Fata Viam Invenient

by Cornerofmadness

Summary

When Wolfram and Hart gets possession of a powerful magical item, it becomes a race to see who ends up with it: the law firm, the thieves, the demons or the Watchers Council.

Notes

Disclaimer -- Mr. Whedon owns them, not I. I don't own any of the song lyrics within. They belong to whomever they're attributed to.

Timeline -- Set a few years after S5 of Angel. It goes AR in the middle of Origins. The season finale never happened and various characters are alive and/or dead. No comic book canon either.

Warning -- kinky sex, minor character death

Author's Note -- Written for Crazygirl Mary for the Connor Het ficathon - I don't own any of the characters (except for Kippendragr). This was originally published in June of 2004. It makes me grin a bit that a few years after I published this, Connor/Gwen became canon (albeit very differently).
Gwen tipped the bottle of Grand Marnier over the valley of her breasts. The liquor splashed over her twin mounds of flesh and trickled down to the hollow of her belly. It pooled with the warm chocolate lake there. Her lover’s tongue lathed her tight abdomen, lapping up the treat before dipping down to tease her clit. He shifted slightly so his nose could play with her erect little nub as his tongue plunged into her, drawing out the strawberries she had planted inside. Slowly his mouth moved back to her belly, drinking up more of the liquored chocolate.

She grabbed his soft hair, gently hauling him up, kissing him, tasting chocolate, oranges, strawberries and herself. As he pushed into her, his belly skating over her sticky stomach, Gwen’s fingers played over the knobs of his spine. “Harder,” she whispered, knowing a gentle urging was all he needed. Her gift, if it could be called that, was electricity. His was his strength. He could pound her in two if he wanted to. She knew he wasn’t showing her his full power, not anywhere close, but he felt like a jackhammer none the less. It was what she loved about him; strength, eagerness to please, brains enough to be good at his job and experimental enough to try whatever she suggested, whether it was Taoist sex or extended orgasms for her. He liked making her happy.

“Give it to me,” he begged, lifting off her as she clamped his waist between her knees. He grabbed the head board which creaked ominously under his strong grip.

“Oh, baby.” Gwen remembered buying him the Kamasutra early on in their relationship and was glad of it. The tenth posture of the perfumed garden that she now found herself in was just one of the benefits.

As his rhythm picked up pace, Gwen trailed her fingers through his brown hair. It stood on end as her power trickled through her fingers. Thanks to the L.I.S.A. device she and Gunn had purloined, she had gained great control over her powers. She rolled her lover’s nipples between her fingers, little blue sparks arcing between her thumbs and into the hardened pink pearls of flesh. His neck arched back as he groaned. She sucked on his Adam’s apple as she ran her hands down his spine, letting light touches of electricity lick his skin. She cupped his buttocks as he came with a shuddering moan.

He rolled on his side, still inside her, pulsing his finger over her clitoris as she ground hard against him. Gwen took her hands off him as her back bowed, waves washing through her. She always feared electrocuting him if she lost control in the middle of an orgasm. Her knees squeezed tight against his lean body as he took her through wave after orgasmic wave. Finally they dropped back on the bed, spent, both of their bellies smeared with chocolate, liquor and sweat.

“That was...,” she panted.

“Fun.”

“That’s a word for it.” She ran a hand through his damp hair. “Have I told you lately how lucky I was to find you, Connor?”
He grinned. “Yes, but I like hearing it.”

Gwen had first seen him in a night club helping a girl who was being dragged out of the bar by her abusive boyfriend and his brother. The speed with which he moved, his agility, his strength had captured her imagination, seeing in him the potential to be her partner in crime. She hadn’t ever really thought about having a partner until that night. At the time he had been going to college, competing in gymnastics, an Olympic hopeful then his whole family died when a drunk crossed the double yellow line and hit them head on with his Hummer. Maybe she should feel guilty about picking up the shattered young man and turning him onto a life of crime but she didn’t. And she doubted he had any regrets.

“And you like hearing the words twelve millions dollars.” Gwen’s hand swept out to the painted panel hung on their bedroom wall, opposite where the wall safe hid behind their Magritte painting.

Connor’s blue eyes shifted to the oil painting and its demonic imagery. “Hieronymus Bosch’s Death of a reprobate, wonder if Ms. Nash gets the humor of having us steal that.”

Gwen smiled. “Don’t care, Connor, so long as she pays.” They had boosted it from the private collection it was held in across the country in New York. It was an easy job, not much needed on their part. It was good to mix up high tech and magical thefts with something as mundane as pilfering priceless works of art. “I’m not sure why anyone wants art they can’t show off, but none of my business, I guess.”

“I like it.” He propped himself up on one elbow, letting a finger trail along her side. “It reminds me of my dreams.”

“Because you’re weird.” Gwen scooted away from him, getting out of bed. It had become ritual after a successful job, to find a new sexual game to play. They’d be running out of things to try if they kept as busy as they had been. “It’s what I love about you.”

Connor got up and stripped off the plastic wrap that had been protecting the sheets that would have costed over a grand had she not stolen them from Neiman Marcus. As he dumped the plastic and his condom into the trash, Gwen eyed her wedding band that rested careless on the night stand. She hadn’t had it on since they had been out on a job. Diamonds and platinum wrought to looking like a garland of ivy was too distinctive. She couldn’t risk it being seen and remembered but she slipped it on before heading to the shower. She treasured it. Connor had insisted on actually buying the ring from Cartier. He wasn’t about to have a symbol of his love be stolen. She had been the one to suggest marriage. A husband couldn’t flip on her in the unlikely event they should be jailed. The fact she actually loved him came as a shock as had when he first said no, realizing her intent and refused to sully something that had surprising meaning to him.

He joined her in the shower, the water running brownish with wasted chocolate. This was one of the few places she insisted was off limits to any sex play, too afraid of what would happen if she lost control and overloaded L.I.S.A. Connor respected that but still liked to at least share the space with her.

Wrapping a fluffy robe around her happily sated body, Gwen padded to the computer to check on what jobs had come in while they were in New York. It was risky being contacted this way but she had the best scrubber programs on the computer and ran them daily. Their four Irish Wolfhounds ambled over to see what their masters were doing. Connor loved the enormous beasts. They looked vicious without actually being it. They were impressive and did a decent job of backing up their various alarms and security systems. He had named them after characters in one of his favorite comic books, the girls Rogue, Storm and Jubilee and the male, Gambit.
Connor leaned over Gwen’s shoulder as she scanned the email. “Boring... boring... we’re not 
assassins, dimwit... boring.”

“Wait,” Connor ordered, patting Rogue’s head as she shoved it under his hand. “Go back one.”

“What? The one about stealing a stone?” Gwen wrinkled her nose at him.

“I know the name, Wolfram and Hart.” Connor tapped the screen. “These guys were the ones my 
parents took me to when they realized I was different. The head guy was a real jerk, refused to help 
out. I wouldn’t mind putting the screws to him.”

“The buyer wants us to steal something called the Alatyr from them... says it’s a magical stone.”
Gwen looked up at him. “You sure you want to do this.”

“Gwen, they’re offering fifty million dollars for this.” He dropped a kiss on her walnut curls.

Looking at him, she understood the meaning of ‘when Irish Eyes are Smiling.’ She sat back in the 
chair. “Magic stuff is always risky.”

“I know. I don’t like magic.” Connor made a face. He didn’t like it but he used magic in his home 
and work as needed. “But for that price, I think we can at least investigate Wolfram and Hart and find 
out more about what an Alatyr even is then make a choice. We have a little time to play with here.”

Gwen nodded. They didn’t need the work. They had enough money that their great grandkids 
wouldn’t need to work. It was the thrill they were after. “I’ve had dealings with Wolfram and Hart,”
she replied, thinking of the things she had stolen for Lilah Morgan and Lindsey McDonald in the 
past. “They’re as evil as they come.”

“Really?” He grimaced. “Wonder why my parents took me there then? Well, that’s all the more 
reason to do it.”

Gwen leaned back, turning her face up. He bent down and kissed her. “You research the stone, I’ll 
get the specs on Wolfram and Hart.”
The Prize

Chapter Two – The Prize

“What did you find out?” Gwen stretched out on the couch and kicked up her feet in her husband’s lap.

Connor looked away from the plasma TV where he’d been watching *The Simpsons* reruns. “I’m liking this less,” he admitted as he started to massage her feet. “The Alatyr stone is Russian in origin. It’s an omphalos, a healing stone. It was protected on Booyan Island. The rivers that flowed over it were blessed and just mentioning the stone in spells drew on its power. The World Tree grew from it. How anyone got it from its guardians, Gagana, a bird creature and Garafena, a snake, I have no idea.”

“You’re afraid of what?” Gwen arched her back as he hit a particularly good spot in the center of her feet.

“That moral streak of mine, the one you’re always worry about...”

“It’s not making a come-back, is it?” Gwen shot him a warning look.

He looked back at the TV, unable to meet her color-change eyes. Their grey was darkening to her angry near brown. “A little. This is something very powerful, Gwen. What if the World Tree dies without it, which I’m not sure I believe in, but what if? I’m not sure I like just giving something this powerful to an anonymous buyer.”

“You get like this every time we deal with something magical,” she chided.

He kissed the top of her foot. “I can’t help it, Gwen. I think about the really horrible things that could be done with the stone, and I’m not sure I want to be responsible for a giant evil.”

“You’re the one who picked this assignment,” she reminded him. “We can forget it and move on.”

“Thought about it. I think we should do it. I mean, it’s a healing stone. I don’t see how it could be used wrongly, which I know I just said I could but really, I’m not sure it’s possible. Still, I have this weird feeling.” He shrugged, squirming on the butter soft Corinthian leather. “Maybe the buyer wants to return it to Booyan Island.”

“Well, let’s see what happens. You might want to change your mind after you see what Wolfram and Hart has for security.” Gwen sat up, shifting so she was leaning against him.

“That bad?” He raised an eyebrow as Gambit shoved his face between him like the jealous child he was. Connor tapped the beast’s nose, pushing him back from the couch.

“Not for us.” She pulled open his shirt, kissing the glyph he had tattooed on his chest. Her tongue lathed the path of light brown hair that bisected his belly. She sat back, business like again. “The tatts will get us past the security systems but there are magical sensors it might not get us passed. I need to do more research to make sure we have all our bases covered. I’ve worked for them before Angel took over, back in the old building. He has a lot of demons working for him.”

“Demons.” Connor’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure? I wonder if my parents had a clue.”

“I doubt non-clients would know.” Gwen patted his knee, shoving Gambit back again. The dogs
weren’t allowed on the Italian leather.

“Like I said, the Alatyr is an omphalos, looks like a river rock like the things in the bad Indiana Jones movie, the second one. It should be easy enough to smuggle it out of there,” Connor said.

“Trust you to find a geek reference for it.” A smile touched her generous lips. “I’ll do more recon on the building if you’re sure you want to do this.”

He nodded. “Moral crisis averted.”

X X X

“I can do this,” Andrew told Xander as he looked at Giles’ email from an operative that he had openly surreptitiously having gotten the elder Watcher’s password.

“I still think you should talk to Giles,” Xander said, looking over Andrew’s shoulder. “He doesn’t like us to act on our own.”

“That was before. We’ve got years of experience now,” Andrew said. “Besides, Giles wouldn’t approve pf this powerful stone being in the hands of vampires.”

“It’s Angel, Andrew. All we need to do is ask for it. Angel would do anything for Buffy,” Xander argued, looking a little well used to it, if unhappy about that truth.

Andrew gave him a pitying look. “No one trusts a vampire, least of all Buffy. And Giles, Willow and Buffy are all in Palatka, Florida, looking to see if it is true that a hellmouth is opening there. Are you coming to L.A. with me?”

Xander took another gander at the computer screen. “No, I think it’s a bad idea. We should just contact them first.”

Andrew shook his head. “You need to learn to take risks, Xander.”

Xander suppressed the urge to slap the monster he had helped create. “Do what you think you have to.”

“Don’t you worry.” Andrew’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “This is a perfect assignment for me.”

X X X

“What are you going to do with this?” Wes turned the cool, smooth ‘river’ stone over in his hands.

“Be grateful that we discovered it in our client’s estate before the state seized everything.” Gunn shook his head. “When will people get over their fear of making a will? Do they really want the government to get it all?”

“Wes, email Giles. I think the Watchers would be a better repository for something like this,” Angel said, taking the stone from Wes. It flared brightly, touching him with warmth. He set it aside. “It tried to heal me.”

Wes scooped the stone back up. “I wonder if it would destroy the stone if you continued to hold it. I can’t imagine it could drive out the demon and restore you to life.”

“Let’s not find out,” Gunn said. “No offense, but wasting this power to save a vampire, even you....”

“I know what you’re saying, Gunn. I can’t deplete something that could save thousands on the off chance it might make me live.” Angel knew they’d be able to hear the regret in his voice. There
would be so much he could do if he were alive, a lot of wrongs he could make right. “The Watchers will know what to do with this.”

“I ain’t ready to make that bet.” Gunn shot Wes a hostile glance. Angel sighed, knowing the thing between them and Fred still was unresolved even though Fred, or the demoness Illyria, had been dead for three years. “This thing is the property of Wolfram and Hart. We could do something with it. We’re supposed to be a force for good, remember? Why give something like this away?”

“What do you think we could do with it?” Wes arched an eyebrow. “I’m willing to listen to your ideas, Gunn. With Giles in charge of the Watchers, we know they’ll be more than willing to work with us, that spot of trouble with Dana aside. We’ve patched things up in the years since that event. It’s different now than it was under Travers, when they were just as likely to bully their way into ownership or outright steal it.”

“I get that. All I’m saying is maybe hold off a day or two to think about our options,” Gunn said.

“All right, we all can work out a plan for the proper use to this thing but keep in mind, Gunn, with Eve dead and no obvious replacement for her doesn’t mean the Senior Partners aren’t still trying to use this branch to their own ends. Eve tried to betray us and she died. Knox betrayed us and he and Fred died. I’m not willing to bet they were the only traitors. If we can’t find a good use for the Alatyr, I’d be happier with Giles in control of it,” Angel said.

“Fair enough. In the meantime, we’ll keep it here in your safe,” Gunn said, and Wes obliged by putting it away in Angel’s wall safe.

“Did we miss something?” Spike sauntered in without knocking. Kate was behind him, looking irritated at his rudeness. Angel had been shocked last year when Kate returned and hired on to head the investigations department. He hadn’t wanted to hire her at first, still unsure if they were making any headway in the whole “using Wolfram and Hart for good” arena but he saw something fragile and needy in her eyes. She needed to be back in this world as much as he wanted to keep her out of it. She was even willing to work with a one-time adversary, more the firm than him, in order to do it.

“Just boring business,” Angel said with a cautionary look at Gunn and Wes. Spike was a complication no one needed. Kate already knew about the Alatyr. Spike’s eyes narrowed and Angel should have known he couldn’t easily deceive the other vampire.

“We’re going to the Whiskey Lullaby. You guys want to come with?” Kate asked.

“Not going to Lorne’s new place?” Gunn asked.

“Too touristy,” Spike replied.

“And there’s only so many fru-fru drinks a girl can handle.” Kate flipped a lock of blonde hair out of her eyes.

“Why not?” Angel had made a resolution to try to take his friends up on invites more often, more of a reaction to Harmony’s attempt to get him involved in their lives. It had ended badly. Still, he couldn’t help thinking it was a mistake not to email Giles about the Alatyr. A little voice told him this mystical object needed to go home and not languish either in the vaults of Wolfram and Hart or the Watchers’ complex. Even as they collected Harmony and headed for the bar, he couldn’t get that out of his mind.
Sneak Thieves

Chapter Three – Sneak Thieves

Connor watched for Gwen’s signal, a simple hand gesture through the doorway should she need his assistance inside. They had waited for after hours to invade the inner sanctum of Wolfram and Hart. They had debated it for a day, trying to devise the easiest plan. They would be less conspicuous in the bustle of everyday business but a daytime recon of the place revealed they needed to go several floors up and past a secretary among other obstacles to get to the wall safe in Angel’s office, which was where Gwen’s sources indicated the Alatyr was.

They ran a risk of someone actually spotting them, not to mention having to get past the offices’ occupants. He and Gwen were invisible to the cameras and other alarms and sensors but not to the human eye. It wasn’t impossible they might run into a magical sensor their tattoos wouldn’t protect them against but that was a risk they were willing to take.

They were dressed in custodial uniforms. He even had a cleaning cart, keeping look out in the corridor. Two curious-looking men passed him. Connor couldn’t help but spare them a long glance. They weren’t in guards’ uniforms nor business suits. They didn’t fit in. The one man was tall, lanky, maybe in his late forties, early fifties, dark hair, arrogant eyes. He was trouble. Connor didn’t doubt it. The other was short, stocky and wore a cowboy hat with a wide brim that obscured his face from view. They had no business he could think of in this corridor.

“Do you have to do this now?” The tall man gestured at the cleaning cart. His British accent only added to his cocksure demeanor. He obviously wanted Connor out of the hallway.

Connor mumbled at him in Russian. He had learned the language in high school and had an affection for it. The arrogant one scowled impatiently at him. “Have orders.” Connor shrugged, hoping his “immigrant-barely spoke English” act would convince them he was on the job. He got out a different broom from his cart.

“Can’t you do another floor?”

“Got orders.” Connor swept in front of the office, putting himself between these men and Gwen. They looked at him for a few moments and, realizing he was going to keep cleaning, slowly pushed off. He watched until they rounded the corner then went into the office.

Gwen looked at him, eyes wide. “Company?”

“Could be. They look wrong but they turned around,” Connor said. “Safe still not open?”

“I was just about to come get you. The electronic locks are toast but I think it must have a magical lock I can’t open.”

Connor pursed his lips. “This is going to be noisy and might just set off that magical alarm.” He slammed a fist through the wall, gritting his teeth against the pain as he pierced plaster, wood and metal. The safe breached under the force of his hand. He pulled his bloody appendage back out then used the hole as a starting point to peel it all the way open. “Man, look at this stuff.” Connor eyed a jeweled dagger in the safe.

“Try not to get too excited.” Gwen grinned, patting his crotch.

He scowled at her and pulled out the stone. “I can dream a little.”
“In this place, that dagger is just as likely to bite off your hand as anything else.” She plucked the stone out of his hands. “Not very impressive is it?”

