A Parliament of Monsters
by Barb Cummings (Rahirah)

Summary

All's quiet in Sunnydale... except for the appearance of a new Slayer in town, the return of Riley Finn, and oh, yeah... looks like Angelus may be on the rampage again in L.A. Both Buffy and Spike have choices to make - and no matter what they choose, their lives will never be the same again.

Notes

12/13/2015: Hi all. In preparation for posting Chapter 13, I've gone back and done some editing on the earlier chapters. For the most part this has been very minor stuff indeed, just a word changed here or there, but there is one major alteration. Back when I was writing chapter 7 I got my timeline a bit confused, and though I tried to patch up the glitch in Chapter 8, it never worked very well. People who read closely will have noted that while a week or more is passing in L.A., only a day or two appears to pass in Sunnydale. So I've added a short scene to Chapter 7 which I hope will both fix this issue, and clarify exactly what happened to Riley's equipment.

This story is set in the same universe as A Raising in the Sun, Necessary Evils, et. al. (See the Barbverse Timeline for specifics.) It contains spoilers for previous works in the series. As
always, thanks to Jane Davitt and the Redemptionista Writers Group, betas extraordinaire.

POM is currently a WIP. YES, I still intend to finish it. NO, I do not know when that will be. If you're wondering whether you should read later works in the series and risk being spoiled for the ending, my personal recommendation is yes, by all means read ahead. I guarantee that when I do finish POM, it will be worth reading even if you already know how it ends. (And if you really want to know, I am more than happy to tell you exactly what happens in excruciating detail.)
Chapter 1

If fate were kind, Rupert Giles thought, it would be in a room such as this that he would die. The very air was redolent of knowledge - leather and ink and aging paper, and the lingering tang of lemon oil rubbed painstakingly into dark gleaming walnut panels. There were books, of course: rank upon rank of them, towering to the beams of the ceiling, titles in gold and scarlet and black. No uneasy tingle of power from grimoires or spellbooks in this sanctuary, just the unsullied power of the written word. An old-fashioned globe stood in the corner, its faded blues and greens and pinks a mosaic of obsolete borders. Outside the tall bay windows, squadrons of bees hummed about the garden, but the scarlet hibiscus nodding against the windowpane rather shattered the illusion of Shropshire in Pasadena. The hills visible against the smog-hazed horizon beyond the window were parched and brown with the breath of summer, the hot dry Santa Ana winds hissing down from the mountains. The sight was oddly comforting. He had lived in California long enough to miss it when he left. Dreadful thought.

A bee in its livery of black and yellow lit on the lip of the nearest blossom and crawled into its blazing heart, to emerge a moment later bathed in a golden haze of pollen. "Africanized," said the very old man seated behind the desk. He waved a gnarled hand at the window. "So-called killer bees. No place in the Southwestern United States they haven't invaded. The European honeybees were dying out. Mites. The killer bees are immune." He smiled, putting only the minimum necessary humor into the expression. "And for the most part, humanity lives cheek by jowl with them, none the wiser. Very like our own situation, in some ways."

"There are certain parallels," Giles agreed. He was in an agreeable mood. Good company, good Scotch - a trifle early in the day for it, but this was something of a special occasion - and every prospect of finding the information he'd come for. He leaned back into the sinfully inviting armchair. "But the bees serve a useful purpose that I dare say most vampires do not."

"Who can say what purpose all things serve in the great balance?" Bernard Crowley rose to his feet and crossed to the bookshelf, his thin knobby hands crab-walking over cracked spines and foxed corners until they found the book they sought. "You are an ambitious man, Mr. Giles." Fingers closing pincer-like on the leatherbound volume, he drew it from the shelf and returned to his chair, also leatherbound and nearly as ancient as the books which surrounded it. "I don't believe I've heard of anyone attempting such an in-depth study of a single vampire before."

Giles shrugged and took a sip of his Scotch. "It's been an enormous project, to be sure, but I've had very able help and the inestimable advantage of having access to a willing subject. I hope to make the finished work as much an ethnography as a biography, though the latter would be task enough. We know so little about the creatures we hunt." He offered a small, professional smile of his own. "Which is why I decided to complete the project despite my, er, recent parting of ways with the Council. Who knows when another such opportunity will arise?"

The lines bracketing Crowley's mouth flexed in disapproval. "I heard something about your recent disagreement with young Quentin. You have a publisher, then?"

"A correspondent of mine in New England has connections with the Miskatonic University Press, and... " Giles waved a deprecating hand. "But that's of no moment now."

"Mmm." Crowley eased forward and laid the book open across the desk. He flipped the pages over, one by one, and yellowing ghosts of newsprint past fluttered in the breeze of their turning, clippings and photographs of a New York more than thirty years gone. He looked up, eyes glittering in their setting of pouchled and wrinkled flesh. "Given your falling out with the Council, why do you assume
I might be willing to jeopardize my pension by helping the notorious renegade Rupert Giles?"

"I've achieved notoriety so swiftly, have I? Standards for villainy are non-existent these days." Giles set his glass down and met the older man's inquisitive gaze. "For one thing, because the accumulation of knowledge is an end in itself. And for another... " He hesitated. "I know something of you as well, Mr. Crowley. Your relationship with the Council was also rather strained in its day. You know what it is to have a Slayer in your charge form... attachments."

Crowley adjusted his glasses and gazed down at the pictures before him. Giles caught an upside-down glimpse of a young woman, a young man, a baby... brilliant white smiles in dark handsome faces, moments of joy captured and pinned like butterflies to the page. "Indeed I do. Though not, I may say, in so colorful a fashion as your Buffy Summers has managed."

The crumpled-parchment face gave away nothing, but there was a gleam in his ink-dot eyes, and Giles was unsure if anger or mockery predominated. The old man had earned the right to either emotion in ways someone like Quentin Travers never could. Choosing his words with the care of a man picking his way through an unfamiliar swamp, Giles said, "On occasion, a little too colorful. Which is why I would be everlastingly grateful for any independent corroboration of events you can offer."

Crowley leaned back and steepled his fingers, gazing down at the book full of memories. At length he said, "There are no substantial inaccuracies in his account of Nikki Wood's death that I can see. I never had the misfortune to run afoul of him myself, but Nikki encountered him several times before the end. She was a very observant woman - I assume you've read my official Watcher's diary for 1977? And later, of course, the witnesses who saw him leave the subway station after he'd killed her gave the police a very vivid description. There was no identifiable emotion in his voice, but his fingers were shaking as with surprising delicacy he coaxed a photograph free of the fasteners attaching it to the scrapbook. He leaned forward, offering it to Giles. "Her neck was broken. A clean kill. He never set fangs upon her, nor violated the body."

Giles took the photograph. Nikki Wood's dead eyes stared up at him from the floor of the subway car, her head cantled at a grotesque angle, her hands curling limp and helpless at her sides. She did not look asleep. "He has... spoken of her. He said... " Would this only make it harder? Would he want to know, in Crowley's place? "He saw her as a warrior. An equal. Not as... food, or a plaything." He laid the photograph reverently back upon the desk. "I don't suppose you have any contemporary photographs of... "

"Only this." Crowley held up another piece of paper, a copy of a police sketch. Even in the clumsy lines of the police rendering, there was no mistaking that face. Giles undid that catch of his briefcase and pulled out the photograph to compare. Beyond superficial differences of clothing and hairstyle, the high brow and aquiline nose, scimitar cheekbones and angular jaw were all the same, facing off across a quarter-century's gap. Across the room the old man's wrinkled throat worked, and the tremor in his hands increased. "That is the... subject?" Crowley inquired, a note of living pain in his voice as fragile as the old clippings in his lap.

Giles looked up, acutely aware that for the man before him, this was no matter of idle historical curiosity. "Yes. This is Spike." He passed the picture over: a slightly overexposed night shot of a small crowd of people standing around a bonfire on a sandy beach, making faces into the camera. At the forefront was a small, lithely-muscled man in a Union Jack t-shirt, out-at-the-knees blue jeans and scuffed black Docs, his thumbs hooked loosely into the waistband of his jeans. He had a slightly startled grin on his face; the flash had bleached his short spiky hair to an even more shocking white than the peroxide had, and stoked the pupils of his blue, blue eyes to a glowing demonic red. An
even smaller woman in white shorts and halter top stood beside him, her arm around his waist, her summer tan dark against his ivory skin. The photographer had caught her in the act of looking up, her eyes sparkling and her mouth half open, her hair a raw-honey blur whipping across her shoulders. "The woman with him is Buffy Summers."

Crowley stared at the photograph for a long time, running his fingertips across the images. "William the Bloody. No Angelus, but... sufficient unto the day." He looked at Giles, voice under control once more - but a control no longer effortless. "Was it destiny, you think, that brought him to the bed of a third Slayer, having sent two before her to their graves? And if destiny drove this creature to love a Slayer, why this one, do you suppose, and not... "

*And not the one you loved?* "Buffy is a remarkable young woman," Giles said, as if gentling something wild and wounded.

"They are all," Bernard Crowley replied, "remarkable young women." He stared at the photograph for a while longer, and turned it over to read the inscription on the back, in Buffy's careless scrawl. *Jul 4 2002 Dear Giles: Fireworks pretty. Had clambake after. S called everyone bloody Colonials till I clocked him. Wish you were here. Love, B.*

"And your Nikki more so than most." Giles put all the sincerity he was capable of into the words. "She was the longest-lived Slayer in this century, was she not?"

"She was twenty-five when he killed her," Crowley said, expressionless. "How much of his past does she know of?"

It took a second to realize Crowley had changed 'shes' in mid-sentence. "More than I do," Giles admitted. "Spike refused to tell me anything about his life before he was turned, but a few things Buffy's said lead me to believe he's confided in her. And she's seen all my notes." He swirled the melting ice cubes around in the bottom of his glass. "She is not associating with him out of ignorance, if that's what you're asking."

Crowley's mouth spasmed around a sound which might have been a curse or a prayer. He handed back the photograph of Spike, and wiped his fingers on his sleeve before picking up Nikki's and returning it and the police sketch to their places in the scrapbook. "He never made an attempt on my life, or on the lives of Nikki's family. Not out of any concern for us, or any sense of honor. You must understand, Mr. Giles, that we were unimportant to him. He had come to slay the Slayer. We were... irrelevant. Food, as you say, or playthings. Had we stood between him and her death, he would have killed any of us, gladly and without a second thought."

There was such a freight of scorn in those clipped, precise words. Giles could hardly reproach him for it; it was a marvel, all things considered, that Bernard Crowley had agreed to meet with him at all. "I understand, Mr. Crowley. Believe me, I never forget what Spike is. And neither, I think, does Buffy." He felt the inadequacy of the words even as he spoke them - what precisely was Spike these days? "He has changed, or perhaps... reverted, but it would serve none of us well to pretend that he was human."

The old man stood, and returned the scrapbook to its place on the shelf. "I find myself too weary to talk of Nikki any longer today. Forgive an old man his weakness, and accept my best wishes for completing your work."

The tone of dismissal was plain, and Giles suppressed a sigh and rose to his feet, following Crowley's shuffling steps out of the study and down the long hall to the front door. There was little to be gained in pressing the matter. "Perhaps I might call again, when you're feeling stronger?"
Mr. Crowley smiled, bland and inscrutable, holding open the screen door. "I fear that I expect to be very much occupied with other matters for the foreseeable future."

Giles made his reluctant farewells and walked down the winding path from the house to the street, brushing aside the drooping dusty fronds of the pepper trees, back to the rented Jaguar he'd left parked at the foot of the driveway. When he looked back, the old man was standing on the front stoop watching him go, dwindled to a bent scarecrow figure of twig-thin limbs and wispy cornsilk hair. Bernard Crowley's was, Giles thought, the fate of all Watchers: to survive one's Slayer and live on, surrounded by books.

Perhaps, if the fates were kind, he would not die in a room like that after all.

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It was an hour short of closing time, and there were a dozen people in the Fish Tank when Evie walked in. She discounted half of them right off. The two tired-looking women in garish spandex and cheap wigs were in the same trade she was, though they were offering different goods, and she'd never had much luck picking up women anyway. She inhaled, teasing individual human scents from the general miasma of sweat and despair, spilt beer and salt water that permeated the bar. Time was when the anticipation was almost as good as the kill, but these days her ribs were far too close to her skin for Evie to play around with her dinner. The old guy slumped in the corner booth, arthritic hands cupping a squat glass half-full of amber fluid - he might be looking for a moment of oblivion, but he was eaten out from within by something neither magic nor medicine would cure; she could smell the rotted-lilies scent of his illness. No, she wasn't that desperate.

Evie ordered a Michelob - she might as well get the cheap crap, since it tasted exactly the same as the expensive crap to a vampire's palate - and sauntered to the end of the bar. She leaned back, elbows propped against the bar rail, and sucked on her longneck, eyeing the crowd around the pool tables. Two big grizzled men with tattooed forearms and leather jackets gaping over beer bellies faced off over the expanse of worn green felt against a trio of slim brown pachucos with impeccably slicked-back hair. Possibilities there. Her eyes sized each one up in turn, looking for the telltale signs: a hint of pallor beneath dark skin or redneck tans, a crescent scar on the wrist or above the collarbone. Nothing. Nothing obvious, anyway. Her stomach growled resentfully and she took another swallow of beer to silence it. God, was she going to have to seduce some virgin?

It didn't used to be like this. Who knew she'd end up missing Whip's crappy run-down rat-trap someday? Shit, she'd cheered the night the Slayer torched the place, and skedaddled for L.A. and greener pastures when Whip and the others stormed off to take the Slayer on. Got no pride, Evie? Whip had sneered. Gonna let a human run us outta the sweetest setup we've ever had? To which the only possible answer was Fuck, yes! She couldn't afford pride - if she could, she wouldn't have been working for Whip in the first place. And it wasn't like she could have fought the brass-haired, brass-balled little bitch in her condition, anyway. Whip and all the others had been dust in the wind for years, and she was still undead and back in Sunnydale. Again.

She inhaled again. Oh, yeah, there. Male, prime of life, healthy. Evie shifted position, checking out the man at the other end of the bar. Wearing a battered leather jacket. Tall, heavy-set, dark-haired, face a scrimshaw of hard, wind-carved lines. Dude had eyes like a gravel quarry, some dark, indeterminate color between brown and grey. Probably played a mean game of poker. Evie stared dead center at his bowed shoulders and put some mojo into it - it was bullshit, but she liked to pretend she had some of that thrall thing going for her. The guy didn't twitch at all, but after a moment he turned. Just his head, no excess motion. Stony eyes looked her over.

They always wanted something more, the ones whose eyes looked like that. Something to make
Dinner is served. "Hey," she said. "That seat taken?"

The man held her gaze for a second longer, then returned to the contemplation of his beer foam. The hitch of his shoulders might have been a shrug or a come-on; Evie plumped for the latter and swivel-hipped it down the length of the bar. The two off-duty whores whispered behind scarlet-clawed hands as she passed them, but Evie didn't bother sorting their crow-chatter from the background noise. Focus on the meal, here.

She slid onto the stool beside him with a practiced wriggle. She hadn't seen herself in a mirror for seven years, and what she'd seen the last time she looked hadn't been all that and a bag of chips, but anyone playing shark in the Fish Tank wasn't fussy. About anything. Evie tossed her hair over one shoulder - long and glossy and black, her one good feature - and took a long swig of her hops-flavored soda water, then set the bottle down on the bar, running the tip of her index finger around the rim. "They serve any food here?" she asked. She was still stalking her prey. Not the way she used to do it in the old days - and don't even think about the old days, the power and the blood and the hunt, only three years gone and might as well be a hundred. She was still a hunter. Hell, this was better than working for Whip, even if she did go hungry more often than not.

Another grunt. "Don't ask me. First time I've been here."

"New in town?" That might be good or bad. "I grew up here. Lived in L.A. the last couple years. I just got back." She injected a little hesitancy, a little concern, into her voice. "You wanna be careful after dark, mister. You wouldn't think it from the Leave It To Beaver vibe, but there's a lot of weird shit goes down in Sunnydale."

The man actually barked out a laugh. "Believe me, sister, I can take care of myself."

Evie smiled, assessing the heft of his shoulders with a sidelong gaze. She could have lived off this one for a month, in the old days, if she'd been careful... but she hadn't needed to be, then. He was wearing some kind of necklace made out of... wolf's teeth, maybe? Bitchin'. Though human would have been more of a turn-on. This guy was more than he seemed, maybe, but that could be a plus. She grinned, slow and saucy, letting her tongue-tip trace the curve of her lower lip. "Bet you can. But I'm still hungry. You know anyplace around here where I might get a... bite, at this time of night? I promise I don't eat much."

She let the gold blossom and fade in her eyes, just obvious enough to make it clear what she was to someone in the know. His eyes reflected a smile almost as devoid of humanity as her own. "Yeah," he said. "Come to think of it, I do."

The streetlight outside the bar was broken, and the alley behind was impenetrably dark to human eyes. Her meal ticket glanced out at the street for passers-by before fading into the shadows of the rear entrance. He must have been back here before, Evie decided, picking her way through the maze of rotting garbage. The night air was close with the odors of stale urine, the dead-fish reek of the nearby docks, and things even a vampire really didn't want to think too much about. Rats scuttled away behind the piles of splintered wooden pallets, their sharp vicious chittering echoing off the brick and concrete. Evie shouldered up to the wall, folding her arms across her chest, unfolding them in irritation as she realized the defensiveness of her posture. Her prey kicked aside a packing crate. Would he want her to fake giving a shit? No, not this one. "You want a quickie, it's fifty bucks. You want me to make it last, it's a hundred," she said. Businesslike. "It's easier if you roll up your sleeve."

His flint-shard eyes swept her up and down, frank and impersonal as a man buying a racehorse. "I want it in the neck," he said. He pulled a wallet from his hip pocket, counted out five bedraggled twenties, and tossed them to the ground at her feet. "You'd better be worth it."
"Traditionalist, huh?" Evie shrugged her purse off and set it down in the cleanest spot she could find. She knelt to pick up the bills - this was part of the show she gave, letting them think they were in control, that their money meant something. She stuffed the money into her purse and straightened, smoothing her palms along her thighs and letting the gold rise in her eyes again. Her fangs made pinprick indentations in her lower lip. "Fine by me. You want it to scar?" She'd had fetishists ask for weirder things.

He opened his arms with a scary-ass smile. "Surprise me."

Evie's fingers closed on the heavy folds of leather and pulled him down, big broad shoulders kitten-helpless in her grip. The scent of dust and creosote hung about him, sweat-soaked leather and hot pulsing blood. Dizzy with hunger and need, Evie's lips parted and she set fangs to skin, fighting the urge to rend and tear - had to be oh so careful now, think good thoughts, how she wasn't going to kill this guy, wasn't going to rip through skin and cartilage and gorge herself on his fountaining blood. No. Slow. Careful. Because he wanted it. And it was OK if he wanted it. Suckle beneath her lips, salt beneath her tongue, God so good, careful, careful, careful...

It took a second to realize that the dagger-sharp pain was in her chest, not her head. "It's an oak dowel with a sharpened steel core," the flat voice whispered in her ear. She could feel the vibration of his vocal cords against her frozen lips. "It's slimmer than a wooden stake and far stronger, and I don't have to be a Slayer to push it all the way through your ribcage with no problem at all. What I want you to do is step back against the wall - no, you leave your demon face be. That's what I need, girl. Mind me, and maybe you won't be dust after I've finished."

A growl of outrage forced its way up her throat. What the hell was he up to? Was he gonna try to rape her? How goddam dare he? She was the hunter here. She would fucking kill this sonofabitch, if it made her head explode to do so. Later, when he didn't have twelve inches of wood stabbing her in the heart to make up for the three-inch floppy he probably sported elsewhere. Evie took two wary steps backward, until cold slimy brick pressed against her shoulder blades, and he followed, step for step. Most humans had no conception of how fast a vamp could move when they had to, but her captor (no, her dinner, damn it) kept that high-tech stake right to her ribs, right above the place her heart should have been hammering against. He'd torn her blouse and broken skin. She could feel blood she couldn't spare starting to seep into the fabric.

One-handed, he fished a pair of weirdly-curved pliers out of a coat pocket and limbered them up, click-click. She saw the silhouette of his upraised hand, black against black, and then the motion-sensitive light over the Fish Tank's rear entrance flooded the alley with its sickly glare and half-blinded her. "Open your mouth, girlie. And keep your face on. You drop it, or scream, or bite me, you're a pile of ash."

Evie blinked back light-tears. Christ on a crutch, he was going to go all Marathon Man on her. He was so goddam dead. She flung her head back, away from his looming backlit figure, lips skinned back in a snarl. Her skull cracked against the bricks, and she welcomed the pain as one more reason to hate. The man chuckled. "That's the ticket. Open wide." He levered the pliers into her mouth, forcing her jaw wide. The flat savorless taste of her own blood flooded her tongue, and the chill metal bruised her gums and split her lower lip as the pincers locked around her lower left canine.

Most humans had no conception of how keen a vampire's ears were, either. Someone was coming. She could hear the approaching footsteps, two pairs, man and a woman, and... no heartbeats. Fuck. Only another couple of vamps, and she'd be lucky if another vampire would so much as pause to snicker at her demise. On the other hand, maybe they'd take down Dr. Scrivello here just for the fun of it.
"- got to learn some time," the man's voice said. "Not every town's got a twenty-four-hour butcher on premises, you know." Light, sardonic British-accented baritone - she knew that voice. Double fuck. Spike. Not just any vampire, a completely fucked-up insane vampire who'd allied himself with the Slayer. On the other hand, Spike had some kind of hero complex these days. Maybe she could take advantage of it.

"But it's bunnies!" the woman countered, beseeching. "Cute little flop-eared bunnies. From a Make-the-World-Safe-For-Anyya standpoint, OK, I can see it, but can't we start with something that's got less personality? And fluffiness? Scales would be good. And beadiness of eye. Frogs, maybe - or wait, not frogs, they make me nervous. Lizards. Or maybe not lizards, because, skittery? Not a good trait in a breakfast food."

"Won't do, Red. 'S got to be warm-blooded." Spike sounded as though he'd given this particular lecture before. "What, d'you think pig's blood generates spontaneously in plastic bags? Someone's got to nail the pig between the eyes with a whacking great mallet, string it up on a meathook, slit its throat and let it bleed out." A snort. "Thinking about it's the only way I can get the stuff down, some days."

The guy that smelled of the desert didn't hear; his face was a mask of impassive concentration. He wasn't even getting off on this, and how sick was that? He wrenched hard on the handles of his pliers and the thin bone around the tooth went snap-crackle-pop. Evie gagged reflexively on blood, fingernails clawing gory gouges on the brickwork behind her as her canine was jerked free of its socket. Steel cracked against the incisor beside it. Her jaw was on fire - no throbbing, because no heartbeat, just a steady agonizing nuclear burn. "Help," she choked out. No human being would hear her more than a few feet away, but what was coming down the sidewalk wasn't human. "Please. I need help."

The stake point grated against bone. "One more word, girlie, you'll be beyond help." Her captor dropped the crimson-smeared fang into his coat pocket, hooked the pliers around her upper left canine, and began working it free in a brutal back-and-forth sawing motion. Her lips were numb. A viscous glistening delta of bloody saliva drooled over the corners of her mouth and down the front of her shirt - adding insult to injury, her stomach was still knotting with hunger. She was going to scream. Then the chill sharp weight against her chest would sink in and she'd dissolve into nothingness and that would be a relief. That was it. Scream, and it would all be over.

"AAAAHHH!"

Evie got a glimpse of a pale elfin face, distorted by ridges and fangs, and auburn hair flying - mother-of-pearl framed in dried blood. Pliers and steel-cored stake clattered to the filthy concrete, and the man who'd held them flew backwards against the stack of pallets, eyes white-ringed with startlement and pain. Wood splintered and collapsed beneath his weight. Her nemesis rolled to his knees, gasping and clutching his right hand to his belly. Small fingers encircled the man's left wrist with an audible crunch of bone grinding against bone and hauled him upright.

The little redhead glared at the man in the wolf's-tooth necklace, her thin chest expanding and contracting in jerky heaves. "Mr. Cain, I presume? You know, I'm really, truly getting to not like you at all."

Vampire, obviously, but there was something off about her, something weird in her scent and the tone of her voice, an alien light in the fulvius gold of her eyes. Evie turned and hotfooted it for the street. A shadow peeled off the wall as she reached the mouth of the alley, and strong hands caught her by the elbows, whirling her for an instant into the halogen glare of the light and back again into the darkness. Platinum blond hair and black leather jacket, knife-slash cheekbones, incongruous

"Let me go, *chupacabra*!" Evie howled, bucking against his grip. Spike chuckled and cuffed her across the mouth, and forked lighting jagged from the raw socket of her missing tooth all the way down her spinal cord. He flipped her off her feet and toted her back into the alley; Evie struggled, but the arm pinning hers to her sides might as well have been muscled with steel hawsers. Spike wasn't the oldest vampire she'd ever met, but he was up there, well into his second century, a hell of a lot stronger than she was and totally loco to boot, what with living off goddam animals and fucking the Slayer and helping close the Hellmouth and saving the world and all. Loco. Catch her running to humans and drinking the blood of dead pigs after... it happened? No fucking way.

Cain was down on his knees in the muck, staring up at the redhead with smoldering resentment, the first real expression Evie had seen on his face. He jerked his head in Spike's direction, his lips twisted in a rictus of disdain. "Spike."

"Cain." Spike stopped a few paces away, head cocked, regarding the confrontation with amused interest. "And now the traditional exchange of manly monosyllables is complete, I can't help but notice you're still in town. What part of sod off and die don't you understand?" He looked to the redhead, scarred eyebrow at half-mast. "I take it you're acquainted with this bloke, Will?"

Will transferred her grip from wrist to the necklace, yanking Cain's head down hard. The cord snapped with a high-tension *ping* and a dozen yellowing fangs rained to the ground, the fragile old bone shattering on impact. "He tried to kill Oz once." Her voice was Waterford crystal, clear and sharp, and Evie, listening, decided that maybe Cain had more to worry about from this Will than he did from Spike.

"Ah. You want to off him, then?" Spike sounded excessively cheerful at the prospect. "Dog-boy was a bit of a wanker, but - "

"Oh, for God's sake, Spike, it's just a damned vampire," Cain rasped. "Vermin even to other vermin. What's it to you if I take the saleable parts before your girlfriend dusts it? And speaking of your girlfriend, does she know you've got minions beating up humans for you?"

Spike extracted a slightly battered cigarette from an inside jacket pocket and tucked it in the corner of his mouth, flicking a glance in Willow's direction. The flare of his lighter picked out a starfield of sweat droplets on Cain's brow. "Interesting question, that," he drawled, drawing the cigarette to brilliant life. "Pity you won't get a chance to ask her. 'Sides, our Willow's not exactly a minion. More of a protege, like."

"You don't even remember me. Or Oz." Willow's voice quivered, but it wasn't a quiver that implied weakness. "I remember every single person I've tried to kill, Mr. Cain. And I don't feel like remembering you. You - you should leave. Now." She dropped Cain's wrist as if it were something fouler than alley-scrapings, and Evie realized in a burst of revolted clarity what was wrong with her.

"She's got a soul!"

"That being why Frank Buck here's still got his delicates intact." Spike plunked Evie down at his side and allowed her to get her feet underneath her. He turned the wolf-grin on Cain. "However, yours truly's not burdened, and Christ only knows when my killer instinct's going to overwhelm the extreme boredom inspired by the sight of your face. I don't care what you're after or why, Cain. Hellmouth's closed, and Sunnydale's my territory. You want bits and bobs, hunt 'em elsewhere."

Cain's breath hissing in and out through his clenched teeth was the only sound in the alley for a long
moment. He hooked an elbow over the top of the nearby stack of pallets and pulled himself upright in ungainly no-hands-Malurches. "You ride me out on a rail, Spike, and you're in deeper shit than you can imagine. I told you, I'm not freelance any longer. I've got backing from the big boys. Your pissant little operation's just in the way."

"Yeah, you've got backing. I've got nice sharp teeth. Your boss isn't around to wipe your arse right now, but I'm right here to wipe the floor with it." A chainsaw rumble rolled up from the bottom of his chest and Spike's eyes shaded from blue to predatory yellow beneath gnarled ridges of bone. Willow hastily followed suit, baring her fangs in a somewhat unconvincing snarl. "Thinking you'd better be off, Gib old mate."

And he was, staggering out of the alley with his torn coat-sleeve hanging askew. Willow watched him go with a cold light in her eyes, and then shrunk in on herself like Styrofoam in a pressure cooker. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God..."

"Snap out of it, Red. Time for that later." Spike gave Evie a little shake. He'd already shed his game face. "You. What's your story? You couldn't break loose from a berk who was practicing home dentistry with one hand and trying to keep you pinned with the other?"

Evie glared after the departing Cain with fervor exceeding Willow's, shaking with hunger and fury. He was her prey, damn it, she'd hunted him down and caught him - so she was using words instead of fangs, so what? She spat in Spike's face, or tried to; it didn't get very far. "I don't talk to goat-sucking, human-loving traitors. Stake me or turn me loose, chupacabra."

"Delighted. Will?"

Willow snuffled and scrubbed the heel of her hand across her eyes, wiping away the fangs and ridges. With a deep shuddery breath she reached over for a length of broken pallet. "Splintery or extra-splintery?"

Evie gulped. "He... got me by surprise."

"I'll bet. You look familiar. Dalton's get, aren't you?" Spike exhaled a thoughtful plume of blue smoke, examining her at greater length. "Worked for me for awhile, few years back?"

Evie shrugged, sullen. "Yeah. Before the Slayer kicked your ass, Angelus stole your girl, and you hightailed out of town with your tail between your legs."

Spike cuffed her again, hard enough to stagger her back a pace. Evie clapped a hand to her jaw and spat incomprehensible profanities as Spike licked her blood from his knuckles. "Fair cop," he said with surprising mildness. "But that was long ago and in another country, and besides, the wench is dead. Not that I hold that against her." His hand dropped and he dug a thumb into her ribs. "You're turning tricks, you're skin and bone, and you let that arsewipe pin you." The corner of his mouth took on a self-satisfied curl, and he laid a finger to his temple. "Got it. Initiative, Class of Double-Ought?"

"Fuck off."

"She's got a behavior-modification chip? Like you used to?" Something took a whetstone to Willow's dull gaze, and the eyes that rose to meet Evie's were keen with interest. "I always wondered what happened to Hostiles One through Sixteen. I thought you were the only one who got out when the Initiative lab got all destroyed. You mean, she's harmless?"

"I'm not harmless!" Evie snarled. "Better a chip in my head than a fucking disgusting soul crawling
around in my gut." Willow flinched, guilt displacing her momentary animation, and Evie turned the snarl on Spike. "Maybe I can't bite, but at least I'm living off human blood instead of human charity."

Spike snorted. "And living so very well, too, by the looks of you." Evie tried to smack his hand off her shoulder, with a signal lack of success. Not just because he was stronger than she was, either; she was getting dizzy from hunger and pain and blood loss. Right now she probably couldn't have fought Willow off. Willow was looking at her, all big sad puppy-eyed compassion. Fucking sick-making, her and her soul, standing there all clean and shiny and well-fed. "Nah, you're not harmless," Spike went on, a needling tone creeping into his voice. "Bet you've sussed out a way to kill even with the chip in your head, haven't you? Laid traps. Set houses afire. Beat the crap out of a demon or two, made them kill for you -" At the look on her face, he broke into incredulous laughter. "Bloody hell, you silly bint, you never even tried hitting a demon?"

"The chip only works on biochemistry native to this dimension," Willow put in helpfully. "It's got really interesting heuristics. I'd love to study one in detail." She eyed the back of Evie's skull with rather alarming avarice.

"Like you did all that stuff instead of hiding behind the Slayer's skirts, you big undead pussy?" Evie flung back at him. "Fuck you and the horse you slurp through a bendy straw, I'm out of here."

She yanked herself away and Spike let her go, his wicked blue eyes a-glitter with amusement. Evie made it three steps before one high heel went out from under her, and she collapsed beside her purse. Hundred bucks. She had Cain's hundred bucks in there, and that would buy... three, four bags of Willy's best at the Alibi Room. Enough to keep her mobile for another week if she'd been uninjured, barely enough to fuel her healing body for a day in her current condition. Evie looked down at the blood and spit smearing the front of her blouse. Assuming someone didn't just roll her as the easy prey she was, and steal the whole thing. She drew a ragged, determined breath, stowed the purse under one arm and forced herself to her feet again. If someone dusted her, she was taking the money with her.

"You're not going to make it a quarter-mile," Spike said behind her. "But happens we've got business in that direction."

Evie stopped, her head hanging. Screw it. Pride hadn't hit the sale table yet. "Yeah? I should care why?"

Spike sauntered over and sucked in his cheeks. "Got a word to have with Rack. Take us to his place, and I might feel generous later."

Evie blinked. The block or so surrounding Rack's place was prime hunting territory, a smorgasbord of half-dazed magic junkies too zoned on stolen power to run. She generally avoided it - too much of a fight to get a good spot. It wasn't far off; in fact, she'd passed it by on the way down to the docks, slinking past with lowered head, careful not to project any kind of challenge towards the three older vamps who'd staked out the entrance. But with these two with her... maybe she'd get a decent meal tonight after all. "Sure. Come on."

Spike and Willow followed her down the street, Spike vamp-silent, Willow walking almost as noisily as a human. Spike hadn't taught her shit about hunting, assuming he was her sire and responsible for such things. Or maybe she just didn't want to learn. Willow still looked haunted and unhappy - a soul thing, Evie guessed; Spike didn't say anything, but now and again he'd look down at her with a bewildered concern that was, in its way, even more deeply wrong than the soul business. Evie felt a sudden weird nostalgia for her own sire. She hadn't thought of Dalton for years, but he'd been all right. He'd looked damn funny when the Judge torched him, too.
Once they left the Fish Tank and its surrounding straggle of parked cars behind, the street was mostly deserted at this late hour. Evie tried to think through the hot-coal aching of her jaw. She wasn't going to heal fast, or at all, till she got a little blood in her, and she wasn't going to get any clientele till she healed. Her face felt lopsided and swollen. "Is it gonna grow back?" she asked.

"Eh?"

"The tooth," she said impatiently. "You're old and you've lost enough fights - do they grow back?"

Spike grinned - teeth sharp, white, and all in perfect working order. "Give it a week or two. Won't give you odds on a finger, though. Never tried that one."

That was some comfort, if he was telling the truth. Evie frowned, taking the next turn to Rack's place automatically. If she bought animal blood, her money would last longer, but fuck, she'd managed to avoid that ultimate humiliation for so long, and it chapped her ass to fail now. She'd been down, but she'd never been reduced to drinking warmed-over pig like the fucking sellouts behind her. Not that it seemed to have hurt them any. Neither Spike nor Willow were exactly the heavyset type, but she could tell from their previous close encounter that his ribs were sheathed in a healthy layer of muscle, and she was acutely aware of her own gauntness in comparison.

"You're the only one I've run into," Spike said abruptly. "From that place. Heard tell a few more made it out, but I never met any of 'em."

Evie shrugged. "There was another guy got out with me, during the big fight. He couldn't take it, not being able to feed. Walked into the sun after a month." She threw a defiant sneer over her shoulder. "I saw you there when the place went smash. Killing off your own kind."

Spike didn't look particularly chastened. "Takes some amount of brains, surviving as long as you have with no bite." The smirk that never entirely left his face when dealing with her intensified. "If you call what you do surviving."

"I do OK," Evie snapped. Almost there. Rack's entrance would be right off the next alley; she could feel it in her bones. They passed an old man huddled on the stoop of the Navy recruitment office, and her stomach rumbled in protest. Her feet slowed down of their own volition, and Evie looked at the crumpled heap of humanity longingly. He was drunk and stinking, and she'd regret it in the evening, but she couldn't bear the black hole in her gut any longer. "Wait up. Lemme get a bite from this guy."

