says he wants her out the way.”

Behind them, Rack chuckles. “Don’t feel bad, slayer. It gets back to him you’re asking questions, he’ll want you out the way too.” Then he shrieks as a loud crack sounds. Spike yelps in turn and drops to his knees.
“Spike!” Buffy hurries over, helps the vampire up, leaving a broken-armed Rack on the floor.

“Sorry, pet” Spike is panting, blood dripping from his nose. “Forgot he was human.”

Buffy stares down at the sobbing Rack. “Easy mistake to make” she says.

*****

“I’m not going to ask why Spike put these up” Faith muses, indicting the chain that loops around her waist from the wall. Initially, they had attempted to fasten the cuffs around her wrists, but they had simply slid off the streamlined points her arms have become. Instead she is lassoed and padlocked.

“Best not to” says Giles from the steps, secretly grateful for a distraction from her pale, moon-like glow, her lengthening horns and the occasional growl in her voice.

As if to pull him back into the nightmare she is trapped in, Faith asks, “Giles, you’d kill me right? If it came to it.”

“Faith, I – ” Giles looks into her desperate (and yellow) eyes, and protestations die on his tongue. “Of course I would.”

“Giles?” Willow’s voice sounds from the doorway above.

Giles twist round. “Any luck?” Willow had been looking into opening a doorway into the demon’s dimension to pull it out, an idea as dangerous as it is unlikely to work, but they will try anything at this juncture.

“No, it’s not that – Tara just tried to talk to Dawn and her room’s empty. She’s gone, Giles.”

*****

“So it might not be coming for me?” asks Buffy as they head back down the alley.

“If that’s the case” reasons Ethan, “It’ll be free of its contract with this warlock soon and we can summon it for you to slay.”

“Soon enough to save Faith?”

“I hope so.” Ethan tries to ignore Buffy’s stricken expression or the way she clings to Spike apparently more for comfort than the need to hold him up. “I’ll phone Rupert” Ethan takes his mobile out “Get them to start on another summoning now.”

“Okay.”

The phone rings and rings. No answer. Ethan snaps the mobile shut. “No signal” he lies.

“Right” says Buffy, “So let’s just get back there. We can drop Spike off and be there for the summoning at the same time.”

“You don’t need to drop me off, love. ’M fine.”

“You sure?” Buffy asks.

“Buggering chip did a bit of a number on me there” Spike admits, “But I’ll be ready to help you fight this thing soon as it’s summoned.”
“Okay, then –”

“Buffy?” a new voice calls from the shadows.

Buffy swings round, causing Spike to stumble. “Dawn? What are you doing here?”

“I came to help” Dawn steps out of the shadows and into the dim, sickly light cast by the combination of the moon and a few distant street lamps. “I couldn’t just sit around while Faith changes.”

“How is she?”

Dawn shakes her head. “We have to hurry.” Then she frowns, glances in the direction of Rack’s door. “Can you guys sense that?”

Buffy glares at Ethan. Ethan hastily tells Dawn, “You shouldn’t have come out here alone.”

“But I had to help” Dawn insists.

“Mage is right” says Spike, “It’s not safe out here, Dawn.”

Dawn takes in his nosebleed and the way he is leaning on Buffy. “What happened?”

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

Before Dawn can issue her standard I’m-not-a-kid-don’t-hide-the-truth-from-me argument, Buffy asks, “Does Giles know you’re here?”

“That answers that” mutters Buffy.

Dawn glares. “Well it’s not like they would have let me follow you if I’d ask” she argues. To Willow, she adds, “Right?”

“Darn right” agrees Willow. To Buffy she says, “Faith’s still chained up, Tara and Giles are calling round Dawn’s friends and Anya and Xander are checking the Magic Box, oh – and there’s your demon.”

Buffy swings round just in time to see and duck the Smulgoor’s swinging needle. “Dawn, get out of here!”

Ethan steps back hastily, out the way of the lumbering demon. Spike does the opposite, leaping for it, and being promptly knocked out. Next, the demon makes for Buffy and Willow, until Willow sends it reeling with a flurry of red sparks. As Buffy takes up the fight, Ethan ducks behind a conveniently placed bin and stares around for Dawn.

She is ducking too, and good thinking considering all the head-height stray kicks and jabs of sharp, sting-like needles that are escaping the fray. But, Ethan realises as Dawn stands up again, she is not simply dodging out the way but bending to pick up fistfuls of litter from beside the bin, a can and half a glass bottle, which she throws with precision at the Smulgoor. It rounds on her with a snarl. Taking advantage of the distraction, Buffy pulls a dagger from her jacket and slashes at it, but it swings a well-aimed needle and –

“No!” shrieks Dawn, as Buffy slumps to the ground. The Smulgoor turns to her again, with a low
and menacing growl. Ethan scrambles to his feet. He is weaponless, and looks around for something to throw. Buffy’s fallen knife is too far away, and Dawn got the pick of the litter, leaving him with crisp packets and screwed up tissues. Well, and the bin. Ethan hefts that and hurls it. It falls a few feet short of the demon, who nevertheless pauses its advance on Dawn to notice him.

“Ah” says Ethan, who hasn’t thought this far ahead. The demon turns its bulk fully, rounding on him. He steps back but, with a wall behind him, there is only so far he can go.

Willow, thankfully, is approaching from behind the demon, sparks dancing at her fingertips. All he needs to do, Ethan realises, is keep it focused on him. “Nice Smulgoor” he attempts. He screws his eyes shut as the thing raises its needle.

“No!” a girlish voice commands, far too close. “Leave him alone!”

“Dawn” Ethan urges, “run!”

“I’m not leaving you! I – aah!” Dawn is sent flying by a swing of the Smulgoor’s club-like, needle-tipped arm.

“Dawn!” Ethan steps towards her only to be sent sprawling too. Landing thankfully some distance from their attacker, he checks himself over hastily. He is bruised but, unlike Buffy, he has been spared the needle. No unconsciousness and transformation for him, which means he has to watch, awake and fully human, as the Smulgoor bears down on Dawn. She screams.

“No!” Willow is suddenly between Dawn and the demon, sending sparks into its eyes and shoving Dawn backwards, out of the way. The air fizzes suddenly with magic and the Smulgoor staggers, rights itself, snarls. Willow doesn’t flinch. Over her shoulder, she calls, “Dawn, I’ve wasted energy on that summoning spell – I’m going to need some help.”


“Your magic. Chanel it to me.” Willow dodges a swing but stands her ground. The still magic-dazed demon stumbles. Willow adds, “Ethan, you too.” “Right you are.” Ethan puts his all into gathering his magic, sending it flowing into the waiting ocean of Willow’s power. Distantly, he senses Dawn following suit, a bright green stream mingling with his river. Magic darkens Willow’s eyes – not to the black of her earlier, reckless exploits, but to a deep amber, not unlike the Smulgoor’s own. She turns her gaze on it and incinerates it. It howls as it burns.

Instantly, there is a release, like a taunt spring snapping. Ethan senses the poison in Buffy’s veins shudder to a stop amid the flow of blood, diminish into nothingness. She opens her eyes. “Dawn?”

“Buffy!” Dawn scrabbles for her sister and pulls her into a hug. Looking up at Willow, she says, “Thank you.”

*****

The others have left Buffy’s home already, Willow beaming at Faith’s grudging thanks. It isn’t clear how long Faith had, but it seems to Giles the demon was killed with mere seconds to spare. The sudden rush of growing demonic energy out of the slayer left her drained, and she now sits propped up by cushions on the sofa, newly restored fingers curled around a steaming mug. Giles waits as Ethan clears up the remnants of the summoning spell, considering whether or not to have a word with Spike before he leaves. Spike is sat with Buffy, Faith and Dawn, a flannel held to his nose and no-one commenting on the fact that the nosebleed is the chip’s continued punishment for
Spike breaking a human’s arm. A human who, Buffy reassured Giles, “pretty much deserved it”, but still. Since when, Giles wonders, does Buffy believe she has the right to decide that? Before or after Spike moved in? And if Spike can break an arm through the pain, what else can he do?

And will Buffy think to ask that question? It seems unlikely. More unlikely, in fact, than Faith’s crude suggestions about the nature of Buffy’s relationship with the vampire. Perhaps he should say something about that too. But what? Faith is right, staking Spike would be out of the question. And there is nothing else the vampire seems to fear that Giles would be prepared to do.

Besides, isn’t he trying to maintain a distance, let Buffy find her own path?

So all he can do is watch them all from the doorway: Faith on the sofa, flanked by Buffy, who keeps one eye on Spike, sat with his flannel in a nearby armchair and on Dawn, who flits between the three of them, reassuring herself that they are all alright. There is no obvious way to painlessly right the scene. They look, thinks Giles, far too like a family.
“For Janus’ sake, Rupert, stop fannying and just call her, if it’s that important.”

Giles glares over the top of his morning paper. “I’m trying not to be overly involved” he reminds his partner. “And I am not fannying about.”

Ethan looks pointedly at the Giles’ tea, which, Giles realises, he has been stirring far too aggressively for some minutes now. He hastily withdraws the spoon, puts the paper down, then swears when it sticks to the splattered drops of tea across the table. “Fine. I’ll call her.”

Dialling Buffy’s number, he is greeted by Faith. “Yeah?”

“Faith. Is something wrong?”

“What? No, just wicked early is all. Morning shift’s a bitch.”

“I see. Listen, could you do me a favour and remind Buffy the visit from the social worker is today?”

“I reminded her already” Faith reassures, “So she’s awake and freaking about packed lunches and hiding Spike.”

“Good. Just so long as she’s getting ready.”

”’Kay. See you, Giles.”

“Bye, Faith.”

*****

“Any luck?” Ethan asks as Willow comes out of her trance.

“No” Willow is serenely calm, but not dazed as anyone else would be, after being under that deep for that long. “Still no idea where it is.”

“Oh well, it was worth a try. It’s not like the Daidalos Chest is going anywhere.” Noticing Willow worrying at her lip, Ethan asks, “Is it?”

“I hope not. But I think I could sense someone else looking.”

“Demonic energy, you mean?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. But there was a sense of it being yearned for by someone who isn’t us.”

“Makes sense: I’m not yearning for it – the thing can rot where it is for all I care. I don’t think even
Rupert’s exactly yearning for it, just keen to pack it off to the council.”

“Exactly; yearning, that’s more a wanting it for selfish reasons thing, isn’t it? Someone wanting to use it for all the bad it was built to be used for.”

“Rupert’s not going to be thrilled by that.”

“No. But if it’s any comfort, I bet people are looking for this thing all the time. And I will keep trying this afternoon.” She gathers her things. “But I’ve got to go now – I’m meeting Tara for lunch.”

Ethan smiles. “Things back to normal on that front?”

“Pretty much” Willow returns the smile. “Or finding a new normal. One with ice cream.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Ethan continues to smile as he watches Willow depart. Gods know the girl could do with some good in her life.

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“That’s concerning” says Rupert later, when he comes into the shop for an update.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it” replies Ethan, “But like Willow said, people must be looking for it all the time. Well, people and demons.”

“That’s what I’m worried about” Rupert shifts to the side to make room for a large flipchart Anya sets down on the counter “The demon part.”

“You should worry about the people part too” Anya reminds him, “Remember whoever summoned that demon to attack Faith was probably human. Humans are capable of all sorts.”

Indicating the flipchart, Ethan asks, “Anya, what is this?”

“Oh, it’s for seating arrangements.”

“Seating arrangements?”

“For the wedding. Xander’s coming over in my break to go through it.”

“Oh, you don’t need to plan seating arrangements” Ethan assures her, “Just get everyone together and provide music and plenty of booze. Sorted.”

“No, not sorted – I want it to be perfect. You and Giles can have a mindless piss up for your wedding if that’s what you want.”

“We will” assures Ethan, just as Rupert says, “Certainly not.” They stare at each other for a moment, until Ethan sighs and says, “Well, it’s not even legal yet, and since we’re waiting for that instead of going down the nudity and rams’ skulls path…”

 “…We’ve likely got plenty of time to decide” Rupert concludes grimly.

The door opens and Xander enters with a cheerful greeting that warms the suddenly despondent atmosphere. As he and Anya busy themselves with post-it notes and diagrams, Ethan tells Rupert, “I managed to get Bleddyn on the phone, by the way, but he wouldn’t confirm that he’s helping anyone else find it.”
“Well, I wasn’t really expecting him to be honest or helpful. I don’t suppose he’ll be in soon so I can talk to him face to face?”

“I don’t think so” says Ethan, who knows the inflection Rupert uses to say face to face when he really means fist to face, and thinks Bleddyn is right to stay away. “He only comes to Sunnydale every couple of months for deliveries.”

“But Willow’s trying again later today?”

“That’s right.”

“I might stick around for that.”

“Good” says Anya over her shoulder, “You can help.”

“I’m sure Willow can manage.”

Xander glances up apologetically. “I think she means with the seating plans.”

Anya says, “Obviously. Now, you guys don’t mind sitting next to the Oracle of Murzuic, do you?”

Willow’s arrival is a welcome reprieve from wedding planning. Giles would suppose it’s different when it comes to one’s own wedding, but the weary look in Xander’s eyes is an argument to the contrary. Perhaps Ethan is right about music, alcohol and an absence of stressful organisation being the best option.

Willow smiles indulgently at the soon to be newly weds before slipping into the backroom to resume her trance. The spell she has found is a complex one, but relatively straightforward for one with her power. Also, it’s cheaper than hiring another unreliable outside expert.

Willow sits, enveloped in her trace. For some time, there is peaceful silence, peppered by Xander and Anya’s good natured bickering from the next room, and Ethan’s occasional remark. Then, “I’ve got it” Willow announces. “At least, I think I have.”

“Oh?” prompts Giles carefully.

Willow is still in the trace, magic tingling around her. “I think I can see where it’s hidden. In the earth.” “In the earth where?”

Willow concentrates. “In the…In the caves, I think. There’s a…” Her voice fades as magic swells around her, and then she flinches forward as the mystical energies suddenly vanish. Giles starts towards her. “Willow, are you alright?”

Ignoring him, she snatches a pen and notebook from the bag she abandoned to the side of her meditation mat and, flipping open the notebook, scribbles frantically. “I’m okay. Just – Don’t talk. I need to get this down before the vision fades.”

Obediently, Giles is silent, watching her. When she hands him the notebook, he examines her complex sequence of lines. “What is this?”

“A map – come on.”
The shop door opens and, looking up and seeing no-one, Ethan frowns, then goes back to attempting to stocktake while Anya and Xander continue their less than harmonious wedding plans. All this planning and order is threatening to ruin a lovely event. Why they can just make it a joyous, carefree party is beyond him.

“We’re not inviting D’Hoffryn” Xander is saying.

“Xander” cautions Ethan, “Anya’s known D’Hoffryn since before you were born.”

“Absolutely” says Anya, “And before Ethan was born. Before Ethan’s great-grandfather was born, in fact.”

Buffy’s voice chips in, “Wow, Xand, and here’s me thinking you and Willow are old friends.”

“Exactly” says Anya, stopping and frowning when she turns to find no-one there. Ethan is frowning too, his brain making a connection between Buffy’s voice and the door apparently opening on its own.

“Where are you?” Xander is scanning the room.

Buffy – Buffy’s voice – replies, “At table four apparently.”

“Wait” Ethan is drawn to the seating arrangements despite his better judgement. “I thought me and Rupert were at table four?”

“What?” asks Buffy’s disembodied voice, “You don’t want to sit with me?”

“I don’t want to be told where to sit full stop: It’s a wedding, not a prison canteen.”

“We’re spreading the scoobies out” Anya explains to the patch of air she apparently judges to be Buffy. Shooting a scowl Ethan’s way, she adds, “And just because it’s important enough to be a formal event, that doesn’t mean –”

“Guys” bursts out Xander, “Buffy. What’s going on with the lack of visibility?”

“Oh, that.” There is a trace of boredom in Buffy’s tone, possibly even of bafflement, but not the worry that might be expected. Her tone continues to be mismatched as she describes a trip to the hairdressers’, and a sudden sensation of being hit by something that rendered her unseeable.

“Magic?” Ethan guesses.

“How much did you have off?” asks Anya.

“Not magic” replies Buffy, “And it’s up to about here.” There is a pause. “Um, if you could see my hand, it’s kind of above my shoulders.”

“Oh” enthuses Anya, “That sounds adorable!”

Xander asks, “Have you been feeling ignored lately?”

“I wish” dismisses Buffy. “No, I’m feeling all kinds of watched, with the new training schedule, and the social worker visiting, and Willow being all making amendsy and Dawn’s being all clinging ever since I got back.”

“Clingy?” Ethan can’t help but frown.
“Not in a bad way” Buffy adds hastily. “It’s just a lot.”

“How did the social worker visit go?” asks Xander.

“Okay, I think. Spike stayed in the basement and Faith and me pretended to be grown ups. She asked loads of nosy questions, but according to Faith, some of them just want to check the kid’s not dead and leave again, so at least she wants Dawn somewhere safe. Now she thinks our house is somewhere safe. I’m guessing we won’t be seeing her again for a while. Or, she won’t be seeing me again, see?”

“I see” states Xander. “Or really, I don’t.”

“No-one does” says Buffy.

“Do you think this happened because you wanted to be left alone?” asks Anya.

“Yeah” echoes Xander, “Kind of a reverse Marcie?”

“Maybe” replies Buffy, “But it did feel like I was being hit by something from outside.”

“But not magic?” Ethan repeats.

“Nope. Something else. It’s not too bad though. There might even be some upsides to this.” Various items are lifted from the counter, to float playfully in the air. This is the most cheerful Ethan has seen Buffy in a while. Or, rather, not seen her. He offers, “Should I find Rupert? He’s off with Willow and Faith exploring the caves, but I’m sure he’d come straight back.”

“Nah” says Buffy, tossing a dried newt into the air a few times, making it do flips. “He doesn’t want me to bother him with personal stuff. Invisibility is personal.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t want to be bothered” defends Ethan. “Not to mention, invisibility is professional too, when you think about it.”

“Invisible slaying” muses Xander, “Yeah, that’s kind of an advantage.”

Buffy adds, “Faith’s going to be so jealous.”

“If this came from the outside, then someone did it” reasons Anya, “But why? You guys are right; an invisible slayer’s got to be way more effective than the standard variety.”

An unpleasant idea forms in Ethan’s mind. He opens his mouth to voice it, then shuts it again.

Xander is saying, “I could go check the spot where Buffy disappeared. Search for clues.”

“That’s a thought” says Ethan. “And the rest of us can research.”

“I’ll put the flipchart away” says Anya, with the air of one making a noble sacrifice.

“And Buffy” instructs Ethan, “If you could refrain from handling the merchandise too much while customers are around. Now and then is fine – adds to the atmosphere – but I don’t want anyone put off coming back.”

“Actually” says Buffy, “I think I’ll take a walk.”

“A walk?” Ethan repeats. “Are you sure that’s sensible?”
“No” Buffy is audibly shrugging. “But I just passed a visit from the social worker with flying colours. Or, hovering colours. Just about to take off colours. I’ve done my being sensible for today.” The door opens again and she is (presumably) gone.

Ethan, Xander and Anya look at each other uneasily. “Well” concludes Anya, “seems pretty obvious it’s some kind of spell that’s done this too her.”

Ethan voices the theory he’d held back while Buffy was present: “It could be Dawn.” At their curious expressions, he explains, “Buffy said she’s been clingy and it’s no secret Dawn would like Buffy around more.”

“So Dawn’s feeling ignored” says Xander, in an evasive sort of tone, the tone of one facing a problem he’d usually label worrying-but-none-of-my-business, “So wouldn’t she be invisible, not Buffy?”

“Maybe she feels like Buffy isn’t there for her” Ethan reasons, “Like she can’t see Buffy as often as she’d like.”

“Oh” Xander frowns.

“A sort of Marcie by proxy” Anya concludes.

“And with her learning magic…” Xander’s tone turns accusatory.

“Marcie wasn’t a witch” Ethan points out, “All it takes sometimes is being an emotional teenager on the hellmouth. Which Dawn is.” Aware of how quickly the boy’s opinion can turn against magic, he adds, “But in case I’m wrong, why don’t you go and look at where Buffy vanished? I’ll get Dawn over, see if we can get to the bottom of this.”

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“Wait” Willow, eyes sparkling with magic, halts in the narrow tunnel.

“What is it?” asks Giles. Besides him, Faith tenses, battle ready. Battles are to be expected in the circumstances: After some searching during which they disturbed a nest of vampires and woke an unidentified – and quite ferocious – demon that had made the caves its lair, they have finally found the hidden entrance to the underground tunnel network Willow saw in her vision. Now within the circle of protections placed centuries ago around the Daidalos Chest, there is every likelihood they will encounter more demons; this time, guards imprisoned with the Chest and fated to defend it. Not to mention all the magical barriers imaginable. But Willow is shaking her head. “There’s nothing.”

Faith asks, “That’s good, right?”

“I guess” Willow replies, “Only, there should be something by now.”

Possibly they are being lulled into a sense of false security. Giles instructs, “Everyone stay focused” and leads the way down the tunnel.

There should be no light in here, but Willow has created a sort of orb that hovers benignly, offering a faint glow – With luck, just enough to guide them but not enough to get them noticed. In its dusky light, Giles can now make out the end of this latest twisting passageway. As they approach the threshold, he stops. So far, all the doorways have been clear, but it is best to check. He turns to Willow. “Anything?”
She shakes her head. “Still nothing. That’s weird, right?”

“Well, I would have expected to encounter a few mystical barriers by now, yes. Faith, do you sense anything?”

“Nothing slay-worthy.” Faith slips past and crosses through the doorway, pauses, then relaxes a fraction. “Nothing here” she calls back, and Giles frowns at the echo her voice makes, asks, “You’ve entered a chamber?”

“Looks like an underground cave.” Faith steps deeper inside and Willow and Giles follow after, Willow’s orb of light shifting from one section of the cave network to the next so that they are never cast into the pitch blackness the place should consist of. Except…

Except there is another light source up ahead. Giles frowns at the orange flicker of it. “Torches.”

“Is this it?” asks Faith, hefting her weapon.

“It can’t be that easy” Giles replies. He wonders for a horrible moment whether the cave system is cursed to let treasure hunters in but not out again, if they will realise their doom only after they sight the chest. But, no – If that were the case, they would have stepped through the bones of previous questers by now.

Stepping closer to the light, Willow lets the orb dim into shadow. “Giles, look at this.”

Heading over, Giles sees the flaming torches set in brackets around a roughly circular wall, carved from raw stone to encompass a sort of altar in the centre of the chamber. On it is a gaping space, the outline of a rectangle in the dust.

“It’s not here!” gasps Willow, “It’s supposed to be here!”

“Someone else got here first” Giles realises, “That’s why all the wards are down.”

“And I’m guessing they’re not going to hand it over to the Council like you” adds Faith, “They’re going to have some fun with it.”

“What sort of fun would that be again?” asks Willow.

“Nothing good” Giles replies, still staring at the place where the dangerous cursed chest should be.

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Dawn, already sulky and bewildered at being picked up from school by Ethan and Tara, scowls at them both from across the table in the Magic Box. “It wasn’t me.”

“Are you sure?” asks Ethan.

“I think I’d remember making my sister invisible.”

“It might be something you did by accident, Dawnie” Tara cautions gently. “Does it feel like you did any magic? Even if you didn’t mean to.”

“No! Anyway, if I did, I wouldn’t have done it at school, would I?”

“It might be a culminative effect” Ethan tells her, “of you feeling like she isn’t as, um, available as she should be.”
“If I wanted her more available, why'd I make her invisible? Even by accident?”

“Perhaps you accidently changed reality to match your perception.” But that sort of magic wouldn’t involve a sudden blast of power like Buffy had described, thinks Ethan. Nor does what she described sound culminative. And, “I don’t sense anything” he admits to Tara.

“Nor do I” she agrees, “Her aura’s normal.”

“Great” grinds out Dawn, “Now can we find who really did this to Buffy?”

“We had to check, Dawn” Ethan tells her. “You did accidently wipe all our memories, after all.”

“I was trying to do magic, though; it wasn’t completely random.”

“True.”

“So we fix Buffy now, right?” Dawn looks from Ethan to Tara, to Anya who, behind the counter, suddenly seems very interested in a petrified hamster. Dawn asks, “Where is she?”

“We don’t know” Ethan admits. “She is invisible after all.”

“You lost her?!?”

“Really” Anya speaks up, “She lost herself. She said she wanted to go for a walk.”

“Why would she do that?” Dawn’s voice goes squeaky, “She could be hurt or attacked or something, and no-one will be able to find her!”

“Buffy can look after herself” Tara reassures her, “And nothing will attack her – nothing will be able to see her.”

“Something could smell her” argues Dawn, “Or sense her aura like you do. Loads of demons could find her and if she gets hurt, how will she ask for help if no-one can see her?!?”

“She almost never gets hurt” Ethan counters, “and there’s no reason to think she will be now. She’ll come back when she’s ready.”

“Why does she need to be ready to be visible again? Why doesn’t she just want it?”

No-one answers. Thankfully, before Dawn can distress herself any further, Xander enters, one arm wrapped around what looks like an empty space.

“Did you find Buffy?” asks Dawn.

“No” he replies, but I did find an invisible traffic cone.” He mimes setting something on the table and, feeling around curiously, Ethan’s hands encounter plastic. Xander adds, “And I, err, stubbed my toe on an invisible fire hydrant.”

“So whatever it was hit other things too?” Anya comes over and reaches around for the cone too, tracing its shape.

“Looks like.”

Tara frowns. “That doesn’t sound like a spell.”

“More like a blast of something” Ethan agrees.
“So…a demon?” guesses Xander, “one with the power to make people invisible?”

“Kind of a weird power” says Dawn.

Anyah sighs heavily. “I’ll get the books.” Heading off, she bemoans, “We’ll never finalise the seating arrangements at this rate.”

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“We got bad news” announces Faith as she enters the Magic Box later, trailed by Giles and Willow.

Without looking up from his book, Xander replies, “If it’s that Buffy is invisible, we already got the memo.”

“Invisible?” asks Giles.

“Hence the research party?” guesses Willow, taking in the scene before them.

“Yes” says Anya, “She came in here earlier all disappeared and we have an invisible traffic cone too.”

“Something attacked her” Tara explains. “We’re thinking with something other than a spell but we can’t find any demons that make things invisible.”

“Wait” says Xander, “What was your bad news?”

“The Daidalos Chest has been stolen” Giles sits down heavily. Concerning as inexplicable invisibility is, it is nothing compared to what that chest could unleash. “Where is Buffy?”

Ethan, Xander, Anya and Tara exchange uncomfortable glances. Dawn stares at the book in front of her, her grip on it tightening. Ethan replies, “We don’t know. She disappeared.”

“Well yeah” says Faith, “Definition of invisible there.”

“Voluntarily as well as spontaneously” Ethan explains. He gestures to the door. “She left.”

“She was upset?”

“Not really.” Ethan looks evasive.

Dawn adds, “Sounds like she was happy to not really be around. Figures.”

Willow squeezes her shoulder. “She’s probably just in shock, Dawnie. We’ll find her.”

Giles asks, “Did she say where she was planning to go?”

“She said for a walk.”

Giles frowns, thrown by how uncharacteristically blasé that seems to be on Buffy’s part. Then again, he has found it difficult to read her ever since she returned.

Ethan sighs and sets his book aside. “We’re not getting anywhere with this. Has any noticed all the supernatural happening we’ve had lately don’t fit any patterns? Things don’t tend to seem like a spell but they don’t seem like a demon either. You’d think I’d find it refreshing, but it’s just a little off.”
Willow says, “Maybe we should try a general reversal spell just to be sure. I’ll get on that.” Moving off to ready the spell, she pauses to ask, “Dawn, you want to help?”

“Okay” Dawn gets to her feet and follows Willow. Faith sits down in her vacated chair. “She see anything before it happened?”

“She said not” says Anya.

Giles frowns at the book-free patch in the middle of the table. “Is this the traffic cone?”

“Yes” Xander makes a help-yourself gesture and Giles reaches out. His hands encounter a sort of mush. “Ugh!”

“What?” Anya puts her hand out. “Oh, ew! When did that happen?”

“This traffic cone was affected by whatever made Buffy invisible?” asks Giles, hurriedly getting to his feet.

“Yeah” Xander makes his own explorations of the invisible mess in the centre of the table, his expression flickering from disgust to horror. “Oh God – That means…”

“Buffy’s going to be mush” Anya concludes.

“Mush?” Willow has returned, followed by Dawn, who looks around at their expressions with visibly mounting concern. “What is it?”

“Buffy’s going to disappear disappear” says Anya.

“Ahn, hon, remember the sugar coating.”

“This is no time to think about food, Xander!”

“Buffy’s going to be fine” says Giles, over the bickering. “Let’s do the reversal spell and then go and look for her. If the spell works, she’ll be safe by the time we find her.”

“And if it doesn’t, we won’t find her” points out Anya.

“If it doesn’t, we’ll get her back here and think of something else.” Giles isn’t sure what but knows they have to fix this somehow. They can’t let Buffy melt away into nothing.

*****

“Nothing” Willow announces grimly as they finish the reversal spell. “At least, I didn’t sense anything. You guys?”

Tara, Ethan and Dawn, seated at the other four points of a chalked symbol on the ground, shake their heads.

“So it didn’t work?” asks Dawn.

“It might have done” Willow hastily reassures her, “Maybe I’m just reading it wrong.”

“We should go and look for Buffy in case” Xander decides.

“Not much point if we can’t see her” says Anya.
“But we have to try. She has to know.”

“Well, phone her. She’ll get the message and show up soon, right?”

“What if she can’t?” asks Dawn, “And we still don’t know how to fix her yet!”

“The spell might have worked, Dawn” Ethan tells her, but Giles can see he isn’t convinced. He decides, “Xander’s right, we should look for Buffy. We might not be able to see her but she’ll be ready to be found by now and, err, hopefully let us know where she is if we come across her.” No matter how odd a mood Buffy is in, he can’t imagine that she would actively hide from her clearly worried friends. He adds, “Of course, a few people should stay here to research.”

“Research how?” asks Dawn despondently. “The books didn’t tell us anything.”

“I’ll check the cemeteries” says Faith. “If I get near her, I should be able to sense her. Slayer sisterhood and all that crap.”

“Alright” says Giles, “And Ethan and I will go to her house. Anya, Xander, could you check the Bronze?”

“Okay”

Willow adds, “And I’ll do a location spell in case she’s finished her walk and staying still in one place – I’ll be able to pinpoint her then.”

“And I’ll keep reading” Tara concludes. “Dawn, you want to help me?”

Dawn heads over to join her, looking as anxious and Giles feels.

*****

“Buffy?” Rupert calls up the stairs as he and Ethan step through Buffy’s front door. The place seems empty but of course, it would do. Glancing his way, Rupert tells Ethan, “You check down here” before heading up the staircase.

Ethan checks. If Buffy is here, the reversal spell didn’t work and she is being very quiet. Ending up in the kitchen, he draws breath to call her name – and then pauses.

From down in the basement, he can hear voices. It only then occurs to him that Spike should have shown up at the Magic Box an hour ago. Instead the vampire is here, apparently deep in conversation with someone who left the door ajar.

Stepping closer, Ethan catches snippets of what the vampire is saying to whoever it is: “...sorry is all...Seeing what it did to you, makes me...” And then, distinctly: “Wasn’t down to me how keen you were to vanish, was it? I didn’t mean for you to go disappearing or changing your hair.”

At that, Ethan swings the door open. “Spike?” he calls, into the startled darkness below. Then, “Buffy?”

“She’s not here” Spike calls up.

Ethan finds the switch and turns the lights on, revealing Spike in his camp-bed, naked but thankfully covered.

“She’s not really anywhere” Ethan comes down the stairs. “Who were you talking to?”
“No-one” replies Spike. “Just…” He trails off, apparently hoping Ethan won’t pursue the matter. When Ethan continues to stare at him, he says, “Well, if you must know, I was just practising an apology to Buffy. Had a spot of unpleasantness with her this morning. Said things I shouldn’t have. I’m not usually one for apologies, but, living with the bird, I have to watch everything I say have an effect on her. It’s like she cares what I think, but it’s not worth it.” His gaze slides slightly to Ethan’s right and Ethan looks around. Nothing there. But then…No. He tells Spike, “If you see Buffy – Well, you won’t see her, she’s invisible – but if you run into her, tell her we need her at the Magic Box right away or –” He breaks off, stares. Is Spike’s earlobe wriggling?

Spike seems to be suppressing a giggle. “I’ll send her right over.”

“And get right over yourself” Ethan adds. “You’re late for work.”

“Oh, right.” Spike seems utterly unconcerned. He shifts oddly on the bed.

Ethan tells him, “My fault for hiring a vampire, I suppose.”

“Alright, mage – I miss one shift, you don’t need to go all prissy on me.”

Ethan glares. Then decides, “Actually, don’t come to the shop – get up and look for Buffy. You should be able to sense her.”

For some reason, Spike seems to find this amusing. He leans back a little, grinning. More to wipe the smirk from his face than anything, Ethan adds, “Unless we find her soon, whatever’s made her invisible will kill her.”

Spike’s smile drains from his face and he sits up straight. Ethan feels a little guilty.

“Yeah?” asks the vampire. He shifts again, a little jolt and the covers around him move. “You know how to fix it?”

“Not yet. We’re working on it.”

At that moment, there is a noise on the stairs behind Ethan. Buffy’s voice asks, “How long do we have?”

“Buffy!” Ethan smiles.

“Yeah, it’s me. Um, coming down the stairs. I just got in and I heard voices.”

Strange thing to clarify but it hardly matters now. Ethan tells her, “Let’s get Rupert and get back to the shop.”

“I’ll catch you up” Spike gets up, wrapping the covers around his waist and reaching for a pile of discarded black clothes.

“Ethan?” Rupert calls down from the kitchen.

“Down here – I found her!”

“Hi, Giles!” Buffy calls up, “I just got in and I heard Ethan talking to Spike so I came down!”

“Buffy, thank God!”

There is the noise of footsteps as Buffy hurries up to her watcher. More noise than she made going down, Ethan notes. Could she have been…
No. Or at least, it hardly matters right this moment. Following Rupert (and presumably Buffy) he heads upstairs himself and pulls to a stop in the kitchen as the phone rings. Bound to be one of the scoobies so he answers. “Hello?”

“Ethan?” It is Dawn. “I don’t suppose you’ve found Buffy?”

“She’s just here” Ethan waves the phone in the direction he estimates Buffy to be in, and relinquishes it when he feels her take it. A button is pressed on the handset and Dawn’s speakerphone-amplified voice calls out, “Buffy?”

“Hi Dawn”

“Oh good! Buffy what were you thinking going off like tha – You know what, never min –” She breaks off suddenly, and a muttered voice sounds in the background. Ethan shares a frown with Rupert. Apparently addressing whoever that is, Dawn says, “Yes, I’m getting to that.”

Buffy asks, “Dawn?”

“Yeah, still here.” Dawn’s voice is clear again. “I’m supposed to tell you I’m kind of in trouble.”

“What sort of trouble? Are you at the Magic Box?”

“Well I was. And don’t go blaming Willow and Tara because it’s not their fault I went further than I said I would when I went to get air.”

Ethan hears Buffy sigh deeply. She asks, “You’ve been kidnapped, haven’t you?”

“Little bit.”

“Same people who invisibled me?”

“They’re invisible too, so I’m thinking ye –” At that point, the phone is apparently snatched from Dawn by someone who, distantly, is saying, “…is why you don’t let the hostage do the talking” Then, clearer, the same voice speaks down the phone and into Buffy’s kitchen: “Don’t talk, Slayer, just listen. We’ve got your sister and if you don’t want anything to happen to her, you’d better meet us. Alone.”

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Alone is judged to be just that, but with Faith, Willow and Giles waiting nearby as back up. “Leave it to Dawnie to get nabbed” Willow is saying. “I told her, just to the end of the alley out the back.”

“They must have been waiting to take one of us” Faith replies, her eyes fixed on the arcade Buffy is in (or is presumably in – it is hard to follow events in which most of the players are invisible) “No way were they just passing. They were waiting for someone to grab.”

And they chose the little girl, Giles thinks grimly. Cowards. His distaste for them is deepened by the fact that all the time they waste here, Buffy will be getting closer to breaking apart and melting away.

“Something’s going on in there” Faith says, a moment before noises of a struggle reach their ears. Children rush out of the building opposite, screaming about ghosts. Hard to resist rushing in to help, but Giles knows it will be hard to help in a fight between invisible opponents. He puts a hand on Faith’s shoulder. “We wait for the signal.”
“Screw that!” Faith breaks away. She gets half way across the road when Buffy and Dawn emerge from the arcade. Giles is beyond relieved at the sight of Buffy, because it is just that: The sight of her. Seeing them, Dawn calls over, “Check it out – New, improved Buffy. You can see her and everything.”

“Are you guys okay?” asks Willow.

“We’re good” Dawn replies, “Sorry Willow – I didn’t go much further than the alley, I swear.”

“As long as you’re okay.”

Giles asks, “And Buffy – you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.” Buffy looks at Faith, “And we’ve got archnemesises…es.”

“Is there a cream for that?” asks Faith, as Giles corrects, “Archnemeses, Buffy.”

“Oh” says Buffy, “Huh.”

“Who are they?” asks Giles.

“Johnathan, Warren and…some other guy. Sweet-summoning guy.”

“Andrew” Willow prompts.

“Yeah.”

“They’ve teamed up?”


“Great. You know, B, we don’t have to share everything.”

Apologetically, Buffy tells her, “It was them who set the Smulgoor demon on you. They had a boast about it just now.”

Faith glares at the arcade. “They still in there?”

“Probably lost in the crowd now” Giles cautions. With so many people around, more fighting is probably unwise. In fact, given these young men are human, more fighting is certainly unwise, but that is something he knows as a fact, not something he feels deeply committed to when he thinks of Faith’s horrific transformation after that attack.

Ignoring his caution, Faith takes off towards the arcade. Buffy says, “She won’t find them – they ran off like only frightened nerds can.” Frowning, she adds, “They said they went after Faith to get the strong slayer out the way. Didn’t seem as worried about me.”

Reassurances gather on his tongue, but before he can give voice to them, a new thought occurs to Giles: “Could it be them who have the Daidalos Chest?” At Buffy’s questioning expression, he remembers that she wasn’t present for most of the events of the day despite being at their centre. He explains, “We found out where it was hidden this morning but when we got there it was already gone.”

“Oh” Buffy frowns. “Could be.”

Dawn puts in, “They did act all confident. Told me they’ve got access to dark magic they could
“unleash if you guys interfere – I just thought they were showing off.”

“Still a possibility” says Buffy.

Interfere with what, wonders Giles.

Willow, whose expression twisted at mention of dark magic, turns to him, “Giles, I don’t want to know what three guys like that could get up to with a powerful artefact like the Daidalos Chest.”

“It’s okay, Will” says Buffy, “We’ll find where they’re based and…well.” She looks at Giles. “Not slay them: They’re human.”

“Yes” he agrees, “But if they do anything that threatens the wider population, I can ask the Council to get involved. In fact, if they ever pose an imminent threat to the wider population, you’d be justified in killing them.”

“Justified but really not thrilled.”

“It may not come to that, if we can get to them before they work out how to use the chest – We’re talking about advanced magic that takes a lot of preparation and resources.”

“So we need to get to them before they get to that level” Willow concludes.

“Yes” agrees Giles. Gods help if they can’t.

*****

“I still don’t understand why she went off like she did” Giles says later, as they clear away the dinner things.

“She probably just wanted a break” Ethan replies.

“A break from what – visibility?”

“Possibly.” Ethan turns the tap on, fills the sink. “A break from the demands of life.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Giles takes up a tea towel ready to dry up.

“Or maybe she was just…”

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure.” Behind Ethan’s dark eyes, an idea seems to be considered and discarded. He says, “You could ask her, if it’s worrying you.”

“I’m not sure she’d talk to me” Giles admits.

“Perhaps she thinks she can’t?”

Giles sighs. “Don’t. I already have Faith insisting I’ve done the wrong thing, encouraging her to rely on herself.”

“It doesn’t seem all that good for either of you, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

“I noticed.”
“Sorry, Ethan. It’s just, the relationship between a watcher and a slayer –”

“– is something I’ve seen first hand for years, remember? Even if Chaos worshiping lovers aren’t mentioned in the training manual. I’ve had some insight. So maybe you should ask me.”

“You’d just tell me to get as involved as I was before because you want me to be happy.”

“I am dastardly like that” Ethan agrees, “But it would make Buffy happy too.”

It wouldn’t, Giles thinks: These days, Buffy’s happiness is a far more tenuous and unattainable thing than anything his actions could affect.
“So, I thought we could just go over what you’ve been doing with Tara and Ethan” says Willow, smiling at Dawn across the table in the Magic Box, “Just so I’m up to speed on where you’re at.”

Dawn’s lip twitches. “You sound all teachery.”

“Well I am back in the magic tutors club.” Willow fails to hide her delight in this fact. Dawn asking her to resume their lessons seems to be, in her mind, a sign of traded-away reality returning relatively unchanged. Perhaps it is. Even Faith, these days, seems to be back to her pre-resurrection jibes at Willow’s expense, possibly because she senses that Buffy’s uneasy distance from those around her amplifies when they argue. Xander, meanwhile, seems too busy panicking about wedding plans to panic about whatever is going to come and devour them, and Anya seems content to let that be tomorrow’s problem for the sake of keeping peace among her wedding guests. Dawn’s forgiveness is just the latest Willow has found herself presented with after a now familiar pattern of old routine gradually slipping back into place. Watching from behind the counter, Ethan smiles at them both.

“Well” Dawn is saying, “mainly I’ve been working on protection insignias with Tara and glamours with Ethan.”

Willow twists to face Ethan. “Glamours? Isn’t that a bit out of the protection spells remit?”

“To be fair” defends Ethan, with an apologetic nod to Dawn, “We’re not sure how strict the remit is these days.”

Dawn elaborates, “Buffy doesn’t care too much about what I’m learning anymore.”

“I’m sure that’s not true” says Willow helplessly. Dawn sits back a little, folds her arms, and whatever else Willow might have said, she swallows, sensing, perhaps, how close they are to discussing the little matter of her dragging her tutee’s older sister out of heaven and into a state of mind where Dawn’s magic lessons are just one minor detail in a now-bewildering life cruelly full of them. Forgiveness may have been offered, but the terms are still shaky. Quickly, Ethan adds, “And we might get to the point where she can make herself invisible to attackers with just a pinch of powder, so it’s not completely unrelated to protection spells.”

“I guess” says Willow, “It’s just, well, we did just get a demo on how dangerous invisibility can be.”

Dawn shrugs. “I’m pretty much invisible these days anyway.”

Willow looks horrified. “No, you’re not, Dawnie. You’re important to all of us.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way on a hellmouth” adds Ethan.

Dawn studies them impassively for a moment, then sits forward, shuts down the conversation with, “So how about we get started on the lesson?”

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“That was your fiancé” Anya announces a few hours later, putting the shop phone down, “He says we’re having a meeting in the Doublemeat Palace this evening to decide how to stop three out of control, reckless amateurs destroying the world with an ancient weapon. Oh, and he says to buy
milk when you go home for lunch.”

“The Doublemeat Palace?” Ethan laments, “Why there of all places?”

“Faith’s doing a double shift, and Giles says it can’t wait.”

“I suppose not.” Ethan studies Anya. “You ever come across the Daidalos Chest in your demon days?”

“Not personally.” She appears to think back. “Knew it by reputation though. Not something anyone should be messing with, let alone three human idiots. Really, it takes a demon to wield that sort of power, and even then, I don’t fancy its chances.” At Ethan’s questioning stare, she adds, “They say it’s cursed to turn on anyone who uses, but to be fair, there is a lot of hyperbole around things like that. It could just be that everyone who’s ever used it was causing the sort of violence that was going to swallow them up in the end, curse or not. Same with the power thing.”

“Power thing?”

“The rumour that anyone who spends time around it ends up mad for power. But the thing is, if you’re raising demon armies and cursing your enemies…”

“…You’re probably mad for power anyway.”

“Exactly.”

A little put out, in some distant part of his mind, by the suggestion that this is a weapon humans can’t handle, Ethan thanks Janus he never had a chance to access this thing in his younger and more reckless days. Unlike these three boys, of course: Warren, Johnathan and the other one. Ethan feels a little sorry for them. Then he remembers the robots Warren built and Johnathan messing with their sense of reality, and decides that there are better people to feel sorry for out there, if the urge was even remotely useful. “Well” he says, “I suppose we’ll know more after this meeting.”

*****

“It’s difficult to know much for certain” Rupert tells them, nudging his uneaten burger towards Xander, who gratefully helps himself. “My research had revealed all it could of the chest, really, before we realised it was missing.”

“What about the council?” asks Tara, “I-I thought they were going to pay Ethan’s supplier for you.”

“They’re coving all the expenses I incur searching for the chest, yes” confirms Rupert, “But they haven’t been exactly forthcoming about any information they may have on it.”

“Enough of the may, Rupert – they must know reams that we don’t” Ethan points out. It is only as he says it, and sees the look on Rupert’s face that the truth hits – he may be thanking Janus that he and Rupert didn’t get his hands on the thing during his forays into dark magic, but the council could be thanking their own tiresome gods for that same reason. A dark artefact said to amplify a person’s hunger for power and unleash untold menace on the world? They don’t trust Rupert with any more knowledge of it than they need to give for him to find it and hand it to them. After all this time, they still don’t trust him. “Screw them” Ethan says, staring down the pain in Rupert’s expression.

“Damn right” echoes Faith, seemingly unaware of Rupert’s discomfort, “Those guys spend their whole lives reading about old crap. You’d think they could tell us something.” She glances to the
counter, where her luminously striped manager is sending glances their way. As Ethan understands it, Doublemeat Palace employees eat out of sight in the backroom, least the customers get the impression they are human beings. For Faith to be spending her break out the front in her uniform is bad enough – for her to be with a tableful of customers borders on communism. Yet the man can’t come over and tell her to get safely back behind the staff only door, least he give the other customers the impression that the Doublemeat Palace makes its employees eat in the backroom to hide the fact they are human beings. Turning back to the group, Faith asks, “Could this devouring thing Willow made have taken it?”

Willow flinches, as does Ethan: So much for forgiveness. Every so often, it is whipped away leaving everything stunned, like a tablecloth trick. Willow answers, “I don’t think it’s here yet – I think they’ll be more fanfare. And I didn’t make it. I just…” Her voice drops “invited it in.”

“Maybe it’s sneaky” counters Faith, “Maybe you just don’t want to face it being here.”

“IT’s not here yet.”

“Wait” interrupts Xander, “I thought the Brotherhood of Can’t Get a Date took it. Didn’t they say they did, Buffy?”

Everyone turns to Buffy, who is tracing a pattern in some spilt salt. “Hm?” she says, “Um, yeah. They told Dawn they’ve got access to ancient power or something.”

Rupert asks, “What was their exact wording?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Did they mention a weapon?”

“I don’t know, Giles, okay?”

“Alright. Perhaps you could ask Dawn later? Where is she tonight?”

“Janice’s” says Buffy, at the same time Faith says, “Movie theatre.” Buffy turns to Faith, who explains, “She’s going to the movies with Janice.”

“Oh. How’s she getting home?”

“I said I’d swing by when I’m done here.” Faith glances back to her manager, but he is busy with a group of teenagers who’ve just come in.

“Thanks, Faith.” Buffy resumes her tracing.

Awkwardly into the sudden silence, Anya suggests, “Couldn’t Warren and his little friends be working for the devouring thing? If it has come without fanfare. It might.”

Willow shakes her head. “It’s different to what we’ve faced before. We’ll know when it’s here.”

“Maybe. But aren’t these guys the type to work for a demon?”

“I don’t think the devouring thing is a demon” argues Willow, “It’s older than that.”

“Yeah” says Faith vaguely, eyes still on the counter, “Thanks for that again”

Willow flushes, but says nothing. Tara takes her hand, shifts a little closer to her. Says, “These guys do seem like they just want to try things out. So why haven’t they used the chest by now?”
Rupert replies, “Maybe they have just enough survival instinct to want to find out more about it before they use it. Or they may not know how to use it – most of the books’ information is limited to warnings.”

“Even in the restricted section” Ethan adds.

“Or they’re fighting over it” Anya theorises, “It’s said to do that – bring out the worst in people.”

“Great” says Xander hollowly, “Because we all wanted to see the worst side of a guy who builds sex bots on his good days!”

“Indeed” says Rupert. “And none of this is to say they won’t eventually find a way to use it, so – err, girls?” He casts a disapproving eye over his slayers, neither of whom are particularly focused. Buffy is now prodding the salt into a neat little pile, while Faith is still watching the teenagers at the counter. “Giles” she says slowly, “Is it me, or are those kids –” And then, instead of saying more, she leaps over the seat and darts towards the group of young people. Or, not young people, Ethan realises: As he watches, the subtle changes Faith picked up on mutate rapidly into unmistakable demon visages, and the gang of them attack. Ethan ducks under the table, quickly followed by Tara, who doesn’t so much choose to hide as is gently but firmly levered under by Willow. Thinking he may as well be helpful in some small capacity, Ethan takes hold of her as Willow leaves, preventing her from climbing out. He tells her, “I rather think you and I are better off casting from here.”

She glances at him and then back to the unfolding fight. Across the room, automatic doors pop open as customers flee. “I don’t have anything except this” she tugs on her necklace, the token of Hephaestus, “And it won’t work because they’re not using weapons.”

This is true, Ethan notes, peeping out at the battle at the blurs of teeth, claws and horns meeting Buffy and Faith blow for blow. He jolts back under the table as a demon flies towards him, not under its own steam, but thrown. The table above them shudders at its impact, and they flinch back as it slides off and lands beside them. Dead, fortunately. Eyeing it, Ethan empties his pockets. “I have these.” He hands over his chalk, a small crystal and a vial of sand. “You know Hythinia’s Shroud?”

Tara nods and hastily scatters the sand in the required pattern, still peering out now and then at the fight. Around them, Buffy and Faith are confusion of limbs and raw power and the demons seem to be slipping into defensive mode, even before Rupert clobbers one on the head with a fire axe, Xander brings a chair down on another and Willow disintegrates a third with a complex wave of one hand. Faith’s manager has retreated to cower with the rest of the staff at the back of the kitchen area, and Anya seems to have joined them, and is ready with a sharp knife in case anything escapes the slayers in that direction. Before Tara can ready the elements of the spell or Ethan can begin the chant, it is over. Sheepishly, they clamber out from under the table. “W-we were going to do a protection spell” Tara tells Buffy, “We weren’t just hiding.”

“Absolutely” says Ethan, kneeling again and attempting to scoop the sand up and back into the vial. A pity to waste it.

“It’s okay” says Buffy, “As long as you guys are safe.” She looks around at the others. “No-one hurt?”

There is a flurry of general reassurances, and Rupert joins Ethan on the floor beside the table to examine the demon that bounced off it. “This is a Horned Snarlosan if I’m not mistaken. Virtually extinct in this dimension.”
Anya navigates her way back around the long counter and comes to join them, concurring, “Yep – That’s a Snarlosan. They’re baby eaters, so a lot of monarchs back in the fourteen hundreds made themselves popular paying warriors to go after nests of them. Hunted out of existence in most of Europe.”

Faith kicks the corpse. “Still some around, apparently.”

Ethan frowns. “This seems a lot of them, though, if they’re nearly extinct.” To Rupert, he asks, “But you said nearly extinct in this dimension?” “Yes” Rupert sighs.

Buffy concludes, “So probably summoned?”

“By our demon summoning fellow Sunnydale High alumni” adds Willow.

“Most likely” agrees Rupert. He turns to Faith. “They must have sent them after you – they already disrupted your interview here; they know you work here.”

Xander pulls a disgusted face. “Nothing creepily stalkerfied about that.”

“Tell me about it” says Faith, “Cept, I haven’t seen their van since before the whole that whole deal with the singing. So how’d they know I was working tonight?”

“Lucky guess?” hazards Anya.

Faith stares up at a security camera in the corner. “You think they could be hacking into that?”

Willow follows her gaze. “Maybe. I mean, if Warren can build a robot, hacking’s got to be a walk in the spyware warehouse for him.”

“And then they’d know we’re all here” states Buffy grimly.

“Right” says Rupert, “So much for meetings in your break then, Faith.”

Faith nods to the manager who is now cautiously making his way around the smashed up restaurant. “Probably couldn’t get away with more anyway.”

Willow is still frowning at the camera. “I’ll see if I can hack in myself” she offers, “Chase them down.”

“Good thinking” says Faith grudgingly. She folds her arms as the manager approaches, but the man only says, “Nothing missing from the till and they didn’t get to the safe, so it looks like you and your friends saved today’s profits.”

“Right” says Faith, “Good.”

The manager stares past her to the fallen demon. “Is he, err…”

“Wearing make up” says Anya quickly. “And a mask.”

“Kids these days” adds Xander.

“I was going to ask is he knocked out or, err…”

“He’ll be fine presently” says Rupert, “I’m a, um, a qualified first aider, so perhaps if you could show your employees out the back way to minimise the crowd in here, I’ll see to these, err, young men.”
“Thank you” replies the manager after a confused pause, “And thank you Faith – I’ll see that you’re paid time and a half for your efforts today.”

“Aw, thanks, Manny.” As the man retreats, Faith turns to the group and says, “See, who says I can’t be paid for slaying?”

“True” says Anya, “Though at half the rate of a Doublemeat Palace shift, I’d argue you’re being severely undervalued.”

Faith shrugs. “Being severely undervalued is part of my job.”

“It’s true” echoes Buffy. “Us slayers are always underappreciated.”

“Damn right, B, but I was talking about the Doublemeat Place.”

“Oh. Well, yes.”

Anya says, “You’d be better off in private security.”

Faith frowns. “There’s a thought.”

“One for later” puts in Rupert, and Ethan wonders if he is thinking of what the Council would likely say to that. Before he can ask, Rupert turns to him, and the witches, and says, “We’re going to need spells – something to confuse the camera, and something else to get rid of these dead demons.”

“Oh it.” Willow gets to work.

Faith doesn’t patrol that night, opting instead to “max out” her time and a half pay by staying to help clear up the now demon-corpse free Doublemeat Palace before going to pick up Dawn. Giles and Buffy walk alone to the nearest cemetery. As they near the gates, Buffy venters, “I’m thinking it was Johnathan and the others summoning them, not some precursor to the devouring thing. Those guys have it in for Faith.”

“And for you” points out Giles. He is grateful for the conversation: These days, on patrol, Buffy tends to keep her thoughts to herself unless directly asked a question.

“They’re not as worried about me” states Buffy.

“They did make you invisible.”

“Yeah, but this is their third time attacking her and it’s always with demons. It’s her they’re scared of.”

Giles glances at her. “Or” he tells her, “She’s the one they can get to. You’re in your house more often than Faith – she’s more vulnerable to attack.”

“Because I let her be.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Giles tries again with, “She has a job, so she’s out and about more. Once you’ve started back at college, you’ll…”

“…Be attacked just as often as Faith? Yay, I guess.” Buffy stops as they enter the cemetery, looks around. “Nice try and all, Giles, but they said it themselves – Faith’s the strong one.”
“Don’t, Buffy.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t use their criteria of strength to judge yourself. Men like them don’t know what strength is or what you’ve survived.”

Buffy looks at him with an expression Giles hopes shows she’s comforted – it is hard to tell in the dark – but then she replies, “See, that’s the sort of thing you used to say before you went all professional on me.”

Giles flinches. “Buffy, I –”

“– You can go home” Buffy finishes, gently. “Spike said he’ll come meet me; he’s got the night off.”

“I, err, I don’t mind patrolling with some back up, if you think it’s called for.”

“Yeah, ’cause you and Spike are so close. Look, Giles, I don’t need both of you, so go home. Relax. I’ll see you next time there’s a crisis. So, knowing this town, probably tomorrow.”

Giles opens his mouth to protest that she doesn’t need to wait for a crisis to speak to him, but then remembers that that is exactly what he wants her to understand – that, excepting in extreme crisis, she doesn’t need him.

Of course, she doesn’t need Spike either.

But then, he can’t expect her not to have any ties to anyone, can he?

Unless, of course, it is Spike. So Giles isn’t entirely comfortable to note that, as the vampire appears, Buffy’s smile is unmistakable despite the darkness.

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The Magic Box’s night-time clientele tend not to be human, and those humans who do show up are rarely so benign as, “Tara, hello.” Ethan smiles at the girl. “What brings you here?”

“I um, I have some research to do” Tara explains.

“Something you and Willow are working on?”

“A-actually, Willow doesn’t know I’m here. She thinks I have a study group.” Tara looks apologetic. “I th-think it would be best to keep it that way.”

This makes Ethan uncomfortable to say the least, but, on the basis that nothing bad has ever been traced back to Tara (well, apart from them not being able to see demon attackers that one night, but there were extenuating circumstances), he gestures around the shop. “Help yourself to anything.”

She smiles gratefully and – much to his alarm – heads up the ladder to the restricted section.

After seeing to a few customers, Ethan makes his way up to join her. “Everything alright?”

Tara glances up. “Oh, um, yes. I” She takes a breath, looks down at the book open in her cross-legged lap “I wonder if you could tell me which books Willow used to bring Buffy back.” “Not just books” Ethan replies, frowning down at the volume. “But shouldn’t you ask her?”
“I don’t want her to worry about this.”

“About what?” When Tara doesn’t answer, Ethan adds, “Tell me you’re not planning to bring anyone back.” Another resurrection spell is the last thing they need. And who would Tara want to try to revive? Her mother? Joyce? Not Joyce, Ethan decides: He would never allow it.

But Tara shakes her head. “No. I just…Buffy, um, Buffy asked me to check something.”

“What?”

Tara looks lost for a moment. She glances at the watching books around them, and then at the floor. “I said I wouldn’t say.”

“It won’t go further than me, if that’s any help” Ethan offers. It does no good to keep to oneself the sort of secrets that can pull a person to books like these. Sensing Tara’s reluctance, he adds, “In fact, if you’re going to use the restricted section for anything, I really need to insist you tell me what.”

“That’s not…not what you said to Willow.” “And look how that turned out.” Tara regards him unhappily. Ethan wonders if perhaps she will just decide to abandon whatever her task is. That would be an acceptable alternative to her opening up. With the others, he would worry about where they might go instead, but not with Tara. Like a lot of hereditary witches, the girl has been taught from an early age to have a healthy respect for the dangers of magic.

Finally, Tara explains, “Spike can hit Buffy without his chip firing. She wants me to find out why.”

“Gods! And he hasn’t attacked anyone yet?”

“No” Tara replies, “I mean, no – the chip’s still working. On everyone except Buffy.”

Ethan sits back. “Ah.”

“Yes.” Tara glances at him guiltily. “I got to the Doublemeat Palace early and so did she. She told me while we were waiting for Faith to finish her shift.” Meaningfully, she adds, “She made me promise not to tell anyone.”

Absently, Ethan mimes zipping his lips. After all, what good would come of telling the others?

Tara adds, “I know I shouldn’t have said anything, but honestly, I don’t know where to start. I don’t know anything about how Willow brought her back.”

“I don’t know much” Ethan admits.

“You know some of it. You were with her in England.”

“But still, she’d be the person to ask for all the gory details.”

Tara shakes her head firmly. “If Buffy’s not quite human now, that…that will be down to her. I don’t want her to have to live with that sort of guilt. It’s not like she doesn’t already have the guilt selection box what with Buffy being in heaven and this ancient evil on its way.”

“That’s true.” Ethan considers the matter a moment. Adds, “But Buffy is human, for the record. I’d bet money on it.” “So would I. There’s nothing evil about her.”

“But also, it would have come up at some point in Devon if she’d taken Buffy’s humanity. One of the guides or visions would have revealed it. And she agreed with some power I don’t want to
think about that Buffy would be a slayer again, and slayers are always human.”

“Oh” Tara breathes out in a relieved rush. “Good.”

Ethan nods. “So why can Spike hurt her, then?” Not to mention, when has he? The two of them seem to get on these days, by and large.

Suddenly, Ethan thinks of the handcuffs he and Rupert keep in their bedroom, and his eyes widen in understanding.

Tara is saying, “I wonder if maybe the problem isn’t Buffy at all, or the chip. What if it’s Spike? What if he’s feeling guilty about hitting her? I, I mean, the chip must react to the signals in his brain. If he hits anyone else, he must enjoy it because he’s a vampire. But he loves Buffy, so his feelings about hitting her must be more complex.” Tara frowns. “I, I’m not really sure when he’s hitting her anyway. They seem to get on okay these days.”

“Quite” says Ethan quickly. “Um. That all tracks actually. Except that, vampires don’t feel guilt, so that won’t be affecting the chip.”

Tara frowns. “But they feel love, right?” she asks, “You can’t see how Spike is around her and not believe that.” “Oh, I do believe that, but guilt is a different thing. You need a soul for that.”

“Yes” Tara says, “B-but if he can feel love, he must be able to feel regret if she’s unhappy or disappointed in him. Wouldn’t that affect the chip?”

Ethan nods, thinking this over. “It might. It’s not real guilt, but it might kill the buzz he gets from causing a human pain enough to fly under the chip’s radar.” He frowns. “Or sensors. I doubt it actually has radar.” He smiles. “So you can tell Buffy it’s nothing to do with her – she’s as human as ever.”

But Tara looks concerned. “I’m not sure I should.” Seeing his confusion, she explains, “Buffy has a lot to deal with, without being reminded that she’s the subject of unrequited love. That drains a person, even if it’s not someone very nice doing the loving. And it could make it awkward for her to live with Spike. Um, not that she should be if he’s hitting her, b-but …”

“…she could the money” finishes Ethan. Not to mention, if his impression is accurate, Buffy consented to the hitting. Possibly that confused the chip too.

“Yes” Tara is nodding, more to herself than Ethan. “A-and maybe the hitting was a one off – Oh but that’s what I always said about Donn –” She stops suddenly, pales.

“It’s different with Spike and Buffy” Ethan tells her gently. He’d be prepared to go into the entire history of kink if that’s what it took to reassure her, but then she speaks again: “Well, w-we are agreed that the last thing Buffy needs is more stress and worry.”

Gods know that is true, thinks Ethan. The gods knew it would be true back when Willow was up here researching the resurrection spell, and they did nothing about it, and nor, busy down in the shop, did he. The least he can do now not complicate whatever it is Buffy is doing with Spike.

With the air of one sharing a scandalous idea, Tara suggests, “M-maybe I should tell her a white lie.” She says it in the same way one might talk about maybe building a house, as though a constructing a lie is as daunting and complex as that.

“And say what?” asks Ethan.
“That, that there’s some mystical energy about her, or something like that. Something left over from the spell that doesn’t stop her being human, but confuses the chip somehow. I-I could tell her that, and then she w-won’t get mixed feelings about kicking Spike out, if that’s how she wants to deal with him hitting her.”

“Yes” Ethan assures her, “That would work.”

“I just don’t think Buffy needs more pressure right now.”

“Agreed. Yes, by all means, tell her what you need to tell her to stop her worrying.”

“…And then she went off on patrol with Spike again” Rupert concludes his review of how patrol went (or didn’t). Rolling over to look at Ethan, beside him in the bed, he asks, “Could it be nothing to do with my wanting to put some distance between us? Maybe she just thinks I’m past it. I can’t deny, Spike is a better fighter than me.” “Well he does have super strength” Ethan points out, “And you deciding now is the time for Buffy to stand on her own two feet is definitely reason enough for her to be off with you, but actually I think this has more to do with Spike – I think they’re fucking.”

Rupert makes a disgusted sound and pulls away, rolls onto his back. Taking a deep breath, Ethan says, “I know it’s hard to believe, but just hear me out.”

“No, no. You could be right.” Rupert sighs. “Faith thinks so to. And Dawn, apparently.”

“Oh, well then, I don’t need to share my suspicions that Buffy was there being invisible the whole time I was talking to Spike in the basement or my inkling that they’re into S and M.” At Rupert’s pained look, he adds, “Except that I really do because how can I be expected to keep that to myself? That’s just cruel.”

Rupert shakes his head. “Good Lord, what is she thinking?”

“That orgasms are a good distraction from pain and Spike’s both convenient and sexy?” “I suppose so. Except, of course, for your assessment of Spike’s sex appeal.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never –”

“– No”

“Alright then.” Ethan snuggles closer.

“Have you?”

Ethan considers the glimpses of Spike’s naked body he got in the basement, but he finds the appeal really lies in fully-clothed Spike, in the leather and attitude, because, “He reminds me a little of you when you were young.” “Gods” mutters Rupert, “That makes me feel even worse about her sleeping with him! Can you imagine me, in my twenties, without a soul?”

“It is a pretty ghastly image” Ethan admits, “But it’s not like they’re dating and planning on settling down. It’s just a post-resurrection fling.”

“It can’t be healthy.”

“Rupert, I’m not sure you can do anything about it with you and her on strictly professional terms.”

“I suppose you’re right” muses Rupert unhappily. “She has to be free to do as she chooses and
make her own mistakes.” “And Spike is certainly a mistake she’s doing” Ethan nods sagely.

“Yes” Rupert’s expression darkens. “He’s being predictably mercenary about the whole thing, of course. How very convenient for him that Buffy’s means of coping with being pulled from heaven just happens to involve him this way!” “Rupert” Ethan puts in quickly, “If you scare him off or stake him, it’s still interfering.”

Rupert looks mutinous for just a moment before relaxing again. His expression remains troubled. “I may need you to remind me of that now and then” he says.
“Thanks for this, guys” says Faith, which is a little disconcerting – it should be Buffy, surely, who asks them to watch Dawn, who gives them the instructions for the child’s late dinner, who thanks them before setting off for the Bronze.

“That’s alright” Giles replies, attempting to include Buffy, who is behind Faith, in his smile, but she is distractedly putting away the stakes that made it back from their earlier patrol. Joining Ethan, who has already made himself at home, on the sofa, Giles adds, “I hope the two of you have a good time.”

“Three of us” Buffy corrects, glancing at him at last.

“Pardon?”

“Three of us – that’s why Spike can’t watch Dawn.”

“Ah” Obviously, Giles had wondered, but he hadn’t asked on the grounds that he’d rather watch Dawn himself than leave her with William the Bloody in any case.

Faith turns away from Buffy and issues a knowing look. Giles, not wanting any part of this innuendo, looks away, only to find an identical expression on Ethan’s face.

Perhaps Buffy would pick up on the insinuation, were it not for Spike choosing that moment to appear in the doorway. He seems to have made an effort, Giles notes, with some displeasure, noting the clean, uncharacteristically bright shirt, as the vampire asks, “Ready to go, love?”

Possibly Buffy is realising now what can be read into his presence: She glances awkwardly around at the onlookers before switching on a smile. “Sure.”

“Me too” states Faith, lifting her jacket from the arm of a chair. “Bye Giles, Eth. Hope you survive Dawn.” And the three of them head out the door.

“Well” says Ethan, into the ensuing silence.

“Don’t, Ethan.”

To his credit, Ethan lets the matter drop. Giles finds himself picking it up again with, “They may have just let him tag along out of pity.”

“Possibly” replies Ethan with a smirk.

“You realise you could have prevented this if you’d made him work tonight.”

“Rupert, if I’d made him work tonight, he’d have been on his own and pinched all the blood in the fridge. Anyway, it’s not my job to scupper Buffy’s love life.”

It should be someone’s job, thinks Giles. But then – as with Angel – any attempt at interference is likely to drive Buffy closer to her vampire suitor.

At least Angel had a soul. Most of the time.

Giles is relieved when Dawn’s footsteps on the stairs signal an end to these musings.
Dot is seventy-three years old, and experienced enough in the hair, clothes and make-up department to hide the fact that she was sired at sixteen fairly effectively. Still, Ethan is a little unnerved by her, and by the fact that when she lights up, he has to quash a compulsion to pluck the cigarette from her lips the way he would if it were Dawn smoking. Pre-Sunnydale, he wouldn’t honestly have cared.

Dot, he reminds himself, is past caring about. He glances at Faith, who has joined him on this information-gathering excursion at Willy’s Place, necessitating a glamour or two, so that no-one recognises the slayer. Then again, maybe they would talk if they did, as opposed to these vague musings like, “I haven’t noticed much” Dot says. She tilts her head to look at Marvin, as he arrives with drinks. “You?”

“Me what?” he asks, sitting down.

“Ethan and…” Dot turns to Faith.

“Alice” Faith supplies quickly. As Dot turns back to Marvin, she shrugs at Ethan.

“Ethan and Alice” says Dot, “want to know if we’ve heard anything about an ancient power rising.”

Marvin looks searchingly at Ethan. “You asked that last week.”

“Just trying to keep abreast of Sunnydale’s happenings.”

“Pretty specific happening.”

Dot smirks. “Not in this town.”

Faith grins at her and knocks back a shot. “You’re not wrong. But a friend’s had a vision.” She turns to Ethan. “I can tell them that, right?”

Ethan spreads his hand in a go ahead gesture, “It’s the truth.” Excepting, possibly, the bit about Willow being Faith’s friend.

Faith asks the vampires, “From Beneath You It Devours mean anything to you guys?”

Marvin shrugs, nods to Ethan. “That’s what he asked last time.” Ethan sighs. “So nothing’s changed since then?”

“Nope”

Dot adds, “But things have changed since summer.” She looks at Marvin. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose.”

Faith asks, “Changed how?”

Marvin shrugs again. “Everyone’s a been a bit weird lately. Wound tight.”

Faith frowns, considering this. “What about?”