“Feels tingly,” Connor replied.

“Really? I don’t feel it.” Gwen froze, her eyes, now a pretty slate grey, widened. They heard voices in the hallway.

“Sorry, boss, how was I to know you wanted that thing in the safe?” a woman asked.

“Because I told you about a dozen times,” a man grumbled.

They were inside the office before Connor and Gwen could move. Connor stared at them. The man was tall and broad shouldered with a heavy brow. He smelled slightly of beer and the woman of something sweet and rummy. Connor remembered seeing the man before when his parents brought him to this place. The blonde with him, he thought he might have seen or not. He couldn’t remember clearly. For a moment they all just stood frozen, staring.


“Angel,” Gwen said, and Connor looked at her, wondering why she hadn’t mentioned knowing him. She had said she had worked for Wolfram and Hart before the man had taken over.

Connor didn’t miss that the man barely registered Gwen had spoken to him. Angel’s dark eyes remained fixed on him. Connor leapt on the desk using it as a launch pad to kick the man in the face. Guilt washed over Connor, feeling something snapping under his foot. Angel seemed too stunned to defend himself, resulting in him nursing a nose that was gushing blood from the kick.

Gwen lateraled the stone to Connor then zapped the blonde. Her face morphed as she went down, a vampire. If he wasn’t more interested in getting the Alatyr out of the complex, he’d stake her on principle.

He and Gwen pounded up the corridor, right past the two men who had been harassing him earlier. Connor didn’t bother with the elevator. He burst through the fire door into the stair well. He looked over the railing. It was a long drop but it was a straight shot to the ground floor. He hunched down. “Get on, baby.”

Gwen locked her arms and legs over his back. He went over the bannister. Gwen’s limbs tightened as they free fell. Connor’s knees flexed, taking off the pressure of the landing. Still, it felt like his head was going to pop off. He stumbled a bit and Gwen slithered free. They bolted to the outside.

Gwen selected the first car with electronic door locks. She touched it with an elbow, fritzing the locks and jumpstarting the car. They both pulled on gloves and blue paper surgical caps. It would minimize any stray hairs being left behind. They put on baseball caps to hide the unusual, eye-catching surgical caps.

Connor pulled out casually. No sense in tearing away and speeding, looking guilty. Just in case they were being followed, he took a long circuitous route before finally going to their escape car. He hadn’t noticed anyone in the rear view. They got into their car, a plain white Civic, something bound not to garner any attention. He had a collection of muscle cars and motorcycles but he’d never take anything flashy on a job, too easily spotted.

It wasn’t until they were heading back to Malibu that they spoke. “That was too damn close,” Gwen said, her voice sounding still flushed with excitement. Her tanned face all but glowed with it.

“We’re going to have to pass the Alatyr off fast and go out of town for a little while.”
“That sounds like a good idea,” Gwen replied.

“I didn’t realize that you knew the guy,” Connor said, trying to sound casual. He wasn’t jealous but he was curious, a true failing of his.

“I’ve only worked with him twice...well, once.” Gwen looked a little evasive. “He interrupted a job the first time. The second time we worked together, not much to tell only that he’s a vampire.”

Connor resisted the urge to slam on the brakes. “You didn’t think that was important to tell me?”

“I didn’t think that he’d show up. Besides, I’ve seen you handle vampires like they were nothing. I wasn’t worried.” Gwen pouted at his tone. “Besides, believe it or not, Angel’s one of the good guys, better than us.”

“Don’t believe it,” he replied, feeling oddly comforted by the fact Gwen wasn’t put out about screwing over a good guy because if she had been, he’d have to wonder. To her, it was about the objects they were stealing and not the shade of grey the owner was. They were both of the belief no one possessing the high level items there were after were saints. Learning that Angel was a vampire made him feel a lot better about the assignment. Once Gwen had opened him up to the world of demons, he had only found three that he didn’t want instantly dead. Not a single vampire had made that list. “Still, you should have told me about Angel.”

She patted his thigh. “You’re completely right. It was dumb and dangerous. You were just a little uneasy as it was about this job. We should have let this one slide.”

“Too late for that. Can’t worry about it now. Vampires can’t get in without an invite. I can’t imagine either of us just asking him in for a beer,” he scoffed.

Her lips pulled into a smile. “We’ll be fine.”

Connor nodded but the uneasy feeling wouldn’t go away. He let Gwen stow the item in their bedroom safe but he didn’t do his usual routine of either a night time swim in their bluff side infinity pool nor take the private walk to the beach. He didn’t want to be outside just in case he had somehow missed the vampire following him up the Pacific Coast Highway. Connor knew that kick to the face, even if he broke the creature’s big broad beak of a nose, would hardly faze it. They were lucky to have gotten out of Wolfram and Hart.

Gwen seemed to sense his unease as they tumbled into bed. Their normal celebratory lovemaking could wait until tomorrow. Maybe by then they wouldn’t be jumpy. His wife snuggled into his side and was quickly asleep. Connor, having left the curtains open, stared out the magnificent master bedroom window at the panorama of the ocean below. Even the soft susurrus of the waves couldn’t lull him to sleep.

X X X

“Now what?” Ethan asked his hat-wearing companion as they tried to nonchalantly meander out of the building. Ethan’s heart still thudded. He could have sworn the bloodied-nosed vampire had seen him. That would end the game real quick. Angel was no more likely to have forgotten him than he had the vampire.

“You got that tracking spell on them?” Kippendragr rumbled in his Barry White bass timbre.

“On the girl...I think.” Ethan’s lips twisted into a scowl. “They were moving pretty fast.”

“You’d be moving fast, too, if you’d just pissed of a pair of vampires,” Kippendragr rumbled with
something that might have been a laugh.

“Yeah, well, if Angel saw me we ought to hurry, too.” Ethan cast a glance over his shoulder just in case as he got into their car.

“You should hurry. Vampires don’t like how my kind tastes.” Kippendragr shrugged.

Ethan looked at the demon sourly, figuring that was true. It was a long confusing drive but eventually Ethan tracked the pair to Malibu. He grinned. “I could get used to living like this. Think I’ve got a shot with her?” He leered.

“Not a prayer.” Kippendragr took off his hat, revealing ridges of blue horn. He pulled on one of them out of nervous habit.

“We can’t just wander in there without a plan,” Ethan said. “This whole area screams security and that pair would have to be even better guarded than most.”

“Agreed. Tomorrow then.”

Ethan wheeled their car away before some nosy security guard drove up on them. This wasn’t going to be easy, which bothered him. He liked easy, but he knew when he was hired to steal the Alatyr this would be a difficult task. He just wished he had known there would be other foxes in the hen house.

X X X

“Are you sure it was Gwen?” Gunn stalked around Angel’s office, unhappy with that idea.

“Positive.”
“My hair’s still standing on end,” Harmony moaned.

“She did this?” Kate jerked a thumb at the hole in the wall.

“I’m not sure,” Angel said, unable to sound convincing. He knew exactly who had done it. He wasn’t ready to admit to himself that his son was a thief.

“I’m betting it was her partner,” Harmony said. “Look what he did to Angel’s face.”

“And here I was thinking Harm had gotten a little too rough.” Spike snorted, lighting up.

“Eww, I’d never, not with Angel,” Harmony squealed then off Angel’s slightly hurt look added, “He’s the boss.”

“I knew we should have just turned over the Alatyr immediately,” Wes said. “If the Watchers had it....”

“So it’s our fault it’s stolen?” Gunn snapped.

“Not saying that,” Wes scratched at his stubbly beard. “At least we’re well suited to finding it.”

Gunn shook his head with a soft laugh. “That damn Gwen. She’s something else. Wish I had been here. Maybe I could have talked her out of it.”

“So what did she take that’s got everyone’s knickers in a twist?” Spike asked.
“A healing omphalos,” Wes said, and Spike just raised an eyebrow.
“A magic rock,” Angel clarified.

“What’s it with you and rocks?” Spike took a drag. “Last time you cracked one open, Acathla popped out.”

“This is nothing like that,” Angel said, annoyed that Spike would bring that up.

“Thanks for stating the bloody obvious. I didn’t think you had Acathla shoved in a wall safe.”

“Spike, you’re not involved in this so why don’t you push off,” Angel grumbled. “We’re not going to find the Alatyr just sitting here.”

“You have a suggestion?” Kate asked.

“Let me see if I can follow their scent.” Angel got up. “Kate, get me all the security tapes. I need to see if I’m crazy.”

“Waste of time,” Spike said. “We know you are.”

Angel ignored him. Seeing his son working with Gwen wasn’t the only shock he had received tonight. “I thought I saw Ethan Rayne in the hallway but I can’t remember his scent clearly enough to be sure.”

Spike’s eyebrows cocked up. “Rupert’s mate? The one that turned him into a Fryal demon?”

“He did?” Angel added that to the stunned column. “Sounds like something he’d do. I need to know if he really was here, Kate, because that would be place to start looking for the Alatyr.” Angel wasn’t really sure about that. Gwen and Connor had run right past the man he thought might be Ethan. It could be Ethan had hired them or else it was a massive and unsettling coincidence. News they had the Alatyr might be drawing thieves from all over.

“I’ll get the tapes. If you’re going out to sniff around, Angel, you might want to do it before the city makes enough stink to cover up your leads,” Kate said.

“Good point. Look for a tall scrawny guy with a short guy in a cowboy hat on those tapes.”

“Lindsey?” Gunn asked.

Angel shook his head. “I know his scent well, not him. This guy wasn’t human, didn’t smell right.”

“Am I the only one who’s creeped out about the whole smell thing?” Gunn made a face.

“I try not to think hard on it,” Wes replied. “But it doesn’t help when Angel asks about my dates when he has no reason to know I even had a date.”

“Sorry, I forget,” Angel muttered, heading out the door. He honestly did forget sometimes and he was trying hard to be more social. Spike was just better at it than he was.

Gunn followed him. “Wes can help Kate.”

“Need another nose on the case?” Spike leaned out the door. “I got a whiff of them from the safe. She smells tasty.”

“Why not?” Angel said as Gunn grimaced at the comment. Angel would rather have Spike where he could see him. He didn’t want Spike after the Alatyr on his own or following Connor. Not that Spike
would have the first clue as to the young man’s true importance.

Angel couldn’t remember being as disappointed as he was trying to follow his son’s trail. The path kept doubling back on itself, obviously designed to confuse anyone trying to track him. The scent was eventually swallowed by the overwhelming scents of L.A., choked with exhaust and human effluvia. He had only seen his son once since the night the spell had been wrought. It was part of the agreement and the one time Connor’s ersatz parents brought him to Wolfram and Hart Angel had sent them away. It had been too painful.

It had been killing him for years, the not knowing Connor’s fate, hoping for the best. He almost felt like the parent of a kidnapped child all over again, or maybe, more appropriately, one who had given his child up for adoption and now, later in life, wanted a reconnection. He would never have dreamed Connor had somehow hooked up with Gwen, that he had been dragged back into the world of demons. Angel knew Gwen dealt with demons and worse. Even if she didn’t, they were obviously thieves. That wasn’t the life he wanted for his son.

Spike broke Angel out of his reverie when he dialed up Kate. “Yeah, we crapped out...yeah, I’ll tell him, hang on.” Spike looked at Angel. “Kate suggests going to Lorne’s and seeing if he can pick something out of the ether for you. She got your two guys on the tapes but not the kid who used your face for a kick ball or his partner. The tapes are blank, even in places that we know they were.”

“Tell her and Wes to meet us there,” Angel said, unsure of himself. What if Lorne saw something about Connor and told them all? Still, if he didn’t extend the offer they would think it odd. It was something they had been working on, team work versus acting as an individual. He wanted to talk to Kate as soon as he could. How could his son not be on the tapes? He had been counting on that, if for no other reason than to keep them for himself, playing the snippets again and again in the privacy of his suites.

“I want to know how they knew we had the Alatyr,” Gunn said as he drove for Lorne’s club. “We only got it five days ago.”

“That’s something to look into,” Angel said. “Either someone was watching the estate and knew Mr. Leib had it or we have a leak.”

“Who knew about the bloody stone at work? You didn’t even tell me,” Spike said, miffed.

“There was no reason to. You’re not exactly into estate law,” Angel said and Spike gave him a ‘that’s hardly the point’ look. Angel let the matter drop. He wished that he had a better feeling about this.

Wes and Kate were already waiting for them at a table. As per usual, the bar was choked with people. Angel hated it. Could he get Wes or Gunn to sing? They had a tie to the Alatyr, too. His tie was stronger and he knew it. He needed to sing and hang the embarrassment.

“Don’t let me sing too long,” he whispered to Lorne as he headed for the stage. He had given a lot of thought to what he was going to sing. He had mangled enough of Barry’s songs for one lifetime and while a song from his homeland was knocking around in his head there was no accompaniment for “Who Put the Blood.” His singing was bad enough. He didn’t need to be singing a song meant for a mother unaccompanied. He settled on Harry Chapin’s “Cats in the Cradle.” He felt it had a very good tie-in to him and Connor. Lorne didn’t stop him, letting him sing to the bitter, off-key, getting pitying looks from the audience end.

“And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me
He’d grown up just like me
My boy was just like me
And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man on the moon
When you coming home son, I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, dad
We're gonna have a good time then.”

Angel dragged back to his table. He could tell from the look on Lorne’s face the demon had gotten a good reading. “Well?”

“That was an interesting choice of songs, Angel- Cakes,” Lorne said, a curious look in his odd colored eyes.

“Yeah and it’s amazing how tone deaf you are,” Spike rubbed an ear. “People were fleeing in terror.”

Angel gave him the hairy eye but said nothing. “Lorne, got a place I can start looking?”

“Yes, and I wish I were going with you. Why don’t I ever get this kind of assignment?” Lorne’s eyes bore into Angel. “But there’s something else, a big shadow over you, so big its spilling all over the rest of us.”

“That’s his singing,” Spike said, smirking

Lorne shook his head. “I wish it were. No, there is something ugly bubbling here just under the surface, a secret.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” Angel cut him off quickly, schooling the panic out of his voice. “And you haven’t told me where I’m supposed to be looking.”

“Malibu,” Lorne said. “Maybe you need to sing a little more, as loathe as I am to suggest that, let me see if I can get a handle on this personal darkness.”

Angel shook his head. “No time to worry about my dark shadows. We need to get that stone back. Guess we’ll have to work out a plan, see if we can sniff them out in Malibu.”

“I’m on this team,” Gunn said, hurriedly. “Always wanted to hang out there.”

“Unfortunately, it’ll have to wait,” Wes said. “It’s nearly dawn. That takes Angel and Spike out of the picture.”

“We all need some rest,” Kate said. “Angel, I’ll set you up with the tapes and Wes and I can do some research on Gwen and her partner.”

“I can help. I’ve worked with Gwen,” Gunn said.

“Fine. Did you get a name for Gwen’s partner?” Kate asked.

“No,” Angel lied. He hurried them out of Lorne’s club before the demon could get back to worrying about that shadow. Angel knew in his heart Lorne was seeing Connor. He should never have picked a song that would deepen his feeling about his son but he thought it was necessary if Lorne was to have a prayer of homing in on the duo. He answered a few more of Kate’s questions on the way but all he was thinking about was, what was his son doing in Malibu?
Chapter 4

Chapter Four – Bolero & Plastic Wrap

His body slicked with sweat, Connor cut through a wave. He usually ran in the pre-dawn hours but last night had unsettled him. Sleep had been hard to find and he had finally dropped off near his usual running time. Later in the day, Gwen had talked him into a little R&R on the beach. Their buyer wouldn’t talk to them about transferring the Alatyr until the evening hours for security reasons on her end.

Connor and Gwen’s ideas of R&R didn’t always jive. She stretched out on the sand with the latest Denise Hamilton book while he pounded up the beach. He ran for miles out and back. Sweat poured from his body. He had powered through his sports drink, tossing the bottle in a recycling bin and kept running, trying to burn out his unease. He ended the run with a dunking in the ocean, after leaving his shoes and iPod with Gwen. He should have brought a body board, leaving it with her while he ran. His mind was obviously not in the game. He body surfed a little, his brain still mulling their near capture. Afterwards, he slogged up to where Gwen was reading, sand sticking to his feet. He flopped down onto his towel, face down.

She ran a finger along his wet spine. “No guppies this time?”

He eyed her sourly. “You promised never to bring that up.”

Grinning, Gwen shoved a long strand of her hair back. “Sorry, love. It was just too funny. I thought a shark had you the way you were dancing around.”

“Let’s see how brave you are when a fish swims up your suit,” he grumbled.

“It was guppy no bigger than my pinkie.” She wiggled the digit for emphasis.

He pouted, thinking she looked utterly delicious in her electric blue bikini. “Why are you picking on me?”

“You get so cute when you’re all hurt and pouty.” She flicked his bottom lip.

He reached over, pulling her to him. He kissed her. “My wife is evil.”

“Don’t ever forget that.” She smiled but then it faded. “You look so unhappy. What’s wrong?”

Connor hiked up on one arm. “This isn’t the place to talk about it.”

Gwen canted her head back, her gaze going to the top of the bluffs where their house reigned like the castles of old. “I think I’ve done enough damage to my skin for one day.”

Connor nodded and helped her pack everything up their private walkway to the house. They both showered off in the pool house so sand and ocean water wouldn’t touch the teak floors of the mansion.

“This is about last night,” Gwen said, sitting on the leather couch with him. Their Irish Wolfhounds came over and collapsed at their feet.

“We almost got caught.”

“You’re being over-dramatic. We weren’t in any trouble.” Gwen stroked hair out of his eyes.
He caught her hands. “Two people just saw us in the middle of a robbery.”

She pulled free. “Two vampires, they can’t exactly go to the authorities.”

“The vampire runs a huge law firm. I wouldn’t be so sure.” Connor said, sternly. “Not to mention those two men in the hallway. I’m not sure one was even human. Tell me that was normal.”

“What am I hearing here?” Gwen got up, nearly tripping over the dogs.

“Maybe we should take some time off. We don’t need any more money. We could take the dogs and travel,” Connor suggested.

“What?” Her lips thinned. “You want to act like we’re a couple of snow birds?”

Connor’s eyes narrowed, his body stiffening. Gwen was taking it worse than he had imagined. “No, just that we’re taking a lot of risks we don’t need to. I know this is my fault. I chose the assignment. There is no need for us to be doing something this high risk. We could stick to art and other stuff, lower risk, almost as profitable. We can afford to take some time off, pursue other interests.”