Spike halted, interposing his deceptively lean frame between her and the bum. "Bloke's veins are running eighty proof, you nit. Two swallows and you'll keel over." He shucked off the motorcycle jacket and handed it to Willow, extending one bare arm, wrist up. "Well, come on, can't stand here all night."

Evie blinked down at the pale, blue-veined wrist before her. The streetlights gleamed off the curve of Spike's shoulder, where the dark fabric of his t-shirt strained over the muscles of his upper arm, and gilded the dusting of light brown hair on his forearm. "This doesn't make me your fucking minion or anything," she said.

"Good, because minions are suck-arse wastes of hemoglobin," Spike rejoined. "You do a job for me, I pay you, we go our separate ways."

Still Evie hesitated. She chin-pointed at Willow. "You made her. I can tell."

"No!" Willow looked quite shocked. "I made me. I mean, I made him make me. Kind of. I was in a
"You gonna drink or not?" Spike demanded.

It occurred to Evie that if the two of them had come straight down Alembert to the Fish Tank, there was no way in hell they could have missed Rack's. But somehow, as she sank her remaining fangs into the vein and sucked down mouthful after avid mouthful, it didn't matter all that much.

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Willow tilted her head back as she walked beneath the big wrought-iron arch of the main gates to Restfield Cemetery, watching the topmost branches of the elms claw at the moon overhead. It was a few days past full, a tarnished silver coin sailing across the clear, cold January night, and it bathed the cemetery in ghostly radiance. "You don't get it," she said. "I really, really wanted to kill him."

Spike, striding along at her side and keeping a scowling eye on the back of Evie's head, snorted. "'Course you did. I keep telling you, Red - vampire with a soul's still a vampire."

"But it wasn't like that," Willow kicked at a drift of dead leaves by the side of the gravel path, disconsolate. "I didn't want to eat him. This was me. Willow-me."

"Who were you expecting it to be, Wendell Wilkie?"

"I don't know. I thought... " She'd thought that she could label all her bad naughty urges *demon* and wall them off in a corner, all very Cask of Amontillado. That there'd be Good Willow with a soul, and Evil Willow without. And instead it was just all one big tangled mess of Willow. She jammed her hands into her coat pockets - she didn't need the coat for warmth these days, but you had to have somewhere to put your hands, right? "Do you remember what it was like? Having a soul?"

"Do I remember being a pathetic sodden mess?" Spike scoffed. "'Oooh, I'm sorry,' and 'Oh, how could I?' twenty-four-seven? Of course I - " He trailed off and crushed out his cigarette on the nearest tombstone, distance clouding his eyes, like a man trying to recall the words to a once-loved and long-forgotten song. "S' a little like remembering a dream. I felt things... try to get 'em back, sometimes. They don't make any sense to me now." He rolled his shoulders, shrugging introspection away. "You remember what it was like the five minutes you didn't have one?"

"Yeah." And it all made perfect sense. Willow shivered. "The scary thing? I wasn't someone else."

Spike chuckled, low and conspiratorial. "Terrifying, innit?" His scowl returned. "You think it would help to talk to the L.A. branch of the family..."

"Hey." Willow patted his arm. "Why? You've got me this far, right?"

Spike gave her a look, half startled pride and half reflexive sarcasm. "Guess I did."

"Hey! Spike! You said I could hit demons, right?" Evie hopped off a tombstone up ahead. She was all hyped up on the blood Spike had given her - vampire blood wasn't anything you could live off, but drinking from a vampire Spike's age was a little like mainlining Red Bull.

"You can try," Spike started, and then his eyes widened. Evie's foot was poised above a scaly, tight-coiled blue-black thing about the size of a bowling ball. "Oi, you daft bint, leave that be!"

Evie gave the whatever-it-was an energetic punt. It sailed over the tombstone in a graceful arc and
landed with a squeal and a meaty thump fifty yards away. She threw back her head with a whoop of glee and tore after it. Spike muttered an imprecation that would have melted lead and sprinted off after his giddy not-a-minion. Willow shook her head and suppressed a tiny and wholly unreasonable flare of jealousy as she pulled out her cell phone. Reception was always lousy inside Restfield, but she'd promised. She punched in Tara's number and strolled towards the crypt as the line rang, and rang, and rang. Just before the voicemail recording kicked in, Tara picked up. "Whas marrer?"

Tara's bedroom voice, drowsy and molasses-sweet. Tara sprawled out all golden and silky-soft on the bed, tangled up in blankets and smelling like sun-warmed rosemary and girl-musk - the very thought made her feel all toasty and purrsome inside. "Tara? It's just me, honey - you wanted me to call before I started home?"

"Mrmf." There was a muffled scraping noise, then, "Willow? It's three in the morning. I went to bed hours ago. I have morning classes tomorrow, remember?"

"Oh." Willow's face fell. She'd known that. "I'm sorry. We - I lost track of time. You know, Spike's been having trouble with this guy cutting in on the business, and he heard through the grapevine that someone was downtown tonight harvesting vampire teeth, and he asked if I wanted to come along when he took care of it, and you'll never guess who it turned out to be! Gib Cain!"

"Who?" Tara sounded as if she were starting to drift off.

"That werewolf hunter? That Buffy - never mind. Can you tell me about it tomorrow?"

"Well... it's good you found the guy. Did... did Spike really need you along tonight?"

Willow opened her mouth, shut it, and tried to keep the hurt out of her voice when she finally answered. "He wanted me along. He asked. He's my sire."

A sigh. "I know. And I'm... it's just that I worry. I mean... this isn't slaying. It's... " The voice on the phone sounded small and sad and confused now. "I know I've b-been... I haven't always been easy to be around, and sometimes... Never mind. I miss you. Come home soon."

Why? The Willow you miss died a year ago.

No. That wasn't fair, was it? Tara was trying, trying really hard. Willow's hand dropped to her side, cell dangling loosely from her fingers. A far-off voice piped "Willow? Willow?"

Spike had told her, back at the beginning, that being her sire didn't mean anything, but of course it did. She just couldn't define that meaning in human terms, and every time she tried she just ended up mumbling, "He's my sire," as if that could explain everything, and of course it could - to another vampire. Who would understand perfectly why she'd immediately accepted the casual offer to come along tonight, or why she resented the attention Spike gave the minions - despite Spike's crochets on the subject, she didn't know what else to call them - even though it was business and nothing to do with her.

It wasn't like she was out every night gadding about with Sunnydale's vampire set, she thought with a resentful scuff at the gravel. As Spike's get they accorded her grudging respect, but she wasn't one of them, nor did she want to be, really. She had a soul. Teensy social barrier, there, when she couldn't get into hanging around the water cooler and swapping tales of slaughter. Spike, who pursued humanity with such ferocious determination, made it easy to forget just how great the gap was, but sometimes she found herself staring even at him across an unbridgeable gulf.

Willow stuffed the plaintively cheeping cell phone back into her pocket and started to walk, fast,
barely noticing where her feet were taking her. A year ago, Willow Rosenberg had plans. Big plans. OK, she'd burnt out her magic to the point it might never come back, she'd come within an inch of destroying the world, she was teetering on the edge of losing the woman she loved, she was kind of a vampire, and worst of all, she'd gotten two Cs on her mid-terms. The goblins might just as well come and carry her away. But she'd rallied. She was going to turn things around. She might be a vampire, but she had a soul and she was going to use her vast powers for good and noble purposes. Like Angel. Helping the helpless, befriending the friendless, and defeating the defeatless. Just maybe not so much with the hitting, because contrary to popular belief and to Willow's secret disappointment, becoming a vampire did not instantly endow you with a black-belt level command of every martial art known to man. The third or fourth time Buffy sent her flying across the training room and into the wall, Willow decided that increased pain threshold or no, this was not on the Fun List.

No, she should follow her strengths. Study. Research. The acquisition of forbidden knowledge. She had an unparalleled in now. She could mingle with demons, find out stuff no human investigator could ever discover. She could be the Dian Fossey of the demon world. Visions of papers co-authored with Harriet Doyle danced in her head, for about the ten seconds it took to discover that demons could smell the soul on her like stink on Anya's favorite Brie, and were even less than inclined to talk to such a freak of nature than to a human.

So a year later, here she was, risking life, limb, and spontaneous combustion for her degree in the afternoons, pitching in with occasional slayage in the evenings, and tagging along after Spike trying to build up her demonic street cred at night. Neither world fit her any longer, and unlike Spike, who didn't give a damn what world he lived in so long as Buffy existed in the center of it, she had yet to find her balance. The Rosenberg outline for So You Want To Be A Vampire had been refined down to a single word: Don't.

Spike's pale head re-materialized among the carious teeth of the tombstones. He had one hand clamped firmly on Evie's shoulder and was marching her ahead of him at arm's length. A horrible reek preceded them, the unholy mating of rotten hamburger and week-old socks. Willow gagged and exhaled quickly, trying to get the nauseating smell out of her lungs. "... and that," Spike said through tightly-clenched jaw, "is why we don't kick the Vernex demons despite their ever-so-tempting resemblance to a football, you buggering little cow." He threw an exasperated glare in Willow's direction, Please, God, tell me I was never this thick at her age implicit in every bristling line of his body.

Evie's manic grin got wider at the sight of Willow. She pumped her fist in the air. "Fuckin' A, I can kick demons!"

The iron-grated windows of Spike's old crypt spilled welcoming golden light across the close-cropped lawn as they came crunching single-file up the path. Spike flung the door open with a crash and swept inside. "Heads up, children, we've got company."

The homey clutter of furniture the crypt had once sported was long gone, cleared out to make room for counters and shelves and bins and an enormous old roll-top desk. Willow had honestly never thought Spike would be able to make a go of his demon-hunting business - he might be great at the killing part, but dealing with clients and taxes and paperwork wasn't exactly his idiom. Spike had solved that little problem by delegating the clients, taxes, and paperwork to someone else at the earliest opportunity. If he wasn't good at fiddly details, he was stunningly good at motivating people who were, as long as the motivation in question involved the occasional boot to the head. It shouldn't have been a surprise; after all, he'd made his Sunnydale debut by taking over the Master's old gang lock, stock, and sepulchre, and running it pretty darn efficiently until Buffy'd dropped the organ on him.
The 'employees' currently in residence rose hurriedly to their feet as Spike ushered Evie inside - balding, phlegmatic David, who craved numbers as much as he craved blood and had taken payroll and accounting over from Anya when it got to be more than a part-time job; small, fierce Nadia and her slim fey brother Denny, who looked after inventory and packaging, and never explained why they'd killed their own sire.

"Gah, Spike, don't tell me you kicked that damn Vernex demon again!" Nadia complained, pinching her nose.

"Shut your gob or I'll kick it down your throat next time," Spike replied amiably. "New bird's Evie. She'll be joining our merry band of outlaws. David, take her downstairs, fetch out the Lincoln green, and give her a feed - yeah, it's pig, and you'll drink it and like it."

Evie followed David over to the ladder leading downstairs without protest - too wiped out to argue, probably. She'd fit in, Willow was pretty sure. It was uncanny, the way Spike could pick them. The weirdos, the misfits, the geeks; he homed in unerringly and went for the jugular. Spike couldn't have known Evie was chipped. But he'd seen something, some weakness, or some strength. Maybe it was just that a century and a quarter's worth of experience in cutting out the vulnerable loners from the human herd could apply just as well to the vampire herd.

Or maybe it took one to know one.

"I'm gonna take off," Willow called across the room. "I kinda promised Tara I'd be home, um, three hours ago."

Spike glanced up from the pile of receipts David was showing him. "I'll be along in a tick, Red. Car's by the front gate; I'll give you a lift if you want."

"Sire's pet," Nadia whispered with a sly grin.

Willow grinned back and walked out into the night, shutting the crypt door behind her with a smugness as unreasonable in human terms as the earlier jealousy had been. She headed back towards the street, swinging along the path with something approaching good cheer. She'd make it up to Tara. When she got home, she'd catch a nap, and then take a really hot shower just before her beloved woke up, and duck into bed before the borrowed heat could dissipate. And she'd remember to breathe the whole time, and there would be snuggling. Severe, unrestrained snuggling.

A staticky crackle issued from her pocket. Drat, had she forgotten to turn the phone off? Way to waste weekend minutes. She pulled her cell phone out, about to turn it off, when something made her pause.

She wasn't all that great at the hunting thing, and she knew it. The raw ability was there - she could see in the dark, she could hear faint, mysterious crunching noises at fifty paces, she could pick Tara's clothes out of a pile of laundry blindfolded by the scent... but telling one mysterious crunching noise from another was another matter. It wasn't that Spike hadn't tried to teach her, but... she'd slacked. With verve and determination. Left to his own devices, her sire would certainly have lost patience and resorted to the Angelus Method ("You don't learn, you don't eat") on her, but there was Tara. And Buffy. And she was a noble vampire, living in a town with a twenty-four-hour butcher, and no intention of snacking on infants, so: slackage emerged triumphant. And probably? Better all around that way, because deep down, the thought of her fangs tearing into living flesh stirred an excited little flutter in her stomach, and she couldn't help wondering just a tiny, ultra-miniturized bit how much richer and better and warmer that lovely blood-taste would be coming straight from the vein. Which was bad. Very bad.
Except now that she really needed the skills for a virtuous enterprise, she didn't have them. What Spike had said about relaxing into the night, becoming part of it? Willow stood still and allowed the nocturnal symphony to wash over her, wind and distant cars and the defiant late-night song of a mockingbird. She could still hear voices from the crypt, and Denny’d tuned a radio to one of his everlasting salsa stations, but this had come from the other direction. The faint crackle of vegetation crushing beneath stealthy feet, or just a stray ground squirrel? She sniffed the breeze, but whatever it was was staying safely downwind of her.

Maybe it was Cain, come back to cause trouble. Definite possibility there. Spike was way too cavalier about Cain. Maybe he did have friends in low places. Spike's business was small, true, but since the Hellmouth had closed, Sunnydale wasn't attracting the huge number of exotic demons it had in the past, and competition was getting tougher.

She was confident that she could handle Cain. Maybe she even wanted to handle Cain. Willow pulled her jacket tightly around herself and started off in the direction of the mysterious noise, moving as silently as she knew how. A stand of junipers loomed before her, dark upright sentinels clustered around a weatherbeaten mausoleum. Was something moving beneath the shadows of the trees? Willow faded back into the shadow of the marble walls and flattened her shoulders to the cool stone, holding her nonexistent breath. Not that she wanted to impress Tara, but... OK, she wanted to impress Tara. Spike hadn't just asked her along to be nice, because Spike, nice? Sheeyah. Maybe she wasn't UberWitch any longer, but she could still use her semi-awesome, why-didn't-I-listen-when-Spike-tried-to-teach-me-this-sneaky-predator-stuff powers for good, darn it. She could -

A dark figure cannonballed out of the underbrush, striking Willow in the midsection and rolling her over backwards on the damp grass. After a second's panic, Willow dredged up her lessons and made a clumsy left-handed grab for her attacker's arm - clumsy, but faster than any human could block.

Her attacker blocked it. Her cell phone tumbled across the grass, buzzing. Willow dug her heels into the turf for leverage and flopped like a gaffed salmon, but a pair of slim, muscular thighs pinned her arms to her sides and a stake-point sharp and deadly as desire pressed down against her heart. Long dark hair lashed her face and flipped back over her attacker's shoulders, revealing a delicate, olive-skinned face with almond eyes and a wide, generous mouth.

"Hello, cutie," the girl said with a triumphant grin, bracing to ram the stake home. "I'm Kennedy, and you're dust."
They weren't supposed to be cute, damn it. Scary or seductive or sleazy, that was OK, but they weren't supposed to wear patchwork suede jackets over baby-doll tops with silly little dancing giraffes appliqued along the collar. They weren't supposed to wear Raspberry Ice lipstick. They were supposed to smell like open graves and decay, not fresh-turned earth and strawberries, and they were definitely not allowed to look up at you with big glistening green eyes like a person. Because if vampires looked like that and smelled like that, you might hesitate for a second before plunging the stake between their ribs and into their silent, demonic hearts.

And if you hesitated that one moment, they'd get you. Or, in this case, something else would.

A panther-scream ripped the night. Kennedy's breath caught and her fingers tightened on the stake, and she whipped around to see another vampire charge out of the trees. No inexperienced fledge, this one; he was lean and mean and - shit, almost on top of her already. In the split second before she could decide to stake the redhead or go for the new threat, a small blonde whirlwind somersaulted over the mausoleum and rammed a three-inch heel into her elbow with the force and accuracy of a Mississippi mule, transforming every nerve in her arm into a strangling creeper of pain. The stake skidded from her limp fingers and buried itself point-first in the damp grass, and the redheaded cutie was out from under her with a squirm and a scrabble, prudently taking the opportunity to put the bulk of the mausoleum between herself and the combatants.

The whirlwind resolved into a girl in a peach-colored bolero jacket and slit-up-to-there skirt - small and curvaceous, with huge grey-green eyes and tawny waves of hair. Her chin was too small, her mouth was too wide, and her nose had a funny bump to it, but the sum of those imperfections was a quirky and strangely familiar beauty. The onrushing vampire gathered himself for a leap and soared over the blonde girl's head as she hit the grass and did a shoulder roll, a pas de deux out of Bob Fosse by Jackie Chan. The vamp came down on all fours between Kennedy and the rapidly retreating redhead, fangs bared, eyes like Japanese lanterns beneath a shock of scruffy moonlit curls. The blonde girl bounced to her feet with impossible resilience, and then both of them were circling Kennedy with the feral intensity of wolves defending their lair. The vampire held up both hands and crooked his fingers, almost dancing. His angular face was alight with a savage, tongue-curling grin.

"Ready for a go, pet?"

"In your dreams, breeder boy." Kennedy lashed out with a vicious kick to the vampire's head. Her foot grazed his temple and the vamp caught her ankle - damn, but he was fast! - and heaved, flipping her over. Kennedy twisted in mid-air, coming to a shaky but upright landing.

"You're good. You may be able to take him," the little blonde observed, brushing a dead leaf off the shoulder of her jacket. Kennedy wasn't used to thinking of other people as small, but she could look down on this chick. "You might even be able to take me." Blondie swung. Kennedy dodged the punch, barely, and delivered a sharp right to the nose. Blondie rolled with it and came right back with a piledriver blow to Kennedy's solar plexus, knocking her back on her ass. Not quite as fast as the vampire, but Blondie was stronger - shit, shit, shit, this must be Buffy Summers! Her hair was a shade or two darker and her figure a shade or two lusher than the Council's outdated file photos, but that face was unmistakable. Which meant the platinum-haired vampire was Spike, and the redhead...

who the hell was she? Kennedy scrambled to her feet and swallowed a curse. Summers wasn't even supposed to be back in Sunnydale until tomorrow.

The redhead shouted "Occulo ardent!"

Kennedy's vision dissolved into a Fourth-of-July explosion of red-white sparks, and Spike's fist tore
through the glittering haze and cracked against her jaw. Before she could recover her balance, Buffy pounced, grabbed her arm, twisted it up behind her, and slammed her up against the mausoleum wall. "But I'll guarantee you can't take both of us, and if my brand new jacket stains, you are paying for the dry cleaning. Now, I'm going to assume that you're a mild-mannered model citizen, possibly with a secret identity and a butler, trying to rid the world of bad evil things, and the choice of stakee is a tragic accident. Willow's got a soul. She's a good vampire. Grasp the concept?"

"Bull!" Kennedy yelled. "The vamp with a soul is a big dark broody guy in L.A." This was all wrong. All she'd wanted from tonight was a quick slay to take the edge off, and now everything was fucked up. Well, she'd unfuck it, then. Too many lives were riding on her ability to pull this off. She could do this. She could do anything she set her mind to. No use in trying to convince them she was just your everyday schmoe now; no human being could have taken those punches and stayed conscious. The truth as far as it goes, then. She struggled for a second, muscles straining, but no joy. Well, that was why she was here, wasn't it? "You're Buffy Summers," she croaked. "I know all about you."

Buffy's hold on her wrist eased slightly, enough to restore circulation. "That's what's on the nametag. Willow's the other vampire with a soul. They come in multiples these days."

"Like Terminator III," Willow piped up from behind the relative safety of several tons of stone. She sounded absolutely wiped, and looked even paler than the marble. "Smaller, and with girl parts. Who are you?"

"You working for Cain?" Spike asked.

So there were other players on the scene. Great. The more the merrier. "Cain who? I don't work for anyone but the Council of Watchers. I'm Kennedy." She managed a scathing glare at Buffy despite her position, took a deep breath and bet the deed to the ranch on one throw. "The Vampire Slayer." She glanced at Spike and Willow. "With an 'S.'" The dig might cost her, but Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this was ridiculous.

Willow crept cautiously around the mausoleum, her movements slowed more by exhaustion than fear. "You're who got called when Faith...?"

"Died? Yeah."

She felt Buffy shift position behind her, but the grip on her wrist didn't slacken any further, and Buffy's voice grew no more inviting. "'Kay, I'm not sure if you skipped orientation week or what," Buffy said, "but Council lackeys? Unwelcome. Extremely. I warned Travers what would happen if he sent you here."

"Who said Travers sent me?" Kennedy snapped. "I came here on my own, because I thought you could help me."

Buffy stilled, then, slowly, eased up on the choke-hold. "Talk."

Kennedy tamped down her relief and stepped away from the wall, shaking the numbness out of her arms and affecting insouciance. She wasn't home free yet. "I've been in training to be a Slayer since I was eight. The last year or two, my Watcher's been dropping hints: Kennedy, you know how rare it is for anyone to get called past the age of fifteen? Kennedy, you know how small the chances of Faith dying in prison are? Kept saying how great it would be if I started studying for a Council position... trying to let me down easy." She lifted her chin, meeting the older Slayer's eyes defiantly. "I didn't want to be let down, hard or easy. I decided - if I didn't get Called, I was gonna... do what I'd spent the last ten years training for, you know? And then one morning last winter I woke up." She
took a deep breath and flexed her hands, unable to suppress a grin at the memory of that incredible realization. "And I had the power. I dusted my first vampire that night. It was the best damn day of my life." No need to fake the passion and sincerity in her voice; this was all gospel truth. "So now I'm a Slayer. Dream come true, right?"

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest and regarded her with inscrutable grey eyes. "If you say so."

"But there's a problem." Kennedy walked over to a nearby tombstone, knelt and braced her elbow against the top, holding her open hand up and beckoning to Willow. "C'mere. I won't do anything. Scout's honor."

Willow looked dubious, but at Kennedy's further encouraging noise, she left her safehold and walked over. She dropped to one knee, facing off on the opposite side of the tombstone, and set her hand to Kennedy's, palm to palm, pale cool fingers curling around warm brown ones. A strange frisson went down the back of Kennedy's neck at the impress of that alien flesh, something electric and a little frightening. She'd never touched a vampire she wasn't hitting before. She'd owned a king snake as a kid, slick and black and shiny, with a flickery little tongue and jet-button eyes. Willow's hand reminded her of the snake - not the black, scaly part, but the cool, supple inhuman aliveness of it. She jerked her hand away and wiped her palms on her jeans. Willow drew away with an unhappy little noise.

"Screw that. She wasn't about to let something as remedial as touching a fledgling vamp wig her - was she eight again, and scared of cooties? "No, no, give me your hand back. It's OK. I won't bite if you won't." She grinned, and was rewarded with a small return smile. Was there something in Sunnydale's water that made you flirt with vampires? But it was a cute smile, you had to admit. She clasped Willow's hand firmly this time. "Ready? Go!"

Caught by surprise, Willow's arm dipped, but then she grimaced and threw her shoulders into it. Their hands wavered upright, Kennedy's knuckles whitening as she increased the pressure. For almost a minute they struggled, Kennedy forcing Willow's hand down, Willow forcing it back up again - Willow never able to gain an advantage, Kennedy never able to gain a decisive victory. Sweat started to bead on her brow and she relaxed, letting the startled Willow overbalance and shove her hand down into empty air. "See? I can't beat her. If I hadn't got the jump, she might have beat me. And she's just a little baby vamp."

Willow let go of her hand. "Toddler," she said a little huffily. "At least."

Kennedy tugged her blouse straight and faced the older Slayer. "I got the power, yeah, but not enough. Something stole part of what I should have. I want it back."

Buffy had watched the whole performance through eyes gone narrow and hard as olivine. Her expression was unreadable; she did stone-faced better than old Travers. "And you think I can help?"

Kennedy shrugged, not surrendering an inch of ground. "You did it, didn't you? You or that Faith chick, but she's dead and you're all the lead I've got left. I know all about you. How you quit the Council because of him." She indicated Spike. "They say you brainwashed your own Watcher and killed half a dozen Council ops, but... " Here it came; how well could she sell this? "I don't believe that. You've never stopped fighting for what's right." Yeah, sure. You may call yourself a Slayer, Summers, but you're sure as hell not getting the job done any longer. She didn't believe the crazy rumors - the Council would never have let Buffy Summers live if they were true - but the Hellmouth had been closed for a year, and Sunnydale was still crawling with vamps. Kennedy had sensed half a dozen nesting in this cemetery alone, way too many for her to tackle on her own. "I need that power. I can do my job - our job - without it, but I can do it a hell of a lot better with it. So I'm asking you - whatever you did to cut me off, undo it. People don't deserve to die 'cause you're pissed off at
"Me? Whatever I did?" Pure astonishment blossomed in Buffy's eyes. "I didn't do anything! For once."

"She couldn't," Willow said. "None of us could." She spread both hands. "Slayer power is deep magic from beyond the dawn of time. I helped tap into it once, and honestly? Not looking forward to an encore. It gets snappish, and it's got bigger teeth than I do. Maybe I could have figured out how to control it eventually, but I don't have that kind of power anymore. I don't know anyone who does - I mean, it's not just the magic you'd need, but the knowledge of what Slayer power is. If the Council doesn't know that, I don't know who does."

Kennedy didn't try to keep the desperation from her voice. "But... who else would want to mess up the Slayer succession?" They couldn't be telling the truth - if they were, if they really didn't know squat... she wasn't just screwed. She was wrenched, hammered, and nailed.

"You want a list?" Spike asked.

"Even if I can't cast spells at that level anymore, I know how they work," Willow broke in. "Tara and I, we can help. I'm sure of it! She's really good at auras and things, and if there's a blockage, or a curse or something, she can find it and I can figure out what's causing it and then you can go to someone who does have that kind of power and they can fix it." She turned eagerly to Buffy, who looked doubtful. Willow's face was aglow, her eyes importuning. "I know what it's like to - to lose something like that. I can help. Really help, this time. I know I can."

The plea in Willow's eyes, the worry in Buffy's, the watchfulness in Spike's, all of it hinted at a backstory a lot more complex than her own personal hill of beans. Kennedy didn't care; she couldn't have asked for a better turn of events. She pulled out the biggest, brightest Colgate smile she owned. "Could you? Really?"

Buffy worried her lower lip, and she exchanged a long, subtext-heavy look with Spike. "Um. It couldn't hurt to try, I guess. Where are you staying?"

Kennedy let her shoulders droop. "Around. I'm not sure yet. I just got into Sunnydale this morning. Is there a Motel 6? Or something, uh, cheaper?"

Willow was practically tugging on Buffy's sleeve, like a kid begging for a puppy. Kennedy did her best to look forlorn and abandoned, which was hard to do when three of her Dad's credit cards and a couple of thou in traveler's checks were burning a hole in her wallet. "Come on," Buffy said at last. "You can sleep on the couch till we find you someplace."

"Score. Kennedy did her best to look grateful.

Spike scowled; he'd lost the game face some time back, but Kennedy was pretty sure she hadn't just become his very special friend. "Then she'd best mind where she flings her pointy sticks. Strangely enough, I don't fancy waking up a big pile of dust, nor finding one in Will's room." He made a sweeping dramatic turn on one heel, a move he'd obviously practiced with a billowy black cape in mind, and strode off towards Restfield's main gates. Buffy rolled her eyes and went after him; a second later they were trading heated glares and low whispers. Kennedy strained without success to catch a few words of the argument as she trotted after them.

Willow had retrieved her cell phone, and her conversation was far more audible. "I'm fine, honey. Yeah, Spike got here - no, really, I'm... I know. I'm sorry. Look, when I get home... OK." She hung up and pointed to the curb, where a Jeep Cherokee was nosed up to the beat-up black hulk of a
DeSoto Fireflyte which had seen better decades. Possibly better centuries. "There's our ride."

Buffy, thwarted in her seeming desire to kick Spike's kneecaps in by the presence of outsiders, slid into the front seat of the Cherokee with a dagger-bright smile that promised mayhem at a later date. Spike, pissed off as he obviously was, stepped around to open the passenger door of the DeSoto with automatic courtesy - which appeared to piss him off even further when he realized what he was doing. Abandoning Kennedy to her own devices, he slouched behind the wheel and lit up a cigarette as ostentatiously as possible. Willow whispered, "Don't worry. They do that all the time."

"So the home life: Jerry Springer or Art Bell?"

"More like 'Tish! You spoke French!'" Willow, her hand on the door of the DeSoto, smiled up at her. "In the interests of informed passenger choice, I should tell you that Buffy runs things over by accident, and Spike runs things over on purpose."

"Yay," Kennedy muttered, sliding in beside her. "I'm reassured."

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Tara sat on the (new, non-sproingy) couch in the Summers' living room and stared bleary-eyed into the dregs of her coffee, cradling the cooling ceramic mug with both hands. She felt numb and jittery. Caffeine and exhaustion - not a good combination. She ought to get up and clear away the remains of the location spell, still scattered across the dining room table. It hadn't been much use; the version she was most familiar with was tuned to the living, and picked up vampires faintly or not at all. In the end it had been plain old deductive reasoning that let her pinpoint Willow's location: recent escapades with Spike and spotty cell phone reception pointed to Restfield.

She'd called in the cavalry instead of riding to the rescue. That was practical, right? Not avoidy. It only made sense to phone Spike, who was already on the spot. Tara set her mug on the coffee table with a thump, sloshing tepid black liquid over the rim, and pitched over sideways on the couch with a groan. She'd thought it would get better in time, that she'd be able to take Willow's new status in stride. And it had. Sort of. She lay at her dead love's side without flinching, pressed her lips to Willow's cold ones, tried to adjust her schedule to accommodate a partner who risked immolation every time she went outside before sundown. And Willow tried so hard to please her as well, to act as if nothing had changed...

The latch on the front door rattled, and Tara started to her feet, coffee forgotten, as the door flung open and a small stampede of people poured into the foyer.

As a rule, Tara wasn't big on epiphanies. The road to Damascus was fraught with suspicious characters handing out pamphlets, and most of the revelations in her life had come to her piecemeal, built up from one painfully acquired moment of "Oh!" after another. But sometimes all it took was one moment to remind you that the supply of moments was a finite thing. Willow's face framed in the doorway, a sight she'd seen every night for the last year, was its own revelation: Some night, Willow might not walk in that door, and she would never know why or wherefore. One pile of dust looked much like another.

Willow saw the stricken look on her face, and was in her arms between one heartbeat and the next - maybe vampire speed wasn't all bad, after all. So strong now, her Willow, that she could pick Tara up and spin her about like a toy, but all that terrible demon strength could come to nothing at the point of a number two pencil in the right spot. Her beloved was as invulnerable and as fragile as a St. Rupert's drop, and Tara held her tight and willed herself to ignore the faint tinfoil-on-fillings sensation screaming dead thing! in the back of her skull.
She had to stop thinking of Willow as dead. Willow was right here, real and... room temperature, and... life-challenged. "You're all right?" Tara asked.

"Fine," Willow said with the sweetest smile possible, cupping her palm to Tara's cheek. Her cold palm.

Spike, and to Tara's surprise Buffy, entered hard on Willow's heels, tossing one another glances as incendiary as any hand grenade. They were followed by a dark-haired girl Tara didn't recognize. "Buffy?" Tara exclaimed. "I thought you were in L.A. till tomorrow."

"The peace and quiet was starting to give me the wig," Buffy replied, tossing her jacket at the coat rack. "So I took the early retirement option, and got this Slayer-y feeling on the way into town that I should stop at the crypt." She waved the dark-haired girl forward. "Look what followed me home! Can we keep her?"

The newcomer paused in the archway leading to the living room, and looked around with the air of one expecting to find dead bodies in the window seat. "Kennedy," she said, sticking out a hand. "I'm the new Slayer. You're what, a witch or something? You're alive, right?"

"Uh... right," Tara stammered, taking the proffered hand. "There's extra sheets in the under-stairs closet, we can make up the couch - "

"Terrible rude to spring houseguests on Tara in the middle of the night, innit?" Spike drawled. "Guess we'll have to turn Dynagirl here out on the street."

"I have bags in the car, Spike," Buffy said, planting both fists on her hips with a pointed look in the direction of the driveway.

"Yeah?" Spike slouched in the doorway and produced another cigarette, conjuror-fashion. He flicked his lighter on and off a couple of times without lighting it, making the flame dance. "You lost the use of your limbs, then?"

Buffy held the keys out with a wordless glower, which Spike endured for a good fifteen seconds before snatching them out of her hand with an exaggerated growl and stalking off. There was much bustle entailed in fetching spare sheets and settling Kennedy on the couch, with accompanying pep talks from Buffy on contacting Giles and how they'd research her problem as soon as possible. Spike returned laden with suitcases and shopping bags, and provided color commentary on the unpleasant things that would happen to Kennedy if she attempted to stake the resident vampires, open the curtains on resident vampires, or drink the imported beer of the resident vampires, which was intimidated to be a far more serious infraction of house rules than mere staking.

Willow sidled up as Tara was taping a note to the television, explaining the presence of the strange woman on the couch to Dawn, and captured one of her hands. She bought it up to trace idle circles around the knuckles with one finger. "Since Kennedy's having trouble accessing the Slayer power," she said, "I thought maybe you could take a look at her aura tomorrow, or maybe we could try it together? I cast a glamor tonight!" she added, practically bouncing up and down. "Just a little teeny one, and it pretty much trashed me for the next twenty-four, but, hey, me, doing magic!" She smiled, hesitant but hopeful. "We always worked better together, didn't we?"

Tara looked down at the pale hand enfolding her own. Together. It had always been her gift to see and hear things others could not - the illness behind her mother's worn face, the promise of blossoms in the winter-bare branch, the fragmented wrongness in Buffy's aura when Faith's spirit had possessed her body. Finding in Willow someone who could share that vision had been the greatest joy of her life. Willow's light had mingled with hers, once, and banished all the shadows from her
heart, but when she looked at Willow now, she saw darkness. When she touched Willow now, she felt death, lurking just below the skin.

The world's song wasn't always pretty; Miss Kitty tormenting a mouse was as much part of the music as the unfurling of new leaves in spring. Death and pain were necessary counterpoints to joy and rebirth. All were part of the circle. But vampires weren't born. Vampires didn't die. They were destruction, pure and simple. Human corpses, animated by demonic spirits, an unholy fusion, an abomination to human and demonkind alike. But she is not an abomination to me, Tara thought fiercely, even as her father's voice in the back of her mind whispered Filthy demon, unclean thing. Even with a soul, Willow's very being, the magic that prevented her from falling to dust, was anathema to everything Tara had been taught.

And whose fault is it that she's standing here?

Tara stared at her lover's glowing, excited face. "Yes," she said, hoping her voice wasn't shaking too noticeably. "We do."

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Buffy heard the footsteps behind her as she rounded the newel post at the top of the stairs. He was taking them two at a time, as usual, with no attempt at stealth. It took all her resolution to keep her pace measured. Not to look back. Not to dash for the bedroom door. Running when a predator was behind you? Fatal. Back straight, eyes front, forward march.