“Just wound tight. Itching for a fight, some demons.”
“Sounds like situation normal to me.” “More demons than normal” Marvin elaborates. “Even guys who usually like the quiet life. Everyone’s been riling each other.”

“And banding together” adds Dot. “Safety in numbers.”

“Safety from what?” asks Ethan. Dot answers with a billow of smoke blown his way.

“No-one’s said why?” asks Faith.

“It’s not a question of why” replies Dot, “It’s an instinct; something that can’t be put into words.”

“Something’s coming” agrees Marvin. He looks concerned for a moment, then catches himself, laughs. “But then, something always is.”

“But this feels different?” Ethan presses.

For a minute it seems Marvin will deny it. But he admits, “I guess. Bigger somehow.”

Faith scowls. “Pretty convenient it’s just a feeling. Not like you’d want us humans in on the party.”

“Oh don’t worry” replies Dot, “You’ll join it soon enough.”

With Ethan and Faith on a reconnaissance trip (which handily doubles as a bar crawl), Giles expects it to be one of them when the phone rings. So it is a shock when Dawn’s voice echoes tearfully down the line.

“Dawn? What is it, what’s wrong?”

“Giles, it’s Buffy.”

For an unspeakably awful moment, Giles thinks she is about to tell him Buffy is hurt or worse. Not again, not so soon. But Dawn says: “A girl got hurt on patrol and she’s going to tell the police, Giles!”

“Hurt?”

“Killed” Dawn admits, “Buffy killed her by mistake, she was fighting demons and it was only an accident, but the police won’t know that, will they? They’ll arrest her!”

She is right, of course. If Buffy insists on intervention from figures of authority, there is the Council. Sunnydale’s police are a poor choice in comparison. He asks, “Is Buffy with you now? Has she called them yet?”

“She didn’t call” Dawn replies, “She’s going over there – she left already.”

“Is someone with you?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Dawn –”

“Yes, someone’s with me! Xander and Anya are watching TV in the living room, I didn’t even tell them yet! I just phoned you as soon as she left!”
She hasn’t been gone long then. But Giles knows how quickly Buffy can cover ground when she is of a mind to. He reaches for his car keys. “I’ll catch her up” he reassures Dawn, “Stay at home and try not to worry – This is fixable, just look at Faith.” A lot the poor child could probably say to that about how long Faith was away and how she suffered in the interim, but Giles puts the phone down before they can get into that: It would be preferable to intercept Buffy before she makes a confession. If he doesn’t, the Council will have to be involved, to get her freed, and then there’ll be the tribunal, the investigation, and it will all be a strain on his already fragile slayer. Without Council intervention, on the other hand, it may be they can move past the incident fairly quickly, given that Buffy’s willingness to confess in the first place suggests she is not about to deliberately misuse her power.

Giles doesn’t think about girl Buffy killed. He can do nothing for her now. Crisis management training kicks in, and he pauses to retrieve the coded Council phonebook from his desk before heading out the door, just in case he is too late.

Pulling up outside the station, he thinks for a horrible moment that he is too late: Buffy is standing on the steps with her back to the entrance, as though she’s left the building. But surely they wouldn’t let someone who confessed to what must look like murder out so soon?

Giles gets out of the car. “Buffy!”

She looks up at him, a guilty expression on her face. Not the guilt that comes from complicity in a death – Giles, gods help him, knows that look – but the hunted expression of a child caught somewhere she shouldn’t be. “Giles.” Giles crosses over to her, places his hands on her shoulders. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. I don’t think it was me.” “What do you mean?”

“A girl died, Giles: Katrina Silber.”

“I know – well, I knew someone had died.” Glancing at the door to the station, Giles guides her away, close to the mouth of an alley. “What do you mean it wasn’t you?”

She stares past him. “Spike…”

“What? Buffy, focus! You’re certain you’re not responsible?” Giles glances again at the station, judges it best to say no more.

With apparent effort, Buffy turns away from the alley. “Everything was halluciny. Time went wonky.”

For a moment, just the briefest flicker of a moment, Giles remembers the time she lost when she accompanied Tara to lectures, and wonders if Buffy is losing her mind. That suspicion is mercifully snuffed out when she adds, “I think this was Warren: She’s his ex. I mean, she was.”

Giles nods because it makes perfect sense: a man with access to magic and just as prone to violence against an ex-partner as any man, which is more prone than Giles would have it, if he could redesign this sorry world. “Did you speak to the police?”

“No – I left when I heard her name.” “Good.”

Buffy walks away from him and into the alley, leaving Giles hurrying to catch up, telling her, “I’ll drop you off at home…um, both of you” he adds, when he spots Spike peeling himself from the ground, bleeding. Buffy crouches beside the vampire. She reaches out as if to touch him, pauses, withdraws her hand. Neither of them say anything, but Spike looks at her with apparent relief.
“Come on” Giles finds himself saying, “I’m illegally parked outside a police station – I’d rather we get going quickly.”

Offering them both a lift, he soon realises, means cramming an oppressive silence into his car. On the back seat, Spike bleeds and stares impassively out the window while Buffy, beside Giles in the passenger seat, keeps glancing back at him. She seems about to speak more than once, but doesn’t.

Back at Buffy’s house, a small crowd is waiting: Dawn, Xander and Anya have been joined by Faith, who comes forward as they exit the car and folds Buffy into a hug. “It wasn’t your fault, B.”

“I know.”

“I mean it – You were in fight mode and she was just unlucky to be there. One of those fucked up things.”

“And also it was Warren.”

“And also it was…Wait, what?” Faith pulls away.

“I think I was tricked” Buffy tells her, “It wasn’t me after all.” Anya asks, “And the police just bought your story about being presumably magically conned into just thinking you killed her?”

“I didn’t get as far as actually speaking to them” Buffy explains.

Spike adds, “I slowed her up.”

For the first time since they got out the car, the group seem to take in how badly bruised Spike is. Questioning glances are thrown Buffy and Giles’ way, and Giles looks helplessly back: He doesn’t know what happened to Spike. Not for certain. His certainty stops just short of the only likely explanation.

Dawn asks, “Are you okay? What happened?”

“Nothing to worry about, petal.” With some difficulty, Spike pulls away from the car, causing Giles to realise he was leaning subtly against it. He limps past the scoobies. “If it’s all the same to you lot, I’m going to sleep this off.”

Dawn asks, “Will you be alright?”

“Give it a few days and I’ll be fit to dance the cha-cha. Won’t do it if you pay me though.” Spike winks – as best he can with both eyes swollen – and disappears into the house.

Turning back to Buffy, Dawn asks, “So you’re not under arrest or anything?”

“No. I’m all free and recordless.”

“Oh huh. I’m going to go get the first aid kit for Spike then.” Dawn turns and marches back inside.

“Right” says Xander, “I’m guessing big scooby meeting tomorrow about how exactly Warren pulled this off, but right now, I’ve got work in the morning.”

“Yes, we should go” agrees Anya, “The Komatiites are phoning long distance later.” At Xander’s stare, she prompts, “Lava demon family? Their youngest is going to be our axe bearer, Xander!” She leads him crossly away, towards their own parked car, Xander protesting, “I thought we weren’t doing that thing with the axes!”
“Young love” muses Faith as they drive away, in the tone most people would use to lament an acquaintance’s unpleasant ailment. Turning to back to Buffy, asks, “So you want to get shitfaced, or straight to bed like a good little non-murderer?”

“I just want a moment. Um, out here.”

“Sure” says Faith, “But if you want a stiff drink after all that, I don’t mind being the sober one.”

“You’d best put on some coffee then” Giles tells her, well aware of where she’s been all night.

“I might just do that.” Faith starts towards the house, calling over her shoulder, “Come in when you’re ready, B – They’ll be a mug of the good stuff waiting!”

Left alone with Buffy, Giles tells her, “You did the right thing tonight.”

“Did I?”

“Yes. Thinking you’d caused a death, you were ready to surrender yourself to justice.” And he was ready to undo the damage, of course, but that is beside the point. Buffy’s almost-confession says a lot about her, all of which make him proud in hindsight, now the threat of arrest has passed.

“Right” Buffy makes her way to the front steps and sinks onto them.

“I’ll, err, say goodnight then” Giles tries. She wants to be alone, after all.

“Okay.”

Giles pauses, looks back at her. Finds he can’t leave her alone, looking so solemn. He sits down beside her. Buffy’s gaze flickers over him and then away again, across the front lawn. Before Giles can think of anything comforting to say, she admits, “I hit him, Giles. I hit Spike.”

“I gathered.”

“I’m stronger than him. It was so wrong.”

“Being stronger than a vampire is rather the point of slayers” Giles says, “And even with the chip, Spike is more than capable of getting away.”

“Is that what you’d say if we were both regular people and he hit me?” asks Buffy with an edge to her tone, “Would it be on me to get away?”

No, Giles realises. “But you’re not regular people. Spike isn’t even a person. And besides, Buffy, he will be okay. He’ll heal in a few days.”

Buffy is silent, clearly unconvinced. Giles asks, “Was he trying to stop you confessing?”

“Does it matter? He wasn’t attacking me is all you need to know. And I hit him anyway. And he didn’t try to stop me, he just took it.” Her tone slips into a pained mixture of resentment and sorrow, a hint of tears.

Gently, and because he cannot think of a way to offer reassurance without knowing the full picture, Giles asks, “Is there something going on between the two of you?”

Buffy turns to him, stricken. “How did you know?” Then, before he can answer: “Oh, God!” She hides her face in her hands.
“Buffy, it’s alright.” Giles removes his glasses to give her a moment of privacy. “It’s understandable.”

“How is it? Even I don’t understand it!”

“Well” Giles concedes, “Perhaps understandable was stretching it. What I mean is, you’ve been through an ordeal, and how you chose to deal with it is your business.”

“How did you – Oh God, the Bronze! I knew bringing him along was too obvious!”

“Actually, I knew before that. Or suspected.”

Giles puts his glasses back on to find Buffy staring at him. She breathes out, “Tara” but her tone is more puzzled than accusing.

“No” Giles tells her, “Faith suspected first, and then Ethan.”

Buffy runs a hand over her eyes miserably.

Giles asks, “Tara knows?” If Buffy has opened up to someone, it can only be a good thing.

“Everyone knows, it seems.” Buffy frowns. “Except Willow and Xander. God, what will they think of me?”

“That you’re dealing with a traumatic situation as best you can?” Giles hazards, “Besides, they won’t find out from me. You can tell them if you wish to. It’s your business.”

Buffy continues to stare. “You must be so disgusted with me.”

“No. Never.”

“He doesn’t have a soul, Giles.”

“I noticed. Buffy, I’m not going to say this is healthy. What I am saying is some unhealthy behaviour is expected after everything you’ve been through. And that least you’re not hurting anyone.” Besides herself, of course. But then, there are worse things she could do to herself. She is not intoxicating herself, at least, or wasting away trapped in memories. A sordid liaison is regrettable, but also survivable.

Quietly, Buffy points out, “You saw Spike’s bruises.”

“He doesn’t have a soul, as you said” Giles reminds her. It is true, but also an oddly uncomfortable thing to point out. It had seemed so simple during his lectures back at the academy: soulless beings are evil, and it doesn’t matter what happens to them. That was before he’d met Spike, of course, and listened to his opinions on the Sex Pistols or been exposed to his penchant for Weetabix. Before he’d witnessed his grief. But then, Giles remembers, he had been warned by his tutors that evil doesn’t always look or sound evil, that evil can be helpful and wear an amiable smile. He may not have much time for the Council these days, but some of his training makes perfect sense.

“That’s not his fault” Buffy is saying, “Anyway, it doesn’t mean I get to hurt him when he’s not a threat to anyone.”

“And I’m not saying you should hurt him gratuitously. But it’s not as though you hurt a human lover. That would be far worse.”

Buffy shakes her head. “So you’re saying this isn’t bad as domestic violence goes? Yeah, that
“Buffy, what do you want me to say? Apologise to him if it makes you feel better – I’m sure he’d forgive you.” The word catches him out, and he frowns. Forgiveness: Something a being with the capacity to understand right and wrong can grant. Hastily, Giles amends, “Or he’ll say no more about the matter, I mean. Forgiveness isn’t really a vampiric trait.” Loyalty is, and Giles has to concede Spike has offered that much, at least.

“I don’t want to be with him” Buffy confesses, and Giles feels a wave of relief, before she goes on, “I just have to be, sometimes. I can’t explain it, Giles, but it’s the only thing that helps.”

Possibly because Spike is disposable. Giles says, “It will get better, Buffy. I promise.”

“How can you? Did you read about it in the Big Book of Resurrected Slayers?”

“I have no idea what it’s like to be brought back from the dead, but I can see that it’s a trauma. And trauma does heal with time.” Giles allows for no other possibility despite knowing there are some. He won’t let Buffy’s experience be anything other than one of eventual healing.

“I hope you’re right.” Buffy glances at him, attempts a smile that more or less works. “Sorry – You tell me you don’t want in on any personal stuff and I tell you about my sex life!”

“Faith and Ethan did that, to be fair. And it’s not that I don’t want to be involved in your personal life Buffy – though I must say some of it is rather horrifying.” Gratified at Buffy’s smile warming into something genuine, Giles goes on, “I simply don’t want to encourage any reliance on your part. You are perfectly capable of looking after yourself.”

The smile fades. “Right. Well, I’m sorry I unloaded on you instead of getting on with that.”

“I don’t think we should get on with that” Giles decides, “I don’t think this artificial distance is workable.” At Buffy’s questioning frown, he explains, “It’s hard on you – I know it must seem very cold.” It is hard on him too, but that is beside the point. “If I could go back to England and be physically away, it would be different, but with this dark power about to rise, I can’t. I can’t not be involved.”

“So… you’re saying you were wrong? I should be all dependent?”

“Definitely not. But I should try to be a better friend than I’ve been.”

“I’d like that.” Buffy relaxes very slightly, then frowns again, stands up. “I should go and see how Spike’s getting on.”

Giles stands too. “He will be okay.” “Yeah, but, still. ’Night, Giles.”

“Goodnight Buffy.”

*****

“So that’s it?” asks Dawn, frowning, “The coroner thinks it was suicide and Warren gets clean away?”

Ethan and Anya glance uneasily at each other. Dawn has been sullen since the scooby meeting; having rejected the comfort Buffy belatedly offered, the child had simply waited for the others to leave so her lesson could begin. Perhaps it would have been better for her not to be present for the meeting itself. She is now the age Buffy was when she was called, but Buffy is the slayer – Dawn
could be spared. She doesn’t seem to want to be though, and besides, she is bright, and if she had
been absent from the meeting, she’d have simply fill the gaps. Unlike the coroner, who knows
nothing of magic, which must have been involved somewhere.

“They won’t get away with it” Anya is confidently reassuring her, “We just need to find them
and…”

“And what?” asks Dawn, “They’re human – Buffy isn’t allowed to hurt them.”

“Everyone’s working on it” Ethan reminds her.

“And coming up with nothing so far” Dawn counters, “We don’t even know where they are.”

This is true; well hidden since the debacle with Sweet, the three young men are still seemingly
unfindable. And still inconveniently human.

“We’ll find them” says Anya, “Willow just needs an idea where they are and she’ll lift that
cloaking spell they’ve got hiding them like lifting a stone in the garden. Except, instead of bugs,
they’ll be nerds squirming around under it.”

“Murderous nerds” Dawn points out.

“They’ve got no reason to hurt you” says Ethan.

“It’s not me I’m worried about” replies Dawn, “They almost had Buffy thinking she’d killed that
girl. She almost got herself arrested.”

“But she didn’t” says Ethan.

“Exactly” echoes Anya, “It’s over now.”

Dawn shakes her head. “Until they go after some other poor girl and blame it on Buffy. Or Faith.”

“We’ll stop them.”

“How?” asks Dawn.
Over breakfast, Ethan comments, “I still haven’t picked out a present for Buffy. Any ideas?”

“I’ve got her a book token” Giles tells him.

Ethan gives him an incredulous look. “A book token?”

“So she can choose what she likes.”

“That possibility hadn’t occurred to Giles, but now that Ethan mentions it, he realises that Buffy’s foray into regular reading might have ceased since she stopped being a student. But then, “She’s starting back at uni next year. She ought to get some background reading done while she has time on her hands.” Not to mention, time unfilled (except by Spike, gods help them) is time to dwell, presumably on unreachable memories of heaven. A book may not be heaven, but the right one can be the next best thing. And shopping for it will get Buffy out the house for something other than patrolling or training, and during the day, when her bleached shadow can’t follow.

Ethan tells him, “You should have let me choose something!”

“It’s done now. She might find the right book offers some, err, solace.”

“You’re expecting her to find Coping with Being Raised from the Dead for Dummies in the self-help section?”

“Well what would you have got her?”

Ethan considers. “Earrings” he says at last, “Or one of those daggers in the gun shop with little jewels up the handles – no reason a weapon can’t be pretty.”

“Practicality, I think you’ll find, is the reason a weapon can’t be pretty.”

“Or perhaps a spa day?”

“I’m not sure I trust the spas around here” decides Giles. Too much lurking around the hellmouth that might absorb a person’s energies – or worse – as they lie unsuspectingly wrapped in mud.

“Can I choose the card at least?”

“Fine. Just so long as it’s free of inappropriate humour.” Giles turns to his desk as the phone rings, answers it with, “Hello?”

“Rupert Giles?” asks Quentin Travers, though he must recognise Giles’ voice, the number of phone calls they’ve been exchanging of late about the Daidalos Chest.

“Speaking.”

“I’ve had some information from one of our operatives on the Cleveland hellmouth – The Diables Grimoire is to be included in an auction this Friday.”

“Ah” Giles consults a note in his accumulating pile of notes on the subject of the Daidalos Chest. “That’s one of the texts we thought could be used to work the chest, isn’t it?”
“Not the most crucial one” Travers tells him, “But certainly not a book we’d want falling into the wrong hands, even without the complication of the chest being uncovered. Have you found these delinquents you say might have it?”

“Not yet.” “Well come on, man, they are human! How hard can they possibly be to run to ground?”

“They do have the Daidalos Chest” Giles points out, “Which suggests that hiding themselves with magic isn’t a problem for them.” “They won’t have the worked out how to unlock the secrets of the chest yet – which means they must be concealing themselves with mundane magic that you and your slayers should be able to overcome.”

“Yes, well, as soon as we’ve found them, you’ll be the first to know.” Or rather, the eighth, after Ethan, Willow, Tara, Xander, Anya, Dawn and Spike. “In the meantime, I take it the chap in Cleveland will be attending this auction?”

“I’m afraid we’ve had to send our Cleveland operative down to the boarder – Some favour to the yanks, they’re expecting a pack of Suvolte demons – so you’ll have to go to the auction yourself.”

“Ah. Well…Friday, you said?”

“That’s right. Of course, we’ll provide a fund, but if you have to go a little overbudget, you’ll be reimbursed – It’s the only known copy.”

“Of course, but, the thing is, I have plans for Friday.” Sensing the icy glare building on the other end, Giles explains, “It’s Buffy’s birthday.” You’d think the man would know the birthday of the young woman whom he knows has saved the world from destruction so many times. The least she could get is a card from the organisation that guides her along a path that limits her birthdays is a card.

“The Slayer has no need of frivolities” comes the reply, “You’re expected in Cleveland on Friday – Now, get a pen, I’ve the time and address here.”

*****

“I think she’ll like him.”

“Who?” Giles glances up at Anya from the corner of the Magic Box. He is reading up on the book he is to bid for, while she lingers by the till, chatting to Xander.

“Oh” says Xander, “It’s nothing really.”

“We’ve found Buffy a boyfriend” Anya informs him, “A reasonably attractive construction worker who as far as we know is in no way evil.”

“But we don’t know if she’ll like him” Xander reminds her, “We’ll just introduce them and see how it goes.”

“And assist as needed. Buffy’s never dated a human before – unless you count Riley and that was a flash in the pan – and human males just don’t take read a lady’s signals the vampire males do.”

Vampire males. Giles sighs: Unless Xander and Anya catch on to Buffy and Spike’s situation and quietly drop their matchmaking, this could make for a very uncomfortable birthday for Buffy.

Unless of course, Spike is not present. That would make the matchmaking less awkward, surely,
and it could even be an opportunity for his slayer to move on if this reasonably attractive construction worker is all Anya seems to think he is. Machiavellian, perhaps, but the worst that can happen is Buffy will be put out, a situation he is hardly unfamiliar with. “Yes” Giles tells them, “I’m sure that will be fine.”

*****

“I’ve a favour to ask” Giles tells Spike when he turns up via the tunnels for his afternoon shift. Anya and Xander have left now, but Buffy and Faith pick this moment to arrive for their training session, opening the door as Spike replies, “Favour?”

“Favour?” echoes Buffy, coming forward.

“I need someone to accompany me to an auction in Cleveland” Giles explains, “Buffy, I’m sorry, but it’s on the day of your party – I tried to get them to send someone else, but the Cleveland unit are mobilised elsewhere and there’s a magic book up for auction that we should try to keep out of Warren’s hands. Or those of anyone bidding on his behalf.”

“Okay” Buffy looks a little upset, but she of all people understands duty. “But why do you need Spike to tag along?”

“Yeah” adds Spike, “I’m not exactly an antique enthusiast.”

“More an antique” Faith agrees, joining them, “What are you, like three hundred?”

“Oi – I’ll have you know I’m only one hundred and twenty one.”

“Is that like one hundred and twenty one again?”

“Cleveland is on a hellmouth” Giles interrupts, “So I’d rather go with backup. Especially as the auction could well be open to demonic bidders.”

“Wow, Giles” says Buffy, “Even your auctions are weird.”

Faith glances from her to Spike, and offers, “I could go.”

“Thank you, Faith” replies Giles, “But I really don’t need to deprive Sunnydale of a slayer. Spike will be perfectly adequate protection.”

“If Cleveland’s a hellmouth, seems fair I visit. Since when are there other hellmouths anyway?”

“Since the dawn of time. But Sunnydale is by far the most potent, at least this century.”

“Cleveland, though” says Spike, “is so tame it’s boring – You don’t need anyone with you, watcher.”

“Much as I trust your definition of boring to be quite horrifying, Spike, I would like some protection.”

“Maybe you should go” Buffy tells the vampire.

“What?” he says, “What about your birthday party?”

“It’s hardly going to be the event of the season. And Faith wants to go to it too.”

“Specially as you’ve sold it so well, B.”
“But I want to go!” argues Spike, “I was going to bring Clem!”

“I can bring Clem” puts in Faith.

“How’d you know Clem?”

“Almost decapitated him once. We laugh about it now.”

Scowling, Spike pulls Buffy aside. They argue in low murmurs which Giles is sure Faith can hear – a sardonic expression graces her face as she stands and waits – but he can’t make out what they are saying. He attempts to busy himself with his book. After a fraught moment, Buffy breaks away from Spike, heads over to Giles and announces, “Spike’s going with you” while Spike retreats to the shop basement, his movements angrily noisy.

*****

“Perfect” Ethan says to the empty air in front of him. Following his partner’s gaze, Giles frowns through a fog of magic to identify, “Dawn?!”

“Hi, Giles!” the girl pipes up from an apparently empty chair. Only by focusing with a sense other than one of the five can he make her out, and even then, she is transparent, shifting in and out of focus when he looks directly at her. “What is this?”

“A glamour” Dawn explains.

“The best I know” adds Ethan.

“Ethan, you’re supposed to be teaching her protection spells!”

Ethan waves a hand at where he apparently estimates the teen to be. “She won’t need protection spells if nothing can see her!”

“And I’m sure nothing could possibly go wrong with that!”

“Giles” cuts in Dawn, “It’s taken me ages to get this good!”

Giles asks her, “Does Buffy know this is what you’re learning?”

Dawn gestures to the door to the backroom, beyond which Buffy and Faith are winding up their training session with some meditation. “Go tell her!”

“It will keep her safe” Ethan is arguing, “She can hide from anything with this.”

“Except for anything that can smell her, or sense her soul, or –”

“She can hide from most things with this” Ethan amends.

“And for the rest you were going to get to protection spells when, exactly?”

“We’ve done some” Ethan defends.

Dawn adds, “We’re learning to transfigure things into snakes next.”

“That’s not a protection spell” argues Giles.

Ethan reasons, “Nothing likes snakes being thrown at them.” He frowns. “Except perhaps for a
Lesser Striped Snake-eating Polgolor Demon, but even then, it would distract it.”

“Protection spells were getting boring” adds Dawn.

“This is ridiculous. Buffy said protection spells only, and she’s your guardian. It’s up to her what you learn.”

At that moment, the door to the backroom opens and Buffy storms out. “Giles – a word.” She pulls him away from Ethan and Dawn, who go into a little spell-stained huddle, the magic not quite settling around them. Buffy snaps, “Tell me you didn’t know Xander and Anya want to set me up with someone!”

Ah. Perhaps it was too much to hope they were meditating unsupervised in there, as opposed to gossiping. “Buffy, I…” Giles can’t lie to her. At least, not easily, or about something so trivial. “I knew they were bringing a young man, yes. But –”

Buffy’s voice drops. “But you just thought it would be a chance to get Spike out the way so some stranger can make his move?”

“You are free to reject his, err, move.”

“Right. And I will. So it’s pointless you dragging Spike off on some road trip!”

“I am going to a hellmouth town for an auction quite a few demons will be interested in” Giles reasons.

“And you couldn’t take Faith?”

“You want Faith to miss your birthday?”

“No. But. Giles, you know about me and Spike! Would you just drag my boyf – my – the guy – the guy I was with off if it was Riley? Or some other human guy?”

“I do need to bring some muscle to this auction.”

“Oh, yes, Ripper, there’s no way you could just look after yourself!”

Giles stifles a glare. It is true that that had been the original plan. But, “If things get ugly, I’ll be grateful for Spike’s presence. And in the meantime, perhaps it wouldn’t do any harm to give a human guy, as you put it, a chance?”

Buffy stares at him for a moment before shaking her head in disgust. “I can’t believe this. I thought you were being nonjudgy.”

“I am. I’m not judging you, Buffy. I just see no harm in you meeting this young man with Spike out of your way for the night. After all, if Spike is only a…a distraction, perhaps someone else could play that role?”

Another disgusted headshake. “You know what, Giles: I think I liked it better when you were being distance guy.”

“I am. I’m not judging you, Buffy. I just see no harm in you meeting this young man with Spike out of your way for the night. After all, if Spike is only a…a distraction, perhaps someone else could play that role?”

Another disgusted headshake. “You know what, Giles: I think I liked it better when you were being distance guy.”

“Buffy!” Giles hastens to follow as she heads for the door, brushing past Ethan on her way. When she turns, he finds he has lost his nerve to argue the point, so instead he directs her attention to the other matter it should be applied to. “Perhaps you should stay and watch Dawn practise her spells? Look over what she’s been learning?”
Seeming to pick up on his meaning only through a fog of bad temper, Buffy looks distractedly at the bundle of herbs Ethan has placed in the centre of the table. Asks Dawn, “What are you doing?”

Dawn looks flustered for just a moment. “Oh, um – Learning to turn things into snakes.”

“Oh.” Buffy turns again and leaves.

“See?” Dawn asks Giles. “She doesn’t care.”

*****

Perhaps thanks to the lecture Rupert gave him about punctuality before he left, Ethan is unfashionably early to Buffy’s party. Really, Ethan thinks Rupert is in a mood because of some falling out with Buffy, rather than anything he’s done.

Dawn lets him in with the sort of bright smile kept in reserve by those who don’t often have occasion to use one. “Hi, Ethan”

“Hello, Dawn. Sorry, I’m early.”

“That’s okay.”

“I’m not really sorry on your account – I just don’t want to be an utter square. Tell me I’m not the first to arrive, at least.”

“You kind of are” Dawn tells him apologetically. Ethan winces. Sets about helping her get the living room ready, because he might as well as he’s here.

He hasn’t seen her since their magic lesson of a few days ago, and wonders if he should say something about it. Perhaps offer to go back to protection spells. But what would be the point? They’ve done them to death, and pretending Buffy’s rule still applies won’t change the fact that it doesn’t, that – Ethan suspects – none of Buffy’s rules regarding Dawn’s education, her curfew, her bedtime or what she eats really apply anymore excepting in life or death situations. An opportunity, in Ethan’s opinion, but it’s clear Dawn doesn’t view it that way. Buffy seems to be stuck in a slayer mode left over from Glory – keep Dawn safe. Sister mode, guardian mode, that has been slower to return to her following her own return to life.

But what can he say about any of that? Instead, Ethan makes small talk with, “Good day?”

“Yeah” Dawn responds automatically, laying out CDs ready to be played. After a pause, she adds, “Except for being called to the guidance counsellor’s office in front of everyone.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah – some new lady. She just asked how things were going after…Well, after mom.”

“It’s good they’re checking” says Ethan, who can’t imagine such support going on during Snyder’s reign.

“I guess. But it just seemed like wishful thinking really – she just asked me what I’d like to be different, she didn’t tell me how to get there.”

“Maybe that’s something you need to find out for yourself” suggests Ethan clumsily, not wanting to dismiss whatever help the child is getting, but not sure it’s the right thing to say either. It doesn’t seem very fair, after all, to expect Dawn to change a situation that is not of her making.
“I don’t think so” says Dawn, “Or, if that’s what it’s for, I did it wrong – I said I missed how close Buffy and me were when we were little, and how I wish we could spend time together like that again.” She smiles. “Of course, I didn’t tell her that’s all fake memories anyway and none of my life is real.”

“Your life now is real, Dawn.”

“It doesn’t always feel like it.”

“That’s called puberty. It passes.”

“I hope. And I couldn’t tell her about Buffy really – about why we’re not close now. I couldn’t tell her she’s not around because she’s bummed from being raised from the dead. So I’m thinking, therapy? Works in theory, but not on a hellmouth.”

“You may be right. But parties? Always work.”

Dawn grins.

*****

Flying out to Cleveland had necessitated arrangements be made for Giles’ vampiric bodyguard. Clearly the Council would baulk at making such arrangements for a vampire, even a chipped one, so Giles had relied on Willow to magically ensure that no-one discovered Spike’s hiding place in the aeroplane’s cargo hold – “Doing a Kendra”, Buffy had called it. As for ensuring that they arrived after sunset, that was simply a matter of choosing the appropriate flight. Of course, all manner of things could go wrong – Spike had to locate the plane at dusk, sticking to shadow, he could have been thrown about and injured if he failed to secure himself, he could have failed to sneak on in time, the magic might not have worked or, if it did, human error (or vampire error) could have seen Spike board (for want of a better word) the wrong flight. So Giles is actually a little relieved when, emerging from his more civilised flying experience, he finds Spike waiting for him. His bleached hair is a little mussed and he appeared to be in a foul mood, but other than that, he is fine.

“Can’t say I’m a convert” Spike says, nodding skyward at the planes taking off from the airport overhead.

“It’s better when you have a window” Giles tells him.

“Better not to come at all. I bet this auction goes off without a hitch and I could have been at the party.”

They take a taxi to the unassuming auction house the Diables Grimoire is to be sold in, silent all the way until, as they are walking up the front steps, Spikes comments, “I know what you’re doing, watcher. Bringing me here.”

Giles checks the time on a poster advertising the auction, checks his watch. “What’s that?”

“Trying to break me and Buffy up.”

Giles looks at him sharply and Spike grins, and adds, “Yeah – she told me you know. Getting more relaxed about us now half the group seem to have worked it out.” His smile slips. “But you’ll not manage to separate us, you know.”

“Are you really a couple to separate?” Giles throws back, “I hadn’t realised it was so official.”
Clearly it is not, because Spike scowls. But he rallies with, “Seemed pretty official this morning in her bed.” The smile returns, lewd this time. “There’s things I could tell you, Giles.”

“Spike, I’d like to point out we’re here with no witnesses. Threaten to tell me anything about you and Buffy again, and I’ll explain to the others when I return alone that you were staked during a bidding war.”

Spike rolls his eyes but shuts up. Keeps the grin.

Wanting to wipe it off his face, Giles adds, “And if things are going so well, I wouldn’t have thought you’d need to warn me off interfering.”

The grin slips with satisfying speed, and Spike replies, “I’m not warning you off. I’m just saying. I don’t need to warn you off.”

“Alright then.”

“She’ll never go for this Richard prick. She told me.”

“Well then, I’m sure you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“Right. I’m not worried.” Spike drops eye contact and hurries inside.

*****

“B, this is Kaz, from work, and Clem, not from work.”

“Kind of from work” Clem corrects Faith, “We met when she tried to slay me.” He offers a wrinkled hand which Buffy shakes with a stiff smile. Kaz, for his part, appears human but completely unfazed by the demon’s presence, possibly due to his being clearly very stoned. Kudos to him, Ethan decides. If he worked at the Doublemeat Palace, he’d want to get high now and then too.

“This is Richard.” Buffy tugs her suitor forward. He stares at Clem in frank horror. Clem gives him an amiable little wave. Faith, beside him, looks the young man up and down. “Richard? Nice name” she comments, and Ethan tries very hard not to read anything into the remark.

Buffy tugs Richard’s arm again, steering him towards Faith. “Why don’t you get him a drink?”

“Sure.” Faith leads Richard away, telling Kaz and Clem over her shoulder, “Booze’s in the fridge.”

Kaz nods and heads to the fridge, not troubling to stifle a belch as he goes. Leaving Clem to either mingle or follow suit, Buffy gathers up trays of snacks to carry to the living room, muttering, “Faith sure can pick ‘em.”

“I think she might have picked your birthday present from Xander” Ethan tells her.

“Oh, Xander had better get me a present beside Richard.” Buffy glances around to check they are not being overheard. “Faith’s doing me a favour. I’m just not in a very datey place right now.”

*****

“She’s not ready to date anyone” Giles whispers, as he and Spike take their seats for the auction. “And if she was, she wouldn’t look twice at you.”

Spike scowls. “Watch it, watcher. No witnesses, remember? A fight does break out, I could just sit
back and let…” His gaze wanders around the room until he nods to a Miquot demon a few rows ahead, “…that bugger do his worst, and go back to Sunnydale and say, *Oh dear, I did try to save old Rupert but it was too late.*”

Giles glares, and gathers his wit to respond – but then the auctioneer steps up to introduce the first item in the estate of the Diables Grimoire’s last owner, and the proceedings begin.

*****

“Before you get any ideas” Ethan tells Dawn quietly as the other partygoers chatter around them, “I don’t recommend turning any security tags into snakes.”

“I told you guys – the shop left it on by accident.” Dawn shoots a glance his way, challenging him to contradict her.

“If you say so.” Ethan takes a swig of his drink and watches Faith lean across Kaz to whisper something in Richard’s ear. Willow has changed the music, and she and Tara are slow dancing while Xander and Anya discuss wedding plans as Buffy listens and smiles, not contributing but seemingly comforted by their conversation. Clem is happily munching on the various snack foods beside her. Dawn is on the edge of all of it, watching and not joining in. So is he, Ethan supposes, but it seems more of a shame for her. It’s more routine for her. He offers, “Perhaps you should talk to this counsellor lady about these shopping habits.”

Dawn glares. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ethan.”

“No. I suppose you don’t.”

“I’m not going back to her anyway. I can’t tell her what’s really been going on.”

“That’s a point.”

“And it’s cruel to the snakes. They’d be all disorientated.”

“Going from a dye filled tag to a viper has to be somewhat disorientating, I suppose. But at least then you could wear the clothes.”

“I thought you wanted me to speak to the counsellor about it.”

“And I thought you didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Dawn’s gaze flitters away, then back again. “I don’t. I’m just saying you’re weird.” “And I’m not disputing that. And I do think you should stop doing the thing you have no idea about, but if you’re not going to, you might as well get something out of it.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes it does – it’s just wanting the best for you. The best is don’t steal. Failing that, the next best is be really good at it.”

“At least someone wants the best for me.” Dawn’s roving gaze comes to rest on Buffy, who doesn’t look over.

*****

It’s not exactly a raging party, but neither does it tire them into stifled yawns and excuses to leave. They all talk, they play monopoly, they dance a little. At some point, Dawn goes off to bed and
Buffy slips away somewhere too, but the rest of them stay in the living room, sharing food and conversation. Ethan is surprised, when daylight flows through the closed curtains, to find that they have stayed all night. Coffee, he decides, getting up and heading for the kitchen.

In it, he finds a little blonde girl. “Um. Hello.”

She turns. “Hi. Who are you?”

“I’m Ethan.” Ethan looks around for any sign of how she entered, or why she is here. Via the door, he supposes, though it is closed. No adults around, apart from the ones in the living room. Has she wandered in from some accident or demon attack? He studies her. She looks alright. “How did you get here?” he asks.

“I live here.” She frowns. “I think I live here.” She smiles up at him, in a manner that implies the matter is of no importance really. “Have you seen my sister?” “Sister?” Ethan shakes his head – not the thing to focus on. “How did you get in here? Who are you?”

“I’m Buffy.”

Ethan gapes. “Buffy?”

“Yes” says the little girl, “It’s spelt B U F F –”

“Yes, yes, I know how to spell Buffy.” Only so many Buffys in the world, and, thinking about it, the eyes are the same. Less melancholy, but the same. And, Ethan realises suddenly, so are the clothes – Buffy’s party outfit has shrunk and warped into child size attire. Ethan looks around the kitchen, hoping to find some magic-based explanation. Because what else could this be?

“Ethan?” Willow enters. “Are you making coffee, because – oh” She stops, staring down at the child. “Hello, sweetie, where’d you come from?”

“I live here” explains Buffy. She is staring up at them both, calm and questioning, smiling.

Willow turns to Ethan.

“I didn’t do it” he says.

“Well, yeah, I mean, why would you?”

“Why would anyone? Unless” Ethan’s eyes widen “Could someone want the slayers out of action? Where’s Faith?”

“I’m here” Faith strolls in behind Willow, very much still an adult.

“Oh good” says Ethan.

Faith notices the child. “What’s with the kid?”

“This is Buffy.”

Faith frowns. “Named after? Like, have her aunt’s folks showed up or something?”

“We’re thinking more magic age regression” explains Willow.

“Ah, crap. B, you can never just have a drama free birthday, can you?”
“Faith!” gasps Willow, “Don’t swear!”

“Why not?”

Willow indicates Buffy and Faith rolls her eyes. “Wills, she’s twenty one years old!”

“I’m ten” says Buffy.

“This is bad” states Willow.

“It’s not a problem” Ethan reassures her, “I’ll just get over to the shop and get a few things for a general reversal spell.”

“Guys?” Xander’s voice comes in ahead of him from the hallway, “We’ve got a problem.” He enters, carrying a girl even littler than Buffy. Barely more than a toddler, in fact.

“Dawnie!” Buffy’s face lights up and she reaches for her sister.

“Okay” Xander gently sets Dawn down beside Buffy. “Look, if any of you guys decided some age zapping party snacks would be funny, now’s the time to fess.”

“We didn’t do this” says Willow.

“And if we knew how to” adds Ethan, “Do you think I’d still be this side of forty?”

“So what did do this?” asks Xander.

Willow shakes her head, baffled, and they watch the two children for a moment. Buffy has led Dawn away from their grown-up musings, and is standing on a chair to pour her some cereal.

“I’ll get to the shop” Ethan decides.

“Sure” says Faith, “I’ll clear the non scoobies out of here.”

*****

“That was just cruel, watcher!”

“Spike, as it’s your vulnerability to sunlight that’s necessitating us staying here until nightfall, I’d thank you not to complain about the name I book you in under.”

“Randy Giles?!”

“It was the first thing that came to mind.”

As they enter the twin room, Spike throws himself moodily onto the nearest bed.

Really, Giles is already regretting not getting separate rooms. Doubtful, though, that the Council would cover the costs of a second room, and it is not as though he is trapped by the sunlight – If Spike becomes unbearable, he can leave. He sits down on the second bed and studies the book in his hands. The Diables Grimoire. A fight had broken out in the end – not over this but over a separate lot entirely, a pair of antique swords. He and Spike had simply waited while the battle grew and died, until the lot they were waiting for came up. Bidding then had been intense but violence free. Demons: So unsubtle. No matter the history and magical prowess of those swords, they were nothing to the spells in this book, even without pairing it with the Daidalos Chest. Yet they wanted the pointy things.
“I have a human name that’s still perfectly useable, you know” gripes Spike from the bed.

“Spike, I have better things to think about than the name of the poor fellow you took over.”

Spike turns his head to eye him doubtfully. “You really think it’s as simple as that? Bloody hell, the council of wankers must have got you good and proper, Rupert.”

Doubt, pernicious and icy, slips through Giles’ mind. He puts it out again.

Spike goes on, “A soul’s not all a person is, you know.”

Utterly ridiculous, that he’d use that word – person. Giles tells him, “Well you would say that. You don’t have one.”

“So what?”

“So, that’s why I’m not going to take your word as to it’s worth. And why, incidentally, you’ll never be good enough for Buffy.” Giles rises. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going out. There’s bound to be something better to do in this city than listen to you winge.”

*****

When Ethan returns from the shop, laden with supplies, Kaz is gone but Richard is still lingering over his goodbye with Faith. Buffy and Dawn are watching, and making a show of squealing disgustedly at the kiss. Faith must have spun her paramour some story to explain the sudden appearance of two children. Clem is still present too, smiling affably and offering to help prep the spell once Richard finally leaves.

“Sure.” Faith wipes her mouth and grins.

“Faith” says Xander, “We’re kinda having a crisis here.”

“Kinda, but not definitely.” Faith indicates the children, who have sat themselves down at the far end of the living room, wrapped up in some secret game. “They’re fine.”

“Apart from being the wrong age!”

“Faith’s right” Ethan puts in, laying out herbs and powders, “Worse things happen at sea. And in Sunnydale.”

“So long as they don’t keep aging backwards, I guess” Willow agrees, stooping to help him, “That would be bad.”

“I can’t think what would cause that” Ethan reassures her. “Then again, I can’t think what would cause this, either.” Something nags at him then; something Dawn said. Focusing on the matter at hand, he adds, “A general reversal should do the trick. Shall we use Hopkins’ Remedial Enchantment?”

“Sure.”

They ready the spell, helped by Tara and occasionally Anya, while Clem and Faith look on and Xander takes it upon himself to supervise the children. Buffy has invented some game involving hiding under the dining room table and leaping out unannounced, to Dawn’s squealing delight.

Once everything is ready, Ethan summons them in. They come, led by Xander, to line up within the pre-prepared circle of sand.
Buffy asks, “Where’s mom?”

The atmosphere in the room drops a few degrees. Willow manages, “Um. Buffy –”

“She’ll be back soon” Ethan hears himself say.

Everyone looks at him, shocked, but no-one contradicts him. Buffy seems to accept his assurance on face value, nodding, smiling, wrapping a casual arm around Dawn. Calm contentment seems to be a side effect of this spell, Ethan notes. That, or children are always this trusting. He starts the reversal spell.

It doesn’t work. Or rather, it works – there is magic, that internal soaring, that flutter of atoms in a different dimension – but it does not overcome whatever de-aging curse the Summers sisters were hit with. When it is over, they are still children, Buffy seemingly trying not to laugh, Dawn’s butterfly attention wandering around the room.

Ethan sighs. “Bugger that then.”

“Don’t swear!” Willow reprimands.

Tara offers, “W-we could try a different spell. Maybe something from the Hogarth Miscellany?” “I left that in the shop” Ethan admits.

Faith stands up. “Let’s get them over there, then.”

This proves problematic. At first, the children do not want to go. They are waiting for their mother. They have games to play. Dawn is hungry, could they eat first? Bribed to the front door with sweets Clem finds in an arm fold (children, it seems, are not fussy), they still refuse to cross the threshold. Or rather, once stern words are had, turn out to be unable to cross the threshold. Buffy eventually explains, stiltedly, in shy and clumsy terms, that they want to leave but can’t.

“That’s stupid” Anya tells Buffy. She steps neatly out the door and then back in again. “There’s nothing wrong with the door.”

“Ahn, it must be part of the spell” says Xander. Anya frowns a thoughtful frown.

“Wicked specific spell” mutters Faith.

“Yes” says Ethan. He frowns too, that nagging thought tugging on his subconscious again.

“It’s okay” Willow tells them. “I know a reverse barrier spell that might help. And if that doesn’t work, Ethan will just have to go to the shop on his own and bring the Miscellany back here.”

“Alright” Ethan agrees, “Let’s try that.”

Again, it doesn’t work. That is to say, it doesn’t work on the door. It may have something to do with the demon which appears out of nowhere. Alerted by the children’s screams, Faith rushes in to slay, but the thing vanishes.

“That’s it!” Anya declares, “We need to get out of here – We need to get these children out of here!”

“We can’t” Faith points out, “They’re trapped here.”

“Where did it go?” Tara stares around at the walls, the ceiling.

Xander asks, “Maybe we should call Giles?”
“No point” replies Ethan, “He can’t do anything from Cleveland; we’d just panic him for no reason.” He watches Buffy pulling Dawn on to her lap, rocking her, and it all clicks into place – They had been close as children, Dawn had said. Dawn had yearned – in the presence of an unknown young woman, no less – to go back to that. She had wished it. “Ah.”

“What?” asks Faith.

“Anya, might any of your former colleagues turn their hand at guidance counselling?” Ethan nods to Dawn.

Anya frowns. Then issues a put upon sigh, turns her face upwards and yells, “Halfrek!” Turning back to Ethan she asks, “Which one did it?” just as a vengeance demon materialises behind her. Without waiting for a reply, Anya turns to her, “Hallie, this is unoriginal.”

Halfrek bristles. “Well at least I emerged from a Sunnydale school unscathed, unlike some people I could mention!”

For a second, Anya’s anger seems to deepen, but then she takes Xander’s hand and agrees, “Yeah, I’m quite happily scathed.”

Halfrek’s expression flickers from puzzled to amused to neutral. Xander raises his free hand. “Um, what’s going on?”

“Buffy or Dawn made a wish to a vengeance demon” Anya explains, gesturing at the children cuddling on the floor.

“It was Dawn” adds Ethan heavily, “She wanted to be close to Buffy again, like when they were children.”

“Or how she remembers it” Willow states grimly.

“And that they spend time together” confirms Halfrek.

Anya adds, “Hence trapping them?”

“Naturally.”

“And then what?” asks Willow, “They’re stuck here all their lives, growing up, growing old and dying and never going outside?”

“Spending every waking moment together” Halfrek confirms. She indicates Dawn with a sweeping gesture, “God knows this poor child needs it. I could feel her yearning for her sister even before I reached town. Her only living family and she barely looked at her.”

Faith asks, “Where’d the demon fit into all this?”

“Demon?” asks Halfrek, puzzled.

Then the thing appears and spears her through the chest.

Everyone screams on cue, except for Faith, who leaps into action, kicking the demon square in the chest. Backing away from the fight, Ethan is pulled aside by Tara, who has herded the children behind the sofa. From there, Buffy pops up, grabs a cushion, and throws it at the demon with surprisingly good aim. It turns her way, giving Faith her opening. Grabbing its sword, she runs it through, then smashes the blade against the nearest wall. Stares down at Halfrek’s crumpled form.
“How’d we undo this without her?”

“You couldn’t” replies Halfrek, opening her eyes. She gets up and brushes herself down, looking critically at the hole in her clothes.

“You need to undo this, Hallie” says Anya, without a hint of surprise.

Halfrek watches the children emerge from behind the sofa. Buffy holds Dawn to her protectively and Dawn snuggles into the embrace. Halfrek says, “I don’t see why you’re put out about it – They’ll make adorable bridesmaids.”

“Only if we have the wedding here!” Anya retorts, then pauses, looks around. Says to Xander, “It might be nicer than Bison’s Lodge – Oh, but it’s not big enough for everyone. You have to undo it, Hallie.”

“I’m afraid I simply can’t. It’s a matter of professionalism, Anyanka.”

“But you’re punishing Dawn too” Tara argues, “And she’s the one you wanted to help.”

Halfrek shrugs. Anya looks a little embarrassed, though whether this is due to what her newer friends think of vengeance spells, or what her old friend thinks of their ignorance of them, Ethan would be hard pressed to say. Turning back to Halfrek, she says, “You can’t just leave them like this.”

“I can” replies Halfrek, “And I will. That girl deserves no better, after her neglect of the precious child in her care. So this is what she will have.” She raises her arms dramatically, as if to depart.

“Don’t you dare, Hallie!” Anya grabs her wrist. “Undo it right the hell now or you’re off the bridesmaid list!”

Halfrek looks stunned. “But I’ve known you longer than any of the others!”

Anya shakes her head. “Doesn’t matter. I won’t have you as my bridesmaid unless you undo this curse.” “In fact” cuts in Xander, “You won’t even be invited unless you undo it.”

Halfrek stares at him and then at Anya. “This is so unreasonable.”

Anya shrugs. Halfrek glares. Then she announces, “Fine. Fine, if that’s how you’re going to be, I’ll undo it.” She snaps her fingers. There is a sort of pop, air twisting and resettling, and where two little girls stood, suddenly stand Buffy and Dawn, restored to full height. Buffy gasps.

Halfrek adds, “I can’t believe you, Anyanka. You’re going to have to do some serious grovelling if you expect me to even turn up for your blasted wedding!” She vanishes.

“She’ll come” says Anya, rolling her eyes.

“She will?” Xander manages a fake smile.

Buffy breathes, “What’s going on?” She raises her hands, looks at them, turns slowly to Dawn. Perhaps Dawn already knows; she looks stricken.

“It was a spell, Buffy” Willow quietly explains, “A vengeance spell.” “Dawn made a wish” Anya adds.

“Accidently, I’m sure” puts in Tara.
Buffy continues to stare at Dawn. “You made me forget” she accuses.

“Buffy” manages Dawn, “I didn’t know.”

“Again! First the memory spell, and now this? Every time I forget, and then I remember again, it feels like –” Buffy stops herself, runs her hands through her hair, fingers clawing at scalp.

“Buffy” says Dawn, “Please, I –”

She gets no further, because Buffy turns and walks quickly away.
When a group of assorted vampires enter the shop with an air of malice about them, Ethan congratulates himself on hiring a useful bodyguard in Spike – at least he does for the second it takes the nastiest looking vampire to cross the room and clap Spike warmly on the shoulder. “Spike! How’ve you been?”

“Brian?” Spike grins. “Alright, as it happens. You?”

“Yeah, fun’s been had. I sired a guy, been training him up.”

“Congrats. When’d you get back to Sunnydale?”

“Oh, just last night. Heard you were working here – What’s with that?”

“Err” Spike glances awkwardly to Ethan, a don’t tell them I’m chipped glance, and mutters, “Favour to a friend.”

“That would be me” says Ethan, keen to clarify that he’s not on the menu.

“I make sure nothing eats him” says Spike, “And occasionally sweep.”

“Huh.” The vampire looks from one to the other of them while his lackeys fan out behind him as lackeys are wont to do, eyeing the merchandise, picking things up and setting them down again.

“Talking of favours” Spike’s friend goes on, “Mate of mine had this idea.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Suvolte breeding season – they’re coming from all over to spawn.”

“Suvolte” Spike muses, “They the big ugly buggers?”

“Doesn’t narrow it down much in the demon world” says Ethan. Then, sensing glares, “Sorry, wrong crowd.”

“Anyway” resumes Brian, “There’s this guy, a buyer, offering good money for anyone who can get their hands on a few.”

“From the Suvolte’s nest?” asks Ethan. “Exactly how big and how ugly are these things?”

“More of us than them” says Spike, with a tell-tale gleam entering his eye.

“Exactly” says Brian, “And I’ve seen you fight – we could use you. Oh, and do you have a place to keep them? The fella won’t be in town for a few days – he’s got to lie low because of these military types honing in on the whole thing.”
“Well with that, he’s got our sympathy” says Ethan.

“Too bloody right” says Spike, “But what if we don’t kill mother? I don’t want some demon high on maternal wrath to come knocking.”

“Well, no” admits Brian, “But it’s not like Suvoltes are nature’s cuddliest mums. She probably won’t notice they’re gone.”

“Still, I don’t know about storing them – I live with a couple of ladies who I’d hate to see get hurt.”

“You could store them here” puts in Ethan, “I’ve got a backroom.” He watches doubt play out across the vampires’ faces – they are already splitting whatever they take is half a dozen ways – but finally Brian says, “Sure – You’re on.”

After that, they discuss terms, cuts and strategy civilly enough, and Ethan tries not to think about what they’ll all look like in vamp face, taking down something big and ugly.

“Don’t say it” says Spike, as soon as the other vampires leave.

“Well, one of us has to” replies Ethan.

“Buffy wouldn’t even need to know! We could just get the eggs shipped off and take the money!”

“There’s no reason we can’t take the money” Ethan reasons, “But Rupert will send me to the curb pretty quickly if we don’t tell the slayers. Not to mention, we don’t know what this buyer’s got planned for a load of baby demons.” “Not going to raise them as fluffy pets, I’d wager” admits Spike.

“There you go then.”

“But how’d we get the money if we go running to the slayers?”

“We hand over the eggs, he hands over the cash, the slayers are waiting for him outside. Hopefully, your pals will never have to know. Or if they do, they still get their share so they can’t exactly complain.”

Spike thinks this over, nods. “Alright then: You clear a space in the training room, I’ll call Buffy.”

****

“So” says Rupert, mastering his pacing enough to sit down on their bed, “A group of vampires offers you an opportunity to sell the eggs of an incredibly dangerous demon on the black-market and…you take it?”

“For espionage purposes” points out Ethan, “Well, and money.”

“Ethan, this is appallingly dangerous!”

“How is it? Your slayers will be on hand. And it’s better than someone else doing the job and the eggs actually being used for whatever they’re supposed to be used for.”

“Demon baiting or attack animals, I imagine. Unless there’s some dark magic that uses Suvolte eggs?”

“Not that I know of.” Rupert leans back against the pillows with a worried groan. “One day, Ethan, I’d like to be sure you’re not going to announce that you’ve accepted temp work from the demon
underworld.”

Ethan lays down beside him, keeping his voice carefully light-hearted as he retorts, “Rupert, do you remember when I decided to move us both to the hellmouth? No? Me neither.”

Rupert looks pained, and Ethan feels a stab of remorse. He soothes the moment over with, “To be fair, this is Spike’s fault. I just happened to be there.”

Rupert looks about to argue, but seems to think better of it. All he says is, “Just be careful, won’t you?”

*****

“Ew” says Buffy, when Spike returns straight from the Suvolte nest the following night with a crate of eggs.

“What were you expecting?” the vampire asks, “Chicken eggs?” He is unhurt, even perhaps cheerful following a fight well won.

“The demon eggs that body snatched everyone in school looked like chicken eggs” replies Buffy, “I just hoped they all did.”

“Nope” says Faith, helping Spike empty the crate, “These would be fucked up chickens.”

Giles asks Spike, “I take it you killed the mother?”

“Not quite” Spike replies, “Might have dented her a bit but she’s built like a tank with legs.”

“Wonderful” murmurs Ethan, “I’ll need to strengthen the wards then.” He frowns, asks, “Did the others make it?”

“Two dusted.”

“So, a bigger share for us.”

“True, that.” Spike looks at the slayers. “That’s if you lot will let us complete the sale?”

“Can’t see why not” replies Faith, “We could use the cash.”

“You’re not in on the job” Spike reminds her, “Ethan and me will take our cut and pass the rest on.”

“While me and B get stuck taking out the dealer? Doesn’t seem fair.”

“Doesn’t seem fair if I end up with a load of pissed off vampires after me.”

Buffy says, “You can handle yourself, Spike.”

“He can” Giles puts in, “But Ethan can’t.”

“Oi” says Ethan. Then, when Giles looks at him, “No, actually, that’s fair.”

Giles goes on, “If we’re going to deny these vampires their share, I think we’ll have to slay them.” To Ethan, he adds, “I’ll not have anything come after you.”

“Aw, Rupert.”
“We’re not slaying Brian!” says Spike, “He’s one of Darla’s.”

“I’m sure wherever she is now, she won’t miss him” Giles replies.

Spike scowls in a way that makes clear he intends to warn this Brian to leave town, but Giles can’t exactly stop him doing that, so he doesn’t comment further. Loyalty, he reminds himself, not fondness. Vampires are loyal, not loving; this Brian is not an old friend of Spike’s because vampires have no friends.

Buffy asks, “Is it okay for us to keep the money? I mean, it feels a bit like taking payment for slaying.”

“I don’t have a problem with that” says Faith.

“It would only end up in the black-market otherwise” points out Ethan.

“Yes” says Giles, “Just this once, I can’t see the harm in it. So long as it doesn’t take priority, of course.”

“Course not”

“Also, we need a plan in case this dealer chap turns out to be human.”

“You think he could be?” asks Buffy.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Oh.”

“We could just knock him out and leave him” Faith suggests, “Not like he can go to the police and say he got jumped while he was moving stolen demon eggs.”

“That’d work” says Ethan, “Do it right and he might not even connect it to us – he’ll just think the slayers happened to be around.”

Buffy is frowning thoughtfully. “Who is he selling them to?” she asks.

“No idea” replies Ethan, “We haven’t been told much about him.”

“I’ve got to make contact” Spike adds, “Now that Si’s dust – let him know where to find us.”

“And he’ll be in town soon?”

“Any day now, pet.”

Leaving Ethan and Spike to make whatever arrangements they feel are necessary for the newly acquired eggs, Giles drops Buffy and Faith home. As soon as they get in, Faith heads upstairs, causing Buffy to smile knowingly. “She’s got a date” she tells Giles, “Some guy called Richard who came to my party.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she seems excited. I mean, she’s showering first which is more than she did for Kaz. Could just be ’cause this vamp called her smelly because of the Doublemeat Palace effect, but I think this
is an actual date not just a – um, and it suddenly hits me, you’re Giles.”

“I’m afraid I am.” Giles offers her a smile. Perhaps one day, the fact that his slayers are now adults won’t seem strange to him, or to them, but the idea that they’ll ever converse on the merits of an actual date versus an um, seems improbable.

Dawn enters, and smiles reflexively at Buffy. “Hi.”

“Hey, Dawn.” Buffy turns her back on the teen, hangs her coat up. Giles stands awkwardly, aware of the tension between the sisters. It will pass soon, he is sure. After all, once Spike was back in one piece, Buffy forgave Giles engineering his absence from her party. Dawn must surely be forgiven her own mistake soon.

“Before you take that off” Dawn says, “We’re just going out if you wanna come.”

Buffy frowns. “We?”

“Willow and Tara?” Dawn prompts, “They came over to sit with me while you were out which I so don’t need but they’re in the kitchen right now.” At Buffy’s blank stare, she mutters, “I guess Faith arranged it.”

“Buffy!” Willow comes in on cue, followed by Tara, “How’re the demon eggs?”

“Gross and scaly.”

“Ah, just how I imagined them, little tykes. Hey, Giles.”

“Hello Willow, Tara.”

“We’re taking Dawn to the Bronze if either of you want to come” says Tara, “And if it’s okay with you, Buffy.”

“Sure.” Buffy shrugs.

Dawn asks, “Do you want to come?”

“Oh, um, no. Thanks, but I think I’ll have a quiet night in.”

“And much as I appreciate the offer” adds Giles, “I’m going back to the shop to pick up Ethan.”

“Sure. Let us know if you need help with the demon eggs.” Willow turns back to Buffy. “Are you sure you won’t come?”

“It’ll be fun” offers Dawn.

“Yeah” says Willow, “We can watch Xander and Anya panic about the wedding.”

Buffy shakes her head. “You guys have fun. House to myself – rare thing.” She doesn’t seem to notice the look of hurt that flutters across Dawn’s face at that.

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“Maybe we should smash them up now?” Buffy asks, staring down at the eggs, “Just keep one or two to show to the dealer.”

Giles glances back to through the open door to the shop, where Ethan and Spike, having closed up
for the night, are awaiting the buyer.

“It might be prudent to keep all of them” Giles decides, “Just until this chap turns up.”

“And then I get to smash them?”

“Then, as slayer, you’re obliged to smash them.”

“Good. Just as long as I get to smash something.” At Giles’ questioning look, Buffy elaborates, “Kind of a sucky day. I heard back from college.”

Oh. “Buffy, I’m sorry.”

“That’s what they said – Just, sorry, can’t offer you a place. They didn’t say why. I guess I just didn’t make the cut.”

“Well it’s their loss.” Giles feels anger build. “Actually, it’s terribly unreasonable of them, after all the progress you made last year, and with your dropping out being hardly your fault.”

Buffy winces. “Yep. ’Cept I’m not sure they’re allowed to take last year into account anyway. Just had to treat it like any application.” “But – But surely they asked if you had any dependents! Dawn being in school here should be taken into account – They should prioritise people who can’t go to college elsewhere.”

Buffy studies one of the eggs. “There’s that. There’s Dawn.”

Dawn, of course, will be free to go to college wherever she wants. For just a moment, Giles senses something unfair, but also very human, about the way Buffy must view her sister, and her freedom. Wanting very much not to dwell on that, he commiserates with, “There’s always next year. Or is there a way to appeal?”

“I dunno.” Buffy turns round as the front door opens at the side of the building. Instantly, she’s in battle stance. Whispers, “Get out there, Giles. I’ll hide in case he recognises the slayer.”

Giles nods. The newcomer must be the buyer. The only question now is, is he human? Beyond the door, he can hear whoever – whatever – has entered, exchanging a greeting with Ethan. Spike, when Giles gets through the door, is less welcoming, skulking by the door to the backroom with a scowl on his face. Giles follows the vampire’s gaze to, “Good Lord! Riley!”

The young man looks up, “Hey, Giles. Good to see you.”

Giles reopensthe door he just entered through. “Buffy? It’s not the buyer.” Turning back to Riley, he adds with a smile, “Or at least I bloody hope not.”

“Buyer?” asks Riley.

Buffy steps into the room. “Riley?”

“Buffy.”

Buffy stares at him. Apparently without meaning to, she shifts slightly closer to Spike. Looks Riley up and down. “I thought you were done being a soldier?”

“I was” Riley replies, “Long story but we don’t really have time now.”

“We don’t?”
“I’m tracking a demon. Suvolte: Big, nasty, nearly extinct but not nearly enough. Mean enough to make Spike here look like a charmer.”

Buffy glances at Spike. If Riley notices the shift in the room’s atmosphere, he doesn’t show it; just smiles amiably. But the rest of them tense a little. It goes to show, Giles realises, how much a part of the group Spike has become since Riley’s departure.

“Tell me this thing’s not looking for its eggs” says Ethan, “Because we have them in the backroom.”

Riley’s eyes widen. “You’re the Doctor?”

Ethan turns to Spike. “Doctor?”

Spike shifts uncomfortably. “Thought I shouldn’t give the bloke my real name.”

“So you went with Doctor?”

Spike shoots a look Giles’ way. “Beats Randy.” Riley frowns. “I’m missing something, aren’t I?”

Buffy explains, “Spike was asked to join with this demon egg dealing adventure. We figured, better he says yes and we get in on the action – dealer shows, I slay, I smash the eggs.”

“After the money changes hands” adds Ethan.

Buffy adds, “Faith would be here, but she’s working a double shift tonight. We figured I could take one dealer by myself.”

“Sure, you could” says Riley, “But he’s human. We’ve been tracking the guys further up the chain for a while now, that and trying to mop up the carnage the Suvoltes cause anytime they pass through a place.”

“Human?” repeats Buffy.

“Don’t sound so surprised” says Riley, darkly. Addressing Spike, he asks, “You got the eggs out the nest yourself?”

“Me and a few others” Spike folds his arms, glares.

Riley seems about to speak, but Buffy puts in, “I’m dusting the others” in a tone that is more the slayer’s than hers personally, a tone that says no need for soldiers, they’re mine.

“Right” says Riley. He casts a confused look between his ex-girlfriend and the vampire, but seems to shake himself, to add, “We need to get going if we’re going to reach the Suvolte before it does real damage. As it’s laid, we can just kill it.” “On it” says Buffy, stepping forward.

“I’ll come too” says Spike.

“No” replies Buffy, “You can stay here in case this dealer shows up before we’re back.”

“I can’t fight him if he’s human” Spike points out.

“Chip still going strong, then?” Riley smirks.

Buffy looks a little pained, but, indicating Spike, replies, “He wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t.”
“Of course” reassures Riley, “I’m just…Well, it’s impressive hardware, isn’t it?” “Bloody marvellous” mutters Spike.

“Perhaps, Spike” says Giles, wanting to save Buffy the vampire’s company, “you could be ready to get your fangs out if a threat is needed? The buyer won’t know you’re chipped.”

“Good thinking” says Buffy. She and Riley head to the door, he getting out some sort of gadget as they go, presumably a tracker. Ethan shakes his head, “It’ll be fine, Rupert – We can manage one human between us. Go on, Spike.”

Pausing in the doorway, Buffy glares at Ethan, but before she can put Spike off, Riley says, “Sure. Let’s just get going.” He pauses, detaches a collection of weaponry from around his military-clad person and hands it to Giles. “The buyer shows, stall him until we get back. Take this in case things get ugly.”

Giles looks down at the gun and…Is that a grenade? “Thank you” he manages, “But I have a knife.” Really, do they think he’s too old to manage without this overblown tech?

The protest is too late – Riley is out the door, followed by Buffy and a smug-looking Spike. Giles sighs and sets the weapons down on the table. Looking over at Ethan, he issues a disapproving look. Ethan responds with his attempt at innocence. “What?”

“That was unfair – Now Buffy will have an awkward time of it.”

“She’ll be slaying, Rupert.” Ethan smiles widely. “No time doing that to wonder if Spike and Riley are comparing notes.”

“Ethan!” Giles shakes his head, sits down heavily. “It will serve you right if this buyer murders us both.”

“Not going to happen love. And Spike couldn’t stop that, like he said.” True, Giles supposes. And if these Suvolte demons are anything like as bad as has been described, an extra fighter could serve Buffy and Riley well. Unfortunate that Faith hadn’t been able to get the night off, but her manager had been difficult, and they had decided that Buffy could manage the dealer by herself. They hadn’t factored in that the Suvolte might stay in the area.

Of course, the Suvolte might be nowhere near so bad as implied, and Riley just was trying to talk up his macho credentials, hoping to impress Buffy.

“The US army are still playing demon hunters, then” comments Ethan.

“We shouldn’t be surprised really” replies Giles, “I’ve heard about American contacts at the Council as far back as twenty years ago. I always assumed they were Council-planted operatives, but perhaps…”

“Perhaps there’s a long line of Riley-style action men.” Ethan frowns. “So much for quitting. I thought all that business with his own chip would put him off for good.”

“I suppose it’s hard to turn your back on the supernatural world once you know it’s out there. The need to protect the innocent from all the danger they’re oblivious to.”

“That’s best case scenario.”

“Perhaps. Probably best we don’t ask.” “Agreed. Best for those vampires too, if Buffy stakes them before Riley can cart them away.”
“I wouldn’t waste worries on them.”

“Remember what Walsh had planned?” Ethan counters, “How many remote control vampires do you want the American army to have?” He frowns, starts to rise. “I might call Willy’s Place, get word out.”

“Wait until Buffy’s slayed the other vampires first” Giles cautions, “We don’t want to be indirectly responsible for all the deaths they cause elsewhere if they’re warned to leave town.”

“No use thinking like that in our lines of work” replies Ethan, but he sits back down. Looks at the clock. “I wonder how long it will be?”

“Not long, I imagine. We did say nine?”

“Yes, and –” Ethan pauses. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Then Giles hears it: A subtle cracking, peeling sound.

“Oh bugger” says Ethan, “I really hope I wasn’t meant to keep them frozen.”

*****

“You blew up my shop” Ethan states, staring at what is left of the Magic Box.

Which is very little. The structure is intact, at the front, but that’s about all that can be said. The front windows are gone, their jagged remains blackened. The front door lolls drunkenly on one hinge. All around them, the stock is scattered, offering bowls smashed, books shuffling their singed pages in the breeze from the doorway. The glass in counter smashed and swallowed the till, which now sits like an item of merchandise within it, decorated with little cubes of glass. Beyond the shop, in the training room, firefighters move, speaking their own code, occasionally spraying patches of the shattered floor that threaten to catch again.

The eggs should have been frozen. And underground. Lacking that, it is a wonder they didn’t hatch sooner. But they did it soon enough. Just soon enough that, in absence of a slayer, Rupert resorted to using Riley’s grenade.

On his shop. All around them, the remnants of the stock melt and mingle. Quite a lot of magic was required to avoid anything in shattered crystals being released, any of the more malevolent books releasing certain curses as the smoke tickled the humourless volumes up in the restricted section. That done, Ethan has energy left to comprehend the scale of the damage.

“It is salvageable, Eth” says Rupert, squeezing his hand.

Sudden anger has Ethan snatch his hand back and step pointedly away, turning and stepping through the skewed front door. Rupert follows, tries, “Not the training room, perhaps, but the rest is…well…”

“Gutted?” concludes Ethan, “A hollowed out, smouldering ruin?” He snarls and turns his back on the wreckage, picks his way over thrown debris to reach Buffy and Spike, and the little unconstitutional drama unfolding at the other end of the street.

Buffy is standing protectively close to Spike, watching Riley and the wife he conveniently didn’t mention earlier bundle the buyer into the back of an ominously plain-looking van. A few soldiers loiter nearby, ensuring no pedestrians walk past “until the fire is under control”. Fire is under control, though: That is very clearly not the point.
Gods know what the firefighters make of all this, or what they’ll have to sign to agree that they made nothing of it, nothing at all.

Ethan thrusts his hands moodily into his pockets and watches as the van closes. One of the soldiers clambers into the driver’s seat and the vehicle moves away at a pat to its side from Riley. Riley turns back to them. “Sorry about the shop, Ethan.”

Ethan manages a flicker that could probably be a smile if he works on it. Anya, he thinks out of nowhere, is going to kill him.