“Do you even have other interests?” Her words knifed into him. “Where is this coming from? I’ve never seen you this...well, you’re acting like an old woman.”

Connor got up and took her hands. “Have you ever gotten the feeling like you can see doom staring you in the face? That old cliché about someone walking over your grave. I’m feeling it.”

Gwen felt his hands shaking. Her face softened. “Baby, oh, baby, you’re rattled. I didn’t realize...you’re serious about this. Okay, we can take a break, go anywhere you want. Diane will take the dogs if we want to go out of the county. We can go on that camping trip in Sweden, stay in that ice hotel like you wanted.”

“You never want to do that,” he said, suspiciously.

Gwen wrapped her arms around him. “That’s because the hotel is made of ice and you have to sleep under reindeer skins or some such nonsense. You have to be a little crazy to want to stay there.” She kissed his cheek. “But since you are a little crazy, I guess that fits.”

“Thanks, I think.” He embraced her tight. “Are you serious about the ice hotel?”

She buried her face against his shoulder. “Oh no, I got the wheels turning. I’m going to be up to my ass in snow.”

“Well, not until next winter at any rate.” He grinned. “I’ll be just as happy to dump the Alatyr off, give Di the dogs and you and I can take a week in Hawaii or anywhere you want to go.

“So long as I agree to the ice hotel this winter.” She reached down, squeezing his butt.

“We can even start in Norway and dog sled to the ice hotel. It takes eight days.” His blue eyes lit up. Her fingers brushed over his head. “I could have sworn you kicked Angel in the head, not the other way around. Did you hit it on the way over the stairwell?”

His eyes slotted as he kissed her forehead. “I did not hit my head.”

“You must have if you think I’m dog sledding across two frigid countries.” She kissed him more deeply.
“Give it a chance.” He sucked at her tongue. “The hotel has a spa and bar.”

“You have your little heart set on this.” Gwen brushed her lips against his prominent Adam’s apple then nibbled his ear lobe. “How about this for tonight’s game after we get ready to make the delivery.” She whispered her idea for their new sexual game into his ear.

He cocked his head, staring into her kaleidoscope eyes. “That’s a little bizarre but okay.”

She tapped his nose. “No more bizarre than your ice hotel. I can only imagine what you’ll want to do in the ice.”

“You’ll enjoy it,” he promised.

She slapped his backside. “Uh-huh. I’ll get ready for tonight.”

“Do that. I’m going to do more checking on Angel.”

“You’re not going to just let it drop.” She sighed.

“I’m fairly sure that Angel’s not going to let this go.”

Gwen’s lips pursed. “You could be right.”

Connor researched various references, starting with Wolfram and Hart’s corporate site then branching into news clips and TV spots. There was something familiar about the vampire’s heavy brow and intense eyes. Connor had no idea why. He had only met the man once previously, and he couldn’t imagine that single negative experience would have imprinted on him so deeply. Despite all his notes and contemplation, he was no closer to understanding the man or why he felt so terribly familiar. Finally Gwen dragged him away from the computer so she could make delivery arrangements with their employer.

They headed to the Paradise Cove, famous for being the bar in The Rockford Files, and had some Bloody Mary’s on the beach before the celebratory games began. Connortook a long swallow of his cocktail with extra tabasco. “Las Vegas.”

“I’m not thrilled to be driving with that thing though the desert for nearly five hours,” Gwen said.

“I’d drive to Kansas to drop that damn thing off,” Connor replied, the vodka and acid of the drink burning through his system.

Gwen trailed her fingers up the inside of his thigh. “I know. Are you ready to head back?”

“Yeah, before I can’t walk, which is likely if you keep doing that.” He grabbed her fingers, bringing them up to his lips.

“Well then, what are we waiting for?”

X X X

“I will see your boss so you might as well have him come out here.” Andrew leaned on Harmony’s desk, trying his best intimidating posture.

Harmony rolled her eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you Angel isn’t in? Acting all high and mighty isn’t going to make him suddenly appear. And you might want to take your hands off my desk before I forget I’ve sworn off human blood.” Harmony’s face morphed, looking totally out of sync with her pretty in pink ensemble.
“I know well how to handle vampires,” Andrew assured her.

“Fine.” Harmony thumbed a button under her desk. “Tell it to security.”

Angel and Spike walked in with Kate before security could arrive. Angel looked at Andrew then over to Harmony. “Problems, Harmony?”

“Nothing security can’t handle,” the blonde said.

“I’ll deal with it,” Angel said and Kate called off her security team. “Andrew, it’s hard to maintain civil ties with the Watchers when you just pop in and try to strong arm people. Now I’ve five minutes available so why don’t you hurry up and tell me what your problem is this time.” Angel went into his office without waiting for an answer.

Andrew looked momentarily stunned then followed the vampire. He tried to get himself together. “I’m here for the Alatyr.”

“Really?” Angel sat down as if totally unimpressed by his visitor.

“An operative told the Watchers that the Alatyr passed to this law firm upon the death of Mr. Leib. I’m here to collect it.”

“Just like that?” Angel tried not to smile but he couldn’t help it.

“It doesn’t belong in the hands of a place like this...with vampires,” Andrew said.

“And you thought they’d just turn it over on your say so?” Kate asked. “What if they, the legal owners, refused?”

“Refusal isn’t an option,” Andrew replied, keeping his eyes on Angel as if Kate wasn’t of concern.

“So? You planned on stealing it?” Kate pressed into his space, her eyes hard and flaring. Andrew was forced to look at her. “From a law firm? Do you know how long you can go to jail for, for grand theft? I’m no longer L.A.P.D. but I have contacts there who would be glad to have a nice solid case dropped on their doorstep, and this firm would make sure the prosecutor pushed for the max. How long do you think you’d last in prison? I wouldn’t bet on you lasting a half hour before someone laid you out or laid you down. Now I’ll ask this only once, what do you think you were trying to do stealing from us?”

Andrew’s mouth flopped wordlessly. He hadn’t expected any real confrontations, realizing he should have put more thought into his plan.

“I see why you wanted her around,” Spike said, “She has style.”

“Oh, yes.” Angel looked at Kate proudly. “And Andrew, if you even had the skills to take the Alatyr, you’re a day late. It was stolen yesterday by a professional thief.”

Andrew snorted. “You expect me to believe that.”

Angel kicked away from his desk in his expensive chair, gesturing at the gaping hole in the wall.

“And Angel didn’t just lose his temper and kill a wall, Andrew,” Spike said. “He walked in on a burglary.”

“You’re just lucky you’re here now braying for the item or you might have ended up a top suspect,” Kate said.
“You can’t be serious,” Andrew said, waving her off dismissively.

“Angel, I just spoke to...” Wes said, coming into the office. He stopped, staring at Andrew.

“Pryce, they’re telling me that the Alatyr was stolen. The Council is very interested in having that item and surely you have enough collegiate feelings for your old team to end this nonsense now.” Andrew stalked up to Wesley.

“It’s Wyndham-Pryce,” Wesley said coldly then turned his attention away from Andrew. “Angel, I just finished speaking to Giles like you suggested.” Wes’ blue eyes stabbed back at Andrew for a moment to make his point. “He’s aware that the Alatyr has been stolen. He said that there has been some ecological disturbances that date back to when the Alatyr first left Booyan Island. He’d like to return the omphalos to what is ostensibly the ‘world tree’ once it’s back in our possession.”

“And if we can find Gwen and her accomplice, we’ll help Giles do this,” Angel said.

“Oh, and Andrew, you might want to check in with Giles. Xander filled him in on you taking some initiative and well...” Wes made a face of disdain. “Let’s just say it wasn’t the initiative he wanted anyone taking.”

Andrew looked like he was about to protest but Angel cut in. “Wes, you, Spike, Gunn and I will head to the beach to see if we can retrieve the Alatyr. Kate, I don’t want you involved in this venture. Did you find out anything about Gwen?”

“Not under the name you gave me but if she is as successful at this as you’ve said, I’m not surprised. Wesley, give me Giles’ number, and I’ll discuss the best way of handling the Alatyr once we retrieve it...unless we had other ideas for it.” Kate looked at Angel.

The vampire shrugged. “I know that Gunn had ideas for it. We’ll discuss that once we have it back.”

“I’m going with you,” Andrew insisted.

“I don’t think so,” Angel said, folding his arms.

“We Watchers have a stake in this,” Andrew protested.

“No, you have nothing. If I decide to cooperate with Giles I will, directly. If I decide to keep the Alatyr, I will since we are the rightful owners of it. If I decide to chuck the thing in the ocean, there’s nothing you can do about it,” Angel said.

Andrew looked to Spike for support. “But Giles...”

“Isn’t in charge here. I’m not having you coming along,” Angel said.

“This is what I do now,” Andrew said, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Yes, and last time you were here you handled the situation so well Spike got his arms cut off,” Angel reminded him and Andrew shrank.

“You do have a tendency to chatter the entire time, Andrew,” Spike said. “We’re trying to break into a well-guarded residence. We can’t roam around Malibu with you jabbering.”

Andrew looked particularly hurt at Spike’s rejection. “Fine. I need to talk to Giles.” He stalked out of the room.

“That was way too easy,” Spike said, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.
“You know him best. I’ll take your word for it.” Angel got up. “Kate, let’s be sure we have a more secure place to put the Alatyr if we get it back.”

“Will do, Angel,” she said.

Angel led the way to the underground garage. Gunn was already waiting for him with a redone police interceptor. The plain blue car had a monster engine under the hood in case they needed it and enough room for all four men to pile in. Angel had only gotten a few blocks when he noticed something in the rear view. “I think Andrew’s actually following us.”

“Maybe he is getting better at this.” Spike twisted in the seat to look. “So, do we just let him sit back there?”

“We don’t even know where we’re actually going,” Wesley said. “All we know is Malibu and then we’re going to trust your noses to lead us to Gwen and her accomplice. It’ll be bad enough for our car to be driving around aimlessly.”

“He’s in a rented Cavalier,” Gunn said, looking out the rear window. “In that area, the cops will pick him off as being very wrong for the area profile. I wouldn’t waste time worrying about him.”

“Gunn’s right. It’ll just make a scene. I’m impressed that he actually thought to try this. And if he gets in the way later, I’ll just tell Giles the thieves got him.” Angel smirked.

X X X

Ethan looked at the Malibu palace, hoping the spell he had just cast had disabled the alarms. “Do you think they’re in there?”

“Who the hell can tell? Did you see that garage full of cars?” Kippendragr said then sneezed loudly several times.

“Are you done or should we alert them some more?” Ethan curled his fingers into fists, not that he’d actually hit the demon. Kippendragr could crush his skull with one blow.

“Do they have dogs?” The demon sniffled. “I’m allergic. Badly.”

“You couldn’t think of that before now?” Ethan eyed him sourly.

“They travel a lot, if this is the pair of thieves you think they are. I didn’t think they’d have guard dogs,” Kippendragr grumbled. “My kind can’t handle dogs.”

“Stay here and guard the door then,” Ethan tugged at the bright coppery wig on his head. He wasn’t wearing much of a disguise. In a case like this, more wasn’t necessarily better. He didn’t want to bring too much attention to himself but he wanted the attention to be on the hair and not his face. His outfit was security blue.

He cast an unlocking spell then looked back at Kippendragr and whispered, “Alohamora.”

“Just get inside, Potter,” the demon grumped, catching the joke.

Snorting, Ethan went in and found himself faced with four enormous dogs, all of them waist-high to him. He already had a sleep spell ready for them, thanks to Kippendragr’s allergies and cast it. He froze as a hundred of pounds of dog hit the marble foyer. No one seemed to notice. The pounding sounds of Ravel’s Bolero poured out of a room deeper in the house. He almost couldn’t pick out the feminine cries of pleasure over the musical strains. He wagged his head. It was such a stereotypical
make out music that it was almost tawdry. Still, it was a good sound. It meant that his marks were occupied.

He took out an oak leaf, prepared earlier for the spell’s final command, from his pocket and whispered to it, “Find.” The leaf levitated off his hand and began to float through the house. It took him past a spacious game room. He caught a glimpse of the pair and hurried past. She was a gorgeous creature. He wanted her.

Ethan put that out of mind and followed the leaf into the bedroom. It hovered in front of a print of Rene Magritte’s The Surprise Answer. Maybe it wasn’t a print given the surroundings. It wasn’t something Ethan wanted on his bedroom wall. It was creepy, just a wooden door with a shrouded vaguely human shape torn out of it, revealing shades beyond and just the slightest hint there was something evil waiting there.

He took the painting down, revealing the safe. He was almost sad that it had such a trite hiding spot. He started to try and open it when movement out of the corner of his eye stopped him. His body went cold, drenched with sweat. He backed away, more afraid than he ever remembered being. There was a demon in the room with him, coming for him. Was it Eyghon? He knew Ripper had destroyed the demon, or at least delayed it long enough for Ethan to escape.

He didn’t wait to find out if it was Eyghon or another demon. He scooted out of the building, trying not to make any sounds. As he threw open the front door he found himself staring at three men, including Angel. Where the hell was Kippendragr? Couldn’t the demon do anything right?

Ethan swallowed hard then said softly. “Can I help you?”

“We got a call about the security system,” another Brit said.

“I’m the caretaker. Come on in and see if you can fix the system while I check out the pool. I haven’t seen anyone prowling about though,” Ethan said.

He tried not to look at Angel as the trio came in. He walked as casually as he could past them then headed for his car. “Kippendragr,” he hissed and the demon melted out of the shadows. “Where the hell were you?”

“I heard a car. I thought it was the thieves coming home,” Kippendragr said, tugging on his ridge of horns.

Ethan curled a lip at him. “Tell me again why I’m working with you?”

“I’m paying you. My tribe wants the Alatyr. Where is it?”

“I didn’t get it. It had a demon guardian. I wasn’t prepared for that and now Angel and company are inside.” Ethan sighed.

“Now what?” the demon asked.

“Get in the car and we wait. If we’re lucky, Angel will steal it and we can steal it back from him,” Ethan said with a wary smile.

X X X

“Well, that was lucky,” Wes whispered, “Him inviting you in. Saves us the trouble.”

“This is luckier.” Gunn pointed to the sleeping dogs.
Angel sniffed. “That was Ethan Rayne.”

“Who?” Gunn asked.

“Are you sure?” Wes asked.

He nodded. “Gunn, Spike, follow him. He might already have the Alatyr. Spike, you know what Rayne’s capable of. Wes, you get my back.”

Angel followed his nose through the house, tracking Ethan past the game room where he almost got himself caught. He couldn’t help stopping and looking. He had heard the sex sounds but he wasn’t prepared for what he saw, nor for Wes mouthing something that looked like ‘looks like fun.’ Angel wasn’t sure he agreed. How had his son gotten so strange?

He ended up in the bedroom and saw the safe in the wall. He tried to push what he had just seen out of mind. He knew that was not the intended use of Ravel’s Bolero nor plastic wrap. What had his son gotten into? Angel nearly kicked into the Magritte picture. He stared at the creepy thing. He preferred Magritte’s surreal pictures with things that floated.

As Angel reached for the safe, his stomach roiled. He tasted the wet penny flavor of blood as his last meal tried to come back on him, odd for a vampire. He was suddenly so afraid, his hands shook. He heard something soft behind him scurrying away. He turned and Wes was gone. Angel looked back at the safe and before him the dead had risen. Hundreds of them suddenly filled the room, all the people he had ever killed. Standing just in front of him were Buffy, Cordelia, Darla and Connor, their flesh rotting, maggots falling like snow to the carpeting. Buffy moved her head and bees pushed out of the opening that had once been her sweet mouth. Rusty fluid leaked from Cordelia’s eyes and his son’s neck gaped open where Angel had once slit it wide before handing the boy to Wolfram and Hart to fix.

Angel stumbled back from the safe. He rubbed his eyes hard, too hard. They hurt but the pain was good. It helped him focus his thoughts. His son wasn’t dead. He was in the other room being ridden hard by Gwen. Buffy was alive in Europe. “A spell,” he rasped out. It was some kind of fear spell to keep him from the safe. Angel pressed the gizmo Wes had given him to the safe and it ran the electronic lock. He knew that was the kind Gwen would have since she could lock and unlock it just by waving her hand at it. The safe opened and he was stunned at what he saw inside. It was hard not to pick up a few of the more beautiful items of jewelry - as if he had someone to give them to - but he refrained and snatched up the Alatyr.

Wes ran into him just outside the game room. Angel tried to hustle him away from the opening even if the lovers were far too involved with each other to notice the nearly silent intruders. Wes’ eyes were huge. He was pointing behind him. “We have a problem.”

The barking explained Wes’ cryptic statement. Angel winced. The dogs had reawakened and were coming for them. Gwen cried out, seeing them standing there, then she was off her bound lover and after them.

“Run!” Angel said, shoving Wes. “Don’t let her touch you.”

Angel booted two of the giant wolfhounds, cramming the Alatyr in Wes’ hands. One dog got Angel by the arm. He hated flinging the beast across the room. Gwen was on him in an instant. The electric shock sent him sprawling. She stalked over to him, naked, tan and covered with sweat and the smell of his son. That last thing was the only thing that took away his focus on how beautiful she was. Angel managed to get up, belting her one. She crashed through a glass topped table between the leather couches. He turned and ran, hearing the breaking of metal. Connor must have torn through
the brass railing around the bar Gwen had him tied down to in the other room.

Angel didn’t stop to find out, slamming the door behind him to keep the dogs off his heels. They had what they had come for. Gunn and Wes were already in the car. He jumped in as it was rolling. Spike tromped the accelerator and they peeled out, the trunk of the car nearly getting nailed by what looked like lightning.

“That was close,” Gunn said.

“Did you find Ethan?” Angel asked, trying not to feel too triumphant at stealing the Alatyr back. He knew this wouldn’t be an end to it. Surely Gwen and Connor would try again. He knew if he were them he would.

“Slippery bastard got away. He had a car waiting,” Spike said.

“The important thing is we have the Alatyr,” Wes said, examining the stone in the dome light of the car. “You didn’t kill anyone did you, Angel?”

“No, well, maybe a dog. Gwen almost fried us there. Her accomplice never managed to join in the fight. Let’s get this home.”