The birthday weekend in L.A. had been three days of pure-grain, undiluted normality: shops, spas, and shoes, without a vampire in sight - once upon a time, her idea of heaven, and still pretty high on the not-too-shabby list. After a year spent crammed into one house with two roommates, a younger sister, and an increasingly live-in demon lover, Aunt Caroline's guest bedroom was a miracle of privacy and quiet. Visiting her aunt did bring the double dose of survivor's guilt, but it never lasted long when there were important matters of family gossip to attend to. Her new job, Dawn's college prospects, Hank Summers's girlfriend, all needed thorough dissection, and her own mysterious boyfriend needed careful introduction. She'd gotten as far as "He's English."

The first night had been total bliss. No icy toes nudging the backs of her calves just as she was drifting off, no cigarette smell working its way into her clothes, no milk jugs with two swallows of congealing pig's blood left in the bottom clogging up the refrigerator. The second night she'd walked into the bathroom and automatically moved to kick the damp towel on the floor across Spike's boots, a standard move in the silent and deadly battle of wills involved in getting him to pick up after himself, and felt unaccountably bereft when her toes encountered neither towel nor boots. The third night the bed felt out of kilter without the weight of another body balancing her own, and she realized there wasn't going to be a fourth night if she could help it.

The footsteps went silent on the hall carpet, but she didn't need to hear them to know how close he was. She could feel his presence, a cold fire up and down the column of her spine, centered on the exact spot where his eyes were burning into her shoulder blades.

It was almost four in the morning, and Dawn was sleeping only one thin wall away, so he wouldn't try anything in the hall. She tossed her head and put a little more sass into her walk. Behind her, just on the edge of hearing, a low, hungry rumble rose and fell with the taunting roll of her hips. He was close now; she could almost feel his breath on the back of her head. She put her hand on the doorknob. Cold brass turned under her fingers, and Buffy slapped the light switch and dashed into the bedroom, whirling to slam the door behind her.
His body collided with hers, and the fire blazed up joyful through all her bones as they careened into the bedroom together, knocking a chair askew and pinning her to the wall. "Are you out of your bleeding tree, letting her stay here?" Spike snarled. "God, I missed you!" His tongue flicked out, cleaning up the trickle of blood left from Kennedy's punch to her nose.

"You'd rather have her sneaking around town behind our backs with a crossbow full of Killer-of-the-Dead?" Buffy grabbed him and hauled him closer, relishing the lean hard weight of him against her breasts and belly. Oh, yeah, Spike was happy to see her. "Missed you too. And don't eat my nose blood, it's all crusty."

"I like it crusty. Don't trust... that little bint... farther than I can... toss her." Spike's teeth, still bluntly human, nibbled crescents of pain and pleasure down the line of her throat. "Council's got its claws in her or I'm a choirboy." He buried his nose in the cleft of her breasts and sniffled, nostrils flaring. It was completely gross that he preferred unadulterated Buffy, sweaty and ripe after a two-hour drive and a chick fight in a graveyard, to the product of an hour's worth of deodorizing and spritzing and douching. Gross, but primally sexy. Spike licked her nose again and made an obnoxious smacking noise. "Actually, I was a choirboy, but... "

"I want her where I can keep an eye on her till we can call Giles. If she's telling the truth - " His hair was finally starting to grow out again after last summer's rebellious shearing. Buffy tangled her fingers into the gel-stiff waves and tugged his face to meet hers, demanding access to his mouth. That mouth was her downfall, an addiction in itself, the upper lip so chiseled and firm, the lower so full and soft, the whole so eminently kissable, lickable, biteable. The heady taste of blood and nicotine surged through her - could you get addicted to cigarettes via kissage? Oxygen finally became a greater necessity than the cool virtuosity of his tongue, and Buffy broke away, gasping. "My fight's with Travers and the Council, not Kennedy. She didn't ask to be chosen any more than I did."

Spike combed his fingers through her hair, ignoring the mess she'd made of his. His eyes, though sparking gold with lust, were serious. "You made a threat, Slayer. If you're not willing to follow through... "

"Oh, there's follow-through. I follow all the way through. Kennedy's getting the whole Slayers-are-part-demon speech tomorrow, with twenty-five eight-by-ten color glossy photographs with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back. And if I find out Travers did send her... " The long cool fingers sliding up beneath her blouse derailed that thought faster than the Springfield monorail. There was t-shirt in the way of her hands when she wanted to be touching Spike, needed the ivory satin of his skin instead of cheap cotton blend against her own. Why did he have so many clothes on? Buffy gave the shirt an impatient yank, and the two of them tumbled to the bed - Spike's big, sturdy four-poster, transported from the crypt - together, shedding random items of clothing and kicking off shoes on the way. "... the mass-mailings will commence. Plus? I may fly to England and choke him with his old school tie."

Spike grinned. "And they wonder why I love you."

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The basement had been Xander's idea - part "You may be a bloodsucking creature of the night, but you're still my best friend," gift to Willow, part occupational therapy. It had probably kept him from going completely stir-crazy during the long weeks in the wheelchair and the longer months on crutches and canes. He'd planned the build-out, wrestled with the zoning variances, and put as much of his own labor into the construction as possible, even on days when three swings of a hammer sent him into an exhausted collapse. At the end of it all, the washer and dryer had been partitioned off into a separate, sound-baffled utility closet, a toilet and shower installed, and the basement converted into
a vampire-safe studio apartment, complete with blackout curtains over the windows. The floor was saltillo tile in warm ochres and rusts; the walls were Navaho white, with Mission-style faux brick arches framing candle-niches. There were wicker chairs and hangings in bright Indian print and low-level lighting that wouldn't overstrain sensitive vampire eyes. There was a futon bed made exotic with bridal-veil canopies of mosquito netting, and a ritual space by the dresser. The room smelled of incense and beeswax and the herbs in their row of fat little clay pots high on the windowsill.

Tara loved it. Once the remodeling had been finished, she and Willow had spent several exciting days moving their furniture down from the master bedroom upstairs (when your partner could pick up an entire dresser one-handed it made moving day a lot easier) and redecorating. They'd thrown a basement-warming party, with tacos and salsa and chips and Dos Equis, and Willow had worn the gaudy yellow sombrero currently hanging on the side of the stairs. It had been the best of days, and the best of nights after, and Tara had been certain, then, that everything would be all right.

She lit the bank of pillar candles on the shelf by the foot of the stairs with a word and a gesture, and drew Willow down the last of the steps. Willow gave her a curious look; Tara wasn't usually so free with her magic. Tara returned a reckless smile. "It's a special occasion."

"It is?" Willow looked slightly panicked. "Did I miss a memo? Because our anniversary isn't till, you know, later, and your birthday's not - I mean, it's not now, not that it's not special - and St. Knut's Day was two weeks ago, and Candlemas? Not till the second - "

"It's International Vampire Appreciation Day," Tara said solemnly, slipping an arm around her shoulders and touching noses. Willow smiled - startled, guileless, at an utter loss. Tara felt a pang of guilt. How long had it been since she'd been the one to initiate a touch, a caress? "I thought maybe... if we're going to do a reading for Kennedy tomorrow... we should practice." She knelt down before the circle chalked out in red and blue and gold between bed and dresser, lit the small brazier in the center, and sprinkled a pinch of incense from the jar on the dresser over the coals. "It's a passive spell, a perception thing. It shouldn't... you know, wear you out."

"But... but... class tomorrow morning," Willow said, plaintive, holding out both arms as Tara stood and removed her coat.

"Shh." Tara pressed a finger to Willow's lips and trailed it down her chin. "I want - I want to see you." She knelt on the bed before Willow, who watched in breathless silence.

Once all they'd had to do was join hands to join power - to join souls. Every living thing had its own unique pattern of energy. It was that energy, connected at its heart to the whole vast web of life, which allowed a witch, aided by the proper words, the proper rituals, to reach out, pull a strand here and tie a cord there, and manipulate that web to her will. And what made doing so incredibly dangerous, because the smallest alteration in reality tugged on a thousand thousand invisible connections. The utmost precision and care were always necessary, and even so, for all but the simplest spells no one person could hope to foresee all the consequences. Major alterations of reality, such as the one which had created Dawn, required the participation of whole circles or covens, and layer upon intricately nested layer of ritual to safely channel the power where it must go.

And it was from this great web of life and living magic that Willow's death had severed her. No longer connected, she could no longer call upon power outside herself, and the power within her had been burnt away. Her undead body, so quick to heal merely physical damage, would never regenerate its own living energies. Vampires, like humans, could turn to elaborate ritual to compensate for the lack of innate ability - Spike had done magic, and fairly powerful magic, to heal Drusilla. But Willow's talent had never been for ritual; brilliant as she was at the theory, her execution tended to be slipshod and rushed. Her strength, and her danger, had always been in the
raw power she could command, and that was gone.

Tara opened the eyes behind her eyes, and patterns of power sprang into being all around her. There were the intricately interwoven spells of warding and protection on the house, the gleaming scarlet threads of the cantrip she'd used to light the candles, the muddied remains of the location spell she'd cast upstairs. The pots of rosemary and basil in the window shone like miniature constellations. Even as the wooden beams overhead retained a ghostly signature of their parent tree, so did Willow's undead body retain the ghost of its living glory. Willow's aura was the dull, black-edged vermillion of banked coals, the light of her soul warped by the heat-mirage distortions of the demonic force animating her. Willow did not do magic. Willow was magic. If Tara could touch that power, could they somehow work as one again? Buffy had done it with Spike last year, and neither of them had had the slightest idea what they were about - but that had been in the middle of an unstable Hellmouth, under never-again-to-be-repeated circumstances.

Tara extended her arms, beckoning, and Willow swayed closer, trembling as Tara eased her shirt up and cupped hesitant hands about each small perfect breast. Her hands fell, fingertips gliding along the slim lines of Willow's torso, and undid the waistband of Willow's slacks with careful attention to each movement. The discarded clothing pooled about Willow's white, matchstick ankles, and she bent one leg flamingo-style, her toes curling as she kicked them aside.

Tara's breathing had fallen automatically into the deep slow rhythms of meditation, but this exercise was not in detachment from the world, but of absorption in it. Ropy blue coils of smoke corkscrewed towards the ceiling, collecting between the beams overhead. The pungent scent of sandalwood and sage pervaded the room, thick and sweet in the back of her throat. Her own blood surged and pounded in her ears. Willow stood before her, reed-slim and milky pale, her flawless porcelain skin stretched to translucence over delicate bones. Her hair was a firefall about her narrow shoulders, and hope and wonder sat upon her sharp-chinned pixie face and great-pupiled, jade-green eyes. Rose-petal lips concealing tearing fangs. A vampire by Lladro. This is what you love.

Tara rose to her knees, took Willow's hands and pulled her through the Milky Way of netting, laying her down among the indigo sheets, in the heart of their private night. How Willow's shoulders trembled, and oh, the breath that fluttered like a trapped bird in her throat. It wasn't that they hadn't made love in the last year - they had, and sometimes it had even been good. But however close she lay, Tara was never easy with this body, or the thing which moved it. No more of that. She would face what Willow was, and love it.

Her hands glided over the sleek boyish frame, tracing the arch of hipbone and the curve of the ribcage, never quite touching the creamy skin. Energy rippled and eddied under her touch, crackling around her fingers like cat's fur in winter. Willow lay splayed upon the coverlet, her head thrown back and her lips parted in a quiet ecstasy as Tara's mouth descended to follow the sweet curves and tender valleys of her lover's flesh, never touching, but leaving letters of fire in its wake. Willow's fingers clutched the sheets, her limbs curling like the petals of some night-blooming orchid, milky white surrounding a heart of fire.

"Touch me," Tara demanded, and Willow looked up, her eyes dark with desire and confusion.

"I could hurt you," she whispered. It had been her fear all along, Tara knew. Buffy and Spike might occasionally appear at the breakfast table with sated grins and mysterious bruises, but Tara was human, Tara was fragile, and Tara's bruises would not heal and be forgotten in a night. Willow always took care, always let Tara set the pace. But there was no place for fear in this room tonight.

"Touch me!"
Willow obeyed. Eager puppy hands frisked over her, too long denied the freedom to romp. They were cold, but that was all right. Even good, when they touched the warm places, and little by little grew warmer. Willow's lips were soft against hers, alternating kisses with happy little whimpers. Willow's fingers fumbled with the buttons of her blouse and the billowing pleats of her skirt. An impatient little growl escaped her, and the numinous shadow surrounding her flared like magma in the earth's heart. Tara drew a sharp, involuntary breath and Willow's head came up immediately; anxious, guilty. "It's all right," Tara reassured her. "You - you can do that. I want you to."

Willow's brows knit, her face full of bewilderment. "I thought the growlies were a major turn-off." Tara ducked her head, not trusting words. Willow put her head to one side, a sparkle in her eyes that had been too long muted. "Maybe just a little Baby Bear grrr to start with? And work my way up to Mama Bear?"

Tara peered at her from behind a veil of hair. "Does that mean I get to be the Daddy Bear?"

"Ooh, who da butch?" Willow pounced, tickling, and Tara rolled over with a giddy shriek.

"Hey, I'm tough!" She gave Willow a mock-swat on the shoulder, and the demon-shadowed aura crackled with red and violet. Not anger. Something scarier than anger.

"You can be tougher than that." Willow's breath, when it came at all, was coming faster, and the hazel flecks in her eyes were rapidly kaleidoscoping to gold. Her voice had gone husky, almost pleading. "Way tougher."

Buffy had told her, once, how big a rush it was, knowing that she could make a dead man gasp for air. Tara had never sought that kind of power, didn't know what she'd do if she had it. But this was what Willow was now, and if she couldn't accept it, couldn't satisfy the demon as well as the woman... Tara squeezed her eyes shut and quelled the flip-flops in her stomach by sheer force of will. "Sure I can, baby. Let's make some magic."

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"Still don't trust the bitch," Spike grumbled, rolling over and retrieving one of the pillows they'd kicked off the bed in their initial scuffle. "Will could've been dustman's leavings if one of us hadn't shown up in the nick."

Buffy rolled her eyes and allowed him to prop it under her shoulders. "You're so cute when you're all sire-y. In an Ed Gein kind of way."

Spike stretched himself out full-length, half on top of her, weight propped on one elbow. "Bugger, woman, that's nothing to do with it. Someone's got to be practical when you've gone all white-hat and idealistic, and don't change the subject." Knowing fingers trailed up her thigh, following the slit in her skirt. "Speaking of not staking people through the heart, Will and I picked up another lost lamb tonight. Bird name of Evie. I'll be giving her the Carrie Nation speech tomorrow evening if you want to drop by for a look-see." He insinuated his free hand up a little higher and squeezed her buttocks, kneading catlike. "Whose naughty little girl's lost her knickers?" he sing-songed.

"Now who's changing the subject? Evie, probation, review of troops tomorrow, check. I took them off in the car," Buffy whispered, flicking the tip of her tongue against his ear. "Because they were getting too... wet. Reached up through the slit in my nice new skirt and pulled 'em off and drove through downtown Sunnydale all nekkie underneath."

"You never." Spike growled, his pupils dilating, his body an overstrung crossbow in her grasp. "You don't have to worry about probation with this one. Chipped."
"I so did." Buffy ran lazy fingers up his arm and across the muscular arch of his chest. All those yummy biceps and deltoids and things were standing out in quivering relief. "I hid them, too." She tapped him on the end of his nose. "Finders keepers."

"Better start looking, then!"

With a lecherous grin Spike unleashed that vile, evil, sumptuous mouth on her, tonguing the now-damp silk of her blouse in decadent swirls around her aching nipples until she moaned and gasped and begged, "Don't... rip... eighty-dollar... blouse!"

Spike chuckled, low-down and dirty and had she mentioned evil? "I'm thinking someone scarpered off to L.A. without her birthday spanking, so she's due a forfeit." He vamped out, putting the brand new eggshell douppioni silk in immanent danger of fanging, and that, you realize, meant war. Buffy hooked bare toes into the waistband of his jeans and tugged. Spike yelped and jerked back as the already-tight denim constricted. He swatted her feet away, falling back on his knees to wrestle with the buttons of his fly as she (carefully!) wriggled out of her remaining clothes.

Then there was nothing between them at all, and Buffy wrapped her legs around his waist and let the full delicious weight of that neat, compact body sink into her. Oh, yes. This was homecoming. Slow and thorough, deep and strong, his cool body steel to her flint, stoking the sultry heat between her thighs to a wildfire blaze. Spike's face was a study in sublime concentration, and he was holding her with a force that'd leave bruises tomorrow. Rockets ignited within, huge multicolored bursts of pleasure building to a grand finale - Houston, we have lift-off! Buffy wailed in joy and raked her nails down his chest, leaving contrails of red across the flat planes of his belly. Spike's eyes flew open, as a man's who'd seen heaven might, and he went bow-taut, spending with a hoarse, wordless cry.

They rode out the aftershocks together, panting as the firecracker jolts of pleasure fizzed and sparkled through their bodies and finally faded away. Joint by joint, muscle by muscle, Spike relaxed, his body melting into her own. Buffy let go the breath she'd been holding in a long-drawn sigh, cradled his head to her breast and let her hands wander through his damp curls. His cornflower-blue eyes glazed over, and the growl throttled down to what would have been a raspy, ecstatic purr if vampires purred, which according to Spike they didn't, never, no way, nuh uh. "Birthday spanking, huh? You and what army of darkness?"

"Gimme a minute. Gathering my forces as we speak."

"A minute? You're slowing down in your old age."

"That's it, minx, you're over my knee. Soon as I can move."

They didn't talk about birthdays. Oh, they celebrated them, all right; Spike lost no opportunity to exercise his romantic streak on her behalf. But they never talked about what birthdays meant: that she was a year older, and he wasn't. She'd tried, once or twice, feeling duty-bound to bring the subject up - Angel had always fretted about it, after all. Spike had just shrugged. Any two people, love, one of them always dies first. We know not the day nor the hour.

It didn't mean they didn't both think about it, and treasure the time they had with a fervor that bordered on the scary. Yesterday she'd been trying on slingback pumps at Diavolina. Tonight a post-orgasmic vampire was lazily licking his own blood off her belly. Buffy Summers, this is your life.

Freaky, but her own.

"What the fuck?" Spike's head jerked up, his impromptu tongue-bath forgotten. Buffy wriggled out from beneath him, and then she heard it, too: in the basement, somebody was screaming.
Willow whimpered, teeth clenching. Tears of frustration tracked her cheeks, and her eyes were flickering from green to gold and back again; she'd been hovering on the edge for what must have felt like hours. To Tara's eyes her aura was shot through with lightings, a savage lacework of rage and desire. "Harder," she hissed. "Harder. C'mon, baby, make it hurt."

Tara almost wept with frustration herself - this had been a mistake, a horrible mistake. She'd called up a demon she couldn't lay, in any sense of the word. She reached out, matching palm to palm, trying once more for that effortless connection they'd once possessed, and the lucent green of her own aura intersected the dark fire of Willow's. Willow's face contorted, fangs and ridges springing to prominence. The auras mingled like the lights of the Two Trees, and power hummed and sizzled between them. A moire pattern of green and black shivered through the aether. Tara struggled for balance, and then just for control as the building energies fought for dominance, reeling farther and farther out of alignment.

For a second she had it. Everything as perfectly balanced as a spinning top, the magic surging from her to Willow and back again in glorious harmony - and then the power wobbled and discharged with a whipcrack of searing blue-white light. Tara cried out, scorched but unconsumed, and dropped Willow's hand. Willow whiplashed forward and back with a strangled "Gnnngh!" and all the candles went out in an airless whoosh.

Tara lay back against the pillows, panting. One by one, half a dozen feeble candle-flames flickered back to life, lifting the canopy of darkness. Willow rolled over, dazed, her hair hanging in limp auburn hanks. Her thin chest was heaving, and a faint sheen of stress-induced sweat glimmered across the shallow curves of her breasts and belly. Tara could smell the earthy vampire-musk of her - not a human scent, but not unpleasant.

"It didn't work," Willow whispered.

"No." Tara shook her head. She felt scraped thin. This should have been a ritual that energized and renewed - where had things gone so wrong?

"And it's never going to work, is it? I'm sorry."

Tara scrubbed a hand across her nose; she felt uncomfortably tingly, as if a mystic sneeze were coming on. "No. No, it's not. But it's me, not you!" The tears that had been building for the last half-hour welled up in her eyes, threatening to spill over.

"Aw, baby, it's all right... " Willow crawled across the bed and gathered her into her arms. Tara looked up into eyes like moons aglow with reflected candlelight, and crescent fangs peeping from still-sweet lips. "It's the thought that counts, right? I mean... I can still do little spells. Glamors, floating pencils... " She managed a laugh. "I could put someone's eye out. And maybe rituals, if I don't try anything too big and ooky." She shook off her game face. "It's not like I'm... impotent, or anything."

"It's not all right! I want us to be together again. Really together." Tara's lips firmed. "I want you to bite me."

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Willow stiffened. She hadn't heard those words coming out of Tara's mouth. It had to be some other words, like How about a sandwich? or Go, Mariners! or Can I mambo dogface in the banana patch? "What?"
"I want you to bite me," Tara repeated. "That's how vampires connect with life, right? By taking it. But I - I know it can be done without k-ki - you know. Those... girls Buffy wanted to hunt down a few years ago? That bit people for money? I can't - the magic won't work. So maybe this, instead."

Something huge and dark and terrible surged up inside her, crying Yes! Oh, YES! Willow fought it down, forgetting to breathe in her panic. Tara lay supine in her arms, that lovely neck exposed and vulnerable. The rich scent of her sweat and the richer perfume of her blood pulsing just beneath the surface - oh, she'd longed for these things ever since wakening to her new state. She'd dreamed of sinking her fangs into luscious sun-kissed skin, drinking down Tara's warmth and strength and sweetness, and woken wet and aching, the sheet an agony against her overwrought flesh. Hating herself and what she'd become, and wanting it so very badly. "But that would be... wrong?" she squeaked.

"Would it?" Tara asked. Her voice was shaking, and Willow tried not to think why. "Doesn't it seem like Spike's kind of peppy for a guy on the pig's blood diet?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Willow squirmed, the peculiar tingling sensation that meant she'd be beet red if she possessed the circulation for it rising in her cheeks. Spike licked the occasional cut or scrape clean on patrol, to only token protests from Buffy, but she wasn't sure that counted. Besides, from his few obscure comments on the subject, a little Slayer's blood went a long way. "Even if he does? Slayer healing. Which you don't have. Besides, I've, you know, gotten a taste. At, uh, certain times of the month."

"Not that way." Tara looked almost feverish, hectic spots of color rising in her cheeks. "The sex - that's just bodies."

Willow drew back, hurt. "It wasn't just bodies to me."

Tara's hands clenched in the rumpled sheets. "I didn't mean - it's just I - I feel like every day you're drifting farther away from me, and I don't know what else to do to keep you close. I need to touch you again, really touch you. It could work. And if it doesn't, you can just... stop." She brushed the tangled strands of hair away from her neck and tipped her head back, exposing her throat. "I trust you, sweetie."

Willow gnawed the inside of her lip, shaking in every limb and trying to keep her fangs from extending. She loves me, she trusts me, I've got a soul. Just like Angel had a soul when he almost drank Buffy dry. Oh, Tara, don't ask this of me... She didn't want to do this, but she did, oh, God, she did. And Tara wanted it. And if it would make things better between them... could it be so wrong? She could stop, right? Angel had been dying when he bit Buffy, and she was in perfect health. Closing her eyes, she lowered her head and ran her tongue along Tara's throat, feeling the muscles work beneath her lips as Tara swallowed. There: that was the place, where the carotid artery throbbed behind parchment-thin layers of muscle and skin. That was the place where for years Buffy had carried the scar of the Master's fangs, and Angel's, and Dracula's (but not Spike's; no, nowadays that scar had faded to almost nothing.) The thought of Tara's neck so marred was repulsive and arousing.

She bit.

Blood flowed into Willow's mouth, a salt-sweet flood of life. It warmed her, filled her, exalted her. She was aflame. The first living blood she'd tasted - God how had Spike given this up? There was nothing like it, better than sex, better than food, better than acing a calculus test you hadn't studied for. The universe was contained in Tara's body, and she was become one with it, spiraling into a black hole where pleasure and pain compressed into a single substance. There was no thought of gathering what little magic she still possessed, and no time to do so; Tara bucked and went rigid in
her arms. Her lover's scream pierced straight through Willow's heart, sending it to dust. She tore herself away from Tara's throat and scrambled back, alternating between scrubbing the blood from her lips and licking it frantically off her fingers. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, are you OK, can you talk, can I call a doctor or 911 or, oh, God, I've killed her, I've -"

"No, no," Tara gasped, pressing her fingers to her wounded neck. Two ragged, sanguine crescents showed through her spread fingers, and thin streams of crimson trickled down her throat and painted her breasts. Willow couldn't force herself out of game face. "It hurts, it really hurts!" She buried her face in her blood-smeared hands. "It hurts," she repeated in a small bewildered voice. "I can't do this. I can't -"

Willow knew with queasy certainty where the sentence was going, but before Tara could finish, there was a crash as someone kicked the basement door open, and a thunder of feet on the staircase. Willow grabbed the first thing to hand, which turned out to be Tara's skirt, and flung it wildly over her head before Tara had time to yank the sheet past her hips. A second later Buffy and Spike appeared in the stairwell, Spike attired in half-buttoned jeans and Buffy doing a Nefertiti in a tastefully wound sheet. "Willow!" she cried, eyes widening in shock.

"What the bloody hell -" Spike started.

"It's not what it looks like!" Tara interrupted. "I asked her to! I made her do it!"

Spike glanced from Tara's state of gory dishabille to the scratch marks on his own chest, and sucked in his cheeks. "Ah. Never mind, then. Carry on."

Buffy flushed all the way up to her hairline. "Oh, God. I'm - oh, God. I thought Kennedy had... do you have any paper bags? Because I'm going to need one for my head."

"It's OK," Willow said dully. With an effort of will she returned to human face, grabbed her robe and shrugged into it, then skinned out of the skirt. The fuzzy pink fleece was speckled with tiny drops of scarlet, already drying to a dull brown. "Tara's, um, very tired, and - and needs medical assistance. And I should sleep. Elsewhere. Not on the couch, because taken, but if I stay up till Dawn goes to school then -"

She wanted Tara to protest and insist she stay here. But Tara was still clutching her neck, stunned and shocky. Buffy knelt and examined her throat. "The skin's torn, but there's no serious muscle damage. Do you want me to wake Dawn up so she can -"

"No!" Tara shook her head wildly, winced, and hunched her shoulders. "I'd d-don't - she's t-too young for..."

"Hey, I'm too young for this." Buffy looked at Spike with the Meaningful eyes. "Maybe I should stay with Tara for a minute and make with the band-aids."

Spike looked at Buffy with the No One's Dead, Why Can't We Go Back And Shag? eyes and heaved a sigh. "Come on, Red. You look like you need a stiffener."

The trek up to the kitchen approached the difficulty of scaling K-2. Spike remained thankfully snark-free for the duration, and once at the top of the stairs, he produced a jelly-jar glass from the cupboard and a half-full bottle of JD from the liquor cabinet and poured her a generous helping. Willow took it sullenly and sat down at the dining room table. She should be the one down there cleaning Tara's (yummy, delicious) blood off the sheets and making soothing there-there noises. She wrinkled her nose at the astringent scent of the whiskey and took a sip, coughing as the dark amber liquid burned its way down her throat. It wiped away the lingering flavor of Tara, and she wasn't
Spike plunked himself down opposite her, propped both feet on the table, and took a swig from the bottle. "Right. We appear to be venturing into don't-try-this-at-home-kids territory without a map. I didn't think the Camille Paglia bit was Glinda's gig."

"It's not." But it may be mine. "Things just got a little... intense." Willow took another sip. Maybe they should have gotten completely snockered first. Then they could have both passed out before doing something so completely stupid. She looked up. "How do you... deal with it when you want to bite Buffy?"

Her sire blinked at her over the top of the whiskey bottle. "I haven't wanted to bite Buffy for years, pet."

"Not even a little bit?"

"Not even a little bit. I want to strangle her sometimes, but show me someone who doesn't." His gaze sharpened. "Seeing your Kitten all tearful and bloody get you a bit hot?"

Willow banged her forehead against the table. "No! I don't know! I never wanted to hurt her! I'm a big ol' vampire freak."

Spike snorted. "Hardly." He glanced over at the couch to assure himself that Kennedy was as asleep, or at least faking it reasonably well, and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Here, you ever tried eating pussy with her monthlies? Safe and tasty."

"You can stake me any time, you know," Willow mumbled into the maple.

"Just sayin'. That sort of thing's got the womyn-power seal of approval, dunnit?"

Buffy appeared in the basement doorway, trailing her 260-count percale fashion statement behind her, marched over to the table and smacked Spike's feet off. Willow watched in dull envy as Spike's arm snaked around Buffy's hips, and her hand trailed possessively along his shoulder. "Tara would like you to go back down. If you want to. No pressure. Total de-compress."

Willow contemplated another sip of whiskey and grimaced. "You think that's not constantly running through my head in an unending litany of self-recrimination?"

"I wouldn't have put in it words of that many syllables. Tara knows you didn't mean to hurt her, and she knows how colossally dumb it was to ask you to do that. God, Spike and I don't even do that. But if we did? Not on a major artery!" Her eyes softened. "We love you guys. Both of you. We don't want you hurting. Or hurting each other."

"I don't love you," Spike clarified. "I just don't fancy the trouble of putting out a 'To Let' sign for the basement if the next time we come down here there's a bloodless corpse and a remorseful pile of dust. So keep your fangs clean and go be good to Tara, eh?"

"Let's hope I still know how," Willow muttered, and turned towards the stairs.

Tara was lying on the bed in a flannel nightgown, the chasteness of which would have done Jane Eyre proud, her hands folded across her breast. Willow half expected a lily to be clutched in her fingers. Buffy had applied gauze and antiseptic with enthusiasm if not artistry, and the bandage
looked very large and white and accusing against the indigo of the sheets. Willow walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, crossing her arms and tucking her hands under her elbows. "So," she said after awhile, "Now what?"

*Tara held out her arms. After a moment, Willow crawled into them and laid her head on Tara's shoulder. She could still smell the blood under the tang of the Mercurochrome. They lay there together as the last candles flickered and died out.*
When one's life and fortunes, not to mention one's accommodations, become entwined with those of a vampire, certain sacrifices are required. Various concerned parties, particularly those expecting fat grandchildren, had pointed this out in exhaustive detail to Buffy over the course of the last seven years. You couldn't sing in the sunshine or have tiny precious babies with an undead creature of the night. Buffy had pointed out in her turn, in what she felt was a perfectly reasonable and not-at-all-strident tone of voice, that just possibly having tiny precious babies was a little lower on her scale of priorities at the moment than getting a degree or her Registered PSA instructor's rating.

Yet Buffy could not deny that there was truth in the warnings. When the pellucid light of morning broke over Sunnydale, tricking out each roof-tile and parked car in more than Oriental splendor, the heavy folds of the curtains kept a stranglehold on the dawn in the bedroom of Buffy Anne Summers and Wm. T. Bloody.

In short, vampires could run up your utility bills something fierce.

As she generally greeted the sunrise wrongside-to, straggling back home after a far-too-late night of slaying, on most mornings Buffy was perfectly content to snuggle up to Spike's side and let the dawn choke. This, alas, was not most mornings. Duty tore her from the embrace of her nice warm bed and her nice lukewarm vampire at the ungodly hour of nine AM. Much bleariness, therefore, held at bay by the intense concentration necessary to fix herself a fortifying post-reunion-sex breakfast. Possibly she could arrange an intravenous caffeine drip.

Kennedy, in the first unequivocal sign of evil she'd displayed, appeared to be a morning person. She'd already showered, dressed, eaten a frugal yet nutritious breakfast, and probably gotten in a facial and a bikini wax while she was at it. She was currently in the living room, doing vigorous step aerobics on a stack of phonebooks, to the accompaniment of a badly recorded Monkeywrench bootleg. The realization that enough of Spike's crappy punk music had crowbarred its way into her brain in the last year that Buffy recognized the band was almost more disturbing than the music itself.

"You're eating that?" Kennedy yelled over the screech of Tim Kerr's feedback.

Buffy blinked down at her half-demolished breakfast - grapefruit, bacon, eggs sunny-side-up, and a croissant. "That was, in fact, my diabolical plan."

"It's all carbs and cholesterol!" Up, down, bend, kick, up, down... Kennedy was mesmerizing, in a really annoying way. It would be wrong to actively wish for ankle breakage, but phone books were slippery. "I'm on a modified Atkins. Check it out, twenty percent body fat. My Watcher put together a whole coordinated diet and exercise regimen for me. You work out, right?" There was a subtle challenge in her tone. "I saw the weights behind the couch."

"Actually, those are Spike's. I'm not looking to develop my biceps." Granted the effect on Spike was exceptionally nice, but Buffy had yet to discover the practical purpose of acquiring muscles when you could already bench press a refrigerator without breaking a sweat. "I usually put in an hour or two of combat drills at the Magic Box after I get off work. I could show you some tricks, kick your ass..." Kennedy shot her a lemon-sucking look at the reminder. One-upmanship, breakfast of champions; petty, yet satisfying. "Did Tara talk to you about doing the aura thingy before she left for class?"

The CD sputtered to an end. Kennedy bounced off her stack of Yellow Pages and sat down on the couch to unstrap her ankle weights. "Yeah, she said to meet her over at the Magic Box at five." She
regarded Buffy through slitted eyes, a hunter taking careful aim with a dart. "If she's up to it, what with having her head half chewed off and all."

Ow. Not quite dead center, but still a hit. "You heard about that, huh?"

"Heard and marveled." Kennedy's expression was just south of a sneer. "Not often that you get more vampire bites inside the Slayer's house than outside." She tossed her cloudy mane of hair and strolled into the dining room, a confident swagger in her step. "So I was thinking of getting in a good slay tonight. That nest of vamps over in Restfield. They all your good buddies and pals too?"

"They're... " This was not a time for imprecise syntax. "Not a threat. Spike keeps them under control."

There was an edge to Kennedy's voice: challenge, and disappointment, almost, lying just beneath. "Yeah? Like Willow's not a threat?"

"No." Buffy sopped up the last of the golden, LDL-laden yumminess with the tail end of her croissant and downed the rest of her coffee. "Different than Willow's not a threat, because a)soul, b) fear and trembling."

"So you're... what, protecting a whole nest of vampires? And you still call yourself a Slayer?"

That was actually a good question, and one she didn't have an answer for. "It's complicated. Look, my first class is at eleven - I'm going to go get my skates and take off in half an hour or so. If you have things to do, I can drop you off downtown on my way to the rink."

Kennedy looked for a moment as if she'd press her challenge further, then relaxed and leaned against the counter. "Yeah, sure. I thought I might scope a few places out. Don't wanna take up your couch space forever. And the sooner I'm up to speed, the better. Looks like you need all the help you can get."

"Gosh, thanks. In the meantime, here." Buffy walked over to the desk in the living room and extracted a ratty grey three-ring binder. A home-printed label on the cover read An Inquiry Into The Origins Of Slayer Ability, by Rupert Giles. She tossed it at Kennedy.

"What's this?" Kennedy caught the awkward missile in both hands and turned it over, suspicious.

Buffy stopped, one hand on the bannister, her tone a model of uninformative blandness. "Light reading. The birds and the bees."

She left Kennedy frowning at the binder and headed upstairs. That should keep Kennedy busy for a while, and maybe give her something to think about. She didn't have to like the girl, Buffy reminded herself, she just had to help her. Once upon a time she'd possessed that blazing certainty herself, the absolute conviction that there was a right and a wrong in the universe, and that she, by golly, was the best-qualified person to decide which was which. Sometimes she missed it. That was the real reason Slayers died young. No one over twenty-one could sustain the moral superiority.