“Where will you take him?” Buffy asks, and for a horrible moment, Ethan thinks she means him or Spike, but then she adds, “Or is it classified?” and he realises, oh, right, the Suvolte egg dealer.

“It is pretty much classified” says Riley lightly. Ethan wonders if even he knows, or if he just smacks the side of the van and they get taken away. As Riley goes to talk to the remaining soldiers, he guesses, “A lawyer-free environment, wherever it is?”

“You’re free to guess” replies Sam uneasily, “But the guy was going to sell those Suvoltes to some fairly nightmarish regimes, so I wouldn’t waste your time on it.”

“Ah, nightmarish regimes” muses Ethan, “As opposed to the kind who disappear their criminals.”

Sam’s smile slips a little. “Trust me, there’s no comparison.”

Spike, Ethan notes, has taken the opportunity to step away and down an alley.

With forced cheer, Buffy says, “Well, it was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise” says Sam. She turns to join the soldiers, pausing to tell Ethan, “And I’m sorry about the shop.”

He didn’t get his money, Ethan realises – money which would have been useful since he’s not sure the insurance people will buy grenade thrown at baby demons. At least the remains of said baby demons were effectively vaporised by the blast. Whatever explanation the firefighters come up with, there won’t little teeth and claws to complicate matters.

Had Riley not left the explosive, it could have ended badly. Or at least, worse than them all standing here alive, with only the shop destroyed. Ethan knows that, but still, it grates when Rupert comes over, and points out, “You were the one who agreed to take the eggs.”

“And didn’t think to freeze them” Buffy adds. “None of you thought to freeze them!” argues Ethan, “Not one of you said Ethan, maybe you should freeze those eggs so Rupert doesn’t have to blow up your shop!” He glares at Rupert.

“I won’t apologise” Rupert states, “Those things would have killed us.”

Buffy puts in, “Giles saved your life, Ethan.”

“He does that all the time, it’s nothing special!”

Rupert sighs and wraps an arm around him. Ethan shifts his shoulders, trying to shake him off, but Rupert simply tightens his grip in a way that is partly comforting, and partly a warning to let it go now, dear.

Seeing that the Initiative – or whatever they are called now – are leaving, Buffy steps away to say
her goodbyes to Riley.

Ethan turns his back on the exchange and surrenders to Rupert’s embrace, allowing himself to be grateful, for the first time since the blast, that at least they are not hurt. Behind him, there is the sound of a helicopter’s blades, and he turns in time to see Mr and Mrs Finn’s overblown departure.

“Well” Buffy re-joins them, “That was…that.” She watches the shrinking aircraft. “I really thought he’d just stay on his farm.”

“More screwed up than we realised” concludes Ethan, grimly.

Buffy sighs. “Yeah. Well, speaking of screwed up, I’d better go make sure Spike made it back to his crypt okay. Not telling me he’s married is one thing, but if Riley’s had Spike recaptured, we’re going to have a problem.”

“I suppose we are” Rupert replies wearily, in the tone of one accepting an unpleasant reality.

“See you guys” says Buffy, “Oh, and I know it doesn’t change things, but I am sorry about the shop, Ethan.”

Ethan nods. She’s right: It doesn’t change things.

“We should go home” says Rupert, once Buffy has disappeared down the alley. “It looks like the fire crew are about done.”

“Yes” agrees Ethan, “I’ll have to call Mrs Dumitru. And Anya, gods help me.”

“Anya will be okay.”

“She loves this place.”

“She has the wedding to focus on. Come on, let’s wrap things up here and get a drink in you.”

“Good plan.” Ethan allows himself to be led away.

*****

“I’m sorry, Ethan” says Willow as she surveys the damage. Oddly, coming from her, it is actually comforting. Perhaps because she understands the loss. Rupert had grieved with him for the books on the back shelves, the ones that hadn’t stood a chance, but beyond that, has not shown the perished stock due respect. Anya, mercifully distracted by the wedding in any case, simply pointed out that at least the till wasn’t damaged. Ethan hasn’t told her yet that, on closer inspection, he found that the drawer is now stiff, and no longer springs open with quite the same satisfying ping.

“It could be worse” he manages, “Most of the books survived. Some might have to be marked down, of course – they smell rather smoky now.”

“But they’re readable” Willow agrees, picking up a volume from the pile he’s salvaged so far and gently rifling through it. “And the restricted section was okay?”

Ethan nods to the raised platform. It is held up by a temporary support pillar now, the stock splayed on the floor. A few items were thrown down here but other hang tantalisingly over the lips of the drop.

“Oh” says Willow, “No ladder.”
“We can use a step ladder” says Ethan, “But not until some bloke from the fire department gives us the all clear.”

“The books…are they…” “I did a few spells to keep them safe. Or as safe as they get.”

“Good, because some of those texts – all it would take is a little spark.”

“Exactly.”

“Well” Willow bends, picks up a cracked and blackened crystal, “We’ll just pick out the least damaged stuff today, I guess.”

“Alright. Thank you for helping, Willow.”

“Any time.” Willow smiles. “Just don’t make a habit of it.”

“Oh, and here was me thinking fire was fun.” Ethan decides not to tell her about all the fire-starting hexes he complied as a youth.

“You realise this is the second shop you’ve had make with the flaming? Seems like a habit.”

Ethan laughs. Then he finds himself thinking back to the fire in the costume shop, and the weeks of cleaning that followed. Joyce and Mr Dumitru had both helped then.

Really, Ethan decides, this can wait. The shop isn’t getting any more ruined. “Let’s have a break, go to the Espresso Pump.”

“Ethan, we only just started.”

“Let’s have a prework break then”

“That’s not a thing” Willow tells him, but she follows him out, smiling, none the less.
Remarkably, they wake on the morning of the wedding to find it’s pouring with rain in California. “Bollocks” says Ethan, pulling back the curtains. Giles surveys the sky. “It looks like it’ll hold all day. Oh dear.”

Ethan scowls for a moment before his natural joie de vivre reasserts itself. “Oh well, at least it makes for a little variety. I miss rain, living here.”

“Well variety is one thing, but it’s a shame it had to happen on the day of the wedding.”

“Just don’t go asking Willow to do any weather magic: I don’t think she ever got past snow.”

“That would be the last thing we need on a day of trying to ensure the Harris family remain ignorant of the supernatural.”

“I don’t think we need to worry. If we can count on anyone to remain ignorant, it’s Xander’s clan.”

“Perhaps keep comments like that to a minimum, Eth.”

*****

The venue is a little drab, but Xander and Anya have done their best to improve it with flowers and veils draped over the stuffed animals. Giles and Ethan arrive rain-ruffled and stand in the entrance area in hope of meeting someone familiar. Despite being rained on all the way from the car, Ethan still looks more elegant than any man here, in a suit that is topped by a red velvet jacket and a twist of ivy added to his lapel. Giles tells him, “You, err, you look very handsome in that.”

Ethan beams. “You don’t scrub up too badly yourself, Rupert.”

“I suppose we ought to find…” Giles’ voice trails off as he spots Buffy, wearing a truly ghastly dress. She doesn’t see him, and quickly disappears into a room marked private. “Perhaps everyone else is busy with the preparations.”

“Poor things.” Ethan grins. “I told you we dodged a bullet not having a role in the ceremony.”

“Except that it leaves us with no-one to talk to until it’s over.”

“Well, we have Anya’s family and Xander’s demons. Wait, sorry – other way around.”

Ignoring that, Giles looks around and spots a likely table. “I think we’re supposed to leave the present there.”

So far, the cover story seems to be holding. Guests are even mingling a little, demons and humans
making stilted conversation. As they near the table, Ethan exclaims, “Dawn! Look you…green.”

“Thanks” Dawn hugs him. “I didn’t get much input on the dress front.” She turns to Giles and hugs him too, notices the gift in his hand. “Here, I can take that. There’s a table.”

“Thank you, Dawn. You look lovely.”

“No she doesn’t.” Faith arrives, giving the child a grin to soften the insult. Giles had forgotten that she has also escaped a part in the ceremony: She is wearing a stylish red dress.

“Nice dress” Ethan tells her.

Faith folds her arms self-consciously and says, “Yeah, well, I was gonna wear black but apparently that’s not allowed at weddings and that is.” She indicates a demon a few feet away, wearing what looks horribly like a shrunken head on a string around his neck. Faith adds, “You guys met Richard?” When Giles shakes his head, she cranes her neck and yells, “Richard!” Then, quieter, “He’s just coming.” Sure enough, a nervous seeming young man is picking his way past the huddle of demons around the buffet table.

Dawn asks, “So are you guys –”

At that moment, a horned, grey-skinned demon in a robe comes up to them and addresses them with, “Hymen’s greetings.”

“Hymen’s greetings” returns Ethan.

“Hymen?” says Faith, “Like that thing you tear the first time?”

“Hymen or Hymenaeus” Giles quickly explains, “The deity said to oversee wedding ceremonies.”

“And with luck, the marriage itself” adds the demon. He smiles at Richard, who comes to stand beside Faith. “Hymen’s greetings.”

“Hi…what?”

“It’s a circus thing” explains Faith.

“Ah yes” says the demon, “Of course.”

Richard eyes the demon. “It’s, um, cool that you all came in costume.”

Faith indicates Giles. “Richard, this is Giles. He’s…kind of like my teacher.”

“Former librarian” supplies Giles, shaking the young man’s hand, “And I still tutor Faith in…”

“Martial arts” Faith finishes.

Richard smiles a slightly puzzled smile. “Neat.” Behind him, the demon hands a package to Dawn, who looks a little alarmed as she finds a place for it on the table.

Faith introduces Richard to Ethan too, before leading him away, just as another demon arrives. A vengeance demon, Giles notes: He’s seen pictures. Ethan, who has seen the real thing, greets her with, “Halfrek? You patched things up with Anya, then?”

“Oh please” the demon quips, “What’s a little curse lifting between friends?”
Noticing a tentacle emerge from among the presents, Giles steps around the group and tugs a champagne bottle from its grasp. Relinquishing it, it wraps itself instead around his arm.

Halfrek is turning to Dawn. “And look at you, all grown up again!”

“How are things? Nothing you wish was different?”

“Dawn” interjects Giles, “Do you know where Buffy is?”

“She’s wrestling Xander into his tux. I don’t want to walk in on that. But she’ll be out later…” She trails off, watching the grey skinned demon lead the vengeance demon away. D’Hoffryn, Giles realises. They were standing next to D’Hoffryn.

Recovering herself, Dawn adds, “I think everyone will be shut away until after the weddingy bit. Tara and Willow are doing something to Anya’s dress so they’re busy too. Oh, but I can show you the bar.”

“Welcome. Wouldn’t want that suit ruined. Dawn, can you believe he almost wore tweed?”

“Yeah I can. Hey, if you two want a drink, the bar’s through there on the left.” Dawn has apparently caught sight of Spike entering, presumably through some hidden means, unless the rainclouds are rendering the side streets shady enough for vampires. Really, thinks Giles, no-one has cause to criticise his wardrobe choices when Spike is wearing the same clothes he wears every day.

Leaving Dawn to talk to the vampire, Giles and Ethan head into the main room. Giles says, “It’s a little disconcerting seeing a vengeance demon being so familiar with Dawn.”

“True” says Ethan, “We’d better keep an eye on it. No offence to Anya, but there are some nasty, fickle creatures in the vengeance gig, and…oh, hullo, Luella”

“Ethan!” Another vengeance demon comes over. “How are you here?”

“Well, us mere mortals do travel now and then.”

“Of course! So easy to forget how much the world’s changed! You know, one time…”

Giles waits as she and Ethan exchange a few pleasantries. Once she’s gone, he asks, “You were saying?”

“Oh” says Ethan, “Luella’s not all that bad. She’s more a patron saint of downtrodden wives and, you know, they can always use one.”

“And you know her how?”

Ethan makes a vague gesture. “Oh…she knows a demon who knows a sorcerer who knows me. Look, there’s Clem.”

The two of them join a few lesser demons and a collection of Xander’s relatives. Seeing that the bar has been commandeered by Mr Harris, Giles avoids it. Instead he tries to focus on the
conversation happening around him, and on keeping up the circus folk ruse.

*****

“We’ll definitely have different flowers at our wedding.” Ethan tells Giles half an hour or so later. “And as for the bridesmaids’ dresses…”

“Well, being men, we won’t have bridesmaids.”

“We could have a flower girl. Maybe Dawn?”

Giles shakes his head. “Somehow, the older we get, the more a big ceremony feels a little overblown. All this fanfare is more for the young.”

“That’s not fair, Rupert – We weren’t allowed one when we were young. And as someone won’t have a pagan ceremony, we’ll be lucky if we’re ever allowed one.”

“Ethan –”

Before Giles go on, Mr Harris stands up from the bar and commands the room for a slurred toast at his wife’s expense. Letting his attention wander (forcing his attention to wander) Giles looks around and points out in an undertone, “There’s Xander over there. Shouldn’t we…perhaps later.” Whoever Xander is talking to, the conversation looks urgent. He’ll just have to congratulate the younger man and Anya together once they’ve actually wed. Really, it’s a good thing the stranger drags Xander off because it saves him from hearing the spiteful conclusion of his father’s speech.

Giles looks down at the floor as Mrs Harris’ smile slips, trying to give the poor woman some semblance of privacy as her husband concludes his insults and sits down again, swigs his drink. As the groups of people and demons around the room resume their conversation, Giles mutters to Ethan, “Will you knock his teeth down his throat, or shall I?”

“Where’s a vengeance demon when you need one, eh?” Ethan returns. “Oh, wait…”

“Of course there is such thing as going too far, love.” Giles glances around and is partly gratified and partly alarmed to see, from the glances thrown Mr Harris’s way, that Anya’s guests are no more impressed by Xander’s brutish father than he is. Suddenly, keeping up the circus cover story seems the least of their worries.

*****

“Do we know if which side of the aisle we’re on?” Ethan asks.

“No” Giles replies. “But we have known Xander the longest.”

“On the other hand, if we sit with Anya’s guests we avoid Mr Harris.”

“Good point.” Giles sits down next to what looks suspiciously like an Aldfrey demon. Some time passes. From the other side of the aisle, a little girl pipes up with, “I’m bored.”

“She has a point” Ethan murmurs. “This is like Travers’ niece’s nuptials all over again.”

“Not quite that dull, dear, be fair.” But Giles – like others – is glancing around: What’s the hold up? Before he can work it out, he’s distracted when he sees the child among Xander’s guests laughing at a dancing pattern of pink and orange light on the far wall. “Ethan, stop that.”
“What? There’s no entertainment laid on for the kids. I’m helping.”

“Xander’s family are taking enough on faith today as it is.”

“Who’s on me?” Faith sits down behind them, to the consternation of a few of the demons around them. Beside her, Richard glances round uncomfortably.

“Hello, Faith. Just an expression.”

“Uh huh.” Faith looks around. “So, what’s the hold up?”

“I’m sure things are just taking a little organisation” Giles reassures her. It occurs to him that Faith has probably never attended a formal wedding before.

Faith frowns. “Isn’t organising what they’ve been doing the last few months?” She looks around again, at the increasingly unhappy guests. Spike, oddly enough, seems to have decided to sit with the humans: He is slumped in a chair at the back, on the other side of the aisle. Giles comments, “Spike seems to have forgotten he’s a demon.”

Ethan looks over. “Maybe he’s saving a seat for Buffy?”

“No, the bridesmaids stay standing at the front over here.”

Ethan gives him a smile. “And you’d know that how? I see I’m not the only one who’s been reading Anya’s bridal magazines.”

“Spike just doesn’t want trouble from the demons this side of the room” Faith explains, rescuing Giles. “A lot of them weird about him killing their friends, and Buffy made him promise he wouldn’t start anything.”

Richard, following her gaze anxiously from Spike to the “circus folk”, surreptitiously checks his watch. “When was it supposed to start?”

“I may have looked at one copy” Giles admits to Ethan, as Faith and Richard make small talk behind them.

“I knew it!”

Faith leans forward again. “Maybe something’s up?”

“I’m sure it’s just an innocent delay” Giles reassures her.

Ethan asks, “So wh – oh, here we go…no, wait, just Buffy.”

The music swells nonetheless, and Giles assumes they’ve started (The same article may have informed him that the bridesmaids precede the bride over here). But Buffy simply whispers to the minister and doubles back up the aisle. Getting up, Giles follows her and waits until they’re a few paces from the guests before he whispers, “Nothing’s wrong, I hope?”

“Giles” She turns to him. Glances back at the assembled guests and whispers, “We can’t find Xander.”

“Oh, good Lord. He, ah, he’s –”

“Snuck out’s my best bet. Unless… no, I don’t think it’s anything hellmouthy. No tingling slayer senses.”
“Well that’s…something.” Not a calamity, thank goodness, just a nervous groom. “I’m sure he’ll come to his senses in a moment. Well, he has to, hasn’t he?” Seeing her forlorn expression, Giles adds, “What can I do?”

“Take a seat. Act like everything’s fine so people won’t, you know, realise everything’s unfine. Willow’s going to find him and, in the meantime, I’m stall-o-gal.”

Giles nods and retakes his seat, and refuses to meet Ethan’s questioning gaze. He does grip his lover’s hand, though, suddenly very grateful for his presence. Ethan doesn’t comment but Giles is sure he’s worked out what’s going on, especially once Buffy comes up to the front and asks, “So… Who here’s from out of town?”

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“Bride or groom?” Ethan murmurs as Buffy and one of the pseudo-circus folk start juggling at the front.

“Groom” Giles replies, barely audible.

“Shit” Ethan’s grip on Giles’ hand tightens.

“What?” Faith leans forward again.

At that moment, Anya’s voice bursts out from the entrance area, an exclamation of despair, and the whole thing is exposed. Everyone but Giles turns around. He meets Buffy’s sad stare.

Then, an out of place chuckle. “It’s a joke.” Rory Harris announces. “Xander’s playing a joke.” Some unpleasant anecdote begins to unspool from the man, but the demons have had enough, and a few say so.

“Oh dear” mutters Giles as one stands up with a growled threat. Within moments, it has slapped Mr Harris lazily across the face with a tentacled extremity and a fight promptly breaks out. It’s hard to tell which side of the room – the demons or the Harrises – are keener to weigh in, but Giles and Ethan quickly find themselves knocked aside as the Aldfrey beside them barges into one of Xander’s uncles. Giles asks, “Shouldn’t we help?”

“No” Ethan grins. “I think the Aldfrey’s managing.”

Before Giles can retort, a scaly hand closes around his neck from behind. Apparently sitting with the demons didn’t guarantee their safety: any human is now fair game.

“Giles!” yells Faith. Giles is aware of her stumbling, and muttering, “Fucking dress”. Richard, for his part, is retreating with a muffled curse. Ethan lets out a cry of “Disceo!” but the hex is not strong enough for a demon, and bounces off its thick skin. Giles knows it’s thick because he’s kicking at it without much effect. Then there is the sound of tearing fabric, an unpleasant crunch, and Giles is released. He falls forward. “Oh good Lord!”

“You okay, G?” Faith crouches beside him. She has torn a strip from her dress, and it is now wound around her hands, no longer red only from the original dye.

“Yes” Giles confirms. Turning to Ethan, he says, “Come on, let’s –” but then Ethan is grabbed and Giles hits out at the assailant with a primal cry. Much of the next few moments are a blur of fists, feet and spittle. It’s like the sodding Royal Oak all over again. Faith’s presence sends a frenzied panic through the demons at one point, but when it becomes clear that she is only barging past
them to bundle Richard to safety, they return to punching the human guests. Who, frankly, give as good as they get. It helps that Spike, who apparently was given no ban on joining a fight if he didn’t start it, is pitching in against the demon guests. Finally managing to extract himself from the brawl, Giles pulls Ethan with him. “Are you alright?”

“Fine” Ethan is bleeding but also practically vibrating with glee at the chaos of the whole affair. “You?”

“Bordering on nostalgic.”

“Bar fights at the Royal Oak?” Ethan grins. “You’re right, it does take one back…”

“We should see that Dawn’s okay. She was by the door, wasn’t –”

“Rupert?” Ethan’s grin has faded. Giles follows his gaze to the alarmingly tall demon standing over Anya. Distantly, he hears Ethan say, “Wait, Rupe –” and then he is charging forward. He reaches Anya’s side just as the demon sneers, “And now…I’d love to see you scream!”

“No!” Giles pulls Anya out the way and the world goes dark.

*****

“Rupert? Love?”

Something pleasantly cool is dabbed on Giles’ head. “Ethan?”

“Yes, dear. Come on, wake up.”

Giles opens his eyes to find himself propped up against the bar while confusion and acrimony reign around him. Typical wedding really, he thinks dully.

Ethan, pressing what appears to be a tea towel wrapped around a handful of ice cubes to his head, smiles. “There you are. You had me worried for a moment.”

“I’d have thought you’d be used to me being knocked out by now.”

“Well I didn’t think you’d get yourself knocked out at a wedding.”

The wedding. Giles scans the room and finds only empty chairs, a few guests standing, apparently bewildered, near the door. Angry voices, but nothing that threatens another fight. Mrs Harris and a large, apparently human lady, have started to pick up the chairs. Giles is puzzled. “Anya: Is she alright? Where’s Xander?”

At that moment, Willow comes up. There are dried tear tracks on her cheeks. She kneels besides them. “Hey there, Giles.”

“Willow” Giles accepts her gentle hug. “Are you alright? What happened?”

She and Ethan exchange a look. Willow replies, “Well, um, the good news is that demon who walloped you got squished. Literally, actually. It was gross.”

“And the wedding?”

“Didn’t go ahead, love.” Ethan tells him. “Xander had a change of heart.”

“Oh God.” Giles’ instinct is to ask if Buffy’s alright but he realises that that isn’t the first thing to
focus on. “Where’s Anya?”

“Someone…Halfrek took her away.” Willow stands up. “We’re going home. I’ll drop you guys off?”

“We’ll be right with you” Ethan replies and pulls Giles to his feet. “I’ve just got to see to one thing.”

As Willow guides him through the last milling, bickering guests, Giles hears Ethan stop behind him and say, “Mrs Harris? Jessica? Have you met Luella…”

He can’t find it in himself to care.

**Chapter End Notes**

I'm going away for a few weeks tomorrow, so there might be a gap in updates. Don't worry, the fic isn't abandoned!
“That was Willow on the phone” Rupert tells Ethan. “She found Xander with a location spell and persuaded him to come home. Well, back to Buffy’s house at least.” He clambers into bed beside Ethan, who is sitting up with a reading light on, a book open against his bent knees. Without looking up, Ethan replies, “Oh, joy.” He stares at the book crossly, not reading.

“At least he didn’t do anything stupid” Rupert points out.

“Aside from walk out of his own wedding.”

“I mean, at least he didn’t hurt himself, Eth. He’s safe: we should be grateful.”

Ethan can’t argue with that, but he does ask, “Did he ask after Anya?”

“I don’t know. It’s not really our business.”

“Not our business? We put aside an entire Saturday! And the gift wasn’t cheap.”

“Yes, well” is all Rupert has to say on that front. Ethan isn’t sure if that is secret agreement or one of those times Rupert wants to distance himself from Ethan being perfectly reasonable. Ethan turns a page for appearances’ sake.

After a moment, Rupert adds, “I told Willow you’ve spoken to Anya. She really didn’t give any hint as to where she is?”

“No.” Actually, the location spell he’d cast for Anya hadn’t worked. Somehow, the magic had just fizzled out, as though it and Anya were repelling poles in a pair of magnets. Not a cloaking spell, he was fairly sure, but something. But then Anya had been in touch anyway, to get a week off from the shop. Gods, he’d give her week and a pay rise and any stock they could salvage, but he’d managed to restrain himself in time, and simply agree, and check she was as okay as she could be in the circumstances.

He hasn’t told Rupert about the location spell failing. There is something about it that he imagines Rupert wouldn’t like. He’s not sure he does either.

Rupert asks, “But she won’t do anything stupid either? You’re certain?”

“Rupert, she’s a thousand years old. She’s hardly going to top herself over Xander Harris.”

“She’s built her entire human identity around him” Rupert points out.

Ethan can’t argue with that. He snaps the book shut and lies down.

Rupert asks, “But she seemed calm, at least?”

“Hard to tell over the phone” Ethan admits, “All cried out is the impression I got.” Moved on to angry. At least her vengeance days are behind her. Not that she doesn’t know plenty of vengeance demons, of course. Perhaps Rupert spoke too soon about Xander being safe.

Rupert comments, “I do hope Buffy’s alright. If it’s hard for us to avoid taking sides, imagine how hard it is for her.”

Ethan judges it best to try to shift the conversation on to happier things, “And how is Mr Harris?”

Normal Again
Rupert scowls at him. “As well as he can be. He’s finally learnt that the growths get worse every
time he looks at a woman or a drink, so he’s given up alcohol and put himself under the care of a
male physician.”

“It could be worse. Mrs Harris was too soft on him if you ask me.”

“I dread to think what you’d unleash on me if I ever took a drunken philandering turn.” Rupert
wraps an arm around Ethan as he says it, to underline that that is a turn he has no intention of
taking. Ethan only shrugs against him. “Well that’s different” he replies. “I love you.”

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A specialist team will be starting what Ethan imagines will be the long job of tackling the mess that
is the shop by the end of the week, giving him a few days to get any of the more potent surviving
items safely out of reach. The restricted section is empty now, the books and a few other nasties
stored in boxes at their flat (What could go wrong?) and a few weapons rooming with Spike in
Buffy’s basement. Anya showed up earlier, blank faced and fragile, to ask if she could store the
till, and Ethan hadn’t had the heart to refuse. Hadn’t had the heart to ask how one repels a location
spell either. She had then left again, leaving him and Willow to manage alone. Willow comments,
“She barely looked at me.”

“Because you’re standing by Xander” Ethan reminds her gently.

“How can I not? He’s Xander.” Willow crouches to brush ash from a fallen shelf. “If I wasn’t
standing by him, I’d fall over.”

Fate was merciful, Ethan decides, when it had Xander meet Willow. No loving family to speak of
until then. “He’s a lucky boy.” “Not really” says Willow, “I know he’s the one who did it, but he’s
so miserable, Ethan. Just sits all day when he’s not at work, just staring.” She picks up fragments
that might once have been a sacred urn, or possibly a statuette. Adds, “It’s my fault.” “That’s
ridiculous, Willow. How could it be your fault?”

“I’m his best friend, and I didn’t notice how over his head he was! I was too busy working on
things with Tara after the whole…well, you know. The whole endanger the world with resurrection
magic, rehab in England saga. I didn’t even see that my best friend was drowning.”

Ethan crouches down beside her, helps pile up the pieces of whatever it was. “Xander could have
asked for your advice any time.”

“What if he didn’t know how to?”

“Then that’s on him. You can’t be responsible for keeping their relationship afloat on top of
everything else.” It is telling, he reflects, that they slip so easily into terms like afloat and
drowning, as if love were a turbulent ocean they all have to navigate.

“I could have made him talk to her sooner” argues Willow.

“He could have made him talk to her sooner” Ethan returns. Or Anya could have, he supposes. It is
not as though she has had no experience of watching a relationship flounder (against rocks, in that
raging ocean again), not as though she isn’t infinitely more mature and experienced than Xander.
But he doesn’t say this out loud. As the abandoned one, Anya deserves for that to go unsaid.

“I guess” Willow acknowledges, “But I could have helped.”

“At a cost to your own relationship” Ethan points out, “since you were busy working things out
with Tara.” It is not fragments of a vase or statuette that they are collecting, he realises; it is bone. The skull belonging to the 13th century witch, it must be – there were a few demon skulls somewhere, but they had horns.

“I could have done both” insists Willow, “All it would have taken would be one conversation.”

“Willow, stop it. It’s not your fault.” Ethan’s hand encounters scattered teeth and he decides the rest of the skull can stay where it is. “I think this is control again – You just don’t want to live in a world where you can’t stop your friends screwing up and hurting each other.”

“I am strange like that” Willow agrees lightly. Lightly but with a depth filled with something darker beneath the tone. Ethan lets the topic drop. Changes it with, “But you and Tara are okay? Working on it worked?”

Willow nods, smiles. “Yeah, we’re okay. Soaring miles above okay. I’m lucky.” She frowns suddenly, looks down. “Huh. I didn’t know you had a security cam – Seems kind of ordery, mister chaos mage.”

“It does; that’s why I don’t have one.”

She shows him the scraps of wires and a smashed but undeniable lens she has scooped from within the skull. “Well this was definitely a camera.”

Ethan takes it, happy for an excuse not to handle the teeth. “Well, it’s not mine.” “Anya’s? Maybe she wanted some tech based security on top of the wards?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe.” Ethan turns the camera’s remnants over in his hands.

Willow picks a few more bits up. “It looks like it was inside the skull.”

“Well Anya wouldn’t do that – she was keen to sell the skull. It could be worth a bit if we find a buyer who recognises the value. Um, would have been.”

A sympathetic look flickers over Willow’s face. She asks, “So, not you, not Anya. Who else would set up a camera in the shop? Spike?”

Ethan shakes his head. “He’s hardly invested in this place.” Ethan frowns down at the camera.

“That’s weird” says Willow, and Ethan doesn’t disagree. Willow takes the camera pieces from him, slips them into her bag. “I’ll see if I can fix it.”

“It is rather ruined, Willow.”

Willow grins. “Hey, spells? Not the only magic I can work.”

She has a point. She fixed the Buffy bot after all. How hard can a camera be? “Let me know what you find out.”

*****

With some rearranging of furniture, a reasonable training space can be created in the Summers’ living room. Pooling the contents of Giles’ weapons chest with Buffy’s, and the little stockpile Faith turned out to have stashed away, takes care of stakes, crossbows and anything else they might need. The dummy and the vaulting horse will be harder to replace. Idly, Giles wonders whether making a new dummy might be a useful distraction for Xander, but in the meantime, sparring will
keep his slayers up to speed. Really, it is a technique they could have made more use of in the past but Buffy and Faith’s tendency towards unhealthy competition with one another saw him avoid it before now. Now, between Buffy’s death and their shared running of this household, the two of them are connected on a level that transcends earlier rivalry. They are even wont to resume conversations they discontinued before training started, without worry that the other will be confused. Giles, on the other hand, is confused when Faith says, “It must be the unholy geek trinity. No-one else is that creepy.” She sits down, hand to hand done for now, and regards Buffy as the latter readies herself to hit the sofa cushions Giles is using in place of the lost mitts. Giles asks, “What’s this?”

“Willow found a camera in the Magic Box rubble” Buffy explains. She punches the cushions a few times, then adds, “Faith thinks we’re being spied on by the geek squad.”

“Yes, Ethan mentioned a camera.” Giles frowns. “I suppose Andrew has been in the shop before.”

“Exactly” puts in Faith.

Buffy shrugs, conceding the point. “First Katrina, now it turns out they’ve been spying on us God knows how long?” she says, “Ew isn’t a strong enough word.”

“Ew isn’t a word” Giles corrects.

Faith muses, “At least no-one got naked in the Magic Box.” Then she frowns and adds, “Least I really hope not.”

“Faith” warns Buffy, “You’re joining in with the ew factor.”

“Not like those geeks I’m not – I might have a dirty mind, B, but they’re finding a new level of perv. What if one of us had been naked?”

“What if one of you came up with a workable plan to find them?” puts in Giles, “Assuming the camera picked up sound, they’d have been alerted.”

“It would have picked up sound” says Buffy, “No point otherwise.”

“Except the perv potential” adds Faith.

“I think we can assume they were after more than that” says Giles, “That’s if this camera was put there by them. There might be some innocent explanation.”

“Giles, it’s a hidden camera” says Buffy, “Innocent explanation doesn’t get a look in.” She sighs. “They didn’t get alerted to anything though – we haven’t come close to finding them.”

“You may have been closer than you realise” says Giles, “You just don’t know it because they’d be forewarned.”

“No – They’ve gone to ground and then some. I – We’re – supposed to be slayers, we should be able to catch three human guys!” Buffy sits down heavily on the sofa.

Faith shifts over to give her room. “Give yourself a break, B. They’re using magic.”

“Magic even Willow hasn’t been able to penetrate” Giles adds.

“Right” says Buffy, “a cloaking spell. But she said she could sense the cloak if she was close enough.” Turning to Faith, she says, “We should check out new rentals – see if anyone’s noticed
three guys hiding out.” “What, just go door to door? It’s a small town, B, but not that small!”

“And the cloaking spell will ensure their neighbours don’t notice them” adds Giles, “as well as preventing you from locating them.”

“So Willow can’t find them unless we have some clue where they are, and we won’t have a clue where they are unless she finds them?”

“Or unless they inadvertently reveal themselves while trying to work out how to use the Daidalos Chest” Giles reminds her. Really, he still unsure of their options once they’ve found Warren, Andrew and Jonathan. Unless the young men pose an immediate threat to others, they will be morally obliged to do no more than confiscate the Chest and any other harmful materials, and warn them against amassing more. Of course, depending how far along they are in their plans to use the Chest, harm to others may indeed be imminent.

“Crap” says Faith, jumping up, “I told Manny I’d do the afternoon shift.” She heads for the door, grabbing her jacket as she passes where she shed it earlier. “Keep at the planning, B – let me know if you come up with something better than wandering around every suburb. See you, Giles.” And she gone.

Into the silence she leaves, Buffy comments, “Maybe she has a point.”

“It wouldn’t be all that targeted” agrees Giles. Then he wonders, “Perhaps if you took Willow? But even then, it could be looking into this camera might be quicker.” He honestly isn’t sure: Whatever Willow has to do to track where the camera’s signal was going, it is a magic impenetrable to him.

“Probably” admits Buffy. Then she frowns. “Camera…” She turns to him, “Giles, this cloaking spell – would it stop those guys showing up on camera? If they left wherever they’re living, I mean?”

“No” Giles replies, “Remember when you left Xander’s parents’ house when we were hiding from the Initiative? It would work like that: The building was cloaked, but you were leaving its protection.”

“And then Ethan had to do a spell to let Spike in” Buffy remembers, “He couldn’t even see the place ’til then.” She glances at him, sighs deeply and adds, “I broke up with Spike, by the way.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. So you can get the champagne out.”

“I won’t be doing that” Giles reassures her. Internally, he registers a profound relief but no joy. Not when she looks so sad and resigned.

She points out, “I know you’re not exactly his number one fan, is all.”

“I’m not. Nor did I think the whole thing particularly healthy. But I’m not about to be gleeful about it.”

“Thanks for that. And, hey, I’m not saying it was healthy either. But he did help me. For as long as I needed.”

“And you don’t need it anymore?” Giles asks, not sure he wants to go into all this, but wanting to be sure she is okay.
“I don’t know” Buffy replies, “But I think it’s time to try, you know? Or I won’t know.”

“Is this to with the wedding?”

“Partly, I guess. That wasn’t really an advertisement for staying with the wrong person. Not that I thought Xander and Anya were wrong for each other, but that shows what I know. And seeing Riley all happy didn’t help either.”

“You’ll be happy again one day, Buffy.”

“I hope so.”

“So has Spike moved out?”

“Uh huh. As of last night. Dawn was cut up about it but it’s not like she can’t visit him.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? Given the sort of place he’s likely to move to.”

“I guess not.” Buffy frowns as though she hadn’t thought about that. “I’ll see. She’ll probably get over it soon anyway.”

Giles isn’t so sure: It seems to him Dawn will be loath to give up contact with anyone who pays attention to her, even if they are Spike. But Buffy must know her sister better than him, so he says nothing beyond, “Well, I think you’ve done the right thing.”

“Me too” says Buffy, in a tone that acknowledges that the right thing isn’t the easy thing.

“Will you be alright for money?”

Buffy nods. “I think so. I mean, he won’t have a job anyway now the shop got grenaded.”

“True.” Spike had actually managed to keep that job, all this time, Giles reflects. He isn’t sure he would have put money on it, but the vampire’s loyalty apparently stretched to going out of his way. He says, “If you need help, let me know – I could talk to the Council again.” Or write another cheque. Perhaps pay it into her account himself and pretend the Council had done what they should have from the start.

“Thanks, but we’ll manage” says Buffy. “Dawn eats like a mouse on a diet at the moment.”

When she says nothing more, Giles prompts her to a change of topic with, “Back to cameras?”

“Oh yeah – I was thinking about Katrina. We can’t track Warren but we can track Katrina, right? Her last movements. Maybe she went somewhere with security cameras. Or drove somewhere with speed cameras. I bet Willow could find out.”

“And if Warren left the protection of the cloak to meet her…” Giles realises.

“…it might have been caught on camera” Buffy concludes. Then she frowns. “Not that it would do much. And I’d still need to catch him.”

“Yes. But we can work on that.”
“I was thinking we can do it here.” Dawn indicates the dining room table, which contains her magic books already laid out. With the shop out of action, they have agreed to magic lessons at the Summers’ house, which seems a little empty just now. Ethan looks around. “Where is everyone?”

“Buffy’s patrolling” Dawn explains, “And, um, not calling in at the crypt Spike’s moved to, I guess.” Her gaze shifts restlessly from Ethan to the books, and around the room. She takes a seat, adds, “And Faith just left for work. We knew you were coming and Xander’s coming by too, to pick up some stuff so I was on my own for like a minute.”

Ethan shrugs, sitting down. “Fair enough. It’s not like the place isn’t warded.”

“I guess.”

“So Xander’s moved out then?”

“Yeah, back to his place. I’m not sure where Anya’s staying.”

“It doesn’t seem fair, him getting the flat.” Ethan tempers the comment with a neutral tone, lifting the book they’ll need to practice glamours. “Though I suppose Anya could have staked her claim to it if she wanted it.”

“Maybe” Dawn lifts the little pouch of powder they’ll use, squeezes it hard. “I guess the place would bring back memories for her.” She frowns. “Maybe him too – maybe he’ll move.”

At that moment, the front door opens and Ethan mutters, “Speak of the groom.” Dawn kicks him under the table, harder than Ethan hopes she intended. She smiles as Xander enters. “Hey, Xander.”

“Hi Dawn, Ethan.” Xander looks at the contents of the table. “Books for dinner?”

“Burger for dinner, once Faith’s back. Stay if you want?”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll just grab my stuff.” To Ethan, Xander adds, “Left my shirt.”

*That’s not all you left*, thinks Ethan through a thin smile. He waits until Xander has trudged up the stairs before asking, “So when is Faith back?”

“Not sure. Sometimes she has to do a double shift. But Buffy will be back before then, so you don’t have to stay.”

It seems a long time to wait for dinner. But drawing her attention to that won’t help, so Ethan says, “Let’s get started: Can you remember how to start?”

Dawn throws a pinch of the powder into the air and whispers the incantation. She has remembered
it perfectly, Ethan notes, despite their last lesson being a while ago. It is not long before Dawn is there but not, a presence rather than a definite person in the room. “Excellent” Ethan tells her. “Now, shall we look at how you could reverse it? If you didn’t want to wait for it to wear off.”

They spend a few minutes going through the trick. It is not powerful magic, but very specific, and Dawn does well to get it as soon as she does, reappearing with a snap that rattles the air around them and leaves a lingering scent of smoke. “Perfect” says Ethan.

Dawn beams. “Kinda cool not to have to wait until it wears off. I could go visit Spike with this.”

Ethan isn’t sure he likes the idea of Dawn sneaking around a cemetery, even invisibly. “Probably better to get someone to take you. Or invite him here.”

“Oh, yeah, because Buffy would love that.”

“Wait until she’s out.”

Dawn shakes her head. “Some rules you just don’t break with sisters – Like not having the vampire she was sleeping with round to tea.”

“What?” A third voice enters their conversation. Ethan twists to find Xander in the doorway, a shirt bundled over one arm.

Dawn bites her lip. “Um” she tries, “Sleeping in the house with. Sleeping in the same house.” She looks at Ethan but he can’t come up with anything better. Pretend it’s a joke perhaps, but it’s a little late to laugh. Besides, how is it any business of Xander’s?

“She was sleeping with Spike?” demands Xander, “When? Why? No – you know what, don’t want to know! But how could she?”

“More to the point” says Ethan, “What’s it got to do with you?”

Dawn looks a little panicked at that, as if she had still hoped to salvage the situation. She manages, “It, err, it just sort of happened.”

“On a fairly regular basis” Ethan mutters, unable not to dig now they’re in a hole. Might as well have it all out, after all. Probably better, in fact, if Xander’s going to look like that at every revelation, that he learns the full truth while Buffy isn’t home.

Xander stares from him to Dawn and gasps, “While he was living here?! And you both knew?”

“I…worked it out” admits Dawn, “It’s not like they announced it.”

“Yeah, I bet not! God, what was she thinking!”

“It’s been hard for her” Dawn argues quickly.

“Hard so she goes and sleeps with the first body she can find? Dead or alive?!”

“That’s enough” Ethan feels compelled to say, “It’s just sex. It’s not like they’re getting married. But then there’s rather a lot of not getting married going around, wouldn’t you say, Xander?”

For the briefest of seconds, he thinks Xander might hit him. But all Xander looks is hurt. He replies, “You know what, Ethan – how about you stay out of this?”

“It was just a mistake” says Dawn unhappily. Ethan isn’t sure whether she means Buffy’s choice of
lover or her letting it slip to Xander. Xander assumes the former and mutters, “Some mistake.”

Dawn says nothing, stares at the table. Xander looks from her to Ethan and decides, “You know what, I don’t want to know this. I don’t want to know any of this.” He leaves.

Dawn stares unhappily across the table at Ethan. “Buffy’s going to kill me.”

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Ethan doesn’t hear from Dawn the following day, though he does hear from Rupert that “there’s been some sort of falling out.” Ethan judges it best not to mention his role in not really shutting down Xander’s anger, so he doesn’t ask for details, and Rupert doesn’t offer any. So whether Xander confronted Buffy directly or Dawn confessed her innocent mistake, Ethan doesn’t know until evening, when he drops by Willy’s Place. With the shop closed, he has to sell the delivery of grinorl charms that couldn’t be cancelled somewhere, and there’s always the chance that he might overhear something about the coming devouring power. Unlikely – that evil, whatever it is, is as shadowy as ever and all the more ominous for it – but it is still possible he might pick up a lucky piece of gossip, something that might help them prepare.

Of course, overhearing gossip relies on sitting quietly and letting the conversation flow around you, so Ethan isn’t best pleased when a clearly drunken Spike flops down beside him. “Mage” he greets, “You here for the atmosphere?”

“Just shifting a few charms.” Ethan looks around nervously. As a killer of his own kind, Spike is hardly welcome here, and Ethan doesn’t want to be caught up in any confrontation. It seems, though, that the place’s patrons are content enough tonight to let Spike drink himself into what looks to be shaping up to be an awful hangover, if the way the vampire is swaying even while seated is anything to go by. Spike rectifies the swaying by tilting forward, resting his head in his hands. Then, twisting to face Ethan, he asks, “You heard about me and Buffy?”

“Yes” says Ethan. Then, eyeing Spike, “Taking the Dutch cure, are you?”

“’S no cure.” Spike takes a swig of the unlabelled – and strong smelling – bottle in his grasp. “Just numbs it for a bit.” He casts a calculating, unsteady gaze over Ethan and asks, “You got magic that’d do better?”

“No. And if I had, it’s been blown up.”

“Everything’s been blown up” slurs Spike. He sits up and sags sideways into Ethan, attempts to right himself, fails, sits back. “’S all ruined.” He waves his bottle vaguely in what might be an offer to share. Ethan pushes it away and tries to slide out from the vampire’s sprawled semi-embrace. “It was never going to last” he says. Then, “Sorry: That didn’t sound as comforting as I thought it would.”

“’S okay. You’re right.” Spike tries again to right himself and manages it this time, buries his face in his hands.

Ethan pats him consolingly and glances at the bar, wondering if he could say he’s going for a drink and then slip out. Spike lifts his head, downs the last of his drink in a few deep gulps and lets the bottle slip through his fingers. It hits the table and spins a little way across it. As if the conversation had continued all along, Spike bursts out, “And then today she turns up to have a go at me because of Xander bloody Harris! Who cares what Xander sodding Harris thinks?!”

Ethan finds himself more sympathetic than he has been thus far. “Not me for one.”
“Fuck Xander sodding Harris! Harris can go and…and…”

“Get leprosy?” suggests Ethan.

“That” Spike nods, reaches for the bottle and offers it to Ethan.

“It’s empty” says Ethan. He takes the bottle anyway and sets it down out of Spike’s reach. Spike nods again, sighs deeply and looks to the bar as if considering another drink. Bad idea, Ethan decides: Buffy may have broken things off with the vampire, but she would surely be upset if Spike passed out and got staked. Ethan isn’t comfortable with the idea himself. Unlikely it would come to that – for all the demons of Sunnydale hate Spike, it is taboo for most of them to kill a fellow demon – but if some kinsmen of some unfortunate creature Spike has killed were to come in while the vampire is so drunk, that might be another matter. To distract Spike, Ethan asks, “So, Xander knows?”

“He knows” confirms Spike, slumping back and staring at the table. He reaches around vaguely, as if hoping to encounter the bottle. Not finding it, he goes on, “Bastard had a right go at her from the sounds of it. So she came along an’ took it out on me. Thinks I told him. I said to her, I said, do I look like someone who hangs around with Xander sodding Harris? ’Cept when we played pool that time. Didn’t tell her that. Jus…Jus” Spike takes a shaky and unnecessary breath “Jus asked her if there’s any way we could…You know. Rekindle…Fuck it.” Spike tilts forward, takes refuge in his cupped hands once again. Then, straightening up, he goes on, “I know we won’t. I know she…I know I’m an” Here, Spike adopts a flowery and badly accented voice that Ethan takes to be an impression of Buffy “an evil, soulless thing.”

“She said that?” asks Ethan.

Spike shakes his head. “Thinks it” he says. “Not like I can help that, is it?”

“No” agrees Ethan.

“’Xactly” says Spike. “Unless I got myself cursed or went and quested it out and that’s never going to work!” He bangs a fist on the table, causing the empty bottle to bounce to the floor and smash. Ethan glances around quickly but demons are not precious about their floors and no-one reacts. Turning back to Spike he asks, passingly curious, “Quested it?”

“Oh” Spike waves a hand, “Some myth I heard somewhere, something about some Old One in Africa somewhere…”

“Africa somewhere? That narrows it down.”

Spike waves his hand again, a sort of shushing gesture this time. “Not important: I’ve got forever. Perk of immortality that.”

“Not a perk Buffy enjoys” Ethan reminds him.

Spike considers this. “Hm. Suppose I’d have to start soon. If I was gunna…But I’m not.” He looks accusingly at Ethan, as if Ethan were actively encouraging him to anything.

“Right” says Ethan half-heartedly, “Of course not.” Really, this is becoming a little tiresome. He’ll never sell his charms with Spike hanging around, let alone overhear anything useful; may as well head home, and encourage the vampire to do the same. “Look –”

“I’m not” Spike argues, “Not going anywhere, not for her. Bitch doesn’t deserve it.”
“Spike, I don’t really care what you do” Ethan tells him, “Actually, I came here to gather intelligence and you’re making it very difficult.”

Spike lets out a hollow laugh. “Oh, you won’t find anything intelligent in here” he sneers.

Ethan studies him, and replies, pointedly, “I suppose not.”

Not noticing his tone, Spike stares at nothing for a moment. Ethan tries, “Might be best to be getting out of here, yes? Sleep it off in your new crypt?”

Spike pulls a face, but makes no reply. Ethan wonders if he should just leave. Perhaps Spike will follow. And if he doesn’t, well he tried, didn’t he?

After a few moments, in which Ethan weighs up leaving and Spike appears to be thinking harder than usual (which is not, in Ethan’s opinion, saying much), Spike continues, “Might be fun. Questing. Lots of smashing skulls to find things out.”

Ethan frowns at him. “Oh?”

“Yea…And I’ve never been much in Africa. Went to Egypt with Dru but we had a run in with the Immortal, it was this whole thing…But Buffy would be right impressed.” Turning to Ethan, Spike tells him with the air of one confiding a great secret, “She dates demons with souls.”

“Possibly” Ethan concedes, “But would you really go through the torture of getting your soul back just to impress her?”

Spike considers this, pain marring his expression. “’S torture not being with her” he replies, “An’ you’d do it for your watcher boy, I know that.”

“True” Ethan decides.

Spike is nodding. “Yeah, I reckon I should.” He stands, wobbles, rights himself on the table and makes his unsteady way out and into the night.
“Anya’s going away” Ethan tells Rupert when he returns from checking on the progress of the repairmen in the shop.

“Oh?” Rupert switches the kettle on by unspoken agreement.

“Yes” Ethan sits down at the little chair that looks out on the balcony, and beyond, to the woods. “She just said since the shop is out of action anyway, she has people to catch up with.” He doesn’t say that the way she said it made it sound like she planned to catch up with them the way a cat catches up with mice.

“Well” says Rupert, handing over a mug of tea, “Travel will probably do her good.”

“Yes” Noticing Rupert’s frown and assuming he is thinking about Anya, Ethan asks, “What?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about my training session earlier with Buffy. And, um, Faith, of course.”

Of course: Rupert doesn’t have enough room to think about Anya. More than ever, these days, Buffy takes up all the not inconsiderable storage space his brain allocates for worries. “What happened?”

“Buffy and Dawn still seem a little tense around one another, that’s all. Apparently Dawn accidently let slip to Xander that Buffy and Spike had been, err, involved, and he took it rather badly.”

“Ah” says Ethan, neglecting to mention his own role in managing Xander’s anger less well that it could have been managed. Really, he was just a witness. He says, “It was an accident.”

“I’m sure. But Buffy is very angry with poor Dawn.”

“You stood up for her?”

“I did my best to point out it wasn’t done with malice, yes, but I think it’s a culmination of other things, too. Buffy has struggled with her responsibilities ever since, well, since she came back.”

“And Dawn’s a responsibility” Ethan concludes.

“In Buffy’s mind, the biggest. She’s already proven she’d prioritise Dawn over saving the world.” Rupert frowns. “Really, though, if I’d known this is the conversation we’d be having less than a year from her return, I’d have been relived. I wish she’d recognise how far she’s come.” He sips his tea, adds, “I’m sure it will get easier, especially as Spike seems to have decided to leave town.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I don’t suppose you’ve run into him lately? Buffy tried to downplay it, but I could tell she’s worried.”

Uncomfortably, Ethan thinks back to his last encounter with the vampire. “I saw him at Willy’s Place about a week ago. Tuesday night.”

Rupert frowns. “Buffy said she last saw him Tuesday morning. Did he say anything about going somewhere?”
“Possibly” Ethan finds his face shifting into what Rupert says is a poor mockery of an innocent expression but which he thinks is rather good.

“Ethan.” “He said…Well, he said…” Ethan isn’t sure why he feels uneasy. Yes, if Spike did indeed go off on some epic quest he will be walking into danger, but what are the chances he was serious? He probably forgot about getting his soul back within a few minutes and went staggering off to Asian House.

“Said what?”

“He said he was going on a quest to Africa to get his soul back, but he was very drunk. I don’t think he’d actually go through with it.”

Rupert looks stunned. “His soul?”

“That’s what he said.”

“How would that be possible?” Rupert rises to do what he automatically does when anything remotely significant happens: Grab a book. Given they are hosting all the Magic Box’s stock, there are more to hand than usual.

“He said something about a story he’s heard about an Old One in Africa.”

Rupert switches to a new book. “Old One by the name of…?”

“No idea. Probably Spike has no idea. He was trollied, Rupert.”

Rupert glances at him, then sinks to the sofa with his eyes on the book.

“I didn’t think he was serious.”

“Well he does seem to have left town” muses Rupert, “Faith hasn’t seen him either.”

For a horrible moment, Ethan wonders if Xander could have staked him. He quickly dismisses the idea: Xander may be a prat at times, but he wouldn’t kill something that couldn’t fight back. Besides, it seems his anger has been directed towards Buffy, the one of the odd and parted couple he expects good behaviour from.

As if sex is bad behaviour. Ethan sighs: The boy’s reaction is all very prudish and American. Or perhaps he’s just being judgmental to protect himself from the truth: That Buffy didn’t trust him enough to tell him about Spike from the outset. Well, great job proving she should have, Xander.

“Where in Africa?” asks Rupert, turning a page, searching.

“I don’t know. Spike didn’t know.” If he has indeed gone off to get his soul, he may be some time. Not to mention, how will he get back if he succeeds? Ethan isn’t sure what regaining one’s soul after centuries of evil is like, but he doubts in leaves one in a frame of mind to make travel plans. He tries, “I couldn’t have stopped him.”

“Why would you? If he succeeds…” Rupert’s face takes on a look of brief wonder.

“What?” asks Ethan.

“There’s no record of any vampire choosing to get his soul back. The fact Spike would even want to…” Rupert shakes his head, wonder creasing into a frown. “He shouldn’t be able to choose at all! That’s what makes a vampire: The lack of ability to make a moral choice.”
“Oh, it isn’t a moral choice: It’s very much a How Can I Get Buffy To Shag Me choice.”

Rupert’s frown deepens at that. Thinking of Buffy, Ethan asks, “Will you tell her?”

Rupert seems to consider this. Apparently his wonder was strong enough to make him forget about his beloved slayer for a minute there. Ethan feels a grudging sort of respect for Spike, already pulling off the impossible. “I suppose I’ll have to if she asks directly” Rupert decides, “But otherwise, no. And I’d rather you didn’t either. In case he fails, you understand: I can’t imagine a quest of this nature would be remotely easy.”

He is right, Ethan realises. But, “Even if he never comes back, doesn’t Buffy have the right to know he tried that for her?”

“What good would that do her?”

“I don’t know” says Ethan. He tries, “it’s sort of romantic.”

“You just said he wants to shag her!”

“In a romantic way!” At Rupert’s frown, Ethan adds, “It’s a dramatic gesture, Rupert.”

“Romance isn’t dramatic gestures” Rupert dismisses.

“I don’t know: It was pretty dramatic when you proposed to me. I’d be bowled over if you got your soul back for me too.”

Rupert is briefly distracted with a fond smile. “I proposed to you with blue tack, Eth, it was hardly a sweeping gesture.”

“I was swept off my feet” Ethan maintains. The lack of ring had made it all the better: It proved how spontaneous it was.

Returning his attention to Spike, Rupert says, “We need to be careful about ascribing human motivations to anything a vampire does. If Spike is doing something, it will be for selfish reasons, by definition.”

Ethan frowns. Couldn’t that apply to any of them? He takes care of Rupert because he loves the man and wants him to stick around. He helps Buffy where he can because he likes the world and wants to go on living in it.

Perhaps the only truly selfless person he has met is Buffy: She saved the world, even at the cost of her no longer living in it. It was enough for her that everyone else would. Which makes it all the more important that she is told information relating to herself. Not to mention, “Well that won’t apply if he does get his soul back: Even you have to agree with that.” Not that Rupert’s experience of vampires with souls is all that positive, he realises belatedly.

Sure enough, Rupert looks troubled. But he agrees, “If he gets his soul back, he’s more or less human, yes. But whether he’d even want to see Buffy after that would remain to be seen. He’d be processing a lot.”

“But Buffy should at least be told why he’s not around anymore – He’s her ex, not ours.”

Rupert gives a brief nod. “I’d still rather not say anything until he’s safely back, or she’d only worry. With the hellmouth to guard, she doesn’t have the luxury of going off to look for him.”
“She could leave Faith to deal with the hellmouth.”

“Perhaps one day. But with Willow’s ancient evil still to come, I don’t think it would be wise.”

Ethan is a little uncomfortable with how readily Rupert calls it Willow’s evil, but he can’t exactly argue she is blameless. Instead he concludes, “And you still have just enough council left in you to not let Buffy decide for herself.”

Rupert glares. “If you’d rather the more experienced of the two slayers go off on a wild goose chase in Africa while a significant threat bears down on us, dear…” And he lets the statement trail off, into the cowardice even Ethan has to acknowledge he has. Ethan looks away. “Fine” he agrees. “We won’t tell her.”

“It wouldn’t do her any good, Eth.”

*Keep telling yourself that*, thinks Ethan. But Rupert’s tone is gentle, conciliatory, and he doesn’t want a fight, so he says nothing.

“That’s not to say we can’t help Spike” Rupert goes on. “If he does get his soul back, that is, which is still highly unlikely.”

Perhaps Spike has been chipped too long: Rupert seems to be forgetting that he killed two slayers. Highly unlikely the average vampire would survive one. Ethan asks, “How could we help?”

“I’ll research, see if I can work out where exactly he’s gone since, contrary to what Spike may think, Africa is a fairly big place.” Rupert frowns. “Of course, he may still give up and just come back here soulless.”

Ethan isn’t so sure. He remembers what Angel had said when Spike first came to town, about how determined his childe could be. But Angel’s opinions do not count for much in this household, and Spike had been drunk.

Personally, Ethan reckons if he gets as far as actually sneaking on to a boat or plane, he’ll find this Old One, however long it takes, and win back his soul regardless of the cost. If, on the other hand, he woke up hungover with only a hazy memory of last night’s plans, he’s probably still off getting drunk somewhere. “But if he does get it back?”

“Then he’ll need help getting home” says Rupert. That word home is telling of the difference a soul makes in Rupert’s mindset: Without a soul, Rupert probably doesn’t think of Spike having a home so much as a dwelling place, somewhere to be dead in.

Ethan asks, “And we’ll, what, stump up the cost of a flight?”

“If he gets his soul back, he’ll be disorientated. In all likelihood, he’ll go wandering off in despair. And he’s bound to be somewhere remote to begin with – Old Ones aren’t exactly city dwellers.” Rupert pauses, considering, and decides, “I’ll contact the watchers I know of in Africa, once we’ve an idea where he’s gone and given him some time to regain his soul. If that even is possible.”

“Watchers? You want him staked?”

“We’ll tell them Spike has information we need and that we want him unharmed until we can interrogate him” Rupert decides, “No point in telling them about the soul. Though, of course, you’ve only met people from Head Office, Ethan – The field agents often take a more pragmatic view of things.”
Ethan eyes Rupert. “I suppose they do.”

Rupert focuses again on his book. “So that’s decided: We won’t trouble Buffy with this unless Spike can be returned safely and ensouled. Now all that remains to do is work out where he’s gone.”

*****

Buffy’s home is increasingly the centre of their activities, now that the shop has gone. Somehow, this means Giles sees less of Dawn. The girl flits about helping herself to food or lingering for snippets of conversation, then disappears off to her room again. Typical teenager, Giles reminds himself. Except, that stereotype has never held true for him. The other children always wanted to be involved at barely more than Dawn’s age, and it seems Dawn does too, in a way. It is Buffy’s frosty manner that makes her hold back, sends her scuttling back off upstairs.

Xander is absent too, and only briefly mentioned by Willow, who, in the face of the look the mention earned from Buffy, didn’t return to the subject again.

All this must be strange for Willow: So far as Giles is aware, she still doesn’t know what went on with Buffy and Spike. It doesn’t seem fair that she is the only one left unaware, but it is hardly his secret to tell.

It means Xander hasn’t told her either, come to think of it, for all that Buffy said he was openly disgusted. That deepens Giles’ sympathy for the young man: He can relate to the disgust for Spike, he just wishes Xander had found a way not to let it eclipse his love for Buffy. He wonders if he should call round at Xander’s tonight, but thinks better of it: Xander needs some space to come to terms with his break-up with Anya and his revaluation of his friendship with Buffy in his own time.

Not that Giles would be missed here: Watching Willow attempt to do something puzzling to a camera is something Buffy and Faith can manage without help. “This was in the explosion?” he asks, nodding to the delicate lens, “You’ve fixed it up remarkably.”

Willow shakes her head. “I’m kinda tempted to say, yeah, I totally did, but actually I didn’t. It was like someone threw a grenade at it.”

“So this is…?”

“I found it in the garden” explains Buffy, “Inside this creepy little gnome.”

“So I’m trying to track the signal” explains Willow, typing on her laptop, focused on the screen.

Faith asks, “Won’t their cloaking spell stop you doing that?”

“Well, the thing about cloaking spells, they’re old. Like, pre-internet.”

A lot of things are pre-internet and not yet old, Giles reflects. He says nothing. Willow goes on, “Not to mention, I can counter a cloaking spell – I just need a rough idea where it is. Tracking the signal? Gives me a rough idea.” “You’re going to mix hacking and magic?” Buffy guesses.

“My specialty” grins Willow, as if this sort of miracle were special to her these days.

Sitting beside her, Tara asks, “So what do we do when we find them?”

“Confiscate the Daidalos Chest for a start” says Giles, “Any further intervention can wait.”
“But us crashing in on them should be enough to scare three losers out of being pains in our asses”
Faith adds.

“Here” says Willow, “I think I’ve got it. I just need to get past this last firewall…”

They wait as Willow types furiously. Then: “This is it!” announces Willow, “I just need to – Oh.”

“Willow?” asks Giles. He comes round to stand behind her. He doesn’t need to know much about
computers to understand what he sees when he looks at the screen: There are other cameras.”

“You see?” says Faith, joining him, “Perverts.”

“Perverts who wanted to track your every move” says Willow.

“Th-this is creepy” agrees Tara, “Look, they’ve got the Doublemeat Palace, a few cemeteries,
Dawnie’s school…”

“Add in the Magic Box and they can pretty much always see where we are” concludes Buffy.

Giles asks, “Can you tell where they are?”

“Not yet” admits Willow. Her fingers suddenly spark and the laptop lights up with a glow that has
nothing to do with mere electronics. “Give me time.”

****

Time, and magic, soon see Willow use the camera’s signal to guide her to the edges of the young
men’s cloaking spell. That done, she turns it over with the practised ease of a young witch who’s
conversed with Osiris, and to whom a mere cloaking spell, impenetrable to any other practitioner,
is nothing.

Giles was expecting that. What surprises him is what Buffy and Faith find in the recently cloaked
house Willow sends them to.

The three men were apparently alerted to Willow’s hacking, and left before the slayers arrived. The
trap they left behind them, however, was not built during a hasty getaway: They had had this back-
up planned for a while.

And in all that time, none of them, apparently, had questioned the morality of leaving concealed
spinning blades waiting for two young women to walk into the path of. Giles could kill them.
Really, they are lucky he will have time to calm down before they next encounter his slayers.

Thankfully, Buffy and Faith are unharmed. Faith has a gash on her shoulder, already healing, and
Buffy returned with her shirt ripped across the front, where she could have been sliced in two if she
hadn’t managed to leap away in time. With the defensive bravado that has become familiar in their
little group, the two girls act as if the whole thing were an inconvenience, but Giles can’t help but
feel shaken. These men are human, after all. It would be one thing if they were vampires, creatures
without soul or choice.

Out of nowhere, he finds himself wondering where Spike is, and how he is doing so far. Probably
distracted by a drink or a fight.

They are all here, aside from the vampire, Anya and Xander. Giles isn’t sure if the latter wasn’t
called or declined to come. Without him and Anya and, to a lesser extent, Spike, the group seems
small. Ethan and Dawn sit on one side of the Summers’ living room, the two slayers at the other.
Tara lingers uneasily in the middle, apparently wishing Buffy and Dawn were sitting closer together. Giles wishes it too.

Willow, at the table, is still focused on her laptop while the rest of them try to piece together books that have been effectively shredded by the blades. It is not a good sign, Giles thinks, that they felt comfortable leaving so many books behind. He joins Willow. “More cameras?”

“No, just more hacking.” Glancing up at him she explains, “The coroner’s report said Katrina was last seen in this restaurant. I’m just having a look at their security footage. I figured once we find these guys, we need to have a plan for what to do with them.”

She is right, of course. She was always a planner, and there is nothing like raising the dead to remind one of the importance of foreseeing every possible consequence. “Have you found anything we can use against him?”

“Nothing so far.”

Faith joins them, dropping a jagged half of a book on the floor as she goes. “We need to find them first. Wanna try that location spell again?”

“They might still be on the move” Willow cautions.

“I’ll do it” says Ethan, standing up. He indicates the mangled books. “I don’t think we’ll learn much from these anyway.”

“It mostly just goes on about powerful magicks” Buffy confirms.

Tara nods. “They’re interested in power.”

“Wait” says Willow. She stares at her screen. “I’ve got something coming up on my news feed.”

“On your what?” asks Giles.

Willow turns around with some urgency. “Buffy – downtown, we have to get over there!”

“What is it?” asks Giles, but then Willow moves enough that he can see the screen and he knows. They have learnt how to use the Daidalos Chest.

*****

None of the books had quite agreed on whether accounts of the Daidalos Chest being used to create a demon army referred to a literal creation of a new species of demon or the opening of a portal through which an army enters. The latter, Giles thinks, could mean the army feel only a passing loyalty to those who brought them forth. Which is better or worse than a more closely controlled army, depending on who is controlling them.

Warren, so far as he can tell. He has never met the youth, but Buffy, crouching beside him, pointed him out. He is the one in the centre of the destruction currently being wrought by his new army. The other two stand a little way off, flinching as they watch Faith and another figure battle the demons. Whether created or summoned, they are fearsome things, large and numerous, cruelly armed. When Buffy and the rest of them arrived, Warren had them scattered through the surrounding streets, looting and terrorising the town’s inhabitants. No-one was killed, so far as Giles can tell: Instead of dealing out direct violence, Warren seemed to be delighting in overpowering and terrifying anyone in his army’s path. Everyone other than the three young men, the demons and the scoobies seem to have managed to flee now, including the two young women
Warren had had trapped, one under each arm, when they arrived. At their escape, Warren had gone from gleefully mocking Faith’s attempts to openly angry at their intervention.

A little distance from the fray, Willow is standing just within a barrier that Ethan agreed to erect to seal them all in: the demons, their human leaders, Buffy and her friends. Giles had been all in favour of Ethan remaining outside the invisible trap, in favour of all of them other than he and Buffy and Faith staying out of it, in fact. But Ethan had admitted that he wasn’t sure he could sustain the barrier from the outside, that the strongest barrier spells involve the caster being inside the spell-sealed area, and so here Ethan is, flinching as the trapped demons lunge at him, and then again when Willow kills them. Willow’s eyes are magic darkened and she is steadily creating a space around herself, Tara and Ethan, a space populated only by the smouldering corpses of demons. Any time she weakens, she reaches to the side, and Ethan or Tara provide her with a burst of shared magic. Already, the remaining demons are realising the danger and retreating back towards Warren – only to come up against Faith and her sword-wielding companion.

Buffy and Giles, meanwhile, have made their way unseen around the edges of the battle, killing stray demons to reach this hastily abandoned car, where close to Warren without him seeing them.

Warren is standing outside the townhall, as though he had planned to walk in and appoint himself Mayor. Perhaps he had. Apparently he and his cohort came by way of the museum: Giles can see several magically potent items piled up beside the expensive car Warren has apparently helped himself to. The Council had inspected the museum before Giles’ arrival in Sunnydale and, concluding that they could not confiscate every dangerous item without emptying the museum, had simply secured them by means of a spell. Apparently the Daidalos Chest has made quick work of overturning it, and now Warren has them, and more besides: From his crouched position, Giles can see material items mixed with the mythical: demon skulls nestled among gold chains, swords stacked against an expensive looking stereo, anything that took Warren’s fancy before they interrupted the looting. “There” breathes Giles, spotting an ancient and unassuming wooden box, nestled half hidden, and close enough for Warren to reach it, among the other items. Something about it sparks an instinctive unease.

“That’s it?” asks Buffy. “I thought it would be bigger.”

“I’m sure that’s it.” Illustrations can be misleading, but it is old enough to be the Daidalos Chest, and there is no other likely-looking box in sight. “He’d want it to hand.”

“Okay” says Buffy, “Then we just need to wait for – it.”

“It” steps forward, dropping the sword as a demon grabs it, but smiling a plastic smile at Warren as she wrestles it.

“You” says Warren to the immaculate apparently-woman, “You’ll pay for this, you realise.”

The demon that has hold of her pauses its fight, apparently confused, and settles for holding her in place.

“Funny” She smiles a tellingly mechanical smile “I think you’re the one who’ll pay. All this damage is probably very expensive.”

Warren snorts, then gestures to Faith, who is currently swinging an axe at a demon lifting her from her feet. “You think your friend’s going to save you?”

“Maybe.” Behind them, Faith frees herself and bludgeons the demon with the blunt end of the axe. “She looks like she’s winning.”
“She can kill as many of them as she likes” says Warren, “As long as I’ve got this baby” He indicates the chest “I can just summon more.”

Giles, about to make a run for the chest, freezes behind the car until Warren turns away again. Behind him, Buffy follows suit, then, as Warren resumes talking, slides ahead of Giles, pausing when one of the other young men looks over, fails to spot them and turns away.

“…So go ahead” Warren is saying.

“Hey Warren” puts in a timid voice (Jonathan; Giles recognises Jonathan), “Maybe we should just –”

“Shut up.” Warren doesn’t even look his lackey’s way, but keeps his eyes fixed on his opponent. She tilts her head. “I notice you haven’t told your demon here to kill me.”

“Not sure I want to” Warren’s tone takes on a sneer and he takes a menacing step forward, “When I have so many little toys that could make you do whatever I want.”

Ah, thinks Giles, well there goes any lingering doubts he had about killing the man.

“Warren –” Jonathan tries again, his voice harder now, though Giles can tell it is costing him a forced courage that won’t last long. As he speaks, he approaches Warren and reaches for him, prompting the former to bat him away with a command of, “Get off me!” Jonathan flinches back but tries, “We have to stop this – We’ve gone too far.”

“Too far?” Warren gestures around them. “Where did you think we were going!”

“If you don’t stop –”

“You’ll do what?” Warren examines the top of Jonathan’s head when he hangs it, then, with an amused huff, turns to the demon that still grips his opponent. “Get him out of my sight.” Now a third voice, Andrew, presumably, says, “Wait, Warren –” and gets no further before the demon grabs Jonathan.