“I’ll call Kate,” Wes said.

Angel nodded.

X X X

Connor didn’t like having the music up so loud because it interfered with his hearing, but on truly adventurous nights they tended to get noisy. Last summer one of their neighbors had made a smarmy joke about it. That was the problem with Malibu, no privacy. Let them snicker about Ravel.

He wasn’t sure he liked this game. Connor didn’t mind being tied up a little. He had no problems with Gwen tying him to the brass railing of their bar top. The old wood of the restored Irish bar was cold on his backside but that was a fun new sensation. It was the total mummification with plastic wrap he wasn’t sure he liked. The only parts of him not encased in blue plastic wrap was his head and crotch. He liked making Gwen happy. He enjoyed pleasuring her any way he could. He felt helpless to do that in this condition.

Her hands tingled over his cock as she sat on his belly, stroking him. It was almost enough to take his mind off the oddness of being a mummy. They were very open with each other. If they didn’t like a game, they’d talk it out and usually never did it again. He was thinking this might be one of those times. Connor turned his head, straining to hear over Bolero. “Did you hear that?”

“Probably just the hounds playing,” she replied distractedly.

He nodded. If it was an intruder, the dogs would be barking. Gwen leaned over him, bringing her breasts into play. She was in total control, leading him to the parts of her she wanted touched. He didn’t mind that. He sucked and licked her warm nipples as she brought them to his lips. For a moment, he could have sworn someone was in the doorway but when he took his mind off Gwen, briefly, no one was there.

Gwen changed the game again, offering him her warm, moist folds as she lay over him. She sucked his penis into her mouth, her teeth lightly scraping over him. He moaned as she worked then tried his best to pleasure her. He was at the wrong angle to do it well and couldn’t move to alleviate that. He paused in his slow licking, thinking he heard voices but then there were no sounds. Definitely this
game was going in the not-again file. He was too distracted.

He let go of the worries as Gwen mounted him, taking him inside ever so slowly. Her little inner muscles worked him gently while she barely moved. She merely smiled down at him. The kabazzah was a talent highly prized by the men Geisha served. He could see why. It was deeper, more touching to just have her looking down on him lovingly than it was to have her thrashing wildly on top of him.

His climax was aborted by the sudden barking of the dogs. Both his and Gwen’s heads snapped over to the door and standing there was Angel and another man that Connor didn’t know. Gwen was off of him racing after them men, naked like some Celtic warrioress of old. The men ran. Connor strained to free himself but between being shackled and mummified he had no leverage. He tried harder hearing one of his dogs yelping with pain. He heard the snap of Gwen’s electrical talent and someone fell. When he heard Gwen’s cry of pain and the breaking of glass, it spurred him on. The brass twisted and tore and he was free, sort of. He could barely walk shrouded like he was in plastic wrap.

When he got out of the room, he saw blood and broken glass and the front door was open. He staggered to it and Gwen nearly ran him over coming back in. She was bloodied but didn’t appear to be seriously hurt.

“They got the Alatyr,” she snarled.

“Fuck that, are you all right?” He tried to turn her around so he could see her back. “You’re bleeding.”

“I don’t think it’s bad.” She kicked the couch. “They got it.”

“We’ll worry about getting it back later. Get me out of this shit and I’ll take care of your back.”

“I’ll be fine, Connor.” She tried to ward him off. “We need to follow them.”

“They’ll go right back to Wolfram and Hart. They wouldn’t think we’d be right back after the thing. I’m not going anywhere until I’m sure you don’t need stitches,” he insisted.

Gwen sighed and tore the plastic wrap half off him, at least freeing up his arms better. He steered her into the bathroom and started wiping down her back with alcohol. She wiggled and hissed in pain.

“Connor, you’re killing me here.”

“Hush, it’s not so bad,” he said, softly. “Really, they’re all shallow. You have some glass in you. I’m going to have to get it out or do you want to go to the emergency room?”

“Just do it,” she insisted.

Connor treated her wounds and got them bound up. She helped him free of the rest of the plastic wrap. Connor went to clean up the glass before his dogs got hurt, after satisfying himself that they weren’t seriously injured in the tussle with the vampire. “How’d he get in here anyhow?”

“I guess anyone can invite a vampire in, not just the owner of the house.” Gwen waved him over. “Connor, come look at this.”

Curious at his wife’s tone, Connor went to the front door. An oak leaf hovered there poking into the wood as if trying to get out. “You don’t see that every day.”

“I think it’s a spell. I think it’s tracking the Alatyr. How else did they know which safe we put it in?”
Gwen said.

“Let’s get another look at the specs for Wolfram and Hart and take our new leafy friend with us. With any luck, we’ll have the Alatyr back by noon,” Connor said.

“That’s the plan.”
“You got it back,” Kate said as Angel came into his office. He saw she was supervising the nearly finished repairs to his wall and safe. He was less thrilled to see Andrew was in the room but the young man was oddly silently. “It was getting a little tense in here.” Her eyes canted to Andrew who glared back.

“You called the cops on me,” he grumbled, turning his glower on Angel.

“No, we didn’t. If you’re ever going to be any good at this, you have to be aware of your surroundings,” Angel said.

“In other words, you can’t go into Millionaire Row driving a shit box car,” Gunn added.

“We have more than just Gwen and her accomplice after the Alatyr,” Wes said. “Ethan Rayne has entered the game for certain.”

“With a demon,” Spike said. “I think it was a Jesked demon. They’re very strong but they aren’t long on bravery or smarts. Pretty much just one step up from a Fyarl.”

“They got to the Alatyr first,” Angel reminded him.

“Yeah, I don’t get why they didn’t just walk off with it. Did we scare ‘em off?” Gunn dropped wearily into a chair.

“There was a fear spell on the safe. It nearly scared me off,” Angel admitted sheepishly.

“It did frighten me away,” Wes said, an embarrassed expression on his pale face. “But what we found in the house probably confirms Spike’s suspicions that it was a Jesked demon.”

“Why?” Andrew asked, then realized he was showing he didn’t know something Wes did.

“Dogs, they had four guard dogs. Jeskeds are severely allergic.” Wes didn’t look at the new Watcher. His eyes were on the stuff from Angel’s safe, now under Kate’s watchful eye on the desk. He picked up a file box that read ‘Connor’ and opened it before Angel could stop him.

“Oh, well, yes, I didn’t know they had guard dogs,” Andrew said, trying to put his officious shell back together while Angel tried to get the box away from Wes without arousing suspicions.

“A fear spell.” Kate drummed her nails on Angel’s desk as Wes took out a picture of Angel and a baby from the box. Angel snatched it away and slammed the lid down on the box but he knew it was far too late. ‘I’d like to have one of those on this safe.’

“As would I.” Angel took a moment to try and get the snappishness out of his tone. He knew he had just aroused Wes’ curiosity by taking away the file box. He should have removed it, with its incriminating photos and videos, mementos granted by Lilah after the spell had been cast, the moment the safe had been ruined. “Have spells and divinations get on that because it was a very effective defense.” Angel clamped a hand down on Andrew’s wrist as he reached for the Alatyr.

“I just wanted to see it,” Andrew protested, rubbing his wrist after Angel let go. He flopped back on the couch.
“Like my dad always said, look with your eyes, not with your hands,” Kate said. “I spoke to Mr. Giles. He’d like you to call him, Angel. I think he’d like Wesley to accompany the Alatyr to Russia along with Andrew since he’s already here. Provided, of course, Wolfram and Hart is going to relinquish the artifact.”

Angel nodded at Andrew. “That explains why you haven’t escorted him out of here. I’ll call Giles and set it up. I think we’re agreed the Alatyr needs to be returned to Booyan Island.”

“Hey, sounds like that thing being out from under the world tree is doing more to ruin the environment than the current administration,” Gunn said. “Take it back. I don’t wanna be responsible for the world dying.”

“Well, if that’s settled.” Kate sidestepped the workers as they left, the wall now repaired. “Why don’t you put the Alatyr in the new wall safe for now.”

“I will. Kate, you’ve been up for nearly twenty-four hours. That goes for Gunn and Wes, too. Why don’t you all go home and get some sleep. Spike and I can stick around for a while to make sure the Alatyr doesn’t go anywhere,” Angel said.

“No arguments here,” Gunn said, heading out.

“Call if anything happens,” Wes added.

“I’m not leaving,” Andrew said. “I have an obligation.”

“Fine, sit out in Harmony’s office. You can be the advance look out.” Angel smirked.

“Just don’t drive her too nuts, kid.” Spike dislodged Andrew from the couch, stretching out before Angel could. “No soul, no chip, she might just snack on you.”

“I’ll be prepared,” Andrew assured him and Kate escorted him to the outer office.

Angel hauled Spike off the couch. “My office, my couch.” He tossed the smaller vampire on the floor and stretched out himself.

After a few minutes of alpha male posturing and fang gnashing, Angel had the couch and Spike had a place on the soft carpet with one couch pillow to his credit. Angel shuttered the huge windows. The rising sun couldn’t hurt them here but there was no sense in trying to nap with it glaring in their eyes.

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“Are you as pissed as me?” Gwen said, staring up at Wolfram and Hart’s glass tower. They had parked inside the visitor’s lot rather brazenly.

“Maybe we should have just told the buyer we lost the damn thing,” Connor said.

“Why? You don’t want to retrieve it?” Gwen’s eyes narrowed.

“No, I want to get the stone, shove it up the vampire’s ass, and get it back from his ashes after I stake him,” Connor grumbled.
Gwen caught his face with her strong hands and kissed him. “That’s the man I married.”

“Still, we should have informed the buyer there could be a delay.”

“If we get it back, there won’t be a delay. No need to worry the buyer unnecessarily,” Gwen argued.

“Good point.” Connor shrugged. He knew he was being ridiculous. “How’s your back?”

“Sore but it won’t be a problem,” she assured him.

He let his fingers play in her long wavy brown hair. She looked as beautiful in her business suit as she did in any of her best gowns or that really hot bikini of hers. He glanced over his shoulder, thinking someone was watching but he didn’t see anyone suspicious. “Let’s do this.”

They went inside, blending in with the crowd. There was nothing eye catching about either of their suits. Only a close look would reveal that their shoes had good rubber grips that dress shoes usually lacked. No one challenged them or even noticed the floating leaf that was leading them through the hallways as if that was an everyday thing. Around this place, Connor didn’t doubt it was.

“Damn, they brought it right back to his office,” Connor whispered.

She nodded and peered into the outer office. “One guy asleep in a chair and the blond vampire is busy doing her nails. Her back is to the door.”

Connor peeked in and saw the blond was, in fact, twisted in her horseshoe styled work station so that she was facing closer to the inner office. In one powerful jump, he cleared the distance between them and slammed her face down into the desk with a loud crack. She didn’t move after that. He knew he should just stake her but he didn’t want to cause himself more grief by pissing off her employer.

Gwen moved in and briefly touched the young man who had just been aroused from his slumber by the noise of the head slam. The blond youth’s back arched as his body did a little dance, as a light dose of Gwen’s electricity coursed through him.

“He’ll be out for a while,” she said, softly.

Connor nodded, wishing he could peer around the inner door with a mirror like he usual did to check out a room. It wouldn’t do him any good if Angel was inside. He eased a squirt gun out of his jacket pocket just in case the vampire heard the sharp rap of the blonde vampire’s head on the desk. He stepped inside and found himself faced with both Angel and a little blond man. Both looked drowsy but wary, obviously having heard the short attack.

“Shit.” Connor sprayed both men, taking the chance that the blond was a vampire, too. He was closer to Connor than Angel was. Both men growled, smoked and sizzled as the holy water ate at them. Gwen heard the cries and ran in to back him up.

Connor didn’t have time to wait for her to join the fray. Angel slammed him back against the desk. The creature’s strength was amazing. Connor had killed vampires before but rarely had he wrestled with them. He tried to shoot Angel, too, but the vampire had his gun arm and crushing it against the desk until he dropped the squirt gun. Angel’s fist shattered the gun. The vampire growled as the backlash splattered him.

Connor used that distraction and tried to kick the vampire in the jewels. The only reason the blow didn’t split Angel open like a rotten tomato was he sidestepped at the last moment. Connor’s foot hit but without a lot of force. Still, it was enough to send Angel to his knees with an abortive breathless bellow of pain.
Connor looked and saw Gwen taking on the blond. She shocked him across the room. He lay twitching as Gwen whirled away from him so she could fry the obviously repaired safe.

“Bloody...my heart...” the blond muttered.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s beating. Won’t last though.” Gwen smirked, touching the safe. “We don’t want to dust you but we will, if you keep getting in the way, Angel. All we want is the Alatyr.”

Connor turned to help her open the safe and realized he had made a critical mistake. Angel wasn’t as out of it as he thought. The vampire yanked his legs out from under him. Connor’s chin smashed off the desk on the way down, and he bit his tongue. Blood gushed into his mouth as Angel twisted harder on his ankle. Connor screamed, trying to free himself before tendon, ligament or bone gave way. Gwen hurtled over her lover, and went to put both hands on Angel’s head. The vampire let go of Connor’s ankle and rolled out of Gwen’s reach.

“That fucking hurt,” Connor snarled, scrambling to his feet. Putting weight on that ankle caused a fiery pain to rip through his leg but he had to risk it in order to dodge a charge by the blond vampire. He used the desk as a brace to kick out with his good foot and not having to put strain on the bad. The vampire slammed into the glass which cracked.

“Spike,” Angel shouted as the blond vampire hit the floor, glass showering down on him. Spike rolled immediately as a shaft of light knifed into the room.

“Gwen, go for the glass. It’s protecting them,” Connor said, leaping on Angel who moved to stop her. He spat a mouthful of blood in the vampire’s eyes as he buried a fist in the creature’s stomach. “That’s for the ankle.” He slammed Angel into the wall. “That’s for being a real pain in the ass.”

Connor fell back a step as Angel’s fist caught him in the face. Out of the corner of his tearing eyes, he saw Spike knock down Gwen as she tossed a chair out the window. The vampire shrieked as she tried to fry him. Connor grabbed Angel and threw him into the wall for all he was worth. The wall shattered, revealing the safe. Angel collapsed, leaving a bloody streak down the wall. “And that was for hurting my Gwen.” Connor punched a fresh hole in the safe and snatched the Alatyr out.

He tried to run but his ankle was refusing to cooperate. He shoved the Alatyr into Gwen’s hands. “If I fall behind, leave me. I can handle them.”

“No way, Connor.”

He pushed her in front of him, out of the office before Spike or Angel could recover. The young man in the outer office tried to stop them and Connor laid him out flat with one barely even trying punch. The hallway was swarming with security. He snagged a fire extinguisher on the run, ignoring the pain in his ankle. Connor laid down a dense fog with it, hearing gun fire. Something burned along his ribs. Seeing Gwen was to the stairwell, he tossed the extinguisher and dashed after her. The pain became blinding but he couldn’t let it stop him.

“Up!” he cried once inside the stairwell.

They climbed and went out onto the roof, sprinting for the edge.

“You can’t carry me across. God, Connor, you’re bleeding all over. I think you were shot.” Gwen’s eyes were huge as her hands tugging at his blood-soaked shirt.

“I’ll be fine. I can help you across,” he assured her.

Gwen bit her lip but nodded. She took a running start and he gave her super-powered push across to the neighboring rooftop. He made the jump himself just as security figured out they had headed for
the roof. His ankle gave out as he landed and he skidded across the roof. The sheer hotness of the surface burned him. Gwen dragged his battered body up and they ducked into the stairwell of the building.

Shoving back his suit jacket, she lifted his shirt, tracing the gouge cut along his chest. “It just grazed you. The bleeding is already slowing. How’s your foot?”

“I don’t think it’s broken.” Connor had never broken a bone to his knowledge, in spite of being in some bad accidents like the one that killed his family. “He might have torn some ligaments though. It hurts like a bitch.”

“We’ll get you to a hospital as soon as we’re in the clear,” she said and he didn’t argue. They went into the third floor down and road the elevator the rest of the way.

They had a clear shot back to their car. No one was in the parking lot yet. Connor managed to sprint there but Gwen took the wheel. They didn’t make it out of the lot before a Hummer slammed into them full force. Connor’s vision dimmed with pain, his side taking the brunt of it. The metal was crushed around him and for a moment he relived the accident that took his whole family from him.

When his heart stopped thundering in his ears, he queried, “Gwen?”

“I’m okay. What does that idiot think he’s doing?” Gwen managed to open her door. “Are you okay, baby?”

“No. I’m a little trapped.”

Gwen’s hands went around him, checking for damage. Connor managed to plant his feet on the floorboards and kicked, bending the metal back away from him. Gwen helped him out. He was cut and bruised but he didn’t think he was any more seriously hurt than he had been. Gwen steadied him against the car. That’s when he saw the duo.

“Oh, damn, Gwen, it’s the guys I saw in the corridor the first time we stole it. Run.” Connor pointed them out then went for the shorter of the two. The blow knocked the man’s head back and his hat slipped off, revealing the horns. “Oh shit!” Connor fell back a few steps. “Come on, if you want the Alatyr, take it from me.”

“Get it, Kippendragr,” the taller man said.

Connor watched Gwen run, knowing she had the stone. To his horror, three SUV’s with the word ‘security’ on them entered the parking lot. Either they were more poorly equipped or Angel had ordered the guns to be put away because they had bean bag launchers. One of them clipped Gwen in the head and she sprawled on the sidewalk. “Gwen!” Connor screamed as the guards poured out of the car with something that looked like a rubber mat and leather cuffs. They knew how to protect themselves from her.

Connor took two steps towards his wife then found himself flying. He had forgotten, in his fear, the demon he had been facing. He landed in the street, nearly getting run over. He belly-crawled a few feet and yanked a man hole cover up. He slammed it over the demon’s head as the creature reached for him then dropped into the sewer. He couldn’t help Gwen, not injured like he was, unarmed. He needed to stop the bleeding, brace his ankle and come up with a plan.