She passed Dawn's old room (now Spike's office) and her old room (now Dawn's bedroom) and entered the master bedroom - not Mom's room any longer. Sanctuary. Her Toscana vanity set rubbed companionable elbows with the antique four-poster, and Spike's well-thumbed copies of Kerouac and Kipling battled for shelf space with her LaVyrle Spencers. The subdued, tasteful shades of taupe and sage and antique rose in the carpet that she'd picked out set off the rich dark jewel tones Spike loved, all warmed in the glow of fat white pillar candles. She was almost glad, now, that her father had disposed of most of her things during the months she'd been dead; it meant that when Spike
moved in, they'd been starting together, from scratch.

Spike, unsurprisingly, was still asleep. He'd always been an uncommonly early riser for a vampire, and over the last year their sleeping schedules had slipped into closer sync. Still, he rarely got up before noon unless the world was ending - not an unusual occurrence in Sunnydale. He was buried under a heap of bedding, (Dan River Essex, one of the few patterns they'd managed to agree upon as neither 'too fucking girly' or 'too Victorian whorehouse'). One narrow, high-arched foot dangled white and vulnerable off the edge of the bed. Buffy contemplated the possibilities for a moment, then virtuously restrained herself to peeling back a corner of the coverlet and giving him a shake. "Hey, gorgeous. Wakey, wakey."

With a complaining rumble, Spike burrowed deeper into the covers in a futile attempt to run sleep to ground. Buffy shook him again, and he flexed beneath her hand, a pale crescent of spine and shoulder against the rich wine and gold of the sheets. He uncoiled in a long, languorous, toe-curling stretch. Fangs extended at the apex of a jaw-cracking yawn, then receded as his eyes blinked from yellow back to a blue that exactly matched the accents in the sheets. Damn, but she'd picked one decorative vampire. Buffy folded onto the side of the bed. "I'm going to drop Kennedy off downtown on my way to the rink. I don't want to leave her here alone with you and Willow asleep."

"Good," Spike mumbled into her thigh. "Less chance she'll trip and accidentally impale herself on my teeth."

Buffy gave the nearest silver-gilt corkscrew of hair a disciplinary tweak, eliciting a muffled yelp. Demanding moral clarity before noon was asking a lot of even the most diurnal of vampires, but she'd always had high expectations. "Am I going to have a problem with you, too? And off the record, do not tempt me."

"Not so long as she confines herself to pointed looks." Spike propped himself up on one elbow and squinted at the clock on the nightstand. "Did you notice last night, love? She talks like Faith's gone and died on us something permanent."

"Like that ever happens," Buffy muttered. "You're right, that's a weirdness." As far as the world at large knew, Faith had died in the Los Angeles County Hospital last winter, of complications from a stab wound received in a prison fight, but Quentin Travers knew the true story. "Either Travers is keeping the rank and file in the dark, or... what if Faith did call down Ancient Gypsy Curse Mark II to keep her power from being passed on?"

Spike's expression indicated that he thought she was bonkers or barmy or some other quaint English version of nuts. "I wouldn't cover that bet," he said. "Not in cash nor kittens."

"We should get the 411 from her anyway." Buffy retrieved her gym bag from the closet and inspected her reflection in the vanity mirror with a critical eye: white cashmere pullover and bright teal stirrup pants, hair drawn up in a perky-bouncy ponytail. For someone running on half a night's sleep, not bad. She slung the bag over her shoulder, skates clinking, and bent to kiss Spike on the nose. "Angel's got a contact number for her."

"You got anything else you want me to do?" Spike grumbled. "Juggle crosses, gargle holy water?"

She ran a teasing finger along his collarbone. "There's dishes downstairs. Or how about wearing The Blue Shirt of Ultimate Hotness?"

Spike went game-faced and mock-snarled at her, "You mean Ultimate Nanciness? There are limits."

Buffy laughed as he tangled one hand in the fall of her hair and drew her down for a real kiss, deep
and languid, his tongue the most cunning of serpents in the garden of her mouth. The gym bag thunked forgotten to the floor. She slid her arms around Spike's neck and hitched a leg over his middle as those big cool hands spanned the arch of her hips. "A tasty armful, you are," Spike rasped into her shoulder. "I'm minded to have breakfast in bed." Fangs pricked the hollow at the base of her throat ever so lightly, and in seconds the tight little buds of her nipples were nudging his chest through her sweater. "There's my cinnamon drops," he crooned. "Hard and sweet 'n hot as hell."

Buffy didn't go braless as often these days, since she actually had something to put in one again, but oh, God, she was glad today was one of those days. She could feel every separate fiber in the fleece. Spike's fingers did naughty, naughty things beneath the waistband of her tights as she rocked against his morning hard-on. His demon eyes were like liquid butterscotch, all warm and melty. Just the way her insides felt when he growled. He was dangerous, her vampire - a lazy, well-fed tiger was still a tiger. Couldn't ever forget that. Call her Sara Houcke. Just now, with her mouth on Spike's chest, her tongue tracing the fading hieroglyphs of last night's loving till he went blue-eyed and gaspy beneath her, it was difficult to focus on exactly where the wrong was.

If this kept up, she might as well not have taken that shower. Buffy pulled away, her voice husky. "If I talk to Angel, I'm just gonna end up peeling his ears off about Darla again."

Spike lifted his hand to his mouth and his tongue curled catlike about each separate finger, savoring. He sank back into the pillows with a smirk and laced his hands behind his head. "Much though I'm enjoying the visual, I think that's Cordelia's job these days."

Buffy grinned and slid down his torso to the floor, oh-so-slowly - if she was going to go to work squirming, so was he. She grabbed her bag. "So true. And you can't say Cordy's not devoted to her work. For once you're the cool, calm, emotionally uninvolved one in the family. Make the most of it."

He threw a pillow at her as she made her escape, laughing. Kennedy was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, taking in her new dishevelment with disapproving eyes. Vamp-loving freak, yeah, right, take a number, hon.

Irony there. She'd loved Angel first in ignorance of his nature, then in defiance of it. They'd never overcome it: until Spike had come along, the most powerfully erotic experience of her short life had been the night Angel had fed from her. In retrospect, she was certain that that night, more than any number of remonstrances from Giles or her mother, had sealed Angel's decision to leave her. Years later she'd railed at Riley Finn for allowing those pathetic vamp whores to suckle at his veins, all the more furious at him because she knew that dark circle of need from the inside out.

Spike, the unabashed monster, had never bitten her. Never wanted to. He'd tasted her in other ways, and there was an indescribable satisfaction in knowing that some tiny portion of her flowed in his veins, but with Spike there was no yearning to give of herself until there was no her left. Death was no longer a mysterious dark-cloaked lover, at once feared and pursued. She'd been there, done that, met herself on the other side. Death was blue-eyed and laughing, her good left hand, her old friend and boon companion, cruel and tender and almost human. Her gift. She didn't love Spike because he was a demon, but she suspected he'd ruined her for anything else.

And the fangs were still a major turn-on. Kennedy could go suck eggs - or not; probably too much cholesterol. Buffy plucked the keys to the Jeep from their hook. "Let's go."

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As the population of a small town had died to ensure his survival into the twenty-first century, the least Spike felt he could do in their memory was to thoroughly enjoy the marvels of modern
plumbing. Accordingly, he ran through his morning exercises and then took his leisurely time scrubbing, shaving, and attending to certain other shower-related necessaries. An hour and a half after Buffy's departure, he abandoned his towel on the bathroom floor - tradition, that - and strolled back into their bedroom. Very important, that possessive pronoun. He'd had plenty of experience building private Xanadus to suit Drusilla's whims of the moment, less in the art of domestic compromise. Buffy was less capricious than his one-time dark mistress, and less apt to be sweet-talked into or out of decisions. Made interior decorating - and everything else - more of a challenge.

The contentious blue shirt had been pulled to the fore on his side of the closet, and Spike eyed it with disfavor. Buffy's determined and subversive attack on his wardrobe alternately charmed and irritated the hell out of him. Life in the Summers household in a nutshell. Sometimes the crowded, feminine bustle drove him snarling out into the night, frantic for a spot of aggro. Other times... it couldn't be denied that having four girls to spoil, and to be petted and spoiled by in turn, went down a treat. Still, William the Bloody didn't pick out his kit based on whether or not his lady love thought it made his eyes look dreamy.

Though she had asked him very nicely...

Oh, to hell with it. Just this once, as a coming-home present. If he could intimidate demons with a chip in his head, he could manage it in a button-down Oxford.

He could hear two voices downstairs as he dressed (at least the shirt was on the darkish side, and didn't look too poncey paired with black jeans) and only one heartbeat. Tara must be back for lunch; she did that days when she had a long enough break between classes. They were talking, then. Good. He'd done his best for Will, but he wasn't cut out to be Qui-Gon, especially not to a vampire with a soul.

There were three orders on the fax machine in the office; Anya's weekly usual, and two new ones Nadia'd sent over from the crypt. Spike squinted at the small print: A witch in Modesto he'd done a job for last summer, wanting a Frewlar demon's second liver, and one from... Edwina Briggs? Consolidated Curses Briggs? He grinned, chuffed as nuts; they were coming up in the world. No wonder Cain and his mysterious backers were pissed off, if his little Ma-and-Pa slaughter was starting to pull in orders from the L.A. mystical elite. Briggs wanted a live Gershon demon - there was a challenge. Gershons were fast, wily bastards, pack-hunters resembling armor-plated wolfhounds. Highly prized, when trained up right, and if he could deliver, it would mean a very pretty penny indeed.

Anya kept telling him he had a chance to make it big here. His intimate knowledge of the demon community gave him an advantage in the post-Hellmouth Southern California market the other suppliers couldn't match. The question was whether or not he wanted to make it big. All he'd figured on when he started was a way to make some extra cash for Buffy and Dawn; power and territory had always been a means for him, not an end. He enjoyed his work, not to mention the shine that his new occupation had put on his reputation, but he didn't expect his current domestic idyll to last forever. In a few years Will and Tara would be in grad school, and Dawn off to university, and then perhaps he and Buffy could shake Sunnydale's dust from their feet and see a bit of the world. Wasn't like Sunnydale needed a full-time Slayer these days any more than Paris or Acapulco did.

Spike set the faxes on his desk, did a quick check of his e-mail and headed downstairs, running over the last places he'd gotten wind of Gershons lairing. Clem knew a bloke who'd mentioned his brother losing a tentacle to one somewhere in the foothills south of Yosemite, and there'd been that supposed mountain lion attack in Topanga Canyon last month...

Willow and Tara were seated side by side at the dining room table, heads together over the mustiest
of a stack of occult reference books. Last night's existential gloom seemed to have vanished in a
mutual burbling haze of spell-wankery. "... so it would have to be a two-part incantation?" Tara
asked. She looked pale, though she couldn't possibly have lost any more blood to Willow than she
would have to the average Red Cross donation.

"At least. Restore normal biological function, exorcize the demon. Three parts if - " Willow looked
up with a bubbly grin. "Hey, Spike! Just the person we needed to see! Line of sight isn't strictly
necessary but it would be a little unnerving without, and besides, we don't want you going all mushy
and puddinglike, the traffic cone was bad enough - "

"We wanted to ask you something," Tara said, cutting in before Willow could soar off into some
giddy verbal stratosphere. "About vampire history and stuff."

Spike surveyed the small lending library assembled on the table - two books on general vampire
history, a third on the Order of Aurelius, and a fourth on several of the less prestigious vampire
families of the last few centuries. He sauntered into the kitchen and pulled a jug of blood out of the
refrigerator, poured himself a mugful and stuck it in the microwave. "I can tell you straight off that
half the stuff in those books is complete bollocks." He drummed an impatient tattoo on the
countertop while his breakfast revolved sedately in place for an intolerable eighteen seconds.
Sodding things weren't fast enough. What was needed was InstaBlood. Or just the old-fashioned
straight-from-the-vein variety.

Not to be outdone in the nervous tic department, Tara twisted a strand of dark blonde hair around her
index finger. "Have you ever heard of anyone who ever stopped being a vampire?"

"Other than at the pointy end of a stick? Can't say as I have." The microwave dinged at last, and
Spike pulled his mug out and poured in a dollop of tabasco sauce. Christ, if he were going Gershon
hunting, it'd mean a fucking safari, far from civilized necessities like hot showers and microwaves.
He mentally jacked up his commission another ten percent and slid into a chair across the table from
the witches. "Mind, there's all sorts of scam artists claiming they can purge the humanity out of a
vamp - everything from prayer vigils to St. Vigeous to those bleeding 'Make Your Demon Larger,
Scalier, Harder!' e-mails. Utter shite, the lot of them."

"We were thinking more of the other direction," Tara admitted, her voice dropping to a whisper
barely audible even to vampire ears. "T-turning human again."

Willow bobbed her head like a dashboard Chihuahua. "A cure."

Spike sat back and cocked his head to one side, brow wrinkling. "A cure? We're not sick, love, we're
dead."

"Well, technically?" Willow bounced a little in her chair, big green eyes shining with the thrill of the
hunt - mildly terrifying, all things considered. "Not. We're undead, which is only mostly dead, and
mostly dead is partly alive, because otherwise, hello the post-mortem lividity!" Apparently Spike's
expression fell short of the rapt and enthusiastic response she'd been hoping for, but she forged on
anyway. "Anyway, a spell to turn a vampire into a human is theoretically possible - heck, a lot of the
pieces already exist, though they'd need tweakage."

Spike tilted back in his chair, teetering dangerously on two legs. His demonic sense of propriety had
been successively beaten, strangled, and, in the last year, bribed into complaisance with all the blood
and sex and licit violence it could handle, but now it perked up in the back of his skull with a
disapproving growl. One thing to kill them, but undoing vampires? Something dodgy in that, though
it would be more worrisome if Willow had the power to light a damp squib. "And all you've got to
do is slap the mystical tinkertoy together and hey presto, heartbeat? Somehow, I smell a catch."
"It's not that simple. If it were, someone would have done it by now," Tara said. She fiddled with the flyleaf of the nearest book. "Aside from some of the spells being dark magic and all of them being dangerous - "

Willow grimaced. " - there's technical difficulties from here to somewhere very far from here. A lot of the component spells aren't compatible in their current form. The mandrake's scream shatters your Orb of Thessula or the belladonna fumes curdle your oil of cockatrice, and, well, best you'd end up with is... "

"Nineteen stone of rotting meat? One of you care to fill me in on just why this is so vital?" Both of them looked squirmty, and Spike pinned Tara's unwilling eyes down with his own. Was she really so desperate as to consider something like this? "Will forcing me to sire her was bloody stupid, but risking an exciting new career as a maggot farm to turn her back won't look good on the Mensa application either."

Tara shrank in upon herself as if something crueller than Willow's fangs had drained the life out of her. She huddled there soft and shaking, her eyes as bleak as a Norse saga. But she wasn't soft on the inside. This was the girl - the woman - who'd sat mute while Glory broke every one of her fingers. Something kindled in her, and Tara straightened and met Spike's gaze without flinching. "Haven't I already done something just as wrong? If I hadn't agreed to do the resouling spell, Willow wouldn't be condemned to eternity as a vampire because I couldn't bear to lose her."

"No, she'd be a pile of dust. I'm not seeing the advantage in that." There was a hint of a growl in his voice now. "What's wrong with my Will that you can't love her no more?"

"I'd never do anything Willow doesn't agree to, and I'm not going to use black magic or sneak around behind anyone's back. But if there's a way to make her human again safely, then yes, I'd rather have her human." Tara took a gulping, defiant breath. "I can't - vampires aren't... I'm sorry, I hate that I feel like this, but you're c-creepy!"

Spike tipped a look at Willow, who made a helpless hand-wavy gesture, and teetered further, nonplused. Buffy might bitch about cold feet or blood breath, but she did so with matter-of-fact equanimity. "Ah. Well, we are that. Part of the whole living dead motif."

"I know that sounds petty. And I keep trying to get past it, but it's not working." Tara fumbled in her pocket and Willow handed her a Kleenex. "I know we can't solve anything by throwing more magic at it, but we've tried, we really have, and... I just wish everything could be the way it was." She trailed off with a hopeless sniffle. Willow took her hand and squeezed it.

Spike considered. "Two possibilities. One, try harder. Two, I turn you, too, and you and Will are happy as vampire clams together, the end."

Tara had to be pounded on the back for quite some minutes after that. "All the no there is in the world," she choked out at last. "You're not... ?"

"Just as serious as you are about turning Will human," Spike replied testily. "Your loss; I have it on good authority that I'm a top-notch sire."

Tara gazed down at the sad little square of peach-colored tissue in her hands, rapidly decomposing into its constituent fibers under the mauling she was giving it. "You didn't mention option three," she said with a quiet dignity. "The one where I give up. And you win."

Willow gave a little cry of distress. "But I don't want you to - "
Spike exhaled in exasperation. Must she make this more complicated than it already was? "Win what? Bugger it, pet, I'm not even playing!"

"But you are." Tara swallowed, lifting her eyes to meet his. "You love her, Spike. Not the same way I do, but everyone can see it."

"Then everyone's stoned. Will's get of mine, is all, and that not by my choice. I've got more affection for - " Spike surged to his feet and began pacing, the length of the dining room and back. "Anyone, really." Tara's sorrowful eyes backed him into a corner, as surely as he'd pinned her earlier, and Spike dropped into his chair again, slid down on his tailbone and threw her a sulky look. "Course there's a connection, of sorts. Can't help that." The demon in Willow was the demon in him, binding them all the way back to whatever sorry tosser sired the lot of them. Didn't mean he had to go all soppy over it. Last time he'd tried playing sire to someone who mattered, it had been an unmitigated bloody disaster. The grotesque benediction of his mother's final dissolving smile was still with him, some nights. *I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

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Sorry, mate, already seen it.

He shook off the memory with a twitch of his shoulders - picking a fight with some yob twice his size and ripping his opponent's liver and lights out bare-handed worked better, but that option had been renovated right off the menu some time ago. Pity. Fuck the fava beans, nothing went better with liver than onions, and there were a good number of people in the world who would, in Spike's opinion, be vastly improved by the loss of a few internal organs. Point was, he'd resolved not to get emotionally involved this time round, and... .

And Willow was sitting there looking up at him, big sea-green eyes glistening with hurt, just the hint of a quiver to her chin, and Spike was around the table and down on one knee beside her chair before the first tear could roll down her cheek. "Oh, Christ, Will, I'm a rotter! You know I don't mean it when I say such things! You're my clever, vicious girl, best I've ever made, best - "

Tara was looking *I told you sos* at him. "Look, never mind all that," Spike said, quite cross now. "Didn't mention you walking because it's not an option. Not if you still love her. And if you look mopey and say love's not enough, I'll bite you."

"Obsessive pursuit of your pooky bear is a time-honored Aurelian tradition," Willow chimed in. "You might as well get used to it." She and Spike exchanged decisive nods, and that was that - closed ranks of vampire solidarity.

Tara looked at them both, resignation fighting the unwilling smile which tugged at her lips. "OK. I won't say it. Option one it is." She looked up at the clock. "Shoot, I've got to get back to campus. Do you want to meet me at the Magic Box later, Willow? I'm doing Kennedy's aura."

Willow saw her to the door. Spike restrained the urge to bang his forehead against the table. That had worked about as well as his plans usually did. He wandered into the living room, sprawled out on the couch and flicked the TV on, prepared to work up a colossal sulk. *Passions* just wasn't the same since Timmy'd died. He could call L.A.; Angel was probably up by now. Though another fifty crunches or so wouldn't hurt. Slayer's blood was powerful stuff, even in the licks and nibbles he got, and a bloke had to watch his waistline. Or he could nip up to the office and start setting up supplies and scheduling for the Gershon hunt. Or possibly there was a sword or two in the weapons chest he'd missed sharpening, or, God help him, dishes to be done.

Bloody fucking hell, he loved Willow. Loved her second only to Buffy and Dawn, with all the selfish, violent passion his demon nature was capable of, and with all William's hopeless, besotted tenderness. He would gladly have laid the severed heads of their enemies in their laps if they'd asked... .
it of him, and loved them all the more because they didn't ask. Tara wasn't his as the other three were, but she was Willow's, which made her family as vampires counted it. Besides, he liked her. Forced to it, he'd side with Willow - of course - but the bints had better work this out; he didn't want to choose.

Willow returned from the front porch, smoldering faintly in an excess of love and sunburn. She plunked herself down on the couch at his side. "Thanks."

"Didn't do anything." He scowled. "You want to be human again, love?"

She leaned forward, rested her pointed little chin on folded arms. "I don't know. I want to be a witch again, and I miss chocolate, and I totally don't fit in with the cool vampire crowd. And I want Tara to be happy. But then I think, 'This would take a hundred years to do,' and realize I've got a hundred years."

Spike snorted. "Shouldn't do it just to make her happy if you don't - "

"Uh huh." She tugged at his sleeve. "And how cold was it going to be in hell before you wore that shirt, Mr. Pot?" Her eyes were sharp and speculative upon him, as if he were one of her magical conundrums to be unraveled. "Come on, if Buffy wanted you human, you'd be out tearing the world apart to find a spell for it. You don't want me to be human again."

Spike shrugged. "Bit more trouble changing species than shirts, pet. Be a love and hand me the remote."

Willow handed it over. "Care to explain why a guy who works out for two or three hours a day lacks the energy to get up and walk three feet over to the coffee table?"

"Some respect for your sire, chit." Spike shook the remote at the screen like an accusation. "Mark my words, Caleb goes pining after Tess instead of sticking with Olivia like a sensible chap, in two years' time the sorry ponce'll be shagged out on her couch, seriously considering doing her washing-up for her."

"A fate worse than death, and we should know." Willow leaned over and rubbed her cheek against his, a purely vampiric gesture that Spike returned with an affectionate rumble. "No matter what," she whispered, too low for human ears to hear, "you'll always be my sire."

She bounced off, and after a moment Spike realized he was sporting a grin hardly less buoyant than Willow's own. Whistling tunelessly to himself, he leaned over and grabbed the phone, and punched in the number for Angel Investigations.

******

Kennedy stood on the corner of Main and Wilkins, squinting into the low-slung winter sun. A celadon sky backed an eclectic scatter of palms, eucalyptus, and pines amidst a wilderness of red tile roofs: Downtown Sunnydale in all its minuscule glory, a jumble of quirky little stores and offices. So strange to see green at this time of year - it felt like springtime, not the dead of winter. Back home in Boston everything would be buried under six inches of grey, slushy snow. College town, hell - she'd seen whole colleges bigger than this place.

She'd called the number her Watcher had given her, left a terse report of what little she'd learned so far on the anonymous voicemail, and spent the afternoon trolling the low-rent motels along Lincoln, taking a room at the least roach-ridden specimen she could find. No way on God's green footstool was she gonna live in a house where fruitcakes offered themselves up for vampires to feed on. When
she'd walked in on Buffy's sister changing the bandage on the ragged wound in Tara's neck this morning, it had taken everything in her to hold back from storming down to the basement and putting a stake through Willow right then and there. This place wasn't just fucked, it was knocked up with twins and starting a college fund.

Much-needed wake-up call, though. No matter how cute and funny Willow was, fairy-tales about souls and star-crossed lovers were bullshit packaged as aromatherapy. The only good vampire was a dusty vampire.

It was getting close to five, when she was supposed to meet Tara at the Magic Box. Presumably, Willow would be there too. Kennedy stopped at a newspaper kiosk and stared at the headlines in the Sunnydale Press. The City Council was holding a bond election, and the Mayor was proudly announcing that Sunnydale's homeless population was down sixty-five percent from last year. She turned away, restless. There was no point to her going over there. The Council had witches and psychics and mystics, oh my, and in the past year it felt like every single one of them had fingerprinted her Kirlian aura and rotated her chakras and pored over her palms, and come up with a big fat nothing. Willow and Tara couldn't possibly find anything that the vast resources of the Council couldn't.

Of course, maybe the vast resources of the Council just weren't telling her what they'd found.

With a little noise of disgust, Kennedy turned and started walking back towards the heart of town, fast. If they were running a scam, she had to find out what it was. The report, or monograph, or whatever it was that Buffy had given her, was digging into her shoulder through the nylon of her backpack. She shrugged the pack off, pulled the binder out, and shrugged the pack on without breaking stride. It wasn't all that long - twenty pages, maybe. She'd read through the whole thing at lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon, off and on, picking at one section or another. It was primo Watcherspeak all the way through, dry as dust, with almost more footnotes than text.

There were parts she practically had memorized. *Superhuman abilities derived from... parallel cases of demonic influence on human physiology (see Appendix II, Vengeance Demons)... First Slayer as archetypical representative of... power activated via specific blood ritual, i.e. the death of the previous Slayer...* Kennedy recognized a few of the names in the bibliography from her own Watcher's library. If it was a fake, someone had put a hell of a lot of work into it. The final paragraphs of the summation were still scrolling across the backs of her eyeballs, closed-caption heresy.

... all the available evidence supports the conclusion that Slayers as a group derive their power from some form of ancestral demonic compact, passed down through the female line.

Bogus. It had to be. Her Watcher wouldn't lie to her about something like this. *Unless she doesn't know about it either.* She'd been in training to be a Slayer all her life, and never given a thought to where her power came from, but it had to come from somewhere good, right? Slayers weren't demons, they killed demons. Demons which tore out people's throats and ate babies and tried to end the world.

Why shouldn't the monograph be a good fake? And - radical thought here - did it matter where the power came from, as long as she had it? There was a world here, still, and it was her job to save it. She was still who she was. Kennedy tilted her head back and sunlight flooded across her upturned face, making her eyes sting and water. Blinding, after the vamp-dim environment of Buffy's house. Slayers had been fighting vampires since... since always. Buffy was a rogue, trying to rattle her with this live-and-let-suck-the-lifesblood crap. Fuck that.

On first glance through the shop windows, the Magic Box looked like any other New Age mecca -
shiny glass-fronted display cases full of crystals and candles and incense, fliers for local meditation seminars and yoga classes plastered around the cash register. It was only when you took a closer look at the rows of murky bottles and disturbingly-shaped objects crowding the shelves behind the counter that an uneasy prickle began to raise the short hairs at the back of your neck.

A sharp-featured young woman in lavender was standing at the register, and Dawn Summers was hovering beside the nearest display of love charms, wearing a dorky little nametag with Ask About Our Curses on the bottom. Unlike her sister, Dawn was halfway through the adolescent transition from lanky to luscious, dark-haired and model-tall, with a heart-shaped face and big blue eyes. Under other circumstances - like Dawn not being a total raving loon on the vampire subject - Kennedy might have seriously considered going for the toaster oven with this one.

Dawn aimed a big eager smile at Kennedy. "Welcome to the Magic Box, where all your incanting needs are - oh, it's you." Her lower lip protruded as Kennedy shut the door behind her, and her welcoming smile morphed into a suspicious scowl. "Here to stock up on holy water? Just remember, if you mess with Spike, you're not just messing with a hundred-and-fifty-year-old master vampire with two Slayers under his belt." She tapped a thumb against her chest. "You're messing with me."

Kennedy cut her off. "I'm not buying. I'm supposed to meet someone here. So how much of this stuff is a total fake?" She stared up at the jars of newt's eyes and powdered unicorn's horn. She'd heard too many cautionary tales about charlatans and phonies to be impressed by the Witchy-Poo crowd, but a vampire slayer couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility that some of this mumbo-jumbo could be the real deal.

The woman at the counter gave a disapproving sniff and primped her Veronica Lake 'do. "Is the person you're going to meet going to be buying something? Because if not, please go away. We have a bus station for meeting people."

"It's OK, Anya, she's mine." Willow emerged from the rear of the store. "In a metaphorical sense."

Kennedy followed her to the rear of the store, fighting back the four-alarm clamor of her Slayer sense. Tara was already back there, arranging a selection of weird items on a table in the library section. The table was covered with a plastic picnic tablecloth, on which had been drawn a complicated circle of alchemical symbols in marker. "Portable spell circle," Tara explained with a shy smile. Her hand went comfortably on Willow's hip - the good news was that that was a big ping on the gaydar, and the bad news was that Willow was taken and God, what was she thinking?

Willow rested her head on Tara's shoulder. Was there a flash of shame in the vampire's face, looking at the bandages on her lover's throat? Probably just bloodlust. Couldn't wait to get her alone again and do things to her, nasty, vaguely perverted vampire things that Kennedy wasn't gonna think about tonight in bed. Willow flashed a smile over Tara's shoulder, reassuring and sweet, and Kennedy swallowed, imagining fangs. Shit. Maybe the Slayer's demonic heritage was the real explanation for Summers and her series of vampire fuck-buddies. Some kind of weird pheromone thing. No, that was stupid. She'd never heard of any other Slayers going native. Probably Summers had made the whole thing up to justify her screwing a vamp, not the other way around. There wasn't any kinship between her and the things she killed. She wouldn't let there be.

Tara set a large piece of quartz crystal in the center of the table. "Sit here, and hold these." She handed Kennedy a pair of stones. One was a shard of unrelieved midnight, the second a glossier black flecked with rosettes of white. "Onyx. It governs aggressive energy, good and bad. It represents your power as a Slayer. The other is snowflake obsidian, and it'll help clarify any blockages in the energy flow of your aura."

Kennedy closed her fingers around the slick cold stone, feeling its edges bite into her palm. She
wasn't going to dance around the subject on tippy-toes. "Buffy claims we get our power from some
demon thing. So what does that mean? There's only so much demon to go around? My midichlorian
count is too low?"

"Hopefully that's what this will tell us." Tara sat down opposite her. "It's a simple spell. I don't even
need it to look at your aura, really, but I need Willow to see too, so we're making a kind of
recording."

In the front of the store, Anya walked over to the front door and flipped the sign around to
CLOSED, Please Come Again! She hovered in the background, watching the proceedings with
professional and slightly critical interest. Dawn just looked suspicious. Kennedy sat stock-still as the
crevices of her palms grew damp around the stones.

Tara intoned softly, "Earth and sky, here meet. Light and dark, here greet. The circle is closed and
consecrated." She reached out and touched the tip of her finger to the quartz crystal in the center of
the table. The crystal hummed, a high, pure note that called light from the heart of the stone. Energy
cooled serpentine up Kennedy's spine and out along her limbs, and in the crystal, a tiny, perfect image
of her appeared, spreadeagled in nothingness like Michelangelo's perfect man. A faint shimmer
enveloped the mini-Kennedy, making her the wick in a near-invisible flame. Kennedy watched in
fascination, impressed despite herself.

Tara spoke a word and the crystal darkened, bringing the aura into bright relief. Currents and eddies
of force swirled and leaped within the brilliant tangerine corona. She looked from Willow to
Kennedy and back to the crystal again, a line of perplexity deepening between her brows. "OK," she
said. "Now that's just plain weird."

"What is it?" Willow asked, hushed.

"The normal aura's there," Tara said, "and the Slayer power is there." Kennedy squinted and peered
closer; shadowing every one of the tiny figure's moves was a... well, a shadow, an inky double
almost obscured behind the vivid orange flame. "You can see how the connection to the Slayer
power is through Muladhara, Svadhisthana and Manipura." She pointed out a series of Klein-bottle
distortions where black and orange met, and bit her lip, still frowning. "That makes sense; it's all tied
up in power and aggression and identity and, uh, sex. Earth, fire, and water. It wouldn't be
communicating through any of the higher chakras. But look at this."

She pulled a handful of quartz crystals out of her bag and laid them on the table. Each one held a tiny
figure of its own, but frozen, obviously portraits rather than a living mirror. Kennedy could see
Willow, and Buffy, and... Tara blushed at Willow's questioning look. "They were going to be
Christmas presents, but I didn't get them finished on time. But look at the differences."

She held up the crystal with Buffy's image. The older Slayer's aura was a blazing sun-gold, rippling
with subtle patterns of jet, like the hide of a great cat. "See? In Buffy's aura, the power's distributed
all through the normal human aura. In Kennedy's, it's there, but not integrated. And there's not as
much of it."

Willow strained forward in her chair like a hound on the scent, obviously unhappy with the need to
rely on second-hand information. "We need to get some idea what the normal variation among
Slayers is. Or among people with demons attached." She held up her own image in one hand and
Spike's in the other, contrasting the uniform dull vermillion of her own aura with the ebony black of
Spike's. "Do we have any totally normal - ooh, here's Xander. He's just plain dark blue."

"That's normal," Tara agreed. "Vampires with souls keep the color, but it's darker. Unsouled
vampires are solid black, with little highlights of the original color left - Spike's a bad example, he's
got a lot. See those blue sparkly things? If you look just right, you can see his aura was that bright blue when he was alive."

"Huh. I noticed those once. Back when I could still do magic on my own was left unspoken. "I thought they came from the chip. Are there any older readings from Buffy? Or Faith?"

Tara shook her head. "Nothing like this. I didn't even learn this spell until last November. I remember a little about Faith from three years ago, but she and Buffy were body-switched, which messed everything up. I think Buffy's aura was a lot closer to Kennedy's back then - more distinction between Buffy aura and Slayer aura. And Faith's aura was more like Buffy's is now, except practically blacked out by her own power."

Willow frowned at the miniatures as if they were at fault for the whole mess. "I wish you'd gotten a chance to look at Faith when she was here last time, since - "

Kennedy sighed. The two of them were off in a world of their own; she might as well have been one of the rocks she held in her hands. "Look, can we skip the history lessons and the vampire psychic anatomy and just find out what's wrong with me?"

"That's the t-trouble," Tara said. "I think... there's nothing wrong with you at all. A-at least," she stammered as Kennedy darkened, "there's nothing blocking your power. There's just not as much of it as there should be. To find out more than that, I think we'd have to... "

Willow’s pale face had gone positively ashen. "Contact the source."

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"Bernard Crowley." Cordelia Chase repeated. She perched on the edge of Angel's desk Girl-Friday style, sorting through a handful of case files. The long, slim length of one calf jogged rhythmically where it crossed the opposing knee, and her Jimmy Choo sandal dangled from one impeccably pedicured toe. Angel found the sight mesmerizing. Was it going to fall, or not? If he kept an eye on the shoe, it ensured that said eye didn't follow the lines of that leg in the opposite direction. "Wizened, British, and Watcher-y. Definitely Watcher-y. He kept insisting he wasn't a part of the brotherhood of tweed any longer, but he sure seemed to know a lot about what they've been up to lately."

Angel leaned forward, propped his chin on his clasped hands and frowned. "And he didn't say why he wanted to see me?"

"Something about a proposition to your mutual advantage. No details. Very Sidney Greenstreet." She tossed her dark hair - grown out, thank God, from the disastrous bleach-and-bob of her Groosalugg Phase - and handed him the file. Her scent lingered on the manila folder. "This was all we could find on short notice. I dropped an e-mail to Pryce Incorporated or whatever Wesley's calling himself these days - and shouldn't it be Wyndam-Pryce Interrogations? Does Wyndam fail the nouveau noir test? I thought English guys just kept adding last names until the family tree collapsed under the need for pruning - " A stare and a raised eyebrow, and Cordy got the hint. "Anyway, no joy - this guy was before his time." She pursed her lips and slid off the desk. "Actually, this guy might even be before your time."

Angel allowed himself the hint of a smile as he paged through the meager collection of facts on one Bernard Crowley. It told him little more than what Cordelia'd already passed on. Cordelia watched him, one hand on her hip. "So, have you thought about it?"

Probably just another attempt by the Council to discover Faith's whereabouts, but it never hurt to be
cautious. "Yeah, I'll see him. Friends close, enemies closer."

She didn't quite stamp her foot. "Not Crowley. It. The big, life-changing, potentially curse-lifting It."

"Still thinking."