Giles half rises but stops himself: There is no time, and their priority is the Daidalos Chest. Taking its command very literally, the demon takes hold of Jonathan and hurls to land with a crash behind an abandoned truck some way away. In the same moment, Buffy darts for the chest and grabs it, retreats to where Giles is hidden.

“Oh God” says Andrew. Then there is a thump, and Giles assumes Warren struck him until he glances up to see that the demon has resumed its hold on the decoy and Warren is facing them, massaging his reddened knuckles.

The decoy states, “You hit me.”

“Oh, you noticed.” Warren grins. “And they say blondes are dumb.”

Kneeling in front of the chest, Buffy frowns. No doubt some cutting remark is gathering in her mind, but she can’t risk speaking when they are so close to Warren and his demons. She focuses instead on helping Giles lay out the items needed to vanquish the army.

The figure in front of Warren asks, “Did you hit Katrina too?”

Warren stops still. Giles notes that Andrew is staring too. Good: Little chance they’ll spot him and Buffy until it is too late.
“You don’t know what you’re talking about” says Warren. Turning to his remaining companion, he demands, “What have you been saying?”

“Nothing” says Andrew. Then, apparently inspired, “It must have been Jonathan.”

“So you did do it?” asks the blonde figure.

“Shut it!”

Giles struggles with his matches and, succeeding on the second try, lights the candle in the centre of the hasty ritual circle.

“It’s just” says the figure with the plastic smile, “If you didn’t do anything, why would you be worried about your friends saying anything?”

“Shut up, bitch, or I’ll make you as dead as I made her!” There is the sound of another blow, and then a new sound: the sound of silicone peeling from metal.

“That’s the thing” explains the Buffy-bot, “You did make me.”

Pulling a book from his pocket and flicking to the right page, Giles glances up to find Warren staring at the exposed wires. Finding the right page, he whispers the chant.

It would have been remiss of him if, in all his research, he hadn’t found a way to reverse the Daidalos Chest’s most recent spell. The only workable method he has found involves channelling the magic through a warrior’s strength. Fortunately, he has Buffy to hand.

A little way off, the robot continues, “You know, I’m surprised you didn’t recognise me. You must be very stupid.”

Buffy lays her hands on the Daidalos Chest. Giles grips her wrists, sending the spell into her. It flows through her, a shimmer along her skin, a breeze in her hair on this still day.

“Wait” says Andrew, “If that’s a robot, then where’s…”

“…Where’s the real one?” finishes Warren. Giles feels the moment the spell is completed. The Daidalos Chest retreats into a more dormant state of malice, the malice of old things used for acts of evil. It retains a grim sort of potential, but for now it is still. Buffy, meanwhile, is left temporarily drained. That is no disaster, since all around them, the demons vanish. A few howl as they go, and there is a crack as the one holding the Buffy-bot tightens its grip as it goes, snapping the mechanical neck.

Shakily, Buffy gets to her feet, steps into view and smiles at Warren. “You guys looking for me?”

“Oh man” says Andrew, “We are so screwed.”

“Not yet” says Warren. He opens his jacket to reveal what Giles takes to be a high-tech waistcoat. “Come on: Time to fly.”

“Wait” says Buffy, “Is that –” She gets no further before Warren is in the air, lifted by twin blasts of fumes, Andrew zipping up behind him.

Giles stares up as they vanish. “What on earth…?”

“You’re kidding me!” Faith has joined them “Jet packs?”
“We’ll find them” Willow assures her, heading over to them. She is shaking, but her eyes have returned to normal. Behind her, Ethan and Tara look drained but unharmed. Ethan embraces Giles and Giles allows himself to relax. Breaking the hug, he tells them, “We have the Daidalos Chest.”

“Good” Willow steps past them to examine the robot. “And at least none of us were hurt.”

Buffy’s eyes widen. “Jonathan!” She hurries off, in the direction the young man was thrown.

Faith makes a dismissive noise. “He isn’t one of us.”

Ethan asks, “You want me to get the barrier down? We might want a glamour – the police will be arriving.”

“Yes – if you can manage one?”

Ethan looks at Tara. “We might need to pool our resources” he admits.

She nods, “I th-think between us we can hide everyone until we’re out of sight. Unless we should just let them see us? It’s not as if we did anything wrong.”

“Too many questions” Giles decides, “Better the authorities don’t know we were here.” Leaving them to work on glamours and dropping the barrier, he follows Buffy. On the other side of the truck (the cab door is open, he notes, the driver having fled at the sight of the demons) she is knelt over an unconscious form. Giles can tell Jonathan’s arm is broken, and a bruise mars his forehead. “Is he breathing?” “Yeah” confirms Buffy, “but nothing else.”

“Ethan and Tara are getting the barrier down – Best to let the police see to him.”

Buffy stands up slowly. “Sure. Let’s get out of here.”

*****

“Hi, Ethan” says Dawn when she lets him into the house the following morning.

“Hello Dawn” Ethan glances around and asks, “Are we the only ones here?”

“No – only Faith’s out. Work. Buffy’s around somewhere.” Dawn gestures up the stairs. “And Willow and Tara – they stayed the night to keep working on location spells.”

“Any luck?”

“Nope – no geek trio. Geek duo now, I guess.”

Really, Ethan is surprised they had it in them: Between barrier spell and killing demons with magic, they all ran themselves ragged yesterday. Unsurprisingly, Willow, when she needs one to share a pinch of one’s power, is a ferocious thing.

“I thought they’d be up by now.” Dawn sounds disappointed, “But they were all lovey last night. I’m thinking anniversary?”

Ethan frowns. “Don’t think so. Anyway, just so long as someone’s here.”

“You need to speak to them?” Dawn’s disappointment increases.

“No – I came for your lesson.” At Dawn’s confusion, Ethan explains, “I was just checking you weren’t home alone.”
“Oh. I don’t mind that. I was home alone when you were all off fighting Warren.”

“Yes, well.” Of course Dawn is capable but it is the principal of the thing. Ethan gets a heavy book out of his bag and sets it on the dining room table while Dawn retrieves her notebook. She has decorated it with wrapping paper, like a school book, and takes meticulous notes in multicoloured gel pens. It is all a little neat for Ethan’s liking.

Before they can start, Buffy comes in. “Hi Ethan” she greets, “Is there trouble?”

“No” Ethan indicates the large book he and Dawn have between them. “I’m just here for Dawn’s magic lesson.”

“I did tell you” Dawn reminds her.

“Oh” Buffy frowns at the book.

“We’re still working on glamours” explains Dawn, “Reversing them now.” She lifts the heavy book to show her sister, but Buffy only says, “I’ll be in the yard – I want to check for cameras.”

“I haven’t seen anything new except that gnome you found.”

“Uh huh” Buffy turns away, then pauses, and asks Ethan, “Could you try another location spell?”

Beside Ethan, Dawn sets the book down with a sigh, and asks, “Are Willow and Tara not up yet?”

“Nearly. I think. I heard giggling.”

Dawn smiles. Buffy asks Ethan, “So, location spell?”

Ethan cautions, “If they’re still on the move, it won’t show anything.”

Dawn asks, “Could it wait for after our lesson?”

Buffy glances at her distractedly. “What? No. Ethan, if you wouldn’t mind doing it before you guys do your thing.”

“Our glamours” puts in Dawn.

Noting her disgruntled expression, Ethan decides, “It could be a part of our lesson, if you like.”

“Sure” Dawn brightens.

They work the magic while Buffy watches. Every so often, Dawn glances her sister’s way, but Buffy says nothing, offering neither questions or praise until the spell is cast, and Ethan concludes, “Still on the move.”

“They still have that van” says Buffy.

“I could keep trying later” offers Dawn.

“I’m going to check out the yard” says Buffy, and leaves.

Before Dawn’s enthusiasm can waver, Ethan pushes the book forward. “So, glamours.”

“Yeah.” Dawn returns her focus to dispelling the things, half-heartedly at first, and then with more enthusiasm. Ethan has her all but vanish herself several times, her presence only noticeable by
those who know to look (“Just like always then” mutters Dawn at one point), before reappearing with a dramatic flourish.

“Of course” says Ethan, “it can be done with less flair, but where’s the fun in that?”

“Yeah” agrees Dawn, “Because if we’re going to –” There is a knock at the door. Dawn issues a frustrated sigh and says, “Hold that thought.” She rises, but the front door is already opening, and Xander’s voice calls through, “Hello?”

A flicker of annoyance crosses Dawn’s face. Ethan can relate. Dawn calls back, “In here!”

“Hi” says Xander when he appears. He eyes the book. “More magic lessons, huh?”

“Yup” Dawn pulls the book towards her and starts to re-read the relevant chapter unnecessarily.

Xander asks Ethan, “Everyone alright after yesterday?”

Ethan toys with the idea of saying, No thanks to you, but decides it would be a provocation too far. Plus, it is only deliciously truthful to say, “We’re fine. Good thing you weren’t there really – not much a non-slayer, non-spellcaster could have contributed.”

He can see that stung, but Xander only nods very slightly. “Right. Hey, Dawn, is Buffy around?”

“She’s outside.” Dawn keeps her eyes on the book.

Xander looks at her for a long moment and Ethan wonders if he should step out the room for to give Xander a chance to apologise to Dawn for the wedge he forced between her and her sister. Not that he is particularly fussed about what Xander wants right now, but Dawn is owed the apology. But before he can think of an excuse to leave, Xander says, “Right. Thanks” and heads out to the garden.

Dawn sets the book aside and offers Ethan a shaky smile. She needs a distraction, he realises, so he says, “Want to go through it a few more times?” even though the girl has almost perfected it now.

“Sure” she replies gratefully.

They keep at it until Dawn is fully proficient. Buffy and Xander remain outside and Ethan supposes the lack of raised voices is a good sign. Once Dawn is fully visible again across the table, he asks, “So what do you want to work on next? We could –” Outside there is a loud bang. A series of them. Ethan jumps, then laughs at himself and gasps, “Fireworks? But it’s –” and then Dawn pulls him under the table.

“That’s not fireworks” she explains. She stares around, wide eyed.

Oh. Ethan feels that rare thing – fear not related to demons – flutter through him. They wait. Silence for a moment, and then some distant sound of running feet, getting closer. Then Xander’s voice again, “Dawn! Ethan! Are you guys alright?”

“Xander?” Dawn darts out from under the table and through to the kitchen. Ethan scrambles to his feet and follows.

“Dawn!” Xander hugs the child, then breaks quickly away, reaches for the phone.

His hands. Ethan stares: They are covered in blood. Who –

“Buffy!” Dawn gasps, and runs outside. Ethan follows, walking slowly like someone thrown into a
nightmare. Buffy can’t be dead again so soon.

“Oh, Buffy!” Dawn peels off her top to press it against the hole in her sister, revealing a training bra. It is that – that visible sign of how young the only person helping is – that snaps Ethan out of it. He retreats to the kitchen, grabs the first aid kit.

“Yes” Xander is saying into the phone, “Yes, the shooter’s gone, but…What? Yes!” Xander spots the first aid kit, “Yes, we have one but –” Ethan hears no more, running back outside.

How are bandages supposed to help, he wonders, pulling them out and unravelling them in his panic. Instead he grabs a wad of gauze and presses it to the terrifyingly deep hole in Buffy’s chest. Buffy’s eyes are open, but she doesn’t seem awake. She directs a blank, stunned stare at the pristine sky above them. Dawn strokes her hair, telling her, “It’s okay, Buffy, you’ll be okay” and the blood that’s found its way onto Dawn’s fingertips paints Buffy’s hair, streaking it orange.

“The ambulance is on its way” Xander tells them, returning. He flutters around Buffy, kneeling to take her hand, then dropping it to help stem the blood. Dawn asks, “Who –” and Xander replies, “Warren”, muttering the word like a curse. Then, staring down at Buffy, he adds, “She saved me. She pushed me out the way.”

It could have been Xander then, Ethan realises. Xander could have died and the last thing Ethan said to him was –

Except, he never would have died, because Buffy was there.

“Oh God!” Willow is running from the house, followed by Tara, “Buffy!”

“It was Warren” says Xander. Then the ambulance makes it’s approaching presence known in a distant shriek of sirens.

Dawn rides with Buffy in the ambulance. Xander offers to go instead but Willow takes his hand and says, “We’ll follow.” Yet when the vehicle wails away down the street, they find for a moment that they can only stare after it. Tara says, “She’ll be okay.” No-one answers, but Ethan supposes she must be right: A slayer can’t be murdered by another human being. It wouldn’t be allowed. Glancing Tara’s way, he notices her necklace and stares more openly. “Your amulet.”

She holds the token of Hephaestus he gave her up for inspection. It is shattered, oily with some blood-like reside that reeks of magic. “Protection against weapons forged from metal” she reminds him, “Like bullets.”

Willow grips her hand reflexively. “Or it would have…” Ethan lifts the amulet gently from Tara’s skin and can’t hold back a shaky laugh. “If I’d know it was a one-time use thing” he manages, “I’d never have bought it.”

“One time was all it took” says Tara.

“Guys” Xander cuts in, “We need to go” and they head for his car.
Later, Giles will retain very little memory of how he got from their flat to the hospital. The phone call, he will remember for as long as he lives, every word choice, every pause Ethan made as he conveyed the news etched into his mind. But all he remembers of the journey is screeching to a halt when he’s more than halfway to hospital, barely registering the angry beeps and shouts around him and thinking of Faith: That he should bring Faith. He changes direction and heads for the Doublemeat Palace. When Faith learns that Buffy is hurt, she leaves with no explanation to her manager and without changing out of her uniform. When they reach the hospital, Faith is wearing a cap with a novelty cow head sticking out the front. “What happened?” she demands.

Between them, Ethan, Dawn, Willow, Tara and Xander stumble through an explanation. “They almost lost her” says Willow, with a haunted expression, “They almost lost her and I almost…”

“It would have been different” Xander tells her firmly, “Bringing her back maybe had some issues, but stopping her going, that would have just been stopping her going.”

“You almost used magic?” Giles concludes.

Willow nods. “Almost.” To Xander, she explains, “It wasn’t my place to decide.”

Giles approves in a distant, academic sort of way. On a more immediate level, he does not particularly care about the ethics of magic at this precise moment.

Tara says, “It wasn’t needed in the end anyway.” Willow nods. She is, Giles notices, gripping Tara’s hand hard enough to turn it white. Tara’s other hand is closed over Dawn’s. The teen sits staring into the middle distance. She has blood on her fingertips.

Willow says, “The doctors saved her.”

“Sort of” says Xander grimly. He explains, “She’s in surgery.”

Willow says, “They stopped her going, I mean.”

Ethan gives a shaky laugh. “Who needs magic when you have medical technology? Walsh would be proud.”

Willow nods. “It’s been an ironic day. Technology trumps magic and a human tries to kill the slayer.”


“Who else” mutters Ethan. When Giles sits down beside him and wraps an arm around him, he adds, “I’m alright” but Giles doesn’t let him go because he isn’t.

Tara asks Xander, “Y—you’re sure it was him? I mean, you saw him?”

Xander nods. “It was him. I guess when ancient cursed artefacts fail, there’s always guns.”

Tara glances anxiously at Dawn, but the girl doesn’t seem to be listening.

Faith takes a seat. “So I can kill him?” she asks, sounding almost cheered.

Giles thinks over the Council’s criteria for allowing the slayer to kill a human: The clear and
immediate danger they must pose, the absence of other options. “I’m not going to stop you” he concludes. A heady cocktail of emotions swim across Faith’s face and Giles regrets his words: He is her watcher too, and ought to stop her slipping back into the darkness that violence against a human brings. But the worry is distant, and his thoughts slip immediately to Buffy, to wondering how long she has been in the operating room.

Tara says, “It would be better if he’s arrested. H-he can be now; he’s committed a human crime.”

“Bullshit” says Faith complacently.

Tara glances at Dawn again and Faith follows her gaze, says no more.

They wait. Every time a doctor bustles past, they are immediately alert, only to sag into their trance of waiting again as the doctor walks past without news. At some point, Faith seems to notice her cap, scowls, and tosses it in the bin. “What?” she asks when they glance at her, “I’ll tell them I lost it.”

There is no clock visible where they are sitting. At some point, Xander goes to buy coffee for everyone and returns with the time. It takes Giles a second to translate the time into something he understands, as if Xander is talking in some archaic language he has only a hazy grasp of. They have been here hours. No-one drinks the coffee.

A doctor appears asking about insurance as if Buffy were a car or a pet dog. Giles signs what needs to be signed to ensure he is billed for whatever Buffy needs. He can worry about money later. Perhaps the Council will help: Not the Council proper but a whip round with sympathetic members, veterans of fieldwork, those with potentials to raise, those who will understand what it is to be sitting here.

The Council ought to be told, he realises. He goes to do that. Puts the phone down halfway through the lecture on allowing a mere human to get the better of his slayer, not out of anger but because it doesn’t seem especially important and he doesn’t want news to come while he is off making a call.

“Spike should be here” says Dawn suddenly.

Everyone glances at each other. Dawn asks, “Shouldn’t someone go get him? It must be dark by now. It feels like it should be dark by now.”

“No yet, Dawnie” says Willow, “It’s about home from school time. But weekend.”

“School” repeats Dawn as if she’s never heard of such a place.

Tara says, “I’ll phone your principal in the morning and explain you won’t be in for a while.”

“Okay. And what about Spi –” Dawn breaks off, swallows convulsively and stares as a doctor approaches them.

A lot of what is said escapes Giles. Normally, between the first aid training given to all frontline watchers and a work placement during his teens with an aunt who worked in the Council’s infirmary, he can follow some medical jargon, but not this time. He gets the crucial part though: Buffy is not dead. That and a magical word: Stabilised.

“She won’t be awake for a while” says the nurse who leads them to Buffy’s bedside, “You guys should go home: Eat, get some rest.” The idea is revolutionary to all of them.

Buffy is small. Awake, she never seems small. Here, she is a slight figure, her face slender beneath
a clumsy plastic mask that fogs and clears in intervals that Giles supposes are breaths. There is a tube down her throat beneath it, gaudy and intrusive looking. Tubes and wires are scribbled across the sheets, over her arms. A rhythmic pattern of bleeps marks the continuing fact of her heartbeat on a screen beside her.

They don’t go home to eat or get rest. They stay until a different nurse hints that there are too many of them around the bed and that they are getting in the way. Then Giles is vaguely aware of arrangements being made. He doesn’t know what these arrangements are until Willow asks, “So is that okay, Giles?”

“Hm?”

“Xander’s going to drive us home” Tara explains patiently, “If you want to stay here with Dawn?”

“Oh…Jolly good, yes.” Giles returns to studying Buffy’s sleeping face.

Tara asks, “Dawn, are you sure you want to stay? You could come and eat dinner and still be back here for when she wakes up.”

“I’m staying” says Dawn, with a stubbornness only her sister taken with a particular approach to slaying could hope to emulate. Giles feels a rush of affection for her.

The rest of them file out, Ethan taking a moment to hug Giles before he goes, and each of them hugging Dawn. When they have been gone for a while, Giles registers distantly that he is hungry and remembers that Dawn, busy holding the hand that he is not, is not going home for dinner. He ought to get some food in the girl, he decides. Buffy would want him to make sure she eats.

Getting Dawn to the hospital canteen takes some doing but he manages between gentle hints and using what Buffy sometimes calls his teacher voice. For all the hospital as a whole is better furnished than any he’s been in in London, Giles can’t imagine the quality of the food would be any worse there. As he and Dawn pick at slimy pizzas, Dawn asks, “Could you go and get Spike, when we’re done?”

“I’m not sure he’s around” Giles tells her carefully. “Apparently he said something about some errand, out of town.” It is not even precisely a lie, and he is trained to tell worse if need be, but the look on her face still stings.

“He didn’t tell me” Dawn says and Giles doesn’t reply. Best not to encourage the child to think the vampire is a trustworthy being who can be expected to keep her informed of his whereabouts. Better she doesn’t want to know his whereabouts, really. Better that he no longer lives with her. And yet Giles finds he thinks this rather academically, the thoughts born of years of training and not of what he actually feels right now. What he feels right now is that if Spike wants a soul, he can have Warren’s. Why is it that good men are sired and lost, and a young man alive in a world Buffy has saved dozens of times fires a gun at her and keeps his personhood?

Not that he knows what Spike was like with a soul, Giles realises. He could have been a Victorian Warren, for all Giles knows. But somehow he doubts it.

“Come on” says Dawn, cutting in before he can wonder further, “We should get back to Buffy.”

*****

The next fifty or so hours are a blur. Buffy doesn’t wake, something which, while worrying, they are told is not surprising. She is never alone, is the main thing. One, or more often, several of her friends are always beside her. They sleep in short bursts and at odd times, snatching rest where
they can. Mealtimes, taken at Buffy’s house, are erratic and unhealthy affairs. Giles and Ethan return to their own flat only to shower and grab a change of clothes. Xander seems to have forgotten that clothing can be changed.

It is Dawn who suggests Giles call Hank. The first time he slept since it happened, Giles had woken with a painful urge to call Joyce and had had to remind himself that he couldn’t. Hank, he had forgotten about entirely. A few fruitless hours of long-distance phone calls go nowhere, but he is able eventually to leave a message with one of the man’s colleagues.

Of all of them, Faith spends the least time by Buffy’s bedside, and when she is around, she is restless. Unused, Giles supposes, to being unable to help someone she wants to help. Instead, she turns to what she can do: “I’m going to find Warren” she declares, pacing at the foot of Buffy’s bed.

On either side of the bed, Dawn and Giles exchange a glance. Dawn looks a little hopeful, and Giles assumes she is hoping he will persuade her remaining conscious carer to stay out of trouble. She has a point, of course. Giles’ anger has now abated enough to leave some room for pragmatism, and he knows how disastrous it would be for Faith to kill Warren. “We’ve taken the Daidalos Chest” he reminds Faith, “And without that, he can’t do any harm right now.”

“He has a gun” Faith points out.

“But we have no reason to think he’ll target anyone else but you.”

“Exactly” says Faith, “So I need to fight back, right?”

Giles sighs. He sympathises, really he does. Only, “Your duty as slayer is to protect humanity. Humanity as a whole isn’t threatened by Warren, but you could leave the hellmouth undefended if you give him an opportunity to shoot you. And the police are after him in any case.”

“The police don’t know half of what he’s done!” Faith glances to the door, lowers her voice. “The police don’t know about demons. So there’s no law against raising them.”

“There’s a law against shooting people” replies Giles, “They can get him for that.”

“Get him and do what? Giles, I thought you were out for his blood too!”

“I was. I was angry. But I don’t want you to get tangled up with the authorities. Not to mention, if you take a human life, even with justification, the Council will get involved. There could be another trip to England.”

A shadow passes Faith’s face, but she only says, “Worth it for B.”

“Definitely” says Dawn. Giles stares at her. She adds, “If the police catch him, then what? Prison? He tried to kill Buffy. He almost did.”

Faith nods emphatically. “Prison’s too good for him.”

“Faith, as a slayer, it is your duty to protect humans. The duty to punish them belongs to others.”

“Who never screw up!” is the sarcastic response.

“Who will be able to convict him for attempted murder.”

Faith rolls her eyes, paces a little more, then sighs and heads for the door. “I’m not just waiting
here. Even if the bastard has to be handed to the cops, I’m still going to be the one doing the handing. My hands leave a few bruises? Just one of those things.”

“You’re not a vigilante, Faith” Giles reminds her wearily.

“So said anything about vigilante? It’s a citizen’s arrest, that’s all. That’s a thing, right?”

At his nod, she marches out. Giles judges it best not to stop her given that if Willow hasn’t managed to track Warren and Andrew with a location spell, there is little chance of Faith finding them anyway. She may as well vent some frustrations looking.

Why Willow hasn’t found them is not entirely clear. Giles hopes it is simply that they are on the move and not that they still have enough magical items for another cloaking spell.

“Is that all he gets?” Dawn asks, interrupting Giles’ thoughts, “He tries to kill my sister and he gets jail?”

“It’s all he’d get for trying to kill anyone else’s sister” Giles reminds her gently.

“So, it’s up to you to decide” she replies icily, “You were all ready to let Faith kill him a few when it happened, and now you’ve decided not to and we have to all go along with it.”

“I was angry” Giles repeats.

“But you’re not now?” How can such a young voice sound so bitter? “Now, him putting Buffy in hospital in just kind of annoying?”

Not for the first time in the last few days, Giles is hit again by the reality of the situation: Buffy is here, right here, in this room as they discuss her. Her face is peaceful under the plastic mask, her body held down by clever monitoring devices that a slayer should be strong enough to shake off. That anyone Giles loves should be strong enough to shake off. He says, “I’ll never forgive Warren for doing this. But, Dawn, is it really fair to expect Faith to kill him? After what she went through after accidently harming a human?”

Dawn is silent for a moment. “I suppose not.” Then another moment of silence, before she says, “But it doesn’t have to be Faith, does it? Warren’s human. Any human could do it.”

“And doing it would damage any human” Giles tells her, “Taking a life…It’s never easy, Dawn. Saying it is easy, but the act itself? It’s never without consequence.” Dawn gives a small nod. “So, it’s not fair to ask someone else to do it?”

“Not really. Not when Warren can be dealt with by the police. If that weren’t the case I might see it differently.”

Dawn nods again, and is quiet for the rest of their visit, holding Buffy’s hand tightly in her own.

*****

Xander and Tara are with Buffy that evening. Faith, having reappeared again briefly, no closer to finding Warren, has gone off on patrol. This seems to worry Rupert, but Ethan, for one, is relieved: For all that no supernatural creature has posed a long-term threat this year, the vampires and lower demons have been rather active. It wouldn’t do to leave them unchallenged, especially not with Spike out of town on top of Buffy being out of action.

Rupert cooks. Then they all make a make a valiant attempt to eat. Afterwards, Dawn slips away
upstairs. Ethan hopes she will catch up on some sleep. He’d lain awake in the spare room last night, listening to the child twist about restlessly.

Willow settles down on the sofa with the broken Buffybot stretched over her lap. The thing is slightly less surreal to look at than it was when Buffy was in the ground but not by much. It is almost a relief when Willow unhinges its face and swings it sideways against her torso, replacing its approximation of Buffy’s familiar smile with wires and gears.

“I tried another location spell” Willow tells them, “No luck.”

“I suppose they could have left town” Giles replies.

“That’s if Andrew’s still with him” says Willow, “Maybe there isn’t a they.”

“That’s a point” says Ethan, “If I was Andrew, I’d have called it quits by now.”

“If you were Andrew” says Rupert, “There are a lot of things you would have done. The right thing for one.”

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit there, love” says Ethan, who suspects that, at Andrew’s age, he would have gone along with whatever was exciting and chaotic and got him closer to powerful magic. He’d only have left when it didn’t, any more.

But Rupert shakes his head, “You didn’t summon Sweet” he points out, “Andrew did.”

Survival instinct, Ethan thinks, and fear of Rupert’s disapproval. Perhaps, when it comes down to it, the difference between him and Andrew is that the tough he followed turned out to have a conscience and a calling.

“I suspect they’re still together” says Rupert, “Warren strikes me as someone who makes an impression on the weak minded.”

Ethan shifts uncomfortably beside him.

“Maybe they made another cloaking spell between them” says Willow, “I don’t think they’d just be driving around. But then, they did invisiblise Buffy, didn’t they? Do you think maybe they’ve perfected that? I didn’t try a location spell for Buffy when she took that invisible walk because, well, walking is moving, so, limitations. But could they have made it so they’re invisible to magic too?”

“I really don’t know, Willow” says Rupert, “The device they used for that seemed to be more a form of technology than magic, from what Dawn said.” “It was” says Willow, “But, magic and tech? Not as unmixy as you’d probably like to think. And if anyone was going to pull off the mix, it would be Mr Robot Guy Warren.”

“And you” says Ethan absently. Willow scrunches her face at the comparison and he adds, “Sorry.” Thoughts returning to where Warren could be, he wonders, “I don’t suppose they could be hiding out with Rack? His den doesn’t reveal itself easily. He doesn’t strike me as one to share though.”

“I’m becoming inclined to think they’ve left Sunnydale” muses Rupert, “Why would they stay here after all?”

“Unless they’re planning something else” says Willow grimly, “Which they might be.”
Rupert nods. “Or they might not. Unless they do, Faith doesn’t need to wrestle with the ethics of fighting humans.”

“I guess not.” Willow returns her attention to the Buffybot, extracting a strip of something from a case by its ear.

Ethan says, “Not if the police catch them and they end up in jail with no supplies” They don’t strike him as advanced enough to work magic from nothing. Without potions and offerings, they will pose no threat.

Willow nods, looks over the little strip of metal, dented and raised in places like braille. “And in the meantime” she says, “I’ll keep working on our back up plan.”

*****

Someone ought to check that Dawn has gone off to sleep, and with Willow focused on robotics and Rupert focused on brooding, Ethan realises after an hour or so that the task has fallen to him. Poor Dawn: Barely two years ago, it would have been her mother, with her sister nearby too and her father still in touch. Now she gets him knocking on her door. “Dawn?”

The door opens. Ethan wishes he’d thought to bring a warm drink or something. “Um. Hello. Just checking you’re alright.”

Dawn nods. “I’m okay.”

“You look as though you’ve been crying.” But is that really so surprising?

She opens the door wider, beckons him in. In the midst of the lovely chaos of her bedroom, she has laid out a map. She explains, “I was doing a location spell.”

“Dawn, it’s not up to you to find Warren.”

“I can look for him if I want.”

“And do what?”

Dawn scowls. “I wasn’t looking for him this time anyway: I was looking for Spike. But he really is gone.” The tears are threatening to make a return.

“I…” Ethan stops himself. “Yes, I suppose he is.” He promised Rupert, he reminds himself, that he wouldn’t tell Buffy where Spike is. Wouldn’t do to get her hopes up and all that Rupert nonsense. But, with Buffy in hospital, raising and scuppering her hopes seems crueller than it otherwise would. And if Dawn knew, she’d tell Buffy as soon as she wakes.

Dawn studies him for a moment. If she asks him directly, Ethan realises, he will have to tell her. She doesn’t ask. She says, “Just another person who’s left I guess. Mom’s gone, and dad’s not calling back. Anya isn’t here. And Buffy almost got torn away, and I still don’t know if she’ll wake up.” Her voice tilts and wobbles, the tears emerging to run down her face. She crumples into Ethan’s instinctive hug.

“She’ll wake up” he tells her. “And Anya will be back. She never said she was going away forever.” As for Hank and Spike, Ethan finds he can’t speak for them with confidence. One has demonstrated little interest in returning, the other may be prevented. Old Ones don’t just say, *Oh, sorry, I can’t give you your immortal soul back, but here’s gift voucher and have a nice day.* They
may have seen the last of Spike. Ethan wishes he’d wished him luck.

Dawn says something into his shirt. Ethan realises she is getting it rather snotty and pulls hastily away. “What was that?”

Dawn repeats, “And Warren will pay.”

“Oh yes” says Ethan, “I think so.” When Dawn still looks miserable, he suggests, “How about we practice some spells? Just to take your mind off things.”

“Spells?” She looks curious for a moment, which is an improvement on miserable.

“Yes” says Ethan, “Nothing too big since your mood can affect it, but we could” He searches his mind “we could practise turning things into snakes if you like.”

She considers. Ethan gets the impression she is not considering his suggestion, but some idea of her own. “No thanks” she says at last, “I think I’ll just go to bed.”

“Alright then. But you’d be surprised how much a few harmless spells can cheer you up.”

“No” she says with a small smile, “I can see that.”

*****

Giles’ dreams are usually odd, half-formed affairs that, more often than not, allow him to dwell on routine concerns. He dreams of lost keys (housekeys, not Dawn) of trying hard to stop something (like a social embarrassment, not the apocalypse) and of Ethan (usually causing the social embarrassment and rarely – to Giles’ disappointment – naked). He almost never dreams about things that matter and he certainly never dreams about his father’s study. And he never dreams at all in such vivid detail. And yet, this is a dream: Giles finds he knows it is.

He looks around. His father’s study is not warped and distorted as locations in dreams usually are: It is accurate in all its familiar detail. There is the photo of Arleen, and there is the telephone with its private line to the Council, and there is the plate of crumbs waiting to be collected and replaced with another slice of cake.

The chair is facing away from him, whoever is in it looking out across the damp countryside.

“Wow” says an achingly familiar voice, “I guess it really does rain all the time here.” The chair swivels round to reveal her.

“Buffy!”

She grins. “Hi, Giles.”

“What are you…I, I mean, I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“I didn’t expect to find me here. I thought that was it: Dead, take three.”

Giles shakes his head quickly. “No. You survived. You’re in hospital, unconscious.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Yeah, I got that message.”

“From who?”

“Oh, I’ve been talking to a lot of people. The first slayer, a couple of girls with some link to us
both, a weird bird lady who said to say hi to Willow, a demon in a cave who said he was waiting for a domesticated vampire whatever that is, the creepiest preacher you could possibly imagine, and now you. Oh, and Jonathan.”

“Jonathan?”

“Yeah – he’s awake now, by the way. In the hospital too, under police guard, but awake. You should talk to him. He said Warren’s planning something, but then we got interrupted by all this Star Trek stuff. Other people’s dreams, I’m telling ya.” She looks around. “This is nice though.”

“It’s my father’s study. I don’t usually dream about it.”

“Well” says Buffy frowning at the Council logo on the wall, “I guess it would get old after a while.”

“Are you really in my dream?” asks Giles, “Or am I just, well, dreaming that you are?”

Her smile deepens. “Why’d you think I’d know? This is just happening to me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’m trying to piece my awakeness together. Turns out slayer dreams plus hospital drugs? Weirdness ensues.”

“Consciousness” Giles corrects automatically.

“Huh?”

“Consciousness. Not awakeness.”

Buffy rolls her eyes.

Giles asks, “You want to wake up, then? You’re not…”

“Not what?”

“Not disappointed” Giles forces himself to say, “that you’re not returning to heaven just yet?”

Buffy looks a little startled, as though the idea hadn’t occurred to her. “I guess not” she says. Then, standing up, she tells him, “Speak to Jonathan. I’ll be home when I can.”

With that, she fades, as does the dream. Giles wakes briefly and, registering the darkness, wraps an arm around Ethan and goes back to sleep. He is woken some hours later by Ethan shaking him gently.

“What is it?” Giles asks.

“The hospital just called” Ethan tells him, “Buffy’s awake.”
“Buffy!” Dawn crosses the ICU to give Buffy a gentle hug.

“Hey, Dawnie” Buffy croaks, then clears her throat, winces. “Sorry – I had this tube down my throat. Pulling it out? Whole world of unfun. Hi, guys.” Since her voice is dropping to a hoarse whisper, she backs up the greeting with a little wave of a tube-trailing hand.

There is a chorus of greetings as her friends file around the bed.

“Have they told you what happened?” asks Giles.

Buffy attempts to nod, then closes her eyes briefly. “Ow. Yeah. Well, they said I was shot. I don’t remember.” Already limp in Dawn’s loose hold, she untangles herself further from her sister. Dawn straightens and grips her hand.

“It was Warren” says Faith. Shooting Giles a look, she says, “But I’m going to find him for you.”

Buffy offers a wan smile. “Thanks.” She shifts and pulls her hand from Dawn’s grasp. “Can you guys see a button? I’m supposed to have a button.”

There is some shuffling as everyone examines the plethora of tubes, wires and machinery. “Here” says Xander, indicating a pen-like object topped by a thumb print sized button and attached to a thin tube that snakes away into Buffy’s arm.

“Thanks, Xand.” Buffy’s smile turns hazy as she presses the button. Pain relief, Giles realises.

After a moment, Buffy says, “You guys are going to have to move fast: I think Warren has something planned.”

“Do you…um” manages Giles. It sounds silly to ask if she remembers his dream. But different rules apply to slayers, he reminds himself, and so he forces himself to say, “I saw you in a dream last night.”

Buffy stares at him for a moment in which Giles feels his face colour, but then she says, “Yeah. I remember. Kinda.” She beckons him closer to the side of the bed nearer to him, apparently unaware that Dawn is already there. Giles hesitates but Dawn steps back and away, allowing him to approach.

“I remember telling you about Jonathan” Buffy murmurs. Her eyes move fast, ideas behind them more active than she can be right now. “And I remember Jonathan’s dream. Huh.”


“Yeah” says Buffy, “He’s up to something. Warren, I mean, not Jonathan.”
“So I’ll find him” repeats Faith, “Make him pay.”

Behind her, Dawn mutters, “I’m going to find the bathroom” and turns to go.

“You okay, Dawnie?” asks Tara, and Dawn replies with a distracted, “Yeah, I’m fine” and walks off to the end of the ward, and out of a door.

Giles tells Faith, “Find him – yes, I’m on board with that now. But making him pay is the job of the criminal justice system.”

“He’s right, Faith” says Buffy.

Faith shrugs, disgruntled but not prepared to argue with her. “Let’s just find him first.”

“Talk to Jonathan, perhaps?” asks Ethan, “Once he’s awake.”

“He is” says Buffy, “Beat me to it.”

Willow says, “I have some spells that could get us past the police officers guarding him. Or, officer – Only one when I went past the other day.”

“We’d best do it quickly” says Giles, “They’ll probably move him now he’s awake.”

“Where’s Spike?” asks Buffy suddenly.

“Spike?” asks Willow, with a frown.

Xander steps back a little with a sigh. Faith looks at her feet. Tara and Ethan awkwardly glance around the room. Giles says, “He’s not here right now. Now Buffy, should we ask Jonatha –”

“He knows where I am though, right?”

She has to be told, Giles realises. Not why he’s gone but that he is. It would jeopardise her recovery to worry. Bracing himself against the inevitability of causing her pain that the button can’t fix, he tells her, “Buffy, I’m afraid he left town.”

She looks forlorn. “Did he say when he’ll be back?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“But he’ll be back, right? He isn’t gone. I mean, not for good.”

In a way, he is gone for good, Giles realises. If he succeeds, the demon will be submerged by the man it once took over. But with the prospect of his success so distant, there is still no reason to distress Buffy with that knowledge. “I’m sure he’ll be back as soon as he can.”

Buffy nods, mollified, and sinks back a little into her pillow. She doesn’t seem to notice Willow’s expression of shock and dawning understanding.

*****

Somewhat disappointingly, Buffy is asleep not long after their arrival. True to her calling, she was awake just long enough to see they came up with a plan for gaining access to Jonathan.

As she works on said plan, mashing herbs into a paste in the relative’s kitchen on the hospital’s fourth floor, Willow asks, “Am I the only one who thought her asking about Spike was weird?”
“Probably” says Ethan. Then, at her questioning glance, comes clean with, “I’m afraid you are the last to know they’ve been getting it on most of this year.”

A splatter of paste hits his face as Willow slips, sending pestle and mortar flying in opposite directions. “Sorry!” gasps Willow.

Ethan finds a roll of kitchen paper and wipes his face. “That’s okay. We got any paste left?”

“I think so” Willow scrapes the remaining paste into a bowl with a guilty cringe. “Are you sure? I mean…with Spike?”

“Positive.”

“I’m not sure it is. Positive, I mean.” Willow sets the bowl aside. “I’m really the last to know? Why didn’t she tell me?”

“To be fair, she didn’t tell me either: I just picked up on a few things. As did Faith. And, err, Dawn.”

“Dawn worked it out?! Boy, my straight radar is really gone!”

“Well you have had a lot on your mind this year.”

Willow nods distractedly. “Yeah, but…Everyone knows? Does Xander know?”

“Less of a happy story, that.”

Willow frowns, then, as the door opens, turns to see Tara. “Tara, did you know? About Bu – What’s wrong?”

Seeing the look on Tara’s face, Ethan asks, “Is it Buffy?”

“No” says Tara, “It’s Dawn – I can’t find her anywhere. She never came back from the bathroom.”

“Could she have gone home?” asks Ethan.

“Maybe” says Tara, “B-but she’d tell us. Wouldn’t she tell us?”

“It’s been a lot for one little Dawnster to take” says Willow, “Could you guys try calling her? I need to finish this spell before they move Jonathan.”

Before Tara can reply, Xander appears with a bundle of miscellaneous items; a toothbrush, a hairbrush, a magazine and a cuddly pig. “How’s it going?” he asks, “Ready to make a nerd fess up?”

“Have you just come from Buffy’s?” asks Tara.

“Yeah” Xander indicates his hoard.

Willow says, “Please tell us Dawn went with you?”

“…No” Xander looks around, then sighs. “Let me guess, missing? Man, she really picks her moments.”

“We have to find her” says Tara.
Willow nods. “You guys go. I’ll get this potion up to Faith and Giles.”

“Sure” Xander tips the items into Willow’s startled hands. “You wanna take Mr Gordo too?”

“Okay. Just get Dawnie back here.”

Ethan asks, “Will you tell Buffy she’s missing?”

Willow shakes her head. “I don’t think so. She’s still fragile.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go then.”

*****

“Dawn?” calls Tara into the murky darkness of the ruined shop. There is no reply. Ethan steps forward, “I’ll try the backroom.” Stepping carefully around boxes of salvaged offering bowls, he passes through the doorless entrance to what was once the training room.

No Dawn. Ethan returns to Tara and Xander, shaking his head. Xander lets out a low, defeated whistle and steps back through the front door, turns to look up and down the street.

“The spell definitely said downtown” says Tara.

“She’s on the move” says Ethan. He leads her out the shop and locks up, not that there’s much left to steal.

“S-still” says Tara, “She can’t have gone far.”

Xander adds, “At least this location spell failed in a different way to the location spell to find Warren, so I’m thinking Dawn isn’t kidnapped for once.”

Ethan gives him a disgruntled look. “It didn’t fail. Dawn’s just quick.” Looking around himself, half hoping Dawn will appear after all, he decides, “And as she’s on the move, there’s no point doing it again – we just need to work out where she’d go.”

“Yeah” says Xander, “Except I’d say the hospital, to be with Buffy, but that’s where we first noticed the absence of a Dawn.”

“Maybe she just needed to catch her breath” says Tara, “M-maybe she decided to head home after all?”

Xander looks doubtful. “Maybe.”

Ethan takes out his mobile. “If either of you know her friend’s numbers, I’ll call them. Maybe she met up with one them.”

“N-not without checking a phone book” admits Tara, “But if we go back to her house we can call from there. Or should we stay here? We know she must be near here even if she’s going home.”

“I vote stay here” says Xander, “Look around a bit more at least.”

Not especially hopeful, Ethan follows them as they fan out, staring around at the passing Sunnydale commuters, trying to pick Dawn out of the crowd.

*****
No-one will remember they were here, Willow has reassured them, and the camera won’t record them either. To any curious lay-person, Jonathan is alone in this room.

His head is bruised, but he seems otherwise unharmed. He studies his covers for much of their conversation, rather than meet Faith’s steady glare or Willow’s thoughtful frown. Giles doubts he seems intimidating in comparison to the young women, but Jonathan is young too and Giles was, after all, his high school librarian. Jonathan strikes him as the type to fear trouble from teachers, for all he has become embroiled in trouble far worse.

“It wasn’t meant to go like this” Jonathan tells them. “It was just supposed to be fun when we started out.”

“Fun to mess with the chicks who put their asses on the line for you every apocalypse?” retorts Faith, “Yeah, real funny.”

Jonathan flinches. “We didn’t mean any harm.”

“You didn’t” Willow concedes.

Jonathan nods, his gaze settling for the middle distance and something none of them can see. “Warren. He’s just…He doesn’t know when to stop.”

“I’d say he does” says Faith, “I’d say he knows to stop when he’s everything he wants.”

“Maybe.” Jonathan shifts his attention to the bedcoviers again. “I didn’t realise when we started out how he can get. I thought we were just going to learn a bit of magic and…well, I don’t know what I thought.”

Yes he does, thinks Giles. He wishes again that they could have done a truth spell, but with the shop gutted they only have so many supplies. He asks, “Where are they likely to be hiding?”

“I don’t know” says Jonathan. That sounds honest at least. “We were in this rented place for a while.”

“With a cloaking spell up” supplies Willow, “A powerful one.”

“And a load of spinning blades waiting for us” adds Faith.

Jonathan shudders. “That was Warren’s idea.”

“You helped him” states Giles. He has had time to think about that, about the intensive three-man job needed to embed metal into solid wall, the drilling, the measuring, the lifting.

Jonathan has the grace to look ashamed. Willow says, “Warren’s a hard guy to say no to, isn’t he?”

“He wasn’t at first” says Jonathan, “At first he was just one of us.” Glancing at them, he adds, “It was the Daidalos Chest that did it – After we – after he – got that, it was all about power.” He asks Willow, “You think he could have cloaked our location like that before? Every spell we did, it magnified it.”

“It didn’t change who any of you were” points out Giles quietly.

Jonathan seems surprised by this. Apparently the idea of an external source of their corruption hadn’t been a lie intended for them so much as himself.

Willow asks, “What else did it the Chest do?”
“You saw the demon army” Jonathan begins.

“Felt it” says Faith, starting to pace, “Popped its necks and heard the blood stop.”

“Well that wasn’t the main thing we did with it” says Jonathan. “The main thing was summon… entities. People – well, not people – to learn from.”

“About magic” says Willow.

Jonathan nods. “We mostly did it when we were hiding out after things got too intense after Katr – err..” He stops, takes a deep breath. “The Chest can be used as a conduit to let things in to this dimension.”

“Things that have no business being here” concludes Giles.

Jonathan gives a twitch of apparent agreement.

“Demons?” guesses Faith.

Willow shakes her head, studying Jonathan’s expression. “Worse.”

Jonathan nods. “I don’t know what they were. We’d lay out wards to trap them in, but so many times, they almost broke free, even with the Chest making our magic stronger.” He shudders. “It freaked me and Andrew out. Look, Andrew hasn’t been on board with Warren for ages, like me. He’s just doing what Warren says so he won’t get hurt.”

“A generous attitude considering he abandoned you to face the consequences alone” says Giles.

Jonathan flinches. “Warren might have made him.”

Faith stops pacing to fix him with a disgusted look. “Made him back when he was planning that shit with the demon army and you guys were doing what to show you weren’t onboard? Looking scared in a corner while he was talking to entities?”

“Entities” corrects Giles quietly.

“Whatever.”

Jonathan squirms. “I’m sorry.” Then, “Look, we were trying to get away. Andrew started talking about Mexico. But then Warren said we were ready to summon the army and things sort of… got out of control, I guess.”

“You guess?” snaps Faith, “My best friend’s in hospital!”

“I didn’t have anything to do with the gun” insists Jonathan. “I didn’t even know he had it – like I told the police.”

“What else does he have?” asks Giles, “What’s he planning?”

“There’s nothing else really” says Jonathan, apparently thinking this over, “Except what he learnt from the things he summoned.”

Nothing but knowledge. Oh dear, thinks Giles. Meeting Willow’s eyes, he can tell she is thinking the same.

“What?” asks Faith, “These things tell him how to get better weapons than a gun?”
“Worse than weapons” Jonathan tells her, “Way worse. I didn’t think he’d ever actually do it. When I heard he’d shot Buffy, I thought maybe he would be the one heading to Mexico instead, that maybe he’d decided it was too risky…”

“That what was too risky?” asks Willow.

“There’s a temple buried up on Kingman’s Bluff. If Warren’s planning anything, it’s to uncover it. There’s an effigy there. One of the things that came out the Daidalos Chest, this weird snake lady, she seemed to know a lot about it. She said the effigy can be used to gain power over all the realms, demon and human.”

“World ruled by Warren” mutters Faith, “We should’ve just let Glory win.”

“Snake lady?” asks Willow.

“Well she had a snake around her” explains Jonathan. “And a kind of – well definitely – forked tongue.”

“Medusa hair?” asks Willow.

Jonathan nods. “I didn’t notice that at first because she was in shadow. The room wasn’t shadowy, I mean, but she brought her own.”

Before Giles can ask what Willow has clearly realised, Faith says, “Can we get back to how Warren might become the king of us?”

“He won’t – at least, not easily” says Willow, “That sort of power doesn’t just get handed over.”

Jonathan inclines his head in agreement. “There’d be a cost” he says, and Giles realises with a shiver that Warren wouldn’t be the one paying it. Jonathan adds, “And it sounded uber risky. Like, it was everything Warren wanted but it’s risky enough that he decided to go with the demon army instead.”

There is a pause while they consider what risks that render a demon army the better option might entail. Giles asks, “Could it destroy the world?”

Jonathan nods. “If it goes wrong.”

“And if it goes right” mutters Faith, “World ruled by Warren is pretty well destroyed.”

Willow says, “Jonathan, that snake lady, that’s Proserpexa – It’s her temple. Of course she’d just tell Warren whatever he wanted to hear – she wants to be unleashed!”

“So…Warren won’t be king of us?” asks Faith.

“My guess? Warren will think he’s getting his way for just long enough for her to use him to get free.” “We didn’t know” says Jonathan desperately, “I didn’t know. I never thought he’d go this far.”

“You thought he just found out about this crap for a laugh?” snaps Faith.

“He said it would do for a back up” says Jonathan, “But I never thought he’d actually use it!”

“Is there nothing else he’d try, if this is so dangerous?” asks Giles, “No alternative route to, um…”

“To getting whatever he wants” finishes Faith.
“It does seem a terrible risk” says Giles, “Even for someone like Warren. Couldn’t he wait, and find a better way to, err…”

“To take over the world?” concludes Faith.

“Yes” realises Giles, “Perhaps not. But if he’s cautious enough to have a back up, perhaps he might wait and find a different approach?” Perhaps Buffy might have time to recover before she has to face all this.

Jonathan is shaking his head. “Maybe he might have waited” he says, “Gone to Mexico, bided his time. But the snake lady –”

“– Proserpexa –” Willow supplies.

“– yeah – she said something’s coming. Something big. And if we didn’t get ahead of it, it would start to devour before we had a shot at power. Or something like that.” He looks down at his sheets again. “I guess she would say that, though? If she just wants out. She played us.”

“Maybe” says Willow, with the unease of one who knows that something is indeed coming, because she invited it.

“So he’s jumping straight to the big finish” concludes Faith. “I guess we better beat him to it?”

*****

“Why would she come here?” asks Xander, staring around with distaste at the slouched and sprawled regulars of Willy’s Place. This time of day, it is mainly the hardcore drinkers, those too drunk yesterday to make it home before sunrise, plus a few day traders, here to swap gossip and questionable goods.

“I don’t know” replies Ethan, “but we’ve tried everywhere else.” And so they have, from Dawn’s friends’ homes, to the mall and everywhere in the town centre. The child seems to have vanished, though a few extra locations spells showed her presence pulsating reassuringly, sending them from place to place only to find she has moved on already. Wretched girl.

Tara looks at the blue haired and heavily made up vampire pouring pints behind the bar. “Should we ask someone?”

Ethan lowers his voice to reply, “And let them know there’s a teen with mystical properties wandering around town up for grabs? Let’s not. We’ll have a quick drink and see if she shows up. Then we can try the airport for all I know. I’m out of ideas.”

Xander says, “Not impossible she’d try and get a flight to see her dad, I guess.” He steps towards the door. “Forget staying here, we should go and – hey” He steps back sharply to let a half breed with a dash of human go past, accompanied by an enormous Lava Demon.

“Hello Eric” Ethan greets as it passes.

“Rayne” the Lava Demon grunts, “Sorry to hear about your shop. That’s rough, that is.”

“Who’s this?” The half breed has turned.

Eric plucks his arms from their folds to gesture between the pair of them. “Rayne, Kelfur, Kelfur, Rayne.”
“Pleasure” says Ethan. When the halfling doesn’t respond, he indicates his companions. “This is Xander, and Tara. We just came in for a quick drink.” “We were just leaving” Xander corrects.

“Good” grunts Kelfur, “Humans have enough places to drink, without coming in here.”

Xander looks surprised. “But aren’t you –” Ethan elbows him sharply and says, “No-one else here has a problem with me.” He indicates the regulars, none of whom are keen to get involved. Apart from Eric, that is, who thumps him on the back and says, “Right – Rayne’s okay. He’s here all the time.”

Kelfur appears unmoved. He says, “That was before some up themselves humans robbed my clan.”

“How’s that to do with me?” asks Ethan, “I’m not humans, I’m just me. I’ve never had any problem with the” He scans Kelfur’s demonic features and hazards, “Nezzla demons.”

“You can’t be sure it was humans that took it” adds Eric.

“Who else would?” sneers Kelfur, “It was something weak wanting to be strong. Humans.” He spits the word and turns away, heads for the bar.

“We should go” says Tara.

Ethan nods vaguely but turns to Eric. “What’s been taken?”

Eric sighs heavily, tucking his arms back into his folds. “Only the orbs of Nezzla’Khan. Look, just ignore Kelfur – It’s not like he could even use the orbs. They belong to purebreds.”

“Orbs of Nezzla’Khan” muses Ethan, “I think I’ve heard of them.”

“Maybe a problem for another day” says Xander, already half way to the door, and reaching out to tug Ethan with him. Ethan shrugs him off. He’ll be damned if he’s forced out his local. At the very least he’ll stay for a conversation, just to prove a point. “They give the power of strength?” he asks, going on what Kelfur said but trying to make it sound like prior knowledge.

Eric nods sagely. “Makes things more or less invincible. Not just humans – a lot of demons could use a boost like that.”

“But it was humans” says Ethan, an unwelcome realisation hitting.

“Nezzla seem to think so” confirms Eric.

“Oh” says Tara quietly.

“Yep” says Xander, eyes wide with the shared realisation. “Ethan, we have to go.”

“Don’t let him force you out” says Eric, “Look, I’ll have a word with him.”

“Thanks, Eric” says Ethan, “But we do need to go. Places to be, people to kill.” Hopefully metaphorically, but if Warren is supernaturally strong, all bets are off. He follows Xander and Tara out into the street, where Xander asks, “Okay, we’re all thinking Warren, right?”

Tara nods. “And Andrew, if they haven’t split up.”

“Super strong geek duo, right.”

Ethan pulls out his phone. “I’ll call the others.” He wrote down the number for the phone beside
Buffy’s bed before leaving. Buffy answers with a blurred, “Hello?”

“Buffy – Is Rupert there?”

“Oh, hi Ethan. No, still…” Buffy trails off sleepily.

“Buffy?”

“Oh. Still with Jonathan, I guess. Lotsa questions.” She yawns.

“Is anyone else there?”

“Only me. Why? Is there a problem?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. See you in a bit.”

“Bye Ethan.”

Hanging up, Ethan tells Xander and Tara, “They’re all still busy with Jonathan.”

“We should get over there” says Xander. “Dawn could be headed back there anyway by now”

Ethan nods and follows, but not before sharing a doubtful look with Tara.

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The doors of the hospital lift almost close, then snap open again as a fourth person slips a hand in then enters. Xander starts. “Anya!”

Anya regards them. “Hi.”

Ethan almost hadn’t recognised her: She’s changed her hair. Her whole demeanour is different too, somehow, but before he can wonder how, she is asking, “Who’s with Dawn?”

Ethan, Xander and Tara glance at one another. Tara asks, “W-why?”

Anya answers with her own question. “Something happened, didn’t it?”

“You heard?” asks Ethan cautiously. Surely she’d only have heard from one of the group and if she had, why does she not know what happened? “Have you spoken to Rupert?”

Anya shakes her head. “I got back to town just now and I could feel it. When none of you were home I came here – I figured it must be a hospital thing. At least, I hoped it was a hospital thing and not a morgue thing.”

“Not a morgue thing” confirms Tara.

Ethan adds, “At least not until Faith finds Warren.”

“He shot Buffy” Tara explains. The lift pings open and they file out, onto Buffy’s floor. “But she’ll be okay.”

Xander is staring at his ex. “What do you mean you felt it?” he asks.

“I can feel Dawn” Anya replies.

“Um…”
“Her thirst for vengeance” Anya clarifies, “As soon as I got back, I could sense it. It’s overwhelming.”

“Oh” says Tara in a small voice.

“Exactly” says Anya, “She must be going after Warren.”


Ethan nods, but decides, “Not the time. If Warren’s made himself invincible, we need to get to Dawn before she gets to him.”

Leading the way to Buffy’s ward, he hears Xander ask Anya behind him, “This sensing stuff: Is it left over from your demon days?” and her reply: “No. Not left over.”

Buffy’s bed is once again surrounded by scoobies. And Jonathan, looking nervous and being gripped slightly harder than seems necessary by Faith.

“…counteract the magic” Rupert is saying.

“Hey” says Xander shortly as they come over. With a pained glance at Anya he puts himself on the other side of the bed from her.

“Anya” Buffy murmurs with a smile.

“Hello Buffy” Anya speaks loudly, her enunciation carefully exaggerated, as though Buffy’s hearing was affected.

“Good to see you back” breathes Buffy, then closes her eyes.

“Err, yes” says Rupert, glancing at her, “Welcome back, Anya. Now, if we could focus on how to stop Warren –”

“And quickly” puts in Xander, “Because he has super strength.”

They fill the others in on the Orbs of Nezzla’Khan.

“Oh man” sighs Jonathan, “I forgot about those.”

Faith gives him a little rattle. “Convenient” she says.

“I swear I had! We thought about it before we found out how to do the army-raising but I thought Warren dropped the idea. I didn’t think he’d do that and the temple raising thing – It seems like overkill.”

“Seems like a good way to stop me stopping the temple thing” says Faith.

“Um” manages Ethan, gesturing at Jonathan, “What’s he doing here?”

“Stole him” says Faith. Directing her words at Jonathan, she adds, “Want to keep him with us in case he turns out to be a liar.”

“But don’t worry, they won’t know he’s missing” says Willow, “I made it so no-one will
remember he was under arrest until we hand him back.”

“Nifty spell” says Faith.

Willow smiles. “Thanks.”

Seeing Ethan’s continued bafflement, Rupert explains, “We thought it best to keep him with us in case he hasn’t told us everything. Or in case we encounter a situation where his insight could be useful. This orb business for instance?” He turns to Jonathan.

“You smash the orb” Jonathan tells him, flinching at a jab from Faith, “Then he’ll lose his power.”

“Easy” says Faith.

“For you maybe” says Anya, “But not for D –”

“Will Andrew be strong too?” asks Ethan, cutting in before she can say Dawn’s name.

“No” says Jonathan, “It works on one person at a time and I kind of think Warren’s past sharing.”

“Probably never his strong suite” says Willow.

Anya, meanwhile, is scowling in confusion as Ethan makes a shushing gesture and points at Buffy.

“She’s asleep” says Anya. She pokes Buffy. “See? Asl – oh” Her tone reverts to loudly forced cheer “Hello Buffy.”

“Hi” murmurs Buffy, “Who poked me?”

“Oh, that was Giles.”

“It was not!” says Rupert. “Anya, if –”

“G-guys” Tara interjects, “Maybe we should let Buffy get some rest.”

“Yes” says Willow catching on, “Let’s, err, go out into the hall.”

“No” says Buffy, “You guys can talk here.”

“If you’re sure…” begins Rupert.

“She’s delirious, Rupert, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about” says Ethan, “Hall it is.”

“Sure, hall sounds good” says Xander. He takes Jonathan’s arm and guides him towards the door, forcing a puzzled Faith to follow rather than lose her grip on the boy’s other arm.

“I’m not delirious” says Buffy.

“You are tired” Rupert tells her, standing up, “It’s probably best you rest undisturbed.” As soon as they are all out in the hallway, he turns to Ethan, Tara and Xander. “What’s going on?”

“Dawn’s gone after Warren” Anya answers for them, “She’s out for revenge.”

“Damn” Rupert turns to Faith. “We have to find him before she does.”

“Definitely” says Faith, “And before he wakes this snake chick up.”
“Snake chick?” asks Tara.

“Patron of a satanic temple on Kingman’s Bluff we think he’ll try to raise” explains Willow, “but don’t worry.”

“Hey Willow” says Xander, “I’m not sure how well don’t worry follows satanic temple.”

“We still don’t know how to stop him” points out Rupert.

“We’ll just have to get up there planless and try” states Faith, “before Dawn does. I’m not letting the bastard kill Dawnie on top of shooting B.” She pulls Jonathan from Xander’s grasp and leads him towards the lifts. She makes her hold on him look casual for the benefit of any uninitiated passers-by, but Ethan can tell the lad has no hope of escape. “Come on Giles” adds Faith over her shoulder, “I’m going to need you to distract him so I can get to the orbs.”

“Absolutely” says Rupert. He turns to Ethan and hugs him. “I’ll see you later.”

“You’d better” says Ethan. “Tell me you’re armed.”

“I will if it makes you feel better, but I’m afraid it would be a lie.” Rupert smiles contritely and turns away, follows his second slayer. Ethan can only stare after him.

“We’ll all go” Xander says, moving to follow.

“No you won’t” Faith pauses at the lift, “I only need G.”

“Not me?” asks Jonathan hopefully.

“Oh, and you, Johnny boy.” Faith gives him a playful shake, “Can’t forget you.”

“Uh huh” The boy seems to resign himself to his fate.

It occurs to Ethan that in return for not being handed back to the police, Jonathan could be persuaded to distract Warren and Rupert wouldn’t have to put himself in danger. Pointless to point it out, of course. Rupert wouldn’t allow the risk of betrayal that possibility opens up. “Good luck” he tells them. Anya adds, “Don’t get killed.” Ethan wishes she hadn’t.

“We all want to help” Xander is saying, “We can all distract him. Willow, Tara and Ethan can help with magic.”

“If you want us too” adds Tara.

Xander glances at her and then turns back to Faith. “Or if you don’t – We’ll still help, it’s what we do!”

Faith shakes her head, pulling Jonathan back as the lift opens and worried people, caught up in their own crisis, hurry past. “Not happening, Xand – I want B to still have friends when she leaves hospital.”

“We’re your friends too” says Tara, “And Dawn’s.”

“Faith” says Rupert, holding the lift for her. Faith tells Tara, “Then you’ll stay where you can’t get hurt – This is slayer stuff.” Entering the lift, she pauses halfway in and decides, “Cept actually, Willow – You should come with us. He gets that temple up; your mojo could be useful.”

Xander stares. “So my offer of help is just a big sack of uselessness?”
Anya mutters, “Sounds about right.” She steps forward. “I’ll come too” she says, “I can sense Dawn. Long story.”

“Huh” says Faith, “Okay then” She leans against the door, keeping the lift in place as Anya approaches. Beside her, Rupert clearly knows exactly what her sudden psychic abilities mean. He stares past her, meets Ethan’s gaze with a grim expression. Ethan gestures helplessly, hoping to convey, *I didn’t know.*

Willow embraces Tara. “Don’t worry about Dawn, sweetie – I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“None of us will” says Xander desperately, “We’ll all help.”

“You’ll stay here” says Faith, “Buffy needs you.” She steps aside to let Willow in and the door closes. A series of descending lights on the control panel mark their progress down and away.

Chapter End Notes

Anya's "Don't get killed" is a line from the show but I can't remember which episode. If anyone can let me know in the comments, I'd be grateful :)

By unspoken agreement, Ethan and Tara return to Buffy’s bedside. Xander follows slowly, first casting a glower at the closed lift doors.

“Hey” Buffy greets.

“Hello, Buffy.” Tara rests her hands on the rail that inexplicably borders the hospital bed. Ethan can’t work out what it is there for. Surely not to stop Buffy rolling out? She is tiny in the wide expanse of mattress; if she rolled over, she’d still have plenty of room. Behind him, Xander hovers, glancing back every now and then at the door.

Buffy asks, “Where’re the others?”

“T-they just had to go and um, handle a few things.”

“Warren?”

Tara nods. “But don’t worry, it’s all under control.”

It’s all under control seems to Ethan to be universal code for start panicking, but Buffy – drug-addled and sleepy – accepts it with a smile. Closing her eyes, she asks, “And Spike’s with Dawn?”

The three friends left at her bedside exchange worried looks. Before anyone can reply, Buffy’s eyes open. “No” she says, almost to herself, “Spike’s gone.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back” says Ethan, hoping to keep her attention on the vampire.

“But who’s with Dawn?” Buffy asks.

If Ethan or Tara had been a fraction quicker, if Xander had been fully engaged instead of heading for the doors now, they might have convinced her that Dawn was home alone. Not ideal, but not really a first. As it is, they are tired and stressed and they don’t come up with the excuse fast enough. Buffy startles into full alertness and attempts to sit, the movement resulting in a harsh gasp.

“Buffy!” Tara eases her back down.

“Where is she?” demands Buffy, “How long has she been gone?”

“Not long” Ethan tells her.

“Not long where?”

“Sh-she took herself off after you woke up” Tara admits, “Sh-she probably j-just needs a little t-time.” She flinches at her stammer. Accomplished in many areas, Tara is apparently not built for lying. She looks to Ethan as if hoping someone more expert in the field might step in but Ethan can tell it is too late: Buffy is eyeing them both suspiciously. She asks, “How long after I woke up?” When they don’t answer, she says, “Oh, God, how long and I didn’t notice?”

“Xander’s gone to find her now” says Ethan, who has no idea where Xander has gone.

“I didn’t notice” Buffy repeats.
“You’ve been shot, Buffy” says Tara, “You couldn’t help not noticing.”

“But I haven’t noticed for so long before that!”

“We’re going to find her” says Tara, “Aren’t we, Ethan? We’ll bring her back.”

“Absolutely” Ethan replies. Ideally, he thinks, before encountering a superpowered Warren.

Buffy nods fervently. “Find her. Bring her back to me.”

“We will” Tara promises again.

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“Will we though?” asks Ethan once their out of earshot, “We know where she’s going – Isn’t it best to let the superpowered among us take it from here? Well, and Xander. I assume that’s where he’s snuck off to.”

“We could still see if we can find Dawn before she reaches Kingman’s Bluff” reasons Tara, “Now that Buffy knows she’s missing, she won’t want us staying in the hospital, so what else can we do?”

“Good point” concedes Ethan, “I don’t really want to go home and put my feet up.” Not with Rupert running into danger. Rupert who is not actually superpowered now Ethan thinks about it. Easy to forget that.

Rupert has taken the car so they make their way on foot. Without really discussing it, they take the most direct route from the centre of town to the jut of land visible on the horizon once they round the remains of the old school. The school is almost peaceful now, snake-meat rotted down to fertilize shrubs of slightly unnerving blood-coloured brambles. Noticing movement amongst them, Ethan stops and stares in case it is Dawn, but looks away when it turns out to be a couple of people in suits, out for a lunchtime walk perhaps. It feels like it could be lunchtime, but Ethan isn’t sure. “Sorry” he says, “I thought…But she’s not here.”

“No Xander either” says Tara. Then a shudder runs through the world and she grips his arm. Ethan stares up at Kingman’s Bluff. He’d barely glanced at the ruined school but in the time he was looking away from the cliff the sky above it darkened. Now it is clouded, competing dark colours swirling slightly as the earth rumbles. It is not an earthquake, exactly, but that is probably what the people in suits – now hurrying away from the ruins – assume. To those familiar with magic, it is something simultaneously worse and harder to pinpoint but to everyone else it must simply feel wrong, if the screech of tyres in the distance is anything to go by.

“Dark magic” says Tara unhappily.

“And strong” Ethan agrees. “So he’s up there.”

“Y-yes, so if Dawn hasn’t found him yet, she’ll know where he is now.” Tara breaks into a run, heading straight towards the cliff. Ethan is honestly tempted to call her back. After all, thirst for vengeance or not, would Dawn really head towards that shivering wrongness?

But what if she does? He follows. They are not far from a steeply rising path, where the more ambitious sort of jogger can circumnavigate the mansions to one side or head up towards the towering cliff above the town on the other. Joggers who, Ethan supposes, must be fitter than him. He stops halfway up, hands on knees. Tara stops ahead of him. “Mr Rayne?”
“Don’t mind me” Ethan pants, “I’m just –” He breaks off as voices sound above them, and stares up. From this angle, it looks like Kingman’s Bluff is about to lunge forward and swallow the town. Formed by an earthquake, Ethan supposes. And then, centuries or millennia later, so shaken by another that an entire temple was folded under the earth somewhere up there.

Now, another shudder of magic gnaws at reality. Tara gasps and makes a grab for the surrounding shrubbery as if to stay on her feet, and Ethan does the same, even though the sensation is still not exactly shaking. Or at least, not the shaking of anything physical. As it subsides, the sound of a fight overhead is unmistakable. Straightening, Tara says, “There’s nowhere to hide up there – She might be nearby.”

Ethan eyes the patchy plant life doubtfully. None of it looks substantial enough to hide a Dawn. Wispy bushes, tangled thorns and stunted trees race up the rise, only to give way to stubbly grass at the top. If the child is hiding here, she is doing a better job of it than Ethan could.

Ah, he realises. Or not.

“What is i –” begins Tara, but then the earth actually does shake, not the pseudo-shaking of shifting dark magics but an actual earthquake. Ethan and Tara stumble to their knees as a burst of loose soil scatters down the rise, brushing over their faces and through their hair. Ethan clenches his eyes shut until it is over, grips the ground.

It stops as suddenly as it began and they stand shakily up. Above them, there is a distinct curse from Faith. Tara says, “Come on – before that happens again!” and they run up the rest of the path, until they can see –

“What is that?” asks Tara, stopping just ahead of where the land evens out.

The thing she points at is not unlike a church spire. It is not one though – very much not. “He’s raised the temple.”

Tara shudders but runs on, towards the danger. Ethan follows, not all that enthusiastically because what can they do? If Dawn is determined enough to come up here where a demon priestess’s temple hungrily awaits them all, he doubts he’ll find the words to bring her down.

That’s if they can even find her. Clearly he has taught her too well.

And she will be determined enough, too, if Anya could sense her as strongly as she did. Anya. Well there’s another thing to worry about if they all survive.