“I’m coming for you, love,” he promised in a whisper.
Rescues & Death

Chapter Six – Rescues & Death

Angel looked at Gwen after security brought her to Wes’ office as per Angel’s request. Gunn, Kate and Wes were on their way in. Harmony was in her office making sure no one went into Angel’s and messed with the re-ruptured safe. Andrew and Spike helped oversee the security guards, shackling Gwen into the chair. She was still unconscious, looking like security had gotten in a few blows when she was down. Normally, he’d protest such treatment but he was hurting all over, especially where his scalp had been split open from the beating his son had given him. He knew he hadn’t broken Connor’s ankle, hadn’t felt the pop, nor heard the telltale crunch but he knew he had hurt the young man. He didn’t like that but Connor had made it necessary. He regretted that Connor hadn’t been captured along with Gwen. Spike lit up, and Angel didn’t protest. Gwen had fried the younger vampire pretty well. Angel was willing to make allowances.

“I’m still all tingly like my whole body is asleep,” Andrew said.

“How’d she sneak past you? I thought you were going to be the advance lookout.” Angel figured Andrew had, like he and Spike, fallen asleep until Harmony had her head bounced off the desk. He just wanted to hear the fantastical story he knew Andrew was likely to come up with.

“The two demons were on me before I had a chance to move;” Andrew said.

“Gwen’s not a demon, and I’m not sure her partner is either,” Angel said, honestly not sure what his son was: probably a hybrid like Doyle.

“At least the security guards got the Alatyr back.” Andrew reached for it.

“Don’t touch it, Andrew. That’s the last warning,” Angel said then his eyes snapped up to the office door. “Kate.”

“Boy, she tore the crap out of you guys,” Kate said coming in, looking fresh from bed. She stopped in front of Gwen.

“Gwen took out Spike and Andrew. Her partner got me,” Angel said.

“Do we need to get someone from the infirmary up here?” Kate examined the bean bag induced knot of Gwen’s head as Wesley arrived. “She has blood all over her.”

“She’s not bleeding anymore,” Spike said. “We’d know it. We can smell it.”

“My word, they came back so fast,” Wes said, looking shocked. “Did they get the Alatyr?”

Angel stepped aside so Wes could see it was safe.

“Connor must have given it to her then booked when he saw security. Guess we know which one has the balls in this partnership.” Spike snorted.

“Connor who? Is that her accomplice’s name? Kate asked.

“Yeah.” Spike lit one cigarette from the tip of the other.

Angel saw the look on Wes’ face, could practically see the wheels turning. His friend remembered that name on the box in the safe. He needed to steer Wes off that track. “Kate, you need to speak to
your men. They opened up in the hallways on a business day with live ammo. There is blood all over the hallway, and we’re damn lucky that no one was killed since at least a half dozen bullets breeched the office walls. I was barely able to stop them from going outside with the guns. They weren’t happy about taking the bean bag guns to Gwen.”

Kate’s lips tightened into an angry line. “I’ll take care of that immediately. They’re supposed to be carrying tasers. It’s not the bad old days at the firm.”

“None of this would have happened if Angel hadn’t been holding back against the runt. I can’t believe he got the better of you,” Spike said, rubbing his chest where Gwen had shocked him. “What was up with that shit?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Angel said, nervously, willing Spike to shut up. From the slotted blue eyes staring at him, Angel knew Spike wasn’t convinced. Spike knew how Angel fought and could easily spot Angel hadn’t given it his all and worse, Wesley was looking at him curiously, too.

Gunn walked in and scowled, seeing Gwen sagging in the chair. “Did you kill her?”

“She should be coming around soon,” Angel said. “The guards got a little enthusiastic.”

“And her accomplice?” Gunn inquired.

“Long gone.”

“Am I the only one thinking we need a better place to keep this damn thing?” Gunn gestured to the Alatyr then went over to Gwen, touching her cheek. “It’s a shame. I really liked her. Always thought maybe we could have gotten her to work with us, do some good. She’s not an evil person, just kinda lonely because of her powers.”

“I think the word you want is greedy. I saw that bloody bint’s house,” Spike grumbled, not inclined to be forgiving.

“That’s your last cigarette Spike,” Angel said, watching him digging in his pocket for the pack. “And Gunn, for what it’s worth, I liked Gwen, too. She and her partner could have dusted me, Spike, and Harmony but they didn’t. They just wanted the Alatyr. Gwen was unarmed.”

“She’s a bloody weapon in and of herself,” Spike argued. “But I’m just as glad she didn’t dust us but her partner was willing to douse us with holy water and bust out the windows.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like vampires,” Wes said with a faint smile. “It’s been known to happen.”

“Um, she’s waking up.” Andrew pointed a finger at Gwen who groaned.

Gwen lifted her head, her eyes squinting trying to regain focus. She struggled against the leather cuffs. “Connor?”

“You have bigger problems than your boyfriend running out on you,” Spike said, getting to his feet. “Like me.”

Gwen scowled up at him. “Did you at least get the idiots who rammed our car?” She nodded at the Alatyr. “They were after that, too.”

“Someone rammed your car?” Angel’s brow furrowed. “Security didn’t mention that.”
“Connor was hurt,” Gwen said. “He sent me running because he couldn’t go as fast. Your people shot him.”

“That happens when you steal things,” Andrew said.

“He was shot? How bad?” Gunn asked. “With our luck, he’ll sue for excessive force.”

“I don’t know how seriously. He said it wasn’t too bad. I thought it might be a graze, but he was bleeding all over,” Gwen said, her eyes wide with concern.

Angel saw the fear in her eyes. He felt it in his own heart. What if Connor was somewhere bleeding to death because they had his means of escape tied up here in the office? “Kate, I want a full report on this. No one mentioned anyone getting shot, or a car accident or someone else being after the Alatyr. Send out a team to sweep the area and make sure her partner isn’t holed up bleeding somewhere. I’m just hoping it was Ethan who rammed their car since at least we knew he was in the game.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“In the meantime why doesn’t she tell us what the hell her partner is.” Spike’s face morphed as he leaned over Gwen but she looked unimpressed. “He smelled human but he sure didn’t move like one.”

“He’s special, like me, a freak,” Gwen said, wryly. “We were born this way. Asking why doesn’t exactly get answers.”

“I can’t believe you’d steal from us, Gwen. I thought we had an understanding.” Gunn favored her with a sad smile.

“The prize was too tempting, Gunn.” Gwen’s lips pulled into a quick smile. “Can you possibly loosen these shackles up? I can’t feel my hands.”

“You’re not going anywhere, sister,” Andrew said, going over to her.

She shot him an incredulous look. “What? You think you can just turn me over to the police? They aren’t equipped to handle me, and last time I looked, this law firm likes to avoid police entanglements.”

“We do have places here we can hold you,” Kate said.

“I guess whining about my civil rights isn’t going to get me anywhere,” Gwen gave her bonds another tug. “Fine, it’s not like Connor is just going to let you keep me here.”

“Do you think he’ll come anywhere near this? He knows we have you, and he knows you can sell him out. Cut a deal and let him take the fall for theft. He’ll be doing the dime in San Quentin while you go free,” Gunn suggested, sitting on the edge of Angel’s desk.

Gwen laughed. “Connor will come and I’m not the least bit worried about a trial or what he’d do if it came to that.”

“Angel, you have a file on someone with the name Connor in your safe,” Wes said. “Why?”

Kate turned and looked at the vampire. “Angel?”
“It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Care to explain this?” Kate asked.

“He’s probably in league with them so the Council doesn’t get the Alatyr,” Andrew said, glaring at the vampire as he sat back down.

“Right, that’s it exactly,” Angel said. “And I got the holy water burns and the busted open head to make it look good.” Angel thought for a moment then added. “Connor Reilly was brought to me several years back. He was a freshman in college when he was hit by a van. Surely you remember that, Wesley. You met his parents first.”

“I...oh, oh, I didn’t remember. You’re right. It’s the same boy. The van intentionally crushed him into the garage and drove off. He was totally uninjured,” Wes said.

Angel nodded. “Yes, and I said we didn’t have time to waste on small stuff.”

“And we turned down the Reilly’s case.” Wes frowned. “I always thought we shouldn’t have done that, and this bears me out.”

Angel threw open his arms. “You were right, I was wrong. There was something different about him, and it wasn’t just dumb luck he wasn’t hurt.” He hoped that would be an end to it. “That was just some of the stuff that was started on that case and archived.”

“In your safe?” Gunn looked perplexed. “Why would it be there?”

“I was purging old files and ran out of time and just threw it in there so no one would get their hands on it. Confidentiality and all that.” Angel hoped that would be an end to it. “Kate, why don’t you get on security and find out why they left stuff out of the report while we make arrangements for Gwen to stay.”

“That’s not going to be necessary.” Connor walked in, two pistols, one real, one a squirt gun, out and at the ready. “Gwen will be coming with me.”

“Told you.” Gwen favored them with a superior smirk.

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Connor pulled his suit jacket back on, looking at the glass monolith before him. The gunshot wound on his side had stopped bleeding but it still burnt like a brand. His right shoulder, hip and knee were swollen and bruised from taking the brunt of the car wreck. They weren’t serious injuries though. He’d been in far worse accidents. His ankle ached miserably but he couldn’t worry about that. The fact that his wife was now a prisoner inside of Wolfram and Hart left no room for worry or self-pity or pain.

He didn’t trust the firm not to hurt her. He didn’t have time to go back to Malibu and properly outfit himself for a rescue mission so he improvised. He washed his blood-soaked shirt the best he could in a public rest room, thinking up a bootstrap plan. The shirt hadn’t dried well under the hand-dryer but at least it wasn’t reeking anymore and would be less noticeable should his jacket gape open.

Connor had gone into a drug store and bought some gauze, tape, an ankle brace and another water pistol. He covered the bullet wound the best he could and painfully shoved his aching ankle into the brace before heading to the nearest Catholic church. He broke into the sacristy and tapped the large water cooler-like font of holy water to fill his pistol, wishing he’d had time to buy one of those big super-soaker water rifles. Connor snagged some holy Eucharist, wondering what would happen if he
shoved them down a vampire’s throat. Connor paused to light a candle after making a donation and sent up a prayer to St. Dismas, the patron saint of thieves.

The Irish Catholic in him satisfied with the offering to his patron, Connor limped into Wolfram and Hart, slithering past the front door guards. He trusted his tattoos to keep him unseen by the cameras, and he stalked the halls looking for a lone guard and trying to scent Gwen. He found the guard and cornered him near the doors to the employee restroom with a question about safety in ‘his’ office after the morning’s shoot out. The guard didn’t even ask if Connor was an employee. Connor easily got close enough to put him in a choke hold. He counted to ten before letting the man go. Ten seconds and the brain would recover, no problems. Twenty seconds or longer and he’d make the man a vegetable.

He took the man into the restroom and set him in a stall. Connor pulled on the gloves he carried in his jacket pocket in case he had to steal a getaway car. He used them to steal the guard’s gun and ammo. He didn’t want to shoot anyone but he knew they wouldn’t be so considerate of him. He locked the stall then swung out over the top of it, gritting his teeth as his sore ankle absorbed the energy of the landing.

First, he looked in Angel’s office but Gwen wasn’t there. He only smelled the vampire receptionist and didn’t go any closer. He worked down the floors from there, finally catching Gwen’s scent and followed it. He listened in the hallway, drinking in the scents, sifting through them; Angel, Gwen, the blond male vampire and the young man they had disabled in the outer office. There were two other men, one he thought had been in his house, and the other was entirely foreign. There was a woman he didn’t know as well. Way too damn many people.

There was nothing he could do about that, and they were threatening to hurt Gwen. Connor knew he needed to go in guns blazing, more or less. He had an escape plan in mind. He knew that he could survive a fall if he had to. The landing would be a bitch but the brace had taken some of the pain away. Even carrying Gwen, he should be all right. He was gambling their lives on it.

He took out the Glock he had stolen and the water pistol and walked in. “That’s not going to be necessary. Gwen will be coming with me.”

The blond vampire cocked an eyebrow and said, “Hell, he does have a pair on him, after all.”

“Gwen, are you all right?” Connor asked, ignoring the leech.

“Killer headache but I’ll be fine,” she replied.

“Why don’t you put down the gun, and we can talk about this,” the blonde woman said softly but firmly.

Connor flashed her a smile. “You were a cop once, weren’t you? You still talk like one. I don’t want to have to use this but if I have to, you need to understand I’m a very good shot.” To prove it, he pegged the blond vampire right between the eyes with the water pistol, and the creature fell back, swearing colorfully as he wiped away the offensive liquid. “So why don’t you just untie Gwen, and we’ll leave you alone.”

No one moved for a moment. Connor made note of where they all were. The lady cop and a tall dark haired man were closest to him. Angel was behind the desk where the Alatyr sat. Gwen was next to the desk with a lean African American man at her side. The runt Gwen had fried earlier was in a chair by the window, right in the path of Connor’s escape route, figuring the security guards would be up his backside sooner or later. The blond vampire was between him and the windows as well. “Let’s all put our hands up so we’re not tempted to trip a silent alarm,” Connor said.
“Do you think the guards haven’t already seen you on the cameras?” the lady cop asked.

“He knows they haven’t,” Gwen said.

“A spell, like the one Lindsey had?” the dark-haired man asked of Angel.

“I think so,” Angel said.

Connor gestured with the Glock at the dark-skinned man. “You’re closest, you free her.”

“Y-y-you won’t get away with the Alatyr again,” the short man in the chair by the window said, standing up. “We won’t let you.”

“Look, this is one of the guard’s guns.” Connor pointed it at the man. “I wouldn’t use a Glock because a half pull on the trigger is the only safety. If I get nervous, I might accidentally shoot you so sit down and shut up.”

“I’d do what he says Andrew,” the dark-haired man said.

“I’m losing patience. Set Gwen free, please.”

“You have a problem.” Angel said. “You can’t free Gwen with guns in your hands, and if you set them down, we’ll have you incapacitated in a heartbeat. We aren’t going to free her for you.”

“Really? Fine, I’ll start shooting, and I’ll start with you. I know it won’t kill you but I bet if I knee cap you, you’re going to be in agony for a few days until that undead body of yours heals itself.” Connor’s eyes narrowed. “Wonder what would happen if I put a bullet in your head.”

“Let’s not find out,” the lady cop said, making downward gestures with her hands trying to calm him.

“Told you he’d show up. We should have been better prepared,” the African American man said. “Think about what you’re doing. I know you’re worried about what your partner might say in court, how much jail time you’ll do if she testifies but think of how much worse it’ll be if you shoot one of us.”

“Oh great, let me guess, you’re the lawyer. I suppose this place is crawling with them,” Connor said with disdain. “Wonder what would the general public would cheer more, me killing a vampire or me killing a lawyer?”

“We’re not going to find out,” Angel said, taking a step away from the desk and got pegged by the water pistol. “Damn, when did those things get made so they can do more than dribble?”

“I don’t see anyone freeing Gwen.”

“Maybe she’s not interested in going with you. I don’t see her struggling,” the lawyer said, gesturing at Gwen. “Maybe she’s already sold you out to us.”

Connor laughed. “Even if she did, it would do you no good.” He shoved the water pistol in his waistband and wiggled his ring finger, flashing the platinum band. “Gwen’s not my partner, she’s my wife. Even if she did talk, which I know she didn’t, you couldn’t use it. I’m not afraid of that. I’m just here to make sure you idiots don’t hurt her.”

“You’re married?” The lawyer looked crushed as he addressed that to Gwen.

She shrugged as much as she could trussed up. “Sorry, Gunn.”
“You know him, too? Do you know everyone here, Gwen?” Connor asked, irritatedly. The fingers of his left hand curled on the door jamb and the wood creaked ominously.

“About half of them. Gunn helped me steal L.I.S.A,” Gwen said.

“I didn’t need to know that. Now I feel like thanking him.” Connor grimaced. “So he’d better start unshackling you before I lose that good feeling.”

Angel moved out from behind the desk, coming in on Connor’s now unarmed side. Connor ripped off the door jamb he had his fingers around and hurled the long strip of wood, piercing Angel straight through. The vampire fell with a grunt, and Connor twisted, getting the water pistol back in hand as the blond vampire started moving. The second bloodsucker backed off, hands up.

“Don’t you bloody shoot me again,” he warned. “I’m not going to rush you.”

“I’m done playing.” Connor said as the lady cop knelt at Angel’s side, trying to help extract the make-shift spear.

“Just let him have his damn wife,” the blond vampire said.

Gunn grimaced, and Connor’s finger started pulling the Glock’s trigger. Gunn undid the shackles then dived for the desk. Connor heard his hand hit the desk.

“That was the alarm. How long do you think it’ll take for the guards to get here?” the dark-haired man asked.

Shoving the water pistol in a pocket this time, Connor didn’t even bother to glance down the hall. He jumped over Angel and the lady cop, snagging the Alatyr. He gestured to the window, and Gwen nodded her understanding. The blond vampire blocked his way. Connor shot him twice, the bullets tearing through flesh and bone and into the glass behind him. As the window shattered, the bleeding vampire rolled out of the path of the sunlight.

Connor and Gwen raced for the window. To his surprise, Andrew jumped at him. Connor lost the gun as the man grabbed his arm. He twisted and his ankle sent fire up his leg. Connor stumbled and fell out the window. Gwen leapt on him, crushing herself to his chest, squashing the Alatyr between them. The motion yanked Andrew after them. He shrieked, finding himself in free fall from a skyscraper. Connor caught his hands, dragging him around to his back. Andrew, with all the survival instincts hardwired into his reptile brain, locked arms and legs over Connor and Gwen.

Connor had no idea how this much weight would throw off the landing but he couldn’t kick free of the other man and let him die. He managed to twist so he could control the landing. Connor screamed in agony as his powerful legs cushioned the fall. He took a few awkward steps, trying to get his balance. He passed out momentarily, crumbling to the ground on top of Gwen. A moment later he heard her groaning and through tear-bleared vision saw the Alatyr rolling down the street, having been thrown free. Andrew rolled off him.

“Ohmigod, I’m not dead. How am I not dead? How did you do that?” the man babbled.

Connor couldn’t talk, could barely breathe. He was afraid to look down, afraid he’d see his ankle bones sticking out through the skin. Gwen eased out from under him, but she looked as shaken as he felt. He couldn’t even tell her to go after the Alatyr.

“The Alatyr,” Andrew cried, getting up.

Connor cursed himself for not at least falling over backwards and crushing Andrew instead of his
wife. The little man raced after the stone. “Get it, Gwen.”

Andrew scooped it up, looked back at them and started running. Gwen tried to hobble after him but Andrew hailed a cab on the busy street and clambered inside.

“Where the fuck is he going?” Connor growled, trying to get up.