"About what? The worst that can happen is that this Kung Pao guy can't help you. Look, this isn't just about whether or not you get to take something other than your right hand out for dinner and a movie without the world coming to an end - "

Angel slammed the folder down on the desktop a little harder than he'd intended. "Kun-Sun-Dai, and no, Cordy, the worst that can happen is that we try it and something goes wrong and Angelus comes out to play. I'm really not willing to take that chance. We've already been through this."

He'd let himself get giddy and careless last winter, when the news filtered down from Sunnydale that Willow was now a vampire with a soul, sans curse. The giddy hadn't lasted more than a week or two, ending with him sitting in Buffy's living room on a poorly-sprung couch that reeked of sex he wasn't having, while Willow scrunched in an armchair, giving off don't-kill-me vibes and Buffy kept her grouchy, overprotective sire on a short leash in the background. "You got your soul back through a curse that includes the Ritual of Restoration. I could put your soul back a dozen times and it'll just fall out again the next time you're perfectly happy. What needs to be done is to break the curse, and I... I can't do that level of magic anymore." For a moment, Willow's face had been the embodiment of perfect misery. "I'm sorry."

"You're not willing to take many chances lately, are you?" Cordelia snapped, yanking him back to the equally uncomfortable present. For a second he thought she was going to grab him, but no - Cordelia had too much restraint when it came to such things. Damn her. The fire in her eyes dimmed and her shoulders slumped. "When did we get so scared, Angel? When did I turn into a blue-haired old lady driving twenty-five in the fast lane? OK, you're older than dirt, fine, but I'm twenty-two. They're doing it." She didn't qualify the they, and didn't need to. "And it's probably not gonna work and they'll probably end up in fiery exploding oh-the-humanity badness, but they're trying. When did we get so scared that we couldn't even get up the cojones to try?"

Angel looked her in the eyes, his mouth tight as a bear-trap. "Cordy... " There really wasn't anything else to be said, but it was a measure of how he felt about her that he'd say it all again. "You know what? You're right to be terrified out of your mind. I'm a demon. Unlike Spike, I don't think that's a good thing."

"I'm not in love with the demon." Cordy spun on her heel and stalked out of the office. Angel watched her go, hands clenching. He wanted to storm after her and argue. He wanted to retreat to his room and stare at the ceiling for a few days. He wanted to throw her down on the desk and... Damn it.

There were times when he wondered half-seriously if he were still underwater, contemplating the slow northward grind of the Pacific plate and victim to one of his own elaborate hallucinations. Life had certainly retained a surreal edge. For almost a week after the rescue, he'd woken every evening to damp sheets and fragile, needle-thin forests of salt crystals, sealing his eyelids shut and riming his lips as his body gradually expelled the seawater from its tissues, and healed the damage that three months beneath the waves had wrought. He'd been constantly, ravenously thirsty.

He'd been through worse. He licked his lips, remembering Wesley's blood on his tongue, a sacrament of forgiveness and regret. This just wasn't the time to indulge in experimental spells that promised heaven and might deliver hell. He was the center, and he had to hold. Connor was skulking
through L.A.'s mean streets, tarnished and afraid; Fred and Gunn studiously avoided one another for reasons he could guess at, but was reluctant to voice. Wesley lurked around the fringes of their lives like a wolf at the edge of a campfire, yearning to be tossed a bone but too proud and wounded to come into the light.

He'd grown to rely on Cordelia in times like these. Cordelia's bluntness, Cordelia's honesty, Cordelia's strength of purpose... but Cordy had her own troubles, and they were half his fault. Her cheer was painted on with her blush and eyeshadow every morning. Angel couldn't blame her. He knew what it was to discover oneself abandoned by Fate; nothing was more terrible save discovering that one had been picked up again. She'd taken a chance. For him, because of him - because, caught up in the giddy certainty that he was going to be free, he'd made her promises he couldn't keep. Cordy'd never gotten a vision warning them of Connor's betrayal. After that night on the L.A. freeway, Cordy'd never gotten another vision again. You didn't defy the Powers without paying a price.

Out in the lobby, a cultured British voice inquired, "Excuse me, miss? Have I found Angel Investigations?"

"Good afternoon!" Cordelia caroled. "You must be Mr. Crowley. Go right on in, and Angel will be with you."

Mr. Crowley proved to be an elderly man in tweed, equipped with, of all things, a bowler hat and umbrella. His wispy, thinning white hair was plastered firmly to his pink scalp, and he had something of the air of an aging John Steed. He looked around the office with restrained curiosity, noting with still-sharp eyes the case files and reference books. Angel rose from behind the desk with his most professionally reassuring smile and extended a hand. Crowley took it, raised a near-invisible eyebrow, and settled himself in the chair across from the desk. "Thank you for agreeing to see me. I realize that your recent dealings with my former employers have been less than pleasant."

That was a serious contender for understatement of the year. Angel sat down and steepled his fingers. "I have to say I was surprised to get your call. So what can we do for you, Mr. - "

The phone shrilled in the lobby, and Cordelia swung into the usual chipper spiel. "Angel Investigations, helping the hopeless since - "

"'Lo, Cordy. You sound ravishing. Is the old man up? Tell him his beamish boy wants a word."

No other voice in the world but Spike's could rouse that particular combination of nostalgia and seething resentment. Vampire hearing was keen enough not only to hear Cordelia through the closed door of his office, but to pick up the person on the other end of the line as well. Normally he tuned her out unless he had a very good reason to eavesdrop; it was the polite thing to do, and there were too many things, these days, that he wasn't sure he wanted to hear her say.

"Spike," Cordelia replied, with all the enthusiasm of a woman holding a dead lizard by the tail. "This is not a good time. In fact, it's never a good time. All times are bad."

"Fine way to greet the chap who helped fish your boss out of the Los Angeles Bay on four hours' notice," Spike retorted. "I need to talk to Angel. He is speaking in complete sentences now, isn't he? All the fish-nibbled bits grown back?"

"He's with a client. Is it important?" Her tone implied that Spike's having anything important to say was on a par with the chances of Arnold Schwarzenegger becoming the next governor.

"Would I call long distance just to annoy him? Don't answer that."
"Excuse me just a moment," Angel said. Crowley nodded, holding his bowler in his lap with the stiff disapprobation one might expect of a man who wore a bowler in Southern California. "Cordy, I'll take that." He picked up his phone and Cordelia transferred the call with the usual quota of mysterious clicks and beeps. "Spike." The pause was almost, but not quite, long enough to be awkward. The events of the summer hadn't precisely smoothed matters over between them - attempting to smooth matters between him and Spike was rather like taking a flatiron to the Himalayas - but they'd reached a species of détente over Connor's treachery. "Is there a reason for this call, or are you just playing with the buttons on the phone?"

"What, a bloke can't just ring up and brighten his grandsire's dreary existence?" Spike drawled. "You sound yourself again. Not so waterlogged. Cheerleader still on the rag about losing her private line to the Powers?"

Spike sounded like... Spike. Which, in the face of all that had suffered a sea-change around Angel of late, was perversely comforting. There were some things, however annoying, that shouldn't change. Angel aimed a covert glance out the window of his office at Cordelia's desk. "Among other things. What do you want?"

"Faith's latest number. Got a bit of a situation here; her replacement showed up last night."

Angel glanced over at Crowley. "Courtesy of our mutual friend?" A year ago it would have been Buffy needs Faith's number, with the implied and wants me to get it for her, Spike losing no opportunity to rub Angel's nose in their connection. Angel doubted Spike refrained from prodding that particular sore spot out of delicacy; more likely they'd both just developed too many calluses to make it fun. Or perhaps his obsession with Buffy was fading, and it honestly wasn't important to Spike any longer.

Yeah, that was likely.

"She claims not." Spike's tone said all that needed to be said about his opinion of the claim.

"Interesting, considering that we got a visit from a dear old auntie of his."

"Listening in as we speak?" When he wasn't thinking with his dick or his fists, Spike was moderately quick on the uptake.

"Right." Angel leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out beneath the desk, flipping through his Rolodex - Cordy kept threatening to convert his address book to something computerized, but so far he'd managed to fob her off. "I'll have more on it later."

"You got my e-mail, yeah? You can send it there if you don't want to be reciting it in front of Auntie May."

Spike had e-mail? "Uh... I think Cordy has Willow's."

"That'll do. If Faith would get a bleeding Hotmail account, I wouldn't be running up my phone bill." Spike paused at Angel's inadvertent chuckle, suspicious. "What's so amusing?"

"The idea of you caring about a phone bill."

"Can't just move across town and kill someone with a clean credit history anymore, can I?"

Angel rubbed his chin. "Can't?"

"Can," Spike said with audibly clenched jaw, "but don't. One year, one month, two weeks and
some-odd days, Angel. Since the chip came out. Haven't killed anyone yet, but cheer up, someone's sure to cut me off in traffic sooner or later - "

Angel tilted his head back against the grey leather and spun his chair. God, but he was tired all of a sudden. "And it's funny because it's true."

"Funny? I'll tell you what's funny, Sire." Hurt and pride and anger crackled in every word. "You were right proud when I took down my first meal. Prouder yet first time I tore someone apart by inches for the fun of it. Now I'm not killing anyone, you haven't a good word to say about it. Ironic, you might call it. You sure that soul of yours is working proper?"

"I'm not your sire, Spike."

"Must have been someone else in that coal mine, then, or on that rooftop in Vienna," Spike snarled. "I'm Dru's by blood, but in everything else that matters, you'll always be my sire. And it kills you to know it."

The receiver on the other end clicked - God, how Spike must hate that modern phones couldn't be slammed down in the cradle with a satisfying crash! Angel closed his eyes for a moment, then straightened and turned back to Crowley. "Sorry. I deal with some volatile people in this business."

Crowley nodded. "I understand, having been in much the same business myself. But in a way this is all very fortuitous." He produced a card case and opened it, selecting two of the small rectangles of paper. "This is my card, and this is the card of my associate, Dr. Gregson. We have in mind a project with which we believe you can be an inestimable help."

Angel took the cards and frowned. Gregson... something about the name was familiar. "Dr. Gregson the Slod demon? The... collector?"

"Quite." Crowley sat back, spine like a ramrod. "You know him?"

"I know of him. I had to kill one of his patients a year or so ago."

"Unfortunate. But then you know that he is quite reputable in his sphere."

Frown deepening, Angel set the cards on his desk. His fingers itched, and he wiped his hand against the knee of his trousers. "If you consider collecting and selling demon body parts a sphere. I'm afraid I don't understand what I can do for either of you. It doesn't sound like you need a private detective, even one that specializes in supernatural cases."

"No," Crowley agreed. "What we need is an assassin."

Angel rose, stepping around the desk. "It's been nice talking to you, Mr. Crowley, but I think you've got the wrong man. I don't take that kind of work."

"Really? I have sources in the Council of Watchers still. I know all about your activities of last winter. It is my impression that you tried very sincerely to get William the Bloody killed."

"Killing vampires is part of my job," Angel replied, stone-faced. "If this is some kind of blackmail attempt, all I can say is publish and be damned. If you think that trying to get one unsouled vampire dusted is the worst thing on my conscience, you haven't read my file very closely." He scrubbed his tingling palm against his thigh again.

"Blackmail? Hardly. My point is simply that you are on record as holding a considerable personal grudge against the vampire known as Spike. I could also bring up the incident of the Gem of
Amarra, which I believe involved the extensive and creative application of hot pokers to your person, or the Du Lac ritual, wherein Spike sacrificed you to restore Drusilla the Mad to good health. Spike is, as you yourself point out, soulless, and still a creature of evil no matter that he has lately been aiding a Slayer whose allegiance is itself highly questionable."

Crowley's voice remained measured, but the passion in his eyes was eerily familiar; Angel had seen it in all too many other faces over the last few centuries. "I will not beat around the bush. Twenty-five years ago, this creature murdered my Slayer, Nikki Wood."

That had been the last thing Angel expected to hear. "I'm sorry."

Crowley waved a deprecating hand, but his eyes were tiny shards of black ice. "I realize that all Slayers die at the hands of a vampire sooner or later, and to pursue personal vengeance is futile. I am old, Mr. Angel, and I find that I no longer care about the futility of revenge. It is... intolerable that this creature live as the lover of a Slayer when he has sent two of her sisters to their graves. I have made inquiries. It is no easy matter to find someone willing to match themselves against a vampire of this Spike's reputation, especially considering the nature of his allies. But your reputation in many ways exceeds his, and I am willing to pay you quite handsomely to - "

"No," Angel said flatly. "I've been a killer in my day, Mr. Crowley, but I'm not for hire." He strode over to Crowley's chair and gestured at the door. "I'm sorry I can be of so little help to you, but - " A wave of dizziness crashed over him, and he staggered, clutching the back of the chair.

When had the ceiling gotten so high? Crowley's pink and impassive face loomed over him, fuzzing in and out as rippling distortions rolled across his vision. Maybe he was still underwater, after all. "I, too, am sorry that we could not reach an agreement, but I did anticipate that you might feel this way." Crowley stepped back as two burly, white-clad men strode into the office. Angel growled, but his vocal cords refused to cooperate, and all that came out was a strangled hiss. "Don't be concerned about the young lady in the lobby - she'll awake in good health. Nor for yourself, for that matter - Dr. Gregson assures me that the entire operation will be... quite painless."
Chapter 4

"... needles as long as your arm, I swear." Evie leaned forward in the variegated light of the massed ranks of candles, dramatic I-have-you-now-Adama shadows blotting out all but the gleam of her eyes. "Worst thing? It was never dark. Ever. Lights glaring down at you like a million suns, 24/7." She paused for effect, and her audience obliged with a shiver of gruesome relish. "There were twenty of us to begin with. Vamps, demons, all kinds. Spike, he was captured near last, but he didn't stay there more than a week. He and this other vampire, Tom, they trashed one of the lab coats and escaped - Spike threw Tom to the guards and got away, Tom ended up dust." Approving murmurs. "And the rest of them? They went crazy. One by one. You couldn't see them, but you could hear - they'd stop feeding, stop talking, just sit in their cells all quiet and shit for a few days... and then they'd start to scream. They'd scream, and scream, and scream, till the soldados came... and then the screaming would stop," she raked a finger across her throat, "just like that."

"Staked?" Denny whispered, pushing a lock of fair hair off his forehead. It was the first word she'd heard him say all evening. Evie grinned, the same grin she used on victims who thought they were going to get away. "Oh, no. 'Cause that'd be a waste of all that government money, right? They'd take 'em away, to analyze. Take 'em apart piece by piece and see what made them tick." She made a drilling motion against her forehead with an index finger. "See, they had plans. Just putting a chip in our heads to shock us when we tried to hurt anything, that was just the beginning."

"Yeah?" Nadia asked. She should have been a raven-haired femme fatale, with that name, but she was dishwater blonde and freckled like her brother. Vampires with freckles were just wrong. "What was the end?"

Evie had no idea, but that was no reason to derail a good story. "Whatcha think? If you could control a vamp's every move, what would you do? But the Slayer and her pals attacked the compound before they could go that far. The electrical grid went down, and we were free. Christ, the expressions on the guards' faces! Bodies everywhere, corridors running an inch deep in blood, and the smell? I'll never forget it! We were ripping the soldier boys to shreds and playing jump-ropes with their entrails!" She hugged herself, eyes slitting in bliss. "I just wish I coulda killed a few of them myself."

"That bites," Nadia agreed. "No pun intended." She took several blood packets from the mini-fridge and snipped the corners off, pouring two into mugs and handing one to her silent brother. Denny didn't use cups. Evie leaned back and touched the tip of her tongue to her blood - it tasted as good as you could expect days-dead animal blood to taste, which wasn't saying much. Still, she couldn't deny that a good feed and twelve hours of sleep had done wonders. The empty socket of her missing canine still ached, but the swelling in her jaw had disappeared, and the deep itch of mending tissue had set in.

Spike's gang had a pretty choice lair. They'd tapped into cables and conduits from here to hell and gone; electricity, running water - all the comforts of human existence. Evie was all for that. The lower level of the crypt was devoted to storage, piled high with crates, boxes, and freezer units containing inventory, while the winding, irregular tunnel excavated between the crypt proper and the nearest sewer main served as a barracks for the gang, outfitted with TV, mini-fridge, dining table and several dilapidated armchairs. Overlapping carpets in various shades of threadbare covered the floor and unearthed coffins had been pressed into service as benches and table supports. Small alcoves off the main room housed spartan cots and a small dresser each. On investigating hers, Evie'd found a
selection of used clothing in various sizes - in any other gang, they'd have been scavenged from victims, but with this lot of fucking teetotalers, they might have come from the Salvation Army. Though the Salvation Army probably wasn't big on 'Eat The Rich (The Poor Are Too Stringy)' t-shirts.

It was a damn sight better than most of the places she'd woken up in recently, which was a pretty sad commentary on her unlife. The only thing missing was a snack or two chained to the walls. She'd never realized how weird and empty a lair could feel when entirely devoid of the whimper of lunch. The selection of blood bags and crimson-tinted milk cartons in the fridge didn't cut it. She watched Nadia fuss over Denny, who was playing with his food, squishing the plastic between his fingers. "So... " Evie waved a hand at the surrounding cavern. "You're... I mean, you can kill, can't you?"

"Of course I can!" Nadia snapped, broken-glass brittle and defensive at this slur on her competence. She patted her brother's head, and Denny grinned up at her, red-fanged. "But Denny's not right. He'll wander off and play in the sun if I don't watch him, and he's no good on a hunt. Gangs won't take me if it means taking him too, and it does. It's worth the shitty food to have someplace safe to stash him." Her narrow horsy face took on a look of half suspicion and half curiosity. "You're one of them, right? An Aurelian? We tried to get in with the old Master's gang once, but they gave me some bullpucky about pure blood. That Luke wouldn't even let us into the caverns."

Evie toyed with her blood, temporizing. "I guess." The Order of Aurelius wasn't much more than a name these days, but it was a name to conjure or curse with. Claiming family connections could put her on Nadia's shit list as easily as win points. "Dalton never told me who his sire was." That was true, though it had to have been someone in the Order, since the Master, and the Anointed One after him, had been a stickler for bloodlines - it wasn't until Spike took over that first time that he'd opened up the gang to any vampire competent enough to make his cut.

"Huh. You ever see him? The old Master?" Fascination laced Nadia's voice, and the tension knotting Evie's shoulders together loosened a notch. There was an art to fitting into a new gang. It wasn't enough to suck up to the master - you had to get in good with a few of the other members, or risk being torn apart from behind. "Was he really so old he'd lost his human face?"

"Do bones count? I saw when they dug him up. From what Dalton told me, I didn't miss a lot."

Nadia's expression grew avid. "They say he killed more of his own minions than the Slayer did."

"Jesus, tell me about it! Spike, though... " Evie dropped to a confidential whisper. "After he took over, he stopped that freakazoid girlfriend of his from putting out my sire's eyes once."

You could never go wrong with gossip about the boss. Nadia looked suitably impressed and scandalized. "Well, paint my toenails and call me Nelly. I thought it was sniffing after the Slayer that made Spike go soft. Or that chip he had."

_Had?_ Evie was about to pounce on that when David slithered down the ladder from the upper level. His smile was a bare millimeter's twist at the corner of his mouth, cool and vicious. "If you're that curious about the precise reason Spike hasn't seen fit to kill you yet, I suggest you ask him. He's upstairs." Nadia shrank a little, and Evie took note; OK, so this wasn't entirely some touchy-feely vampire summer camp. David continued with a nod at Evie, "He wants to see you."

"I'll bet he does," Evie muttered.

David's unnerving olive-green eyes studied her. He had a stare like a fucking snake or something - maybe _he_ could do thrall. "Have you fed sufficiently? His orders are to see you healed and put to work as quickly as possible. We're not a charity."
Evie looked at her blood in distaste. No point in being all principled and shit now. The time to spurn the disgusting reheated slop and declare she’d never be that hungry had been last night. But they’d handed her the cup, the scent of it took a warm red baseball bat to her hindbrain, and fuck, she was that hungry. Two seconds later she’d been sucking the stuff down like it was El Tesoro.

All three of them were watching her to see if she’d repeat the surrender when she wasn’t half-starved and high as a kite on master's blood. Evie raised the mug to her lips and tilted her head back, draining the contents in one long pull. David nodded, the lines of his face sketching prissy satisfaction, like she’d passed some test and he was weighing the merits of giving her an A- or a B+. She got it. She was no better than they were. Except she was, damn it. This was temporary. If Spike's chip wasn’t working any longer, there had to be a way to disable hers. Once she figured out what it was, she'd be out of Sunnydale so fast her tracks wouldn't leave a scent. She slammed the mug down and followed David upstairs.

The upper level was bustling. A Sharpesi demon she vaguely remembered having seen around the Alibi Room a few times was seated at one of the desks, talking earnestly on the phone. Spike was attacking a keyboard at another desk. He'd done a sartorial 180 since last night, rumpled and bookish with the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled to the elbow and a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles sliding down his nose. He looked like a different guy altogether... at least, until you got a look at the eyes behind the winking lenses.

He whipped the glasses off the instant Evie's head poked through the floor, and the woman - human, by her scent, though there was a subtle strangeness about it - kibitzing over his shoulder rolled her eyes. "Oh, for goodness sake, Spike, everyone knows by now." A speculative look honed her sharp features further. "Does Lasik work on vampires, or would your corneas just regenerate in the same poor shape they're in now?"

Spike slid the glasses back on and gave her a look over the rims. "You're just not happy unless you're contemplating slicing a bloke's parts off somehow, are you?" The phone on the desk rang. "Spike. Yeah. No, they're expected. Show them in, but keep an eye out."

The Sharpesi demon gave Evie a cheerful grin and a wave of one wrinkled paw. Evie waved back, confused. What was he, part of the inventory? She could understand vampires wanting in on a demon-hunting operation; most demons despised vampires as half-breed mongrels, and the idea of taking some of your own back out of their hides had a lot of appeal. The humans wouldn't care. But what was in it for this guy?

Spike banged the enter key with the gleeful finality of someone launching a ground-to-air missile, and one of the printers burst into chattering life. He raked a hand through the crisply gelled waves of his hair, tore the printout from the feeder tray, and skimmed it across the desk towards Evie. She made an automatic grab for the paper before it could flutter to the floor. It was a list of camping equipment, along with a few more exotic items.

Spike settled back and dipped a hand into the pocket of the leather jacket draping the back of his chair. He extracted a heavy silver lighter, tapped a cigarette free of the crumpled pack of Marlboros lying on his desk, and took his sweet time puffing it to brilliant orange life. He jabbed the cigarette at each of them in turn. "Clem, Anya, this is Evie. Clem's customer relations and Anya's our retailer. Now." He took a deep drag and blew a smoke ring over her head. "We're not a gang, we're not a clan, we're not the Order of bloody Aurelius reborn. We're a business. We hunt non-intelligent demons - only non-intelligent demons, mind - chop them to messes, and sell their short and curlies to the Magic Box and a selection of private clients. Your job is to do the boring parts so I don't have to. Normally there's a probationary period, but you've worked for me before, and your sire before you, and I know you've more than two brain cells to rub together. I'm putting you in charge of supplies.
See David about your budget, and get me this stuff by the end of the week. Buy it, don't nick it, but deal as sharp as you like."

Evie nodded, taking it all in. In the last seven years she'd been in and out of half a dozen gangs. The trick to survival was to do your job without ever calling attention to yourself - to blend in, whether that meant joining in on meaningless rituals and ancient chants, turning tricks, or drinking pig's blood. "And what's all this get me?"

"Not dusted," Spike replied. "Also a safe lair, the protection of numbers, and a salary, enough to keep you in blood and cigs if your taste's not fancy." He sprang to his feet and began that loose-limbed predatory pacing, the length of the crypt and back again, leaving contrails of tobacco smoke in his wake. "More to the point, I keep the Slayer off your back. Long as you follow a few simple rules. Rule number one, no hunting. Only reason you're here to begin with is I've got reason to think you can handle that. Catch you even thinking about it, and the Slayer won't have time to draw a stake 'cause I'll rip your head off myself. Got it?"

Evie nodded.

"Rule number two, you look out for your mates. Goes against the grain for some of us, but it's tit for tat: they'll look after you. What's the biggest killer of vampires in the world?"

A nod seemed insufficient. "The Slayer?"

"Wrong." Spike stubbed his cigarette out on the lid of a sarcophagus. "Other vampires. One Slayer - well, three at the moment - and thousands of vamps. Do the maths. If we didn't off each other with giddy abandon nightly, we'd've eaten ourselves out of house and home by now. Which brings us to rule number three: no siring. Last thing we need is more idiot fledges cluttering up the middle ground. You want to keep turning tricks or blow your earnings on the good stuff at Willy's, go to it; I don't give a piss. Kill a human, I'll kill you, and I won't be quick about it. All clear?"

At a loss for any other response, Evie nodded again. A vampire she didn't recognize appeared in the crypt doorway and tossed Spike a casual salute. "They're here."

Every individual hair on the back of Evie's neck leaped up and raced its neighbors to the ceiling as she realized who 'they' were. The Slayer stood in the doorway, a tiny golden figure framed in indigo night. At her side, a sullen dark-haired girl gripped a stake, flaying each vamp and demon in the crypt with a look of utter all-business hatred. Any minute now someone would be yelling Look well, O wolves!

Spike broke into a wicked, radiant grin, and offered the Slayer an arm. Buffy advanced into the crypt and tucked a hand through the crook of his elbow. Slayer and vampire flowed together, river to the ocean, shadow fused with sunlight. Spike's brow rippled into demon-ridges and his fangs extended, a change as calculated as everything else about this performance, and Buffy's mouth took brief possession of his. Oh, gah, there was spit. Evie's stomach revolted, and she wished she hadn't chugged all that blood. Queen and consort turned on her as one, cheek to cheek and forehead to forehead; Evie's chin went up and she clenched her jaw on the churning in her belly. From the lowered eyes and foot-shuffling going on around her, none of the other vamps in the room were any easier with Spike's pervy yen for Slayers than she was, but none of them said a word. This was a test, as much as the pig's blood had been. Evie took a step forward, thumbs tucked in the waistband of her jeans in half-unconscious imitation of Spike. "Hey."

The Slayer pursed her lips, looking Evie over like she expected the odometer to have been tampered with. "Spike's told you the deal? You don't kill, we - "
The dark-haired girl (was this the rumored third Slayer?), still lingering in the doorway, made a contemptuous noise, and Evie felt an unexpected surge of kinship. Not all tonight's tests were for her, it seemed. The two Slayers locked gazes, and after a moment, the dark girl's eyes skidded off sideways - not submission by any means, but an agreement to drop the argument. "We," Buffy repeated, "don't kill you. You fall off the wagon, you'll be dust before you hit the ground."

Evie nodded. She was going to wear out her nodding muscles. Spike hitched one hip up on the nearest desk and began cleaning his close-bitten nails with a penknife. He was human again - he'd never gone game-faced often, even in the old days, but he was almost always human now, even when there was no one around but other vampires. It was more than a little freaky. "Right then. I'm not paying you to imitate the statuary. Get to work."

And that was that; the high melodrama dissipated and the tableau dissolved into the organized chaos she'd walked in on. The two vamps who'd escorted the Slayers in escorted them out, and Spike went back to arguing with Anya about one of her orders. After an indecisive moment, Evie took the list and headed downstairs to find David.

She had no doubt that if she'd failed a single one of those tests, someone would be sweeping her off the crypt floor about now, and there would probably be more to come. No probationary period my ass. Still, Spike had been a reasonable Master in the old days, especially compared to the nutballs preceding and following him. He almost never killed his minions without a reason, and if he made a promise, he kept it: always to the letter, and usually to the spirit. Slayer-love or the chip had fucked him up, for certain - it didn't take an Einstein to see Spike had taken on Nadia and Denny, and probably her as well, because he saw his own past in them. That could be an advantage, especially if Spike didn't realize what he was doing. Evie looked over the list he'd given her - a lot of this stuff could be picked up on the cheap at the army surplus outlet over on Levitt, and some of the more outre items looked eBayable. She'd see about getting some computer time once David gave her an idea of how much she had to spend.

"At least this isn't some cheap-ass pity assignment like finding Rack's place," she muttered, as David acquainted her with the ins and outs of petty cash. Nadia whooped with laughter, and even David cracked something resembling a smile.

"Man, don't you know?" Nadia said with a conspiratorial grin. "Spike can't find Rack's place anymore. He won't admit it, but I've seen him hunt half an hour for the damned door when it's right under his nose. He always brings one of us along."

Evie gaped at her. "You're joking." To fall under the sway of the spell that kept Rack's operation safe from the prying eyes of normal humanity, a vampire would have to be... not just crazy, but...

"Fuck! He doesn't have a soul too, does he? 'Cause I'm not working for anyone who's got a fucking soul!"

"Nah, nothing like that, hon," Nadia assured her. "Soul doesn't matter for Rack's, anyway, lots of humans can find it. He's just... " She stalled out on an appropriate word to describe Spike.

"Different."

"You'd best get started," David said. Evie bit her lip and went over to the big map of the Sunnydale sewer system on the wall, plotting out the best way to get over to Main and Levitt. Obviously the two of them didn't want to think about the implications of Spike's little handicap, and she couldn't blame them. If it could happen to the Slayer of Slayers, it could happen to any of them.

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The waning moon tore a hole of light in the hazy web of stars overhead as Kennedy stalked the
straggling lines of tombstones. The tightly-held stake in her hand provided none of its usual comfort. The night was conspiring to piss her off. Shadows raced across the uneven ground to trip her up, and tiny itch-demons of foxtails clung to her socks and nipped at her ankles. She wanted to kill something, but Restfield was as dead as its inhabitants, and everything in killing distance, apparently, was off-limits.

The creeping ick of the crypt was still with her. The clear, cold night air couldn't slice through the odors of dust and blood and burning wax which still clogged her nose, and the distant twinkle of street lights recalled constellations of candle flames guttering in the darkness, and a million tiny bug feet skittering up and down her spine as the flames resolved into unblinking golden eyes. And Buffy, yellow flames reflecting in her eyes, cheek to cheek with the demon.

I'm not like that. The witches said so. Her new mantra. She wished the witches had stuck around longer to talk about the results of the aura spell, but Willow had rushed off to some evening class, leaving her with vague assurances that she was going to talk to this Giles person about it, and Tara had returned home to cook dinner. The promised sparring session with Buffy hadn't improved Kennedy's mood any - she knew she was good; even before she'd been Called she'd been fast and strong and resourceful. Someday she'd be able to take Buffy down. That didn't make getting the crap beaten out of her by the Summers School of Anything-Goes Martial Arts any easier in the meantime. Evening brought them back to Buffy's place for dinner: meatloaf and Smallville ("Poof." "He is not! Shut up!" "Spike's right, Dawn. All those lustful subtext-y glances..." "He is so totally in love with Lana!" "Yeah? Has he shagged her?" "Of course not!" "Poof."). All too lullingly mundane for words, as long as you counted the sight of a vampire pouring blood over meatloaf as mundane.

Buffy sashayed through the graves ahead of her, having traded in the skate bunny ambiance for a wine-red leather bolero jacket, skin-tight black denim jeans and kicky black leather ankle boots. Apparently the full set of Slayer powers included the ability to unerringly navigate untended hummocks of grass and the occasional fallen tombstone while wearing four-inch heels. Buffy was chattering on about the habits and habitats of Sunnydale's much-reduced vampire population. "... used to concentrate patrols on the cemeteries, but there's twelve besides Restfield, and hitting each one once every week and a half? Not efficient. I haven't cut out regular patrols altogether, but now I'm targeting the older vamps who're siring all these guys. It's like the trickle-down theory of slaying..." 

Summers might be the undisputed ruler of Sunnydale's night, but she'd bought that sovereignty with counterfeit coin. Anger boiled up through fissures in Kennedy's self-control, met cool reason and subsided with a hiss. She still needed Buffy's help. She wasn't supposed to blow her cover. She couldn't take Buffy even if she wanted to - but that was a stupid argument, because since when could Slayers pick and choose their battles? Kennedy realized that the pain in her head stemmed from the iron-bound rigidity of her jaw muscles, and forced herself to relax.

"... two main gangs when I got here, the Order of Aurelius and the Mayor's hirings. Or is it henchmen?" Buffy hopped the myrtle hedge surrounding a husband-and-wife monument dripping with bas-relief grapevines, weighing the relative merits of each term. "I'm never sure which is which. Anyway, ancient history. The biggest stable family nest right now is in a warehouse over on West Palchet, but the ones I'm really after are three or four upscale types over on the east side who're passing for human. They hire on a lot of the lone wolves as minions, and they've still got all kinds of connections with the police force, so they're tricky to go after - "

"Go after? What, there's vampires we actually get to kill?" The brittle crust of reason shattered, and rage flooded out, magma-hot and seething. Kennedy grabbed Buffy's shoulder and whirled her around. "What the hell was that back there?"
Buffy's muscles - she definitely had muscles beneath that girly exterior - tensed, just to the point that it was clear that the whirling was something she allowed rather than submitted to. "That was Spike's night job, when he's not helping me with the slaying."

Kennedy set both palms to Buffy's shoulders and shoved, hard. "It's not enough you're fucking them and feeding them?" Buffy took a startled step back. "You gotta play Queen of the Damned too? Slayers don't make deals with vam - !"

Fingers cinched her wrist, cutting off both words and circulation before she could get to the 'pires.' "Your Watcher ever fill you in on a cutie-pie called Acatlha?" Buffy demanded. "If I didn't make deals with vampires, you wouldn't be here today to bitch about it. Look, demons? Mostly I just kill them. One day Spike gave me a reason not to kill him. And then he gave me another one, and another one, and pretty soon not killing him got to be a habit, and then... well, that part's not actually any of your business." She released Kennedy's hand and stepped back, her eyes as grey and hard as the granite slabs surrounding them. "Every night I patrol the campus is a night I don't patrol downtown. Every night I dust a vampire in Sunnydale is a night I'm not dusting a vampire in Spokane. People die with every decision I make."

The words were razors, and all the blades turned inwards. Kennedy glared into those eyes without sympathy. "Boo fucking hoo. Every Slayer in history's got the same problem. Doesn't mean we give up and start playing pattycake with the monsters. What's the wrinkly guy's out? Does he do your dry-cleaning?"

"Clem's harmless! Mostly!" Buffy stabbed the air with her stake. "Have you been listening to anything I've said? The vampires in Restfield aren't fluffy bunnies, but right now they're not killing anyone. Every night I'm not taking out the vampires in Restfield is a night that I am taking out the vampires somewhere else. The ones that are killing people."

Kennedy's lip curled. "They all kill people! If not right now, then later! What makes you think you can trust them to keep their side of your little deal?"

"Spike."

"Uh huh. What the hell do you think slaying's about, anyway?"

"Protecting people," Buffy shot back. "Some of whom turn out to be not entirely human."

Tara's torn throat flashed before Kennedy's eyes, and for a second, she had no trouble at all believing that Buffy Summers was part demon. The back of her neck crawled, Slayer sense going nuts, and all those years of training came together in one moment of perfect synergy. Her fist was in motion before her brain could engage, arrowing straight for Buffy's chin. Taken by surprise, Buffy went down, and the two of them crashed backwards into the prickly embrace of the myrtle, toppling right over the bowed back of the scruffy-looking young man - no, vampire - in shabby Birkenstocks and Hawaiian shirt hiding behind the bushes. Well, that explained the Slayer sense going nuts.

The vampire crab-scuttled behind a nearby mausoleum, whooping "Whoa! Chick fight! Awesome!" as the two of them cartwheeled into the open. Buffy's kicky black boot made close personal acquaintance with Kennedy's solar plexus, and before the course of her graceful arc intercepted the myrtle once more, Kennedy caught a brief mid-flight glimpse of a pretty blonde girl in an Ed Wood cashmere sweater and heels even more impractical than Buffy's, cringing with wide-eyed dismay behind Hawaiian Shirt.