The path they were following doesn’t come out right where the temple is – they have to run on for a few frightening minutes as waves of dark magic roll past and break off jarringly. Once they are within sight of the others, it is clear why: Warren is caught between too very different forms of combat, matching his magic to Willow’s only when Faith isn’t able to force him to break off and fend her off physically.

Which he does far too easy a job of, with the help of those cursed orbs. That no-one has been thrown off the cliff yet is a miracle. As Ethan watches, Warren sends Faith crashing back against Xander, and returns his attention to the temple, which seems to grow straight from the ground, pulsating upwards like some terrible amaryllis, long dormant and now ready for a show. It stops suddenly, wavering under the force of Willow’s counter spell until Warren gathers and sculpts his excess magic into a mass that he sends flying at Willow. She brushes it away, but the temple surges upwards while she defends herself.
“Willow!” Tara runs forward. Warren turns to her and Faith takes the opportunity to lunge at him. He twists, trapping her in his magic-enhanced grip. “You don’t give up, do you bitc –” He doubles over as she knees him between the legs, retaliates with a punch.

Rupert appears, dragging Andrew with him. The young man squirms but not in a way that implies a real desire to escape. Easier to be caught at this point, Ethan supposes. Jonathan is with them, helping, somewhat superfluously, to restrain Andrew with a hand clasped over his wrist and watching the fight anxiously. Anya trails after them.

“You shouldn’t have come here” Rupert says by way of greeting.

“Buffy found out Dawn’s missing” Ethan explains. He watches Tara and Willow lock hands, senses their magic entwine to strengthen the counter spell. The spire of the temple sinks a little with a jerky movement that sends a rumble through the ground.

“She’s close” Anya tells him, “Really I’m surprised we can’t see her.”

“But since we can’t” says Rupert, “You’re putting yourself in danger for no reason.”

Ethan gestures to the temple. “If that thing’s freed I’m doomed anyway” he points out, “And I think she’s –”

There is a yelp from Faith as Warren flings her to the ground, stamps on something that snaps audibly.

“Gods” mutters Rupert. He tugs Andrew sideways, presents him to Ethan. “Keep hold of Andrew, will you?”

Andrew mutters, “I’m right here. You don’t need to talk about me like I’m not righ –”

“So you can join in with fighting the guy who’s got a slayer on the ground?” asks Ethan.

“Ethan, you just said we’re dead anyway if that temple rises, so –”

“We won’t be” Andrew interrupts, “I mean, sure, Warren will be in charge but – ow” He rubs the spot were Rupert cuffed him and scowls. Rupert pushes him towards Ethan who feels obliged to take hold of him, gripping the fabric of his jacket half-heartedly. “Rupert, you can’t –” he begins, but Rupert is charging at Warren, who is back to casting his spell as Faith picks herself up, lifting the temple from the earth as Willow and Tara’s counter spell crackles around it, slows it up.

Warren turns as Rupert makes a grab for him and punches him almost lazily, then rolls his eyes as Xander comes at him. “You again? Give it up already, sparky.” He sends Xander flying too.

“He’s got a point” says Anya, “Until we smash those orbs it’s pointless Giles and Xander trying to help. Even Faith can’t fight him.” She sidesteps Jonathan, who is still clutching Andrew’s wrist, eyes fixed on the emerging temple. “What were you saying about Dawn? Because I swear she could be right in front of me. Unless the temple’s messing with my sens – oh!” There is a pop and Anya vanishes, reappears beside Warren who has his hands on either side of Xander’s head, about to crush. Vengeance demons are strong, but Warren is apparently stronger – soon, Anya is hitting the base of the protruding spire, spitting insults as she rights herself. Xander makes use of the distraction to scramble out of Warren’s way.

Ethan lets go of Andrew to search his pockets. He knows he doesn’t have the powder he needs but perhaps he has something that could –

No. Nothing but chalk. He resorts to looking around for Dawn even though he knows he won’t see
Beside him, Andrew and Jonathan wrestle briefly, then stand, separate and sulky. Ethan risks stepping away from them – where can they go anyway? – to call louder for Dawn. Unlikely she’ll respond but he has to try. Another quake ripples through the earth as Warren gains the upper hand, then quells as the counter spell reaches it. Ethan turns to Willow and Tara, wondering if he ought to get over there and let Willow supplement her magic with his, add it to the spell, when the spell breaks anyway when Warren sends both witches tumbling with another hurled bolt of magic that scorches the ground between them. Willow retaliates with a blast of blinding blue light that Warren dodges only to back into Faith, who is on her feet again. As they exchange blows, Ethan takes a few hasty steps back and away from the brawl, returns to stand beside Jonathan and Andrew.

“If you just tell them where they are –” Jonathan is saying.

“I don’t know, okay?” snaps Andrew, “He hasn’t let me see them yet!” He eyes Jonathan disdainfully. “Anyway, I know you only want to break them!” “Yeah, I wanna break them!” says Jonathan, “Andrew, Warren’s in over his head here, Willow said –”

“She’d say anything to stop him!”

“Unless someone stops him, he’s going to end the world!!”

“No, he’s not! Look, I know raising the temple has this little risk but –”

“The apocalypse isn’t a little risk!” snaps Jonathan. “Tell him, Mr Rayne.”

Ethan glances at Andrew and sighs. “Frankly, I don’t care what you think. Now, do either of you have any magical supplies? I need to find –”

“You see?” Andrew turns back to Jonathan, “Mr Rayne isn’t scared of the apocalypse.”

“Oh, I didn’t say that” mutters Ethan. He closes his eyes, tries to focus in on Dawn’s magic but there are too many spells flying about the place. Warren is using stolen power, raw and grating against the hidden sense Ethan experiences magic with. He can’t pinpoint Dawn amidst all this. And he is distracted by the bickering.

“Jonathan, this is Warren we’re talking about” Andrew is saying, “He’s got this.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s got this and what do you get? Even if he doesn’t destroy the world, how long before he screws you over like he did me?”

Andrew is quiet for long enough that Ethan opens his eyes and glances over. He mumbles, “We were going to get you out. And, hey, now you’re out you can make a break for it. Hide out in Mexico or something, until me and Warren –”

“Until you what? Andrew, there is no you and Warren! There’s only Warren looking out for himself!”

Ethan watches the man in question as he fights off Rupert, Faith and Xander before raising his arms to send another bolt of magic at Willow and Tara. As he returns his attention to the temple, it pulsates upwards again, the spire fully revealed now, Proserpexa hanging tauntingly above them. Ethan takes an instinctive step back and Andrew and Jonathan scuttle after him.

“Okay” says Andrew, “Maybe we could both go to Mexico? You know, give Warren and chance to cool off –”
A stray magic-formed missile streaks the air above them and they scatter, Ethan one way, Jonathan and Andrew another. Over the screeching noise of the warring magics, Willow calls out, “Warren, you’ve got to end this!”

“Yeah” says Xander, gaining Warren’s attention as Faith creeps closer on his other side, “Or you’ll end the world. Which – in case you haven’t noticed – you’re in.”

“End the world?” asks Warren, “Is that what the witch told you? She’s just jealous she can’t pull this off!”

“Really not” says Willow, “Warren, if you wake Proserpexa –”

Warren rounds on her. “If I wake Proserpexa I own the bitch! You think that little demon army was the only thing I learnt from the Daidalos Chest? Think again – I’ve got magic to make Proserpexa tremble.”

The eyes on the snake demon’s statue, Ethan notices, have started to glow. Anya has seen it to – she takes a cautious step away from the spire. Below that waiting malice, Faith side steps as Warren moves towards Willow, circling him like the predator she is and approaching him from behind.

“You’re not thinking straight” tries Tara, “All this dark magic, it’s poisoning you. You’re not yourself.” Ethan can’t tell if she really believes that or if she’s just trying to keep him distracted from Faith, a few strides from reaching him now.

“What, you think I actually want to end the world?” Warren laughs. “Babe, this temple rises and I own the world. Maybe then you and me can get along better.” He eyes Tara appreciatively. Above him, the statue’s mouth opens slightly and a forked stone tongue shifts. If Ethan didn’t know better, he’d think Proserpexa was licking her lips.

Actually, he doesn’t know better.

Willow steps sharply in front of Tara. “Okay, Warren, talk to my fiancé like that again and you won’t live to get along with anybody.” Ethan tears his gaze from the statue’s glistening eyes. “Fiancé?”

Willow glances at him. “Not the time, Ethan.”

Faith grabs Warren around the waist and he bends, twists, fights to throw her off as she grapples with him, searching. “You stupid bitch, you can’t get it into your dumb head, can you? You can’t stop me this time slayer: I win.” Warren has one hand free, and Ethan sees magic gathering flame-like at his fingertips. “Faith –” It is too late: Warren breaks Faith’s hold with a blast of magic at close range. She is thrown back as if electrocuted, but Ethan has only a second to see this – then he is scrambling back as the ground crumbles away. Faith has been swallowed by the patch of ground she hit and the chasm spreads, racing away from the edge of the cliff and down the slope that leads away from it, shattering the land.

Ethan isn’t fast enough: the earth beneath his feet writhes like a shook-out table cloth, sending him rolling. Distantly he is away of Willow falling too, of shouts and gasps as the rest of them follow. The slope steepens greedily, the soil rolling like liquid until the deepening angle becomes a sheer drop. Ethan’s legs encounter gaping air and he scrambles blindly, manages to close his fist around a root as the others fall into the darkness below. He hears them hit the bottom of the newly opened cavern with a series of thuds.
Then, for a soundless moment, Ethan is simply aware that he is hanging off of something, beneath a magic-dug, steep-sided trench and above a vertical drop. He looks up, and sees Andrew and Jonathan’s shocked faces staring down. He calls up, “Give me your hand!” Really, they are too far to be able to reach him, but it is worth a try. Jonathan reacts, moves as if to bend and reach down, but Andrew’s hand on his shoulder stops him. “So, have you decided about Mexico?” the boy asks. They move out of sight.

“Oh, bugger you then!” Ethan calls up. Then he yelps as the earth shakes again, tightens his grip on the…It’s not a root. He doesn’t want to think about what it is.

“Ethan?” a familiar voice calls up as the shaking subsides.

Ethan twists to stare down into the darkness. “Rupert?” He’d hoped Rupert had managed to avoid falling. “Are you alright?”

“I think so.” Rupert isn’t visible in whatever the pit is: It is coal-dark. “What’s happening up there?”

Ethan stares up. The spire of the temple is in his line of sight now. He’s sure it wasn’t before the quake. He’s also sure that Proserpexa didn’t look quite so hungry a moment ago. “He’s back to raising the temple.” And with nothing to stop him. Well, nothing except his own limitations: Ethan can’t see Warren at the foot of the spire, but he can hear him breathing hard. Apparently blasting one’s enemies into the ground takes it out of one, strength-enhancing orbs or no.

Twisting, he calls over his shoulder, “Is everyone else down there?”

Willow’s voice answers, “Everyone except Xander.”

Tara adds, “H-he hit his head. I saw it just before I fell.”

“That sounds like his usual level of competence” mutters Anya.

Ethan grips the soil above him with his free arm, tries to pull himself up. He manages an inch or two before slipping back.

“What are you holding on to?” calls Rupert.

Ethan forces himself to examine it. “A hook” he replies, “Which, considering this place was the site of human sacrifices, I’d rather not think about.”

Tara says, “We must be in the temple proper.”

“Oh, wonderful” mutters Ethan. He moves his dangling feet to search for purchase on the walls. Marble. Tara must be right: They are in an intact but subterranean room, Ethan dangling from what was once the ceiling. A little below him and to one side, he can see another statue protruding from the wall, this one bronzed and more blatantly serpentine than the one on the spire.

Below him, Willow whispers a word of Latin and a greenish light fills cavern. Now, Ethan can see the five of them down there, picking themselves up. For a horrible moment he thinks there is a demon down there with them, but then he realises that the marble room they are entombed has a doorway at one end, which, in keeping with the décor, is arched by a carved monster.

Rupert asks, “Everyone alright?”

There are murmured assurances. Rupert asks, “Ethan?”
“Oh, I’m having a lovely time” says Ethan, “Just casually dangling from this murder hook over a sheer drop with my arms getting tired.”

Faith’s voice retorts, “At least you didn’t get a magic punch to the guts and thrown into a satanic temple.”

“I almost was” replies Ethan, “It’s just that I had the presence of mind to grab this murder hook.”

Willow says, “Lucky no-one was impaled on it when we fell.”

Ethan eyes the thing. No-one impaled on it today, but he’s certain it isn’t a stranger to such uses. If this is the worship Proserpexa demands, he really doesn’t want Warren to –

Do exactly what he’s doing, shaking the ground again to raise her temple. The room below him shifts and soil scatters down the slope, gets in his eyes and raining down on the others as the sloped pit threatens to bury them. It stops quicker this time. Ethan blinks hard.

“Not that I’m complaining” says Rupert as the last rumble dies away, “But what’s keeping him? He’s making less progress than he did against the counter spell.”

There is a clatter, and Faith says, “Could be these.”

Ethan twists to look down: She has the orbs.

“Faith – Well done!” Rupert manages a smile despite the circumstances.

“Yep” confirms Faith, “Got them just as he blasted me off.”

Willow says, “So now he’s casting stronger magic than he’s got the strength for. Especially after all that fighting.”

“So he’ll run out?” asks Faith, “Or pass out or something?”

“I’m afraid not, given the magic he’s learnt from the Daidalos Chest” replies Rupert, “Or at least, not until he’s had time to raise the temple.” As if to confirm his words, there is another grinding shake. A few heavy rocks are forced from the ground and smash into the temple below, narrowly missing Tara. Ethan feels his hands slip and tightens his grip. Not that the drop would kill him, but he has no desire to break an ankle in exchange for becoming more thoroughly trapped.

“This is just great” Anya declares as the shaking subsides, “Warren’s up there ending the world and the only person who can get to him is unconscious Xander!”

Well, Ethan thinks, and possibly Dawn. Unless she fell too, unless she is hurt and none of them can see her, oh Gods. “Dawn?” he yells. There is no reply.

“Can you see her?” Tara calls up, fearful.

“Well and me” says Anya, before Ethan can reply, “I can get up there.” To Ethan, she calls, “Is she up there?”

“You can get up there?” Faith asks, “How?”

“Teleportation. Perk of vengeance.”

Willow says, “And you didn’t mention this sooner, because…?”
“I didn’t know Faith had the orbs, did I? I thought he was still Mr Power Trip with the slayer-stopping super strength.”

“Get me up there” decides Faith, “Carry me!”

“I can’t – that’s not how it works.”

Ethan lets go of the hook with one hand and wipes it on his trousers until it is less slippery. Then he swaps hands. Below him, Anya concludes a lecture on the physics of teleportation with, “So I can’t carry you, but I can get up there. How do I stop him?”

“You don’t” says Rupert, “Not alone.”

Ethan, busy kicking at the wall around him, searching for a foothold, calls down, “Rupert, I’m not sure this is the time to insist on a team effort!”

“Anya’s our last chance” Rupert replies.

“Well, and Xander” says Anya grudgingly.

“He’s knocked out” Rupert reminds her, “We’re trapped in here. If you fail, we’ve lost – you need back up.”

“I do have demon strength” Anya says, “It’s not like I’ll just pop up in front of him and get knocked out. Unlike someone I could mention.”

Willow says, “He’s still wielding some powerful magic up there.”

“And he’s wearing himself out with it” Anya reasons.

“Don’t see what other choice we have” Faith tells Rupert. Then, to Anya, “Fine, you get up there. The rest of us will find a way out of here – I’m thinking that could lead to the cave tunnels.”

Ethan looks down to find she is looking at the ominous doorway. “Or” he says, “You could stay here. Wait until Xander wakes up and –”

“Sorry, Ethan” says Willow, “Faith’s right – We have to get back up there before Warren raises that temple. We can’t wait around.” She closes her eyes, starts on an incantation.

Rupert asks, “Do you think you could drop down?”

“What, so I can join you on your jaunt through the satanic catacombs? I think I’ll take my chances with Proserpexa.”

Rupert looks torn for a moment, until Faith puts a hand on his shoulder and regains his attention.

Wonderful, thinks Ethan: Even with the world about to end, Rupert only has eyes for his slayer and she isn’t even Buffy this time. Willow, meanwhile, is condensing the green light into a bright pearl that hovers, bee-like, among them before darting through the doorway. “Come on” she says, “That should show us the quickest route.”

Rupert looks up as they all leave. The light is just close enough that Ethan can see the outline of his head, a curled strand of his hair above his ear. He wants desperately to smooth it down before Rupert leaves. Rupert tells him, “For gods’ sake be careful, Ethan. Let go if you’re in danger and catch up with us.”

“Thanks” says Ethan, “But I don’t think dropping into a demonic temple is going to reduce the
danger.”

Rupert looks about to argue but masters it and turns to Anya. “Try to keep Warren distracted without engaging him directly. Failing that, find back up.” He turns to go. Ethan calls down, “Watch yourself, Rupert.”

Rupert nods, then disappears, following the others. Anya calls after them, “Don’t get killed!” She waits until they are out of earshot before exclaiming, “Back up from where? Buffy’s in the hospital with a hole in her chest, you’re dangling off a murder hook, Xander’s —”

“Useless anyway?” a voice above them chimes in. Warren has appeared at the lips of the chasm.

“What have you done to him?” asks Anya. With a pop, she materialises beside him.

Warren flinches but recovers himself. “I haven’t done anything.” He gestures off beyond Ethan’s tilted field of vision. Ethan wonders for a moment if he can hear Xander groan but he isn’t certain. Anya looks relieved, though. “Good” she says. Then she punches the side of Warren’s head. She wasn’t exaggerating about the demon strength: Warren is throw a few feet back, landing with a crash that almost sends him into the pit. Scrabbling, he rights himself, and, lifting his arms heavenwards, sends Anya staggering back with a searing blast of magic. “I’ve had it with this!” he says, “I’ve had it with you people interfering!” Above him, Proserpexa’s statue blurs a little, as the magic gathers around it. Ethan can still see her eyes, though, glowing. It goes against instinct to move towards it but he still stretches a leg out, twisting to the side. The metal statue sticking out the wall is tantalisingly almost close enough. If he could just reach…

“…won’t interfere much longer” Warren is saying. “I’ve just got one last thing to do, and then Proserpexa’s power is mine!”

“One last thing?” Anya picks herself up, wiping blood from her cheek. Her face is demonic now and for all that he knew what she has become, Ethan finds the sight of it jarring.

Warren smiles nastily. “You never heard of a human sacrifice?”

Anya looks a little alarmed, and glances sharply to where Ethan estimates Xander to be. “I won’t let you.” She moves quickly out of sight in that direction. Warren chuckles, but doesn’t seem ready for another punch. Above him, Ethan notes, the magic gathering around the spire is waning, Warren’s attention all on Anya.

Human sacrifice. But Warren hadn’t known they’d follow him up here. So who…

Ah. Andrew. Shame the boy’s cleared off: He could use a demonstration of the dangers of following the wrong person. Not that there would have been much time for the lesson to stick.

Now, Warren is turning slowly his way, nasty smile still in place. “Have it your way, demon bitch. You can’t protect them both. Ah, ah, ah” He holds up a hand, apparently to keep Anya from lunging at him. “One move and I kill them both. You think I don’t have magic for that?”

“You kill them both with magic and you’ll never get this temple out the ground” Anya points out, “Trust me – I’ve been around magic longer than you. You can’t just keep burning through power like this.”

“Probably not” Warren concedes, “But maybe I can keep at it just long enough to kill them both and raise the temple. That a bet you want to take? No?”

Anya says, “You can’t reach Ethan anyway. What are you going to do, levitate him out?”
“Thanks, Anya” mutters Ethan.

Warren laughs. “Oh, don’t worry, old man. I’ve got a better idea.” His gaze trails past Ethan to the statue on the wall below. Magic washes over Ethan in a dizzying wave and hits it.

For a second, nothing happens. Then the statue blinks. Blank, snakelike eyes turn Ethan’s way as the bronze head swivels jerkily to stare at him. There is a crunching sound as a metal arm is wrenched from a stone wall and the statue leans sideways, reaching for Ethan. Ethan yelps and tries to move his feet away, but there is only so far they can go – he is dangling, trapped. Another terrible crunch and the statue twists round, prizing itself from the wall and clawing its way towards him.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Ethan kicks out at it. It tries to grab his feet. Above him, he is aware of Warren cackling, lazily blasting Anya with magic when she tries to intervene. “Don’t think you’re not next” he tells her, as Ethan twists a foot from the statue’s grasp, “You and Harris. Don’t worry, I’ll say hi to Buffy for you. After I’ve had my fun with her, that is.”

“That won’t happen” someone says, and for a moment Ethan, twisting away from the statue as it inches closer, thinks it is Anya answering. But then he realises.

And then she appears above him, in a showy sprinkle of powder and magic. Fresh magic, not stained and jarring like the dark forces dimming around the temple spire. Glamour dissipating, she stands a few feet from Warren on the cusp of the drop. She says, “You’ve had all the fun with Buffy you’ll ever have.”

“Dawn!” Ethan exclaims, “Thank Janus – I thought you could be hurt or –” He stops when he sees what she’s holding. The statue takes the opportunity to grab him and he screams.

Dawn shouts to Warren: “Break the spell!”

“Oh, what, you’ll shoot me? Sorry, little Miss Nobody, but I –” He gasps sharply as a shot rings out, but Ethan doesn’t need to look to know he isn’t hit: The statue is still grappling with him, Warren’s magic still active – very active, in fact. His metal attacker wraps itself around him and starts to squeeze, pythonlike. “Dawn?” he calls, shifting in the constricting embrace to look up.

She is still on her feet, but only just. Anya is right behind her and Ethan realises she must have materialised behind the girl at the last minute to stop her toppling into the pit on the recoil.

Warren lets out a shaking laugh. “See that…That was way too wide to be you trying to kill me… You don’t have the guts for that.”

“Or she’s a bad shot” says Anya, “Want her to keep practising? That a…what was it? Bet you want to take?”

Warren shuts up.

Dawn shrugs. “I just need you to know it’s loaded. Break the spell.”

Warren laughs again but it isn’t convincing, and tapers out quickly. “Okay” he says, a little to the left of nonchalantly. He snaps his fingers. The statue relaxes and stills, draped loosely around Ethan like a lover who’s fallen asleep.

Warren’s hands, Ethan notices, are shaking, though he can’t tell if that is from the gun still pointed at him or the dark magic still draining his resources. The temple raising spell is still visible in the air around them – dull, but visible – and Warren has to be tiring fast.
Anya stares down at the neutralised statue and relaxes. “Well done, Dawn.” She pats the girl’s shoulder. Dawn is still aiming the gun and Warren remains frozen, leer half in place.

“So…You snuck up here with a glamour?” Anya looks from Dawn to Ethan. “That explains a lot.” She nods at the weapon. “And that’s how you got the gun, too?”

Dawn nods, not taking her eyes off Warren. She clutches the gun with both hands. “And the bullets. From the gun shop on Main Street. Only store I hadn’t stolen from already.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” Anya looks from the gun to Warren. “So what now?”

Dawn doesn’t answer, tightens her grip on the gun. Warren laughs again, the sound climbing from nervous to try to hide it. “Sorry if you’re too stupid to notice, kid” he hisses, “but I broke the spell. That’s what you wanted, right?”

Dawn still doesn’t answer. Ethan risks looking down at his feet and at the newly stilled metal statue now tangled about them. Tilting his body gingerly against the wall, he finds a foothold and carefully pushes himself up a few key inches.

Above him, Warren tries, “So you can just run along now.”

Ethan twists to stare up. “Dawn” he calls, “Best to let us handle this, okay?”

“Oh, really?” says Anya, “Ethan, you’re dangling above a hell worshiping temple that the others are already trapped in! How exactly are we handling this?”

She has a point, Ethan has to admit. But while they stand in a gun-enforced tableau, the temple itself is draining from something malevolently magic-woken to a network of dormant ruins. Proserpexa’s statue is still now as Warren’s spell dissipates in the absence of a sacrifice.

“I’m not leaving until this is finished” says Dawn. She shifts a little, re-aims the gun.


Dawn spares Ethan a glance for just long enough for Warren to take a step to the side. She corrects the movement immediately, turning to keep the gun trained on him. “Stay. Where. You. Are.”

Ethan climbs from the statue’s base to it’s shoulders, pulls himself up so that he can rest one knee uncomfortably against the hook, one hand still gripping it. From this new vantage, Xander is visible, stirring on the ground, but being visible is not the same as being reachable, and Ethan is still too far down to pull himself up.

“You won’t shoot me” Warren is arguing, “Even if you’re enough of a bitch to pull that trigger, I can stop the bullet with magic.”

“Really?” Dawn’s voice is chillingly light, “Can I see?” Her finger moves.

“Wait, wait, wait! You do that and you die too – I can burn you where you stand!”

“You’re lying” says Dawn, “You were using a cometa adjaculatus curse on my friends. You need to use your arms for that.” She looks at Ethan through the corner of her eye. “Right?”

“Right” he replies.

Dawn returns her attention to Warren. “You move your arms, I shoot you.”
“Right” Warren looks frantic, “So what do I need to do so you’ll fuck off?”

Dawn is silent. Ethan leans against the statue’s dormant face to readjust his position, resting his foot rather than his knee against the hook. He moves his hand from the hook to the statue’s head. There is a horrible groaning shift as the thing sags a little, less secure in its new location. Ethan gasps and presses himself against the wall.

“Ethan?” Anya’s voice. Ethan looks up to see she has left Dawn’s side and is cradling Xander’s head in her lap. He is rubbing his face blearily.

“I’m okay!” he calls, then adds, “ish”

Dawn and Warren are still staring at each other. “Well?” says Warren, “I’ve broken the spell – It’s over, see?” He waves a hand at the temple spire, still visible but motionless and without its halo of dark magic. “So you can drop the gun now.”

Dawn shakes her head slowly. “So you can do it again?”

Warren huffs. “You think it would work again? You think that’s how it works, I can just wake an Old One up and let her down and wake her up again? You’ve screwed this up for me so now you can run along and have a laugh about it. Go on.”

Dawn says nothing. She doesn’t drop the gun. Ethan wonders whether he should tell her to aim for the legs – That way, Dawn wouldn’t be a killer and Warren wouldn’t be a threat. Or would he? What spells could an injured Warren still find the strength to resort to? Best not find out. “Dawn” Ethan calls, “I’m coming up. Give me the gun.” He manages to raise himself to a standing position, balanced on the hook. The steep slope above him is too deep and sharply angled to climb unaided but if Anya could grab his hand he might manage. “Anya?”

Anya leaves Xander and comes to the lip of the cavern, carefully stepping around Dawn and her still-aimed gun. “Yes? Oh, right.” She kneels and reaches down. Ethan reaches up. Their fingers almost meet.

“I moved my arm just then” Warren points out. He does so again, a mad wave of his arms, a flex of his shoulders, “And you didn’t shoot me, did you? So, so much for threats you’re too much of a kid to follow through. Drop the gun and drop the act.”

“Just shoot him!” says Anya over her shoulder.

“Wait, Dawn!” calls Ethan.

Warren takes a step towards Dawn. She steps back, but doesn’t lower the gun. Warren scoffs, “You’re just a pathetic little girl.”

“I’m not a girl” Dawn tells him, “I’m older than you.” She nods up to Proserpexa’s towering form. “Probably older than her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That means nothing, Dawn” Ethan interjects. He presses a knee against the sloped earth and reaches for Anya’s hand again but she has sat back, eyes on Dawn. “You’re a child and –”

“And what?” snaps Dawn, “I can’t understand?” To Warren she instructs, “Get on your knees.” “What or you’ll shoot me? If you were going to, you’d have done it by now!”
Dawn bares her teeth. It is hard to tell if it’s meant as a smile. She’s right, thinks Ethan, she doesn’t understand. She doesn’t know what taking a life does to good people like her and Rupert. “Dawn” He tries, “Just wait until I’m up there, can’t you? Anya, give me your hand!”

But Anya is moving away, back towards Xander as he sits slowly up. “Xander? Can you hear me?”

Dawn glances at Ethan and shakes her head. “Like you wouldn’t do it if you were up here – You heard what he said about Buffy!” To Warren she shouts, “Stay still! I told you to get on your knees!” The gun wobbles in her grip. Warren raises his hands placatingly. “Okay” he says, lowering himself, “There, see?”

Dawn takes a step closer, angling the gun straight at his head.

“Could you just shoot him in the leg?” Ethan suggests desperately, “You don’t need to kill him.”

“No” says Anya, “But she wants to.”

Dawn nods, readjusts her hold on the gun. That blasted glamour, thinks Ethan. If he hadn’t taught it to her…

Well, if he hadn’t taught it to her, she’d be unarmed against a man hellbent on a blood sacrifice. Pros and cons, and all that. He argues, “Shoot him in the leg and he’ll fall in the pit! Just trap him there and we can decide what to do with him!” When that doesn’t garner any response, he adds, “Or pass me the gun!” He has no idea what he’d do with it.

“You don’t get it, do you?” asks Dawn, “I’m not giving it to anyone. This is the most anyone has looked at me in a year.” “So keep it” says Anya, “But how about let me do the Warren killing part?”

“I can do the Warren killing part.” Dawn stares at the man.

“But I can too” Anya suggests, “All you need to do is say I wish and –”

“And?” Xander’s voice, sounding coherent and slur-free. Good. Ethan had been worried underneath all the worry about the apocalypse and the dark magic fuelled temple and Dawn toying with murder. Now, Xander stands, looking shaky but alert. The world rights itself a little.

Anya looks relieved too, but in an annoyed sort of way that Ethan can relate to. Xander asks, “What’s going on?”

“We’re just arguing about who gets to kill Warren” Anya explains.

“What? But –” Xander spots the gun. “Okay, Dawn, give me that.”

Dawn doesn’t trouble to look at him. “No” And to Warren: “Close your eyes.”

“Where are the others…?” Xander stares down into the pit. “Oh God.”

“They’re okay” Ethan explains, “They went off to find a way out.” He watches Xander stare around, taking in the lack of magic in the sky and the absence of anyone but the four of them. Well, five, counting Warren.

Warren is staring up at Dawn as she steps closer still. She stops just short of an arm’s reach from him. “Okay” he says, “Enough already. You stopped me, okay? You won.”
“I said close your eyes.”

Xander stares from Warren to Dawn and then approaches the child. “Okay. Point made, Dawn, now give me the gun.” He extends a hand, palm up.

Anya says, “Dawn, give it to Xander – he can do it. Or you could make a wish.”

Xander says, “Ahn, hone –” and stops quickly.

“I’m doing it myself!” snaps Dawn.

Warren snaps, “What the hell is wrong with you? You got me okay? You can call the police!”


“I can do it, Dawn” says Anya, “Just make a wish and you don’t have to worry about it.” “Anya” snaps Xander, “You are not helping.”

“Not unless she makes a wish, I’m not. But, Dawn, if you do –”

“Ahn!”

“What?”

“Go find the others – help them.”

“But –”

“Get out of here, Anya!”

Anya scowls. “Fine, I’ll go. But he others can take care of themselves. I mean, they took care of you okay when you abandoned me.” To Dawn, she adds, “Sorry, Dawn: I was only here because I didn’t want the world ending. The rest is up to you, unless you make a wish.” “No thanks” says Dawn, “I want to do this myself.”

Warren looks slightly sickened.

Anya nods. “Good luck then. Do it fast, is my advice – You don’t want to think about it too much.” She vanishes.

“Dawn” says Xander, “Give me the gun.”

“Stay out of this, Xander!”

Xander steps, slowly and deliberately, in front of Warren.

Dawn stares at him. “Get out of my way.”

Xander shakes his head. “I can’t let you do this.”

“No. Do what? Get rid of the guy who tried to kill Buffy?” Over Xander’s shoulder, she calls, “Move and you’re dead!” She tries to sidestep. Xander moves too. Warren glances around, apparently weighing the risks of running. Ethan closes his eyes, starts to gather his magic. It’s a long shot: He has nothing to cast a spell with, but a blast of magical energy might make the bastard think twice about moving.
Dawn is glaring at Xander. “Why are you doing this? He’s the one you’re meant to be fighting!”

Xander glances round at Warren and, noticing his movement, spins and punches him. Warren crumples to the ground. Ethan allows himself to relax for a fraction of a second, then pulls the threads of his power taunt again.

“There” Xander is saying, turning back to Dawn, “He’s down. You don’t need to shoot him.”

“No, but I want to!”

“You think you do, Dawn, but you don’t.” “Don’t tell me what I think!”

“Sorry” Xander raises a hand, steps closer. Dawn dodges away, tries and fails to get a clear shot of Warren’s slumped form. She snarls, “Have you ever asked me what I thought all this last year and you’re telling me now?! Get out of my way!”

“I’m sorry, Dawn” says Xander again, “It’s been a tough year.”

“Oh, you think?!” snaps Dawn, “Whose fault is that?”

“Not just Warren’s” says Xander.

“No, but Buffy being in hospital’s his fault! He wanted to kill her, Xander! After everything she’s done, how brave she is…” Dawn takes a breath, suddenly tearful. Xander steps towards her. She darts away.

“Dawn” Ethan tries, his voice strained as he melds shapeless magic to shapeless magic, “Could you give me a hand here?” If she can’t be reasoned with, perhaps she can be distracted.

She looks at him, and then back to Warren. “In a minute” she says.

“Give me the gun first, Dawn” says Xander, “Then we can pull Ethan up and go find the others.”

“They wouldn’t even be in danger without him!” Dawn has let the gun lower a little, but she raises it again now.

“I know” says Xander gently, “I get that he deserves to be punished. But we’ll do that, okay? The human way.” “He isn’t human!”

“Hate to break it to you, Dawn” puts in Ethan, “But not all humans are good.” He closes his eyes again, focuses on shaping his magic into something tangible without the channel of a spell.

“You think I don’t know that?” she snaps.

Xander says, “I think you know that killing him would destroy you.” He inches towards her. She stays where she is, staring down at Warren. “Destroy me, huh? Like losing Buffy destroyed me? ‘Cause it nearly did. But if he’d killed her when I almost had her back, that would have killed me too. That would…After everything she’s been through, Xander, and he tried to…”

“I know.”

“She almost died right in front of me!”

“I know. I’m sorry, Dawn. I’m not saying he deserves to live. I’m saying you don’t deserve to kill him.” He reaches for the gun.
Dawn doesn’t seem to notice. “She was just starting to be like herself again” she whispers, “And then he…”

“I know.” Xander’s hand closes around the gun. He steers it sideways, away from Warren, away from himself and Dawn. He breaks her grip on it with a gentle twist and steps away, sets it on the ground.

“I almost lost her again” Dawn says, “When I’ve lost so much else already.”

Xander returns to her side. “I know.” He embraces her.

“Ethan? Xander?” a voice calls from the distance.

“Rupert!” Ethan returns the call, “You took your bloody time!”

“Is everything –” Rupert comes into view, staring up at the statue on the spire and at Warren unconscious on the ground. Behind him, Ethan sees Willow, Tara and Faith rush over to Dawn. Xander detaches himself to make room for them and steps away, out of sight.

“Ah” says Rupert, still looking around, from temple to Warren to group hug, “Yes, well, that all seems to be taken care of.”

“Apart from one thing!” yells Ethan, “Is anyone going to help me out this damned hole?”

“Sorry, dear.” Rupert kneels down and reaches for him, calling over his shoulder, “Faith, could you…” “Sure” Faith detaches herself from the cluster around Dawn and saunters over. On her way past Warren, she kicks him sharply and then, at Rupert’s expression, says, “What? I slipped. Oops, slipped again.”

“In your own time, Faith” calls Ethan.

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve half got yourself out, what do you need me for?” She reaches down and pulls him up as if weighs nothing, dragging him over the sloped soil. Once on the surface, Ethan attempts to brush his clothing down but quickly gives up. He looks like he’s been buried alive.

Magic still pulses through him, gathered into a tight bundle somewhere within his soul. He supposes he should let it unravel but doubts he could do so without fainting. Better to keep it condensed inside of him and cast a spell later. Perhaps Rupert will be up for some fun.

Rupert, he realises, has his arm around him. Ethan leans into the contact. Looks around. Warren is still on the ground, a pained look on his face thanks to Faith’s intervention and a blossoming bruise thanks to Xander’s. Xander stands a little way off with Willow, gently brushing off her attempts to examine his head injury. Tara still has both arms around Dawn, a sideways hug. Dawn’s tears have dried into a sort of striped warpaint. She stares at Warren but without her earlier wrath. She just looks tired. Faith pokes him with the toe of her boot and asks, “So…All in favour of rolling him into the pit?”

“Don’t” says Xander.

“What?” says Faith. Then, as Xander’s gaze slides to Dawn, “What’s going on?”

“We should call the police” says Tara. As she says it, sirens sound in the distance as if at her bidding, the noise coming rapidly closer.

“Looks like someone already did” says Willow. She steps away from Xander, adding, “They’ll
want to speak to me…”

“They will?” he asks, “Okay, Willow, fess up: What have you been doing?”

“Just a bit of Nancy Drewing.”

The sirens are closer now, the engines audible beneath them. Rupert steps away from Ethan. “I’d better warn them about the hole.”

“Sure” says Faith, following, “Can’t have them crashing into that. Be funny though.”

The rest of them watch as the police cars pull up, two of them, the officers in one stopping to speak to Rupert and Faith and those in the other headed their way.

“Watch out for the hole!” calls Tara. She detaches one arm from Dawn to point, then wraps it around the child again.

“Wait” says Xander in an undertone, “What do we do about the gun?”

“The what?” asks Willow. Then, spotting it, “Where did that come from?”

“Long story, but I’m thinking we don’t want to tell them it.” Xander nods to the officers, now making their way around the edge of the pit. He adds, “Maybe we should – oh!” He steps sharply away as the now decidedly scaly gun slithers past his foot.

“Saves explaining” says Ethan, shaking the residual magic from his fingertips and blinking his head clear in the wake of the rush of unformed power. He watches the snake disappear into the patchy grass as the police arrive to find a unconscious wanted fugitive surrounded by innocent civilians. And almost-not innocent civilians, of course, but they do not need to know that.

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“He’s being charged” Willow announces as she enters Buffy’s hospital room that evening.

“With what?” asks Faith, “Raising satanic temples and demon armies?” To Rupert, she adds, “I still think we should have rolled him into the pit.” Rupert ignores her and stands up, offers his chair to Willow.

“With Katrina’s murder.” Willow shoots Dawn a worried look as she sits down, one that tells Ethan she has spoken to Xander.

Dawn is on the bed with Buffy, on top of the covers and carefully avoiding the various tubes that already seem routine. From the moment they entered the room with Dawn, Buffy has been hugging her, and she still hasn’t let go. She looks around her little sister to ask Willow, “You gave them the stuff from the Buffybot?”

“Yep.” Willow smiles. “And she got him to pretty much admit it, so I’m thinking he’ll be put away for a good long time.”

“It” corrects Buffy, “That robot might be useful but it’s still not a she.”

Dawn asks, “Could he escape with magic?”

“I doubt it” says Ethan, “Doing magic without any ingredients isn’t easy – that’s why I didn’t transfigure that gun sooner.”
Dawn looks fleetingly uneasy at the reminder of the day's events. "But you did it" she points out.

"Yes, but I've been casting longer than him" Ethan replies, "He was running on borrowed magic."

"Borrowed from the Daidalos Chest" Willow explains, "So without that, he'll be...doing whatever it is guys do in prison, I guess. Weightlifting."

Faith snorts and turns away. Dawn's face falls. "But he doesn't deserve that!" she argues.

"He'll never be free again, Dawn" Buffy reminds her, "That's good enough for me." She asks Willow, "Is Xander okay?"

Willow nods. "Mild concussion but they've discharged him. Tara's driving him home."

"Good." Buffy lays back carefully. "He should have stayed out of it."

Dawn glances at Ethan. He shakes his head slightly. No need yet to trouble Buffy with what Xander stopped. Searching for a change of subject, he turns to Willow. "So. Is this the time?"

"What?" she asks.

"Fiancé?"

"Oh!" She grins.

"Wait, what?" Buffy struggles upright.

"Since when?" asks Faith. Then, "It is Tara, right?"

"Obviously." Willow rolls her eyes. "And since the night before you were shot, Buffy. We would have said sooner, but, well, you were shot."

"Me and my sense of timing." Buffy grins. "Willow, this is wonderful! Congratulations!"

"Yes" says Rupert, "Congratulations, Willow." He leans in to hug her.

"Yeah, good going" adds Faith, slapping Willow matily on the back and causing her to wince, "Tara's one of the good ones."

Dawn slips from Buffy's arms and pulls Willow into a hug. Ethan comes round the side of the bed to offer his own. "Congratulations" he murmurs.

Dawn asks, "Can I be a bridesmaid?"

"Who else did you think we were going to ask?" Willow smiles at her.

"Wait" asks Faith, "You're doing bridesmaids and churches and the whole straight shebang?"

Ethan's soaring spirits wilt a little. They are celebrating Willow and Tara joining the list of the waiting. He and Rupert have been waiting twenty years and counting. Unless, "You're sidestepping the legalities, aren't you?" he asks, "Doing a pagan ceremony?"

Willow nods. "As far as the law's concerned, it'll be non-event. But I'm thinking Hecate ranks a little higher than US law."

Ethan gives Rupert a pointed look. "She has a point, Ripper."
“Each to their own, Ethan” Rupert replies. He reaches out to take Ethan’s hand. Ethan grudgingly lets him.

“This is the best! I love you guys!” Dawn hugs Willow again.

“Wait” Buffy is still attempting to sit upright. “Don’t I get a hug?”

“Sorry Buffy” Willow leans over to embrace her carefully.

“We should get champagne” Ethan decides.

“I don’t think I’m allowed to drink” says Buffy.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll have your share.”

“We’ll wait” says Willow firmly, “We were going to wait until you were better to even announce it, Buffy.”

“Are you kidding?” asks Buffy, “I’ve been waiting all year for things to get happy.”
“Fruit again, Giles?” Buffy eyes the grapes and then gestures to the Doublemeat Palace packaging on her bedside table. “Faith already brought me that. Do you guys think they don’t feed me?”

“Grapes are good when you’re recuperating” Giles defends, “You can have a little now and then. Of course, if you don’t want them…”

“Giles, I’m kidding!” Buffy reaches for the bag. “I want them really.” When Giles hands them over, she makes a show of popping one in her mouth. “There see?” She watches him take a seat. She looks better, these last few weeks. The same old Buffy again, albeit less mobile. That, and there is still a drain of some sort near the wound, that Giles tries not to think too closely about, least his own chest seize up in empathy.

Buffy says, “By the way, I had this dream last night you should know about.”

“Oh? Portentous?”

“Poor what?”

“Significant, do you mean? A slayer dream?”

“Yeah, a slayer dream, I’m not going to tell you about the dream about Spike and me scuba diving.”

“Go on.”

“Well, Spike had this octopus around his neck and –”

“– Buffy –”

“Okay” Buffy relents with a grin, but her expression sober as she continues, “There was this girl. She was running through this city in…It looked like it could be India, maybe? But I’m just going by the writing and this Bollywoody poster.”

“Writing?”

“On the shop fronts.”

“Did you see what she was running from?”

Buffy shakes her head. “Something in a cloak. A couple of somethings in cloaks. They seemed to be after her specifically – At one point, she got close enough to a main street that I could hear traffic, but she veered off. Like she was trying to lead them away from other people. But I still thought, maybe they’ll be distracted. But no, they kept going after her.” Buffy pauses and studies her bedcovers.

“Did they catch her?” Giles prompts.

Buffy exhales in a resigned rush and then flinches, puts a hand to her chest. “Oh, yeah. I still didn’t get a good look at them, but I saw what they did to her alright.”

“We could prevent it. If you have any idea when it might happen? Did you see any signs as to the time of year, or –”
“It was last night. It happened last night. I know it.”

Giles frowns. Unusual for her to be so certain. She has been clear about the urgency or meaning of her prophesising dreams before, but never the timing. “You’re quite sure?”

Buffy nods. Giles tells her, “Slayers do sometimes dream about the deaths of past slayers. Could it have been…”

“No. It was last night. I dreamt it while it happened.” Buffy studies him for a moment. “What does it mean?”

“I’m not sure. Um, that is to say, I’ll have to research.”

“Thanks, Giles.” Buffy is quiet for a moment. Giles gets the impression that she is relieved simply to have told him, so that he may take on the responsibility of worrying about it, leaving her to rest. He can hardly begrudge her that. She may be sitting up and talking at her usual rate but that is hardly the same thing as being well.

It is not like her to dream on an international scale. Her dreams tend to involve the hellmouth or threats to her immediate circle of friends.

“There was one more thing” says Buffy.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask how is Anya?” When Giles draws back involuntarily, Buffy adds, “I did ask Faith, but she was Miss Evasive and I didn’t want to ask Xander when he came yesterday. I mean, how do you just subtly ask, oh by the way, is your ex killing people now? But I do need to know.”

“No you don’t, Buffy.”

“Really do – Friend and slayer, remember?”

“Never the twain shall meet” murmurs Giles.

“Huh?”

“Buffy, Faith is a slayer too. If it does come to…” He stops. He could make himself say it if he had to, but he doesn’t, and a pained look is clouding Buffy’s features. He says, “There’s no evidence she’s killed anyone, and it could be that she leaves town before…”

“Before she does? Aren’t I supposed to try to stop that?”

“You’re supposed to rest, and let Faith and me worry about everything slayer related.” Odd to think of Anya as slayer related. She’s only been in their lives three years, against a thousand as a demon, but already it is already odd.

“I guess” says Buffy, “I guess I’ve just had a lot of time to think about stuff. And it’s weird having all these visitors but never her.”

“I’m sure.”

“At least Xander’s doing better.”

“Yes, he does seem to be, doesn’t he?”
“You’ll look after him, won’t you? I kinda think he puts on this front for visiting me, like he
doesn’t want me worrying.”
“Not all that successfully if you’ve noticed.”

Buffy smiles. “I guess not. It’s just that I’m lying here thinking all day. I don’t think slayers are
made for the stationary lifestyle.”

“Have you tried reading?”

Buffy nods. “But the drugs mess with my concentration. So then I’m back to worrying.”

“Try not to worry, at least. Faith and I will take care of everything.”

“You’ll find out about the dream?”

“I’ll do my best. And you’ll tell me if you have more. Which you’ll need to sleep to do, so there’s
no excuse for lying awake worrying.”

Buffy smiles. “Sure. I mean, how long have I waited to combine research and napping? High
school me would kill for this gig.”

*****

The Magic Box is still shuttered, a situation that has seen Ethan spending more time in Willy’s
Place, selling small items that are benign enough that Rupert doesn’t mind him storing them at the
flat. Most customers here are demons, of course, but tonight he is exchanging protection charms
for grubby notes a nervous warlock hands over by the fistful. “Thanks for this” the man says,
glancing around. “It’s starting to seem like we’ll need them.”

“Oh?” Ethan tries to sound nonchalant but he knows what the man means. The on-edge nervousness
of last year has grown from reckless youngsters taking on the slayers into a more generalised
anxiety pervading all the town’s underworld. Willy’s Place is quieter these last few weeks, but it’s
a tinder box sort of quiet, everyone eyeing each other warily and fights breaking out over askance
looks or a weapon casually toyed with at the wrong moment.

“Yeah” the warlock replies, “Can’t you sense it?”

“Nothing specific” says Ethan, who hopes this build up continues to be just that for as long as
possible; something coming, not something here.

“Not specific yet” says the warlock, as though he can read Ethan’s thoughts (possibly he can)
“You’ll be wanting to leave town while the going’s good.”

“I can’t” says Ethan, “Commitments.”

“Ah, well. Good luck then.” The warlock slides the charms into his various pockets and scuttles
out.

“He’s right you know” says a figure to Ethan’s left. Ethan turns to find a slime demon leaning
against the bar, sipping something noxious. It nods to Ethan’s remaining charms. “You’re in the
right business, son: We’ll all be wanting them soon.”

“Yes” says Ethan irritably, “We all know something’s coming.” He steps over the bar and signals
Marvin. “There’s no use dwelling on it.”

“No coming” says the slime demon, “Practically here. It’s foot’s in the door.”
“What’s foot?”

The demon shrugs. “No telling yet. But we’ll know soon.” It drains the foul substance that makes up its coat and pushes away from the bar with a muttered, “From beneath you, it devours.” It exits, leaving Ethan frozen in place, clutching a protection charm until it bites into his palm.

*****

“Faith” asks Giles as they enter the cemetery, “Have you had any disturbing dreams lately?”

“You mean like being naked in the old high school?”

“No. Slayer dreams.”

Faith glances at him. “Oh. Then no. I mean” She ducks to stake a vampire as it rises, springs back up “No more than normal. Why?”

“Just something Buffy mentioned. She saw a girl die.” Belatedly, Giles wonders if perhaps he shouldn’t share the details, in case Buffy’s dream ends up influencing Faith’s.

Faith frowns. “I dream about a lot of dead girls” she says at last.

“You think Buffy might be mistaken about its significance?”

“No” Faith is still frowning. “I’m just saying. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t mean anything. Just I don’t think mine do yet. B usually does this stuff first.”

“You’ll let me know if you have any potentially prophetic dreams, won’t you?”

“Obviously. It’s the job, Giles. Tell you the weird dream stuff.”

“Thank you.”

“You think it’s this wicked strong evil at last?”

“Quite possibly.”

“Good. Kinda.” At Giles’ glance, Faith explains, “I was getting antsy just waiting for it all the time.”

*****

Getting in from Willy’s more than a little shaken, Ethan finds the phone ringing. Must be for Rupert – anyone who wants to speak to him rings his mobile – but Ethan still plucks it up. “Hello?”

“Who is this?” an accented male voice enquires.

“Ethan Rayne. Are you calling for Rupert?”

“Yes. Is he there?”

“Out pa – err. Out. Just at the moment. Do you want to leave a message?”

“It’s confidential.”

“Ah, you’re with the council, then.”
“I don’t follow.”

“Of course you don’t.” Ethan half wishes he knew this month’s codeword, just for the sake of being nosey. The man on the other end says, “I’ll try for Rupert Giles later.” In the background, a second voice says something. Ethan has the impression of another accent, English this time. Almost recognisable. “Alright” Ethan says, “Well –” At that moment, Rupert walks through the door “Oh, here he is.” He hands the phone over.

While Rupert talks to whoever it is, Ethan sets about making tea for the sake of something to do, and toys with the idea of telling Rupert about the slime demon’s ominous comment. On one hand, obviously he has to. On the other, does he really have to right now? He could wait until morning and give Rupert one more stress-free night.

Or perhaps not, he thinks, coming back into the living room and seeing Rupert’s expression. Rupert has put the phone down, but is still staring at it. “Rupert?”

“That was Mr Mabweni” says Rupert. At Ethan’s questioning look, he reminds him, “He co-ordinates the Council’s activities in central Africa. A potential in a village fifty miles from Bangassou has found the vampire I enquired about.” He sits down and runs a thoughtful hand over his face.

“Spike” Ethan realises, sitting down too.

“Yes” Rupert helps himself to tea.

“I take it no-one got stake happy?”

“No, thankfully. You remember I told them I need Spike alive for questioning? He’s going to be smuggled over.”

“And he’s…” Ethan frowns. “You said thankfully? So, he’s got his soul?”

“It would seem that way.” Rupert doesn’t sound especially impressed, but a flicker of feeling over his face acknowledges the historic nature of Spike’s accomplishment. “Mr Mabweni said he’s in some distress.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose he would be.”

Rupert nods. “They’re going to keep him unconscious and chained, given his history.” He sighs heavily. “I’m going to have to tell Buffy.”

*****

“I’ve got something to tell you” says Dawn.

“Oh?” Ethan glances at her over the dining table in the flat. Another impact of the lack of Magic Box is that they use his and Rupert’s flat for lessons lately. Sometimes, Ethan doesn’t go outside all day.

At first, they had tried to have the lessons at Revello Drive, but Faith’s presence had been an issue: “You teach her a few spells, she almost shoots a guy” she had said, plonking herself down to watch the first lesson they had after Warren’s arrest.

“That wasn’t magic” Dawn had said.
“Exactly” Ethan had added, “And it was Warren. As I recall, you were all for rolling him into a pit and leaving him there.”

“Yeah – me rolling him in” Faith had countered. “I didn’t want Dawnie getting involved.”

“But I didn’t do it” Dawn had pointed out.

“Because of Xander, not because the magic power trip made you all non homicidal.” Faith had stayed right where she was, gesturing at them to begin. “I just wanna see what’s on the curriculum.”

This desire on Faith’s part had somewhat impeded the curriculum, and so the lessons had moved to the flat. Ethan doesn’t know what Dawn tells Faith she is doing when she’s here because what she doesn’t know can’t hurt him.

“Yeah” says Dawn now, “I told Faith about the shop lifting. All of it, I mean, not just taking the gun that day.”

“All of it?”

“Well, not about using the glamour every time, but I think she figured it out.” Hastily, Dawn adds, “I didn’t tell her you taught me it for that or anything. I mean, I don’t know if that was why anyway. Was it?”

“Of course not” says Ethan, “It was so you could hide for demons.”

“Right. But don’t worry about Faith being mad at you anyway – She said it’s good I didn’t get caught at least. And a lot of stuff about pigs.” Dawn shrugs. “But she says if I am still doing lessons with you which she says she knows I totally am, we should do protection spells.”

Ethan sighs. “Why don’t Tara and Willow get this level of interference?” he asks, “She knows they teach you too.”

“And she knows the be invisible in a gun store thing was down to you.”

“The invisible part was down to me, the rest was all you.”

“I know that. But I think Faith’s in denial. She likes to think I’m all innocent, like I didn’t spend all last year living with her and Buffy and Spike.”

Ethan glances at her, wondering if he should tell her about Spike. Decides not to – Best leave that sort of thing to Rupert.

Dawn goes on, “It’s not like protection spells would be a terrible idea, with the old school being rebuilt.”

“Oh, gods, you’re actually going there? I thought Faith was all for home schooling you.”

“She was, but Buffy played the actual-sister card when I told her I do actually want to go to school.”

“But do you want to go to that school, really? When you could just have magic lessons from me, Willow and Tara, and history from Rupert?”

“And English, math and science from who exactly? Willy? Look, Ethan, I know you guys are worried. But I don’t want to miss out on going to high school.”

“You’re right.”

“Thanks.”

“We are worried.”
“Ethan!”

“Well we are! If I was Buffy, I’d insist on home schooling. It’d be fine. We could teach you any old crap or let you watch TV all day.”

Dawn rolls her eyes. “That sounds really appealing.”

“Wait until your final exams – You’ll drop the sarcasm then.”

“I want to do the exams” Dawn counters, “And make friends and be normal for a change. Is that so wrong?”

“It is so dangerous.”

“I can handle myself. It’s not like I don’t have two slayers to watch my back.”

“One of them is in hospital” Ethan points out.

“Not for long. And Xander thinks he’ll still be based there after the first semester starts.”

“Oh, well, if Xander with all his super powers is there, we’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“He did save me from going to prison for murder” Dawn reminds him.

Ethan makes a dismissive gesture – How often will Dawn need to be talked down from acts of violence after all – and doesn’t admit that Xander’s presence actually make him marginally less afraid for the child.

“And if you teach me protection spells, I’ll be all set.” Dawn smiles hopefully. Ethan sighs. “Fine then. Back to protection spells it is.”

“Thanks, Ethan.”

*****

“So I had a dream” says Faith, “Not a races coming together thing, more a girl being taken apart by guys in hoods kind of deal.”

“Oh dear” Giles glances down from the ladder he’s using to examine the carvings in the ceiling of this final section of Proserpexa’s temple. “That sounds worryingly like Buffy’s.”

“Yep.” Faith holds the ladder steady as Giles clambers down. The two of them have been working their way through the uncovered temple, removing dangerous items before city officials move in with a view to archaeological exploration.

“Could you tell who she was?” Giles asks, “Or where she was?”

“Nope and nope. She was young. Maybe sixteen? I’d guess she was in a city in Europe, but I don’t know for sure.”

“You’d guess based on what?”

Faith shrugs. “It was all cramped and old.”

Outside of California, Giles reflects, that really doesn’t narrow it down. “Did she say anything? Did you recognise the language?”

Faith shakes her head. “Sorry, Giles, that’s all there was to it. Robey things chased her around, caught her, gutted her. She didn’t say anything. Faith examines the floor, watches him dismantle
“Screamed a lot.”

“I’m sorry, Faith. That must have been unnerving.”

“Whatever. It’s not like my dreams are a walk in the park ever since I was called.”

“Do you think you were seeing her die in, um, real time?”

“Yep. My brain’s own live action show.”

“She wasn’t in period dress or anything?”

“No, she’s a modern day gal. Or she was.”

“We’ll have to look at the international press, see if we can find any deaths that match the trend.”

“Two dead girls in two countries and we can sort of pinpoint the continents? How hard can it be?”

“You’re right. I’ll contact the Council. They’re better placed to find out what’s going on.”

Faith nods. “And they’re good at knowing where random teenage girls are.”

****

Giles would have liked to tell them all at the shop, which had had the reassuring presence of a well-equipped training room and a host of books. But the shop is gone and Buffy couldn’t detach herself from her various monitors and get there if it wasn’t, and so he consolidates the information at her bedside when everyone is visiting together. He lets them talk a while first, Willow and Tara sharing warm glances while Dawn plans her dress for the wedding. “Not a big fancy gown” the girl says, “because it’s the desert. But maybe a summer dress?”

“Whatever you like, Dawnie.”

Giles waits, hoping for a lull in the conversation, but they are all together so little these days that it doesn’t happen. Xander has been busy rebuilding the school he once helped destroy, attempting – Giles suspects – to distract himself from thoughts of Anya. Faith has been juggling long, tedious hours at work and long, exhilarating hours of training, preparing for exactly this, for it coming, whatever it is. Willow and Tara have been wrapped up in each other. It is not that Buffy hasn’t had plenty of visitors, but they have been coming sporadically, fitting visits in around their day to day lives. Having them all together around the bed feels like a party, and Giles wishes he didn’t have to ruin it by addressing the little matter of the incoming apocalypse, but someone has to.

When he has summarised the dreams and shared the muttered words in the demon bar, Dawn asks, “So it’s started?”

“Looks that way” says Ethan.

“Couldn’t it have just been that demon trying to get to you?” asks Xander, “Maybe it’s just something they say, like evil’s catch phrase.” He looks hopefully at Willow, catches her expression and says, “Or I’m clutching at straws.”

“I have been asking around” says Ethan, “But I’ve been careful with the confusion hexes, and I’ve never seen that chap before.”

“Demon” Giles corrects reflexively.

“He just knows it’s coming” say Ethan, ignoring the correction, “They’ve been sensing it for a


“While.”

“Right in time for the wedding” mutters Dawn. Faith looks about to say something sharp at that, but it is Willow who says, “That doesn’t...” and then she looks at Tara, apparently worried about offending her. Tara takes Willow’s hand and finishes, “It isn’t the main thing.”

“We’ve known for ages it was coming” says Buffy, “You’re not going to put off the wedding over it, are you?”

“No” says Willow, “We’ll still go ahead.”

“Good” says Xander, “I mean, if we can’t multitask the good stuff with the hell-stopping, what did Sunnydale High ever teach us?”

“Biology” says Buffy. Xander says, “Speak for yourself.”

Giles shares a glance with Faith and can tell she is thinking the same thing: That weddings and school-day reminisces are not the priority right now. He hopes Buffy is downplaying the concern for her friends, but a part of him wonders if her sojourn in the hospital and the dependence her injury has necessitated might have distanced her from the ruthlessness she will need to face what is coming. As for the rest of them, they all seem to genuinely see this as just another apocalypse. It isn’t. It is one Willow started, and probably worse than anything they’ve faced. Yet even Willow smiles and jokes about things they’ve faced before, nods as the others reassure each other.

But then she glances at Giles when Xander, Dawn and Tara are looking elsewhere, and he realises it is an act. She knows what she did, and behind the veneer of confidence, she is shaken. Perhaps a part of her had hoped that after so long, this unknown devouring evil might not ever come after all. Now it has, she will have to confront her guilt all over again.

He waits until the others are gone to tell Buffy the other news. First Xander heads off for a meeting with his supervisor, then Willow and Tara say their goodbyes and Faith, grown inevitably restless, beckons Dawn to leave. Giles considers telling her then – Faith and Dawn will need to decide if they want Spike in their home after all – but he reasons that Buffy should have a chance to come to terms with the news in her own time before any arrangements are made.

Once Faith has dragged Dawn off, Ethan makes some excuse about bringing the car around and leaves Giles alone with Buffy. He says, “There is one more thing.”

Buffy looks at him, already tired. “Uh oh.”

“It’s not necessarily bad” Giles says and then wonders how appropriate an assessment that is. Surely a soul regained is better than not necessarily bad? Or perhaps Buffy will grieve the demon now supplanted? Giles doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what it’s like to care for a soulless thing. He tells her, “A contact of mine in Africa called me on Spike’s behalf.”


“He’s alright. Physically, that is.”

“Giles. What are you not telling me?” She looks so worried, Giles realises, even thinking he’s soulless.

“He has his soul back” Giles announces. He watches to see her reaction but she keeps it behind her eyes.
“Oh” she says, very quietly. Then, a frown gathering, “Why? I mean – how? Does this mean he’s
cursed?”

“No as I understand it. I’ll have to ask him more about exactly what he did, but my understanding
is he won it.”

“Won it? Like a jackpot?” Her frown digs in. “Only with a whole side order of angstiness, I’m
guessing.” Buffy stares at him, wrapped in her thoughts. She starts to ask, “Why would h –” and
stops. She knows why. Giles watches the why slip into her mind and take root there. She asks, “Is
he okay?”

“I don’t know, in all honesty.” Distressed, he was told, but wouldn’t it be worrying if he wasn’t, in
the circumstances? “Arrangements have been made to get him back to Sunnydale. We’ll see for
ourselves then.”

“How soon?”

“You’ll know when I do, Buffy.”

“You’ll bring him straight here?”

“If you like.”

*****

Only after agreeing to take Spike to visit Buffy did Giles start to wonder whether it would be
possible. Would a recently ensouled vampire be safe around patients? What if the demon was
fighting back with random flashes of violence? What if he was ranting and raving, and lashing out
at any unsuspecting member of staff who tried to calm him? The chip would prevent the worst if
that was the case, but how then would Giles put doctors off of examining the suddenly screaming
man?

Thankfully, when Spike returns, he is far from the horror of Giles’ worst imaginings. He had spent
the bulk of the journey drugged and semi-conscious, flanked by a trainee watcher on a night flight
over from Yalinga. In L.A, he had been met by Jenny, who had passed him on to Angel – Giles
hadn’t been so naïve as to think Angel taking over from the young watcher directly would be good
for either party – who had housed him somewhere sun proof to wait out the coming day. Now
Jenny and Angel step out the car at the last stop before Sunnydale, a small-town Giles and Ethan
have driven out to meet them in. It has a church, a grocery store, a bar that apparently caters
exclusively to motorcycling demons, and not much else. No-one observes the odd meeting; a
vampire, a watcher, a mage and a techno pagan all waiting as a second, slighter vampire gets out
the back of one vehicle and slips into the back seat of another. As Spike passes him, Angel says,
“Make yourself useful to her.” No need to say who she is, of course. Giles isn’t sure whether Angel
is telling Spike to help the slayer as penance for his actions as a demon, or telling him to endear
himself to Buffy in hope she’ll save him, offer him a purpose as she once did for Angel. He bristles
slightly at the idea of Buffy being used as a ladder to someone else’s salvation.

Better perhaps if Spike returned to L.A. with his sire. Of all the creatures in this world Angel is
best placed to understand what he is going through right now. But Spike and Angel are connected
via a chain of murders and Spike must just now be coming to realise the horror of that. Natural he
would want to be among humans, if natural is a term that could ever apply to this situation.

Once Angel has gone off to see to the bar and Giles and Ethan have caught up with Jenny, they
start the drive back to Sunnydale. Spike is silent in the back of the car. He stares straight ahead at
first, but then his eyes are drawn sideways and upwards, toward the desert sky.

Where was he, wonders Giles. The soul, the person for want of a better word now wedged inside the demon in the backseat: Where did he go when he was killed and replaced by that same demon? On what plane of existence has he been all this time? Glancing back, he says, “Congratulations.”

Spike doesn’t respond. Giles offers, “No vampire ever earnt his soul back before. You’ve made history.”

“Dru named the stars” replies Spike, still staring up at them.

An awkward silence ensues. After a while, Ethan breaks it with a half whispered, “I can cast a glamour if you insist on taking him to the hospital tonight – We’re well past visiting hours.”

“Thank you” says Giles, “We’ll do that.” Buffy demanded as much when he saw her this morning. Turning to the back seat, Giles explains, “Buffy was hurt, Spike – she’s in hospital. She’ll make a full recovery. We’re taking you to see her now.”

Spike says nothing but he turns Giles’ way and frowns.

In the hospital, the glamour ensues no-one looks their way twice. The building is as labyrinthine as any other hospital building on earth, and they go up and down corridors and in and out of lifts to reach Buffy’s latest ward. There have been a few changes of location since the awful day the gun was fired, each marked by the removal of another tube. Spike remains silent and watchful, flinching once when an orderly steps suddenly out a side room, calling cheerfully over his shoulder to a colleague. Obviously the vampire’s skin was always sunless, but somehow the hospital lighting makes it more noticeable, making Spike look gaunt. Between that his cautious manner, they hardly needed the glamour – to any outside observer, it would look like Giles and Ethan were escorting a vulnerable relative.

Buffy is awake and waiting for them. Ethan hangs back a few feet from the bed and Giles follows suit, though the watcher in him is keen to know how invested his slayer is in this metaphysical anomaly.

Spike carries on walking, stopping only when he sinks into the embrace she folds him in to. She hugs him fiercely. Giles hears him say, “You’re in the wrong place, pet.”

“I’ll be out of here soon” Buffy murmurs back.

“Got you a present. It’s got people talking.”

A chaos of emotions cross Buffy’s face in the hospital’s night time half-light. She looks like she has a lot to say, but restricts herself to, “Thank you. It’s the most amazing thing anyone ever got me.”

Giles forces himself to turn around and give them some privacy.

*****

“I’m fine to have him back” Faith had said, “But not in the middle of the night. It’s okay for you, you won’t have a hyped up Dawn to deal with.” So Rupert had agreed to Spike staying with them the first day. Ethan imagines they will have a hyped up Dawn visiting well before it’s dark enough to return Spike to his basement (“Where he belongs” Dawn had said firmly).

Spike sits down on the sofa only when directed. Beside him, Rupert and Ethan dither. Rupert says,
“We weren’t sure what you’d want so we bought cow and pig’s blood.”

“Not hungry” says Spike, “Thanks all the same.”

“You should eat something.”

Spike looks mutinous for a moment, then slides back into neutral. Rupert says, “I’ll heat the pig’s blood.” He retreats to the kitchen. Ethan sits down in the chair opposite Spike. Apparently regaining a soul is a conversation killer; Spike was never engaging company – he was far too interested in maintaining his cool for that – but now he simply sits and stares, first at the middle distance and then through the half open bedroom door. Really, Ethan reflects, the only time he and Spike ever chatted was over cards. He is about to suggest and game but then remembers, “I’m going to put up a few barrier spells.” They’ve talked about this already, Rupert asking him to seal off Spike’s access to the door and the window until sunset.

“You think I’m going to dust myself” says Spike without inflection – no confirmation or denial, just a statement of fact. He doesn’t look at Ethan, just keeps staring into the bedroom.

“Won’t you?” asks Ethan. He can’t imagine being responsible for so many deaths and not at least considering a swift exit. Randall was bad enough all on his own.

It occurs to him that Spike probably never killed anyone before he lost his soul. He, Ethan, is the one who knows how that feels. He ought to be able to offer advice. He’s got nothing.

Without tearing his gaze from the bedroom doorway, Spike says, “No use in that” Then he frowns, and says, “Charlotte”, concentrating on the word.

“What?” asks Ethan.

“That was her name.”

“Who?”

“The little girl under your bed.”

Ethan forces himself not to go and look. Obviously there is no little girl. He watches Spike uneasily.

“She’s hiding from Angelus” Spike adds.

“Right.” Ethan is grateful when Rupert returns and hands Spike a steaming mug. Spike takes it absently and looks back through to the bedroom, as though waiting for permission. Carefully, Ethan gets up and closes the door.
“Have you spoken to Willow?” Buffy asks.

“Not since we all visited” Giles replies, “Actually, I was going to ask you if she’d visited since.”

Buffy shakes her head. “I saw Tara” she says, “Apparently Willow’s been uber research gal since you did your end is nigh speech.”

“I wasn’t aiming to scare anyone.”

“I know.” Buffy shifts against the hospital mattress. Her range of movement has improved in little subtle ways just over this last week. Giles hopes she isn’t pushing herself. She says, “Maybe this is me being harsh but I’m starting to think she should be scared.”

“I agree we should take this threat seriously” Giles replies cautiously, “But that’s not what you mean, is it?”

Buffy shakes her head. “Willow specifically” she confirms, “Because she let it in. God, Giles, does that make me a terrible person?”

“No. No, I think that makes you human.”

“I’ve been trying to forgive her for the whole…For bringing me back. And I’ve pretty much got there – I don’t want to be dead. Ironically, with this thing coming that wants to make me dead again.” Buffy sighs. “But I guess I just didn’t think much about this evil coming. Too busy coping with getting back into the whole weird mess that is living. But now…Giles, it was one thing to know people might die because of what Willow did but it’s another thing to see it.”