“I have no idea.” Gwen put her arms around him, shooting ‘back off’ looks to terrified pedestrians who had seen the fall. “Come on, babe, they’ll be coming.”

“Gwen, I can barely move.”

She helped him up and took a page from Andrew’s book. She hailed them a cab. Gwen shoved Connor inside and got in behind him. “Where to?” she whispered.

“Pick a place where we can get a car,” he whispered back.

Gwen gave the cab driver instructions for the nearest mall then huddled with her husband in the back seat. “Should I have made that a hospital? You were thinking about one before the fall as it was.”

He shook his head. “You know how I heal. Do you need one?”

“I’m fine…but I’m pretty sure I have a concussion.” She touched her head where she had an egg from the bean bag barrage.

“Damn, we should go to the hospital then.”

“No way, not like this. They’d be obligated to call the cops. I’ll call Dr. Ungaretti when we get home. I know I can’t take any aspirin, or risk bleeding into the brain,” she said. “From the last time this happened.”

He leaned back against the smelly cab seat. “We fucked this up bad.”

“Yeah, the buyer isn’t going to be happy. Do we go back after it again or do we just give it up?” She rested her head on his shoulder.

“The smart thing would be to just give it up but I’m so pissed I could kill.” He punched a fist into the seat beside him.

“If that were true, you would have let the twit fall to his doom,” she said. “You didn’t even stake the vampire.”

“Okay, so maybe not kill. How about maim?” He kissed her forehead. “I just don’t want to lose you, baby.”

“Not going to happen.” Her eyes clouded. “You’re not going to ask a million questions about Gunn, are you?”

“We all have pasts, Gwen. I don’t need to know,” he assured her. “We just need a way to track that damn stone. It didn’t look like Andrew was taking it back inside. I thought he was working with them.”

“I have no idea. Maybe he was heading for a new safe house with it,” she said. “I think I know who to call for a tracking spell.”

“Oh man, not the three nut jobs in the book store. Those ladies make me feel dumb,” he moaned.
“They make everyone feel dumb.” She patted his hand. “But has their magic ever failed us?”

“No, all right. Home, call the doctor, then the Florida Three. Ever wonder why they didn’t stay there?” Connor tried to shift into a position that didn’t hurt.

“Because they hated the humidity.”

Gwen had to help him out of the cab and he barely could limp out into the parking lot of the mall. They took a car at the far end of the lot and headed back to Malibu.

X X X

Ethan hadn’t expected manna from heaven when he and Kippendragr staked out Wolfram and Hart. He also hadn’t expected to see three people falling to their deaths from the building. He turned his face even as Kippendragr leaned forward eagerly. The demon had been out of sorts ever since he had been smashed in the face by a manhole cover earlier in the day. Ethan had been trying to figure out a way to get into Wolfram and Hart and steal the Alatyr, seeing it being hauled back inside with Gwen. A triple homicide - he knew no one committed suicide in a threesome - wasn’t on the menu.

“Damn, they didn’t squash,” Kippendragr groaned, disappointed.

Ethan looked up and saw all three on the sidewalk, all obviously not dead. “How’d they manage that?”

“The guy who clobbered me stuck the landing like a Russian gymnast...well, until he fell over. What the hell is he?” The demon reached under his hat to pull on his horns.

“Not a clue. Damn, there goes our prize into a cab,” Ethan couldn’t believe his bad luck.

“Well, at least it’s not back inside the law firm where we can’t get to it.” Kippendragr shrugged. “That guy’s on his lonesome. Think you can whip up another tracking spell?”

“For this, no problem. Let’s get a car first,” Ethan suggested. The Hummer they had stolen and crashed had been hustled away by the firm’s security.

Kippendragr shoved his thick hand through a window then broke the steering column of a nearby older model Cadillac so he could hot-wire it. Ethan cast the spell on the tacky dashboard Jesus and the thing started point, gyrating and glowing to indicate the path of the cab the man with the Alatyr had taken. It led to an Econolodge not so far away. Ethan took the Jesus off the dashboard and let him point out the room on the second floor. They could hear the man inside jabbering loudly.

“I’ve got it, Mr. Giles. We don’t need their help. Someone keeps trying to steal it from them. He nearly shot me then knocked me out of a skyscraper window, and I don’t know how we didn’t all die and I can do this, trust me.”

Ethan knocked but the man inside didn’t answer. He pounded more loudly. “You’d better let us in.”

Kippendragr shoved Ethan aside and shoved in the door with one kick.

“Giles, that Connor fellow must have found me!” the man was saying as Kippendragr took the door.

Ethan gestured and the phone flew out of the young man’s hand and shattered against the wall. “Ripper doesn’t need a full update.”

“You aren’t the thieves...you must be Rayne.” The young man tried to puff out his chest and bluff
his way into making them think he wasn’t scared. “You can’t have the stone either.”

“Awww, isn’t it sweet, he thinks he has a choice.” Ethan smirked. “Just give it to us.”

“Never.”

Kippendragr’s fist lashed out catching Andrew in the head, cracking it open like an eggshell with a pink-grey yolk. He wiped the gore on the garish bedspread.

“Well, that was messy,” Ethan said, curling his lip in disgust.

“They’ll think the other one did it. This one told them as much. We know he’s strong enough to do this,” Kippendragr said. “Hurry up and get the stone.”

“Why don’t you just do it?” Ethan pussyfooted around the spreading puddle of blood.

“My kind can’t touch it,” Kippendragr said as Ethan snatched it up and they both fled the hotel room, shutting the broken door the best they could to hide the body.

“Then why do you want it?”

“Because we’re being well paid by a certain political party for it. They want to shove it under an Alaskan oil field to pump up the yield when they get the rights to rape it. My kind feeds off the decay of the earth. They keep screwing the place up and we get nice and fat,” the demon replied.

Ethan shrugged. “I’m all for getting well paid. We’d better work on that plan to get out of town.”

“We’ll be making the transfer during the symphony in the glen at Griffith Park tomorrow,” Kippendragr said.

“Oh great, nature.” Ethan shuddered as they climbed back into their stolen car.
Chapter Seven – Can’t Be Saved By Lies

“Giles, I’ll send someone was soon as I can to check on Andr-ooow! Kate!” Angel looked over his shoulder as the former cop dressed the wound from his impaling. Spike, sprawled on a chair in Gunn’s office, snickered at his discomfort. “Sorry, Giles, Kate’s fixing up me and Spike...he got shot. I got impaled...yes, the thieves are determined....do you know where Andrew was staying. He didn’t tell us. He doesn’t think we need to be cooperating. He should have brought the damn thing back here instead of haring off with it.” Angel nodded as Giles gave him Andrew’s address. “Sorry, it took so long for you to get through to us. It’s crazy here. We’ve had shoot outs and three people fell out of the window including Andrew. Are you sure that’s what Andrew said, Connor was breaking down the door? Okay, I’ll send Kate and Wes to check it out. The sun’s still up here. Okay, Giles. We’ll let you know as soon as we know something.”

“What happened?” Kate asked as she finished the bandaging.

“Andrew called Giles to tell him that he had the Alatyr. In the middle of the conversation Giles heard someone kicking in the door, and Andrew said it was Connor. The phone went dead. Andrew’s supposed to be working with Wes so it would be good to take him with and make sure Andrew’s okay,” Angel replied.

“I’ll go get Wes,” she said. “But why didn’t he just bring the Alatyr back in here?”

“He wants to play the hero,” Spike offered. “He always has. He needs to prove himself. I hope the bloody prat hasn’t gotten himself killed.”

“He probably wouldn’t have survived the fall if the thieves intended to kill him,” Kate said. “He should be okay unless he really tried to play the hero and forced their hand.”

“That’s what I’m thinking but go in prepared for anything,” Angel said.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Kate said and headed out the door.

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Spike got up slowly.

“Because you haven’t forgotten about Ethan and the Jesked demon,” Angel said. “I’m going to lie down for a while. I don’t feel so good.”

“No.”

“Come on, it’s not like I snore. I don’t want to go back to my place and get a call five minutes after I get there to saddle up and ride out,” Spike moaned.

Angel figured it was just easier to give in. “Fine.”

They rode up to the suite together.

“That was pretty intense,” Spike said. “If he didn’t survive the whole sunlight thing, I’d swear the scrawny runt was a vampire. Bet you’re sorry you didn’t keep that kid around now.”

“You have no idea.” Angel didn’t want to talk about it and hoped Spike would just shut up. He got
his wish. Spike eased his bullet-riddled body down onto the couch.

Angel flopped on the bed. Having only caught snatches of sleep since the whole thing began, Angel was out almost instantly. He knew he hadn’t been asleep long when the phone rang but at least it was sun down. “Yeah,” he muttered then sat up. “Damn, Spike and I will be...no, Spike will join you and Wes. I’ll go to Malibu with Gunn and see if we can catch them at home.”

Angel rang off and went to wake Spike. The vampire’s blue eyes were trained on him, obviously having been awakened by the phone.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Spike sounded honestly regretful.

Angel nodded. “His skull was crushed.”

“Damn, I don’t get that.” Spike stamped on the floor. “Wes said they went through the effort of getting a good hold on Andrew and kept him from dying. Why kill him now? Andrew wasn’t a physical threat to them.”

Angel shook his head. “I’m not convinced it was them. Kate wants you to join her and Wes.”

“Okay. I heard you tell her you’re going to Malibu.”

Angel ran a hand through his messy hair. “The Alatyr is missing. You can tell better than Kate and Wes if Ethan and his partner were there. Gunn and I will make sure it wasn’t Gwen and Connor.”

“I’ll call you if we find anything. Want me to call Rupert?” Spike offered.

“Why don’t you.” Angel was relieved to not to have to tell Giles the young man had been murdered. “I’ll go get Gunn. Tell Giles that I’ll call if I find out anything else he needs to know.”

“Will do.”

X X X

“Wish the ladies would just call us,” Connor grumped as Gwen put a fresh bag of ice on his ankle. Wearing nothing but a pair of khaki shorts, he stretched out on the modular couch in the game room. The leather couch in the living room was poorly suited to wound tending. One of his favorite movies, *Star Wars*, was playing on the big screen TV. There wasn’t a part of his body that didn’t hurt but his ankle was the worst. It looked like a balloon with Angel’s fingerprints on the tanned skin in long black bruises. “Come on, babe, sit. You have a concussion. I can get my own damn ice if I need it.”

Gwen sat with him and peeled the gauze off his gunshot wound. “You’ve already taken care of my head and back. It’s your turn. This doesn’t look too bad.” She squirted a blob of Neosporin on his wound and covered it with fresh gauze. She got up and went to the bar and washed her hands. “The ladies will call when they get the tracking spell.”

“I’m more concerned about them giving us a spell to revoke the vampires’ invite,” Connor said, casting a wary eye at the sliding glass doors a few feet behind the couch which led to the pool area. “At least the buyer is going to give us another chance to get the Alatyr.”

“That’s a good thing.” Gwen looked up from the bar as she took a bag of popcorn out of the microwave and emptied it into a bowl. She took two root beers out of the bar fridge and four doggie treats out of a jar labeled Hominis Lupus. She had to dodge the four Wolfhounds who had been miraculously awakened by the ding of the microwave. She nestled up with her husband, tossing each
dog a treat to get their minds off the popcorn. “How many times can you watch this?”

“How cool,” he said. “Want me to put in *Pirates of the Caribbean*?”

“You like Keira better in *King Arthur* or should I say you like her costume better.” Gwen grinned. He kissed her shoulder. “What I liked best was you wearing that leather costume for Halloween.” Gwen laughed. “Yes, I know. You made me wear it how many times after that?”

“When we heal up maybe you can wear it again.” He smiled hopefully.

“It’s not very comfortable.” She played with the line of fuzz on his belly. “Maybe you should wear it.”

“Now that’s a scary image.” Connor shuddered, and Gwen shoved some popcorn in his mouth.

They settled in for a while then sat up in unison looking over the back of the couch, hearing the sliding glass door opening. Belatedly, the dogs started barking but by then Angel and Gunn were inside. Gunn had a pistol out.

“Guess we should have set the alarm,” Connor muttered.

“Making sure you weren’t bleeding to death was a bigger concern,” Gwen said, neither of them looking too worried that a gun was being pointed at them.

“See? The three nut jobs really needed to get us that revoke the vampire invite spell fast,” Connor said, then turned his attention back to the intruders. “What do you two want?”

“Are you trying to be funny? You really have balls asking us that after what you two have done to Wolfram and Hart lately,” Gunn said. “Why don’t you call off your dogs?”

“Why don’t you get the hell out of my house,” Connor replied.

“And the funny keeps going,” Angel muttered, looking at the dogs who were still standing between their owners and the intruders.

“You’re not going to shoot us, Gunn,” Gwen said, getting up. “Would you like something to drink?”

Gunn’s jaw dropped. “Do you think this is a social call, Gwen?”

“No, generally our friends don’t come calling with guns. They usually bring expensive wines and or top notch take out,” she replied. “Soda? Mixed drink? Beer?”

“I don’t believe this.” Gunn’s gun arm wavered a bit, as he glanced over to Angel as if the vampire had a clue as to why the pair of thieves weren’t more impressed.

“Just put the gun away. It’s not like you’re going to use it.” Connor got up gingerly.

“You look like hell,” Angel said, looking more upset than Connor would have expected from an enemy.

“Well, I’ve been shot, run over, had to jump out of that building twice, and you tried to pull off my foot,” Connor said, heading their way. “So, do you want to get the hell out now or have a drink and tell us why you’re here guns drawn? You got the Alatyr back.”
“No, we don’t,” Gunn said, holstering the gun, obviously figuring it was having no effect.

Connor’s brow wrinkled. “Yes, you do or wasn’t the little idiot who nearly got us all killed going out the window working with you?”

“He wasn’t, and he doesn’t have the Alatyr anymore,” Angel said, and Connor sensed he was keeping something back.

“Well, we don’t have it. So, the gun’s away, do you want that drink now?” Connor gestured at the bar.

Angel’s shoulder’s hunched. “No, I saw how the bar railing got messed up. I don’t want anything from there.”

“Oh, that’s the place where...” Gunn’s eyes widened. “That story just got a little less exciting.”

Gwen scowled. “I think they want to leave now, Connor.”

“Yeah. Those dogs don’t get to weigh over a hundred pounds eating dog chow. They’ll eat you on my say so.” Connor pointed at his dogs, which looked far more likely to lick someone to death.

Angel gave him a critical look. “Those dogs weigh more than you, don’t they?”

Connor crossed his arms defensively over his bare chest. “No.”

“Uh-huh, look skinny ass, we aren’t here for no drinks. We want what’s ours,” Gunn said, taking a few steps forward.

“I don’t have the damn Alatyr,” Connor snapped. “And I’m wiry.”

Gunn snorted. “We’re not leaving without it.”

“Better have that drink then since you’ll be here a while,” Gwen replied, coming over to her husband. “You can check if it makes you feel better.”

“Like you’d show us.” Gunn’s fingers inched back toward his gun as Connor got in his face, moving a dog to do it.

“If you want your stone, go talk the guy who took it.” Connor shoved Gunn so hard he tumbled back out the sliding glass door.

Angel lunged for him but Connor went out the door. Gwen caught Angel’s arm.

“Don’t make me shock you, Angel. I know it won’t kill you but I also know it doesn’t feel good. Why don’t you just go out and see that Connor didn’t break your friend’s ribs by accident. He forgets his own strength.”

“Is that what happened today?” Angel asked, going out to help Gunn to his feet.

Connor flipped on the backyard lights, illuminating the infinity pool, spa, outside bar, pool house and the path to the beach. In spite of himself, Gunn whistled. “What are you talking about? I did everything I could not to hurt the living today. You were the ones with my wife tied up, letting her bleed all over.”

“Andrew, the one who took the Alatyr, did you forget your strength with him after he got away with the omphalos,” Angel said.
Connor shook his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Someone crushed his skull in and took the stone,” Gunn said. “He was on the phone with someone and told him you were breaking down the door. Why did you have to kill him?”

Connor took a few steps back, closer to the pool. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Know anyone else who can put a fist through someone’s skull?” Gunn asked.

“Your buddy there for one.” Connor nodded at Angel. “Or any of the other vampires Wolfram and Hart has on staff.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Well, it wasn’t Connor,” Gwen said. “We took a cab to the mall, stole a car there and came home. Connor dropped me a mile from home. I got our car and picked him up from where he ditched the car. Check the police reports. You’ll probably see the stolen car report. We didn’t have time to go anywhere and kill anyone. We’re still waiting for a way to track the Alatyr.”

“You want the clothes I had on? The only blood evidence on them would be from me and Gwen.” Connor said.

Gunn looked over at Angel. “Don’t think he’d offer that if he did it.”

Angel wagged his head. “I told you from the get go I didn’t think they had.”

“So you busted into my house at gun point for nothing?” Connor growled.

“We had to be sure.” Angel shrugged.

“I wish I didn’t have a concussion. I could use a beer at this point,” Gwen groaned.

“Screw it, I’m getting one,” Connor said. “And you two can get the fuck off my property. I don’t have your damn stone.”

“You’re still planning on stealing it back,” Gunn said. “We can’t have that.”

“Not if it has a body attached to it. Our buyer can find someone else,” Connor said as a cell phone jangled.

Angel fished it out of his pocket. “Yeah, Kate? Spike thinks it was the demon? Okay, I’m pretty convinced it wasn’t Gwen or Connor. Have Wes see if he can track the Alatyr...what do you mean he went back to the firm? What spell? He found files in Lilah’s old archives about Connor? Damn it, Kate what did he find?”

“They have files on me?” Connor asked, intrigued by the panic in the vampire’s voice. “Damn, my parents only took me there once years ago.”

“Kate, there is no need for Wes to break any spells centered on Connor,” Angel said frantically. “I don’t give a damn that it’ll put Connor back to normal. It’s not what Wes thinks. Connor’s abilities don’t come from a spell. Casting a spell he got from Lilah’s files to undo magic around Connor isn’t going to make him less dangerous to Wolfram and Hart. It might make it worse. Go stop him, Kate.” Angel rang off and placed a call himself.

“What the hell is going on? I’m not under a spell,” Connor said, staring at Angel angrily.
“Come on, Wes, pick up. No, damn it, not voice mail.” Angel’s voice was tight. “Wes, if you get this, do not cast that spell. Call me first.”