Buffy flipped herself to her feet, swung Tarzan-style around the pillar at the corner of the mausoleum, and slammed heels-first into the vampire's ill-trimmed goatee. His head snapped back,
and Buffy locked both legs around his neck, riding him down to the ground. Her stake descended, and she fell the last foot to the to the dewy grass through a gritty cloud of Hawaiian Shirt's dust. She rubbed her backside gingerly, and brushed powdered vampire off her palms. "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, going after them is tricky. Not the dusting of, but the avoiding prosecution afterwards. Plus any time they're up to something, they sire a few Rhodes Scholars like this to keep me busy." She wiped a trickle of blood from a scrape on her temple and glared at Kennedy. "And while we're asking, what the hell was that?"

Kennedy slumped back against a faux-Egyptian obelisk and pressed a hand to her ribs. This was a pain that would linger. She couldn't feel the warning tingle of vampire presence any longer. "You get the girl, too?"

"Girl?" Buffy frowned, suspicious. "There was girl? All I saw was Randy of the Redwoods."

"There was girl. Believe me, I notice girls."

One perfectly-arched eyebrow lifted. "I notice changes of subject."

"I'm not a goddamned demon, got it?" Kennedy folded her arms across her bruises and scowled. "Demons aren't people, I don't make deals with them, and I don't care what excuses you have for sleeping with the enemy, or what my stupid aura looks like. I'm not like you."

"Probably not," Buffy replied composedly. "And not demons. Invested with demonic attributes, including but not limited to mostly useless prophetic visions, vampire-specific spidey-sense, and the strength of ten because our hearts are pure. Or something like that." She inspected her knuckles, made an irritated moue at the condition of her nails, and sat down on a tombstone to ransack her purse for an emery board. "I've never actually read the whole report, 'cause Giles in full research mode? Sure cure for insomnia. I generally conk out by page six."

Kennedy's lips tightened. "So what's the point of making me read the damned thing?"

"Because the more we know about who and what we are, the better we can stay ourselves." Satisfied with her repairs, Buffy extended a hand overhead to admire it, but her gaze passed through her spread fingers to Orion and the Big Dipper, wheeling opposite one another about the hub of the winter sky. "You gave pounding me into hamburger the ol' college try just now. Did you do that kind of thing before you were called?"

Heat rose in Kennedy's cheeks. "I can take care of myself."

"That's not the question." There was no accusation in Buffy's voice; for whatever reason, she was trying hard to sell this. "A year ago, would you have wanted to go after me like that?"

A cold little worm of doubt squirmed to life in Kennedy's belly. She'd always known what she wanted and stopped at nothing to get it, but... she'd kind of lost it just now, and no mistake. Looking back over the last fifteen minutes she couldn't quite figure out just how everything had slipped out of her control. Just knowing you could punch through a wall changed the way you looked at things - what you were willing to say, and what you were willing to do. "So according to you, every time I lose my temper it's the fault of this demon crap?"

"It's not that simple." All earnest now, Buffy wrapped her arms around her knees, rocking back and forth on the cold stone. "It's not like you've got a shoulder devil whispering 'Punch Buffy in the nose!' in your ear. It's all you in there. But whatever gives us power is old, and dark, and strong. If you live long enough, it'll get stronger. You'll get stronger. Giving in to your own strength is... glorious. But it can eat you from the inside out if you let it, till there's nothing left of you but the
power. If that doesn't scare you a little, you're stupid."

"Well, lucky me, I'm not gonna have to worry about that for a good long time, am I?" Kennedy peeled off the obelisk and shook herself, shedding dead grass. "I got myself a room at the Sun Dancer Lodge over on Lincoln. Maybe I'll hunt down the one that got away, if she's not on the endangered demons list too?"

Buffy accepted this change of subject without complaint. "We should hear back from Giles by tomorrow if he's got anything useful for us." She hesitated. "If you need anything, stop by. And you're welcome to come to dinner any time if you... " She hovered delicately around run short on cash, and Kennedy felt a shamed twinge at the con she was pulling - she could have put a down payment on Buffy's house with the money she had at her disposal. Buffy settled on, "... get tired of McMeals."

"Thanks." But no thanks. Cash aside, she wasn't sure if she could take another dinner at the Summers house; it was a little too enticing watching Willow's pretty pink lips wrap themselves around a Crazy Straw and suck. "That report thing you gave me," Kennedy said. "You mind if I send a copy to my Watcher? 'Cause it occurs to me that someone who's an expert on Council history and demons and stuff might possibly have a different take on it than li'l ol' me."

Buffy didn't faze. "You want hard copy, Word, or PDF?"

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Spike changed clothes before he left the crypt, ditching the poncewear for his usual basic black. If Buffy pouted he could point out very reasonably that it made no sense wearing his Sunday best on the hunt, for all she did it on a regular basis. He was halfway out the crypt door, axe in hand and assorted stakes concealed about his person, when David appeared at his shoulder with a dry little cough.

Spike suppressed a groan; the last time that cough had gotten an airing, they'd failed to meet payroll and he'd had to kill someone to make up the shortfall. "Yeah?"

There was obviously a bug making its way up David's arse, destination brain, at record speed. "That slaughter at DeCosta's last week. There's talk down at Willy's that the Slayer's behind it."

"Now is that any business of yours?" Spike stroked the haft of the axe with a reminiscent grin. He trusted David as far as he ever trusted another vampire, but that was about as far as Dawn could punt a Ghora demon. "Don't tell me you care who she kills so long as it's not you."

David rubbed a hand over his balding pate - nervous, but he'd never been afraid to speak up when he thought it necessary. "She's going after Wilkins's old guard, isn't she?"

Spike settled his weight on one hip and regarded his second with increasing impatience to be off. "What if she is? No skin off your nose."

David made a frustrated noise. "It could be skin off a great deal more than my nose. Everyone knows that where she goes, you go. We're your minions - "

Trouble was always around the corner when someone started flinging that word about. "Employees."

"Semantics. You and the Slayer come as a set. What the Slayer does comes back on you - and us."

David drew a hand down his cheek. "It hasn't mattered till now, since she's always taken out vampires at random. But lately - she's got a plan, and you've helped put it together. Amherst, Corvini, Nguyen... they know the Slayer's on their tails now. We can't match their numbers or their
firepower if they decide to organize and come after us first."

Spike tested the blade of his axe with one thumb, and David inched back; apparently him fidgeting with weapons was more nerve-wracking than the ordinary kind. That David would fear the firepower available to a handful of moderately wealthy vampires was a genuine surprise, but just possibly, Spike thought, two or three apocalypses in a row had jaded him. "Not intending you to do so," he replied. "This wouldn't be the gang I'd build to go head to head with anyone, not by a long chalk."

David grimaced, acknowledging the truth of it. "And that's the problem. Whoever sent Cain won't stop with him, and that doesn't worry me - but we're not prepared for a war on two fronts. We're not prepared for a war at all." He added with a smile so dry it was shaken, not stirred, "Your death would interfere with the signing of my paycheck, but my death would interfere with my cashing it."

He hadn't considered this angle, but David was right; however stringently he separated his business killing from his recreational killing, other vampires wouldn't be so nice in their distinctions. It was tempting to blame his lapse on living too long among humans, but he'd never had much of a head for politics to begin with. This was what one had subordinates for, after all, to notice such things and report them. "Bugger. I take your point. We'll have to do something about that." Spike did a quick calculation; Amherst and Nguyen had seven and six minions respectively, Corvini four. "EVIE!" he bellowed.

The new girl's head appeared at the top of the ladder a second later, equal parts apprehension and belligerence in her dark eyes. "Yeah?"

"Forget the supply run for now. Got a job for you." Spike dug into a pocket and pulled out his wallet, repository of one green card (fake), one driver's licence (legit), and several credit cards (legit, but seldom used because Spike preferred to avoid leaving data trails when possible) in the name of one William 'Spike' Williams - not exactly his first choice of a nom de guerre, but that was what Buffy had blurted out to Dawn's social worker in a moment of panic, and he hadn't been in a tearing hurry to correct her. He peeled off a couple of bills. "Here. Go out and have yourself a time. Anyone you run into tonight, let drop casual-like that a bloke name of Kite offered you a job and you want to know if he's on the up and up. They get curious, tell 'em that the job was to be cozying up to another bloke name of Corvini. Make 'em feel like they're digging for it. Got that?"

Evie took the money with a grin and stuffed it into her decolletage. "Loud and clear. I'm not gonna be mentioning I work for you, am I?"

"Smart girl. Off with you." Spike grinned in the happy consciousness of a dirty deed done dirt cheap. Kite was Amherst's most trusted and senior minion; rumors that he was trying to infiltrate another gang ought to divert attention from them very nicely, and with luck would set Corvini and Amherst at one another's throats, weakening them both while Buffy attended to Nguyen.

David watched the exchange, python-eyed. "You could take Corvini down yourself. Co-opt her minions. Bring them under your protection. Take the others one by one."

"Could," Spike agreed. He shouldered the axe and turned to go.

"And you're not going to."

"Knew I didn't keep you around just for your looks."

"You're the eldest scion of the Order left sane and unsouled. You could - "
Spike stopped a pace or two outside the door and sighed. If David weren't so good with the books...
"Look. What I do comes back on you, you said - that goes both ways, yeh? Master's responsible for his minions. Any one of mine kills on my watch, it's on my head, so pardon me if I'm choosy about who I take on. If I'm going queer my deal with the Slayer, it's bloody well going to be for the pleasure of killing someone myself, not having it done by proxy." This was a piece of moral algebra beyond most vampires, and Spike was quite proud of himself for working it out.

"Spike, that's bullshit." David wasn't so much accusing as puzzled. "You're Master of Sunnydale in everything but name - why not make it official? It can't be the fight that scares you. The chip's gone. You don't need the Slayer's good will any longer. I know they say down at Willy's that she leads you around by a little pink bow on your - "

**WHOK!** The axe swung in a blinding-swift reverse arc. Spike completed his turn and appraised his handiwork: axe-bit lodged two inches deep in the wood, and David spreadeagled against the door, nails digging splintered furrows in the rough boards. The blade neatly bisected the angle where neck met shoulder, and tiny droplets of ruby seeped from the hairline incision in David's pale scrawny throat. Sloppy work, that; he'd have to get a little more practice in. "It's a very big bow, mate," Spike said mildly. He levered the axe free of the new gash in the door, and examined the blade for nicks.

"And what do you say?"

David's lips compressed to a line sharper than the blade. "Nothing I'm not paid to say, apparently." Which wasn't true, and one of the reasons Spike paid him. "I hope she's worth it. You're wasting yourself."

Spike clapped him on the shoulder, hard enough to jar teeth. "I'll be the judge of that. You've done well enough to tell me about the problem. I'll think on it. Tell Elise and Fernando to keep watch extra sharp, and make sure Evie's shown the back way out."

He did think on it, lounging astride the gleaming ebony bulk of the Triumph outside the front gates of the cemetery, but not for long. Spike had no doubt that he could take Sunnydale if he wanted it, but there'd be a price: his crew of misfits aside, Sunnydale's vampires wouldn't accept the Slayer's lover as their leader, nor willingly subsist on pig's blood and hospital leavings. Buffy, on the other hand, wouldn't stand for him looking the other way while his minions killed, even if he kept his own fangs clean. Being an effective Master meant withdrawing the foot he kept in the door of humanity, and going back to celebrating life only in the taking of it.

No choice at all, really. That was a skin long since shed, and there was no squeezing back into it now. Besides, when you'd gone up against hellgods, lording it over a few dozen vampires lost some of its allure.

With a glance up at the westering moon, Spike took a last draw on his cigarette and added another butt to the growing pile on the sidewalk. The bloodshot eye winked and closed forever as he ground it out beneath one heel. Buffy was late. He was beginning to wonder if he should have a recce when the delight of his unlife materialized in the shadows between the tombstones, leaf-flecked and tousled. She was wearing the squinchy expression that presaged either bark in her eye or a budding moral crisis. Buffy trudged out to the curb and butted her forehead against his shoulder like a disconsolate sheep. Spike ringed her in one arm, nuzzling into her disheveled hair and taking a deep proprietary whuff. "Ivy League get your back up?"

Dropped eyes and a gnawed-on lip were all he needed to confirm his suspicions. "I'm a sell-out," Buffy said with a shrug that failed to convey the intended indifference. "I'm - oh, never mind. You're all melancholy Dane yourself."

"Ah, me? I'm pussywhipped. Here, kitty kitty... "
There was that smile; that was better. "We're slackers." Buffy intercepted his hand and wrapped it in hers. "Letting the home team down."

Spike chucked her under the chin. "Yeh, but if my home team gets stroppy, I just kill them. Superior arrangement, to my mind."

"The not tempting of me? Still in effect." Buffy shook off her funk, dug into her purse and produced a left stiletto-heel pump in an exceedingly tacky silver. "Behold, I come bearing clue."

Spike cocked his head, less than impressed. "I was going to brag about finding those step-ins you hid, but I see you've got me beat."

Buffy flipped the shoe under his nose. "My heart-to-heart with Kennedy suffered vampus interruptus." She grimaced. "Actually it was more of a fist-to-fist. Anyway, I staked the party of the first part - party of the only part I saw, but Kennedy insisted there was a party of the second, so I did a little scouting, and voila. Party of the second is solid enough to shop at Payless. Look familiar?"

"Not hardly, but even odds she worked for one of the toffs we're after. Vamp in the street knows better than to plant their get in my back yard." Spike sniffed, but the shoe was brand new and didn't hold enough of a scent to identify. "Wish you hadn't staked the first bloke; we might have found out whether he was working for Amherst or Nguyen. If they decide to take out their frustrations on the lot at the crypt, we need to - "

"We do, do we?" Buffy pulled away and snatched her helmet off its hook. "These are vampires, right? Super strength, super speed, half-way invulnerable?"

"Yeh, but they're our vampires."

"Your vampires," Buffy corrected. "Newflash! I've got priorities here, and killing the bad vampires before they eat the humans is still number one. Babysitting the not-quite-so-bad vampires is somewhere around number six."

That settled the moral crisis/bark in the eye question, then. Spike suppressed a growl; he'd love her till he was dust, but if Buffy ever went through an ethical menopause, he just might throw a party. He considered the options: knock-down drag-out fight followed by spectacular makeup sex, or keeping his yap shut and taking care of patrol first. A year ago it would have been the former, no contest, but it occurred to him now that if he put off the fight till after patrol, they could have the spectacular makeup sex at home in bed. He was either getting smarter in his old age, or just getting older.

Oblivious to his scheming, Buffy strapped her helmet on with an adamant glare and swung onto the seat behind him, snuggling up close and wrapping both arms around his waist - but only, her posture implied, because she had to. Spike opened the throttle and bike's growl echoed his own as they tore away from the tangle of quiet streets surrounding Restfield and pulled out into the heavier traffic on Wilkins Boulevard.

One thing about the Triumph, it wasn't a vehicle for encouraging chit-chat, which was probably a plus at this juncture. Their bodies were always on speaking terms, even then they weren't. After a few blocks Buffy leaned into him, laying her head against his shoulders and cradling his spine in the curve of breasts and belly, offering a truce in warm soft womanflesh. They'd have a reckoning later, but for now the vibration of the engine knit them together into one creature. Spike grinned, threw his head back and yowled, well you tried it just for once, found it all right for kicks... The wind tore the words away and flung them over his shoulder. No great loss there - his singing voice wasn't exactly American Idol material, and the words didn't matter as long as the two of them were on the hunt.
The lance of the headlight cleaved the night ahead, and the blended howl of wind and engine sealed it up behind. Spike swerved from lane to lane for the sheer hell of it, grazing the orbits of semis as they rumbled their ponderous way towards their early-morning deliveries. They roared up the stately curves of Crawford Street as it rose out of the modest residential neighborhoods where the Harrises and Summerses and Rosenbergs of the world lived, up into the swanky suburbs flanking Kingman's Bluff. Here were the semi-palatial homes of Sunnydale's old money: Wilkinses and Chases and Kendalls. Two stories, three baths, four-car garages, and five bedrooms, sequestered behind acres of exquisitely manicured jewel-green lawn and shaded by huge overhanging Aleppo pines and magnolias.

Some of Sunnydale's money was older than the rest. The Master had come to Sunnydale in the late thirties, intending to open the Hellmouth, but the then-Mayor Wilkins-of-indeterminate-generation was already in residence with his own vampire minions and his own long-simmering plans, none of which included the Old Ones being unleashed untimely. The earthquake which banished the Master to dimensional limbo in '37 might not have been entirely coincidental; Darla had written Spike several strident letters on the subject, demanding his assistance. Spike had found them useful for rolling fags. Pissing around a tiny California town on the arse-end of nowhere, trying to pull old Bat-nose out of the rabbit hole when there was a bloody brilliant European war brewing wasn't Spike's idea of fun; he had places to go and people to eat. Dru always did love a man in uniform.

In retrospect, however moronic Wilkins's goals had been (what the fuck would a giant snake do of a Saturday night, anyhow?) he'd left his followers in better shape than the Master had left his. No ancient chants and dingy sewers for them; the vamps who'd survived the Graduation Day slaughter, the smart ones, anyway, had six-figure incomes and posh lairs with sound-proofed basements. Hunting the docks or trolling for dinner at the Bronze wasn't their style; they had their meals delivered. The Slayer was no threat to them.

Until now.

The Triumph's headlight bounced off metal, and Spike slowed to a crawl as they cruised past Angel's old mansion. Stopping at the neighborhood eyesore wasn't in the plan; tonight was recon, scouting the perimeter of Sammy Nguyen's lair, marking the entrances and exits and changes of the watch, and taking out stray minions as the opportunity presented itself. Which meant following Crawford all the way up to the foot of the bluff, ditching the bike in Granville Park, and slipping past Nguyen's sentries on foot. He rolled to a stop at the foot of the leaf-strewn driveway. A shiny new rent-a-fence surrounded the property, cutting off further access.

Buffy hopped off the bike, twined her fingers into the chain-link and peered up the drive. "Looks like someone got a stern letter from the zoning commission."

Spike cut the engine, booted the kickstand into place and got off the bike, staring up at the mansion with feet planted shoulder-wide and both thumbs hooking his belt. The windows, which had been gaping, glass-toothed maws a week ago, were now tidily boarded up, the chest-high weeds had been cropped to a golden-brown stubble, and a Dumpster full of trash and scrap lumber squatted in the barren front garden. The front door sported a sturdy new lock. "Timing's a bit suspicious, innit?"

Buffy craned her neck up at the blank-eyed facade of the mansion. "Someone planning a fallback? Does this place connect to the sewers?"

"Didn't when Angelus had us parked here, but it wouldn't be hard to tunnel into the basement. Feel anything, pet?"
Buffy shook her head. "Maybe... go stand over there, all I can feel is you. I wish I didn't suck so much at the vamp-sense-y thing. Kennedy - " She broke off with a frown, concentrating. Spike returned to the Triumph, rummaged through the various useful items in the saddlebag, and produced a pair of wire-cutters. Two or three expert snips and the fence parted like a chain-mail theater curtain. Spike wheeled the bike through, looking warily around the yard, and Buffy followed.

There were no white stars of jasmine at this time of year, but a wiry scrollwork of winter-killed vines etched the low stone walls of the garden, dark in the failing moonlight. Buffy touched his arm and jerked her chin in silent indication of her intention to check out the front of the house. She sheered off up the front walk, and Spike rolled the Triumph further up the drive. The place had an air of utter abandonment despite the recent improvements. Loath though he was to admit it, the mansion flat-out gave Spike the creeps, not least because it gave Buffy the creeps - not that she'd admit it, either. Too many bad memories here, for both of them, too much pain and betrayal and love ill-lost. It wasn't the dead that haunted this place, but memories of the living.

Something caught his eye as he unhitched his axe from the motorcycle. Spike knelt and touched the faint marks on the concrete - mud and leaf mould, still damp, still compacted into interlocking chevrons by a boot-sole. He measured the mark with an outstretched hand, then tried to match strides and came up considerably short. Who or whatever had made it was a largish beastie. He'd stopped breathing for reasons of stealth; now he inhaled, and immediately went into a coughing fit as the overpowering scents of garlic flowers and anise assaulted his nose. Someone knew their business - most unread idiots thought it was garlic bulbs that repelled vampires.

"Spike!"

Buffy didn't sound urgent, but he swiped the garlic-induced tears from his eyes and hastened to her side anyway. He found her crouched on the front steps, peering in through an intact and unboarded French window. Spike dropped down beside her, wrists on knees and hands loose between. "There's been someone other than us here, and recent-like," he said, low-voiced. "There's fresh tracks on the drive. They've masked their scent, but p'raps inside... "

Buffy beckoned him over to the window. "There's at least one more vampire around here somewhere," she whispered back. "I've definitely got the tinglies, and looky."

Spike pressed his nose to the windowpane and cupped his hands to his eyes for a better view. Sheet-shrouded furniture rose like spectres from rubbishy graves: drifts of newspapers, old Doublemeat Palace wrappers, the pathetic crumples of used condoms, and... there, in the thin stripe of moonlight - a silver stiletto-heel pump. Right in the spot where he'd sat six years ago, wheelchair-bound and fuming, while Dru urged that sodding puppy on him - could have brought him a nice toddler, but no, it had suited Angelus's idea of a joke to feed the invalid on the next step up from rats.

*And nowadays live dog's a treat, so suck up the irony, mate.* What coals of scorn his former self would heap upon his head would make David's veiled criticism look like a Stuart Smalley special. Spike ran a hand around underside of the nearest windowsill. Would the current owners have the place wired? Or hooked up with something more advanced - one of those motion-sensitive things? Likely not; all that would do would ensure that some fool minion would set the alarm off by mistake every other day. Still, all the earmarks of a trap. He caught Buffy's eye and arched a brow. "Do we spring it?"

Buffy bit a knuckle. "Come on."

She rose lithely to her feet, vaulted up onto the porch railing, chinned herself on the edge of the verandah, and was up and over like a seal sliding onto the ice. Spike took a few backwards steps off the porch, got a good grip on his axe, and cleared the roof with one soaring leap. Buffy punched his
arm and mouthed *Showoff*, and the two of them cat-footed across the rippled expanse of red clay to the nearest second-story window. Thirty years of dead pine needles crunched beneath their feet, packed so densely into the ruts of the tiles that in places the roof looked as if it had been thatched. Spike could see the drive from here, and part of the back garden, stretching away in a tangle of dead rose bushes and bare, whippy branches to the six-foot cinder-block fence which obscured the service road at the rear of the property. The moon was almost down, hanging low above the western horizon, and nothing moved beneath its half-closed eye but vagrant leaves.

Mindful of loose tiles and rotting beams, the two of them nested close to the sill and squatted down beside the window. Through the cracked and dusty panes the upstairs hall was empty. "Footprints," Spike breathed, millimeters from Buffy's ear, pointing to scuffmarks her human eyes couldn't distinguish in the uncertain light. Buffy nodded and made a going-in gesture. She dug a hand into the interstices of the ancient casing, and Spike followed suit. Paint chips flaked away under his fingers. The warped wood groaned; the window inched open under the pressure - jammed, and lurched upwards again with a screech. After a long, frozen moment in which she was almost as unbreathing as he was, Buffy slid one leg and then the other over the sill, limboed through the gap and eased herself down into the hall. Spike found it a slightly tighter fit, but he encountered no resistance; whoever was in there either wasn't human, or didn't consider it a permanent residence.

The first bedroom they investigated was adrift with cobwebby beer bottles, half of them shattered. A set of manacles lay tumbled in the corner, fastened to the headboard of the grim old hospital-style metal bedstead. Old blood crusted the dark metal. Spike scraped a flake or two of desiccated hemoglobin up with a fingernail and gave it an experimental taste. Nothing left of it, no scent, no savor - no telling how old it was. He licked it off his finger anyway. Buffy wrinkled her nose, and he gave her a shrug and a smirk in return.

The voices came clear as they moved back into the hall - male and female, low and strained and obviously unhappy with one another. Spike touched Buffy's shoulder and pointed - master bedroom, the one Angelus had commandeered during his residence here. She nodded, pulled out a stake, and together they slunk down the corridor towards the open door at the end of the corridor.

"... lay off, you're dust. I'm sick and tired of - " The male voice was hoarse, low, unrecognizable with strain. The woman's, shrill and angry and strangely familiar, broke in with, "You can't do that! Mr. Amherst will - "

Buffy shot him a look; they were close enough now for her to catch most of it. So Miss Twinkletoes was one of Amherst's minions - must be a new fledge. Who was the man? Another of Amherst's? Or one of Nguyen's? They didn't sound any too chummy, but vampires would fight over card tricks just to relieve boredom. Spike tried again to pick up a scent, but the hallway stank of garlic, even worse in the confined space than it had been outside. He held his breath and prowled after Buffy, keeping close to the wall to avoid creaky boards, beset by sniffles and deja vu. How often had he lain abed up here and listened for another pair of voices, imagining creeping down the hall and wreaking violent revenge on sire and grandsire both? Six years and an entire ocean under the bridge hadn't served to blunt that old humiliation entirely, or dull the infuriating memory of the wanton screams and wild laughter that echoed down the hall from bloody fucking Angelus's room. His knuckles whitened on the axe-haft. The blade jerked minutely with the movement, scraping against the wall, and a long ragged strip of wallpaper ripped free in its wake.

The voices in the master bedroom cut off as if he'd sliced them short. Bloody fucking *hell!* "Who's there?" The woman's voice was squeaky with apprehension.

Buffy was in motion before she finished the 'there,' and Spike, cursing himself, was right behind her. A huge dark shape hurtled towards the bedroom window as they rounded the corner, and a small
dark shape hurtled straight towards them. Spike heard the aerosol hiss, almost lost in the crash of breaking glass, and put two and two together just a second too late. "Gas, pet! Don't breathe!"

The cannister hit the doorframe and bounced off, expelling a choking fog as it rolled to the floor. In the artificial murk, a small light-haired figure broke from the rear of the room, collided with Buffy, fell on its ass with a terrified wail and dove between Spike's legs for the door. Buffy inhaled reflexively at the blow and immediately doubled over coughing, tears streaming down her cheeks. Spike risked a sniff; vampires were susceptible to injected and ingested toxins, but generally immune to inhaled ones... as long as they didn't inhale too deeply. Ordinary tear gas, seemed like, but the garlic was doing a number on him almost as bad. He swooped down, grabbed the cannister and sent it spinning out the window, scorching fast and hard. A gratifying thunk gave notice that he'd hit his mark, and the figure fleeing across the lawn, scorching fast and hard. A gratifying thunk gave notice that he'd hit his mark, and the figure fleeing across the lawn staggered, rolled, and took off again, limping badly.

Spike grabbed the helplessly retching Slayer, tossed her over one shoulder, and dove out the window after their first assailant, wreathed in a cloak of acrid white smoke. He somersaulted in mid-air and landed hard in the weed-choked back garden, folding in on himself to take the impact in his knees. Buffy was pounding not-so-weakly on his shoulder, trying to make him put her down; he hadn't been in a good riot since Watts (Prague had definitely been a bad riot) but if he remembered right, the effects of tear gas on humans didn't last for more than a few minutes once they stopped breathing the stuff. He swung Buffy to her feet and gave himself over to his own gagging fit. She was dripping tears and snot, and both of them were hatchmarked with tiny scratches and glittering shards of broken glass, but she was already reviving. Spike got his stomach under control and snorted, trying to get the lingering tang of o-chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile out of his nose; he still couldn't identify the scent of their prey, but he could bloody well smell the garlic.

An engine roared to life on the service road. Spike whipped round with a snarl. The look in Buffy's eyes was a perfect match for his: No way in hell, buster. They could jump the fence, but if their quarry made it to the open street, neither of them could keep up with a moving car indefinitely. As one they broke for the motorcycle, racing across the scraggly lawn. Spike flung himself across the saddle and was tearing out almost before Buffy could grab pillion. Helmetless, they rocketed towards the tear in the fence. Buffy held tight, shielding herself behind his back, and Spike gunned the engine, ducked his head, hunched his shoulders, and shot through the opening with a rattle and a clang of mistreated aluminum. One of the cut ends of wire snagged the sleeve of his jacket, and the bike slewed crazily to one side before the leather gave. For an instant they wavered on the edge of wiping out - Spike wrestled the handlebars with every ounce of supernatural muscle he possessed, and Buffy thrust one foot out to push off the concrete with all of her considerable strength. Sparks flew, one pair of kicky ankle boots was toast, and they were upright, more or less, cornering so tightly that leather scraped asphalt on the turn.

Buffy was half-standing as they skidded around the block towards the mouth of the alley, her lips pressed close to his ear so that he heard her via bone conduction more than anything else: Come on, faster, faster! The car in the alley had a head start on them, and it was running blind, headlights doused to discourage pursuit. Spike expected it to burst out of the service road ahead of them, but it didn't; once the driver had decoyed them in towards the east end of the block, he'd thrown it into reverse and was bumping down the unpaved road at fifty miles an hour in the opposite direction. Spike turned into the mouth of the road, spitting gravel in his wake, barrel-racing past the cheery blue bulks of recycling bins and the solemn black of trash cans. The car jolted to a halt at the end of the alley, and the headlights flashed on, foglights blazing their full glory. Spike threw an arm up to shield his night-sensitive eyes - no use; his vision blanked out in lurid violet-edged splottes.

Utterly blind, he struggled to keep the bike on course. "Left!" Buffy yelled. Without question Spike swerved. "Straighten up!" He felt a jolt and a bang, and the ground rose beneath them. The timbre of the car's engine changed and intensified, and Spike realized that it was headed straight towards them.
Buffy's fingers were digging through the heavy leather of his coat, straight down to bone, but there was no panic in her. "Wheelie! NOW!"

Spike hauled back on the handlebars and the bike reared, bellowing its challenge to the onrushing behemoth. They soared into the air, free-falling towards infinity, and then the rear wheel slammed into metal, the bike's nose came down with a crash, and momentum carried them screaming down to earth again. The streaks in front of his eyes were fading, and the engine-noise was receding behind them. Bloody fucking brilliant, they'd jumped the sodding thing!

"We need to turn!" Buffy shrieked in his ear. Spike shook his head.

"Garlic!" he yelled back, pointing. Behind them, there was an earthshaking crash and half the lights on the block went out as the car rammed into an electric pole. Every car alarm within a quarter of a mile went off at once, a banshee cacophony that bid fair to drive him mad. The Triumph bounced out onto the pavement and Spike's nostrils flared, hunting the loathsome scent of garlic flowers.

"There!" Buffy pointed, and Spike hauled the bike around and took off. Their quarry was running now, limping noticeably. It lunged for the top of the nearest fence, grabbed the top, and scrambled over. Spike braked and slewed to a stop in a flurry of dead leaves, going from bike to wall in one quicksilver leap. Buffy was right behind him, handicapped by the state of her boots, but keeping up gamely. They were over the fence, racing across the close-mown winter rye towards a line of upscale condos. A whistling howl arose from the parking lot, and as they crested the top of an artificial rise, Spike saw them: two figures locked in a wrestling match in the Visitors Only slot. One was noticeably larger than the other, and in the sickly yellow of the parking lot lights, the row of spines along its back that marked it as other than human were plainly visible. For a second it looked as if it had the upper hand, and then the smaller figure jammed something into its ribs. The demon convulsed with an inhuman shriek and collapsed to the ground. The smaller figure, obviously human now, fell with it, and the two writhed together on the ground.

Buffy put on a burst of speed and flew at the demon, launching a spinning kick at its long-muzzled jaw. "My name is Buffy Summers. You killed my footwear. Prepare to die!"

The demon surged to its feet with a snarl and sliced at her face with one taloned paw as she came down, while attempting to choke the man on the ground with the other - three? Four arms, grey, elephantine hide, crocodilian head ringed in a shaggy ruff of coarse iron-grey fur - what the hell was this thing? Spike caught the flailing wrist in both hands, wrenching it round behind its spiny back. Bending that mass of muscle and bone was like trying to macrame a treetrunk - some sort of Sunnydale curse in effect, that even when he brought a weapon along, he'd end up fighting bare-handed. Better that way. Spike vamped out and sank his fangs into the nearest piece of grey flesh. Buffy aimed another punishing kick at the thing's left kneecap and followed up with a series of savage blows to its midsection. The demon staggered, but ignored her to tear at the prostrate man with mindless ferocity. "You'll not take me alive, puny human!" it roared.

"Sorry, neither!" Spike caroled. The man on the ground was wearing a Kevlar vest, and so far the thing's claws had failed to penetrate. Buffy continued to deal out scientific whup-ass, kick-punch-kick, to the sweet tune of crunching ribs. The lower left arm swept back for a swing, and Spike hooked his legs around the creature's middle, pinning the arm with his thighs. The demon slammed backwards into a light-pole, and Spike narrowly escaped the loss of extremely important body parts as its dorsal spines tore into his side. He kept twisting the upper right arm, his own muscles screaming in protest, until ligament by ligament, things started to tear. The shoulder dislocated with a pop! as Buffy wrapped both arms around the demon's toothy muzzle, locking its jaws together like an alligator wrestler, and heaved it into the air, cracking the enormous body like a bullwhip. Spike leaped free in mid-crack, landing on all fours beside the human chew-toy, which stirred with a groan.
There was an audible crunch of disintegrating vertebrae, and the demon crashed to the ground, limp and motionless, its long purple tongue lolling out of blood-flecked jaws.

Buffy lifted one foot to examine the shredded wreck of her boot. "You have been avenged."

Spike got to his feet, panting, and stared at the thing - no species he'd ever seen, and that was saying something. It was wearing a tattered assortment of old fatigues, and Army boots with the toes cut off to accommodate its formidable claws. He knelt beside the body and parted the coarse mane. Around its neck was a set of dog tags, and amongst the jingling metal was a lumpy, cloth-wrapped bundle from which emanated the worst of the garlic-stink. So... was this who they'd been chasing? It wasn't impossible - he'd assumed human or vampire, but this was largish and bipedal, more or less, and the pattern on the soles of the boots matched the tracks in the driveway. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. The garlic was giving him a headache.

Buffy came up behind him, resting her hand on the small of his back, and Spike let the amulet fall. He straightened and draped an arm around her shoulders. The subject of the demon's fury rose unsteadily and backed away, running a shaky hand through his blood-matted hair. "Are you OK?"

Buffy asked. "That was a - "

The man turned. Tall, broad-shouldered bloke, kitted out in vaguely military-looking gear, all black doubleknit and Kevlar and an assortment of mysterious belts and pouches. Brown hair, brown eyes, open, honest-looking features. Good-looking in a deadly dull way, save for the large scar tracking across the left side of his face. His eyes went to Buffy, then to Spike, and back to Buffy again, taking in the easy placement of hands on bodies. He half-smiled, wry and pained and unsurprised. "What was that again about not needing a boyfriend with superpowers?"

The rest of Buffy's sentence vanished in a startled puff of air, and her arm tightened around Spike's waist.

"Well, well, well, as I don't live and breathe," Spike drawled. "Riley Finn."
Riley had it all worked out. He'd played the simulations in his head a thousand times. Every possible permutation, from shameless wish-fulfillment (Riley Finn, International Man of Mystery, strolls into the Circle K with a supermodel on each arm, to buy a Slurpee from remorseful old maid Buffy Summers) to sober, mature speculation (The two of them sit in her living room, balancing the good teacups on one knee - we both made mistakes, can we just be friends?) He'd prepared for every eventuality.

Or almost every eventuality. He'd somehow neglected to run the "Make a stupid personal remark immediately and piss Buffy off from the get-go" scenario. It figured; the moment he set foot back in Sunnydale, things had started to go to hell. Buffy's eyes took fire; her chin came up, and without moving another muscle, the casual curve of her arm around Spike's waist became a political statement. "For the record? Superpowers are optional in the Buffy Boyfriend Sweepstakes, but you do have to be present to win."