Giles nods. “You are the slayer. You instinctively look for the source of the threat.”

“And this time it’s Willow” says Buffy miserably.

“Not wittingly.”

“I know. And it is sort of me too. Definitely not wittingly because, corpse. But still.”

“Buffy, you are the very last person who should feel responsible for this.”

“Do you think it will come after us? Me and Willow specifically, I mean. Will it want to go back to the source?”

“I don’t know. But if your dreams are anything to go by, it has plans on a more global scale.”

“I was afraid you’d say that” sighs Buffy. “I wouldn’t have minded so much if it was me and Willow. We can take it.” She looks at him. “But I guess we’ll all have to.”

“In good time” he reminds her, “Heal first.”

“If it gives me time for that.”

“There’s Faith, in the meantime.”
“Great, way to make me feel worse.”

“She doesn’t mind, Buffy.” Really, Giles suspects Faith is enjoying being the only active slayer, her first experience of it that didn’t involve Buffy being dead.

“I guess not. But I worry about you guys.”

“It’s our turn to worry about you.”

Buffy’s mind follows a well-traced connection between generalised worry and a certain vampire. “How’s Spike?”

“Back in the basement. He seems to be coping as well as can be expected in the circumstances.”

“Look after him, won’t you?”

“He has Faith and Dawn for that.”

“But you’ll help? Please, Giles.”

“Alright” says Giles, who will do anything for a hospital-bound Buffy. “I’ll help.”

*****

Giles isn’t sure that inviting Spike on patrol is especially helpful – surely Spike would want to stay away from violence now – but when Faith suggests it, Giles still agrees on the grounds that it is at least an idea, which is more than he has.

Spike trails behind them around the cemetery, a mournful shadow, while Faith and Giles take the lead.

“Perhaps he’d like to go home after this one” suggests Giles, glancing back.

“Nah, trust me, G, this is good for him. A bit of violence to work the guilt out.”

It doesn’t sound especially healthy, but Giles supposes there is no harm done if it results in fewer demons. Not to mention it appeases Spike’s demon, the demon still very much in there. That, at least, has been tried and tested with how readily Spike turned to demon hunting after the chip.

The chip was a blessing after all, he reflects. It gave Spike a support network he never could have bonded with otherwise. Not that he would be in this situation otherwise. But still, no wandering the earth alone for centuries for this souled vampire. Perhaps if there is a way for a vampire to manage a soul without becoming an utter mess, Spike will find it.

“I can hear you, you know” says Spike behind them, even though neither Giles or Faith has spoken for some time.

“Damn vampire hearing” mutters Faith. Louder, she adds, “Hi, Spike.”

Giles glances back and finds Spike isn’t even looking at them. He staring off into shadows. Giles says, “I’ve been meaning to ask – Should we be calling you Spike?”

Spike turns and seems a little surprised to see them. “‘S my name” he replies.

“Yes, but wouldn’t you prefer a human name now?” Giles stops short of asking whether he would prefer not to be so constantly reminded of the incident with the railway spikes. He wonders what
Spike’s human name was. Probably William, but not automatically. Buffy might know.

“I’m not human” says Spike, “No point pretending it.” He nods casually past Giles and adds, “Demon” and after that, their night is too busy to worry about names.

*****

When it is over, Giles drives them home. Faith settles into the passenger seat with the satisfied sigh of a slayer sated, while Spike wipes the blood from his hands grimly on his shirt and then stares at the streaks.

Once they are on their way back to Revello Drive, Faith says, “So Willow called me today.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. Said she’s found a news report from Canada that matches that dream I had about the girl being killed while the sky went all trippy.”

“The aurora borealis.”

“Nah, turns out her name was Alice.”

“Oh?”

“Alice Clark. She got stabbed literally the same night I had the dream.”

Giles lets this sink in. “So we have proof then, that this is happening currently.”

“We didn’t need it” Faith dismisses. “B and me already knew.”

“A chance to find out why these girls are being targeted then.”

“Girls?” asks Spike from the back.

“Girls around the world are being murdered” Giles explains, “I don’t suppose you heard anything on your, um, travels?”

Spike looks blank for a moment. “Can’t say I did” he replies, “About specific girls, I mean. There are girls being murdered all the time, Rupert, it’s the world we live in.”

“Whatever’s killing these girls ain’t human” Faith maintains.

“Still, knowing who one of them is – err, was – outside of your dreams opens up a research angle.”

“Willow wishes” dismisses Faith, “She just wants to fix it fast because she woke the thing up.” Spotting that Spike is still following the conversation, she explains, “It’s the thing she let in bringing Buffy back. You know, the thing she hoped would just punish her. It’s punishing Alice instead, and Willow gets to read about it online.”

Giles puts in, “Would you rather she didn’t read about it, didn’t try to help?”

Faith folds her arms. “I’d rather she let me slay it. Whatever it is. None of this research crap like it’s just another demon.”

Giles sighs. It is not fair, he tells himself, to expect Willow to be universally forgiven. That everyone was on good terms with her until now was one thing, with the coming evil an indefinite
thing, yet to actually harm anyone.

He doesn’t ask whether Faith would have preferred for Buffy to have stayed dead. He saw Faith’s grief first hand. But not wanting Buffy dead is not the same as wanting her return to come at this still-unfolding cost. He feels the same confusion: A keen awareness of the wrongness of the resurrection spell laid an undeniable love for Buffy.

But isn’t it unfair to Willow that they put the blame on her, to condemn her for the cost of her spell while welcoming what it bought them all?

Rather than try to wrestle with all that, he says, “Her help will be invaluable, Faith.”

“You know what would be valuable?” Faith snaps, “If she had to watch these girls die because of her instead of me being stuck with the dreams.”

To Giles’ surprise, it is Spike who answers, “She does have those dreams, pet. Can’t not.”

There is a silence. Faith stares moodily out of the car window. Spike turns and looks expectantly at the vacant seat beside him. After a moment, Giles shifts the conversation to practicalities with, “What did Willow find out about Alice Clark?”

“Nothing weird. She went to school, had a Saturday job, all that stuff.” As they pull up in Revello Drive, Faith moves to get out but pauses to add, “One weird thing, though. It’s probably stupid.”

“Oh?”

“Her name. Alice. It was bugging me after Willow called, and then I remembered: A while back me and Ethan went to Willy’s Place to ask around about this thing and I had to come up with a fake name on the spot. I said Alice. Dunno why, it’s not like I know anyone called Alice.” She shrugs. “Probably coincidence.”

“But you don’t think it is?” presses Giles.

Faith frowns. “No. Weird, huh?”

“As though you had some sort of psychic link to her” says Giles. And then he realises.

Still slumped in the backseat, Spike asks, “Watcher?”

“I may need to call the Council” Giles says.

And you are completely certain this isn’t merely a side effect of the psychic connection the slayers have with their heirs?”

“Quite sure” says Giles, for what seems the umpteenth time in one short phone call.

Travers sighs. Giles tries to read resignation into it, an acceptance of the facts, but it is hard to tell. It’s only a sigh. “Thank you, Giles. This is appreciated.”

“You will talk to all the watchers of known potentials?” Giles asks sensing the other is about to put the phone down. “As soon as possible – tell them to –”

“Yes, yes. We’ll instruct each field agent as appropriate.”
“I can contact those I’m aware of, if it helps.”

“Let us see to it, Giles.” An edge enters Travers’ voice. “You focus on training the slayers and finding out the exact nature of the adversary.” He pauses, then adds, “Yours is the most important role.”

“Not if the potentials are being targeted, it isn’t” replies Giles. Buffy and Faith only matter to the fate of the world if there are girls waiting to carry the torch. Obviously to him personally, they matter regardless, but his personal opinion has never mattered less.

“We will see to it” Travers repeats, “Giles, in likelihood, this threat, whatever it is, is attempting to distract your slayers by showing them visions of what it is doing to a handful of unknown potentials. It hasn’t even tried targeting those under the Council’s guidance –”

“ – yet –”

“ – but if it does, we will be ready.”

Giles feels himself relax, just a fraction. It is an old sensation, the same sense from childhood that the adults are taking care of things. After all it is the same adults – the Council have always been a presence in his life, a sense of things taken care of, and the longer he’s lived, the truer he has known that to be. The Council is many regrettable things, of course, often by necessity and sometimes by cold and cruel tradition. But the one thing it is above all else is dependable. There it is, in every nation and every regime, on the board of every significant corporation and with the ear of every secret service. A vast network all over the world. This evil, whatever it is, may have picked off some poor, unregistered potentials, but now that the Council has seen it, evil will not be allowed to prevail. For all his frequent frustrations with the organisation, Giles is suddenly grateful it is around.

*****

“You’re alive then” Ethan greets, opening the door to let Dawn into the flat.

“Don’t sound too relieved about it” she snipes, but she tempers it with a smile. Sets her things up on the dining table ready for her magic lesson. “Can we make this quick? I need to visit Buffy, tell her how my first day went.”

“Would you like to call her? You could use our phone.”

Dawn holds up a fistful of tech. “Already did. Buffy made Faith get it for me.”

“Ah – welcome to the twenty first century.”

“I know right?”

Ethan admires the phone. “I’m beginning to see an upside to the constant peril” he muses.

“Yep – hyper protective slayers, always ripe for a guilt trip. I just need to convince them that a new wardrobe will keep me safe.” Dawn pulls her pencil case from her bag.

“But you didn’t need keeping safe today at least?” asks Ethan, taking a seat.

Dawn looks fleetingly guilty. “Well, there was a zombie ghost factor” she admits. At Ethan’s blank look she explains, “Manifest spirits. They were after Faith because she went off with the Mayor while they were being killed by things. It wiggled her pretty bad, but we got out of it between the
“Four of us.”

“Four of you?”

“Other school kids” Dawn reassures him, “Don’t worry – even with Buffy and Faith being all protective, three people dropping me off would be overkill.”

“Actually, I think overkill is what happens once Faith stops dropping you off.”

Dawn shakes her head. “Not anymore – Faith’s got a job at the school.”

“Faith?” Ethan repeats incredulously.

“She’s not stupid” says Dawn defensively.

“No, but her wits aren’t exactly academia orientated” argues Ethan. “How’d she swing this?”

“The new principal just came up to us and offered it. Said the troubled students could use an ex-troubled student who’s seen the value of education in hindsight. Well, he didn’t really say that, but that was the gist I got.”

“Has Faith seen the value of education, though?” asks Ethan.

“Well no. But she wasn’t about to turn down the chance to keep an eye on him – Turns out, his office is right over the hellmouth.”

“Ah. So he’s either evil or…”

“Really, really doomed” Dawn confirms.

“Has it occurred to Faith that he might want to keep an eye on her?”

“Yeah, but she can handle herself.”

“Yes, I suppose so. And this way she’s on site if you happen to have a run in with manifest spirits.”

“Exactly.”

Ethan nods, starting to like the idea. Dawn may be blasé about the return of Sunnydale High, but he certainly isn’t. He saw how it went last time, unlike Dawn who was out of town with Joyce according to their memories, and part of the central matter of existence in reality. “Well” he says, “Lets get started.”

Barrier spells are straightforward once the caster knows how to do them, but precise, and baffling to the uninitiated.

“Like knitting” says Dawn.

“Not at all like knitting” says Ethan, “No magic is like knitting.”

For a fledgling witch like Dawn, even a serendipitously skilful casting of barrier magic – a lucky accident, really – won’t do much more than buy a few precious seconds to escape. And even that scenario depends on whatever is attacking giving her plenty of time to prepare it.

“So what’s the point?” asks Dawn.
“If this thing starts devouring tomorrow, there is none” explains Ethan, “But if it gives us a couple of months, you can improve.”

Dawn studies the crystal he placed at the centre of the table. “I thought it might be about that” she says, “Not just about the high school.”

“Oh, it’s about the school too.” Ethan lifts the crystal, puts a sheet of paper beneath it and tells her, “Draw the symbol of Lagorlyt in a circle around it: Work anticlockwise.”

Dawn does so without comment, but she looks alarmed when Ethan places a statue of Janus beside the crystal and lights the candle next to it. “This is theological magic?” she asks, “Am I ready for that?”

“Of course you are” says Ethan, who isn’t honestly sure. The thing is, an apocalypse is coming. She’ll have to get ready.

“And the god is Janus? I thought I got to choose the god that suits me?”

“This is doorway stuff: It has to be Janus. You’ll chose your patron deity when we get deeper into theological spells, but you won’t use them for every casting. I ask Dionysus for help all the time.”

Dawn considers this, unconsciously twirling a strand of hair as she does so. It is a childlike gesture, and gives Ethan a pang of protective guilt. She asks, “What if he doesn’t like me?”

“Who, Janus? He likes you.” Of course, he liked Willow too. But Willow has the sort of power no-one this millennium has. It’s not comparable.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to connect with a god” says Dawn.

“You’ve prayed in a church haven’t you? Now” Ethan nods to the crystal “that’s our conduit. We join our magics and focus it in on the crystal. Ready?”

“I guess.”

They link hands, with the crystal between them. Ethan closes his eyes only when Dawn does and lets her take the lead, feeding his magic towards her in a steady flow, enough to support her but not enough that she doesn’t have to make an effort to keep the spell building.

Honestly, he isn’t expecting anything to happen. Dawn is still a novice and barrier spells take time to learn. The point of a first attempt is to get a feel for the process, not to connect with Janus.

Who pops up after a mere ten minutes of meditation. Ethan is so surprised that he almost lets his flow of magic run dry. The spell wavers, holds. Ethan can feel Dawn’s grip tighten on his hands. She can sense the god too, obviously. He is filling the spell, a third presence amid the magic, welcoming them, toying with the casting, tinged... green? That’s odd. Ethan has known magic to feel like a colour before but this seaglass-green is new.

Ethan finds he is smiling, though he isn’t sure it matches what he feels. What he feels is the bafflement of a child whose parent shows up unexpectedly and larks around in a way they usually don’t. Janus is everywhere but small, somehow, a whisper rather than a torrent. The way he twists the magic is playful, and Dawn seems to relax, but Ethan knows how Janus likes to play and he lets the flow of his magic slip away from Dawn. The spell shrinks. Dawn’s magic swells to replenish it, and her gasp tells Ethan she hadn’t meant it to. He opens his eyes.

Green light. They are surrounded by green light. It wasn’t just in his head.
“Ethan?”

Ethan drops her hands. As he does, a flurry of sparks issue from them, the paper under the crystal catches fire and the spell breaks.

“Ethan!” squeaks Dawn again as they jump to their feet.

Glancing around, Ethan grabs a convenient mass of fabric and smothers the fire. Then he snaps his fingers to shut the smoke alarm off. He hadn’t heard it earlier. The green light had muted the sound.

“My sweater” says Dawn sadly.

Ethan takes a closer look at the makeshift fire blanket. “Sorry.”

Dawn takes it back and scowls at the damage, then at him. “You want to tell me what that was about?”

“I would” says Ethan, “But I don’t know.” Internally he senses Janus withdraw – a fleeting impression of a knowing chuckle and a glimpse of stars.

“Ethan?”

Ethan finds he has sunken back into his chair. “Sorry. Um. That will be all for today.”

“Yeah, I’ll say! We don’t have to do that again, do we?”

“Honestly, child? I have no idea.”

*****

If the Magic Box weren’t closed up, Ethan might go there for answers. He still has all the books, of course, but he finds he can’t concentrate on them at home. Not with Rupert restless, waiting for a call. Ethan wonders if he should tell him what happened, but Rupert isn’t fully on board with Dawn’s magic lessons as it. Not to mention, he’s bound to tell Buffy. And they’d both be fuming about him inviting Janus into the mix. No, perhaps best not.

So, unable to focus on a book or share his worry with Rupert, Ethan heads out. Rupert is worried by the idea of him leaving this close to sunset, but not to the point that Ethan can’t extricate himself with a promise to be careful. Possibly Rupert just doesn’t want him around when the Council phone. If they do – Rupert doesn’t seem sure.

It is a relief to be outside, even in Sunnydale. Ethan heads for Willy’s Place, more for something to do than having much to sell, though there are a few powders he’s been trying to shift.

Marvin looks uneasy when he enters. “What?” asks Ethan. Then, heading for the bar, “You won’t get far in the hospitality business pulling that face at your customers, Marvin.”

Marvin glances around, making sure no-one is paying them much attention before saying, “You, um. You probably shouldn’t be here.”

Ethan pauses, his hand halfway to his wallet. “Why not?”

“You’re human.”

“And you’ve, what, only just now figured it out?”

Marvin seems very interested in the bar top all of a sudden. “It’s nothing personal” he says.
Ethan stares at him. “You’re serious.”

Marvin says nothing.

Ethan exclaims, “Fuck’s sake, Marvin – Willy’s human! You want to kick him out his own bar too?”

“Willy’s left town. Left me in charge.”

“Left town?”

“Said things are getting too hairy here. Rack’s gone too, I heard.”

“Oh, what a loss” Ethan deadpans. “So they’re holed up somewhere for a few weeks and you think I should follow suit?”

“Do what you like” says Marvin, “And it’ll be more than a few weeks, you know that.”

“Do I? What I know is, if I can do what I like, I’d like to order a beer.”

Marvin shakes his head grimly. “I’m not serving you, Ethan.”

“Oh, come on! This is ridiculous! You’ve never had a problem with me being human before!” But even as he says it, he looks around. Hostile gazes are starting to turn his way. A long snouted something pulls its top lip back and eyes him speculatively.

Marvin has seen it too. His voice takes on a tinge of urgency. “Look, you’re still welcome at the bite house” he offers, “That’s different. But here, with all these demons and everything about to kick off? I’m not sentimental but I don’t want to see you dead.”

“We’re agreed there” says Ethan shortly, “But I’ve kept myself out of trouble all this time, haven’t I? Anyway, I can cast spells, make them think I’m a demon or something.”

“Some of them” says Marvin, and Ethan has to concede the point: Not every demon species can be fooled by such magic. Marvin adds, “Look, I don’t know why you’re surprised. You’ve been asking about this big evil for ages, haven’t you? Well it’s here now, or good as.”

“I didn’t realise it would affect my local!”

“I’m sorry, Ethan. I just don’t want to be peeling you off the floor.”

Ethan looks at the long snouted something again. It has stopped pretending to be looking at anything but him. Around the room, others are glancing between the two of them. A Dylechor demon licks its lips and someone calls out, “Yeah, take a hike, mortal!” Another snarls, “Get lost – this is our town now!” and from a shadowy corner, a third voice: “You got that right. From beneath you, it devours.”

Ethan looks at Marvin. Marvin looks apologetic. Ethan sighs. “Whatever” he mutters, “You think I’d be drinking here if this town had anything else going on? You might want to clean your glasses now and then.” As parting words go, it is hardly cutting, and it comes out whiny. Possibly he’s been spending too much time with Dawn.

Outside, he takes a quick, convoluted and glamour-laced walk to lose anything that might have tried to follow him. It takes him to the boarded-up Magic Box. Once there, he looks around the dark streets and realises with the snowballing frustrating of one who has spent a day inside already
that there is nothing to do but trudge home again.
“I think a book” says Willow, “She’s got time to read now and with the non-sleepy painkillers she should be able to concentrate.”

“Maybe” says Tara, glancing around the mall.

“Does this place even sell books?” asks Ethan. It’s big enough, but the place doesn’t really allow for any of the secluded, eclectic vibe of a good bookshop.

“I-I think the bookstore was turned into a coffee place” Tara tells him. Turning to Willow, she adds, “And I never feel right choosing a book for someone else. It’s like buying someone underwear but more personal.”

“Right” Willow nods, “Maybe book token is the way to go.”

“I think the way to go is cakeshop” Ethan points to one of the less busy sections of the food court, “We’ve been at this for hours.”

Willow says, “Ethan, we’ve been at this twenty-five minutes.”

“Still, I could do with a break, and this way we can decide what we’re actually going to get her while eating cake.”

“I can’t argue with that logic” Willow replies.

Within minutes, they are ensconced in corner by the escalator, enjoying a sugar rush. Willow says, “I meant to ask, what did you cover with Dawn last week? She was sort of vague when I did my lesson about what you guys got up to.”

“Nothing much” Ethan replies, “A few protection spells.” The decision to hide the truth is instinctive, so much so that he barely has time to register it before Willow says, “Same here.” She sets her fork down, cake uneaten, and adds, “I got to say, though, to the extent I had expectations about having the true essence of magic in me, it messing up my teaching Dawn was not one of them.”

“She didn’t mention anything to me” says Tara.

Willow shakes her head. “I think I hid it well. But I it’s changed how my magic works enough that I end up asking too much of her. I’m so used to having this power now that it just seems automatic and I forget it’s not like that for someone just starting out. I could handle it but I’m wondering if you guys should just take over anyway. So I can focus on other stuff.”

Other stuff, Ethan knows, is the coming apocalypse. After all, that’s why the coven gave Willow the essence of magic. But none of them say it out loud.

“S-sure” says Tara, “There’s still a few protection charms I want to go through with her. Mr Rayne, when will the Magic Box be open again?”

“Yeah” agrees Willow, “Dawnie’s lessons could really use a magic-centric location.”

Ethan sighs. He had been hoping he wouldn’t have to tell them today. “Actually, I heard from Mrs Dumitru this morning – She’s selling the place. Some property developer made her an offer she
couldn’t refuse with their youngest starting a business. It’s going to be offices.”

“Oh” Tara looks grieved. Ethan takes a sip of coffee, feigning nonchalance. “Yes. Well. It’s a change. It will just take a little adjusting to, like any change.”

“Sorry, Ethan” says Willow, “I know you loved that place.”

“It was a place, at the end of the day” dismisses Ethan, “I just need to find something else to do with myself.” Like finding out what’s going on with Dawn’s power, he thinks. He realises all of a sudden that that is why he didn’t tell the witches about it: Why share until he knows what he’s dealing with?

Willow and Tara are still looking sympathetic, so Ethan directs their attention to happier things by tapping Willow’s almost untouched plate. “Starving yourself for the wedding?”

“Goddess, no. It’s not that kind of wedding.”

Tara adds, “No starvation-requiring dresses. People can wear what they want.”

“Actually” says Ethan, struck by an idea of a sudden, “Is that something we could get Buffy? Something to wear to the wedding?”

Tara looks thoughtful. “Maybe” she says, “It would remind her there’s something to look forward to. I was wondering about a throw cushion to get comfy with all the stitches and staples, but maybe that will remind her she’s stuck indoors.” She turns to Willow, “What do you think?”

“Hm?” Willow seems to pull herself from thought and looks blankly at them for a second.

“A dress for Buffy?” prompts Ethan.

“I don’t know” says Willow after another second of blankness, “I don’t even know what I’m doing for my outfit, let alone Buffy’s.”

“I thought you ordered that pant suit?” asks Tara.

“What? Oh, yeah, I still need to do that.”

“I vote dress” says Ethan, “For Buffy that is. How often does she get to wear pretty things?”

“Not as often as she has to wear patrolly things” agrees Willow.

“We shouldn’t say it’s for the wedding though” says Tara, “She might already have something picked out.” She glances at Willow and adds, a little pointedly, “Like us.”

Willow seems not to notice the hint. She stares across the food court. “Hey” she says, “Isn’t that Anya?”

Ethan twists in his chair to look. It is Anya: Anya in deep conversation with a tearful and heavily pregnant young woman. “So it is.” As he watches, the woman presses a hand to her face, and Anya hands her a tissue. Working then. “Perhaps best not to disturb her.” The last thing they need is a misfired wish.

“Actually, I think the disturbing is going to come from not disturbing her” says Willow standing up. As Tara and Ethan look on, she strides across the food court and goes up to Anya’s companion. Willow says nothing, but a tinge of magic in the air is all it takes for the young woman to feel suddenly compelled to leave, making hasty excuses to a disgruntled Anya. Once she has gone,
Willow says, “Sorry, Anya” and returns to their table. Anya stares after her, then follows, catching up with Willow as she resumes her seat. “That was uncalled for” she says. Noticing Tara and Ethan, she forces a smile and says, “Oh, more scoobies. Hi.”

“Hello, Anya” says Ethan. Tara twitches her hand in an abortive wave.

There is silence for a moment. Anya picks at a loose thread on her sleeve, and Willow pokes at her cake with her fork, without eating it. Ethan and Tara glance about. Then, grudgingly, Anya asks, “How’s Buffy?”

“Sh-she’s doing well” says Tara, “She’s coming home tomorrow.”

“Good.” Anya smile becomes genuine, “That’s good.” She looks appraisingly at their table, then prods Ethan, sitting down when he moves over to make room. “And the rest of you?”

“We’re alright” says Ethan, “No shop and just the one slayer. But a –” he bites back the words a wedding coming up. Looks to Willow and Tara for help.

Tara asks, “How are you?”

“Busy” says Anya, “I went to France the other day. Then Slovenia last week. And I’ve been doing up my apartment. I moved in in a rush after the whole dumped at the altar thing and it’s turned out to have a load of problems with it so that all needed sorting. And now I’m adding the finishing touches; houseplants, ornaments.” She smiles at them. Ethan has the impression she hasn’t had anyone to talk to about her apartment until they ran into her.

Willow adds, “Also, demon now.”

Anya’s expression darkens. “Well, you’re one to talk” she replies.

Willow looks genuinely perplexed. “I’m not a demon.”

Anya shakes her head. “No, and neither is this thing you’ve let in. It’s worse.”

Willow recoils slightly, glances sharply at Tara, who puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Ethan asks Anya, “What have you heard?”

For a second, Anya looks about to snap at him too, but she reigns it in, limits it to, “It’s not a great time to be in the souls, humanity and cake brigade.” She stands up and adds, “From beneath you, it devours. It’s about to start chomping.” Then, to Willow, “So I’d think before telling me I’m evil for holding a guy who cheats on his pregnant girlfriend to account.” And then, she is gone.

*****

“How’s Spike?” asks Giles when he and Faith meet for patrol. The vampire hasn’t joined them since that first time, and has been emerging from the basement to watch Faith’s training sessions less and less. After his promise to Buffy, Giles feels he should know how the vampire is adjusting. Not to mention, Buffy always asks how Spike is, never mind that Faith and Dawn, who actually live with Spike, visit her too. Apparently news of Spike is too important to limit to just the one source.

“Freaking” Faith admits, “I was going to tell you yesterday but then we had those demons.”

“Freaking?”

“Out” Faith clarifies.
“Yes, I gathered, but how, exactly?”

“Talking to invisible people. He only acts normal around Dawn and even then it’s kind of strained. Like a part of him’s still listening to them.”

Giles frowns. “When did you notice this?”

Faith shrugs. “It’s been getting worse all week. I mean, the guy was wicked distracted when he moved in, I just figured getting a soul gives you a lot to think about. Now, I think maybe they were in his head the whole time whispering to him because now he’s answering back.”

“They?”

She looks grim. “People he’s killed.”

Giles nods, draws in a deep breath of night air. “That makes sense. I can imagine the guilt of having done what Spike’s done over the years would be enough to send anyone over the edge.”

“Just don’t say that around Dawn” Faith warns, “She’s already seen her mom dangle off that edge, she doesn’t need to know any more about this than he can’t hide from her.” She pauses, then asks, “You think he’ll be okay?”

Giles considers this and finds he doesn’t know. On first consideration, the guilt seems insurmountable, but this is a vampire who sought his soul out, the first, so far as Giles knows, of all the millions of vampires that ever were to do such a thing. It seems cruel that he did all that only to succumb to madness. But inevitable? When Spike has achieved so much? “If anyone can recover from this in time” he concludes hesitantly, “I think it would be Spike. He had the strength to win the soul back, after all, and I can’t imagine all the trials were physical.”

Faith nods. “So just wait it out?”

“I suppose so, yes. He’s surprised us before.”

*****

Driving Buffy home from the hospital, Giles feels a weight lift. He had worried that she would seem frail in the outside world, but she slips back into it, smiling up at the sky as they drive along. He knows that colour doesn’t magically return to her cheeks, but it still seems that way.

She asks him, “So the others not being here – I’m guessing they’re doing the whole surprise party thing?”

“Just act surprised” he confirms.

Buffy grins and leans back in her seat. “Knew it.”

When he and Buffy walk through the door, she does put on a good show of flinching back, grabbing his wrist in shock. Or possibly, she is indeed startled, despite knowing what was coming: It has been a summer since she was in an informal, noisy environment. “Dawn, come here.” She pulls her sister into a hug, before hugging Faith, Xander, Willow, Tara and Ethan in turn. Tara says, “Welcome home, Buffy.”

“Yeah, good to have you back, B” adds Faith, “It’s past your turn to keep an eye on the Dawnster.”

“Sit down” says Dawn, indicating the living room, “We’ve got presents.”
Buffy obeys, but glances around the group as she takes a seat. “Where’s Spike?”

“Skulking in the basement” Xander explains, “I did tell him it was time to hide.”

“Maybe he’s just doing a really good job of it” says Dawn.

At Buffy’s forlorn look, Giles says, “I’ll go and fetch him.”

Going down the basement stairs, he is aware of a one sided, whispered conversation.

“Not your style” Spike is saying, as Giles steps into the basement and locates the vampire, huddled on his camp bed. He is staring intently at the air in front of him and, before Giles can speak, adds, “Come on, Darla!”

Giles clears his throat. Spike jumps a little.

“Buffy’s home” Giles tells him. Spike stares at him a moment, and then back at that particular patch of air.

“Spike, there’s nothing there.” Giles steps forward, but stalls when Spike holds up a hand. Spike clambers off the bed, gaze still fixed, and seems to step carefully around something, placing himself between it and Giles. “Enough” he tells it, “I’ve got things to do.” To Giles, he adds, “Ignore her.”

“Gladly” says Giles, “Since she doesn’t exist.”

Spike gives him an odd look, turning to face him fully. Giles reiterates, “You and I are the only people down here, Spike.”

Spike frowns thoughtfully and then turns slowly back to that transfixed patch of air. “No argument there” he murmurs. And then, with a provocative sneer at the empty air, “You heard me!”

Giles sighs. He hadn’t realised it was as bad as this. After a moment, he catches Spike’s arm, gives him a gentle tug. “Come on: Buffy’s waiting.”

Spike nods gravely, shoots a look at the non-existent visitor and follows him. He’ll have to have a word with Buffy, Giles decides. They will need to make a decision as to whether it is safe to have Spike around Dawn. A vampire in the basement is one thing, a hallucinating vampire in the basement quite another.

Except that he hadn’t called Spike a vampire just now, had he? We’re the only people here, he’d said.

Upstairs, the curtains are already closed, must have been, Giles realises, before he and Buffy entered the house. That, perhaps, is another consideration: A disorientated vampire might not think to check the sunlight is properly blocked off before wandering upstairs.

“Spike.” Buffy stands up to hug him.

“Buffy.” He returns the hug, sniffing at her neck with a motion that looks and sounds like a breath but which Giles can tell is a hungry snatch at her scent. “God. You’re home.”

“Yep. All present and non-hospitalised.”

“Still smell like that place.”
Buffy gently disengages. “And to that, a world of ew.” But she still leads him back to the couch to sit beside her.

“So how does it feel to be out of the land of weird smells?” asks Xander.

“Not a weird smell” says Spike, “Formaldehyde.”

“It’s good” says Buffy, reaching sideways to run a hand through Spike’s hair. “I get to enjoy all the luxuries of life now: no lights going out when I’m not tired, no lights staying on when I am tired, take out whenever I want, hot and cold running chocolate. Oh and hot and cold running water because as soon as my stitches are out I get to actually bathe.”

Dawn asks, “And until then you just smell?”

Buffy rolls her eyes. “Until then I’m showering with that weird plastic thing around my chest.” To Spike she adds, “You should see it, it’s –” and then she catches his raised eye and glances around at her friends.

“Don’t mind us” says Ethan, “But you can always show him later.”

Buffy scowls, and she and Spike shuffle apart very slightly. Buffy says, “Um. So. Dawn, did you say something about presents?”

Buffy seems to like the slinky pink top from Willow and Tara. Willow tells her, “Ethan helped us choose it.”

“You did always like pink” Ethan adds.

Buffy eyes him meaningfully, “You are not about to mention a certain Halloween.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it” says Ethan.

Next are a CD Dawn put together, chocolate from Xander and a pair of studded earrings in the shape of two little crosses from Giles and Ethan. For once, it was Giles who successfully bought jewellery and Buffy knows him well enough to comment on that.

Faith presents Buffy with a daunting blade, unwrapped, which she hands over with the words, “Because one of us should own a machete.”

“Absolutely” says Buffy, “Thanks.” She turns it over in her hands, then passes it over for Spike to examine.

“Not that you’ll be patrolling for a while” Giles cautions, “Just because you’re out of hospital, that doesn’t mean you’re completely healed.”

“Yeah, B, at least wait until your stiches are out.”

Buffy holds up her hands defensively, “Guys? No argument here. I’m not looking a gift vacation in the mouth.”

Xander nods sagely, “Boy, you know you’re a slayer when a bullet in the chest is a vacation.”

“That’s all you’re back to hospital for, right?” asks Dawn, “To get the stiches out.”

Buffy nods. “And they want me back for counselling, but I’m going to tell them I can’t afford it.” She turns to Giles, “I actually can’t afford it, right?”
“The fund from England is a little low” he begins, until he registers, “Counselling?”

“For the trauma” Buffy explains, “I kept getting those nightmares in hospital so they think it’s a reaction to the shooting. I’d explain that nope, just slayer prophecy dreams, but then I figure I’d be in hospital a lot longer than planned.”

Willow, Giles notices, has gone very still. Beside her, Tara says, “At least y-you’re not really t-traumatised.”

“True” says Buffy, “At least not by Warren anyway.” To Faith, she adds, “These dreams are getting wiggy” (Willow flinches) “but Warren? We’ve all handled worse than him.”

“He almost was worse” says Xander, and Giles remembers all of a sudden that he saw it happen.

“Oh, I’m not absolving Warren” says Buffy, “Knowing he’s in jail? Makes me all kinds of happy.”

“I wish they’d set a trial date” says Xander. “I love you, Buffy, and I’m all ready to do the whole witness testifying thing, but I do gotta let my boss know when it’s going to be.”

“I’m sure your boss will have to be flexible” Giles tells him.

“With the hole in the girls’ room floor and us already past deadline at the school?” Xander shakes his head, “I’d say sending Warren to prison had better be worth it, but I already know it will be.”

“I think it’s cool you working on site” says Dawn.

“Cool for keeping an eye on all things hellmouth but we’ve got other projects on. Not that I’m complaining about the money – someone’s really invested in sticking a load of teens at the centre of the evil.”

“So all the more reason for two of you to be on site” says Giles.

“Yes” Ethan adds, “And, give Faith a chance to make her mark and there’ll be plenty more contracts.”

“It’s true” says Faith, “I’m planning to smash a few things.”

“Well you might have to” says Tara, “Fighting evil.”

“That too.”

Dawn eyes her. “I’m starting wonder how you got that job.”

Buffy adds, “Maybe the new probably evil principal wants to eat her.”

“Looking the way he does?” says Faith, “I might let him.”

“Faith” Giles chides.

“What?” says Faith, “He’s a honey. And I haven’t had any in a while.”

“Any honey” says Buffy quickly, looking at Dawn, while Giles feels himself redden, “Yeah, you should really go and buy some or…”

“Or make some” Tara intervenes, “With bees.”

“It’s okay” says Dawn, “I’ve had, like, a whole lesson on it last week.”

Xander asks, “Do they still do that thing with the eggs?”

Buffy sighs again. “We’d have to get on that if they did.”

“They don’t” Dawn tells them, “But I might get a turn with a robot baby.”

“Better than eggs” says Ethan. Then he asks Faith, “What about that Richard bloke you took to the – err” he glances sharply at Xander, just as Giles recalls a Richard at the wedding that never was and quickly amends, “Who we met last year” more to help Ethan out than out of any desire to hear about Faith’s love life.

“We went out a few times” says Faith with a shrug.

“Yeah, he mentioned you” says Xander.

“Did he mention the part where he was an ass?” retorts Faith.

“Oddly, that never came up.”

“Yeah, well” says Faith. She turns to Buffy. “Every guy I like turns out to be a jerk so I’m thinking I’ll have to kill Wood before the end of my first week. But apart from that it should be fun.”

Buffy says, “And if he’s not evil –”

“– You get to watch him being eaten” finishes Xander.

Buffy says, “I was going to say she could ask him out.”

“Right” says Xander, “I guess it’s just been so long since I went on a date that that wasn’t the first thing that came to mind.” He turns to share the joke with Willow, but she doesn’t seem to be listening, stares at the floor. Tara leans towards her. “Willow?”


“Easier said than done” Xander replies.

“Yeah” says Faith, “All the nice demons are taken.”

As Xander makes a show of being offended, Giles glances over at Spike and sees him move to test the blade of the machete against his palm. Reaching past Buffy, he confiscates the weapon. Spike seems briefly surprised to find it in his hand, and relinquishes it without quarrel. Buffy turns, sees what’s happening and grips Spike’s hand, tight.

*****

“I meant to talk to her about Spike” says Giles as they drive home.

“Not sure I want to be around for that” says Xander from the backseat, “Now he’s got a soul, Buffy’s all jonesing for the guy.”

Giles objects with, “Worrying about an ensouled being is hardly the same as having romantic
feeling for him."

“No, I think he’s right, Rupert” says Ethan, “They’ve got history.”

“Yeah” says Xander, “And it’s kosher now. I mean, with his soul, he’s in the Angel zone, right?"

Giles tries not to think about how that ended, for Buffy and for him and Ethan. Spike doesn’t have a curse, he reminds himself. But knowing it and feeling it are not the same things.

Breaking his musing, Ethan asks, “What about Spike, anyway? Why did you need to talk to Buffy about him?”

“He’s acting oddly.”

Xander scoffs, “That’s a surprise.”

“Hearing voices” Giles clarifies, “Seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Okay, admittedly weirder than evil dead’s standard fare.”

“He’s not, though, is he” says Ethan, “Evil dead, I mean. He’s got a conscience now, to filter all the memories through. It’s bound to have an impact.”

“Yes” says Giles, “The question is, how bad will that impact be?”

“You don’t think he’s a danger, do you?” asks Xander, “To Buffy and Dawn, I mean.”

“He still has the chip” Giles reminds him.

“So, what’s the worry?” asks Ethan.

“I’m not sure” Giles admits. “I’m just uneasy. I think it would be prudent for us to go round there as often as we can, keep an eye on the situation. Supporting him shouldn’t fall to Buffy alone, however she feels about him.”

“Got it” says Xander, “Vampire watch it is.” He shifts to look out the car at the passing houses and pavements; Sunnydale asleep, mundane seeming. “Hey Giles” he says after a while, “Giles – pull over!”

Giles stops the car. They jolt with the shock of it as Xander scrambles out. Giles follows when he sees what Xander has seen, scooping a terrier out of harms way while Xander alerts the startled owner to the threat behind her: A growing rumble, the ground shaking as something subterranean makes its way rapidly towards them. Ethan, meanwhile has gotten behind the wheel and turned the car around. As scoobies, stranger and dog pile in, he speeds off, asking, “Back to Buffy’s?”

“Back to Buffy’s” Giles confirms.

*****

When Willow phones the following day to suggest they meet for coffee, Ethan wonders if she’s picked up on the no job, no local vibe he worries he’s been giving off since he was kicked out of Willy’s and the shop closed for good. But when she arrives at the Espresso Pump, he notes how tired she looks and wonders if it’s something else entirely.

She doesn’t give anything away easily, and Ethan gives up asking directly, instead letting the conversation flow until they are talking about the Sluggoth demon of last night. “At least it makes
a change for Xander” he says, “His potential paramour being a demon target, not a demon.”

Willow smiles but without humour. “Poor Xander, it’s going to be so hard for him.”

“What is?”

Willow sighs, traces a pattern over the table. “When Faith or Buffy has to kill Anya” she says at last, looking up.

“Oh.” Ethan wonders what his chances are of convincing Anya to leave town before then. Not high. She can teleport anywhere, why would she feel the need to relocate to appease two of the thousands of slayers she’s outlived? And even if she found an apartment outside Sunnydale, she still could turn up from anywhere on earth. But still, he hopes, “It might not come to that.”

“But it might” says Willow miserably.

“She did undo the wish.”

“And what will she need to do to make up for that?”

Ethan is silent. Willow sighs. Says, “She was right about me, you know. Anya. When we saw her at the mall.”

“Willow, there’s a world of difference between you and Anya. You didn’t mean any harm.”

“But I did harm. I’m doing harm. All those girls in Buffy and Faith’s dreams? That’s me. I let that in.” She traces her pattern on the table top again, pressing the pad of her finger against it hard. “That’s why I’m saying this to you, not Buffy. I don’t have the right to ask Buffy what she’s planning to do about Anya when we’re all waiting for the worse I summoned up.”

“Accidently summoned up” Ethan corrects her.

“Does that make it okay? Ethan, this isn’t some minor screw up like an accidental will-be-done almost killing people I know. This is me messing with life and death in a resurrection spell and bringing something forth to actually murder all these girls all over the world. And Tara doesn’t deserve to be shackled to a murderer.”

“Willow, you’re talking rot. Tara loves you.”

“But she deserves so much better than me.”

Ethan considers her for a moment. “I saw Ripper kill someone” he says at last, slipping back into use of Rupert’s old nickname automatically as his mind returns to that time. “I’m still with him, aren’t I? And I haven’t regretted it once.”

“That was different. The way I’ve heard it, he did what he had to do to save people.”

“From what he and I invited in” says Ethan. “And you thought you were saving people too. You thought you were saving Buffy from hell.”

“And I wasn’t! All this death, and I wasn’t even doing that.”

Ethan studies her stricken face and wonders what to say. What does one say to someone who’s unwittingly brought about an apocalypse? “Tara loves you” he repeats.

“I know that” says Willow, “But is it enough?”
“It is. Take it from me.”

Willow nods quietly but she doesn’t look convinced.
“Are we doing barrier spells again?” asks Dawn, somewhat nervously, as they take a seat for her lesson.

Ethan looks at Spike, who has wandered up from the basement and is leaning in the doorway, and replies, “No. I think we’ll just go over a few protective symbols today.” The last thing they need is Buffy hearing all about the strangeness of Dawn’s barrier magic in garbled, unstable vampire language.

Briefly, Dawn seems an odd mixture of relieved and disappointed, but then she smiles, looks at the book he shows her for a few moments, and then pipes up, “So are you excited for the wedding?”

Inevitable that this lesson would be completely overshadowed by tomorrow’s wedding, and Ethan is a little annoyed by it, but he can’t deny, “Of course I am. I love a good wedding.”

“Me too” says Dawn, who Ethan is certain has never attended one before. Xander and Anya’s attempt doesn’t count. Apparently, Dawn’s thoughts are dragged to that day too, because she adds, “And this time, I don’t have to wear bright green.”

Spike turns his head to scowl at a patch of nothing a little to Ethan’s left and says, “Not any more, she’s not.” Dawn and Ethan stare at him for a second, two seconds.

“Well” says Ethan at last, “I must say the lack of dress code is refreshing.”

“Yeah” agrees Dawn, with an anxious glance at Spike, “But I’m still going all out.” She half reaches for the vampire, and he comes over to her like a dog brought to heel, sits beside her and glowers at the patch of air but says nothing further.

“Yes” says Ethan, playing along. “I’m more inclined to dress to the nines when its not compulsory. And Willow’s got her outfit sorted at last.”

“Just in time” says Dawn, “And she’s staying here tonight, so I get to help her get ready.”

“Yes, me and Rupert are driving Tara out there” confirms Ethan, “Actually I’m surprised they’re going in for the whole bad-luck-to-see-the-bride-before-the-wedding thing.”

“I think it’s just an excuse for Willow and Buffy to hang out” says Dawn. “Faith’s taking patrol.” She turns to Spike. “You’ll be okay here on your own, won’t you? For the actual wedding, I mean.”

He takes a moment to focus his attention away from the nothing next to Ethan. “I’ll be alright, bit” he tells her, “Not really up for a daytime ceremony. No stars.”

“Right” says Dawn, “And the whole fatal sunlight thing.” She tries to smile but it falters as Spike stares at that particular patch of air again.

“We won’t be long” says Ethan, more for Dawn’s benefit that Spike’s. “You can join us for the after party, Spike.”

“Right” says Spike absently, not looking Ethan’s way, “The wake.”

*****
“I found another girl” Willow tells Giles when he and Faith go to meet her at the college library. She pushes a piece of paper towards them, a print out of some internet version of a newspaper. Giles recognises the logo of Le Monde. Willow points to a photograph, a girl leaning against the shoulder of another teen, who has been cut off by the frame. “Is this who you saw?”

Faith studies the picture. “That’s one of them” she confirms. To Giles, she adds, “That’s the girl who tried to hide in that place with the skull walls.”

“The catacombs” says Willow.

“Yes” says Giles, staring down at the photograph. The girl is perhaps fifteen. She wears a crucifix. Baring religious devotion, it suggests to him she was aware of vampires at the very least, and probably had a watcher. Not that that couldn’t go hand in hand with religious devotion, of course: Nothing like discovering that the supernatural exists to send a young person into the reassuring embrace of rules and answers that the church provides.

“What does it matter?” asks Faith, taking a small step back. “We knew these girls were real already: We don’t need to find all the intel on every single one.”

“Well, no” falters Willow, “But it’s not like you get all the context in your dreams. If we know why they’re being targeted –”

“We know why they’re being targeted” cuts in Faith, “They’re potentials.”

Willow looks at Giles. “They’re what?”

“Potential slayers” explains Giles, “At least, that’s my theory.” One he was hoping not to have to burden her with until after the wedding. Faith couldn’t have known that, but she doesn’t seem especially affected by Willow’s visible distress.

“Like Buffy was?” Willow asks, voice small.

“And me” says Faith, “Latest in a line here.” She jerks her chin towards the girl in the photograph. “She could have been number…What is it?”

“Impossible to say” Giles tells her, “The latest of thousands. If not millions.”

“The next superpowered chick” Faith amends.

Willow asks, “How long have you known this?”

“Not long” Giles tells her, “I was hoping for some confirmation from the Council, but so far, they’ve been…”

“Useless?” supplies Faith.

“Slow to respond is the way I’d phrase it.”

Faith nods knowingly. “Useless.”

Willow hands Giles the article. “If you show them this –” she begins.

“If this girl was a known potential slayer” reasons Giles, “they’ll already know.” And if she wasn’t known, they’ll have no way of proving it now. Giles doesn’t know much about the system used to locate potentials – few do, even in the Council’s upper echelons – but he knows it is imperfect at best. Plenty of girls go unidentified, as Buffy herself illustrates. Giles is starting to wonder if there
are more unknown potentials than even the more pragmatic watchers estimate.

Willow is staring down at the article. “I thought it might help to know more about her” she says.

“Might help you feel less guilty” says Faith.

Willow looks up sharply. “The opposite” she says.

Faith makes a dismissive noise. Giles murmurs, “Faith, enough. I’m sorry, Willow, I was waiting until we know more before I shared the suspicion, but if these girls are potentials, we don’t really need background information on each one of them – we already know why they’re being targeted.”

“Even if it helps you to stay busy” adds Faith, unhelpfully.

“Sure” Willow replies wearily, reaching for the article. “I won’t look them all up anymore, then. I’ll try and find out about these cloaky guys instead.”

“That would be useful” says Giles. Noticing her reluctance to take back the article he offers, “I might look over that though, in case it sheds new light.”

“Sure” says Willow. She picks up the article, folds it carefully in half and hands it over. “Her name was Camille Dubois” she tells them.

*****

“Maybe try and make it a long one?” Buffy murmurs to Giles that evening as Faith bustles around getting ready for patrol. “I’d like to have some one on one time with Willow.”

Willow is just out of earshot, in the kitchen, having put her wedding clothes carefully away in Buffy’s spare bedroom. Giles can hear Dawn chattering excitedly to her, and Giles recognises that ushering the child upstairs so that the one to one time can commence may be a lengthy process. “We’ll cover all the cemeteries” he reassures her.

“Good” says Buffy, “Because, much as I love Faith, I’m so not ready to deal with how her and Willow have been to each other lately.”

“I know what you mean.” Remembering the other barrier to Buffy and Willow’s night alone, Giles asks, “Would you like us to take Spike as well?”

“Thanks” says Buffy, “But I think he’ll just hang out in the basement. And I’m not sure he’s really up to patrol at the moment.”

“Alright. Well, if I don’t come in when I drop Faith off, I’ll see you at the wedding.”

Buffy’s face splits into wide smile. “I can’t wait” she says.

*****

Ethan awakens on the morning of the wedding to find Faith stretched out on the sofa. After a confused moment, he recalls that Rupert brought her back here last night after a particularly long patrol.

Rupert, despite the late night, rose before him and is apparently making his slayer breakfast in the kitchen.

“You took your time to get up” Faith comments.
“I took my time to get ready” Ethan corrects. As Rupert enters, he asks, “How do I look?”

Rupert takes in the slate suit and floral waistcoat and replies, “Smashing.” Ethan blushes. The moment lasts until Faith faux-retches. Ethan rounds on her, “So what are you wearing?”

Faith makes an *isn’t it obvious* gesture. “This.” She is wearing the clothes she wore on patrol last night, complete with blood stains.

“You can’t wear that” says Rupert.

“There’s no dress code” Faith argues. “Tara just said whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“That is true, Rupert” says Ethan, who, much as he wants Willow and Tara’s wedding to be a success, rather likes the idea of someone taking the lack of dress code to its natural conclusion.

But Rupert shakes his head. “We can drop you back home on the way to pick up Tara” he tells Faith.

“It’s not on the way” points out Faith. “Anyway, they don’t care what I wear.”

“You should make an effort” Rupert chides.

Faith rolls her eyes. Her gaze snags on a bundle of leather in the corner. “I could wear this” she says, reaching over to lift it. “What is it?”

Ethan says, “Oh, that’s Spike’s. I keep meaning to take that over, but even jobless I’ve got better things to do.” Odd that the vampire hasn’t asked for it.

“Huh.” Faith shakes out and examines the leather duster, then stands and slips it on. “What do you think? It looks good on me.”

She’s right, it does. So much so that Ethan wonders if it was a woman’s coat originally. “Yes, that works.”

“Not really for a wedding” says Rupert, but he seems to have given up arguing. “Come on, we don’t want to be late for Tara.”

*****

Tara wears a long blue dress, just a shade richer than the bleached Californian sky. Ethan checks her hair for her before anointing her with the same blessing charm he will give to Willow when they meet her and the others in the desert. Then they meditate in preparation for the holy spot the ceremony will take place on, while Rupert and Faith wait on the edge of the magic.

Blessing done, all that remains to do is drive to the desert. Just as Rupert is steering the car towards the edge of town, Ethan’s mobile rings. He fumbles for it, swearing. “Sorry, Tara.”

“D-don’t worry” says Tara from the back, all flowers and folds of silk. Beside her, Faith is an unlikely bridesmaid.

“I’ll just turn this off and…oh, it’s Buffy.” Ethan flips the phone open after all.

“Hello?”

“Ethan” Buffy’s voice is grim and Ethan knows immediately that something is wrong. He doesn’t want to ask what it is with Tara in the car, so he waits, frozen in place in the warm car. Buffy tells
him, “I can’t find Willow.”

“Shit.”

Beside him, Rupert issues a disapproving glance, but then looks again and mouths, *What is it?*

*Pull over,* Ethan mouths back, gesturing to the side of the road.

“She was fine last night” Buffy is saying, “I mean, quiet and she mentioned the whole ancient evil thing a few times, but I didn’t think…” Ethan hears her break off to speak urgently to someone, before her voice comes back into his ear, “Where are you guys?”

“Just heading out of town” says Ethan, who is half in, half out of the car by now. He had hoped to spare Tara by stepping away from the vehicle for this conversation, but there is no point: Her expression is a pale, glazed mask. She knows.

“Get over here” Buffy tells him.

****

“She’ll come back” says Xander, half an hour later in the Summers’ living room. “I mean, sure, she’s upset, but she’s not…”

“You?” asks Spike.

Xander glares and says sarcastically, “Hey, look who’s all sane when it comes to mocking me!”

Spike rolls his eyes and looks away. Buffy says, “Leave it, Xander.” She looks around the room at her friends’ worried faces in the half light created by the closed curtains. “So, she didn’t say anything to any of you?”

Dawn shakes her head unhappily. Rupert replies, “When I last saw her last night, she seemed calm. Just a little…”

“Distracted” concludes Tara. She meets their gazes. “She’s had a lot on her mind.”

Faith mutters, “Starting an apocalypse will do that to you” but her voice holds no venom.

Buffy says, “Comments like that aren’t helping.”

“Why would she run off, though?” asks Dawn, “I mean, the apocalypse is happening if she gets married or not.”

Ethan looks at Tara. “She thinks she doesn’t deserve you” he remembers.

Tara looks exasperated. “Sh-she told you that?”

“I thought I’d talked her down” he admits, before realising that Tara’s frustration isn’t with him at all: Tara’s gaze is not on him, but on something none of them can see.

Xander says, “Well at least it’s not you guys together that’s got her wigged. She’s all up for the whole wedding thing, it’s just…”

“Everything else” finishes Buffy.

Xander asks, “You don’t think she’d do something stupid, do you?”
“No” says Tara, suddenly present again, “I’d know. She’s not…I-I mean she wouldn’t h-hurt herself.”

Rupert asks, “You’re certain of that?”

Tara nods. “Even without what she’s got to know it would do to me, she, she knows her magic is needed to face whatever…”

Faith finishes, “Whatever she let in.”

Xander glances coldly at her. “So over that.”

“You’re not seeing girls die every time you sleep” replies Faith.

“That’s enough” says Rupert. “We knew what Willow is responsible for: We kept her in our lives.”

“So much so we’re all dressed for her wedding” adds Ethan.

Buffy nods. “Right. We’re all here with the Willow love” She glances meaningfully at Faith before looking around at all of them, “The question is where would she go when she’s not?”


_Hopefully not Rack’s_, Ethan doesn’t say. He feels Tara’s unhappy gaze on him and knows they share that fear. But it is a distant fear, he realises: For all Willow is upset, he can’t easily imagine her returning to that particular flavour of self harm.

“Maybe” Buffy is saying, “But I’m not sure she’d be in the library spirit if she’s um…” She trails off, glancing at Tara.

“If she doesn’t want to get married” says Tara miserably. “If she doesn’t, we can talk about that. B-but I need to know she’s safe.”

“Can you think of anywhere else she might go?” asks Rupert.

Tara shakes her head but guesses, “Maybe our dorm room and we just missed each other?”

Rupert turns to Buffy. “When did you realise she was gone?”

“I haven’t seen her all day” Buffy replies.

Faith states, “She could be anywhere by now.”

“So we look everywhere” says Dawn, twisting the skirt of her dress into anxious bunches.

“Guys” Xander looks like an unpleasant thought has just occurred to him, “We’re sure she’s gone by choice, right? Nothing’s taken her?”

“Nothing got in here” Spike tells him, “I’d smell it. ‘S what I do, I see evil. Like to like.”

Buffy takes his hand, then nods with the air of one reassuring herself, “And there were no noises, nothing disturbed” she says, “Just a distinct lack of Willow.”

Xander looks reassured, but Ethan suddenly has a horrible vision of something – some unseen, menacing presence – luring Willow out. Playing on her guilt, perhaps. “Sod looking everywhere” he decides, “I’ll do a location spell.”

*****
The location spell insists that Willow doesn’t exist. Ethan doesn’t tell the onlookers that, but he can tell that with her burgeoning magical knowledge, Dawn is suspicious, and Tara outright knows. As soon as Ethan’s spell dies, she announces, “There’s something else we can try.”

Suddenly singular purpose in a wedding dress, she summons up a bright jewel-coloured light. It dances around her head for a moment before shooting for the door. Buffy is already pulling a jacket on. “I’m guessing we follow it?”

Tara nods. “It will take us to Willow.”

Buffy glances around. “Okay. Just a few of us maybe? We don’t want to overwhelm her.”

Tara nods. “Just you and Xander” she decides, “And” she glances around, conflicted. There is a small crowd of them, after all, all close to Willow in different ways.

Except perhaps Faith, who says “I’ll stay here” and puts her feet up, a studied copy of relaxation. “She won’t want to talk to me.”

Tara doesn’t argue. She looks from Ethan to Rupert and back. “Will you guys come too?”

Rupert turns to Ethan. “You go” he says. “Buffy’s right – she won’t want all of us.”

“Alright” agrees Ethan, “See you later.” For reassurance, he adds, “For the wedding.”

Tara glances gratefully his way, but all she says as they head out the door is, “I just hope this works.”

*****

It doesn’t. Thank Janus it doesn’t, because when Ethan gets down into the pit in the section of the high school that remains a construction site, and sees what the light has led them to, he thinks for a world-clenching second that it is Willow, and gags. Beside him, Tara evidently reaches the same conclusion: Her legs give way and Buffy catches her spasmodically, eyes on the corpse. Behind them, Xander yelps. But, Ethan is already realising, “It’s not her.” He nods to the flat, wide – and skinless – chest. “Male.”

Buffy steps around him to stare at the body. She gestures to the shredded fabric nearby. “Guy’s clothes” she adds.

“Also, really dead guy” says Xander.

They glance around as the ladder clatters oddly. Nothing there. They turn their attention back to the corpse.

“Okay” says Buffy, “So, slayer thing to solve. But no Willow. Why would the spell bring us here?”

Tara replies, “Willow must have been here. Recently. B-but I don’t know why the light’s gone out. It’s not supposed to go out until I’m with Willow.” She sounds tearful. There’s not much blood, Ethan notes distantly, but some of the little there is has managed to find its way onto her skirt. He steps aside to let Buffy past to hug her. “We’ll find her” Buffy promises.

Tara says, “I-I know. But not yet. I think she doesn’t want to be found yet.” She looks over to Ethan and adds, “I think that’s why the spells failed. I th-think she could cloak her magic from us.”

“She could cloak her magic from anyone” Ethan agrees, “The question is, why would she keep
hiding? If she’s been here, she must have seen this.” He gestures to the corpse.

“Yeah” says Xander, “I mean, it’s one thing to hide out during a case of wedding wiggins, but to keep hiding when there’s obviously a demon on the loose? I can’t see Willow doing that.”

“Unless she’s going after it herself” realises Buffy.

Ethan looks at her. “Why would she do that?”

“Because she doesn’t want to bring it to us. To me and Faith. She already feels bad about the dreams and the…Well, the…”

“The apocalypse” finishes Tara quietly. “She already feels guilty about the starting the apocalypse.”

“Yeah” says Buffy softly.

Ethan looks again at the corpse. “Bugger.”

Xander gestures helplessly. “But – that was an accident! No-one’s been making her feel bad about that!” He scans their faces. “Have they?”

“Faith” mutters Buffy.

“Anya” adds Ethan.

At mention of Anya, Xander’s expression slips. Buffy says, “That’s not important now. If Willow’s gone after this thing, she’s probably used magic to get half way to tracking it already. If she’s hiding from us, we won’t find her, but find the demon –”

“And we find Willow.” Ethan nods his agreement.

“In one piece” adds Tara. It sounds more like a prayer than a prediction.

*****

Fortunately, the day is still new enough that Xander can arrange for the construction crew to take the day off, rather than show up to be rattled by the skinless corpse. It being a weekend, there are no milling students take into account. Between them, they make good headway on the research, but Faith is restless, pacing. “I suck at all this book stuff” she tells Giles eventually, “I want to go up to the school, see this thing for myself.”

“Can’t say I recommend it” says Ethan.

“We already did the crime scene thing” Buffy adds.

“Yeah, but I’m betting you didn’t look in the basement” says Faith. “For all we know, the demon just scuttled off back down there.”

“Maybe” Buffy allows.

“It is where all the nasties like to hang out” agrees Xander, pausing his research. With a sour glance at Faith, he adds, “And it should be you that saves Willow from going after this thing, since you’re the reason she wants to go after it.”

Faith snaps, “Hey, I didn’t know she was going to go all lone ranger.”
Seeing Tara’s stricken expression and Dawn’s troubled frown, Giles stands up to prevent the argument spiralling. “There’s no harm in looking” he tells Faith, “I’ll come with you.” It is not as though the others aren’t capable of research without him.

The school basement is strange, almost menacing, as though energies from the hellmouth are stagnating down here. Giles glances around a few times, certain that something is behind him. Nothing is, but that just makes the sensation of being watched all the odder.

Odd too that they don’t find anything living down here after all. In its old incarnation, the school basement always had something lurking, if only a relatively harmless sprite or shambling monster. Now, nothing seems to have moved in to replace the spirits Dawn encountered on her first day. The place is sterile, but it is sterile the way a poisoned landscape would be: devoid of life.

The old basement, Giles realises, never ran directly under the library. The final layer between the hellmouth and the human world in the old school was filled daily Buffy and her friends. Here, there is only the principal’s office, a place of solitude, and beneath it, gaping space between that floor and a mound of earth that must hide… “That must be the seal” Giles realises.

Faith eyes it. “Makes your skin tingle, doesn’t it?” Her hands twitch into fists, but she draws a deep breath, steps back. “Nothing here” she decides.

After some doubling back on themselves, they find their way back to the stairs. Faith leads the way out, only to almost walk into a figure that swings open the door at the top of the steps. “Oh!” the man exclaims, “Sorry, I – Oh, Faith, hello.”

“Principal Wood” Faith offers an tense smile. “Hi.”

“Call me Robin.” The warmth in his voice doesn’t reach his eyes. He looks over his shoulder at Giles. “And you are?”

“Rupert Giles.” Giles reaches out to shake his hand, and the principal seems to become aware that he is blocking their exit. He steps back and lets them emerge into a locker lined school corridor.

“We were just passing” Faith tells him, “Saw all that police tape and figured we should see if everything’s alright.”

“And you thought you should check the basement?” asks Wood.

“Heard a noise.” Faith shrugs. “Figured you might be down there. But you were just on your way down.” She lets the statement tilt into a question and Wood looks self-conscious. “Yes” he says, “I, err, heard a noise too. Which must have been you.”

“Sorry.”

“Not to worry. As to the police tape, someone called 911 anomalously this morning – there’s been a death.”

Giles keeps his face carefully blank. Faith asks, “Anything we can do?”

“I don’t think so, but thanks. The police are working on identification now.”

“Uh huh.”

“So I guess I’ll see you next week.” Wood steps aside, makes a gesture to the door that is half a polite farewell and half a dismissal.
“Yeah, see you then.” Faith steps past him.

“Hey, nice coat by the way.”
“Thanks.”

As they leave the building, Faith mutters, “See what I mean about that guy?”

“He is a little suspicious” Giles allows, “I doubt he was headed down to the basement because he heard us.”

“Yeah. But I mean, isn’t he hot?”

“Oh, err. Yes. Um. That too.”

They take the long way back, reasoning that if the others identify the demon, they will call on the mobile Ethan had handed Giles as he left, and which Giles had handed to Faith once they were out of sight of the house. “Anyway” says Faith, “B can take it if it comes to that. But the way I see it, we’re more likely to see some sign of the thing if we’re not staring at books.”

“I’m not inclined to agree” says Giles.

“Well, you wouldn’t. You’re Giles.”

“And you’re more worried about Willow than you’re letting on.” Normally, Faith tolerates the inevitable research better than this.

Faith shrugs. “I was hard on her. Now she’s no-show gal.”

“You can’t hold yourself solely responsible.”

“Never said I did.” Faith glances at him, annoyed. Then Ethan’s mobile rings. She snatches it out the duster pocket and hands it to Giles. He opens it as Faith waits impatiently.

“Hello?”

“Giles” says Dawn, “We know what it is”

“Oh?”

“I should have realised earlier because of the lack of blood but I was all worried about Willow. It’s Gnarl.”

Ah. Troubling snippets of training on the more infamous clanless demon species float to Giles’ mind. “Gnarl” he tells Faith.

“Huh?” says Faith.

Giles asks, “Am I right in thinking it’s killed by removing its eyes?”

“Yup. Buffy’s gone to find it with Spike, Xander and Ethan. She said to call you. Was there any sign of Willow?”

“No. She took Ethan?”

“In case they need magic. Tara’s busy meditating, seeing if she can connect with Willow.”
“The Gnarl is immune to human magic” Giles tells her, memory of a long ago lecture struggling through mounting worry to reach his consciousness.

“Oh” says Dawn, and Giles thinks for a moment that she shares his concern for Ethan, but then she says, “Oh no – Willow.”

She is right, of course: Ethan is with Buffy. He’ll be alright. It is Willow, if she is indeed searching for this thing alone, who is in danger. “Buffy will find it first” he tells Dawn.

“I really hope so.”

*****

As they enter the thick shade of the trees, Spike lifts the blanket from his head. “This way” he tells them vaguely, and they follow.

There is something unnerving about certain parts of the wood. As they head further from where the trees toe the road, Ethan finds himself flinching at odd noises and staring around at trees he is certain are in more menacing shapes than they should be. No birdsong, he notes.

“Not now” mutters Spike, and Ethan thinks for a moment that the vampire is chiding him for his jumpiness, but then he sees that Spike is scowling at nothing again. “This isn’t the time” the vampire says, “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Spike” Buffy slips between the nothing and the vampire, and shakes her head gently. Spike’s eyes widen and he stares over her shoulder for a moment. Whispers to Buffy, “You’re sure?”

“There’s nothing there” Buffy confirms, “And I need you to focus.”

Spike stands awkwardly for a moment, and then carries on, with apparent effort. Xander shares a glance with Ethan and mutters, “Great sign, that.” He shuts up at a look from Buffy.

The cave, when they find it, is suitably intimidating, a jagged opening in the rockface that seems to lead to a dark cavern within. No visible sign of the blood Spike can smell, thankfully, but Ethan can imagine it well enough – traces of red watering the forest floor as this thing made its way home.

Buffy asks, “Are you sure?” and Spike nods.


Xander rolls his eyes good-naturedly and slides in. Glancing around at the watching trees, Ethan readies his protection talismans and goes in after them.

Something is wrong, inside. He senses that it won’t work, but he still whispers a spell into the stagnant darkness.

Laughter answers. The four of them stare around as it echoes from wall to wall. “Okay, what was that?” squeaks Xander.

The voice cackles, “Two little sorcerers, and five little blindfolds. What fun.” It breaks off into merry giggles.

“Well” says Ethan, turning to Buffy, “Thank you for bringing me here. I really feel I’ve
experienced all Sunnyhell has to offer now.”

“Shh” chides Buffy, “Just focus on the protection spell.”

“Magic keeps away” teases the demonic voice, “while I start to flay.”

Amid a growing desire to run, Ethan feels a spark of anger. This thing isn’t going to cut him off from Janus. “Want a bet?” he asks it, staring around as the source of the sound shifts.

“I’ll bet you a pretty little girl.”

“Oh, I’m not any girl” Buffy tells it. She is staring around too, trying to locate the thing.

“Yeah” adds Xander, “You’ve got – ahh!”

“Xander!” Buffy pulls him back but it is too late: A thin red line mars his suddenly exposed flesh.

Spike catches him as he falls back and asks Buffy, “Remember what the bit said?”

“Paralysis. Right.”

“What?” asks Xander, his voice already strained as his jaw sets.

“So” says Ethan, “All in favour of making a quick exit and walling this thing in?”

*****

“…so then we put a load of rocks across the entrance and left it in there” Buffy concludes. The group nod, reassured that at least the thing can’t escape, and that Willow, wherever she is, won’t find it between this mundane walling up and the unlikelihood of magic to uncover it working so near the Gnarl.

“Sounds like we missed some fun” says Faith.

“But there was no sign of Willow?” asks Tara.

Buffy shakes her head. “I’m sorry. But she will come home when she’s ready. I know she will.”

Tara looks sorrowfully outside. The sun is starting to set on what was supposed to be their wedding day.

“I’m starting to think she just needs some time” says Xander. “She’s not after the Gnarl at all.” It would sound insightful were it not for the fact that he is forcing his voice out from a paralysed face while Ethan distracts himself by arranging his fingers into rude gestures.

“Quite” says Giles.

“So” breathes Xander, “Any chance of getting me unparalysed? Like now?”

“As I understand it” says Giles, “we need to kill the Gnarl for that.”

Spike sits down on Xander’s other side and reposes the fingers of Xander’s left hand, putting the pointer finger down but leaving the middle finger up. “Me and the slayers then?” he asks. “Don’t want the rest of you in danger.”

“Good thinking” Buffy agrees.
“I’m up for it.” Faith heads for the weapons chest.

“Isn’t that my coat?” asks Spike.

“Hey” says Faith, “How about we use crossbows on the eyes? Target practice.”

“Just so long as you get the job done” says Giles. “I’ll come with you.”

“No you won’t” say Ethan and Buffy at the same time. They look at each other. Giles tells them, “Yes I will. If this thing is as bad as it sounds, I’m not letting my slayers face it alone.”

Buffy looks about to argue, and probably would, except that there is a knock at the door and she goes to answer it. Ethan, Giles notices, looks grimly resigned.

Tara has started towards the door as well. “Willow?” she asks as it opens, but it’s Anya who stands there.

“There you are!” she exclaims, stepping in and looking around at them all. “Did Willow find you yet?”

The group exchange looks. Tara asks, “You saw Willow?”

Dawn adds, “Where?”

Anya nods. “She asked me to come and see if you guys were back yet. I’d have come sooner except I was busy today.” She looks sourly at Tara, “It’s not like I was invited to a wedding or anything.”

Tara asks, “What about Willow?”

Anya says, “She was really upset she couldn’t find you guys. You know, if this is a prank, it’s not very funny.”

Tara looks perplexed. Anya stares at her, and then at the rest of them as though they are being uncommonly stupid. Carefully, she says, “You do remember it’s supposed to be your wedding day, right?”