“You’d better start explaining,” Connor said. “My parents took me to Wolfram and Hart because someone ran me down with a van and the van lost. I’m not under a spell. I want to know what kind of files you...” Connor broke off, his mouth gaping open as he slammed a palm against his forehead as if in severe pain. A thin, papery wail trickled out of him as his body stiffened. Gunn groaned, dropping to his knees, holding his head.

“Angel, what’s happening?” Gwen ran for her lover.

“Wes cast the spell,” Angel said, defeated.

“Connor, baby, what’s wrong? Angel, what did you do to him?” Gwen reached for Connor who was thrashing now, mouth open but no sound issuing out any more.

He stumbled backwards and toppled into the pool. Gwen and Angel ran to the lip. Connor sank to the bottom with no signs of trying to save himself. Angel jumped in, sinking like a stone. He grabbed Connor and fought to bring him to the surface. When they broke back into air, Connor sputtered and coughed. Finally, he pushed away from Angel and caught the lip of the pool, heaving himself onto land. He lay there shaking. Gwen fell at his side, stroking his back.

“Connor, sweetie, talk to me.”

“It’s all a lie,” Connor rasped out. “Oh god, it’s all a lie.”

“Angel, what did you do?” Gunn asked, getting to his feet. “What did you do?”

“What I had to.” Angel knelt beside Connor, reaching for him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to do it but it was...how can I explain it? What do you remember?”

“Everything.” Connor quailed away from Angel’s questing hand. “Don’t touch me!”

“Someone please start explaining,” Gwen said, pushing Angel’s hand away from Connor.

“Angel, he was your son. What did you do to him?” Gunn asked.

“Your what?” Gwen fell back onto her butt. “I...I remember now you talking about having one but I never saw him. I...how can this be true?”

“I didn’t mean to mess with your mind, Gunn.” Angel looked up at him. “There was no other way. You remember Jasmine.”

“Hell Goddess, you kicked her ass.” Gunn said then his face screwed up. “That isn’t right. I remembered it all wrong.”

“Exactly. Connor killed her because he had to but you couldn’t handle that, son. Do you remember?”

Connor nodded, his whole body trembling.

“Connor’s mind went, Gunn. He was going to kill Cordelia and a mall full of people if I didn’t kill him first. It was what he wanted. Instead, I had Wolfram and Hart remove him from everyone’s memory and give him a good life, with normal parents who loved him instead of being raised in hell by a fanatic and given back to a father who’s a monster.” Angel caught his breath, wiping his
cheeks, tears or pool water no one knew. “I know it’s a lie, Connor. I know you told me you can’t
save anyone with a lie but I tried anyhow. And I thought it worked.”

“Hell yeah it worked, he’s living in a mansion in Malibu,” Gunn muttered.

“This isn’t what I had in mind,” Angel snapped. “That’s why I turned away your parents that time. I
was afraid if they investigated, they’d find out you weren’t theirs, that the truth would come out, and
it would drive you insane again.”

Connor sat up. “I can’t… I can’t…I need to get inside.” He struggled to his feet.

Angel stood, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Let me go with you and explain.”

“No, no chlorine water on the floor,” Connor said.

“Connor, it hardly matters,” Gwen said.

“No.” Connor headed for the pool house, struggling out of his wet shorts.

“I think he’s in shock,” Gwen said, heading inside. She came back with some clothing and took
them to the pool house where Connor was showering. Gunn and Angel waited outside. Connor
came out naked except for his towel. He took his clothing from his wife.

“I don’t have any clothes to change into,” Angel said. “I can’t go inside like this, and I would like to
come inside if you want me to. Do you have something I could borrow, and we could still talk this
out.”

“I’d like to see you get into my pants,” Connor said then shuddered. “Should have phrased that
better. Inside the pool house, there’s a set of clothes. Our friend, Ron left them the last time he was
here. They’ll fit. Shower. It’ll give me time…” Connor wandered off, heading for the house.

“I’ll go with him,” Gwen said and Gunn followed them.

After dressing, Connor flopped on the couch and absently started eating the forgotten popcorn. No
one said anything for a few moments.

“I’m sorry, kid, I didn’t know,” Gunn said.

Connor shook his head but didn’t speak.

Angel came in quickly. “I left my clothes in the pool house but this…” He gestured at his clothing.

Gunn started laughing. “Sorry, man. I…..” He broke down into a laughing jag.

Connor made a sound that could have been a laugh or a sob that dissolved into pure laughter.

Angel looked at his clothing, a shirt in rainbow 60’s mod swirling circles and black shorts with
tropical orchids, cocktails and drink recipes on it. “I could die.”

“I’m sorry.” Connor wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ve never seen anything so funny.
God, I didn’t need this on top of the mind trip.”

“You were never meant to find out, Connor. You were supposed to have a good life and never have
to see me again. I should have known fate would find a way to screw us over,” Angel said crossing
the room and sat on part of the modular couch.
“I remember wanting to die.” Connor bit his bottom lip. “I’m glad I didn’t. I don’t know how to feel about all this. I’m kinda numb.”

“I’m sure. I don’t expect...Connor, I don’t expect things to change. You have your life now. I’m not a part of that. I’m not going to try and get back into it, even if I’m not particularly happy with you being a thief.” Angel said.

“What if he wants you to be a part of it?” Gwen asked, draping a protective arm around Connor.

“That would be different,” Angel said. “You two really are married? That wasn’t just a bluff?”

“No bluff,” Gwen assured him.

“The spell ending doesn’t change how I feel about her.” Connor looked into her eyes, hoping she knew he meant that. “I don’t know what I want, you in my life or gone. I’m not even sure if I’m angry at you for this or grateful. Tell me, what about Cordelia? Did she ever come out of the coma?”

“You knew Cordelia?” Gwen asked a hint of distaste in her voice.

“She meant something to me once,” Connor said, studying his wife’s face, seeing something there that said there would be a need for explanations later. “It’s a long story, and it might not be one you’d like any more than I want to know about you, Gunn and L.I.S.A.”

Gwen nodded. “Understood.”

“I’m sorry, son. Cordelia...her spirit saved my life a few months after she went into the coma. She said goodbye to me, for me to tell the others.” Angel’s voice broke.

“She died?” Connor’s lips trembled and Gwen squeezed his hand comfortingly.

“I’m sorry.”

“What about Fred? I didn’t see her any of the times we broke into Wolfram and Hart,” Connor said. Gunn’s eyes saddened. “She’s gone, too, killed by a demon who took over her body. It’s another long story.”

Connor gnawed his lip again. “I’m sorry. She was nice to me mostly. I wasn’t easy to be nice too.”

“Glad you know that now,” Gunn said. “Guess you’ve grown up.”

“Yeah, and we still have a problem, someone murdered your friend and stole the Alatyr,” Connor said. “We can deal with the rest of this later when we’ve had time to think...feel...” He leaned against Gwen.

“The Alatyr is our problem,” Angel said. “And Andrew wasn’t exactly our friend, more of a friend of a friend. He originally came to take the Alatyr away, too. But the thing is, we need it back. It belongs under the world tree.”

“Yeah, on Booyan Island...so that’s real. I was afraid of that,” Connor said, a stricken look in his blue eyes.

“He’s been moaning about it ever since we took the job,” Gwen said.
“The world is only going to get sicker unless we take the Alatyr back,” Angel said.

“Let us help you,” Connor said. “If we play it right, we can get it back and throw a few people off the trail and get it back where it belongs. I know you aren’t going to trust me and Gwen but we can help.”

“I think that can be arranged. We’d better get back to Wolfram and Hart, though. Wes is going to have questions about this whole spell thing,” Gunn said.

“We can work on a plan there...and if Spike says one thing about this outfit, I’m going to stake him,” Angel said.

Gunn’s eyes lit up. “Promise?”
Chapter Eight – Team Work

“So you’ve explained to everyone what’s up?” Connor asked as they got into the elevator. He and Gwen had driven separately from Angel and Gunn to Wolfram and Hart.

“Several times now,” Angel replied. “And everyone’s waiting for us in my office. The windows at least have been repaired.” The vampire eyed his son sourly. Connor looked utterly unapologetic.

“Even Lorne’s here,” Gunn added.

“I should go change,” Angel grumbled.

“No time,” Gunn said and Angel thought he heard a hint of sadistic glee in that.

Connor and Gwen helped Gunn make sure Angel didn’t detour. The vampire set his teeth knowing Spike, no matter how serious the situation, would never let this outfit pass without commentary. Angel wasn’t, however, prepared for the additional quartet of people in his office. As Spike brayed with laughter, smoke bubbling out of his mouth, the serious expressions on the quartet’s faces melted. Angel suddenly wished the ground would open and take him whole. He shifted nervously.

“Angel-cakes, that outfit is awful. The next time you want to have a makeover, let me call the Fab Five,” Lorne said. “I have Jai on speed dial.”

Angel shot the demon a stricken look. “Um, Buffy, Faith, I wasn’t expecting you, Or you and Giles, Willow. How...planes couldn’t get you here this fast.”

Buffy took a few steps towards him, a soft smile on her face. “Well, we were in Palatka, Florida investigating that Hellmouth that opened up, but Giles and Willow did a teleportation spell. It was really hard on them but with Andrew dead and the Alatyr, missing it was a risk we thought we needed to take.” Buffy’s eyes raked over him as she covered her mouth with a hand. “It’s, ah, good to see you, too, Angel.”

“He needs to put on real pants. I can’t talk to him like this. Those legs could blind someone,” Faith said, coming over to slap Angel on the shoulder. “But it’s good to see you again. I didn’t come in on the Witch Express. Giles called me in Cleveland for back up for Andrew before we knew he was dead.”

“And these would be our two determined thieves?” Giles gestured at Connor and Gwen.

“That’s them,” Kate said.

“Hi, Connor,” Willow said with a little finger wave.

“You don’t look any older, kid,” Faith added.

Connor smiled. “Neither do either of you. It’s good to see you again, Faith, Willow and I don’t think I ever met you two.” He gestured to Giles and Buffy.

“That’s Rupert Giles. He’s a Watcher, which I’ll explain when there’s time.”

“Holtz told me about them a little, Slayers, too,” Connor interrupted Angel.
“Fine. We can leave it at he’s usually in charge,” Angel said. “And this is Buffy, a Slayer.”

“Oh, hello,” Connor said, looking oddly shy.

“Hi, you must be Angel’s son, the one no one told me about.” Buffy’s eyes cut over to Angel who shrank away.

“He went through a lot of effort to hide me away,” Connor said.

“She means before that,” Willow explained. “Wes explained about the spell. There just wasn’t time to tell you, Buffy, after I first found out and afterwards, with the First Evil, the right time never came.”

“And things here were always so crazy,” Angel said.

“Like me getting kidnapped and raised in hell,” Connor put in.

“Like that. Later, when we catch Andrew’s killers and get the Alatyr back, I’ll explain why I never found the right time to tell you, Buffy,” Angel said, apologetically.

“You two were together once, weren’t you?” Connor asked, looking between them.

“Yes, but that’s also a long story for another time, but it is how Willow knew how to put Angelus in his cage,” Angel replied.

“That makes sense out of something that confused the crap out of me at the time. Cordy got mad at me, thinking I liked Faith, talking about me having my dad’s weakness for Slayers while she’s bouncing me off walls.” Connor’s brilliant blue eyes dimmed.

“She did that?” Angel put a hand on his son’s shoulder, looking shocked and upset.

“Now I’ve another reason to dislike her,” Gwen grumbled.

Connor turned to her, taking her hand. “I’m sorry, love. I should have introduced you. This is my wife, Gwen.”

“You’re married?” Faith raised an eyebrow.

Connor made a face. “Why does everyone say that like it’s a huge surprise?”

“Worry about it later. Can I go change before we talk strategy?” Angel asked.

“God yes, you don’t have any underpants on under those shorts.” Spike waved him off. “Too bad we don’t have a camera, though.”

“Why are you even looking?” Angel grumbled.

“Hard to miss all that jiggling around even if you’re trying hard not to look,” Spike replied, lighting up.

“I had to go in the pool, and he wouldn’t let me back in his house wet.” Angel jerked a thumb at Connor.

“My floors are teak, not to mention some of the carpets are wool and silk. No chlorine should ever touch it,” Connor said. “And it’s not my fault you’re too fat to borrow my clothes.”
Angel managed to look highly offended. “I’m not fat. You’re a sack of bones. I’m going to change.”

“While he does that, I’ll get the security tapes. We can screen capture that outfit to our heart’s content,” Kate said, smiling at the vampire.

“Don’t you dare,” Angel warned, knowing it was useless. They’d be using the picture as the company’s Christmas cards with his luck. He tried to leave with as much dignity as he could in the horrible shorts and Hawaiian Mod shirt.

“Less than two hours, Connor, and you’ve managed to torque him off more than I’ve seen him in years,” Gunn said. “Yep, we’re back to normal.”

“Happy to be of service.” Connor beamed.

Spike ambled over to him, examining Connor closely. “Can’t believe Peaches has a son.”

“Peaches?” Connor’s grin widened.

“Don’t you call him that,” Faith warned, elbowing Spike.

“Gotta question for ya, kid. Are you going to shoot me, douse me with holy water, shove me in sunlight or otherwise stake me, or are you done with all of that?” Spike asked.

Connor’s lips skinned back. “Do I have any reason not to?”

“Spike has a soul, Connor, like your father,” Wes said.

“Not to mention we’re kin,” Spike said, touching Connor’s shoulder as if to prove he was real.

“Your sister, in the way vampire’s usually do it, was my mom.”

“Wow, just when I didn’t think my day could get any worse, you have to go and say that.” Connor backed away from him.

“Yes, well, being related to Spike would disturb the best of us,” Giles said, and the vampire’s jaw dropped. “I’m sure it’ll probably do no good to ask who you’re working for, and if you have any idea who Ethan is working for.”

“I don’t know this Ethan fellow and his demon friend beyond the fact they ran me down with a Hummer,” Connor said. “As for my buyer, even if I knew anything about them, I wouldn’t say. Bad for business.”

“We don’t really like to know much about our employers,” Gwen said, grimly. “It’s not good for the health.”

“But this makes me curious. Gunn, can I borrow your computer?” Connor asked. “Given our failure, the buyer might be looking for another operative.”

“Help yourself.”

Connor started weeding through his messages. His face darkened.

“The buyer’s looking for alternatives.” Gwen read his look.

“We have until midnight to get the Alatyr back in our possession,” Connor said.
“We so don’t need another player in the game,” Buffy said.

“That’s something to consider if we get the Alatyr back,” Connor said. “Our buyer isn’t just going to give up. If you try to restore the Alatyr to Booyan Island, the buyer might fetch it back. We might want to start thinking along the lines of preventing that,” Connor suggested as Angel returned outfitted in all black.

“All better?” Buffy couldn’t hide her smile.

Angel scowled at her then sat down behind his desk. “Yes, so thoughts on how we’re going to find the Alatyr?”

“Let me give our magic contacts a call,” Gwen said. She put in the call. “Hello, Caran? Yes, thanks, I’ll tell him. How about the other matter?...No? Okay, keep trying, thanks.” Gwen hung up. “No luck on tracking the Alatyr but they do have that anti-invite the vampire spell you wanted, Connor.”

“Oh, good.”

“You were going to ban me?” Angel looked hurt.

“Hey, if a strange vampire you didn’t know got into your house, wouldn’t you try to ban it?” Connor asked.

“I’m not an it,” Angel grated out.

“He’s a man but just barely. Ask any of his lovers,” Spike smirked.

“Connor, any time you get an urge to kill a vampire, you can start there.” Angel jerked a thumb at Spike who just snorted. Connor looked delighted.

“That’s not helping,” Buffy said, her eyes narrowing.

Angel held up a hand. “Willow, Giles, Wes, any thoughts on tracking the Alatyr?”

“Most of the spells Giles and I’ve tried failed,” Willow said.

“Why don’t we go to the library? It has access to things even the Watchers don’t have. We can look for another way to track the stone,” Wes said.

“We know it can be done. Ethan tracked it to us using a floating oak leaf,” Gwen said. “We used that same leaf to track it back here but the spell wore off.”

“Floating leaf? I think I might know that spell,” Giles said.

“Good, in the meantime why doesn’t someone who’s had contact with the stone sing for Lorne? That might be the quickest way to find it,” Wes suggested.

“That would be Gwen or Connor. They handled it the most,” Gunn said.

“It was in Angel’s safe,” Connor protested.

“No one wants to hear me sing,” Angel shot back.

“What makes you think we’d be any better than you?” Connor asked.

“You’d have to be, kiddo,” Lorne replied, patting him on the back.
Connor wrinkled his nose. “This sucks.”

“Let’s shoot for who does it,” Gwen said, shaking her fist.

Connor joined her in the fist shaking. They shot out their fingers, yelling out numbers in Italian. This went on until Gwen shouted out the exact number of their combined fingers, and Connor snatched his hand away.

“Damn. Who taught you to play morra that well?” he grumbled.

“Your friend, Dom.” She grinned.

“It’s not hard, spice cake, just warble a little something. That should be all I need,” Lorne said encouragingly.

Connor sighed and hesitantly sang.

“So may this round be on the corpse of a dead man
With a toast that tells of a love you never shared
So as we dance on the grave of the misbehaved
Raise your glass and sing the praise of a fallen soul

Many bow their heads for this man they knew so well
With solemn thoughts they drink and drug for a resurrection
Facing death you fear no danger
While Mothas shed their tears through a veil of desperation
These fiends of vicious breed raise holy hell.”

His eyes pleaded with Lorne to let him stop.

Lorne finally held up a hand. “You don’t sing all that bad but your song selection.” The demon shuddered.

“Hey, I’m the one who has to hear him singing *Curse of a Fallen Soul* along with the Dropkick Murphys all the time,” Gwen said. “Be thankful he didn’t pick the Pogues or The Tossers. Connor loves Irish punk bands.”

“Hey, maybe the kid’s not so bad.” Spike nodded approvingly.

“Did you see anything, Lorne?” Connor asked, ignoring the vampire.

“Does a park with a classical orchestra mean anything to you?” Lorne asked.

“Griffith Park,” Angel piped up immediately.

Connor nodded. “The symphony in the glen. They’re performing tonight.”

“You do classical music?” Gunn smirked.

“Yeah.” Connor sounded a little exasperated as if no one could believe he had a little culture.