Ow. Riley's shoulders stiffened, then slumped. Well, they hadn't exactly parted ways with an exchange of gift baskets. Take it like a man, Finn. "I suppose I deserved that."

Buffy's expression wavered between guilt and annoyance that he'd played the Mature Adult card first. Spike's hand settled on the back of her neck, long pale fingers soothing the taut line of muscle and tendon. It strained belief that Spike's sick little infatuation had come to anything - but there he was, standing at her side with an undeniable air of entitlement, his eyes fixed upon Riley with aloof suspicion. Buffy bit her lip, giving Spike a little glance before meeting Riley's eyes once more. "I'm sorry. I didn't - "

"Don't apologize. I was out of line. Your personal life is none of my business." There, boundaries firmly established. Sort of. He couldn't help it - his eyes kept straying to Spike. Morbid curiosity. The furtive, starving look in the vampire's eyes, that had little to do with physical hunger, was gone. Buffy looked good, too, like a weight had been... not lifted, maybe, but shared. Her hair was a darker blonde than he remembered, the fine lines at the corners of her mouth looked more due to smiles than unendurable strain, and she'd put on a few pounds, regaining the lush, athletic curves he'd seen in only her high school yearbook photos. Buffy had back. Which was the last thing he should be noticing.

"That's the sixty-four dollar question, innit? What exactly is your business at the moment?" Spike strutted over, nose to chin with the larger man, a wiry, malevolent terrier facing down a Great Dane. Riley had a good six inches and fifty pounds on Spike, and he'd gotten accustomed to seeing fear in the vampire's eyes, back in the old days. There wasn't any now. Sure that Buffy would protect him, or... ? "Taking up old habits, Finn? Didn't realize Amherst was pimping his minions out, but - "

"I don't know any Amherst," Riley interrupted, his eyes flinty with distaste. Damn it all. Tonight his past seemed bent on catching up with him in an embarrassingly literal manner. Another ten minutes and the whole mess would have been resolved, one way or another, but of all the gin joints in all the world, Buffy had to show up here and now, with her own personal bloodhound in tow no less. There was nothing to do but brave it out; he'd planted the amulet on the demon in time, the odor of garlic had thoroughly confused his trail, and he was fairly certain neither of them had gotten a positive visual ID. "I made you a promise once, Spike. I can still keep it."

Spike's grin uncurled like a cat stretching in the sun, and there was a ten-cylinder purr in his voice to match. "An oldie but a goodie: Love to see you try."
"Stop it," Buffy interrupted. "I don't want it to be like this. I call do-over, with fifty percent less bitterness." She held out a hand, assuming an expression of determined good cheer. "It's nice to see you again, Riley. I didn't expect to run into you in Sunnydale. In the middle of the night. In a parking lot." She laughed, self-conscious. "Or anywhere, ever."

Riley took her hand, and the tentative shake segued into a clumsy half-hug. Buffy pulled away and reclaimed Spike as quickly as manners allowed - no hint of yearning in her face, no sudden flowering of long-denied passion. Riley couldn't deny a little twinge of disappointment, but it was only a little twinge, thank God. Over. It really was over. Bottle of red, bottle of white kept running inanely through his head - it was good but at the same time sad, like he'd lost a childhood treasure and only just now noticed. He stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I want you to know - I didn't ask for this assignment. I was just the best qualified, because I know the territory. I was going to call you up tomorrow and give you the heads-up, and... well, ask for your help, to be honest."

Buffy blinked. "Um. Thanks. I think. What with?"

"Him, for one." He nudged the supine demon with the toe of his boot. "We've been tracking this puppy for days. Sam and I almost had it cornered in that old warehouse down on Main and Bleecker, but there was some kind of interference on the scanner, and we lost him. We split up, and it jumped me. Got me pretty good." He patted his right leg. Limp accounted for.

Buffy looked at Spike; Spike looked at Buffy. Both of them looked at him, Yeah, right, metaphorically tattooed on their foreheads. They hadn't bought it. He wouldn't have, if he were them. But all he needed was reasonable doubt.

As if the dubious looks were whizzing right over his head en route to Canada, Riley unhooked the trace scanner from his belt and bent over the fallen demon. He ran a hand through the coarse grey fur; it felt faintly greasy to the touch. Running the scanner over the creature's shaggy chest elicited a series of bleeps and chitters - confirmation, if he'd needed any, that this was one of the targets. Riley punched the coordinates of capture into the keypad, watching the results of the DNA analysis scroll across the tiny screen: traces of three different demon species. A chimera. One of the prototypes for Adam, though after three years the scars and suture-marks were barely visible. He tucked the scanner back into its holster and pulled out his cell phone. "Finn. Hostile 14's been terminated. Condos at 6917 North Bauden, just south of Crawford, parking lot in the back. Send a team along for pickup and disposal, stat." He glanced at Spike. "I may have a line on one of the black sheep."

He clicked the cell off and straightened, turning guileless eyes on Buffy. It was she whom he had to convince; Spike was only along for the ride. "When Fuzzy here started moving so fast along that alley," he jerked a casual thumb back in the direction of the service road, "I figured he'd stolen a car and I was gonna lose him, but you chased him right back into my arms. Thanks for the assist."

"I could have sworn we were chasing something with fewer arms." Buffy frowned down at the sprawled form of the demon.

Serpentine, serpentine! Riley neatly sidestepped and seized the offensive. "You and Spike are really... working together?"

Buffy tucked her arm more securely around Spike's middle and nodded. "We really are."

You could have powered L.A. for a week on Spike's smirk. "Working together, playing together, living together, all manner of togetherness, mate."

"That's... " Riley came to a decision; he had to tell her something. "Buffy, can we talk? In private?"
I've got a situation here, and this... " He indicated Spike with a flick of one hand. "Complicates things."

Spike's cheeks hollowed, and his scarred brow migrated a sardonic quarter-inch upwards. Buffy answered the question in the vampire's eyes with an imperceptible shake of her head. Couple semaphore. When she turned back to Riley at last, her smile was sincere and sunny. "Of course, but just so it's understood? If you tell me something I think he really needs to know, I'm passing it on. Since Spike and I are working together, and all."

His mind churned as he allowed Buffy to steer him down the row of Beamers and PT Cruisers and a candy-apple red '68 Mustang, standing out like Danny Zucco at a white-tie formal. Spike receded behind them, a Rorschach blot of ink and moonlight against the fender of the Mustang, his ashen head bent over cupped flame. The new-lit cigarette scribed a sigil of fire upon the night.

He hadn't anticipated this. He couldn't have. That Buffy had a not-so-secret fascination for vampires, sure; some of his less-plausible daydreams had involved rescuing her from the thrall of some undead Rico Suave with a Gothic mansion and a copy of Brooding For Dummies.

But Spike... A guy who stole women's underwear and got tanked on JD straight from the bottle wasn't Buffy's style, vampire or not. God knew he was the last person who could throw stones regarding sleazy vampire affairs, but he'd never pretended that they were anything but sleazy affairs. The idea of taking any of those nameless, faceless tricks into his home, much less his heart, was ludicrous. He'd sought them out in an attempt to discover what dark glory it was that drew Buffy into the night, and found nothing but squalor and desperation and hunger, his and theirs. Whatever Buffy got from her liaisons with the undead eluded him to this day. Night's language, which she spoke with such fluency, would forever remain a mystery to him.

She was so tiny, walking beside him. He'd forgotten how small she was; his memory made her larger than life. And she was still magnificent in a fight. The elation in her eyes, the ferocity in her grin, when that demon had come slamming down on the pavement, bones breaking like firecrackers... magnificent, and a little scary. "So, you and Spike. Anything else exciting happen while I was gone?"

She smiled, wistful. "The usual. Two apocalypses and counting, came back from the dead, dropped out of college after Mom died, and I'm teaching beginning and intermediate figure skating. You?"

*I spent my first leave drunk off my ass in Tijuana, letting some cheap dead blonde drain me dry. But I got better. "I met a girl," Riley offered. "She even has a pulse."

"You're one up on me with the pulse." Buffy led him all the way to the end of the covered parking, out of range of Spike's inquisitive ears, and stopped. She took his hands in hers, tossed her bangs out of her eyes and looked up at him with great shining sea-mist eyes. "OK, Riley. It's just us. Was that you in the mansion?"

She was so earnest. Part of him wanted to spill the whole sordid tale and let her make it better. But damn it, he wasn't Mission's boyfriend any longer, and he'd never been the damsel in distress that Buffy would have made of him given half a chance. Asking for the Slayer's professional assistance was acceptable, whining to Buffy to bail him out of a jam wasn't. He could clean up his own messes. Riley retrieved his hand and raked blunt fingers through his hair. "I know what it looked like, but I don't do that anymore, Buff. I haven't let a vamp bite me for two years." He held out one arm and rolled the sleeve back. Some of the old scars were still visible in the right light, but the bare unmarked flesh was testimony in itself. "I'll strip so you can check if you want, but - " He allowed his tone to lighten, and jerked his head back at Spike, "I don't think he'd appreciate the competition. Can you trust me when I say it's nothing to do with the mission, and I'll take care of it in my own
way?"

She searched his face, obviously torn, but in the end she nodded. Riley seized the offensive. "Look, I said it was none of my business, and it's not, and I'm sorry, but I have to know. How serious is this... thing... you have with Spike?"

Buffy's eyes iced over. "How serious does it have to be?"

"What I mean is - " He was hacking his way through a jungle of words, none of which said the things he wanted to say. "I know you have, um, needs." *Boy, do you have needs.* "Sometimes you get caught up in the moment. You think it's only going to go so far, and before you know it you're in over your head..." And they both knew it wasn't her he was talking about. Riley abandoned the botched attempt at delicacy and ripped the Band-Aid off in one pull. "The behavior control microchip that Doctor Walsh's team designed was experimental. It was never intended to last for years under field conditions, and the ones that are still in commission are starting to break down. The aversion parameters in the biofeedback loops become distorted."

Buffy raised a hand. "Um... not Willow. Translation?"

"The chips are breaking down. We implanted behavior-control chips in about twenty HSTs, mostly vampires. About a dozen of them escaped the Initiative complex while you and Adam were duking it out. Until now they've been harmless." The set of his jaw turned grim. "My team's here to hunt down any surviving subjects - capture them and return them for study if possible, kill them if it isn't."

She looked interested, concerned, speculative. The implications weren't sinking in. He knew Buffy; she'd taken Spike out of one mental box and put him in another, and forgotten the old box existed. "It's been years," she pointed out. "What's the chances any of them are still in Sunnydale?"

Riley shrugged. "We have to start somewhere. And I knew for certain that at least one of them would be here." Her eyes were blank; he nodded down the long row of parking spaces. Spike was kicking the tires on the Mustang with the covetous expression of a man deeply regretting his retirement from grand theft auto. "Buffy... his chip is going to become increasingly unreliable. Eventually it'll stop functioning altogether. Odds are it'll fry his brain in the process and leave him a vegetable, but there's about a thirty percent chance it'll go out in a way that'll leave his higher functions intact. If that happens, he'll be able to kill again. Soon."

Buffy's hand flew to her mouth, penning in a gasp that was half relieved laughter, half guilt. "Oh. Oh, God, I forgot. You don't know. Spike - the chip's been gone for a year now. Willow took it out. It's a really long story, and - Riley, don't be stupid! He'd break you in two."

There were tones of voice that could have made those words palatable, even romantic, but Buffy was only a little impatient. And concerned. Always concerned. Riley's knuckles blanched around the stake which had appeared in his hand, muscles knotting across his back and shoulders. Half a parking lot away, the bobbing coal of Spike's cigarette dipped out of sight as the vampire bent to check under the hood of a sporty little Jaguar by the simple expedient of lifting the whole front end of the car off the ground. Riley tucked the stake back into his belt. "He probably could," he agreed. He'd never been afraid of Spike, and he wasn't about to start now, but he had some mental boxes of his own to re-arrange: cross out Skinny little guy who can't hit back; write in Supernaturally strong, semi-invulnerable demon. He wasn't stupid enough to go Tyler Durden on a vampire who'd killed two Slayers with his bare hands; taking Spike down would require heavier artillery. But some wounds still ached, long after the weapons that dealt them had rusted away. Especially when he still didn't understand why they'd been dealt. "I never had a chance, did I? No one human did. Was it him? When you'd leave me at night after... was it him all along?"
"Was I cheating on you while you were cheating on me, you mean?" Sparks flew in Buffy's voice. "I went out at night to kill vampires, not screw them. If you think - " She cut herself off, squeezing eyes and fists tight. "Maybe I was too closed off. I'm sorry about that. But it's not - I didn't deserve... Even if I didn't love you, I could have, Riley Finn." She opened her eyes, and in their dark-lashed agate depths was all the pain he once could have wished for - ashes, now. "I could have."

This was the Buffy he understood, the Buffy he'd loved, the wounded and determined girl. What lay beneath that sun-kissed California surface was something dark and deep and untouchable - the Slayer, glorious in the light and terrible in the darkness, as fey and strange a creature as the things she hunted. The irony was that he'd lost the girl in his desire to understand the Slayer. It could have worked. If I'd been different, if you'd been different, if everything had been different...

She needed to believe that. It would have to be enough.

Spike materialized at Buffy's side, a feral glitter of eyes in the dark, fifty yards of asphalt covered in less time than it took to say it. "Company."

Headlights pinned the three of them to the wall as the APC hove into the parking lot, matte-black and deadly. It rumbled to a halt and a small battalion of men piled out of the vehicle and pounded across the lot, trailing long stark prison-break shadows and a demon-sized body bag like the flag at some surreal Iwo Jima. Riley's heart lightened at the sight of the tall, statuesque brunette leading the charge. Not everything had gone wrong tonight.

Without a word exchanged, Buffy and Spike had shifted positions, the vampire moving to the Slayer's left, each of them covering the other's off side. There was a fugitive gleam of gold in Spike's eyes as he watched the men at work, and a near-inaudible growl in his throat. Riley felt an unexpected surge of pride. It was good to be part of the thing that monsters feared.

Sam jogged up, poked the muzzle of her modified M-16 through the zippered slit in the bag and nudged the demon. "Positive ID?"

"Absolutely, hon." Riley handed her the scanner and pulled her into a non-regulation embrace. "And check this out. Ninety-five point eight percent integration on the genetic scan. Halberg's gonna go wild."

Buffy looked from him to Sam, wary. "I'd heard the military had loosened up, but... " She sounded pardonly confused.

Riley blushed, and broke into a grin equal parts proud and sheepish. "Sorry. Buffy, this is Sam - Samantha Finn. My wife."

******

Dawn always left the porch light on for her. Mom had done that, once. At least twice a week, Buffy would turn the key in the lock and open the front door with her customary post-patrol stealth, to find her sister curled up in robe and slippers on the living room couch, yawning over her reconditioned Thinkpad and a supposed late night of homework. After the first couple of lectures on the importance of a good night's sleep to the educational process, Buffy gave up and restricted her pseudo-parental urgings to forbidding the consumption of caffeinated soda after twelve A.M.

Besides, there were certain things that absolutely required the liberal application of sisterly balm and solace.

"He had the nerve to ask if I was sneaking around with Spike before he broke up with me. Hello? Dumpee, not dumper! And then?" Buffy took a bite of her sandwich and flourished the remains in Dawn's general direction. Tara always left them something easy to fix for a post-patrol snack - more
of a post-patrol dinner, really, since these days her schedule meant that breakfast was more often than not lunch. Mom had done that, too. Buffy sometimes pondered the fact that it took two people to fill Joyce Summers's shoes, three if she counted herself, because she always did the dishes after. "He said he knew I had needs. Which everyone knows is code for 'You're a great big ho.'"

"You can't be a ho," Dawn pointed out. "You're not getting paid." She selected a potato chip, scrutinized it for structural soundness, and began piling on successive layers of dip, bologna, pickle relish, and Cheez Whiz, the apparent goal of the enterprise being to create a Sears Tower of condiments before the chip got too soggy to support them. "You're a nymphomaniac."

Dawn didn't seem to have a handle on the whole balm-and-solace routine yet. "I don't have time to be a nymphomaniac," Buffy grumbled. Jobs and minions and slaying meant that those five-hour shagfests were a thing of the past. They could barely squeeze in an hour before bed these days. Maybe two. Three on weekends, tops. The post-workout quickies in the training room barely counted. Or the extended detours on slow patrol nights. Or the wake-up sex first thing in the morning. Or that time of month, when you couldn't keep Spike away with an Uzi... or... oh God, she was a nymphomaniac.

"Soldier Boy's just rightly jealous of the fact that you're my nymphomaniac." Spike plunked himself down on the couch with a bottle of Sam Adams and a plate of raw liver, which Buffy was given to understand was the vampire equivalent of Godiva chocolate. She didn't want to know what constituted the vampire equivalent of, say, broccoli or Spam. He propped his boots on the coffee table, vamped out, and pried the bottle top off with a fang, which, considering it was a screw-top cap, was a pointless display of macho vampire something-or-other and shouldn't look nearly as hot as it did. "Two bob says the World's Largest Cub Scout was lying through his pearly whites."

"Riley is innocent until proven guilty, hurrah for the overthrow of the Napoleonic code," Buffy replied loftily. "I mean, who hasn't had a perfectly harmless midnight rendezvous with a vampire in a deserted mansion at some point in their life?"

Spike popped a bloody, oozing chunk of let's-not-think-about-it into his mouth and waggled an eyebrow. "I meant about the wife. Bet she's hired for the occasion."

"Spike's right. Doctor? Demon fighter? Peace Corps volunteer? Sheeyeah, right." Dawn nibbled on another chip and cast a speculative eye on Spike's plate, but mangled bits of raw beef liver were apparently beyond even her elastic culinary pale. "I bet she's a robot or a clone or something. Warren out on probation? Did she make any whirring noises?" She swung into balm mode with belated enthusiasm. "Anyone who just dumps you and runs off to Bolivia for no reason isn't going to end up married to the lesbian love child of Mother Theresa and Xena, Warrior Princess."

"Belize. Riley had... reasons," Buffy protested, aware that her argument was suffering from severe anemia. "Secret, military reasons." Spike leaned forward, malicious amusement gleaming in his eyes, and opened his mouth. Buffy promptly stuffed it full of liver. Dawn might be mature and sophisticated and the same age she'd been when she'd started slaying, but there was no way in hell she was going to explain the vampire hooker fiasco. She ran a hand down the buttery folds of leather and fingered the tri-cornered tear in the sleeve of Spike's jacket. "This is pretty nasty." Look at the shiny non-sequitur; you are getting sleepy, sleeeeepy...

Spike choked down his unexpected mouthful and fell in with the diversion. "It's seen worse. I'll have someone take care of it."

'Someone,' Buffy knew, would be Not-A-Minion. It sometimes disturbed her that they ended up performing so many services far outside the range of what could reasonably be expected of an employee. Spike was perfectly capable of cleaning up after himself, but saw no reason to exert
himself if he could bully or cozen someone else into doing it. Weirdly, the not-minions seemed to feel better about the whole arrangement when Spike imposed on them. Not that their emotional well-being made even number six on the list of priorities.

Spike aimed a pointed look at the clock. "Bit, you get any forwarder on that report? Isn't it past time you were..."

"Off to bed so you can grope my sister?" Dawn collected her crumb-speckled books and got to her feet. "Yeah, I'm almost done. I don't know how much of your story I can use, though. I need to figure out how to cite 'Personal recollection of immortal vampire’ in the bibliography. Mrs. Dembeau gets unreasonably fussy about stuff like that."

Spike waved this objection away. "Giles went and wrote a whole bloody treatise on me; cite that and let the old bat argue with the Watcher about sources."

Buffy ran water into the sink while their voices receded up the stairs, Dawn badgering Spike about the details of some tall tale about vampire-crewed U-boats. Personally she thought the story ranked somewhere below 'I've always been bad,' on the accuracy scale, but she had other matters occupying her mind at the moment.

There were at least seven hundred and forty-two things she hadn't expected to see in that parking lot, and while Riley Finn might not have been number one, he certainly made the top twenty. She shuffled through the emotional Rolodex as she stacked plates - startled, stunned, surprised... oooh, looky, there in the corner, a little left-over betrayal! Was that all? She'd shared almost two years of her life with the man. It wasn't Riley's fault that Angel had come along first and taken so much out of her, or that Spike had come along after and given her so much more back. Maybe he'd never roused the agonized longing Angel had, or the unbridled passion Spike did, but Riley'd been... nice. On paper, the perfect guy. That was the trouble: her vampires rated Harlequin-level adjectives, while Riley made do with 'reliable' and 'thoughtful.' Except he hadn't been so reliable there in the end, had he? She'd been so angry at him when he left, and at herself - that had to mean there'd been love, didn't it? Now even the anger was all dusty and tarnished around the edges. If all she could give him was time and space to deal with his problem, whatever it was, she'd do it. She owed him that much.

Spike strolled back into the kitchen, enveloped her from behind in a garlic-and-tear-gas scented embrace and nuzzled her throat with a little grrff of content. "Evie'll have some news on Amherst by tomorrow," he said. "We find out who this bird Finn was meeting is, and we'll -"

"Let him be for now." Buffy frowned at her reflection in the wet china and handed Spike the plate; after a moment's horrified, uncomprehending stare, he picked up a dishtowel with a martyred sigh and began drying. "He did break up with me, you know. With ultimatums. I definitely remember ultimatums. Stupid me, I thought we were happy." A bolt of sheer terror ripped through her and she whirled, grabbing Spike's elbow in panic. "We're happy. Aren't we?"

His eyes darkened - sky in December, from clear pale morning to azure dusk. He stooped like a hawk upon her mouth and mantled over her, bent her back against the counter and settled against her body with the evident intention of staying for a good long time. Spike's kisses were nothing if not thorough.

Her hands found their way along familiar paths, along the curve of his back to the blade-bones of his shoulders. Up and down and up again, the languid deep-muscle caresses that set him purring like an outboard Evinrude. The water was still running. She didn't care. He had liver breath. She didn't care. They were about to knock the plates out of the dishrack. She didn't care. The only thing in the universe was that cool, supple mouth systematically despoiling her own. Riley's words flitted through her head: They have such hunger for me... Maybe she understood that, now.
Spike let her up for air with a lazy grin, and ground his hips against hers. "I feel happy. You?"

The sink was poking into her spine, Spike was poking into her belly, and the swoony feeling in her middle had nothing to do with tear gas. She was pretty damn hungry herself. "I could feel happier." Buffy reached behind her to turn off the faucet, grabbed Spike round the waist, slung him over one shoulder and sprinted for the stairs. "Shower first. You smell like an Al-Qaida deli."

"Oi!" Spike yelped, sounding anything but unhappy about the situation. "I'm being repressed! Put me down, you pint-sized Amazon bitch!"

"What language! You shock me, sir," Buffy smacked his ass, hard, grinning as she felt his cock jerk and stiffen against her shoulder. "Someone needs his mouth washed out with soap - eep!" Spike's hands snaked round her hips, undid the button and zipper of her jeans with Blurry Vampire Speed (tm) and yanked them down around her knees. He vamped out and ripped into her thong with his fangs, shaking the scrap of damp magenta silk back and forth in his teeth with a raunchy growl. She stumbled to the floor, trying desperately not to break into housemate-awakening shrieks of laughter. Somehow in the next five minutes they managed to completely divest one another of clothing and get the shower in the master bathroom going without ever actually taking their hands off one another. Synchronized vampire stripping. Cirque Du Soleil, Buffy considered, was missing out on a good thing here.

The word for today was tingly.

Tingly was goooood. Tingly was Spike's hands holding her firmly from behind, thumbs pressing the base of her spine, fingers spread across the twin arches of her hips - lovely big hands, anchoring her at the warm steamy heart of the deluge. Tingly was Spike's voice, like burnt caramel and whiskey, crooning, "... sweet lil' pussy, stroke her fur and she gives me cream... " Tingly was Spike's very presence, which thrummed along her spine and radiated out along every filament of nerve. His hands concentrated it, his mouth intensified it. His cock was a lightning rod, every thrust a miniature electrical arc.

Water drummed against her shoulders, as hot as she could stand it, a tropical storm to go with the lightning. Buffy spread her feet as far apart as the walls of the tub allowed and braced her forearms against the cold tile, tipping her face up to meet the spray. Her throat was still a little sore from the gas, but the humidity helped. Helped lots. The wet slap of flesh on flesh made the laughter bubble up; lovemaking was really a very silly activity when you thought about it, but, oh, who could think when there was so much to feel instead: cold tile and hot water and juuuust right vampire filling her so full...

"Happy, pet?" A hand slicked up soapy skin to squeeze one jouncing breast, down to plunge between her thighs. Working her hard before and behind, groaning and breathless with the effort of holding his own when she arched into his strokes and squeezed. "... make you happier, oh, yeh, come on sweeting, come for me, right where you live - " Buffy gave vent to an inarticulate, whimpering moan, vibrating all over as his fingers found that spot and dove in for the kill. Her body hummed beneath his touch like a swarm of bees. "Sweet my love, cunt on you like a velvet beartrap, arse like a ripe peach, tits like - like - oh God oh Christ oh Slayer oh Buffy have mercy upon me now and in all the hours of my death!"

How the hell could he keep up a running commentary on his own orgasm when she could barely get out a 'Guh'? She let her body say the things she couldn't, every muscle focused upon holding him tight in a grip of silk and steel, drawing him deep, drinking him down. Spike seized up, wordless at last, and she was sunlight, she was water, she was golden honey and pounding spray, melting and reforming, subliming into something utterly new and taking him with her.
Then she was Buffy again, plastered against the tile, and Spike was plastered against her, his arms locked around her waist and his head against her shoulder as the water sluiced over their intertwined bodies, both of them drawing great gasping breaths of sultry air. Spike smelled like earth after rain, like her mother's rose garden, dark, rich, musky clean-vampire smell. Willow had explained it once; something about actinomycetes and lower body temperature. What it boiled down to was boy smell good.

She shut off the cooling water and reached for a towel. Spike stretched wolf-fashion, fore and aft, and got out of the shower. He stood smug and dripping in front of the indifferent mirror, squeezing wasteful amounts of toothpaste onto his brush. There were times when it startled her to see Tara or Dawn's face reflected beside her own, she'd gotten so used to Spike's invisible presence. Buffy reached for the bottle of Pantene they'd knocked off the shower caddy and frowned at the level of product. "You've been using my conditioner again."

He blinked golden eyes over a mouthful of foamy fangs. "Have not."

"Have too. Even I with my puny human nose can smell it. Jasmine-cucumber. Revitalizes and enfullens."

Spike spat, rinsed, grabbed his comb and yanked it through his wet and suspiciously tractable hair in a defensive huff. "Smells like a bleeding fruit salad. Why don't you get some of the unscented? And 'enfullens?'"

"It's a perfectly cromulent word. Why don't you just buy your own?"

"Because I don't use conditioner," Spike countered, secure in this bastion of unassailable masculine logic. He leaned over and licked her shoulder - most of the cuts from the shattered window had healed already, but the hot water had washed the scab off one of the deeper ones, and tiny rivulets of scarlet were trickling down her back. Spike caught them on his tongue like snowflakes and followed them back to the source, licking, nuzzling, not quite sucking the wound. Instant tingles from slightly rough, minty-fresh vampire tongue and the illicit thrill of fangs on tender skin. Towels fell forgotten to the floor as Spike kissed her owies all better.

She didn't return the favor; vampire blood was just plain gross. But other parts of him were oh, so tasty and she still had room for dessert. Always the gentleman, Little Spike, rising whenever she entered the room. She worked magic with hands and mouth, forging adamant from pliant flesh with small savage nips and whisper-kisses on dark satin. This time it was her tongue which stole his words away and left him a trembling, gasping, glorious wreck. Look up, and there's her beautiful vampire, backed glaze-eyed and slack-jawed against the sink, white hands gripping smooth white porcelain, the back of his damp tousled head bumping the mirror. Look in the glass behind him and there's only her own face, smoky-eyed with abandon, taking him in.

The one good thing about not making it to the bed was that no one had to sleep in the wet spot. By the time they rolled under the covers, she was sore and sated, warm and full. Full of Spike. Overflowing with Spike. Buffy wanted nothing more than to curl up with him and fall asleep - and that, naturally, was when Spike chose to start the argument.

"About the lot at the crypt, pet." Spike rolled over, drawing patterns around her navel with one finger. "They're going to come in for grief if we go after the big boys without taking precautions."

Buffy dragged a pillow over her face and groaned. "We're not talking about this."

"Bloody well are." Spike snatched it away with a growl and pinned her arms down, the muscles in his own cording, one hundred and sixty-seven pounds of irritable vampire pressing her into the
Buffy stared up into his eyes, and struck - knee to the gut, whip her arms free of his grip and use the momentum to flip him over her head. Their positions were reversed and Spike was gazing up at her with a mixture of lust and exasperation. She smiled, kittenish. “Aren’t.”

And the bastard head-butted her.

Two seconds later they were straining and snarling, Spike trying to get her in a headlock while she did her damnedest to pin him again. Spike had always been heavier than he looked, being all solid whippy muscle, and he’d filled out nicely in the last year. Plenty of vampires over the centuries had killed Slayers and drained them dry, gotten one dizzying hit of that powerful blood. Not so many had been in a position to feed off one... well, snack on one, anyway... over time. Giles would be taking notes, if either of them were stupid enough to inform him that Spike was getting the vampy equivalent of experimental vitamin supplements.

She could still take him. But she wanted to go to sleep, dammit. He was hard again - no surprise, fighting always turned him on. Buffy abandoned her Shaniqua impression for a snake-strike between his thighs, squeezing and rolling with merciless precision. Spike’s eyes went wide with desperate intensity, every fiber of his being focused on not coming for just one minute longer, and the mixed pain and rapture on his face shattered her into a million fizzy pieces inside. "OK," Buffy gasped. She made the mistake of looking down; his quivering cock strained towards her, a strand of liquid pearl drooling from the head. His long, hard, thick, curved-just-right, OK, maybe this wasn’t such a great idea. "You last for more than five minutes, we talk. Deal?"

Spike glared at her, canines dangerously pointy and eyes flickering yellow. “RRRRRAAAAAARRRGHH!”

For the record, twenty-one minutes and forty-two seconds. Possibly the longest forty-two seconds of her life.

"Riley was right," Buffy murmured, dazed.

"Not precisely what a bloke’s looking to hear at a time like this," Spike mumbled into her shoulder. "Try 'Oooh, William, you incredible stallion, in your arms I scale Himalayan heights of pleasure undreamt of by mortal man,' instead."

"Would you settle for 'guh'?"

Spike's chuckle mellowed into a smug grin, and he rolled over, reached beneath the bed and produced a package of Marlboros and a plastic lighter. How long had he had those stashed there? Buffy considered making him put it out, but that would have required the utilization of large muscle groups, and all of hers were on strike at the moment. Besides, she had to admit that in this particular case, he'd earned it.

It wasn't the superpowers. She'd held back physically with Riley - of course. He'd never had the strength or stamina to push her to those Himalayan heights, but that was the least of it; she hadn’t even known what she was missing. Till that last night, she’d never raged at Riley, never turned the knife-edge of her tongue on him, never... pushed him, the way she pushed Spike daily. Fearing in the fastness of her heart that she dared not, because he wasn't ready to see the dark inhuman power that moved her, and worse, the neediness, the self-involvement, the petty meanness that was wholly human. That she would break him, in ways that had nothing to do with physical strength. That he would be unable, in the end, to push back, and would instead be pushed away.

Spike exhaled a long self-satisfied plume of slate-blue smoke. "Simple. You think vampires bright enough and level-headed enough to live without killing grow on trees? It's taken a year to collect this many, and we let 'em get dusted, we'll be a long time finding more now that the Hellmouth's not drawing vamps like flies. We don't have the workforce, we miss filling orders, we lose customers, we go broke, Dawn don't get that Ivy League education we're aiming for." Spike scowled and jabbed his cigarette in cindery emphasis; he was really serious about this, Buffy realized with a slightly guilty start. He was giving her vampire logic, all quid pro quo and what's in it for me, but she had to admit he had a point.

"On top of that, we're partners, right? That's for the good and the bad, innit? They're our min - employees. We're responsible for 'em. I told 'em they gave up killing, I'd look after 'em. My word as an Englishman, and that's not something I give on a lark. So if we're partners, my word's yours, innit? And yours mine. Only right."

"Spike - " They're vampires. She had no illusion that Spike's gang were friends or even allies; they kept their bargain purely out of fear and an eye to a sweet deal. They just weren't worth her time to take down when there were so many other clear and present dangers to deal with.

She'd scorned that argument not so long ago, when Giles had used it to justify his failure to bring Whip's establishment to her attention. She'd been just as horrified and angry with him then as Kennedy was with her now... though the discovery that Riley Finn had been frequenting said establishment had a good deal more to do with her outrage than she liked to admit. Spike had brought Whip to her notice - and now he was the reason she spared the Restfield vampires. Kennedy was right: she could have taken the lot of them out easily; they trusted her, insofar as trust meant anything in this situation.

She'd given her word, and kept it, ever since David had first worked out his arrangement with Spike. Her word wasn't lark material either. But this was new - one thing to turn a blind eye; very, very different to actively protect the things she was sworn to kill. David and Denny and Nadia and Evie... she shouldn't have learned their names. It was the first step towards thinking of them as people, and she'd always had trouble with that. How many times had she let Angelus or Harmony or Spike himself walk away because something in her said person even as everything else was screaming vampire, kill?

Are you sorry you let Angelus and Spike walk away?

Are all the people who died because you let them walk away sorry?

And those questions led to more questions, and finally to the big one, the one the Council feared above all others, the one that prompted them to hide the secret of the Slayer's power from generations of their tools.

If one demon can work for good...

If one vampire can stop killing...

Then...

Spike was watching her. Her tame vampire, grown sleek and well-fed on loving her, as content with his lot as any demon could be... whose eyes still flashed sulphur and hellfire, whose teeth were still razors, who was still, even now, the most dangerous creature in the world to let into her heart.
If they were partners, really and truly...

Buffy drew a shaky breath. "OK. What are we going to do about defenses for the crypt?"

*******

The scent set hooks in his nostrils and hauled Angel out of the murk of unconsciousness even before he opened his eyes. Woman-smell, warm, musky and tantalizing, masked beneath chemical layers of soap and deodorant.

He took a single deeper breath, sifting the odors: antiseptic and floor wax, isopropyl alcohol and adhesive tape, sickness and fear and despair. Some kind of hospital, but not a human establishment - he could smell traces of demon mixed with the mouth-watering scent of prey. Gregson. Crowley had mentioned Gregson, and Gregson owned a clinic. He'd operated on James there, removed the pussy-whipped loser's heart in exchange for a spell of temporary invulnerability - had Crowley paid the doctor to do the same to him, turn him into an invulnerable and short-lived assassin? If so, he knew who his first target was going to be.

His eyes slitted open on a sterile fluorescent glare which could have been noon or midnight or any point in between. It was a private room, at least. No windows. His bed was surrounded by a pale green curtain, pulled half to; he could see half a dozen mysterious boxes set up on gurney, and he was hooked up to all of them, needles and tubes trailing from chest and skull and arms. Their uninformative faces displayed readouts in glowing red and blue and green, measuring... what? He was dead. The machines didn't seem to care; they whispered and beeped among themselves, happy to record the non-events occurring in his body. Angel raised his head, crowned with a wreath of electrodes, and looked down. He was wearing one of those peek-a-boo-ass hospital gowns. OK, Target Zero was going to die a little more slowly than usual for that.