“Vividly.” Tara folds her arms. “Where is she?”

“And what do you mean, couldn’t find us?” forces out Xander, “We couldn’t find her!”

Anya wrinkles her nose at him. “What happened to you?”

Spike holds up a posed hand. “Got turned into a good little toy soldier” he explains. Dawn adds, “Gnarl.”

“Oh” says Anya, as if this explains everything, “Gnarl.”

“What do you know about Gnarl?” asks Faith suspiciously, “You didn’t summon it, right?” She turns to Giles, “Is it something you summon?”

“No” Anya answers for him, “It’s not. And even if it was, I wouldn’t - Flaying wishes fell out of style around the sixteenth century. Too bad for me because D’Hoffryn loves a good flaying. Easy way to stay in his good books.”

“But you knew it killed someone?” Faith presses.
“Well yes” says Anya, “That’s what it does.”
“It is a demon” agrees Xander. Anya stares at him.

“Gnarl can wait” says Buffy, “We’ve got him secured. Anya, when did you see Willow?”

“After she went to the school.”

“Why would she go there?” asks Giles.

Anya gestures around. “When she woke up and couldn’t find any of you, she thought it might be a hellmouth thing. Personally, I just thought you were just avoiding her because she unleashed the thing that’s about to devour the world, but she thought if it was dark magic, the school might be a place to check out. Can’t fault her logic there.”

“So she was at the school” Buffy muses. She asks Anya, “Do you know where she is now?”

“She’s gone after the Gnarl” says Anya, “She thought it might be doing the whole invisible scoobies magic, and even if not, that you guys would go after it too and she could find you that way.”

Around the room, unease grows. Ethan stops playing with Xander’s hand and says, “Wait, how long ago was this?”

“An hour or so back” says Anya. “She’d been in the library reading up on skin eating demons and then she ran into me on her way through town.”

“But she wasn’t in the cave” says Buffy.

“And if she’s been looking since an hour back…” Tara’s expression wobbles into horror.

Dawn asks, “She didn’t know where the Gnarl was, right?”

“Oh, she did” says Anya, “She did a spell. On my carpet.”

“She knew” Tara’s voice is edged with panic.

“What’s wrong?” asks Anya, “Willow’s the most powerful witch in the northern hemisphere; she can handle one demon.”

Ethan shakes his head, growing pale. “Not a demon that magic doesn’t work on.”

“Oh-kay” Anya says, “I didn’t know that.”

Dawn turns to her sister. “She wasn’t in the cave, right?” she squeaks, “You’re sure she wasn’t in the cave?”

Spike answers, “I can see in the dark, remember, sweet bit? There was nothing in that cave except a demon darting about.”

Buffy looks stricken. “Except we can’t see her” she breathes. She turns urgently to Giles. “We can’t see her!”

“Oh goddess!” Tara runs for the door, “Willow!” Buffy follows. Faith calls after them, “I’ll drive!”

She glances at the weapons chest, retrieves a handful of blades and hands one to Spike as he rises to join them. Giles tells Ethan, “Stay here with Dawn and Xander.”
“No way” says Dawn, “I’m not staying here if Willow’s in danger!”

“Dawn, we can only fit so many in the car” reasons Giles. Probably only one more: He turns to Anya. She seems to read his mind, “Oh, no” she says, “The last thing I need is a fight with Gnarl.”

“Anya, you have demon strength. You can help us.”

“Can” she says, “Not will.” But she follows him to the car.

As they spill out of the overcrowded car at the edge of the wood, Giles is concerned, but not especially surprised to see another car pull up beside them. “What about Xander?” he asks Ethan and Dawn as they emerge.

“We left him tilted forward in case he vomits” replies Dawn.

“You can’t exactly expect us to stay behind if Willow’s in danger” adds Ethan.

Giles doesn’t argue, but he makes sure to go ahead of them through the trees. If he can keep ahead of them in the cave too, he reasons, he can prevent Dawn from seeing if they are too late. Judging from Anya’s expression, she can tell what he’s thinking and doesn’t disagree.

Gnarl may be immune to magic, but Tara still whispers a protection spell as they approach the cave. More of a prayer, perhaps. Ethan whispers, “I can’t find my torch.”

“Keep it off” Buffy whispers back, “Spike can see it – if it can’t see us, we can surprise it.”

They silently uncover the entrance, rock by careful rock, and step in. Giles senses the protection charm die in the tarry darkness. A horrible lapping sound reaches them from somewhere. Giles puts a hand to the side, ready to push Dawn back. Tara has had the same thought: Her hand hits his, then grips it hard.

Buffy, Faith and Spike move ahead, and nothing attacks them. The demon is apparently distracted. What it is distracted with…Giles shudders. He can hear it now: An unnervingly light voice, bouncing disorientating off the walls of the cave as it addresses something unseen. Or possibly just mutters to itself.

Then, a terrible screech, as it spots their ambush. Giles steps sharply backward, shielding Dawn and Ethan and pulling Tara out of the way of the fight. Anya slips around him but doesn’t join in, instead standing on the edge of a skirmish they can only hear, until Spike apparently manages to grab hold of it. “Now!” he says, and Buffy answers, “I got it!” There is a squelching sound, and then the light-casting charm Tara has started to whisper suddenly works, the Gnarl’s death letting it bloom.

“Oh, gross, B” says Faith, “I had knives right here.”

Buffy grimaces and wipes her thumbs on Spike’s shirt.

Tara is staring around. “Willow?”

Hopelessly, Giles looks about. He can already see that Willow isn’t here. But then Anya says, “Oh god!” and rounds a little outcrop of protruding rock.

Faith says, “Shit” and joins her.
Following, Giles expects to see Willow huddled, hidden. But there is nothing. Faith and Anya are fussing over a patch of air. Giles shares a puzzled glance with Ethan. Spike follows and stares blankly. “I’m not exactly one to judge” he says, “But have the two of you lost your minds?”

Buffy, Dawn and Tara join them, peering round the rocks and looking perplexed.

“Can’t you see her?” asks Faith.

Tara shakes her head. “Willow?” she asks hopefully. No-one answers. Anya seems to listen intently, then announces, “She can’t see you either.” Then, to the rocks, “But they are here, Willow.” Another pause, and she looks at Tara. “She says she loves you.”

Tara starts to sob. Dawn pushes past Ethan and Giles to put an arm around her, asking, “Is she hurt?”

“Pretty bad” confirms Faith.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” Ethan steps away from them and towards the exit, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“Let’s hope the paramedics will be able to see her” mutters Anya.

“They will” says Buffy, “This is personal.”

“What does that make me?” asks Anya, “A non-person?”

“You are a demon” Faith reminds her.

Anya asks, “So what’s your excuse?”

Faith frowns at her, and then looks down, eyes widening. “I could see you already, right?” she asks.

“What do you mean?” asks Giles.

Faith ignores him, apparently looks at Willow. “I could already see what you are. What you think you are.”

A sudden understanding lights Spike’s face, but Giles is still puzzled. There is a pause, and then Anya says hurriedly to the cave-floor, “Don’t upset yourself. It will make the pain worse.”

“Willow” says Tara, directing her gaze to the rocks Anya appears to be addressing, “It’s alright. Whatever it is, we’ll fix it. The only thing that matters is that you’re safe.”

Anya tells Willow, “Tara says she loves you too.” She frowns, then says to Tara, “Oh, she says she doesn’t deserve your love.”

“That again?” Ethan returns, and glares at the spot of ground they are gathered around “Willow, you need to get over this. You love Tara, Tara loves you – That’s all that matters.” He looks at Anya. “She can hear me now, right?”

“No” says Anya, “And you were talking to her feet.” She gestures. “She’s over here.”

Tara edges closer. “Willow, I-I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you. You’re the most incredible person and, and you pick me? I’m so lucky I met you. I feel lucky every day.”

“Tara says she does deserve you either” Anya tells Willow. “You know, it would be really helpful
if you could visualise yourself already.”

“She can’t” says Faith.

“Not something she did deliberately” realises Ethan.

“Okay” says Buffy, “We’ll deal with that.” She raises her voice a little. “Willow, we’ll deal with that, okay? We’ll fix this. You just hang on.”

“We’re here, Willow” echoes Dawn.

“We’re all here” says Buffy.

“Except Xander” says Anya.

“Y-you’ll be okay” Tara says, “We’re here. And we love you. I love you. I want you back.”

And then, in a sudden shimmer of dissipating magic, Willow is back.

“…couldn’t find any of you” she is saying, “so I…Oh! Tara!”

“Willow!” They embrace.

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“It was me” Willow explains later, “I felt like you were all forgiving me too easily. Everyone except Faith and Anya were all supportive and still-loving, even with my apocalypse on its way. It was like you couldn’t see what I really am.”

“What you really are” says Ethan, “Is really lucky not to be Gnarl food. What were you thinking going in that cave?”

“I found a flayed corpse, Ethan, what was I supposed to do?”

“Go somewhere other than the lair of the thing that did it! Literally anywhere else! That’s what slayers are for.”

“Exactly – so I knew Buffy and Faith would come along eventually. I didn’t know I was doing the magic all by myself just thinking it. I wasn’t even sure if what was happening was magic or not, or if the Gnarl was doing it. I wanted answers. Of course, if I’d known about the whole magic-doesn’t-hurt-him thing, I might have found a different plan because ow” She gestures to the bandage around her torso.

Ethan winces sympathetically, then takes in how wretched she looks in general, fresh out of hospital, cave dirt not quite out of her hair and shadows under her eyes. He tells her, “No-one will mind if I go out there and say we’re going to wait until tomorrow.”

“I’d mind. I’ve put Tara through enough today.”

“Not on purpose.”

“Not on purpose” Willow agrees, “But because of my thoughts. Because I thought she shouldn’t want me. But it’s not up to me what she should want.”

“True.” Ethan replies, “And I’m glad it only took a demon trying to eat you alive to see it.”

“I still don’t get it, though” Willow admits, “It feels like, why is the universe letting me be this
lucky – me! I’d feel like that about meeting Tara even without the whole oops, caused the apocalypse thing.”

“Willow, it happened. You knew it might when you did the resurrection spell in the first place.”

“I did. But I didn’t know their names then. All these girls.” Willow twists her hands in her lap. “I guess a part of me wanted to protect Tara from being tied to me. And what with the essence of magic…”

“You didn’t even need a spell to change reality this time” Ethan concludes.

Willow inclines her head. “I’m going to have to watch that.”

“Exactly – watch what it grows into. We’ll need it to stop whatever this evil turns out to be.”

Willow nods and fixes a shaky smile to her face. Ethan asks, “So, you’re definitely up to this?”

The smile mellows into something genuine. “I am. It’s not midnight yet, right? Still time for this to be my wedding day?”

The idea had occurred to them collectively as they drove Willow home from the hospital. The sacred place in the desert had been a nicety, they reasoned, not a necessity: Hecate can be anywhere. She can be in the Summers’ garden, where the others are already gathered when Ethan helps Willow outside. Tara, back in her dress, hurries forward to help.

Ethan looks around appreciatively. Dawn has been busy, seeking out every candle the house, and for all Anya had had some sharp words to say about not being invited to the original wedding, she has helped the child light them. The resulting flickering light laps at the darkness, while Willow’s friends gather round, Xander offering Willow his arm so that Tara can resume her place in the sacred circle. Before she enters it herself, Willow embraces Buffy, who, Ethan notes, has to let go of Spike’s hand to hug back. Faith has given him back his coat and is wearing a dress which Ethan suspects is Dawn’s. She offers Willow a grin as Buffy lets her go to step into the circle.

Ethan and Rupert perform the ceremony between them. The others join in as required, but mainly watch, as Willow and Tara finally marry.
“I’ve read some magic can drive you mad” states Dawn, when Ethan places the channelling crystal between them on the table in his and Rupert’s flat.

“That won’t happen to us” Ethan tells her, “Those spells usually involve trans-dimensional communication of some sort; all we’re doing is creating a barrier. Closing a door on other dimensions – the opposite really.”

“But connecting with Janus to do it” Dawn points out as Ethan places a statuette of the god in question on the table.

“Dawn, dear, you really mustn’t let Rupert prejudice you against the pagan gods.”

“Oh, Giles hasn’t prejudiced me against the pagan gods: That was all Glory.”

Ethan makes a dismissive gesture, to show how little he thinks of that particular deity. He lights the candles. Dawn watches them burn and adds, “She was all about the crazy.”

“She was squished by Rupert, ultimately” Ethan reminds her, unsure whose point that proves. “Besides” He takes a seat across from her, “Sane and insane are terribly binary terms. The human mind is always more complex than two categories, whether it’s been affected by magic or not.”

“Oh huh.”

Ethan hands her a pen. “The symbol of Lagorlyt” he tells her, “Anticlockwise, remember?”

She wavers for a moment, then takes the pen, starts inscribing the symbol on the paper around the base of the crystal.

“What’s brought this up, anyway?” Ethan hopes she hasn’t mentioned to Willow or Tara that their last barrier spell twisted into something unpredictable, even dark. Though, thinking about it, he doubts the witches would have restricted their reactions to warnings about magic-induced madness.

To his surprise, Dawn says, “It was just, I was wondering if that’s what’s happened to Spike. If he got hurt by whatever magic put his soul back into him.”

“He’s still having one sided conversations then?”

Dawn nods. “Big time. I went down to the basement to visit him the other day and he was talking to something. He stopped when he saw me, but... And there was no-one else there, obviously.” She frowns. “Unless there was? Could something have hitchhiked in with his soul like it did when Buffy came back?”

“That wasn’t a hitchhiker in the end” Ethan reminds her, “That was a demon created by the resurrection spell. And I’m not sure magic did give Spike his soul back. An old one might not need magic to do that.” Or not human magic, at least.

Dawn looks unhappy. “So no easy fix?” she asks, “We can’t just magic him better?”

Ethan shakes his head. “Sorry, Dawn.”

“That’s okay. I just thought.”

“He’ll get there. He just needs to work through a few things.”
“I hope so. He does seem okay sometimes. Like, last night he went out drinking. So, that’s progress, right? I mean, drinking alone, maybe not progress exactly, but at least he’s not just shut down in the basement with the voices.”

“Absolutely. Now: Are you finished?”

Dawn looks at the symbol under her hand. The part she was working on when she realised Spike’s cure won’t be straightforward is smudged slightly. “I guess.” She sits down, considers the barrier spell’s components. “So, this won’t hurt us?”

“We won’t let it come to that.” Ethan reaches across the table, places his hands palm up, waiting.

She regards him anxiously. “We could just not do this” she tells him, but she reaches out and takes his hands anyway.

“If we don’t” says Ethan, “we’ll never know if this…” Ethan isn’t sure what to call this. He settles for, “If this effect could be useful.”

“We don’t need to do it today” Dawn retorts.

“True. But do you want it hanging over you anymore? I know I don’t.”

“I guess not.”

“We’ll stop if it gets too dangerous.”

Dawn frowns. “Right”

“I mean it, Dawn: I’m not especially motivated to injure myself exploring magic. Those days are behind me.”

“Right. Okay then. If you’re sure it could be useful?”

“I’m sure.” How is another matter. But magic doing unexpected things just as evil comes for the world is not a coincidence in Ethan’s mind. Or, perhaps it is, but coincidences are rarely coincidental in his experience. Rather, they are gifts from Chaos.

Dawn nods to the components. “Even though this takes way more prep than most evil things are going to give us time for” she presses.

“Well admittedly most barriers don’t just pop up the second you need them” Ethan replies, “But if you’re hiding…”

“…And you happen to have a load of crystals and chalks in your pockets…” teases Dawn.

“Dawn, you live on a hellmouth. You should always have crystals and chalk in your pockets.”

She smiles a little, but her expression clouds as she considers the spell again. “Do you think it is going to be like before?”

“I don’t know” Ethan admits, “But this time, I think we’ll aim to keep the spell going a little longer. Well, and to not set fire to the table.”

“Why?”

“It’s hard enough hiding one burn mark from Rupert.”
“No, I mean, why keep the spell going?”

“Well, we do want to actually create a barrier.”

“But all that green light last time wasn’t barrier stuff, was it?” Dawn’s tone is mulish, not scared so much as insisting on answers.

“I don’t know” Ethan repeats, “I don’t know what that was all about. But I vote let’s find out.”

Dawn looks doubtful, but closes her eyes at last, settles into the magic. Ethan does the same, quieting his mind until he has reached the magic nestled within it. It twitches and wakes as the power of the ritual touches it, unfurls as the candles burn.

This time, Janus takes longer to show up. They sit silently, eyes shut, feeding magic into the channel of the crystal. Ethan begins to wonder if nothing will happen after all. Perhaps last time was a freak accident, or some strange once-in-a-lifetime side effect of the hellmouth, not to be repeated.

But then Janus is among them, and this time, his presence is a flood. Sudden power roars through Ethan and he shudders. Dawn’s tightening grip tells him that she feels the same, and he is distantly aware of the crystal wobbling, threatening the candles. The magic streaming into it is too much for it to contain, and so it reverberates, pulsating back through the channel of the spell, making Ethan’s head spin. The green light is back, faint and flickering this time, like stars. Dawn grips his hands very tight, and Ethan is grateful for it – he’d have let go already otherwise. Janus jumbles the spell into something alien and the light changes, grows flamelike. Dances. Ethan can’t tell if the room is growing hotter or colder but he knows it is one or the other.

“Ethan?” asks Dawn.

“Just a little longer” he tells her through gritted teeth. He is more than ready to stop already, but then they won’t know where this is going: A barrier, or something else?

“Ethan!” The crystal shatters. Dawn and Ethan duck instinctively as the magic it had pooled washes back through them and over them, in one swift, painful rush.

Dawn gasps, scrambles up. Then she grips the chair and sits back down, not entirely voluntarily.

“Are you alright?” Ethan asks.

“Yeah. I think.” She gasps again, breathless. “That was way worse than before!”

“Not really” Ethan attempts to flatten his hair, which seems to have decided to stand on end. “Different, perhaps.”

“In a worse way?”

Ethan inclines his head in acknowledgement. Hastily rearranged hair falls out of place again. He runs his hands through it. “We still didn’t get to the point of actually forming a barrier.”

Dawn gives him an incredulous look. “Could we have? And still been us?”

Ethan considers this. “I just don’t know where it was headed” he admits. “Or why.”

Something twists in Dawn’s expression and Ethan feels the empty spaces the blaze of magic left inside him fill rapidly with guilt. “Look, Dawn, perhaps I was wrong about trying again. Perhaps
we should stay away from it.” Something tugs at his mind as he says it. He doesn’t believe what he’s saying, he realises belatedly.

Dawn is nodding, steely-eyed. “I think you were” she says. “Anyway, how could it be useful? It’s like I said, the evil isn’t going to give me time to smash a crystal before it eats me.” She gathers her things. “I should go – I promised Buffy I’d be back before dark.”

*****

“Have you spoken to him about this?” Giles asks.

Buffy looks at him. “What am I supposed to say? Hey Spike, about those voices you hear…?” She shakes her head. “Anyway, suddenly having a conscience after everything he’s done – everything the demon’s done, I mean – isn’t it normal to go off the rails a bit? If there is a normal for soul-having vampires.”

“I’m not sure two is enough to establish a norm” Giles concedes. He risks asking, “That you were, err, with the demon – Does that change how he sees you? How willing he is to trust you, that is?”

Buffy looks just a little hurt for just a fraction of a moment, but doesn’t allow herself to be distracted from what Spike needs. “No” she replies after some consideration, “At least I don’t think so. It’s not like with Angel, Giles; it’s not like two separate people. William and Spike are more intermingled than that.”

Giles frowns. “Is that a good thing?”

“I don’t know” Buffy admits, “No normal, remember? But it doesn’t seem like the demon is just quashed like when Angel got his soul back.”

Giles shudders inwardly, remembering. The veneer of Angel, and Angelus gleaming through, a malignant presence Buffy never seemed aware of.

Spike is different, though. Even if the soul were to be lost, they would be left with a creature who had claimed to love Buffy. Perhaps it is that that unified the demon and the soul. “Well, keep an eye on him.”

“Way ahead of you” Buffy confirms, “After everything he’s been through, I am not about to lose him to non-existent voices in my basement.”

They sit in companionable silence for a moment, both aware of Spike’s slumbering presence in the basement. The vampire is, according to Buffy, sleeping off a night out. A night out for the unstable vampire is an alarming notion to Giles, but as Buffy had pointed out, Spike is not a prisoner.

Buffy had, if anything, seemed a little hurt not to have been invited.

As they finish their coffee, Faith returns, strolling through the door and calling out, “Hey, B, we’ve – oh, hi Giles. Glad you’re here, we’ve got a situation.”

“The hellmouth?” asks Giles.

“I dunno.” Faith pulls a hastily folded piece of paper from her jacket pocket and unfolds it, places it creased on the coffee table between them. “I kind of hope so, because anything else it is, is way complicated.”

The paper, Giles realises, is a print out of some computerised student management system, featuring a photograph of a smiling young girl. Cassie Newton. Not Cassandra: Like Buffy, her first name is an abbreviated one.
“Cassie Newton?” Buffy picks it up.

“She came to see me today” explains Faith, “In-between all these time-wasting guys and a few kids with real issues. She said she’s going to die on Friday.”

Giles stares. “She’s suicidal?”

Faith shakes her head. “She said not. She said she just knows.”

Buffy looks at Giles. “She’s a pre-cog?”

“Possibly, yes. But precognition is an exceptionally rare gift.” To Faith, he adds, “It’s, err, statistically more likely that this girl is testing you in some way, some sort of call for help.”

“Or she’s being threatened” Buffy muses.

“Maybe” says Faith. She takes the photograph from Buffy and studies it.

“Either way” says Giles, “This sounds like a matter to pass on to the police, or the school’s child protection team. It’s unlikely to be a supernatural thing.”

“I did tell Robin” says Faith, “But still, it seems like we should do something.”

“Oh?” Giles can’t help but feel that, with an apocalypse looming, they can’t afford to focus on one girl who could be helped by the authorities. But he reminds himself Buffy has, over the years, had instincts that have proven to be unquestionably precise. Perhaps it is a slayer trait, and Faith ought to be given the benefit of the doubt too.

Buffy certainly thinks so. “Absolutely” she says, “Let’s save her.”

*****

“It’s morbid stuff” Ethan concludes, looking over the online poems, “but it doesn’t seem like she’s happy about all this impending death.”

Willow nods. “More like she’s bitter about it.”

“Okay” says Xander, “So not suicidal. Except death seems to feature pretty high on her list of favourite topics.”

“Question is why” agrees Buffy. Beside her, Faith shifts from foot to foot. “Hopefully something we can hit” she says.

Why anyone would put their innermost thoughts in any form – let alone poetry – on the internet, is beyond Giles, but he does feel he has a greater understanding of Cassie reading through her amateur verse. “There’s no obvious villain of the piece” he points out, “No-one mentioned as a threat.”

Tara frowns. “M-maybe she didn’t want to out that online.”

“So it could be someone?” asks Faith.

Spike, leaning in the doorway, nods. “Someone who knows her well enough to read her poems. Not the sort of thing you show just anyone.”

Xander says, “Except it’s online for anyone to see it.”
“In theory” says Willow, “In practice, I’m guessing teenage girl’s own website? Most of the clicks are probably from people she already knows.”

Giles concours, “And, barring the supernatural, it’s more likely to be someone she knows.”

“Should we bar the supernatural?” asks Ethan, “At the very least she could actually be a seer.”

Faith sighs. “If she is, she could be more ready with the details.”

“We’ve got the coins” says Buffy, “That seems dark ritually.”

The door opens and closes behind them, and Spike straightens up to let Dawn past. Then he slumps again, evidently tired. Dawn smiles around at them until her gaze settles on Ethan. Then she frowns. Giles would assume that was coincidence were it not for how quickly Ethan looks away, indicates the screen and says, “Dawn. Care to help us spy on one of your classmates?”

Dawn doesn’t move to look at the screen, but asks, “Cassie?”

Faith nods. “Cassie. Hey, did you find anything out?”

Buffy eyes her. “You’re getting my sister to do undercover?”

“I don’t mind” says Dawn.

“Like you’d have done different, B. Anyway, Dawn, spill.”

“She’s got this guy friend” Dawn tells them, “And I’m thinking he wants to be more than friends.”

Still focused on the laptop, Willow puts in, “I’ve found her dad.”

“What’s his deal?” asks Faith.

Giles heads around to read over Ethan’s shoulder, glancing up as Dawn complains, “You didn’t finish hearing Mike’s deal.”

“Is he creepy?”

“Well” says Dawn, “Not really; he seems nice, but –”

Faith nods. “Creepy.”

“Or” Buffy has come to stand next to Giles, peering around Willow to scan a litany of mistakes “It’s her dad. There’s a lot history here.”

“Criminal history” Willow elaborates for those not crowded around the screen.

Giles adds, “Mostly alcohol related.”

Faith nods again. “So it’s gonna be creepy guy or drunk guy. I’ll start with the wino.”

“He is human” Giles cautions.

“And I’m a school counsellor. Perfect cover.”

Tara asks, “You’re just going to knock on his door?”

“Why not? I’ll say I’m from the school and I’m worried about Cassie.” She frowns, adds, “It’s actually true.”
“Or I could go” says Buffy.

Giles tells her, “You’re still healing.”

“Hardly.” She gestures to her chest, her shirt hanging naturally with no bandages beneath to bulge it. Then she holds up a hand, indicates a small amount with her fingers. “I’m this close to being slay-ready, but like you said, this is a human. If he gets violent, all I’ve got to do is knock him out and leave.”

All Giles can look at is the thin scar on her wrist where one of the IV lines went in. Buffy follows his gaze and drops her hand. “Giles, I can do this.”

“Let her, G” echoes Faith. To Buffy, she asks, “What’ll you say?”

Buffy pauses. “I could pretend to be from social services or something. Or a stand-in for his parole officer.”

“Or from a domestic violence charity” suggests Willow, “You could say you got an anonymous call.”

Buffy nods. “Right.”

“I’ll come with you” says Giles.

“And in the meantime,” adds Dawn, “I’ll check out Mike Helgenberg. I think you guys are way off with the dad – she hasn’t even mentioned him.”

Tara asks, “You’ve spoken to her a lot?”

Dawn nods. “We’ve been hanging out.”

Tara looks anxiously at Buffy and Faith, and asks, “Ha-have you thought about how if she is psychic, she might know if she was going to be saved?”

Faith frowns. “You saying we shouldn’t bother trying because she hasn’t mentioned us pulling it off?”

“No. You have to try. But she hasn’t said?”

Faith shakes her head grimly. “To hell with psychic” she declares, “If it’s fate we have to fight, we’ll fight it.”

“Absolutely” says Buffy, “We’re slayers. It’s what we do.”

Giles hadn’t expected to feel sorry for Cassie’s father, but he does. What a waste of a life, stuck in a hellmouth town for the sake of one weekend a month with a daughter who must have seen the worst of him over the years.

Cassie herself, he hadn’t expected to see, but she appears, out of the darkness, to speak with them as they leave.

She hasn’t met them before, of course, but she already knows why they are there. Once they have exchanged a few questions and unilluminating answers she turns and heads back the way she came, moving through the vampire riddled night with the confidence of one who knows that it won’t be
until Friday.

Buffy is quiet in the car going back. Eventually, Giles says, “Tara may be right.”

Buffy glances at him. “First time I hope she’s not” she says. Then, “She seems nice. Cassie.”

Nice people die all the time, Giles doesn’t say. Buffy knows, after all. She sees it every time she dreams about the potential slayers, every time she stakes a vampire wearing an outfit carefully chosen by a bereaved family. What he does say is, “You do seem to be putting a lot of hope into saving this one person.”

“One person at a time, Giles. How else can I do it?”

“I’m not talking about your efforts to save her – you’re right to give that your all. I’m talking about how personal this seems.”

Buffy considers this, watching the town glide by out the window. “I know” she says at last, “I know there’s this big fight coming and Cassie’s one person out of billions we’ll have to fight to save. But she’s one person, you know? And one person I might actually be able to help, which, between the hospital and these girls being killed all over the world while I just watch, is kind of a novelty these days.”

“You will save others, Buffy. You’ll save the world.”

She offers a twisted smile. “Again?”

Giles watches the road, a sorrow settling into his bones. Again. When she could have been at peace. But, “You’ve a gift, Buffy. I know it’s come at a terrible cost to you, but you are gifted with the power to save us.”

Buffy seems to relax a little. “Check” she says, “Another stopped apocalypse coming up.” Then, “But I might need a little help with this one. And I’d never usually follow that up with have you heard anything more from the council?”

“I’ll call them.”

*****

“I’m sorry, Giles” says Travers over the secure line, “But I see no need for further action.”

“Potential slayers are dying all around the world! What more could it take to justify further action?”

“Potentials are often targeted – it’s unfortunate, but it’s nothing new.”

“The scale is new” counters Giles.

There is a sigh down the line. “How can you be sure of that?” Travers asks, “These are by and large unidentified potentials. Before your slayers started having these dreams, we’ve had only a sketchy idea of precisely how many are lost.”

Giles is baffled. “But surely the fact that the slayers are dreaming about it now means it’s getting worse?”

“Or the coming adversary is trying to distract you and the slayers” Travers explains with the air of one talking patiently to a child, “Successfully, it would seem.”
“And if that isn’t the case? We don’t know how many potentials we can afford to lose.” As he says it, Giles thinks of Cassie. One person. They all matter.

“Leave that to us” Travers tells him.

“We might be less distracted if we knew what steps you’ve taken” says Giles.

Grudgingly, Travers replies, “If you must know, we’ve stepped up our efforts to locate all the girls who should undergo training. Since it is mostly unidentified girls being killed, that should address the situation.”

That means nothing, Giles knows: If the Council had the ability to locate potentials more accurately than it already does, it would have done so all along. He opens his mouth to say as much, but his attention is caught on, “Mostly? You mean to say known potentials are being targeted now?”

“A few.” Travers sounds indifferent. “Mostly the recently identified; those whose training is limited. A handful of more experienced girls in remote areas. And a couple who were identified unusually young.” The indifferent tone wavers on the last sentence. Even Travers is human.

Giles doesn’t want to know, “How young?”

Travers ignores the question. He asks, “I take it your slayers didn’t dream of those deaths?”

“No.” Buffy and Faith would have told him, Giles knows, if they had seen children younger than the ages they were called being slaughtered.

“That” Travers decides, “Would appear to indicate that these dreams are less portentous than you fear. Slayers often dream of others in the line.”

“This isn’t glimpses of other girls’ fights” Giles counters, “This is nightly visions of potentials being wiped out. And if they haven’t seen every death, doesn’t that just show the scale of it? There are more deaths than nights of sleep since this all began!”

“We often experience a spike in attacks in the run up to significant apocalypses” Travers soothes, “It’s not unprecedented.”

Giles stammers, then stops himself. Bloody Council higher ups, still bringing out his stammer after all this time. Or perhaps it’s not that. Perhaps he just can’t believe what he’s hearing.

Travers continues, “The real danger here is that you become fixated on these dreams at the cost of preparation. Miss Summers has left hospital, I take it?”

“Yes”

“Then focus on ensuring she regains her prowess. We’ll worry about the potentials.”

“But will you worry enough?”

Travers sighs again, an annoyed huff now. “We’ve stepped up security around the girls we know of.”

“And what does that mean? You’ve told their watchers to be vigilant?” A damn insult, to think that they wouldn’t be already. Travers went the academic route to the top – he never had a potential assigned. He has no idea.
“I’m not going to discuss further specifics, Giles.”

“What about the girls in remote areas? Could they be moved to London?”

“That rather defeats the point of having a worldwide network.”

“So does them being picked off in the middle of nowhere.”

“As I said” Travers sounds like he’s making an effort to remain patient, “Let us worry about the potentials. The best way for you to help is focus on preparing the active slayers.”

*****

Some things can’t be prepared for. When Faith shows up for patrol after Cassie’s death, tired-looking and hollow-eyed, Giles wants to offer comfort, but the words that leaves his lips are, “How is Buffy?”

“She’ll deal” says Faith, stalking past him and towards the cemetery gates, “She’s Buffy. It’s what she does.”

“A-and you?”

She turns to him, looks almost amused. “You know me” she says and doesn’t elaborate. She tugs a stake from her pocket and gestures to the cemetery. “So, patrol, huh? Are you ready?”
Arriving for her after school magic lesson, Dawn slips a spell book from her bag and holds it up like a shield. “Tara gave me homework” she explains, “I figured we could do it now.”

Ethan says, “There’s a key word in homework that indicates where it should be done.”

Dawn rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but it saves you lesson planning.”

Unemployed and barred from Willy’s, Ethan has nothing to do these days but lesson plan. He says, “I suppose so.”

Dawn grins, putting the book on the table. “Great. And with us not doing barrier spells, it’s something to do. We’re not doing barrier spells anymore, right?”

Ethan sighs. “Dawn, the last thing I want is for you to be scared of doing magic.”

Dawn looks at him. “But?” When Ethan flounders, she adds, “You said we didn’t have to do them anymore.”

“Not technically.”

“Okay, I said. But you didn’t argue.”

“Because I didn’t want to pressure you” Ethan explains, “And I don’t want us to do anything dangerous – aside from anything else, gods know your sister would kill me.”

“If she was killing you because you killed me? I really don’t have a problem with that.”

“I’m not going to kill you! I’m not going to make you do any magic you don’t want to do.”

“But?” she repeats.

“But what if we just research barrier spells? Just some bookwork, to find out what we might be dealing with.”

Dawn considers this. “Just reading?”

“Absolutely, just reading.” Ethan forces himself to add, “Until you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready?”

“Then we never do another barrier spell.” A lot of things they might never do, after all, with this evil on its way. “The thing is, Dawn, this isn’t how barrier magic usually works.”

“I’m getting that.” Dawn traces the cover of Tara’s spell book. “Just my luck, huh? I’m the only girl who’s got a slayer sister, and then I turn out to have not been a girl at all once, and then even
my magic’s a freak.” Her mouth twists into a tainted smile, brave and bitter.

“Freaks are often gifts” Ethan offers.

Dawn’s smile slips. “Great comfort, Ethan, thanks.”

Ethan makes a dismissive gesture. “I’m not actually trying to comfort you because I don’t think you’re all that upset, are you?”

Dawn sighs. “Sure: I’m over not being like other girls. The whole why aren’t I normal thing? More Buffy’s deal. What I’m worried about is us getting killed.”

“So am I.” Ethan leans forward. “All of us, that is: I don’t think your barrier magic being this… unexpected is just a matter of chance. Or if it is, it’s a chance we should take.”

“Why?”

“Because this is happening just as some ancient evil is rising. Whatever your magic’s doing, it could turn out to be useful.”

Dawn looks dubious with just an edge of scared. “Useful? Against Beneath us It Devours?”

“Maybe.”

Dawn sighs heavily and bites her lip, fingers drumming on Tara’s book. “You know, if anyone has to fight it with magic, it should be Willow.”

“I know. And she will. But what if we can, too?”

“Yes, because you’re always happy to fight big scary things.”

“You must be confusing me with a different Chaos mage – I’m terrified. But I’d rather avoid whatever’s coming winning. At least let’s look into what we could do with your barrier magic. All I’m asking for now is we research it.”

Dawn frowns. “Just research it? Just to find out how dangerous whatever’s going on with my spells is on a scale of one to nope?”

“Exactly.”

“And if it’s nope?”

It won’t be. Or at least, it can’t be as dangerous as whatever’s coming. They are faced with a choice between danger they wield and danger that swallows them. And Ethan knows which he prefers. “Then we stop” he promises. Dawn isn’t as unlike Buffy as she professes. She’ll understand his way of thinking as the devouring evil creeps closer and magic – even dangerous magic – becomes more familiar. Satisfied that the matter is settled, Ethan indicates the spell book.

“But we could still do Tara’s homework if you need it for next lesson.”

Dawn looks at the book. “I don’t. Next lesson’s cancelled so Willow and Tara can go to the movies. They seem to be compensating for the whole lack of honeymoon by being all coupley.”

“I suppose married people tend to do that” Ethan says. He thinks of Rupert, hopes the world doesn’t end before he has a chance to be married himself.

Dawn nods, apparently thinking she’s read his mind – and she’s almost right. “Everyone’s trying to enjoy time together while they can. Willow and Tara are all loved up and I swear Buffy and Spike
were kissing right before I came in yesterday.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. And Spike’s way better now. Apart from all his going out and drinking, but I think he’s just trying to deal with the whole soul-getting without Buffy worrying. She does, though.”

Ethan gets up and fetches a few books on barrier magic he hadn’t wanted out until Dawn agreed to his research plan. Behind him, Dawn adds, “And Faith’s all flirty with Principal Wood. It’s going to suck for her if he turns out to be evil.” She sighs as Ethan returns and places a new book in front of her. “And I got asked to Winter Formal” she concludes.

“You did? Do tell.”

Dawn pulls a face. “He’s not my type. But now everyone’s loved up I’m wondering if I should have said yes anyway. Not like I’m definitely going to get another chance.”

“No-one’s ever definitely going to get another chance” Ethan tells her.

“I guess not. I mean, look at Cassie.”

Before Ethan can think of anything comforting to say, his phone rings. He glances at it. “Your sister” he tells Dawn, and answers, “Hello, Buffy.”

“Hi Ethan. Is Dawn with you?”

“Yes. Is Rupert with you – he said something about training?”

“He’s here.”

Why then, wonders Ethan, isn’t Rupert the one calling him. But then he recognises something in her tone: This is Buffy taking charge, or rather, not Buffy. The Slayer. “What’s happened?” Beside him, Dawn looks up sharply.

“I’m calling a scooby meeting” Buffy tells him, “My house, as soon as everyone can get here. Will you drop Dawn off at a friend’s house first? Tell her I’ll explain everything afterwards.”

Ethan glances at Dawn. She’s still staring at him. His powers of persuasion, he decides, are not up to this. “Tell her yourself” he says, and hands the phone over.

*****

“S-so this is why you didn’t want Dawn here” says Tara, when Buffy finishes telling them.

Buffy nods. “She shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

Willow nods. “That’s right” she says, “Better to wait until” She breaks off, glances at Xander, “Until it’s over.”

Spike, seated says, “That’s right. Not for the bit to worry. Any more than she has to.” He looks drawn but, according to Buffy, his sanity seems to return more and more every day. Giles supposes sorrow is sane is this situation. Everyone is grim-faced, except for Xander. It hasn’t hit him yet. He stares around at them all before turning to Buffy. “Over?” he asks incredulously, “Just like that? You’re just call a meeting about How about I kill Anya and that’s it? Hey, shouldn’t we vote on it?!”
“I’m not asking your permission, Xander” Buffy tells him gently.

“And she won’t be the one doing it” Faith adds, from where she leans in the doorway. Addressing Buffy, she adds, “I’m not as close. I can save you the grief.”

“No you can’t” says Buffy, “But thank you.”

Xander is on his feet now. “Grief?” he demands, “What grief? Buffy, you can’t be serious!”

Giles takes off his glasses. Then he puts them back on, because Xander deserves that he looks at him properly, at least. “Xander” he begins, “Think about what Buffy saw today.”

They’d rearranged their usual training slot because Buffy was meeting a tutor about returning to college. Instead of arriving in the good mood Giles expected after this step forward in her recovery, Buffy had come home sombre, to tell him and Faith of Anya’s latest granted wish. Some small hint of something wrong and raw slayer instinct had had Buffy enter a fraternity house while on campus, where she had found corpses and a distraught girl. Buffy had killed the monster that then attacked, but it was only the effect. Anya was the cause.

“So she screwed up” Xander says, “People screw up all the time – Look at you and Ethan!”

“Oi!” Ethan, lost in his own thoughts, rouses himself beside Giles to stare at the boy.

“What did they do?” Faith asks.

“Easy to forget, I guess” retorts Xander. He glances at Buffy and Willow, “But you guys remember Eyghon, right?”

“Don’t you dare compare it to that!” Ethan retaliates, before Giles can stop him. He indicates Giles. “He put himself through hell to set things right –”

“Enough, Eth” says Giles.

Ethan finishes, “– He killed someone he loved!”

“What” says Xander, “So I should too? I should just stand back and let Faith kill Anya? After ten seconds to decide?”

“We’ve been thinking it might come to this for a while, Xander” Buffy puts in. She indicates Faith. “We both have.”

Xander draws back. “Oh, right, you both have – both of you in your little slayer bubble and the rest of us just have to accept it when you decide to kill someone we know? Someone I” He stops, lowers his voice “Someone I love, Buffy. I still love her.”

“I know.”

Spike sits forward beside her. “She can’t let that stop her, Harris. You know it.”

Xander glares. “Oh, do I? Because it’s news to me that a vampire gets an opinion on this!”

“You think I’ve killed as many people as her?” Spike asks.

Buffy adds, “Xander, she isn’t the Anya you knew.”

“What, and you get to be the one to decide that?” Xander turns to Faith, then back to Buffy.
“You’re the ones who get to decide that Anya dies?”

“Yes” says Buffy quietly. “That’s what being a slayer is.” She looks to Giles for support. Giles wants to tell Xander she is right, that ultimately, the Slayer is what stands between light and dark, and that there is no room for mercy towards a demon she just happened to know once. But he finds – just for a moment – that he can’t. Xander’s accusation is still shuddering through him. He did kill Randall, and endangered so many others, and he can judge Anya for her millennium of bloodshed, certainly, but he can’t judge Xander. Xander loves Anya and desperately wishes he could save her. Giles may not have loved Randall as anything more than a friend, but he still knows what it is like to love a doomed person, to desperately wish there was another way –

And to swing the sword anyway. “Xander” he begins, “Anya is a danger to innocent people. Our duty –”

“Your duty!” Xander snaps, “I’m not in the slayer club, remember?”

“Lucky for you” says Faith, “You think I want to do this?”

“So don’t do it” says Xander, “She summoned a demon, we’ve all done it!”

The scoobies stare. Willow asks, “We have?”

“Some of us.” Xander indicates Giles and Ethan again and Giles finds and grips Ethan’s hand. Xander’s gaze sweeps over Spike “Some of us have laid waste to Europe” and Faith “And some of us have worked for demonic politicians” and settles on Willow, “And some of us have had spells gone wrong, and summoned world-eating evil, Will.”

Willow flinches. Tara takes her hand. Buffy says, “Willow’s trying to set things right, Xander. But Anya chose this. She chose to be a demon. Twice.”

“So she doesn’t get a chance to choose differently?”

“She did!” argues Faith, “Twice!”

“Xander” Giles tries, “Think about those boys, at the college.”

“She didn’t mean to! She’s – she’s practically being forced by her demon friends to –”

“What?” prompts Faith, “What, to kill people? A demon working for other demons, what are we supposed to do with that?”

Xander rounds on her. “And a slayer working for demons? What did we do about her? Oh yeah – we gave her a chance!”

“Damn right you did! So I could stop people dying! Who’s she going to come after next, Xander? Because yeah, I screwed up – And I changed. She’s a thousand years old – When’s she gonna?”

“Enough, Faith.” Buffy reaches for Xander, but he brushes her off. Appeals to Willow. “Willow, you’re with me, right? You…I’m not judging, here. I know you didn’t mean to do any harm. But you get a chance to put things right. Why can’t Anya have that? Just one more chance.”

Willow stares sadly up at him. “Faith’s right, Xander. Who will it be next? We can’t just let her kill mor –”

“She won’t! One more chance, like I said.” Xander looks suddenly inspired, reaches urgently for Willow. “Bring them back – those boys that spider demon killed! I mean, mystical deaths are
Willow makes a dismissive noise, and – when Xander turns to him with a glare – says, “You just said it yourself – Willow’s still making up for one resurrection spell. How many world-eating evils do you want there to be?”

“As many as it takes to save Anya!”

Willow takes Xander’s hand and clutches it. She stares past him to meet Buffy’s sad eyes. Xander, meanwhile, stares around at all of them. After a moment, he pulls away, gets his coat, and leaves.

There is a short silence. Then Tara asks, “Are you certain – absolutely certain there’s, there’s nothing else to do?”

Buffy shakes her head. “We wouldn’t be doing this if there was.”

Tara nods, shifts closer to Willow.

Ethan asks, “Couldn’t you just make her leave town? You never go after anything that leaves Sunnydale.”

“I never warn them either” counters Buffy.

“But this is Anya.”

“So she gets to kill people in other towns? I thought you agreed with me.”

“I took issue with Xander insulting Rupert – that doesn’t mean I agree with you.”

Faith puts in, “She doesn’t need you to.”

Ethan turns to Giles. “You decided it before we got here, didn’t you? The three of you.”

Before Giles can answer, Buffy is nodding. Faith says, “Like B said, we weren’t asking permission.”

Ethan sits back. “Xander wasn’t far off the mark then” he says, “About the slayer club.”

Buffy asks, “Would you rather make the decision?”

Ethan falls silent. No-one else speaks for a while. Then Buffy turns to Faith. Peeling herself reluctantly from the doorframe, Faith asks, “Now?”

Buffy nods. Then she looks at Giles. An afterthought, he notes. She doesn’t need his approval, not at this stage. The slayer club is ultimately a club of two. He stands up. “I’ll go with you” he tells Faith.

Ethan looks up at that. “Rupert – no. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“I’m not going to let Faith go through it alone, Ethan.” Giles detaches himself from Ethan and follows Faith out the door.

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No-one speaks. No-one leaves. Hard to just stand up and say, Well, thank you for a traumatic evening, but I think I’ll be going now, I’ve got to get dinner on.
Rupert almost destroyed himself with guilt after Randall. Ethan wishes he’d stopped him going with Faith.

Buffy paces. Spike reaches for her once as she passes, but lets his arm drop again when she doesn’t stop. Tara asks him, “I-I always wondered, do vengeance demons have souls?”

Spike. “Way I’ve heard it, they do. Not sure if it’s the same thing as a human soul, mind. Not sure how she could bring herself to do all that if it was.”

They digest this information in silence.

Willow murmurs, “That would explain why she wasn’t all tortured when she was suddenly human. She’d had a soul, the whole time she was doing all that.”

“I’m not sure how often she stayed to watch” says Buffy.

“I-I think it was a cause” suggests Tara, “She convinced herself it was justified.”

Buffy nods. “And she never gave it up willingly. She was only ever human because of some accident.”

“But she tried” says Tara.

Buffy sighs. Says, “Yeah, but we don’t get the luxury of waiting forever for her to try again. Not when” She glances at Willow, falls silent. Adds, “Those college guys don’t get the luxury of waiting.”

Willow’s eyes widen suddenly and she sits up straighter. “Wait, what if we summon D’Hoffryn? That’s got to be possible, right?”

Buffy frowns. “And tell him what? Go help Anya?”

“We don’t want that” Ethan puts in, “He’s powerful – we can’t unleash that on Rupert.”

Willow says, “But what if we could persuade him to make Anya human? He can do that, right? I think she told me once.”

Buffy asks, “What makes you think he’d do that just because you ask?”

Ethan shares a look with Tara. Buffy may not understand, for all she was the subject of Willow’s most earth-shattering spell, but they do. Willow has bargained with gods and monsters. D’Hoffryn is a bit player in the light of her power. Ethan says, “He might listen.”

“She hasn’t asked to be human” cautions Tara.

“No-one chooses it” says Spike, “Doesn’t mean she couldn’t make a go of it, like you said, Glinda.”

“And her other option is death” muses Buffy. She looks at Willow. “Okay – you guys find out how to summon him. But in case he goes off to warn Anya, I’ll catch up with Giles and Faith.” She heads out for the door.

*****

“So she’s okay?” asks Ethan when Giles tells him later about Anya’s restoration.

Giles nods, despite Anya having looked less than okay as she headed out the door at the fraternity
house. Battered would be a better word – emotionally speaking, that is. The fight with Faith had had little impact on her physically.

Giles hadn’t joined in. Faith had buried whatever she felt deep down to go in there as pure slayer malevolence with a sword. Giles knows that he could have taken up that sword if she had failed but he is glad it didn’t come to that, that all he had had to do was...well, watch. Little help, at the end of the day, for all that Faith had thanked him for being there as they left.

Xander had been there too, of course. He had hurried after Anya but Giles doesn’t know if he caught up with her. Does know it will be a while before Xander trusts them enough to tell them. The veil has fallen now; Xander knows where duty draws the line, how it is not in a place that spares those one happens to love.

Ultimately, the whole evening has served as a stark reminder of the real role of the Slayer. Staking vampires, saving lives, that is all one thing. What a Slayer’s job really comes down to is fighting the darkness, whatever the cost, and whatever those around her think of the cost.

Ethan sighs and heads for the drinks cabinet. “Scotch?”

“Yes please.”

Ethan pours two generous measures. “Dawn will be pissed off with all of us. She doesn’t like to be left out.”

“She’s a child; we had to spare her.”

“She wouldn’t have been spared long if Anya had died.”
“But she wouldn’t have been tormented with waiting for it to happen.”

Ethan acknowledges this with an easy-going shrug and hands Giles a glass. Giles drinks deeply. Sitting back down, Ethan comments, “She’s stronger than you think. Dawn.”

“Oh?” asks Giles wearily. It doesn’t matter if Dawn is strong, he thinks. The point is, she doesn’t have to be.

“Yes. We’ve been –”

The phone rings. Giles sets his glass aside and lifts the receiver. “Hello?”

“Giles, I’m glad I caught you.” It is Robson. Glancing at Ethan, Giles steps into the kitchen to take the call.

Perhaps it is the day’s events that make Giles agree to Robson’s proposal so readily. After all, if Faith can put a sword through Anya’s chest, he can manage an international flight to tell off a few of his father’s old friends.

When he returns to the living room, Ethan asks, “What did Travers have to say for himself?” At Giles’ questioning look he explains, “You did your talking-to-the-council voice.”

“Oh. It wasn’t Travers – it was Robson.”

“Not so bad then.”

“No. Listen, Eth, how would you feel about a trip to London?”
Him

Pointedly not in the central conference room – a grand and spacious late Victorian edition to the eighteenth century head office – the Council instead hold the meeting Giles and Robson requested in the Regency Room. This awkwardly narrow and draughty space was in fact not built in the Regency era but at the turn of the century. The name comes from its one time use as the meeting place of the Regency Club, a group of former potentials who were never called, and instead became the first female watchers. They were like regents, the thinking went; waiting for power that never came, reduced instead to tending to the administrative details that power requires in order to achieve anything. Serving the slayers they once could have been. The names of the original members are displayed on a plaque in a discreet corner. Rather a lot of them, and Giles wonders if this is why the room was chosen; a reminder that, as far as the Council are concerned, there are always more girls.

“There isn’t an endless supply of potential slayers” Robson is arguing, “If the line is compromised –”

“There’s no danger of that.” The man opposite – a Travers loyalist, sent in absence of the man himself – sounds almost bored.

“There have been three attacks this month” Vickers, a friend of Robson’s points out.

“Three that we know of” Giles corrects. Vickers nods. Giles hadn’t met him until today but knows him by reputation. Originally a professor of ancient languages, he joined the Council after surviving a vampire attack, during which he saw things that couldn’t be unseen. Rare for the Council to recruit from the general population, but his academic skills made him useful to the Research Department. And, apparently, he has more sense than the old guard, many of whom are lined along the other side of the table, their expressions a spectrum from unconvinced to defensive.

“Ah, yes” says one, “The slayer dreams.”

“They’re a proven source of information” points out old Chesterton. He looks as jet lagged as Giles feels, having flown in from Kolkata. Quite a few of those gathered to express their concern have returned from field work beyond Europe, Robson, with his London flat and British potential being an exception.

“But they are dreams” a man in a loud checked shirt is saying. He is young – likely barely out of Oxford – and pushes his glasses further up his nose self-consciously as he speaks. “They can be misinterpreted. And not all the attacks the slayers have…err, witnessed while dreaming have involved confirmed potentials.”

“So they were unidentified” argues Giles, “Obviously it would start with them.”

“What does your witch say about all this?” asks Alfred Cavendish. An old friend of Giles’ uncle, he fixes Giles with a look that would take Giles back to school day scoldings if Giles let it. Giles explains, “Willow doesn’t have any new information about the coming threat. She’s been meditating and researching but –”

“I thought she was supposed to help?” interrupts Hugo Fletcher-Smythe, “If she isn’t useful, you’d do well to hand her over to us. She should have been in our custody long ago, the dark magics she’s wreaked.”
Before Giles can answer, Sebastian Price points out, “The Devon Coven have given their assurance she is safe.”

“Safe, yes” grumbles Fletcher-Smythe, “But after what she’s done, I’d say nothing less than invaluable to the cause justifies her freedom.”

Giles glares at him. Generally, the surviving watchers of fallen slayers have supported his and Robson’s call for urgent action. Trust Fletcher-Smythe to be the exception, seated across the table from a group of largely battle-scared veterans with the lifelong pencil-pushers like Nigel Haversham, who interjects with, “Quite. My understanding was that she would be in our custody were it not for her being a resource to use in the coming battle.”

Inwardly, Giles shudders at hearing Willow described as a resource. Forcing his voice to stay level, he replies, “The coming battle, as in, not here yet. Willow will be needed when the adversary arrives.” Adversary. A useful word since they don’t know what is coming, though traditionally it is used to refer to the devil. Giles suspects they will wish it were the devil, when it eventually shows itself.

“She let it in” grumbles Fletcher-Smythe, “At the very least, she ought to spend time at our rehabilitation facility once all this is over.”

“Lets just concentrate on getting through it” says Giles.

“Quite” echoes Chesterton.

Cavendish states, “There are preparations under way. It seems to me that you want to know more than you ought to. There is a reason we don’t allow a single watcher to know the identities of more than dozen slayers, Giles. Especially those in active service. If you were to be captured by this coming evil –”

“It wouldn’t need to capture him” Vickers says bluntly, “It already knows where the potentials are.”

“Not all of them” sighs Travers’ man.

“Enough of them” reiterates Robson, “And it’s already killed enough for it to be clear the line is under attack.”

“Potentials are often targeted in the run up to an attempted apocalypse” says the newly minted watcher in the gaudy checked shirt, sounding as if he is quoting from a text book.

Giles shakes his head. “These aren’t random attacks, they’re a pattern. And whatever precautions the Council have taken, Buffy and Faith’s dreams haven’t abated so it clearly isn’t enough.”

“Giles, there are thousands of girls.” Haversham again. “That a few unidentified potentials being targeted, mostly in remote areas is hardly indicative of a threat to the entire network. Or at least not one that the steps we’ve already taken won’t avert.”

“But it’s not just a few identified girls!” snaps Giles, “Faith and Buffy dream about it enough to indicate nightly attacks! And I had it from Travers himself that know potentials are being targeted now too.”

“Poor show of Quentin not to be here himself” Chesterton mutters, eyeing the suit sent in the head’s stead.
“What steps have we taken?” Sebastian Price, ever the peace-keeper.

Pointedly ignoring Chesterton’s grumblings, Travers’ man lists them off: “Known potentials have been advised to be cautious, and issued with a curfew where appropriate –”

Giles snorts back a frustrated interjection. The man ignores him, powers on with, “In some cases, protection spells have been put in place and –”

“In some cases?” echoes Giles, “Where appropriate? They all need protection, not –”

“Some of these girls have had years of training, Giles!” Haversham snaps, “They may one day stand alone against the forces of darkness – they can’t be coddled.”

“They’ll never have the chance to stand alone if we don’t protect them before they come into their power!” retorts Giles.

“They won’t have to wait long for their power” answers Haversham, “if you insist on being distracted by the potentials at cost to your own slayers!”

Giles recoils. “What’s costing the slayers” he breathes out, trying to keep the venom from his voice, “Is seeing girls slaughtered around the world every bloody night!”

“Exactly” says Travers’ man, as if to a slow child, “This is psychological warfare, Giles. This evil, whatever it is, is seeking to intimidate the slayers with these visions, not to destroy the line.”

Giles shakes his head, incredulous. Naturally, Buffy and Faith care about the deaths they’re witnessing. But intimidated? These tweed-suited, tradition-blinded fools would do well to actually meet his slayers.

Beside him, Robson asks, “You’d stake the line on that theory, would you?” and Chesterton says, “We need to assume the worst, and gather them. Get the known potentials under the protection of teams of watchers, send some to the slayers.”

“And then they all know one another’s’ identities and become a liability” says Fletcher-Smythe.

Haversham nods. “Not to mention, they could give each other all sorts of ideas.” He frowns at Giles. “After all, when the two current slayers first met, one ended up working for the forces of evil.”

“Yes” says Giles sarcastically, “I’m sure meeting a few girls in the same sorry boat will have them all working for demons.” Then he frowns. “Or starting a rebellion against the Council” he realises, “That’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it?”

“What I’m worried about” interjects Price quickly, “Is that if we get all the girls in one place, they’ll be a more obvious target.”

“They’re already being targeted” Vickers argues, “The point is to get them out of range of this… whatever it is.”

“Perhaps” says the young novice, “We’d get further by renewing our research effort –”

“We’ve already doing all we can on that front” Travers’ man dismisses. At Giles’ questioning look, he explains, “The archivists, Research Department and Office of Seers are all working on it, not to mention we’ve got special ops and a few undercover agents digging up what they can.”
“I take it there’s been no luck yet?” Giles asks. This evil, it seems, will continue unknown and unnamed until it decides to show itself.

“Well we don’t know what it is yet” admits Cavendish, “Though whether we’ll call it luck once we do know it remains to be seen.”

“Perhaps you could join the research efforts now you’re here, Giles” says Price, “Fresh from the hellmouth, your instincts might be sharper than ours.”

“I doubt that” says Giles, “Besides, I need to get back to Buffy. And Faith, of course.”

“They can manage on their own for a week or so, can’t they? I could see to it that you have unrestricted access to the entire library.”

Unrestricted access? They’ve never trusted him with that before. “Alright” Giles is swayed. “I’ll help with some research since I’m here. But we need to concentrate on the potentials.”

“Absolutely” says Robson, “We all know the slayers in waiting are a weak point in our defence. I agree with Chesterton – We need to assume the worst and follow the protocol for an attack on the line.”

“If we did that every time a few potentials were attacked” Travers’ man states, “we’d never maintain a global network. We’d be forever shunting girls from safehouse to safehouse.”

“Or troubling the slayers with them” Cavendish adds.

“It wouldn’t be trouble” says Giles, “Buffy and Faith are more than capable of protecting them.”

“But it’s a waste of their talents” says Fletcher-Smythe.

“How?” demands Giles, “How is protecting young girls a waste o –”

“You see this is what it boils down to, isn’t it?” puts in Haversham coldly, “Rupert Giles, still led by his passions after all this time. I’m sure this sentimentality endears you to the slayers, Giles, but we have to look at the facts. When lives are lost, it’s a regrettable thing. But they are not young girls – they are potentials. The hard reality is some of them will die. We achieve nothing by getting emotional about it.”

*****

“…And then they just talked in circles” Giles finishes explaining to Buffy over the phone. He glances around, but no-one from the Council seems to have tailed him to this phone box tucked away on a quiet street.

“Wow” says Buffy, “Anyone would think they’re out of touch pains in my ass.”

“Buffy” Giles reprimands half-heartedly.

“Sorry. I mean out of touch pains in my ass who did at least pay my hospital bill.”

A lot of that was Chesterton and Cavendish. Neither of whom, Giles is well aware, would support the idea of the Slayer actually being paid a wage. “It is complicated” he tells Buffy. “However easy it is for you to imagine, they’re not cartoonish authority figures in tweed suits.” He sighs.

“And however easy it is for me to imagine they’d offer significant assistance” he admits, “They’re not going to be easily persuaded to do so.”
“So we’re on our own?”

“Practically speaking, yes. Though they did grant me temporary access to the classified section of the library, so the trip won’t be a complete waste.”

“At least you get to read” teases Buffy. “But seriously, will –” She breaks off, and Giles frowns at the sound of a minor commotion in the background. When Buffy’s voice comes back over the line, she says, “Sorry, Giles, I have to go – Dawn’s upset. There’s been this whole stupid love spell deal.”

“Love spell?” That’s about the last thing they need.

“It’s all being sorted” Buffy reassures him, “Xander and Spike are dealing with it now.”

“Spike? Is it wise to send him?”

“Oh, he’s been trying out this new sanity thing these last few days – no voices, no rambling. It’s been nice. But like I said – I’ve got to go.”

“Alright Buffy. Take care.”

“You too.”

*****

For dinner they pick a pub a little out of Rupert’s way; any pub within a half mile radius of the council’s central London HQ is likely to have a smattering of watchers in it, even though Ethan knows for a fact they have a bar within the HQ itself. Rupert has never confirmed it, but Ethan once met a halfling who worked as a barmaid there. Unlike the council to give work to a half-demon, so Ethan had concluded that the other half must be pure tweed. Quite a scandal there if he could just scratch the surface for the details, but collecting council scandals – something he started as a young man in case blackmail was ever required – is more just a hobby at this point.

It’s lovely to be back in a London pub. There’s even a proper fire going, and he picks a corner close to it because apparently years in California have eroded what little hardiness he ever had. When Rupert eventually joins him, with that expression of abstracted worry that tells Ethan he’s been reading for hours, he scowls at the flames. Leave it to Rupert, he of the rugby, kayaking and camping enthusiasm, to stubbornly refuse to adapt to California’s heat.

“Any luck?” he asks, sitting down and wordlessly accepting the pint Ethan slides towards him.

“Well there were plenty of demons wanting to tell me from beneath me it devours” says Ethan, “But no-one quite so ready with useful details.” He’s spent the day in demon haunts around the city, listening, asking the occasional question.

Rupert asks, “Do they not know, or are they just not willing to say?”

“I’m sure they have no more idea than we do. What about you? Are the council as far in denial as they are their own arses?”

That Rupert lets this go with merely a look is answer enough. He takes a generous drink of his beer before replying, “They’re in complete denial. Convinced themselves it’s all an intimidation tactic to distress Buffy and Faith.” Another sip of beer. “They have given me access to the full range of books in the library.”
Ethan quirks an eyebrow. “Even the dark magic volumes? My, Rupert, they must be finally convinced you’re too stodgy to be drawn back in.”

“Yes, thank you, Ethan, for keeping the sarcastic comments to a minimum.”

“Would you like me to make more of them?”

“We’ve got bigger things to worry about than your grudge against the Council.”

“Well, yes, but not enough to go on that we can actually do anything about it. Unless any of the restricted books mention a nameless evil with an annoying catchphrase?”

“I haven’t read all of them yet.” Rupert scowls. “And unless we move back here fulltime, I won’t have time to read a tenth of them before we go back.” He stares at the dancing fire for a moment before recollecting himself. “But until I find anything useful, I’ll keep making notes on possible candidates; There are a few passages of thing that could be given a way in by a resurrection spell.”

“And a few ways to fight them?” asks Ethan hopefully.

“Some of them” says Rupert. He chases the head of his pint down to the midway line. Glances around before continuing, “Travers wasn’t at the meeting but I managed to get a few minutes with him in his office before I left.”

Ethan smiles his approval. “Let me guess: This wasn’t on his appointment list?”

“I didn’t burst in by force” says Rupert defensively.

“I’m sure you didn’t need to.”

“His secretary had stepped out for a moment” Rupert admits.

“Purely coincidental, of course?”

Rupert shifts evasively. He says, “I asked him to give me a list of all known potentials. A long shot, but I had to try.”

Ethan waits, until Rupert inevitably adds, “He refused.”

Having been warned off sarcastic remarks, Ethan limits himself to a hum.

Rupert adds, “Well of course he did. I didn’t really expect anything else. It’s been a sensible precaution for time immemorial that no-one knows the full list, but…”

“But things are changing.”

“Far too fast for the Council to keep up.”

*****

“Ethan?” Dawn’s voice is shaky down the line. Ethan sits up in the lumpy hotel bed and rubs his eyes. “Dawn? Do you have any idea what time it is here?” Beside him, he senses Rupert stir with his usual stubborn refusal to completely let his guard down, even in sleep.

“Buffy told me not to call” Dawn whispers. “She said it was late there and we could tell you tomorrow. But I…It felt weird, you guys not knowing.”
“Not knowing what?” Ethan asks. Rupert is fully awake now, sitting up and reaching for the phone. Ethan shakes his head a little to convey that it’s not Buffy, and Rupert lowers his hand.

“It’s Warren” Dawn tells him, “He’s dead.”

Good. “Oh, really? When?”

“Earlier this week” Dawn tells him. “It was only in the paper today.”

“Well, it couldn’t happen to a nicer bloke” says Ethan. Rupert mouths, *What is it?* and Ethan tries to mouth *Warren*. When Rupert still looks puzzled, he settles for miming *wanker*. Rupert looks nonplussed.

Dawn says, “Yeah. I mean. He was creep, but it’s the way it happened that’s weird.”

“He was still in prison, yes?”

“Yeah. Sucks for Katrina’s parents: He’ll never get a trial now.”

“No, but he’ll be dead forever. I’m sure they’ll find some comfort in that. So what happened?”

“That’s the weird: Something broke into the prison and attacked him.”

“Something?”

“From what it said in the paper, it wasn’t human. Blasted through walls, that sort of thing.”

“Could have been humans with explosives.” Ethan yawns. He’s with Buffy on this one; this could have waited until morning. “Didn’t Andrew and Jonathan make it to Mexico?” There had been an appeal for information on them, but so far as Ethan knows, it came to nothing. “Maybe they came back and tried to break him out or something, with their usual level of competence.” Beside him, Rupert mouths, *Warren?* Ethan nods.

“No. Other prisoners saw it and now they’re all talking about monsters.”

“Oh. Hellmouth happenings, then.”

“Maybe.”

“Dawn, what’s worrying you?”

“It’s just, what if…” Dawn begins. There is a pause, and Ethan imagines her looking around, hoping not to have aroused the attention of the surplus of slayer senses in her house. Then, with a deep breath, she goes on, “Ethan, what if it was me? What if I let whatever it was get to him?”

“And how would you do that?”

“I’ve been dreaming” Dawn admits, “About green light. Like when we did the barrier spell. I’m not stupid, Ethan – I know what’s going on.”

“Do tell.”

“It’s me. The Key me. That’s why the barrier spells are stronger than we can handle. I mean, a barrier is like a locked door, right? Keys lock!”

That all makes sense. But, “What’s that got to do with Warren?”
“I tried to kill him, didn’t I? What if part of me…deep down…What if I’ve been wanting to finish the job? What if I unlocked the prison without meaning to and let whatever it was in?”

“Aside from anything else, sweet child, it doesn’t sound like the thing came in through unlocked doors.”

“Metaphorically, I mean. What if I wanted it and it happened?”

“Dawn, I know you’ve been around Willow, but she’s the exception. It’s not just any witch who can make things happen by wishing it.”

“Really?” Dawn sounds relieved until she asks, “But how else would he be dead?”

“He might have been indebted to a whole number of things, with a whole number of ways to get in.” Possibly they should have put up magical protection around the prison, Ethan reflects, but it is hardly a great loss. “The important thing is, it wasn’t you.”

“Good.” Dawn allows the relief to stay this time. “Sorry Ethan. I didn’t mean to wake you up in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, you didn’t.”

“Good.”

“It’s 4 a.m.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Not to worry. But I should get back to my beauty sleep. I’m headed for a few demon bars tomorrow; I want to look my best.”

“Demon bars?”

“For information.”

“Right. Worse things to worry about than Warren, I guess.”

“Yes.” Hardly reassuring when she puts it that way.
Running a tired hand through his hair, Rupert sets aside his empty pint glass and starts on a full one. “They just won’t listen to reason” he tells Ethan, “I’ve tried to warn them but there was no sense of urgency.”

“I know, dear” Ethan soothes. Since the first meeting he had on arrival failed to achieve anything, Rupert has been steadily working his way through the high security section of the council’s library, whenever he isn’t trying to get through to various high-ups. From what Ethan has gathered, none of it has been successful, and it has all culminated in this: Rupert in a dark corner of a grotty pub, not drunk, exactly, but on edge enough to start with that the addition of a couple of rounds makes him look a little wild. It’s sexy. It’s also concerning. Before Ethan can think what to say, Rupert adds, “And the information they have, Ethan! We’re talking the most esteemed collection of books on the planet! Millions of books! Thousands I’ve only got access to for the next few days and there’s no way they’ll agree to let me copy them, let alone borrow any!”

Ethan nods sympathetically. “So a waste of time coming here, then? Not that we weren’t right to try.”

“A waste of time.” Rupert sighs. “I really thought that if I spoke to them in person, they’d help. This is what they’re supposed to do, after all: support the Slayer. But they won’t even give me the books Buffy and Faith could really use to fight this thing, whatever it is.” He frowns. “Unless…” He begins, then takes a heady gulp of beer.

“Oh Rupert. If you’re going to rediscover your rebellious youth, don’t you think you could start smaller? Pinch Travers’ car or something?” Ethan prompts.

“Almost no-one.”

Rupert shrugs off the compliment. “Can you help? I have an idea of the Council’s security but it won’t be easy to bypass.”

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“I might know a fellow. You won’t like him.”
“Why not?”

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“The Council library?” Jay smirks, shakes his head. He’s surprised enough to slip out of vamp face, just for a moment, but he gets his fangs out again when he catches Rupert glowering. Tells them, “The Crown Jewels would be one thing.”

“It’s important, Jay” Ethan tells him.

“You chaps are mad. No-one gets in that place.” Then he pauses. “I do like a challenge” he concedes. Ethan can see it ticking over in his mind. Not one hundred years ago, James Underhill III’s progress across the globe could be traced by the absences left in his wake: Missing pearls, vanished rubies, pilfered gold, banks robbed and stately home raided. Edwardian society fluttered at his trademark hat-tipping swagger and noted that he’d stolen more than a few hearts in his time as well. Becoming a vampire changed very little, except that the hearts became literal for a while. Then, having learnt that the supernatural exists by means of his own death, Jay made it his business to get around magical barriers as well as physical ones. Stealing from demons presented an appealing challenge and Jay gradually lost interest in stealing from humans at all. Now, he is an expert in circumnavigating a range of protection spells and curses, running an up-market bite house on the side so that mere necessities like eating don’t steal time from, well, stealing.