“I go sometimes, too,” Angel said, pleased he finally found something he might actually be able to bond with his son over. “I know exactly where it is.”

“So we think that’s where we should go?” Buffy asked.
“We’ll see what Wes and the others come up with,” Angel said. “And we can think about what we’re going to do once we get the Alatyr back.”

Angel was disappointed when Wes, Giles and Willow came back in defeat. Ethan had shielded the Alatyr from detection. They thought they might be able to break it eventually but Giles and Willow were totally exhausted from the teleportation spell. Angel’s team, not to mention Connor and Gwen, were wiped from days of little sleep. They decided their best bet was to actually try and sleep and head to the park at night, gambling on Lorne’s reading.

X X X

Connor didn’t like the set up. There were far too many people in Griffith Park for them to do this easily. He had no doubt of the outcome. Two Slayers, two vampires, himself and Gwen rounded out the super powered people. Giles, Willow and Wes had the corner of the magic market. Gunn and Kate could handle themselves. He doubted Ethan and the demon had a prayer but that didn’t mean innocent people weren’t going to get hurt. The Jesked demons was obviously willing to kill humans. Worse, a storm was rolling in.

They had fanned out around the fringes of the park, figuring the deal wouldn’t be going down in the middle of the crowd that had showed up for Mostly Mozart, a predictable selection but always a crowd pleaser. Connor could hear the animals from the nearby zoo over the strains of the Serenata Notturna. He took Gwen’s hand, sparing a moment for a kiss to those delicate digits. He felt eyes on him, and didn’t have to turn to know Angel was watching. Suddenly he stopped and looked back at the vampire. He saw Angel testing the air was well.

Buffy jogged over to them. “You found something?”

“His scent,” Angel said and headed for the tree line.

The rest of the group took note and they converged. Connor saw Ethan in the shadows of the trees talking to several short men built much like his companion was. They had a large container that Ethan was about to put the Alatyr inside. Connor glanced up hearing a peal of thunder. That didn’t bode well.

“More Jeskeds,” Spike said. “They ain’t brave but they can really hurt you if they get hold of you.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Buffy said then glanced up at the sky. “I think it’s about to rain.”

“Yeah, we noticed,” Connor said. “Everyone might want to give Gwen a wide berth.”

“Why?” Faith asked.

Before Connor could reply, a deafening clap of thunder echoed in the clearing and lightning sent Gwen rolling head over heels.

“Shit,” Faith jerked to a stop.

Connor helped Gwen up. “My wife tends to attract lightning.”

“That’s not all we’re attracting.” Angel pointed towards the tree line. Ethan and his demon companions had seen the celestial display of wrath and were running.
“Told you they weren’t brave,” Spike said.

“Damn it.” Buffy took off at top speed.

Gwen shoved Connor ahead of her, and he didn’t wait for her. She was fast but she couldn’t keep up with Buffy, Faith, Angel and himself. His ankle was still hurting but not like yesterday. The demons weren’t particularly fast either but Connor didn’t like where they were going. “No! Don’t let them get to the historical merry-go-round. I like the merry-go-round.”

“We’ll try not to break it much,” Buffy called over her shoulder.

Connor scowled. He didn’t want to see a pile of irreplaceable jewel-encrusted bridles, sunflower and lion head decorated blankets and horse heads everywhere. They poured on more speed, and he managed to grab one of the demons before it got to the carousel. It whirled on him, trying to gore him with its horns. He easily side stepped but saw his companions were all having similar problems. Worse, Ethan was the one who was carrying the Alatyr, and he had jumped on the still carousel. At least it was closed, and no children were going to be imperiled by what they were doing.

Connor pulled out the knife he had hidden in a boot sheath. It wasn’t as long as he might have liked but it wasn’t as if they could walk into Griffith Park well-armed. He managed to gut the demon anyhow, blue ichor spilling over his hands. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Gwen grab two of them just as lightning hit her again. She was fine. The demons fried.

Buffy and Faith were fighting back to back while Wes, Gunn and Kate were taking on another pack of the demons. Connor saw Giles go for Ethan on the merry-go-round and went to help, catching a demon fist in his kidneys for his trouble. Breathless, Connor rolled on the ground, kicking up, shattering the thing’s knee. He slit its throat when it went down. At least they had the decency to turn into a powdery blue pile of sand when they died.

“Give it up, Ripper. Don’t you know by now I always have the upper hand?” Connor heard Ethan saying.

“Is that why usually you’re the one on the ground spitting teeth?” Giles inquired, and before Connor could go to help he heard flesh hitting flesh. Ethan groaned, whacking his head off a jumping horse as he went down. The Alatyr rolled free, and Giles scooped it up just as a demon snared him by the shirt. He hauled Giles into killing range when Willow shouted something in Latin, and the demon flew backwards right into Angel’s kill zone.

Connor looked around and saw nothing but piles of blue sand left and Ethan scurrying off into the nearby parking lot. “Son of a bitch.” He tore off after the man and nearly got ran over for his trouble. Disappointed, he jogged back to the others, taking note that no one on their team looked seriously hurt. “He got away.”

“He usually does,” Giles said, sardonically.

“I could probably track him,” Connor said.

“Ethan’s good at covering his tracks. You could give it a try if you want but the storm’s getting worse,” Giles said, and as if on cue the sky opened up and rain pelted down.

“That’ll kill the scent trail quick,” Angel said.

“We have the Alatyr,” Buffy said. “Maybe we should get inside before Gwen gets hit too many more times.”
“I’d like that,” Gwen said ruefully.

“And I think I have an idea how to get the Alatyr back to Booyan Island safely and get my buyer off its trail. I just need to talk to Willow, Giles and Wes about the magical logistics of it,” Connor said.

“So, back to the firm then,” Wes said. “We don’t have much time before your buyer hires someone else.”

“Okay, but we’re going to need to take the stone to our buyer,” Connor said.

“Ooo, I don’t think so,” Buffy protested, arms akimbo. It would have been more intimidating without the rain rolling down her face.

“We have to if this is going to work,” Connor replied.

“What makes you think we’ll let you take it?” Faith asked, eyeing the sky angrily.

“We’ll cut you in on the profits.” Connor shrugged, pushing his wet hair back.

Faith’s eyes lit up. “How much?”

“Faith!” Buffy said, sharply.

“What did you have in mind, Connor?” Giles shot his two Slayers a warning look, trying to get control of the situation before they could really get to squabbling.

“We have to convince our buyer the Alatyr is out of reach for good but for what I have planned I’ll need the stone. You’ll get it back,” he assured them.

“And you’ll pay us rent on the stone for this?” Faith pressed, her dark eyes gleaming.

“Faith, honestly, that’s not why we’re here,” Willow said, sternly, crossing her hand over her chest, realizing her pale green shirt was now nearly see-thru with rain.

“Hey, he offered.” Faith tossed her hair. “I say we take him up on it.”

“We’ll decide after we hear his plan,” Buffy replied. “How much did you have in mind?”

“Can’t we do this out of the rain?” Giles urged.

“How much do you want?” Connor countered.

“How about forty grand,” Faith said quickly. “That’s ten thou a piece. We could have a little fun.”

“Done, if you agree to the plan.” Connor couldn’t help but smile.

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Connor was surprised to see the buyer, or at least the proxy, was nearly eighty years old but seemingly perfectly at home in her suite in one of Las Vegas’ finest offerings. He and Gwen watched her examine the stone carefully, handing it off to one of her companions whom Connor presumed was a mage of some sort. He inspected it for authenticity. He nodded at the old woman
who smiled up at Connor and Gwen.

“It’s everything I could have hoped for. With its power maybe I’ll look a little like you dear, when it’s done,” the woman said, tapping Gwen’s hand.

To her credit, Gwen didn’t shudder. Connor hadn’t ever put much stock in people being so evil you could feel it. Demons yes, people no but this woman had proved him wrong. She gave him the cold chills. He was hoping Willow’s spell was going to work. Buffy wasn’t thrilled with the risky plan to begin with, and he didn’t want to explain if something went wrong.

“Make the transfer,” the old woman said to her companion and Connor watched as they electronically transferred the millions into his Swiss account.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Gwen said. “Sorry it was so problematic.”

“You two are as good as your reputation.” The old woman kissed the stone. “I can’t wait.” She put the stone to her chest. “Start the spell.”

“We should study it some more,” her companion protested.

“I’m not going to be this old and pained for a second longer. Do it,” the old woman insisted. “Use the Alatyr to heal me.”

Frowning, her companion started chanting and the stone started to glow. “That’s not right. I’m nowhere near done with the ritual.”

“What’s wrong?” the old woman asked, then shrieked as the stone burst in a white bright light, turning into dust and pebbles. “No!”

“Wow, what was that?” Connor asked.

“It’s gone,” Gwen said.

“Maybe you were too impure,” the mage said, and the old woman wept, throwing the pebbly bits at him.

Connor and Gwen just backed out and merged with the casino crowd in the game rooms below. Connor flipped open his phone and placed a call, speaking the code phrase. “Was that twenty on black or red? Uh-huh. Great.”

Gwen looked at him as he rang off. “It worked.”

“Perfectly.” Connor let himself relax. Willow’s spell had worked as he had hoped. A teleportative bait and switch, a little light show, and Willow yanked the stone back to her, leaving the rubble. “They have it where it’ll be safe.”

“Good,” Gwen said, looping her arm around his waist.
“That was the most fantastic meal ever,” Buffy said, patting her belly which was full of linguine alla’arragosta.

“Beaurivage does make some of the best Italian around,” Gwen said, opening the front door of her home.

“At thirty dollars a dinner, I should hope so,” Willow said. “And you said there was dessert for later?”

“We’ll go to Gladstone’s 4 Fish. They have chocolate desserts to die for,” Gwen assured her. “A mile high chocolate cake.”

“I could live like this,” Faith said, strolling through Connor’s home and out onto the back patio where Spike and Angel were sitting at the pool bar.

Connor grinned. Everyone had gone to an early dinner before the vampires could come out to play so they would have more time to spend with them afterwards. Gwen had taken the ladies shopping for clothing appropriate to wear to the lavish restaurant they had treated them to.

“I mean, look at this pool.” Faith slid her foot out of her pump and touched a toe to water. “I’m glad Gwen insisted we get suits, too.”

“You might regret that invite when you can’t pry her out of one of your guest rooms.” Buffy laughed.

“Pool, hot tub, private walk to the beach, make yourself at home,” Connor said.

“See, you aren’t just another pretty face.” Gwen kissed his cheek. “But you all are welcome to stay here for a few days until you get things taken care of.”

“Andrew will be buried tomorrow,” Giles said, looking regretful to interject business after such a relaxing day. “My group will return the Alatyr to its rightful spot. Wes will come with us, if Angel wants someone along, or do you prefer to send Connor?”

“I have pretty much no control over him, Giles,” Angel said, ruefully.

“Damn straight. I think I should keep a distance from the stone just in case the buyer wasn’t totally convinced,” Connor said. “You have enough protection on the Alatyr with the group that’s already going.”

“Speaking of that, you owe us rental money,” Faith said with a ‘gimme’ motion. “Or I could just take Gwen’s jewelry. I could be happy with that.”
Angel came over and touched Gwen’s necklace. “It is exquisite.” He looked at the necklace, a double strand of freshwater pearls supporting a triangular array of over a dozen white-gold dragonflies each connected to the ones lower in the pyramid with more pearls and each body a brilliant cut diamond. She wore a matching bracelet that was three tiers of pearls and diamond bodied dragonflies. Matching dragonfly earrings completed the set.

“Thank you.” Gwen preened.

“Can’t have that, Faith. I bought Gwen that for her birthday and together, not counting her wedding ring, you’re looking at over half of the agreed upon price,” Connor said.

“You’re wearing over twenty thousand dollars in jewels?” Buffy’s mouth gaped.

“Afraid so. Why don’t we all go inside, get changed into swimsuits and just relax,” Gwen said, a little sheepishly. “Connor can transfer the money to your accounts.”

“How do you want me to do it?” Connor asked.

“Give it all to Giles. We’ll divide it up later,” Buffy said, and Faith looked disappointed.

Connor nodded. “Dad, did you and Spike bring suits or is that something we really don’t want to see?”

“You don’t want to see it,” Angel replied with a whole body shudder.

“Speak for yourself, Peaches. I’m going swimming,” Spike said.


Connor left them bickering at the pool side bar as he went in and made the money transfer with Giles’ help. Everyone else changed into swimsuits, then he got a few bottles of Kristal for the ladies and a bottle of Scotch for the men, taking it out to the pool bar. “I might have been a little sexist in thinking all you ladies wanted wine. Anyone want the a hundred year old Scotch?”

“Did you say a hundred years?” Giles asked, almost salivating. He was all but one with the bar rail.

“Yes, I did. Vampires can drink beer since they have no taste anyhow,” Connor said, decanting scotch into crystal glasses.

“I want to try the scotch,” Angel said, disappointed.

Connor gave in and let both of them have some scotch. Kate opted for the scotch and Lorne the wine. Gwen raised a glass. “To a job, if not well done, at least done for the right reasons in the end.”

They drank to that. Faith was the first to break for the pool, barely able to restrain herself. “So, how much did you two end up making after the forty grand you gave us?”

“The job was for fifty,” Connor said.

“Fifty? You ended up taking all that punishment for a mere ten thousand?” Gunn shot them a pitying look.

“Fifty million. You should have asked that question first, Faith,” Connor grinned.

“You’re shitting me, right?” Faith’s eyes were as wide as the pool she treaded water in.
“No.”

“That’s cheating,” she pouted.

“No, just a bad business deal on your end. Besides, I’m a thief. Were you expecting complete honesty?” Connor grinned, and Angel shook his head, looking pained.

“I’m still working on fifty million. I can’t picture that,” Willow said. “Then you two must be worth...”

“A few billion. See Dad, really the spell did work out in my favor,” Connor said.

“I never wanted you to be a...billions? Really?” Angel asked, stunned.

“Gwen was probably worth a billion before I even met her,” Connor said, pulling his wife against him.

“I should have been nicer to you way back when,” Faith lamented.

“No, you and Connor...if the darkness ever came out of either of you, together you’d make me and Darla look like well...angels.” Angel smirked.

“My dad has such faith in us,” Connor said. “Who’s for a little music?”

“Got any good punk? Like the Sex Pistols?” Spike asked.

“Don’t even think about it,” Gwen warned. “I’ll put on some dance mixes.”

“That might be for the best,” Connor said. “Oh, and if the dogs jump in the pool, just let them swim. You can’t stop a hundred and fifty pound wet dog.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Buffy said and joined Faith in the pool.

X X X

The house was mostly quiet; some of the partiers asleep in the guest rooms; Faith, Buffy and Gunn still out with the vampires at the pool. Connor and Gwen had retired to their room, sitting in the yab yum position, her in his lap, arms around each other, hearts touching as they just gazed into each other’s eyes. The followers of Tantra believed it to be a position of profound connection. Connor agreed. They didn’t speak. There was no need to. Connor could feel the energy flowing from Gwen into him and back again. It wasn’t a time for their wild games. The soft, gentle reconnection was what they needed.

Eventually they broke the connection, Gwen stretching out on the bed. Their lips met as he slowly slipped inside her, their love making quiet, honey-hipped but intense. They both knew they had come close to losing their lives. They wouldn’t talk about that now but Connor knew later, maybe there would be adjustments in how they lived. For now, they would simply glory in each other.

Afterwards, they lay entwined in each other’s arms. He kissed her again. “The spell changes nothing. I still love you.”

“I know,” she murmured. “It makes you even more special.”

Connor let her fall asleep against him. Sleep, however, wouldn’t find him. He slipped out of bed and
saw the party had moved indoors at least in so much as Faith and Gunn were passed out on the modular couch in the game room. Buffy was asleep on a chaise lounge overlooking the view. He didn’t see Spike at all. Angel was outside looking at the beach. “It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

“Gorgeous. I forget to take the time to appreciate stuff like this,” his father replied.

“I try to make time every night. Usually I run the beach before dawn, just getting in touch with nature, with the power in this body.” Connor tapped his chest.

Angel turned to him. “Are you happy, son?”

“Yes, and knowing the truth hasn’t changed that. I’m not sure how I feel about having my mind messed with but I don’t doubt you meant well, that you were trying to do the right thing. I meant what I said that day in the mall. I know you tried very hard to love me, and I can’t stand here surrounded by everything I have and complain about how it was done,” Connor said.

Angel grabbed him, pulling him close. “I’ll tell you all about how and why, whatever you want to know.”

Connor surprised himself by embracing his father back. “I have a lot of questions, not just about the spell. About you and mom and things I never had time to ask before.”

“I’ll do my best to answer...even if it’s not stuff I really want you to know about it. I can’t expect you to know how you really feel if I’m not honest,” Angel said.

Connor backed away, feeling an emotional tide trying to break free. “That’s all I’m asking for.” He took a deep swallow regaining control. He looked down at Angel’s feet. “I can’t sleep. Your shoes are good. You want to join me on a run up the beach?”

Angel looked at him then down at the water. “Uh, okay. Can’t remember the last time I did that when something wasn’t chasing me.”

“Like I said, nature, the strength of your own body, it’s a good high.”

Connor went in and changed into his running gear then led his father down to the surf. “I’ll stay closer to the water. I have the aquatic track shoes. Try to keep up, old man.”

“The day I can’t outrun you, is the day I hang it up,” Angel retorted, good naturedly.

Connor snorted. “Please, it’ll be all you can do to keep that bulk moving.”

“At least I’m not in any danger of disappearing if I turn sideways. No wonder security measures can’t stop you.”

This time Connor laughed and started jogging in the moonlight. Angel paced right along with him. Connor got lost in the feeling of finally having all the pieces back in place, feeling like he belonged. He knew he’d have to have a talk about not being a thief with Angel, knew that this reconnection might make bumps in his and Gwen’s relationship but he wasn’t worried. It had been a long time since he felt worry free. Nothing was going to take that from him tonight.

He scooped a hand into the cool surf and splashed Angel playfully. He darted ahead of the sputtering vampire, laughing. He knew Angel would pay him back for that but that was all right, too. Fate had found its way in reuniting them and finding out what that meant, for better or worse, was going to be an adventure.
~Fin~
Author’s Note - St. Dismas is a real Catholic saint, the ‘good’ thief. The Alatyr is from Russian myth.

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