“Alright” he tells them at last, “I’m in.”

*****

“This had better work” Rupert whispers, while Jay lays out a series of crystals across a corridor in the east wing of the council’s HQ. It looks like an ordinary corridor, but the hiss of magic as a curse dissipates sets Ethan’s teeth on edge. The barriers they’ve encountered were no problem for Janus, but the Council have nastier protections on their base. “It will work” he whispers back. “Jay knows what he’s doing.”

“I’m not disputing that. I’m disputing whether we can trust him.”

“Have you got any better ideas?”

“None that will work at such short notice” Rupert admits.

“Just channel your inner Ripper, dear.”

“Must you make a joke of everything?”

“I’m not joking: Just think how happy you’d be back in the day to be stealing from the council.”

“This isn’t stealing. If we and books survive, we’re bringing them back.”

“Alright then, not stealing. Just elaborate, secretive, under-the-cover-of-darkness borrowing.” They watch Jay trace a complex shape in the air, sending a wave of magic through a series of unseen barriers. Magic rustles and falls like snow, silently, and leaves the hallway cold. At Jay’s nod, they continue.

There are more barriers, and more stops to ensure they won’t leave the place with something unpleasant tailing them. On reaching the library, it takes them an hour to get in, between a spell to drop the barrier, a spell to baffle the alarm, a spell to make the inky spirit that emerges from a hidden charm fall asleep and a lot of good old fashioned lock picking. For all he’s making a show
of this being a sad necessity, Rupert is keen enough to help with that part. Finally, they enter the library.

It takes up three floors by itself including two tiers of internal balconies ringing a vast room crosshatched with shelves. Off to each side, little reading rooms are tucked away, each consisting of a hearth, a few comfy chairs and walls of books. Ethan could happily live here. He’s never seen so many books in his life. And not just any books: Each leather bound volume is ancient and unique and priceless beyond words.

Rupert leads them to the classified section at the far end of the room (room? thinks Ethan, surely palace would be a better word for it.) The entrance is an archway etched with writing in a language Ethan doesn’t recognise, but Rupert grabs his wrists and whispers, “Don’t cross it.”

Jay has stopped walking too. “We’ll need the Laverna stones” he tells them, slipping the charms from his pocket. There are two of them. Ethan asks, “So who’ll wait outside?”

Jay looks at Rupert. “You should go in” he says, “You know what you’re looking for.”

Rupert nods. “And I don’t trust you unsupervised. Sorry, Eth.”

Ethan sets his torch down on a nearby shelf. “Not to worry. I’ll find something to read to pass the time.”

Rupert shakes his head. “There’s no telling what some of these books will do if you disturb them after sunset.”

“Fine.” Ethan rolls his eyes. “You two go ahead, I’ll stand out here on my tod.”

“You can look after this” Jay replies, taking another item from his pocket. A little flame. Ethan stares. Then, without meaning to, he takes it from Jay as the vampire hands it over. It doesn’t burn. It feels like silk, soft and smooth like that. Something about it makes Ethan shiver even before threads of smoke-like magic unfurl from the thing and wrap around him like spiders’ webs. When Ethan tries to shake them off, they tighten. Rupert takes a hurried step towards him but Jay steps neatly between them. “My insurance” he explains, “You stake me, watcher, and it’ll grow, wrap around your boyfriend here and swallow him up into the ether.”

“Oh, fuck you, Jay” says Ethan.

“Sorry Ethan. Nothing personal.”

Rupert takes a menacing step towards the vampire but Jay puts up a hand to stall him. “Wait a sec, watcher, that clever little device answers to me. You behave yourself and you have my word as a gentleman that I’ll free him when we’re out of here, no harm done and we’ll say no more about it.”

“Oh, believe me I’ll have more to say about it” Rupert tells him. He eyes the threads crisscrossed over Ethan’s body. Ethan shifts, flexes a hand, exploring the trap. He is almost certain his magic could break it but that almost gives him pause: It is safer, perhaps to just co-operate.

“I don’t like doing it.” Jay attempts to steer Rupert away but it is like steering a pissed off ox and he quickly stops. “It’s just that I don’t trust you any more than you trust me, dear chap.”

“Just go ahead, Rupert” Ethan says, “If I have to be a hostage, I’d rather you do what you’re told.”

“He’s right, you know” says Jay, “Let’s get in there, get the books and then we can take a photo for prosperity and leave.”
“Forget about the photo” says Ethan irritably, “Jay, can I at least put this in my pocket or something? My arm’s going to get tired.”

Jay shifts the flame to Ethan’s jacket pocket. The smoky threads tauten. “We have to take a photo” he says, “Or no-one will believe we did it.”

“I’ll leave my stake out here” Rupert tries, “You don’t need to hurt him.”

“You might have another one hidden about you” Jay points out.

Rupert slips his coat off and holds his hands out. “Search me” he offers.

“Rupert” snaps Ethan, “Just go with him and get it over with, those barriers will only stay down for long – We don’t have time for you to get strip searched.”

“He has a point” says Jay.

“No” says Rupert, “A point is what you’ll be introduced to unless you let him go.”

“You see, it’s comments like that that make a fellow want to take precautions in the first place” says Jay, “And we’re rather running out of time. I hate to think what the council might do if they catch us here.”

“Go on, Rupert, really.”

Reluctantly, glancing back at Ethan as he goes, Rupert follows Jay under the archway and into the room containing the council’s most dangerous books. The carved words glow briefly as they pass through, and then Ethan is left in the fractured semidarkness of the moon coming in through a high window, the beam of his torch and the reddish glow of a magic-addled alarm set in an alcove a little way off.

He sighs heavily, and feels the tendrils of magic shift around him. Wonders again against a counter hex but judges it safer to just wait it out. Jay is a man – well, vampire – of his word. He’s one of those weirdos who gets some sort of entertainment by imitating humanity in that way.

He shifts from foot to foot and wonders if it would be safe to sit down. Reads the words on the spines of the nearest books, but then the temptation to take one starts to be enough of a bother that he stops. He rubs his hands together, partly to distract himself and partly because it is a noticeably chilly night and the council are apparently tight fisted about their central heating.

“Well you always were a wuss about the cold.”

Ethan jumps and the threads of magic waver and clench about his torso. Randall smiles at him and adds, “I mean, here you are shivering and fidgeting and what-not. You’re going to have to man up with what’s coming, you know.”


“Noticed, did you?”

“Well you always were a wuss about the cold.”

Ethan jumps and the threads of magic waver and clench about his torso. Randall smiles at him and adds, “I mean, here you are shivering and fidgeting and what-not. You’re going to have to man up with what’s coming, you know.”


“Noticed, did you?”

“What, um.” Is it rude, Ethan wonders, to ask Randall what he’s doing here? It seems rude. But he is dead. Can you be rude to a dead person? “What are you doing here?”

Randall shrugs. “Just thought I’d drop by. Quite a mess you’re in. I see some things don’t change.”

Ethan looks down at the wisps of magic. “I don’t suppose you could help me out?” he asks.
Randall shakes his head. “Sorry. If it’s too much for your magic, I don’t know what you think I can do.” He studies Ethan for a moment. Ethan stares back at him. He is heart-clenchingly young, barely older than Dawn. Ethan had thought he remembered what Randall looked like but apparently it is more complicated than that. He did and he didn’t. In his memory, Randall has become a caricature of himself and the real thing is a shock.

Smiling a smile that is both familiar and alien, Randall says, “While I’m here, I might as well say you need to get your act together. Ripper won’t have time to worry about you with everything that’s about to go down.”

“Um. Noted. Randall, are you…” Ethan trails off. It would be ridiculous to ask a dead person if he is okay. And obviously Randall isn’t in hell like Ethan always feared, or he wouldn’t be here. Ghostly visitations don’t come from hell. They don’t let people out of there.

“Am I what?”

“Alright?”

Randall laughs in a way that’s rather unnerving. “It’s not me you need to worry about mate. This is the big one. The end game.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?”

Oh, Gods. “You mean…the actual end? We won’t stop it? But no – why’d you be here if there’s no hope?”

Randall chuckles. “Who says I’m here to help? I can’t help, can I? I’m dead and buried. Well, not buried. The guys from the council had me burnt as medical waste in the end.” Randall smiles again, coldly. “But you weren’t there for that part, were you? You and Ripper, you just ran off.”

“There” Ethan stops, swallows, tries again. “There was nothing we could have done. You were already gone.”

“Well, yes. Ripper cutting my head off sort of helped me on my way.”

“Before that” Ethan drops his gaze, looks at Randall’s feet. He remembers those shoes. “You were gone before that. Taken.”

“And whose fault was that?”

Everything Ethan has told himself over the years – that they were young, that they all knew the risks going in, that they were all equally stupid – trickle away. “I’m sorry.”

Randall shrugs again. “Don’t feel sorry for me, Ethan. You’ll be feeling sorry for yourself before all this is over. And you know what? I’m really going to enjoy watching.” Randall winks and laughs, and saunters away until he blends with the moonlight.

“Ethan?”

Ethan jumps again, but it’s only Rupert, emerging from under the archway with an armful of books.

“Nothing” says Ethan.

“What?”
“Nothing. Um. No-one. Anyone. I wasn’t talking to anyone.”

“Are you alright?”

For just a second, Ethan almost tell him. He stops himself: Rupert has enough to worry about without ghosts. “Just, err. Not as good at being held hostage as I thought. Sorry, love.”

Rupert turns to Jay as the vampire emerges with more books. “Get that thing off him now.”

Jay takes the flame-curse off Ethan and Ethan sits down heavily in the nearest chair, staring at the moonlight.

He’ll have to tell Rupert eventually, of course. Just to let him know Randall is very much not in hell if nothing else.

But not now. Now he’ll just calm himself down and remind himself that, for all Rupert might look back with rose-tinted glasses, Randall always was a prat, and a little thing like being dead probably hasn’t changed that.

He’s lying, that’s all. He’s lying.
“Hi, G.” Faith sounds shaky over the phone.

“Faith – Is everything alright?”

There is a pause, as though she’s weighing up how much to tell him. “Not really” she says at last, “Fucked up day. Well, night, really."

“What’s happened?”

“Ghosts happened.”

“Oh?” This is almost a relief: Usual hellmouth fare rather than the ancient evil announcing itself. Faith draws a deep breath. “Willow saw Cassie, Tara saw her mom, Dawnie saw Joyce, poor kid. I saw…Well, I saw Miss Chadwick.”

“Faith” Giles wants to comfort her but, not knowing what was said, isn’t sure where to begin. Instead he focuses on practicalities with, “It’s highly unlikely these were real hauntings; unrelated people appearing all at once, it’s not how ghosts usually operate.”

“Oh, we got that memo: Willow’s pretty certain it’s her pet project come to play at last.”

So much for usual hellmouth fare. It is here. Or rather, there. Giles needs to go back, he realises. Absently, he says, “Not Willow’s project, Faith. We need to be united in the face of this.”

“I guess” says Faith, uncharacteristically willing to set friction aside. After a moment, she adds, “Sounds stupid, but it was kind of a relief. I wouldn’t like to think Miss Chadwick really thought that about me.”

“She thought the world of you, Faith. Any watcher would.”

“You didn’t even know her.”

“I don’t need to have known her: I know you.” Giles nods to Ethan as he enters the hotel room and mimes writing. Ethan glances around and hands him a pen. Poised to make notes on the hotel’s complimentary logo-adorned pad of paper, Giles asks, “Were everyone else’s ghosts hurtful? What did they say?” He senses Ethan tense and turn to listen.

“Tara’s mom wanted her and Willow to come and join her. Did a whole murder-suicide promo. Cassie told Willow she’d been sent from one of those mega-powered, non-human occult chicks she spoke to in England, saying they’d made a mistake and Willow had better do all this dark magic to try and spit the essence of magic out of her. Joyce, I’m not sure about. Dawn’s all convinced it was really her, no matter what we say.”

“What about Buffy? Did she see anything?”

“No, but she’d been so wicked distracted by Spike she probably wouldn’t notice if something did pop up. That’s the other thing: Spike sired an army and it’s the second biggest deal to happen this week. Welcome to Sunnydale, I guess.”

“Sired an army?” What about his soul? Giles thinks, stunned. He went through so much to get it, only to ignore it? Then, What about his chip? Surely that, at least, is reliable, tangible.
“A load of vampires in an abandoned house” Faith confirms, “We don’t know how long he’s been at it but long enough. He doesn’t know, is the scary thing. Well, scary aside from the ghosts and vampire army, I mean.”

“He doesn’t know?” Perhaps the shock of the restoration of his soul sent him into some sort of fugue state, reasons Giles. Perhaps it was foolish of them to believe he could ever be a person after all.

“B thinks this Big Bad’s been messing with him.”

Easy enough to mess with something so damaged. Giles feels a stab of pity for the vampire but asks, “Have you staked him?”

“Giles, if I’d done that, do you really think B would have left me with enough teeth to be talking to you?”

“Faith, if Spike has become a tool of whatever this threat is –”

“Then we have to deal” agrees Faith. “But B’s got herself convinced Spike has information. Gal might have a point: Whatever it is has to have been pretty close to him. Anyway, say I do stake the guy with a soul I’ve been rooming with the best part of a year, what then? We wait for this evil to control Xander instead and kill him too? We could run through all of us pretty quick; only so many scoobies.”

“It may not be able to control humans the same way it can vampires.” If it could, it wouldn’t waste time on Spike. It would tap into Willow’s power.

“Well” says Faith, “That’s the sort of thing you can help us research when you’re back. ’Cause we kind of need you back now.”

“Understood. We’ll get the next flight we can.”

Giles puts the phone down to find Ethan staring at him. “Ghosts?” he asks. Then, “Also, staked who?”

“Spike” Giles explains shortly, “And he’s not staked, even though he’s been controlled by this ancient evil to kill people.”

Ethan frowns, seems to think about this. “A chance to find out about it, at least?” he asks at last.

“That’s what Buffy thinks. And she’s not at all biased.”

“He does have a soul, Rupert.”

Giles thinks of the fragile-seeming creature they collected from the airport at the end of summer. “I know. But so do a lot of people who’ll die before this is over. We can’t afford sentimentality.”

“You sound like the watchers.”

“I am one, Eth.”

“But do you want to be that sort of watcher? Overriding your slayer when she might be on to something?” Ethan shrugs. “Not that I care all that much about Spike, but it would be a shame, if we could avoid it.”

“It would be a shame” agrees Giles. He thinks again of Spike when he first arrived back, and of the promise Buffy extracted from him to look after the newly ensouled vampire. Promises have their limits when it comes to apocalypses, but is this the limit?
Ethan asks, “Anyway, ghosts?”

“The children have seen lost loved ones” Giles explains, “Or rather, what Willow thinks is this ancient evil, manifesting as apparitions claiming to be lost loved ones.” As he says it, an unpalatable idea occurs. Fragments of the research he’s been doing since all this started begin to come together.

He is distracted by the look on Ethan’s face. “Eth? What is it?”

“I saw Randall.”
Giles feels like some hideously high-pitched noise screams through him. He reaches for Ethan, clutches his hand. “What? When?” Why didn’t Ethan tell him?

It wasn’t Randall, he reminds himself. A new chill runs through him at the thought of this thing in the same room as Ethan.

“In the bloody library when Jay had his fire-hex on me” says Ethan, “He said we wouldn’t win.” He brightens. “But he would say that, wouldn’t he? It wasn’t really him?”

“It wasn’t really him” Giles confirms, squeezing his hand. Randall remains wherever Randall is. With some effort, Giles puts him from his mind. Then he tells Ethan, “I need to go and speak to Robson. We’re getting on the next flight to Sunnydale and I want Nora to come with us.”

Randall not really being Randall is enough of a relief that Ethan is left in a good mood despite the arrival of an adversary all set to make a credible attempt at an apocalypse. A still unidentified adversary, in fact, though Ethan wonders if Rupert knows what it is: There was something in the flavour of determination he’d had about him as he left that left no room for uncertainty.

He is gone longer than Ethan expects. Unsurprising, perhaps. Robson has cared for Nora since she was ten; agreeing with Rupert about the need for action is one thing, letting her go, quite another.

Ethan wonders about booking flights, but decides against it until they know for sure that Nora will be joining them. When a few hours slide by, he does wonder about calling Robson’s but realises he isn’t certain of the number. He paces, tries to stay calm. Robson and Rupert are probably busy getting Nora packed up by now. Or still arguing. Forcing himself to settle down in the leather armchair by the window, Ethan watches the London street scene below slip into evening-mode.

Eventually, Rupert bursts back in. “Ethan, pack up. We need to get out of here.”

Ethan regards Rupert. “You’re late. What happened?”

“Robson and Nora were attacked. It’s happening, love, and we need to leave. Not for the airport – change of plan. I’ve hired us a car.”

Ethan stands up. “Are Robson and Nora alright?”

“Robson’s…Robson’s gone off in the ambulance, so I hope so.”

“So Nora’s in the car?” Ethan assumes they’re off to warn potentials in person now, so having one with them will be useful. That and it means having another fighter besides Rupert.

Rupert stares at him forlornly. “No, she…they killed her.”
Drawing in a deep breath, Ethan lets it out again with, “Fuck”

“I know.” Rupert heads for the wardrobe and hands him a few items of clothing at random. “We have to hurry or there’ll be more. Essentials only, I’m afraid.”

It’s testament to the severity of the situation that Ethan doesn’t complain about the mismatch of clothing or abandoning their already limited luggage in the hotel – he doesn’t think Rupert will react well to that right now – but he does say, “We’re going to need three suitcases.”

Rupert shakes his head. “I’ve already got the books packed. Another for the clothes – I want to get going before anyone from the hospital calls the Council. Gods know how they’ll reach with everything so tense already.”

“You said essentials, yes? I need a suitcase for my supplies: wherever we’re going, we’ll need magic.”
“Hello, Summers’ residence” says an unfamiliar voice when Giles finally gets through to Sunnydale.

“Who is this?” asks Giles.

“Um, Andrew.”

“Andrew? What on earth are you doing in Buffy’s house?”

“I’m um, I’m sort of her prisoner? Willow met me coming out of the butchers and took me prisoner and then she gave me to Buffy.”

Giles can hear the nervous smile in the young man’s uncertain voice. Setting aside a lot of questions, he says, “Hand me over to Buffy.”

“I think she’s sort of busy with Spike right now. He pretty much smashed through a wall so he’s got to have a headache. You know, I would have been standing right the other side of it if Tara hadn’t invited me down for tea.”

“I…what?” What on earth is going on over there?

“Tara’s nice, isn’t she? She said Xander and Anya couldn’t interrogate me any more today and they might as well untie me because Willow can just cast a spell so I can’t leave the house.”

Giles finds himself reaching for his glasses, but he can’t clean them while holding the phone so he lowers his hand again. “What do you mean Spike smashed through a wall? Where is Buffy and what on earth are you doing back in Sunnydale? I thought you were in Mexico?”

“I was but, well, Jona –” Andrew breaks off suddenly. Then, with forced cheer, he states, “It’s a really long story.”

Giles glances back the way he’s come, to where Ethan is returning from filling up the hired car. He’d taken the mobile phone a little way from the petrol station to make the call, heeding the warning signs about keeping one’s phone off while at the pump. He tells Andrew, “Just answer the other questions then.”

“Um, what where they again?”

Lord give him strength. “Where is Buffy and what’s happening with Spike?”

“I’m not sure.”

“About which one?” Giles watches Ethan get in the car and start it up.

“Oh – about what’s happening with Spike. I’m not sure about that. Except that Buffy’s chaining
Ethan pulls up beside him and Giles gets in. “And Faith?”
“She went to take a look at the Seal of Danzalthar.”

The signal is already patchy as they speed away, and for a moment Giles thinks – or hopes, perhaps – that he’d misheard. He recalls references to the seal in the books he’d read in preparation for his move to Sunnydale. Nothing particularly specific, but enough to make him recognise the seal’s uncovering as a bad turn of events. “Has she gone alone?”

“Willow’s with her. Listen, do you think Buffy will let me go soon?”

“That rather depends on why she’s taken you prisoner.”

“Well there might have been a little incident where Jonathan and I uncovered the seal and…well, we don’t need to go into all that.”

“You bloody little toerag.”

“Is that – is that British for something or –” There is a fuzzy sound as Ethan turns onto a country lane, and Andrew’s voice is swallowed by it. Giles had judged it best to avoid motorways and so they are taking what Ethan calls the scenic route. Ethan thinks this is because it prevents the forces that may try to stop them from finding them. It doesn’t. It does, however, ensure that if they are targeted, they are the only ones that will be hurt. The last thing Giles wants is to give the First evil an excuse to attack the M20.

Andrew’s voice comes back into focus as the signal recovers itself. “…really think it was him, and Jonathan didn’t suffer so… Well, anyway. And then Warren said we could use pig blood so that’s why I went to the butchers.”

“What?”

“For the blood.”

“Blood for what? The seal?”

“Well, Jonathan was kinda little.”

“Andrew. What did you do?”

Andrew sighs a put upon sigh and says, crossly, “I already told Xander and Anya all this.”

“And now you’re telling me.”

Perhaps it is because he was the boy’s high school librarian, but Andrew actually explains, “Like I said, Warren came to Mexico and – well I didn’t know that he was. Was um. Dead. So. Anyway he told me about the seal and how we could all live as gods and –”

“Andrew, is the seal open?”

“No, because then Willow took me prisoner. So do you think Buffy will let me go? Oh, and do you want to speak to Tara?”

*****

Molly’s watcher is inevitably reluctant to send her away. “I’ve had no instructions from the Council, Mr Giles. Until I do, I’m going to have to insist the girl stays here.”
Giles glances at the girl, a little unnerved to be calmly discussing her future as though she isn’t there. This is the first potential slayer Giles has met since he started training Buffy and it serves to remind him how unusual his attitude to her was. At least Molly appears to have been given some freedom to choose her own wardrobe, for better or worse, but still, her upbringing hasn’t been all that different to any of the others: identified at eleven, out of mainstream education by twelve, still yet to see a vampire in the flesh at fifteen.

Mr Blakeslee adds, “As I understand it, the Council have tightened security to guard against further attacks.”

“You do know about the attacks, then?” asks Ethan and Blakeslee glares at him. Giles sighs: perhaps it would have been better to ask Ethan to wait in the car. Having him leaning in the doorway there, dressed in a brash silk shirt and looking like the anti-watcher isn’t helping their cause. Giles tries, “Mr Blakeslee, I have reason to believe these are more than random attacks. The line is threatened. If we wait until it changes, it may be too late to protect Molly.”

“Molly doesn’t need protecting. She’s safe here in Kent with the Watcher’s Council practically down the road. She’s not one of these far-flung girls we’ve barely discovered.”

“It’s not just those girls anymore! Nora was in London and it didn’t save her.”

Blakeslee glances at Molly whose eyes widen a little. Before he can order the girl from the room, Giles presses, “You have heard about Robson and Nora?”

“There was a memo. The Council are investigating.” Blakeslee eyes him. “Actually, Giles, they were keen to talk to you. You should call them.”

Giles dismisses the idea with a gesture. “We need to concentrate on protecting the remaining potentials. On protecting Molly.”

“Then why don’t we call the Council now? Head Office are best placed to deal with this.”

Giles pauses, not sure it’s a good idea to admit the extent to which he’s become freelance. He looks at Ethan in case his partner is able to convey any advice but Ethan isn’t looking at him: he’s staring out the front window. With a sickened feeling, Giles follows his gaze. The front lawn is covered in robed figures.

*****

“That was more brazen than we’ve heard of them being yet.” Giles tells Ethan later. “Attacking them at home like that.”

They are driving north along a winding country road, steadily putting as much distance between themselves and Blakeslee’s ransacked house as they can. Giles has had Ethan cover their tracks with a few spells. Should the watchers decide internal disciple goes nicely with denial, the last thing they need is a retrieval team after them. Better they were never there.

At least the books are safe. In the passenger seat, Ethan’s gripping the bag like a life raft. He’s wiped after all that magic but otherwise unscathed, and Molly escaped with only a few minor cuts and bruises. Molly is asleep in the back, the tears she shed for her fallen watcher still drying on her face.

“Bringers” says Giles.

“Come again?”
“Bringers. Agents of the First. I had suspected it, but this confirms it. They’re not easy creatures to mistake.”

“Bugger.” Ethan shakes his head. “I’d have picked anything else.”

“Me too. But at least we know now.”

*****

Annabelle is a lot like Kendra, in a discouraged, obedient sort of way. Under the care of the Council since infancy, she doesn’t question Giles when he arrives at the room she’s rented since her watcher’s death, reels off a few specifics only a watcher would know and asks her to get in the car that’s waiting outside. Doubtless the Council had told her to sit tight and wait for someone to come, and instead of getting a lift to HQ, she’s just won a fabulous trip to the Hellmouth. Giles feels like an abductor.

*****

Getting a hired car onto a ferry is a more complicated process than getting four people sans car into the channel tunnel, and Giles doesn’t want Ethan to overreach himself when a protection spell might be needed. So they cross to the continent under the seabed, a sort of magic in itself, Giles thinks. They snatch sleep whenever the carriage is quiet enough. Giles and Ethan never sleep at the same time.

Ethan and Molly have bonded over her questions about magic and life in general beyond the Council’s limitations and his willingness to answer them. They spend much of the journey in their own aggressively cheerful little bubble made mostly of false cheer painted over raw terror. Annabelle sits closer to Giles and glances nervously at him every so often, clearly torn between wanting to ask questions of her own and the unquestioning compliance her upbringing has instilled.

Really, the stretch on the channel tunnel is the most relaxed part of the journey because if the Bringers are going to attack, it seems unlikely they’ll do it miles beneath the sea. Once they resurface, they hire another car and drive through remote country roads, past scenery that is beautiful beyond the telling and which they don’t look at. As they near the farmstead, Giles explains, “This girl is something of a special case: only ten and the Council haven’t properly approached her family yet.” Really he’d rather anyone else have that difficult conversation, but since the Council haven’t sent anyone so far, it’ll have to be him.

“Does she have a watcher?” Ethan asks.

“Yes, but she doesn’t know it. The young artist who rents a barn conversion on her parent’s farm is actually Endicott’s son, Benjamin.”

Ethan laughs humourlessly. “And they say the watchers are creepy bastards.”

“Mr Rayne!” squeaks Annabelle from the back seat.

In an undertone, Giles replies, “Perhaps you could keep comments like that to a minimum, dear?”

Ethan smirks and makes no promises.

Molly asks, “What’s a ten year old going to do the Hellmouth? Blow raspberries at the monsters?”

“Molly!” Annabelle scowls at her and Molly folds her arms stubbornly but doesn’t argue. Giles wonders if they’re falling into some pseudo watcher/slayer relationship for the sake of some
security. He explains, “She’ll be safe at the slayers’ house. And if the Council come to their 
senses, perhaps alternative arrangements can be made.”

Molly nods but Annabelle looks troubled at the reminder that they’re not operating within the 
framework of Council approval.

A few more miles of Basse farmland pass them by, and then then turn onto a bumpy stone-strewn 
driveway that takes them around a few bends until Giles announces, “Here we a...”

The front door is wide open. A window smashed. “Ethan, put a protection spell on the car as soon 
as I’m out.”

“What? Rupert!”

“Just do it.” Giles gets out, ignoring Ethan’s protest of “But you won’t be able to get back in!”

“A protection spell, now” Giles doesn’t look at the car, stares at the house. “And cast a glamour so 
the vehicle’s hidden.” With that he walks rapidly towards the building.

Inside, he gets the moment of overwhelming darkness that comes with stepping from bright 
sunlight into thick shade. A long terracotta tiled corridor leads to a slatted wooden door that hangs 
limply on one hinge. Between the darkness and the colour of the tiles, he almost misses the blood.

The slatted door leads to a large kitchen which contains a dead dog. Half in and half out of the back 
door is Benjamin Endicott, or what’s left of him.

Backing out quickly, Giles searches the house, alert to the possibility of lingering Bringers but 
aware that it’s not all that likely – the blood is sticky rather than runny, this happened some time 
ago and can Bringers come out in daylight anyway? He’ll have to check. In the living room, a man, 
the father. A fruitless check of his pulse and Giles continues his search. Perhaps Benjamin had time 
to hide the girl? Perhaps he should check the barns?

The girl is upstairs, along with her mother and brother. No need to check their pulses – they barely 
have skin left on their necks. Giles finds that for a moment he isn’t sure where he is or how he got 
there.

Molly and Annabelle, he remembers after a lost moment. Molly and Annabelle, and Ethan are 
outside, and alive, and he needs to get them to Sunnydale. He heads out the house as quickly as he 
can.

Ethan’s glamour isn’t strong enough that he can’t see through it with a little effort. He ought to tell 
him off for that. And for the fact that he can re-enter the car without Ethan dropping any barriers. 
He says, “Let’s go.”

“What’s in there?” Molly gasps. “You’ve gone all white, Mr Giles!”

“Shh.” Annabelle tells her, “You know what’s in there.”

“But –”

“Shh”

Ethan touches Giles’ arm. “Should I phone the police? Report the bodies?”

Giles shakes his head. “I’ll call the Council later. Anonymously. Benjamin was here under a false
name and Endicott has the right to know…Well. Let’s go.”


“Mr Giles? Mr Giles!”

It takes Giles, exhausted and laden with take away, a moment to place the young and garishly dressed young man hurrying towards him through the hotel lobby as the freshly trained watcher from his last meeting with the Council. “Ah, Mr – err –”

“Blackwood – Peter Blackwood.” The man glances around and adds, “I’m here on, um, official business.”

“Oh – lets head up to my room then.” Giles calls the lift, and steps inside. Blackwood follows, straightening a ridiculous bowtie and fidgeting as they begin their ascent. As the lift is empty but for them, Giles asks, “So, has Travers acknowledged the scale of the crisis or are you here to waste my time?”

“We made a mistake.” Blackwood looks solemn, to an extent that briefly transcends his shirt. “I’ve been sent to put things right.”

Giles nods with some relief. With the full weight of the Council behind them, this will be so much easier. “Did you get our message about Endicott?”

“Yes. Poor chap – a real loss. He was a few years above me at the academy. I rather looked up to him.”

“How did Endicott take it?” How can one take it?

“Poor man, the news blew him away.”

The lift pings and they step out. Giles leads Blackwood to the family room they’ve booked into for the night. Entering, Giles feels the hairs stand up on the back of his neck and is reassured despite the discomfort: The barrier spells are working then, and are stronger than Ethan’s usual fare if the tingle up his spine is any judge. Perhaps he’ll even sleep tonight.

Then he remembers Endicott. Perhaps not.

Inside, Molly is cross-legged on the child sized bed and Annabelle is perched on a camp bed beside it. Both of them are watching Ethan struggle with the TV.

“Can’t you just magic it?” asks Molly.

“Oh, yes” says Ethan, “Because that’s a spell the ancients knew to invent – a channel finding enchantment. Oh, hello Rupert.” Ethan notices Blackwood as pauses briefly. Frowns.

“Ethan, girls, this is Mr Blackwood, from the Council.”

Ethan continues to stare at the man for a moment. Then he shrugs and turns back to the TV. “Wonderful” he says, “Have you lot woken up and smelled the war at last?”

Blackwood shuffles awkwardly, but offers a little smile when Molly greets, “Hi. Do you know anything about TVs?”

“I’m afraid not. Mr Giles, I have orders from the Council to bring the girls back to London.”

Giles, busy unpacking take away, looks up sharply. “No” he decides, “They’re needed on the
hellmouth.” And, somewhat ironically, they’ll be safest there.
“Oh we agree, but let’s let them be part of the official contingent.”

“There’s no point them going back to the UK just to leave on a different fight to the one we’re booked on tomorrow.”

“Except that we can protect them more effectively than you alone. Well, and…” Blackwood indicates Ethan, who is back to fiddling with the TV aerial. Annabelle is diligently watching his progress, but Molly isn’t interested in pretending not to listen.

“It’s a little late” says Giles, “for the Council to claim to be best placed to protect these girls.”

Blackwood holds up his hands placatingly. “But it is true” he points out. Giles can’t argue with that.

Molly asks, “Aren’t you guys going to find this Kennedy bird? So me and Annie could go with Mr Blackwood and meet you on the hellmouth.”

“Molly!” hisses Annabelle, “That’s not for you to decide.”

“It would make sense” concedes Blackwood.

Giles asks, “But surely you’ve already sent word to Kennedy’s watcher to take her to Sunnydale?”

“Ah!” says Ethan behind them, “Got something!” An image flickers on the TV screen. Molly asks, “Is it in English?”

“I’m going to call Head Office” Giles decides.

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“I’m going to call Head Office” Giles decides.

“I’m sure that’s not necessary” says Blackwood.

“Ethan, can I use your phone?”

“Go ahead, love.” Ethan is still staring at the TV, “It’s on the side…Oh, it’s porn.”

The girls squeal and Molly squeaks, “Let me see!”

“Just kidding!” Ethan steps aside so they can view the thankfully non-pornographic show on the TV. A music video of some kind.

“Ethan” Giles reprimands tiredly. Blackwood’s smile twitches at the scene. As Giles dials, he tries, “Really, there’s no reason to trouble Mr Travers.”

“Oh, I doubt I’ll be honoured with a conversation with him” mutters Giles.

“But still, I have my instructions. And really, Mr Giles, you have tried the Council’s patience already of late.”

Ethan tweaks the aerial and suddenly the TV has sound, of the relentless, pulsating variety Buffy favours for her workouts.

The phone at Head Office doesn’t seem to be working. Giles frowns and tries again, double checking the international code. “That’s odd.” Blackwood frowns politely. Ethan glances over. “What?”

“The number I have for the Council doesn’t seem to be connecting.” Giles looks questioningly at Blackwood but the young man looks as baffled as he feels and asks, “Do you think they’ve
changed their number?”

Giles shakes his head. “Not like them to do something so drastic without a few decades of debate first. I’ve got a number for the Scotland office…”

“Mr Rayne, can you find something else? This music sucks.”

“Yes” says Giles, “And turn it down, Ethan.” He steps around Blackwood, who scuttles out his way, and rummages through the luggage on the queen-sized bed for his address book. He hopes Blackwood doesn’t look too closely at the other bag, the one with the borrowed library books. Finding the number, he dials again.

This time the phone just rings and rings. “I’ll try the German Office. Ethan, turn that down, can’t you?” he snaps distractedly as Ethan channel surfs. Annabelle is still focused on the TV – or pretending to be – and Molly is glancing between a series of low quality channels and the new watcher. “Or at least find something decent, not these bloody music videos.” A stretch to call it music. No answer in Germany. “Do you have any Council numbers to hand?”

Blackwood makes an apologetic shuffle. “Only Head Office, I’m afraid. But really my instructions were clear: The girls are to travel to London with me and we’ll all head to California from there.”

Giles shakes his head distractedly. Perhaps he could give Alice Layton a try? She’s not an active watcher anymore but she has family high up in the Council. She could make them see sense.

Ethan’s switched to a news channel now and the theme music blares out suddenly. “Ethan, please turn that down.” No answer at the Laytons’. Perhaps they will all have to go back to England; he’s loath to let the girls out of his sight. Behind him, Ethan says, “Rupert.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any phone numbers for the Council you haven’t told me about, Eth?”

“Rupert.”

Giles turns. Ethan has gone very still, Molly has her hands over her mouth and Annabelle has slipped off her bed and onto Molly, is wrapping an arm around her. The news is showing footage of rubble, the aftermath of some explosion. It takes Giles a moment and a horrified jolt to understand that the city in the background is London. “Good God, what’s happened?”

“It’s the council.” Ethan pulls his gaze from the screen and takes a step towards Giles. He stalls as a soft chuckle issues from Blackwood. They all do. They stare. Suddenly, horribly, Giles understands.

“Well” says Blackwood with a grin that doesn’t seem to belong to that eager young face, “I must say, it’s a poor show that you wouldn’t let me take them to meet my Bringers. But almost worth it to watch you find out.”

“Get out” says Giles softly.

“If you insist, Mr Giles.” The First twists Blackwood’s face into a leer as it adds to the girls, “But don’t worry, I’ll see you all very soon.”
Reluctantly on Giles’ part, they’ve agreed to all go to sleep at the same time, no-one standing guard. Except that Giles doesn’t sleep. He thinks.

The Council is decimated. The Head Office flattened, the national offices all attacked in some way. And the attacks on individual watchers and potential slayers culminated in a day of carnage the moment the organisation was rendered defenceless. In the days since, the news has been full of reports of murders and freak accidents and he knows – knew – many of them, and those he doesn’t know he recognises. All over the world, girls dying mysteriously alongside their adopted parent, or teacher, or neighbour, or whoever their watcher posed as. Surprising that no-one seems to have noticed the pattern, but then not many people obsessively read every global news site the tech-savvy teens they’re travelling with can be persuaded to point them to. Just Giles, in fact, every chance he gets, adding to an internal list.

Those not dead are missing. Perhaps – just perhaps – a few are in hiding. Perhaps the Council could be somehow revived after all this is over, if there’s still a world left for them to protect.

Suddenly a voice says, “I know it’s shit, Ripper, but this is the way it has to go.”

Giles sits up and stares: Thomas. Or, not really Thomas. He reaches for his glasses but then thinks better of it: better not to see in any detail this copy of his old friend, standing beside their bed. The Thing That Isn’t Thomas continues, “It’s the way it was always going to go.”

It’s all Giles can do not to lunge at it. Only the knowledge that it’s incorporeal stops him. He stares past it to check the girls are alright. They took adjoining rooms in this latest hotel but dragged the mattresses from one in here. Giles wasn’t prepared to let the potential slayers out of his sight.

The First follows his gaze with an approximation of Thomas glancing casually back over his shoulder. “You realise they’ll go the same way as the others eventually? Really, you’re just saving girls from being killed so they can be killed later. Death: it’s what all human life leaves to.” It finishes with an imitation of Thomas’ empty laugh. “No point to any of it, mate.”

Naturally Giles wants to rage at it, damn it, for what it did to virtually everyone he knows. Knew. But what would be the point? The First evil can’t feel remorse. It can’t be made to suffer. It just is.

It steps closer to the girls and looks down on them with a considering air that reminds Giles of Thomas admiring women at parties. “I mean, take this one.” It nods to Kennedy. “I bet you think she’s coping but that’s only because the little ones are even more shit-scared. I bet you are too, deep down.” It smiles unpleasantly. “Why are putting yourself through this, mate? You know I’ll win.”

There’s a lot Giles could say to that, starting with asking why, if the First is so confident, does it feel the need to pay a visit and make a show of it. But Giles doesn’t want to antagonise it into sending something corporeal for an early wake up call, and besides, a refusal to engage seems the best reply. Silently, he lies back down. Beside him, Ethan shifts closer in his sleep, burrowing into his warmth. “Heh” The Thing That Isn’t Thomas chuckles, and Giles can hear the grin with his eyes closed. “The two of you in bed together, with strangers in the room? Things have changed. Shame you had to hide it all that time. But then, it was a different world, wasn’t it?”

Giles waits, alert behind his eyelids.
The First continues, “You realise if you fight for humanity, that includes all those who’d never do the same for you, don’t you mate? Those bastards who used to call you all sorts and spit at you in the street. Plenty of them still out there. You want to save them?”

Giles listens hard for any sound beyond Not Thomas’ voice. He’s grateful for the protection spell Ethan cast on the room. Grateful for Ethan’s warmth beside him.

The First adds, “And your best years are behind you now, anyway. Not like you’re saving the two of you for anything special. Trust me: nothing special about old age.”

Not that poor Thomas would know anything about that. But this isn’t Thomas.

“Come on, Ripper: why don’t you just take Ethan and go home? Or go anywhere. Have some fun together while there’s still time.”

Leave it to the root of all evil not to understand why that isn’t an option. Pointless to try to explain. Giles keeps his eyelids pressed closed; his lips sealed.

“You’ve put Ethan through enough, don’t you think? Moving him to the hellmouth and all. Why not make these last few months about him? Won’t make any difference either way.” The First waits for a moment, as if hoping for a response. “You know I’ll kill him eventually.”

Giles waits, eyes closed, heart hammering. A shifting in the air and then a new voice adds, “You really should turn back while you can.”

Giles opens his eyes. Thomas – Not Thomas – is gone and in his place, is Cousin Mora. Giles called the helpline just this morning to receive confirmation that she was among the casualties in London. She offers a smile a few degrees warmer than she generally gave him in life. Actually, if this were really her, she’d certainly not be smiling at the sight of he and Ethan in bed together. She’d be blushing and backing hastily out. Giles feels a bizarre triumph at the thought that his relatives are difficult for the First to play-act. With Mora’s voice, it says, “You really don’t want to see the terrible mess I’m about to make in Sunnydale.”

Another pause, and Mora removes her glasses, cleans them with one of the brightly coloured silk handkerchiefs she always carries. Always carried. Finally, it says, “Well, on your head be it.” Another laugh, familiar from family reunions and Christmas dinners. “Perhaps literally. Well, until I next see you...”

And then it’s gone. Giles lets out a long slow breath and turns to gather Ethan into his arms. Holds him close.

****

Within a few hours of their arrival, it is as if they’ve never been gone. Except that Ethan feels jet lagged and knackered and the hellmouth’s usual sense of threat has been amplified to pack up and run in their absence. Trust Rupert to pack up and run to it.

Dropping off briefly, Ethan jolts awake in alarm – where are the potentials? – and then he recollects that they have reached Sunnydale and the girls are all in the kitchen with Faith.

The three potentials aren’t the only houseguests; Ethan gets the impression that over the last few days, Willow, Tara and Xander have more or less moved in. Willow and Tara are upstairs now, using the borrowed books as a basis for web searches and, Ethan suspects, snatching a moment alone.
Just books now, actually. They aren’t borrowed if there’s nowhere to return them.

Willow had been visibly shaken by that. Girls glimpsed in dreams was one thing, but with the attack on the council, the First murdered tangible people she’d know about, even met a handful of. People he and Rupert knew, no less. Another reason, perhaps, for the retreat upstairs: So she doesn’t have to look anyone who isn’t Tara in the eye. Idly, Ethan wonders if a forgetting spell wouldn’t be a mercy in the circumstances, but it’s too big for that. How would he account for the months in Devon? Besides, Willow has been prepared for the coming fight by powerful forces that Ethan doesn’t want to piss off even more than he wishes Willow didn’t have to live with this harrowing guilt.

The potentials don’t know. Probably best to keep it that way. So far, they have been too awed by the slayers, who they have approached with a mixture of admiration and appraisal (Their lives depend on them, after all) to notice the rest of the group. Annabelle hadn’t even been told there were two slayers, and Molly had only had a hint from a hastily abandoned conversation. Apparently the council hadn’t wanted the girls to know there was any chance of them not being alone. Ethan would resent them for it except that, well, they were all just blown up.

“Coffee” Dawn announces, appearing beside him, and placing a steaming mug in front of him.

“Bless you.” Ethan pulls it towards him.

She sits down beside him. “So I guess fleeing half way round the globe makes you tired?”

Ethan nods, concentrating on his coffee. Dawn adds, “And I’m thinking the Molly factor didn’t help any.”

“The girl’s like you on speed” Ethan confirms.

They listen for a moment to the voices in the kitchen, Molly’s, brash and flippant, Kennedy apparently trying to compete with Faith in the cool stand-offish category. Dawn says, “Maybe she’s just scared. Trying to cover.”

“I think we all are.” Ethan looks at the clock. Rupert and Buffy went off an hour ago. “They’re taking their time.”

Dawn says, “They don’t know where to look, to be fair. I mean, this thing could be anywhere, right?” She has a coffee of her own, but she doesn’t drink it. She wraps her hands around it. “I’m not sure Buffy’s ready to find it anyway.”

Faith, stomping into the room, retorts, “Exactly, that’s why this is a recon mission. They’ll see if they can work out where this thing is based and they’ll leave again.”

“I hope so” says Dawn, “I don’t think Buffy’s in retreat mode. She’s worried about Spike.” She looks down at her untouched coffee. “We all are.”

“B’s not about to lose her head, Dawnie.”

“And she has Rupert with her” Ethan points out, “He won’t let her go tearing off into danger.”

Dawn seems ready to accept this. Instead she asks, “What does it even want with him? I mean, it’s in everything evil, right? Why not have a non-souled vampire open the seal? Or one of its robe-minions?”

“It’s messing with him” Faith tells her, “Why open the seal with something that will enjoy it?”
Dawn frowns. “So he’s definitely not dust then? Because it would want to keep him around and have some fun with him?”

Ethan wishes she didn’t understand that. Faith says, “We’ll get him back, Dawn. He’s our vampire, right? We’re not going to let it keep him.” At that moment, the voices in the kitchen raise, turn argumentative. Faith sighs. “This is gonna be like babysitting, isn’t it?” she mutters, turning to the kitchen. Before she reaches it, the voices are quieted by the sound of the back door opening. “Buffy!” gasps Molly, “What happened?”

Hurrying in with Faith and Dawn, Ethan finds Buffy looking bruised and…shaken? Surely not. Behind her, Rupert seems deep in some unpalatable thought.

“You found it?” Faith asks.

“One of its minions” confirms Buffy. “Either that or the Master just came back with a hell of a hangover.” She turns to Rupert, “It looked like him, didn’t it? Only, meaner.”

“I’m not sure” says Rupert, “I only saw the Master very briefly, and the mid-flight.”

“Wait” squeaks Molly, “Can some of them fly?”

“I threw him through a roof” Buffy explains.

“He was an incredibly old vampire” Rupert muses, “I suppose it makes sense he’d look a little like what you just fought.”

“You gonna tell me what that was?”

“A Turok-Han.”

*****

Willow and Tara have protections on the house but now Ethan is back, they enhance them with a third thread of magic. Ethan considers asking Dawn to try, but that would mean telling everyone about unnerving askew flavour of her barrier spells, and everyone is wound up enough as it is. Even something as usually exciting as unpredictable magic feels like a danger too far.

Dawn is thinking it too. He feels her eyes on him as he casts.

That done, he goes to look in the fridge, in vague hope that he’ll find some decent beer. He needs something to calm his nerves.

He’s debating an attempt at transmogrifying the milk into wine when Molly enters. “Anna – oh. Hi, Mr Rayne. I thought Annie was in here?”

Ethan shrugs and indicates the room with a wave of his hand. “Only me, sweet child. Do you need something?”

Her expression grows uneasy. “But she was in here just now, right?”

Ethan shakes his head. “I thought she was out there with you.”

Suddenly Molly looks stricken. “Oh shit!” she exclaims, and races from the room.

*****
Leaving the others to return to their flat feels counter intuitive, so, against Ethan’s protests, Giles asks if they can stay at Revello Drive. That night, they find themselves cuddling on a makeshift bed on the dining room floor. “I’ve got to hand it to your slayer” says Ethan, “She can make a decent speech when she wants to.”

Giles nods. “She’s a remarkable girl.” Remarkable young woman, really. Or, not so much remarkable as miraculous. To be as beaten as she was before Faith saved her, and still sum up such defiance? He’s something of a fighter himself, and he can barely fathom it. Buffy is presciently what the world needs right now.

Beside him, Ethan murmurs, “Poor Annabelle.”

Frankly, they need to get used to this: many of the girls will die. Perhaps most of them. Giles says nothing and squeezes Ethan’s hand.
Never a safe place to be after dark, the streets of Sunnydale carry a deeper sense of threat tonight. Heading out of the bite house, Ethan gasps and flinches away from the figure that rounds the corner ahead of him, relaxing only when he realises it is Anya. “Oh” he breathes out, “You survived then?”

“Only just.” She indicates the protection charm draped around her neck and shakes it crossly. Its power has dissipated with overuse, and Ethan is reminded of the need to get inside, fast. “Come on – I parked just round the corner.”

She follows him, glancing back the way he came. “Did the vampires know anything?”

“No. I didn’t really expect them too. I asked a few of them to keep an ear out a while ago and nothing came of it. I may be persona non grata at Willy’s these days but I like to think they would have told me if they’d heard anything specific.”

“Other than From Beneath You It Devours? Yeah, that’s all I got out of my contacts too.” Anya relaxes as the car comes into view and slips gratefully inside as Ethan unlocks it. “Let’s face it, this is a different league to your standard apocalypse. Nothing the local lowlifes are going to know much about.”

Ethan nods and starts the car. Anya adds, “Really, I only went to shut Faith up about how I should pull my weight. That and to get out of the House of Teenage Horror for a while.”

“Oh yes, there is that.” It seems like every time Ethan has looked up from reading this week, another potential slayer has arrived, inevitably younger, more afraid and less informed than the last one.

The reading is almost done now. The stolen books just re-tread what little they already knew.

“You know” says Anya, “I kept thinking while all those demons threatened me, why didn’t I bring Spike along for protection? And then I’d think, Oh.”

“He’ll be back.” Ethan doesn’t particularly believe this, but it is easier to say than the alternative.

“We don’t know that. We might never see him again.” Anya sighs. “And with us coming up empty tonight, I’m guessing we’re back to square one. Not that it feels like square one. More like the little start square before square one, like on the game of life where you decide do you want college or a job, except here it’s the game of death and the choice is do you want to die screaming or just die?”

“There’ll be a way” Ethan tells her, and wishes he believes it.

“How? We don’t have any information.”

“We have…Well, we have Janus.”

“Blind faith? See, I saw a thousand years go by before a god troubled to get in the fray. And then it was Glory.”

“For information, I mean. I should consult him.”

Anya considers this. “It might be worth trying” she admits, adding, “But good luck finding somewhere quiet enough to do it in Revello Drive right now.”
Strangely, it is quiet when they get back. Rupert is pacing outside, almost at the point of going out and looking for them, and the others are inside with a new girl. The newest three girls had actually bedded down for the night, something Ethan wasn’t aware anyone with that much adrenaline rushing through them could do, but they hadn’t worked up to actually sleeping when Buffy and Faith ushered Rona in.

Once Molly has led her off to the kitchen, Faith announces, “Bringers almost got to her before us. They know we’re getting them all together here.”

“Wonderful” says Ethan, “So all this carnage you’ve been seeing in your dreams is about to come here too?”

Eve shudders. “Don’t say that. I’ve been having such awful nightmares just lately.” Vi nods in miserable agreement and Chloe draws in on herself.

“Sorry” says Faith, “But we can’t pretend this isn’t going down.”

“Exactly” says Rupert, “You’re under protection here, but that can’t include protection from the truth.”

“Or from the war, right?” asks Eve. She turns to Buffy. “I mean, Molly said you’re calling us an army?”

“Because that’s what we’ve got to be” confirms Buffy. She turns to Ethan and Anya, “Did you guys learn anything?”

“That demons aren’t all that forgiving to those of us who turn human” says Anya, busying herself unrolling a sleeping bag.

“Gee, really?” murmurs Xander, though he adds, “But you’re okay?” when Anya shoots him a look.

“I’m fine” she says grudgingly.

Faith says, “Not for long if we don’t work out how to kill this thing. Ethan?”

“No-on seems to know anything” he replies.

“Great” says Xander, “So it’s humans and demons together in the not-knowing club?”

“The ignorance club” corrects Anya.

“I did not know that.”

“We do know that we can’t kill the First” Rupert tells them, “It’s not an entity that can be ended because it’s an aspect of all things, living and not. The best we can hope for is to force it back somehow.”

Buffy asks, “Anything more specific on the how?”

Faith says, “Well there’s cave vamp. We can slay that.”

“And again, I ask how. Because I do not want to make that thing angry and send it back to Spike.”
Seeing that Eve frown in a way that pre-empts a question, Ethan cuts in with, “I could always try communing with Janus” more to stave off a long explanation of Buffy’s love life than because he really wants them all to know. “I will need somewhere quiet, though.”

Faith rolls her eyes. “Good luck with that round here.”

“Just keep the girls out of one room for an hour or so.”

“Janus?” asks Vi, “Who’s that?”

“A dangerous person to talk to” Rupert answers, studying Ethan.

“I’ve done it before” Ethan dismisses.

“And I’ve worried before.”

Buffy says, “I don’t want you to worry, Giles, but we’ll all need to worry unless we get some intel on this thing soon. Even if it is from Ethan’s weird chaos god.”

“Wonderful” mutters Ethan, “Insult him in the place I plan to do the ritual, that’ll put him in a good mood.”

“Chaos god?” asks Eve, “That sounds downright satanic. Aren’t you people supposed to be the good guys?”

Anya replies, “Some of us. Really I like to think of us more as the winning team.”

“But” says Eve, “How can we win if we don’t know how to fight this thing? What if we can’t?”

Buffy says, “Girl’s got a point. And I don’t want all the answers to come from Janus.”

“Oi” says Ethan, “He can hear you, you know.”

“There is another option” says Rupert.

Ethan frowns, checking them off. “We’ve tried books, the internet, demons, the coven, meditation and now I’m trying Janus. What else is there?”

“Beljoxa's Eye” and Rupert, and Ethan swears.

“Who’s what?” asks Faith.

“Beljoxa’s Eye” Anya replies, “It’s what we’d try if we wanted to be really, really dead.”

“We’ll be really, really dead with no answers” says Buffy, “What is this eye thing?”

Ethan tells her, “Legend has it it was created as a side effect of the first truth spell: An oracle that sees everything that is all at once. They needed to create a dark dimension to contain it.”

“A dark dimension?”

Anya says, “Nothing but darkness and a lot of eyes. Not a great place to be trapped.”

“We won’t be trapped” Rupert tells her.

Anya gestures to Ethan. “Can’t we just let him ask Janus about it? Because I like the idea where Ethan’s in danger better than the one where I’m in danger.”
“Guys” says Buffy, “We’re all in danger all the time unless we find a way to stop this thing. I’m sorry, Anya, but you’re going to have to try.”

Faith nods, then asks Giles, “You want me to come with you guys?”

“Thank you, Faith, but I think it’s best you help guard the potentials. They’ll be safer with both slayers around.” He indicates the girls, none of whom look as though they are feeling especially safe.

*****

“You know” says Ethan, when Rupert finds him looking over the watchers’ records later, “I’m sure I remember you saying we’d be safe here. Now you’re running off to a dark dimension and a Turok-Han is on the guest list.”

“And you’re about to talk to Janus” Rupert concludes, “But I never said we’d be safe. I said this is the safest place.”

“…oh.”

Rupert nods to the books. “Anything we missed?”

“No. Non-corporeal, bringers, older than time, so on and so forth. Something here about it enjoying singling out individuals for prolonged torment. I suppose that explains why it’s been fixated on Spike.”

Rupert nods. “And why it freed Warren only to kill him and take his form to manipulate Andrew. It could open the gateway any number of ways but it wanted to do so in the manner that most pained the victims of the moment.” He frowns. “Which does appear to be a weakness but I’ve no idea how to take advantage of it.”

Ethan isn’t sure it is a weakness so much as a grim personality trait. “Well” he says, “It’s a part of all of us. Nothing more personal than that.”

“I suppose not.”

Ethan shudders. “There’s got to be a point where all this stops being scary, isn’t there? That much evil all at once – there’s just no variation. It’s like Californian weather, predictable as fuck.”

“I’m very sorry if this apocalypse is boring you, dear.”

“Don’t be. I’d rather be bored than dead.” Sometimes, Ethan would rather be one of the people who can leave situations like this to other people to handle. Sometimes he wonders what life would have been like if Rupert had never returned to the council. They could be looking forward to a night of partying in blissful obliviousness right now. Certainly it wouldn’t be the most graceful way to age, but one could argue nor is this.

Seeing that his fiancé’s attention has wandered, Rupert gently lifts the book from his hands. “I’m calling the coven later. See if the seer has any more information.”

“If you make it out of Beljoxa’s place alive that is. Are you going now?”

Rupert nods. “I’ll be fine, Eth. And you’re ready to talk to Janus?”

“Yes. I’ll make a start as soon as the potentials are in the basement out the way. They’re heading
down there to train.” Ethan adds, “It might not work, you know.” Janus can’t necessarily help: The First is a whole different level. It predates and possibly made the gods. Or at least some of them, and not the ones whose mercy Ethan wants to be at.

Rupert asks, “Janus or Beljoxa?”

“Either.”

“I suppose not. But we have to try.” Rupert pulls Ethan into a sideways hug, then puts his coat on. “I’ll see you later.”

“I hope so.” Glancing over in time to see Rupert pocket a knife, Ethan adds, “Let’s go back to our place tonight. Assuming we are both still alive.”

Rupert casts an are-you-mad sort of look his way. Ethan argues, “We need to get some actual sleep at some point, or we’re useless.”

“Not until the Turok-Han is dead.”

Ethan sighs: no decent night’s sleep then. And no last minute, end of the world sex either. Plus, if the Turok-Han kills them all, no actual sleeping in a bed ever again for the rest of their lives. “I can put up a barrier spell.”

“I’m not ready to leave the potentials alone.”

“They won’t be alone: They have Buffy and Faith.”

“I know. But they’re not watchers.”

“You can’t be a watcher to all of them, Rupert.”

“Someone has to be.” Before Ethan can argue, Rupert adds, “Let’s just concentrate on gathering information. Good luck.”

*****

Green light. Other colours that he will not be able to name later. A distance rhythmic sound, like a heartbeat or crashing waves, but decidedly not either of these things. Riotous sensations cling to Ethan as he remembers himself – remembers that he is a self and wasn’t always a part of this Chaos.

“Ethan!”

The voice is not Janus’, even to the extent that Janus can be said to have one. But he is leaving Janus’ presence not, or leaving the edges of it, the fleeting impression of it that his mortal mind is capable of containing.

“Ethan, wake up!”

Dawn, Ethan realises distantly. He tries to open his mouth to reassure her, but he can’t seem to find it, and besides, it is too full of light to form words. He falls through swirling and distorted space, searching for it, rising out of the trance. Essence of matter churns about him and time carries on somewhere else. There is a glee in all this and a part of him understands that Janus is enjoying the coming war. Change is in the air and Janus likes nothing better.

“Ethan, you’re scaring me!”
A wordless question is answered with the flash of a blade. More green light. Then Ethan finds he has eyes and opens them. He is breathing very fast.

Dawn is facing him, dangerously close to the sacred circle. Looking down, Ethan realises that he has grabbed her hands and is gripping them hard. He lets go. “Sorry.”

“Ethan?”

Ethan looks around. The light in the spare bedroom is altered in a way that suggests he has been at this for some time. The candles have burnt low. “Is Rupert back yet?”

Dawn stares at him blankly. “What language is that?” she asks.

Latin, Ethan realises, he is speaking Latin. He swallows and tries again. What language does he usually speak? “Is Rupert back?”

“Oh. No, not yet.” Dawn sits back, still eyeing the sacred circle. She adds, “Buffy, Faith and Xander went out too. The coven called about another girl who arrived a couple of days ago. I’m not sure why she didn’t come straight here.”

Ethan examines his torso, then traces his hands over his face. He is intact, despite the blade. There was a blade. Green light too.

Dawn says, “You broke the window.”

Ethan twists to look at the crack scribbled up the pane. “Oh. Bugger.” Though really, it’s not like they don’t have worse to worry about than broken windows.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dawn.”

“Your eyes are black.”

Ethan blinks them. Wonders if they are the same eyes he had before. “Better?”

Dawn examines them. “Better.”

Ethan stands up, smudges the circle enough that it is no longer potent. Seeing Dawn still watching him, he tells her, “That was…more intense than usual.”

“Right. Because I’m guessing talking to a god is usually relaxing.”

“It’s not really talking.” And it is never relaxing, of course, but it is usually more comforting than that.

Dawn asks, “What did he say?”

“He’s all het up. Looking forward to the fight, I think.” Very much unlike Ethan. “It’s going to change things.”

Dawn looks frightened. “You mean we’re going to lose?”

“No. He wouldn’t be looking forward to that.”

“Was all that green light normal?” asks Dawn. Ethan stares at her. She adds, “Not that any of this is
“You saw it too?”

She nods. “It was filling the room” she explains. “I came in to see if you were alright because you’ve been up here forever and there it was. It was just like with the barrier spell.” She looks away, folds her arms.

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it?” Ethan concentrates on clearing up. Buffy will be annoyed by the state of the floor, he thinks, and the thought is oddly cheering, a little normalcy after all.

Dawn asks, “It is the barrier spell, isn’t it? It’s important.”

“I think so, yes.” Ethan just isn’t sure how. But the more he thinks about it, the more he is sure it was the same light.

“Should we tell Willow and Tara?”

“Probably.” Ethan looks at her. “And we definitely need to try it again. See what we’re dealing with.” And what Janus wants them to do with it, he thinks, but he doesn’t say it. It seems too big.

Dawn nods, looks away, twists her hands in her lap. “Okay. If we get time to. If we don’t all die tonight, I mean.”

“Janus would have told me if we were going to die tonight.”

“Oh. Good. I mean, I knew Buffy would protect us, it’s just, there’s a lot of us now.”

Before Ethan can collect himself to say something cheering, Dawn adds, “We should go downstairs – You’ve been up here hours and everyone’s going to start worrying. Plus Tara’s getting lunch ready. A big lunch because what with the cave vamp attacking after sundown we thought…well, we thought there might not be time for a big dinner.”

“Just what I needed to hear to work up an appetite, thanks Dawn.” Nevertheless, Ethan follows her downstairs, abandoning the remaining spell components where they lay.

Willow is leaning in the front doorway downstairs, watching the family across the street pack up a moving van. Following her gaze, Ethan notices that quite a few houses along the street seem shut up. Willow glances their way and says, “Hi, Ethan. Dawnie, could you go see if Tara needs a hand? She’s got Andrew but…”

“But he’s being Andrew? I’m on it.” Dawn heads off.

Willow asks Ethan, “Are you okay? I was sensing some pretty powerful forces up there.”

“I’m fine. Ish.”

“Ish?”

“He keeps steering me to this barrier magic I was teaching Dawn” Ethan explains. “We tried to do a standard barrier back in autumn and it twisted into…Well, I don’t know what.”

Willow frowns. “A good I-don’t-know-what or a bad I-don’t-know-what?”

“I don’t know. But it could be useful.”
“Dangerous?”

“Probably. But more dangerous to not pursue it, I think. Could you watch us try again, give us your professional opinion?”

“Sure. But not today, okay? You’re close to tapped out, it’d be too much.”

“I’m not going to argue with that.” Ethan nods to the neighbours’ car as it turns out the drive and away down the street. “Your doing?”

“Uh huh.” Willow folds her arms anxiously and admits, “I resorted to a little mind-control. Made some big property developer in L.A decide to make Buffy’s neighbours an offer very few of them have refused.” Guilt plays across her face. “I did my parents too, made them accept research positions at the University of Maine. And agree to take Miss Kitty Fantastico with them.” She shoots him a look. “I know mind control is wrong. But it’d be wronger to let Buffy’s neighbours stay in danger if this place becomes a battleground.” She pauses, admits, “Of course, getting the cat to safety was just being selfish.”

“Ah, yes. Appallingly selfish, making sure your pet doesn’t die.”

Willow glances back over her shoulder and into the house, before replying, in a whisper, “When other people’s children are facing the Turok-Han because of me? Yeah, I’d say it is.”

“Willow, there’s no point dwelling on that.”

“I know. I know I have to focus on helping Buffy. I mean, even the spirit guides agreed there – Remember the owl lady said I have to stand by the hand that wields the gift? When we did the enjoining spell, Buffy was the hand. And the gift’s got to mean being chosen, right?”

“Some gift” mutters Ethan, “I think you’re right, though – Who else could it be? And wield sounds like a weapon. A slayer is a weapon, from certain perspectives.”

“And Buffy’s spirit guide told her death is her gift” Willow concludes, “So it must be Buffy.” She glances behind her again, before adding, “Just not her death this time. I couldn’t live with that. Except. Except wouldn’t that redress the balance? Since her resurrection tore a hole in the order of things.”

Ethan shudders, unwilling to follow Willow down the line of dark musings that seem to be routine to her now.

Willow adds, “Except if I’m standing by her, doesn’t that sound permanent? Like maybe I’ll die too? So at least I won’t miss her for long.”

“It might not go that way at all” Ethan tells her, “This time round, the gift might be the death she metes out to the First’s minions.”

“I hope so. But if I’m right, you’ll take care of Tara, won’t you? You and Giles. She doesn’t have anyone, Ethan.”

“She’s got us. Always will.”

“Thank you.” Willow’s face brightens briefly when the car pulls up and Buffy, Faith and Xander jump out and hurry towards the house. Then she frowns and asks, “No potential?”

Buffy replies, “Where’s Eve?”
Already thrown by the surprise telepathy, Ethan can’t quite get his head around the plan. Doesn’t want to, in fact. *You want to let the barrier fail?* He thinks.

Willow nods. *The girls all think we’re on the defensive and then Buffy swoops in and proves she’s the person to follow.*

**What if Buffy dies?**


Ethan stares at her from across the kitchen. *You’ll bet all our lives on that, will you? No wait, of course you will – that’s the plan.*

Faith pulls herself up to sit on the worktop. *Chill, Eth. I’ll be there as plan B. Well, except we should call B plan B. But I’ll be there if things get ugly.*

Xander adds, *Uglier than the uber vamp just automatically makes it. But Faith’s right, Ethan. Buffy’s got this. We just need the girls to see it.*

Ethan sighs. *Fine. I’ll go along with the play acting. But I’ll be holding it against you all if we all end up dead.*

*We won’t.* And actually, Buffy doesn’t look scared. But then, she never does.

They approach the patch of dust almost cautiously, a few of the less experienced girls apparently thinking he Turok-Han could reform itself.

*“It’s gone”* Xander reassures them.

*“History”* says Buffy. She spits blood. Just a split lip, Ethan reassures himself. She is not seriously hurt. None of them are.

She leads them out, but then tells Faith, “Get them home safely. I’ll get Spike while the way’s clear.”

*“Can I come?”* asks Dawn.

*“No.”*

*“But you said the way’s clear.”*

*“Yes, but I’m still not risking you.”* Buffy’s expression softens. “Don’t worry, Dawn, He’ll be home tonight.”

They return to the house shaken and dishevelled and heartened. Anya comes hurrying out to meet them. “Xander!”

*“Anya, we’re – Ow!”* Xander reels from the slap. “What was that for?”

“I was checking you weren’t the First. I figured you might be dead what with the house trashed and
dead Bringers everywhere.”

Rupert comes running up behind her. “Ethan! Thank God!” He moves as if to embrace his fiancé but then pauses, looks the group over, and turns to Faith. “Where’s Buffy? What happened?”

“On her way to save Spike” Faith explains, “She just dusted the uber vamp gladiator style.”

“Sorry, Mr Giles” says Tara, “We would have told you, but you were out.”

Rupert stares around, tension draining out of him. “It’s dead?”

“Better than dead” confirms Willow, “Dust.”

Kennedy says, “Buffy took its head off with a wire.”

Molly adds, “It was amazing, Mr Giles.”

“Good. That’s good news at least.”

Anya tells them, “Beljoxa’s Eye was a waste of time. It hinted that there is a way to defeat the First but nothing as useful as details.”

Kennedy says, “Then we’ll just have to stop it the old fashioned way. Decapitation.”

“That’s the spirit” says Rupert distractedly, “Now, let’s get inside.”

All told, Spike is less injured than he could be, but given where he has been, that’s not saying much. Buffy, bruised herself, tends to him as Dawn alternates between helping and holding the vampire’s hand.

Giles asks, “Did you learn anything?”

Spike twists awkwardly to look at him. “’S sending a Turok-Han” he forces out, then turns to Buffy and says, “But I’m guessing you saw to it, luv?”

“Hence you being out of there” she confirms.

“An’ you smell of it.”

Buffy wrinkles her nose. “Oh, now I’m going to have to shower.”

Giles persists, “Spike, was there anything it said that could be of use to us.”

Dawn asks, “You think it gave him a speech about how to kill it?”

“She has a point, Giles” says Buffy, “Let him rest.”

“Wanted me to join it” says Spike, “Turn against you.” He closes his eyes. “Told it to go to hell.” Buffy leans forward and kisses his forehead, very gently. Giles considers asking further questions but if Spike did learn anything, it doesn’t look as though he’ll stay awake to tell it.

It makes sense, he notes, that the First would hate the idea of a vampire with a soul. Spike was once an agent of evil and now here he is, with his head in the Buffy’s lap and her fingers in his hair.
Getting into their flat, Ethan goes straight to the bedroom. He calls through to the hall, “Gods, I’ve done more running tonight than I ever have since you stole that copper’s bloody truncheon.”

“Yes, thank you for reminding me of that.” Giles carefully locks the door and follows his fiancé. Ethan is prone on the bed, with no apparent intention of moving, so Giles forces himself to say, “We could do with going over the protection spells on the flat. Or the whole building, if you can manage it.”

“Right you are. Just don’t ask me to make it fall at the crucial moment. I must say, your slayer has a flare for the dramatic.”

“Ethan, when you’re ready.”

With every appearance of reluctance, Ethan peels himself from the bed, and Giles feels a vague pang of worry: really, they’re too old for this, for running half way around Sunnydale pursued by a prehistoric vampire, fighting ancient evil. But who else will do it?

Ethan reinforces the existing protection charms and Giles watches on, feeling that reassuring sense of magic settling about him.

“There” declares Ethan, returning to the bed. “Now tell me we can get some sleep at last.”

“First I thought I’d make love to you” says Giles, “If you have the energy, that is?”

“Oh” Ethan reaches for him. “Well for that, I’m sure I can find the energy somewhere.”

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