The nurse whose scent had woken him bent to adjust the strap confining his left wrist, her starched white uniform straining over middle-aged bulges. Saliva flooded his mouth and his fangs ached in his jaw, and the impulse shot through him like red lightning - Take her. Tear her open. Plunge your hands elbow-deep into the pulsing Crackerjack box of her body and pull the toy surprises out, pink and red and glistening. Let the glorious crimson torrent course down your throat, rich as cream, strong as whiskey, warm as fire. Make her life your own, and when it's fled, kiss her dead lips, close her dead eyes, toss her aside and go on to the next, and the next, and the next...

You'd think a soul would weigh like lead, but you'd be wrong - it was light as air, and as inescapable. He waited for the guilt.

It didn't come.

The restraints encircling his wrists and ankles were too sturdy for even vampire strength to break, but his ravenous snarl sent the nurse skipping back with surprising agility. She goggled at him, her mouth an O of Mr. Bill horror. One greying lock of hair straggled over her eyes. She tucked it beneath her cap, still staring. He lunged against his restraints again, and she broke and ran, a jiggling blancmange of a woman calling, "Doctor! Doctor Gregson! He's awake!"

Angel fell back in the bed, giggling. It wasn't gone. His soul still bound like cheap briefs, but somehow it didn't matter any more. Someone had hurt him, and someone had pumped him full of painkillers. He felt like shit, woozy and shot through with pain - needles to the head, knives to the heart - but at the same time light and warm and buzzy. Happy. Manufactured happiness, but who cared? Better unliving through chemicals. He felt so good, so clean and free. Strip the soul away, and layer upon layer of emotion came with it, the impasto of guilt and remorse, the sfumato of obligation and gratitude, baring the underpainting of his psyche. Portrait of a killer.
There had to be some way to get loose; this momentary emancipation would be torn from his grasp
the minute the drugs wore off. Seize the day, and anything else within his grasp. There was fresh
young meat only rooms away, and if he played his cards right, he might yet get to check out the
hospital food. The restraints were heavy-duty nylon and high-impact plastic. He tested each one in
turn - was there a fraction of give in the left wrist? He’d interrupted her in the midst of adjusting it.
He clenched his fist and pulled, exerting steady pressure. Clench, relax, clench, relax... If he could
work even a little slack into the straps... Footsteps echoed in the corridor outside, and Angel froze.

"Doximal," a voice said. Soft, slightly nasal. He didn’t recognize it. Gregson? "Along with a
carefully calculated mix of stimulants to counteract the soporific side effects. With further testing we
can transition to a targeted euphoric, but for now I felt it was best to use a proven formula."

“You're certain he'll be coherent?” That was Crowley, the prissy little fuck.

"I do know my business, Mr. Crowley," the first voice said. "And speaking of business, there is the
small matter of my fee."

Crowley's reply was frosty. "I've contacted my associate regarding the artifact. Providing the
operation was successful, you should have it by the end of the week."

Gregson sniffed. "I can't guarantee the patient's cooperation. But I think you'll be pleased with the
results."

The door to the room swung open and two men stepped in - or one man and one demon; the tall,
thin, balding man in the lab coat looked human, but his scent gave him away. The old man and the
thing that walked like one strolled over to the foot of his bed. Crowley looked Angel up and down
like a man who'd received a mail-order bride and wasn't entirely satisfied with the merchandise.
Gregson glanced at the monitors, picked up the chart and made a note.

"Mr. Angel," Crowley said, clasping his hands behind his back. "Or do you prefer Angelus?"

Angel relaxed as far as the restraints permitted. Interesting question. He'd defined himself by the
presence or absence of a soul for so long. Angel, not Angelus. A negative space. I am not that. What
am I, then? Only Angel pondered that question. Angelus knew. "What's in a name, Mr. Crowley?
Do you prefer me to crush your shiny bald head like an egg and watch the brains dribble out your
ears, or string you up by your toes and skin you from the soles of your feet down?"

"Angelus, then," Crowley said, rocking primly back and forth. "Perhaps you are inclined to
reconsider the offer I made you earlier today?"

"Kill Spike?" Angel consulted the fluorescent light overhead. "Now, why did you want me to do that
again? Oh, yeah - because he's living soft in the Slayer's lap, deluding himself that he's one of the
good guys. Pretty damned pathetic, falling for a Slayer. I should know." His voice darkened,
deepered, aged in oak and gall of wormwood. "And what a shame it didn't happen twenty-five years
ago. Who knows, if Nikki'd done one thing, said one thing different, maybe our William would've
developed a taste for chocolate. Close... " Angel rolled his shoulders, turning a dagger-toothed grin
on his captors. "... but no cigar. Mr. Crowley, I couldn't have come up with a better torture for a
washed-up failure of a Watcher like you if I tried for twenty years. Why the hell should I lift a pinkie
finger to stop Spike causing you pain?"

The old Watcher's pink and shaven jowls quivered. There was raw, helpless hatred in his eyes.
"Perhaps because you have an interest in this particular Slayer?"

"Had an interest in her." Crowley's discomfiture made him chuckle, and his voice grew mocking.
"What, you think I give a shit that she's fucking a vampire? That I'd be jealous? Because I still wuv Buffy?" He burst into laughter. "Who the hell do you think I am? Spike? Don't get me wrong, pinning a Slayer down like a frog on a dissecting table and stripping her to the bone is always fun for the whole family. But it's not the overriding goal of my existence, Crowley my boy. That would be getting off this table and ripping your larynx out through your ass." He settled back with a sneer, savoring the devastation in the old man's eyes. "Unfortunately, by the time I finish with that I'm pretty sure the happy pills will have worn off."

You had to hand it to Crowley; the guy recouped fast. "That would be inadvisable," the Watcher said. "Because then the happy pills will wear off."

Angel's lion-gold eyes flicked from Crowley to Gregson's bland and deceptively human face. "Suddenly my interest level rises."

A smile hemmed Crowley's mouth in tight, unpleasant lines. "I began researching your recent history several months ago, in the event that your... er... better half refused my offer of employment. Removing and returning a soul is a lengthy and dangerous ritual no matter what method is used. But I discovered a newspaper article linking you with a certain Rebecca Lowell, who was extremely helpful -"

Memory matched the name to a face - young and beautiful, and never quite young and beautiful enough. The actress who'd wanted him to sire her. Too bad he hadn't been able to finish the job. She'd had some promise. Angel turned to Gregson with a nasty chortle. "You have done your homework. What'd you do, promise her monkey gland injections?"

Gregson looked down his nose. "Please. Doctor-patient confidentiality."

Crowley hid a cough behind a translucent, blue-veined hand. "Based on Ms. Lowell's information, and with Dr. Gregson's invaluable assistance, a device has been implanted in your thoracic cavity. At scheduled intervals, it injects a cocktail of drugs into your descending aorta. The device contains sufficient medication to last for several weeks - so long as it receives a daily remote signal from a second device, the location of which I shall not divulge. Should it fail to receive this signal, it will cease to operate, the drugs will wear off, and you will revert to your usual self." His eyes were raven's eyes, dark and shining, waiting to feast on the dead. "If you are considering torturing me for the location of the second device as soon as you are free, please remember that I am old, frail, and a Watcher. I will be dead long before you can break me, and very shortly thereafter you will regret your actions exceedingly. If you cooperate with me, I shall, upon the completion of your mission, provide you with unlimited supplies of the most efficacious drug we discover to... maintain your current condition."

The implications took a moment to sink in, but when they did the jolt was like feeding off a crackhead. Freedom. Limited, conditional freedom, but freedom still, from the thing that bound him far more effectively than Spike's chip ever had. Angel felt his soul's chafing, far away and deep within and easily dismissible. He smiled, his face human once more, and a lilting hint of his Galway youth tinged his words. "Mr. Crowley, for that I'd send my own mother to hell, if I hadn't already done so. We have a deal." For now.

Crowley bowed his head and let go the breath he'd been holding for both of them, the steel melting out of his spine. Those fragile, ancient hands twitched once, and fell to his sides. "Very well. I shall leave you to recuperate." He shuffled past Gregson and paused in the hall outside the doorway. "I am a cautious man, Angelus. Please don't imagine that I'm so foolish as to have no other failsafes in place."

"You're doing very well," Gregson said, making another note and hooking the chart back on the foot
of the bed. "You should be able to leave in the morning. We have sewer access from the morgue. The orderly will bring your dinner shortly."

The bulk of his body hid his left arm from the doctor's view. Angel began his stealthy work on the loose wrist strap again. "Human blood. I'm not drinking any more of that pig slop. And make damned sure it's fresh."

The doctor smiled, satisfied with his labors. "Of course."

Gregson followed Crowley out and closed the door behind him - it shut with the definitive snick of a well-constructed lock. They weren't taking chances. Angel let his gaze go unfocused and allowed his head to thump back onto the unyielding hospital pillow. Clench, release, clench, release. His left side was beginning to twinge as his efforts pulled on the half-healed staples in his breastbone. He was in worse shape than he wanted to admit; even vampire healing couldn't make light of having your rib cage sawed open.

No two ways about it, Crowley would have to die, preferably in extended public agony. Something creative with hot oil and tweezers, perhaps. No one controlled him and got away with it. He'd make the Watcher an example. But not until he'd discovered what those other failsafes were, and neutralized them. He didn't trust the old bastard; no Watcher would willingly let Angelus loose on the world unhindered. Gregson, on the other hand, might prove useful for a bit longer.

He worked doggedly on loosening the strap. The last time he'd lain so comparatively helpless, it had been the day and night following his rescue from the bottom of the Bay. He'd drifted in and out of uneasy slumber a dozen times or more, and always when he'd woken, Cordelia or Wesley or one of the others would be at his side, pressing more blood on him, tending to the open sores where things had come in the murky water and shredded his skin with tiny relentless needle teeth.

Once in the still small hours, it had been Spike.

He slumped boneless in the big wicker chair across the room, chin propped on one hand, a Caravaggio vampire in bleach and black leather. Lamplight gilded the long lashes, the elegant curvature of a wrist, the careless out-thrust of a bent knee, aureate highlights on a ground of ebony. When Angel stirred, Spike rose, his broad spare shoulders blocking the lamp, and shadows devoured him whole. Radiance limned him from behind as he stalked over to the bed, a walking figure of fire.

A be-ringed hand stretched towards him - long aristocratic fingers, big square palm, nails bitten to the quick. Angel had been terrified that Spike would open a vein, and that he would be too weak to resist the enforced intimacy of feeding. But the hand had passed him by and taken up the squeeze bottle of tepid, congealing pig's blood on the nightstand. Spike tipped the contents into Angel's mouth with rough efficiency and watched his grandsire's throat work as the blood went down, his jaw rigid and his eyes a-glitter with anger and resentment and a fierce and heedless love.

Spike hated him, but when Cordelia had called Sunnydale for help, Spike had come to L.A. (Buffy hadn't, the bitch; some feeble excuse about being a material witness at Warren Mears's trial.) With Spike the line between love and hate was always a knife's edge, and it was oh, so easy to turn the blade against him. He and Buffy were alike in that.

Buffy. He still despised the way she'd made him feel. Ensouled, he'd loved her - how could he not? She was the warrior of light who'd stooped to lift him out of darkness, the living face of his salvation. And fucking hot to boot, a juicy little seventeen-year old package of pout and wriggle. Joan of Arc in hot pants. She'd made him yearn after lost humanity, and there was no forgiving that. But it had been years since she'd dominated his every thought, and enough water had passed under that bridge
that he no longer felt the need to burn it behind him immediately. Angel tugged on the strap, his keen ears catching the creak of stressed fabric. Crowley's attempt to play upon his jealousy was futile, but it hadn't been a bad ploy. Jealousy generated from love like maggots from rotting meat, and there were men in whom that most human of weaknesses was cankered so deep in the bone that even the loss of a soul could distort and darken but never wholly erase it.

He'd never been one of those unfortunates.

They all forgot - even he, sometimes - that Angel hadn't sprung full-grown from the forehead of Angelus, just add soul and stir. No, he'd built Angel with his bare hands: forged a new self out of guilt and misery and the least promising of raw materials, day by day, year by laborious year. Liam of Galway had never been a good man, in life or in death, with a soul or without one. Once upon a time he hadn't been an evil one, and that was the highest goal he could conceive for himself after his soul had been thrust back upon him.

In Buffy's arms he had believed, for the first time in two and a half centuries, that he could aspire to more than simply not evil. No mere girl could give him that, but Buffy was no mere girl.

Skin abraded and nylon burned against his wrist as he wrested one more millimeter of give from the straining buckle. The sharp tang of his own blood stung his nostrils as Angel set his teeth and pulled. Bone compacted against bone, and he laughed, welcoming the pain as an old friend.

When Spike loved, it was as simple and direct as a blow to the head. With Drusilla, with Buffy - everything they were or could be, good, bad, indifferent, Spike loved with everything he was and had been. Angel's love for the Slayer was as complex as Angel himself, a tapestry of a thousand thousand threads - draw but one, and the pattern would change. So much easier for a demon to tear down than to build, and he gloried in his own wreckage. Salvation was the last thing he wanted now. He'd owed the Slayer a lingering death for years, and he intended to pay off, with interest.

His hand tore free of the straps in a splatter of crimson. He clawed the buckles on his right hand open, jack-knifed up to wrench the manacles from his ankles, and rolled off the bed with a snarl of triumph. A quick survey of the room revealed no easy concealment, and the bed was a mess of crumpled, blood-streaked sheets, the childbed wherein he'd died giving birth to himself. Angel surged into game face and snapped razor teeth at the ragged flap of skin dangling from his wrist, severing it neatly. The scrap of bloody flesh slid down his throat, slick and salty, himself into himself, an Ouroboros afterbirth for the devouring. He glided over to the door, licking the blood from his mangled hand, and cocked his head: footsteps approaching, and the rumble of wheels. Dinner was served.

He flattened himself against the wall. The doorknob rattled and turned, and the orderly's cart bumped it open. Angel didn't wait for the man to see the Grand Guignol of the bed; he grabbed the cart and shoved it across the room, sending the orderly into a staggering half-fall as it was torn from his grasp. Angel's hand closed around the man's throat, strangling his yell, and hauled him inside. A quick kick and the door slammed shut behind them. The orderly's eyes were wild with all the terror his throat couldn't utter; all that came from his mouth was a dry raspy wheeze. The vampire smiled and caressed the man's cheek with his free hand, leaving finger-trails of dark gore. This mark, upon this threshold, was none that an Angel would pass over. Faster than human sight could follow he struck, yanking the jaw up with punishing force and plunging his fangs into the exposed neck.

Flesh burst like ripe fruit, and blood fountained up to meet his lips. Angel drew at the wound with the oblivious greed of a babe at his mother's tit, lost in the hot rush of stolen life. Beneath him the man's eyes fixed and glazed over, his thrashing limbs stilled and his hoarse bubbling mewls faded away. Once, twice, his chest convulsed, and then breath ceased and heartbeat faltered and fell silent.
Angel tossed his head back with a voluptuous moan, flinging gobbets of scarlet aside to spatter against the walls. The blood was always sweetest at the moment of death. He could feel it pulsing through him already, bringing a flush of false warmth in his cheeks, knitting abused flesh together and lending new strength to sinew and bone. Licking his lips, he bent to the corpse once more, fangs scoring the ravaged throat anew, sucking hungrily at the cooling feast. He didn't intend to eat and run; Crowley and Gregson just needed an object lesson in exactly who they were dealing with.

He needed a plan. The last time he'd been stir-crazy, insane with liberty after a century of soul-guilt. More than just crazy - stupid, allowing his humiliation and fury at the Slayer to drive him to mad excesses. This time would be different. He'd need to quell any suspicions at Angel Investigations. Or maybe just kill them all. The AI crew knew him too well to fool them for long, Cordelia especially.

He'd definitely need allies and pawns of his own. Buffy wasn't a naive, heartsore teenager any longer, and Spike was unpredictable. Their mutual destruction would be a challenge. Spike wanted schooling as badly as Crowley did: a lesson in what he was, and the futility of attempting to be otherwise. Given the choice, he'd prefer to bring his black sheep back into the fold. Spike was as much a work of art as Drusilla in his own way, perpetually unfinished, forever throwing up rough edges that needed polishing. In the end, Spike would thank him for the catechism of pain.

Angel let the orderly's skull hit the floor with an invigorating crunch and stood, stretching in full-fed satisfaction. Maybe he did prefer Angelus, after all.
Chapter 6

L.A.’s demon scene was a glittering labyrinth of excess, a network of glitzy casinos and smoke-filled clubs. Curiosity shops stocked with monkey’s paws and magic carpets huddled furtively in the shadow of glass-sided skyscrapers, sprawling bazaars threaded their way through entire sewer mains, and exotic bordellos where anything and anyone could be had for a price did business twenty-four seven.

Sunnydale's demon scene was Willy's Alibi Room.

It was the shank end of the night, almost closing time, and Evie'd run through her sob story so often she’d memorized the thing. Sunnydale proper currently harbored upwards of sixty vampires, with maybe another dozen or so lairing on campus or hunting the cheap new housing developments which were eating up the farmland on the outskirts of town. Evie figured she'd talked the ears off of thirty of them tonight - she'd even hit the Fish Tank and Bender's and the Espresso Pump on the chance of running into a hunting pack or two. She'd earned some R&R.

It was Pirates of the Caribbean Night at Willy’s, a promotional gimmick which seemed to consist primarily of flinging a few sad plastic leis across the bar, programming the juke box with nothing but Jimmy Buffet and Bob Marley, and giving all the drinks nautical names. Which apparently justified jacking the price up a buck or two apiece. Not that Evie cared; it was on Spike's tab.

She maneuvered past a table full of Fyarl who were tossing back steins of something with a suspicious resemblance to used motor oil to the accompaniment of booming honks of laughter and bellows of "But why is the RUM gone?" and sauntered up to the bar.

"Another of the same," she demanded, slapping down a twenty on the stained oak. Susie, the taciturn Bracken demon who served as Willy's relief bartender, gave Evie a skeptical look and handed her change and another B-pos Bloody Mary.

It had been a long time since Evie'd had this much cash to throw around. Susie smirked at her and turned to survey the bar. A quartet of vampires had filed in through the front door as she ordered, Jets all the way, and claimed a table near hers amidst the usual exchange of territorial growls with other patrons.

She sashayed back to her table, seated herself with a flounce and a calculated crossing of legs. Spike hadn't intended his grubstake to cover the slinky new dress, much less the fuck-me pumps, but the mall was open till ten, it fit the bimbo image she was going for, and hey, she was evil. Evie skewered the slightly wilted cherry tomato bobbing in her drink with her yellow plastic cutlass (free with every drink on POTC Night!) and held the trophy up for inspection, trying to put a name to the lantern-jawed goon at the next table. Jer, that was it. He'd been one of the Mayor's crew, and hopefully he'd remember her only as one of Whip's putas, if he remembered her at all, not as Dalton's get and someone who might possibly possess a brain beneath the hairspray and eyeshadow.

She popped the tasteless little morsel into her mouth with a throaty purr and ran the tip of her tongue along the plump curves, licking crimson dewdrops from vermillion flesh. For a finale she vamped out and bit, fangs flashing - well, fang, anyway. Cold red seeds spurted and Evie licked her lips, cleaning up every last drop. She shot a lash-veiled glance at the other table; yep, all four were watching, all right - the guys entranced, the women cynically amused. The puddles on the table were equal parts beer and drool. Technically speaking, vampires reproduced asexually, but anything possessing a dick was generally pretty eager to put it to use.
Five minutes later she was seated with her new pals, pretending to be a few yo ho hos drunker than she was and regaling them with her tale of Kite's mythical offer. The women, Tanker and Linnet, watched with slit-eyed alertness while Jer interrogated her, cats stalking an oblivious mouse. Linnet was small and dark and fluttery; Tanker leather-clad and pierced, with a butchy shock of salt-and-pepper hair and tribal tats encircling impressive biceps. Freddy, the youngest of the group, was a straggly nondescript youth in a backwards baseball cap and jeans perilously close to sliding off his lanky hips. He seemed dead set on living up to every stereotype of the dumb fledge out there, and just sat there in game face, staring at Evie with a faintly worshipful expression which implored her to do the cherry tomato trick again.

"... so I dunno if it's worth it," Evie burbled. "Amherst's got it going, but I hear the Slayer's out for him, and I left L.A. 'cause it was Gang War Central. I don't wanna get caught in the crossfire again."

"That treacherous bastard!" Tanker exploded, pounding a fist on the table. "Alliance my undead ass!" She rounded on Evie with a snarl. "Kite say anything about why he wanted you to get in good with Corvini?"

Jackpot. These must be Corvini's minions. Evie assumed a cheerfully vacant smile and shrugged. "Nope."

"You got no percentage takin' Kite up on it," Jer argued. He was a big rock-shouldered guy whose nose had seen a few too many close encounters with a fist before he was turned. He looked as if he were waiting for the fedora to make a comeback. "You risk your neck for him, and whaddya get? Nothin'."

"Yeah?" Evie dunked her plastic sword in her drink and licked blood off the blade. "I figure I get a place in the baddest gang in Sunnydale."

"Baddest and biggest. Which means you'll get somewhere between diddly and squat when it comes to divvying up prey or perks," Linnet pointed out. "And if you think you can catch Amherst's eye with that sword-swallowing act, think again."

"Whereas there are only four of us. Works out to a better chance for advancement, capisce? Besides, it's what you might call common knowledge that Amherst has already got some high-toned L.A. broad polishin' his ridges, if you know what I mean." Jer took a swallow of blood, followed by a shot of whiskey, and licked his lips. "You work for us, you feed Amherst phony info, and you got a deal worth lookin' at."

"Not to mention that Kite ain't currently in the vicinity, and we are. If you don't play ball, there could be considerable discomfort involved."

All four of them leaned forward and grinned, a mass show of ivory. Evie pushed away from the table, an adrenaline tremble in her arms and a hollowing in her chest where the pounding of her heart should have been. If she threw her drink in Jer's eyes and kicked the chair in front of Tanker, then maybe she could...

Spike's mocking voice sounded in her ears: "Bloody hell, you silly bint, you never even tried hitting a demon?"

The muscle-memory of punting the Vernex demon into the junipers rushed through her, and a heady sense of renewed power surged up in its wake, filling the hollow places with a red and joyful rage. Evie's hand crept to her purse and slipped into the outer pocket. Lipstick, change purse, wet wipes for those stubborn bloodstains... there. Her fingers curled around the sliver of metal. "I bet there will be, hijo de una perra," she said. She whipped the nailfile out and drove it point-first through Jer's
palm and into the tabletop, pinning Jer's hand to the scarred wood. Evie leaped to her feet with a triumphant, terrified snarl, eyes blazing yellow. "But it's not gonna be mine."

Jer roared and ripped his hand free, then roared again at the further damage he'd done himself. He lunged across the table after her, game-faced and snarling, clawing for her throat. Drinks crashed to the floor, glasses exploding like cherry bombs. Evie exercised the better part of valor and skittered backwards. Jer skidded face-first into the minefield of broken glass and spilled alcohol. Tanker and Linnet sat back, amused and a trifle more respectful, and Freddy burst into whooping adenoidal laughter, breaking off into a *yerp!* of surprise when Jer lurched to his feet, malt-sodden and bleeding, and cuffed him in the head.

Several carnivorous types at other tables looked up, nostrils and other less identifiable orifices flaring at the scent of blood, and Willy came storming out of the back room, both arms windmilling in futile outrage. "Goddammit, take that outside!" he yelled, the tip of his thin nose quivering. "No freebies!"

"It's a good offer," Evie said. She yanked her nailfile free of the table and backed towards the door, holding it like a shiv. "I'll think about it. You think about how if you dust me, you got no in with Amherst at all, and fuck knows what he's planning. I could find out for you. Tell your boss I'll have an answer for him tomorrow night."

Jer rounded the wreckage of the table in one limping stride, and Evie broke and ran, kicking off her heels as she went. Grrl power was great and all, but there were four of them and one of her, and she wasn't fucking stupid. Every sense strained for the sound of pursuing feet, but Jer's steps faltered halfway across the parking lot, and only Freddy's yelps followed her down the street, as Jer took out his frustrations on the fledge.

Wind beat against her face as she raced through the waning night. Evie slowed to a jog once she'd put a few blocks between herself and the bar, and steered for Main Street. It was too late to use crowds of pedestrians to confuse her scent, but she skinned up the first moderately tall building in her way, and hopscotched from roof to roof for awhile before diving into a couple of the stinkiest Dumpsters she could find. One little black dress a total loss, but she'd rather lose a dress than her spleen if Jer and his pals tracked her to Spike's lair.

Satisfied at last that no one could trail her, Evie slumped against a streetlight and took a non-breather. She was shaking with reaction, fear and the rapture of reawakened bloodlust warring for control of her body. She turned the nailfile over in her hands. She'd never been much of a fighter, even before the chip. She'd always relied on her wits to get by. But tonight... fuck, that felt good.

It occurred to her that she could double-cross Spike, rat him out to either Amherst or Corvini, and probably be richly rewarded for it. But Spike had given her teeth again, and for a vampire, what richer reward was there? She brought the nailfile to her lips and licked it clean before tucking it back into her purse, paying fastidious attention to the blood clotting in the grooves. It tasted like victory.

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Sooty fire-edged clouds rose from the coal-bed of vermillion and gold on the western horizon, and the wind smelled of rain come to quench the celestial conflagration. Tara stood at the sink, washing jalapenos and watching the storm roll in. In the living room, Miss Kitty Fantastico washed her paws on the back of the couch and Spike sprawled out below with remote in hand, treating a longsuffering Buffy to an enthusiastic play-by-play of Manchester United's defeat of Blackburn Rovers. Dawn scrunched in a gawky foetal curl in the armchair, thumbing through *The Sibley Guide to Demons* in a purely informational search for pictures of horns.

Out in the driveway a car door slammed, and Willow raced for the shadowed rear of the house, an
undead Isadora Duncan muffled in a violently lime-green scarf. She skipped into the kitchen and plunked her booty down in triumph on the counter, a few stray locks of unconfined hair sparking and frizzling in the last feeble rays of the sun. "Got it!"

Tara examined the book in dismay. *Annabel Victoria Pryce: A Watcher's Memoir*. To call it a slender volume would be generous; it was practically anorexic. "All the way to Santa Barbara for this?"

"Yup. Unimpressive, huh?" Willow unwound the scarf and pinched out her smouldering coiffure. "But Giles says it's got some material on Slayer legends we can't find anywhere else. He's pretty sure someone did a purge of the Council records around twenty-five years ago - there's a lot of unexplained gaps in the material available to field Watchers. And with his personal persona being non grata, he's gonna have to call in favors by the bushel before he can get access to the main Council Library in London, much less into the restricted files."

Her fingers, still damp from the peppers, were leaving blurry spots on the quaint old typeface. Tara set the book down with a shiver. Slim cool arms entwined her waist and Willow's head nestled against her shoulder, ash-smudged alabaster, a china doll left too long in the attic. Breath stirred the fine hairs at the nape of her neck, chill as the wind outside. "Nervous?"

"A little," Tara admitted. "Summoning ancient powers and giving them a stern lecture isn't really my kind of magic."

She felt Willow's cheek curve in a smile. "You can do it, baby. We just have to figure out how. You gave me my soul back, didn't you?"

"That was different. A tested spell, and I was - " She didn't know what she'd been, desperate or stupid or brave, but that kind of insane determination wasn't something she could summon up every day.

"Incredible, and don't let anyone tell you different." Willow picked up the book and cradled it to her chest. "I'd better get to work on this. Half of it's in French. It's worse than Uncle Paul's letters to Harriet."

"Spike knows some French, doesn't he?"

Willow grinned. "I don't think the words Spike knows are likely to be in this book. Should we set the table?"

"I thought we'd just eat in front of the TV tonight. If you want to get out the soup bowls - "

Willow bounced out with crockery in arm, and Tara arranged a mandala of pepper slices on the last cheese sandwich. She piled melty golden-brown sandwiches in a pyramid on the blue willow platter and poured bowls of savory red: tomato soup from the saucepan in front, pig's blood from the double boiler on the back. Cooking was like a spell, in a way: the right ingredients, the right gestures in the right order, and voila, happy people. Tomato slices for Dawn, extra cheese for Buffy, jalapenos for Spike, and extra-light on the butter for Willow, who, in unhappy contrast to her sire, had a delicate stomach for anything not blood.

She had no idea what secret ingredient would make her content with her own lot.

*Try harder.*

She didn't make the mistake of thinking that advice was cheap, or cheaply given. Spike rope-walked the chasm between good and evil without a net, and Buffy risked her own fall, leaning unsupported
across the abyss to take his hand when he faltered. Sometimes Tara thought it might have been easier
for her and Willow in some other time and place, where they didn't stand in those larger-than-life
shadows. Mostly she knew better - there was no time or place in which this would be easy. In the last
year Willow had done everything it was reasonably possible for her to do to make things work
between them. But there was no way (no safe way, no easy way) for Willow to un-become a
vampire.

That was the seductive thing about magic: it always came with a price, but the temptation to buy on
credit was overwhelming. Out in the living room, Willow sat cross-legged, tucked into one corner of
the couch, her new find propped on one knee and a literary Tower of Pisa of spellbooks teetering at
her side. Her small pink tongue-tip peeked from one corner of her mouth as she jotted down neat
columns of notes, coursing from one book to another like a hound on the scent. Just as Buffy had
always to remember that Spike, however domesticated, was still a demon, she had always to
remember that Willow, however chastened by experience, was still Willow. When Willow reached a
limit, her first reaction was to push it.

Everyone converged on her when she brought the platter out, mad dogs when the bread comes.
Buffy put her and Spike's dinners on the same tray, soup and burba-spiced pig's blood in dangerous
proximity. An unwary sandwich could end up anywhere. Dawn left the Sibley face-down on the
nearest TV tray - the wail outside was either the wind picking up, or Giles's moan of bibliophilic
anguish from across the Atlantic - and relieved Tara of a bowl of soup. "Are you all right? You look
like Mrs. Fitzgibbons after Spike ate her Pomeranian. Want me to check that bandage?"

Tara shook her head, embarrassed. "I'm fine, really. Just thinking about the... the spell for Kennedy." Her fingers were at her neck again, prodding the tender flesh as if to squeeze out the pain like poison.

"Am I ever going to live that sodding dog down?" Spike asked, deeply aggrieved. "Bet 'f I'd eaten
Mrs. Fitzgibbons no one'd give a rat's, but lay a fang on the poor little puppy - " He reached for the
burba weed, and Buffy took advantage of his momentary distraction to stage a commando raid on the
remote. Paul Scholes gave way to Charlton Heston as a singularly unconvincing Mexican. "Oi!
We're watching that!"

"Correction. You were watching that. For the third time." Buffy tossed the remote to Dawn, who
clutched it to her bosom with a maniacal cackle.

"Fine." Spike slouched down amidst the couch cushions with a martyred pout. "You just keep this in
mind the next time you want me to watch some great nance sliding around an ice rink in sequined
knickers."

Buffy laughed and curled up at Spike's side, and Dawn settled herself on the floor between his
knees, the two of them teasing a deep purring growl out of him in no time. Tara sat sandwiched
between Buffy and Willow, acutely aware of the pressure of Willow’s thigh against her own. So very
ordinary, 95% of living with a creature of the night. Why couldn't she handle that other 5%? In the
moments when vampire became only another thing that Willow was, no more or less important than
the red hair or the quirky grin or the frog fear, it all worked - couldn't she make those moments last
longer? Maybe there was something, some meditation or exercise, which would allow her to... not
notice vampire-ness, somehow? Right. Because the last time you cast a spell to not notice demons, it
worked SO well. Not that there was much to notice right now. Willow ate her sandwich the way
Willow had always eaten grilled cheese sandwiches: cut diagonally, first one corner, then the other,
nipping off neat, symmetrical bites from each end, and if she hadn't known that there was blood in
the soup bowl... But she knew.

On the TV, Heston deposited his clueless American wife in a near-deserted hotel outside Los
Robles. "What, did he just overdose on stupid pills?" Dawn asked, "Put her on the grill, she's dead meat."

Willow shuddered and tugged the red and blue afghan up over her knees. "That motel guy gives me both heebies and jeebies."

_Try harder._ She'd had the right idea, the other night; she'd just gone too far, too fast, and in a really stupid direction. Buffy'd had considerable acerbic commentary on that: _Accepting Willow as a vampire doesn't mean accepting yourself as an hors d'oeuvre._ Arm around the shoulders; that was good. Willow gave a happy little wriggle and snuggled closer, her body sweetly pliant against Tara's own.

Buffy had mentioned in passing once that vampires really, really liked having their brow ridges stroked. That was a nice, safe, middle-of-the-road thing to do, right? Solidly balanced between brandishing crosses and offering up one's jugular. "Sweetie? Change," she whispered. "Please?"

Willow blinked, confused and a little apprehensive, but her eyes closed green and opened gold. Tara brushed bright strands of copper from her lover's newly-furrowed brow, tracing the curves of bone and cartilage. Willow's gasp, and the small moan with which she butted into Tara's palm, indicated that 'like' was a rather inadequate descriptive verb. Or at least that it should have come with several more 'reallys' attached. The alto counterpoint to Spike's baritone rumble burst from Willow's slim chest, and the whole couch vibrated to a two-part harmony of predatory bliss, straight from where the wild things were.

She liked cats. Maybe she could think of vampires as being like cats. Big, dead, evil cats.

On the TV, the motorcycle gang closed in, and Janet Leigh screamed. Willow's yellow gaze riveted on the cinematic carnage and her purr deepened to a throaty snarl of anticipation. Only for a second, and then she was shrinking into Tara's side with a _meep!_ of dismay at on-screen naughtiness, but Tara's heart was battering its way out of her ribcage anyway. The doorbell rang and she sprang to her feet. "I'll get it! That must be... "

"A pizza guy, UPS, wandering Mormons, anyone would do. She fought a gust of cold rainy wind for possession of the door and froze, open-mouthed with surprise. "Kennedy?"

"Hey." Kennedy's tone was deliberately casual, and she stood with an indifferent elbow propped up against one of the porch columns. She was dressed to slay in a rain-speckled blouse of blood-red silk cinched with a silver concho belt - real Navajo silver, if Tara was any judge. Artfully distressed designer jeans and a pair of Italian boots calculated to induce paroxysms of shoe envy in Buffy finished off the ensemble. "I was patrolling, and I thought I'd stop by and see if there's any news."

"Oh." It was barely half an hour past sunset, and prime patrolling time wasn't for another hour yet; most vampires were just getting up about now. "Uh... not really. We're just starting to... "

The fidgeting escalated to toe-tapping. "Mind if I don't stand here and catch SARS? It's starting to rain like a sonofabitch."

Tara stepped aside - without issuing an explicit invitation, because in Sunnydale you never knew - and Kennedy strolled right in, alive and well and fetching damp around the edges. She was wearing a musky, exotic, come-hither perfume, and the scent wafted through the room with her every movement. Willow's nose twitched, Spike's nostrils flared, and a glint of fang showed as Kennedy hip-swished past the couch. She made a runway turn in front of the fireplace, tossed her stormcloud hair and halted. Licorice-dark eyes homeed in on Willow, and her tongue caressed raspberry-glossed lips. Maybe she didn't get that when a vampire said you looked edible, they meant
it literally. "Got something for me?"

Willow gaped at her. "Oh! Right. Yes. Not, um, to scale and I haven't painted it or anything - " She fumbled for her notebook. "No sign of a spell or mystic illness on this end. Total certainty’s on hold till Faith checks in, but since Buffy's not lacking in the power department... "

Buffy finger-waved from the couch. "Full of zingy Slayer goodness."

"... it's not real likely that there's something wrong with the source of Slayer power, either. It's fine, you're fine, you're just not getting any. Enough. Um, power. Whatever the problem is, it's only affecting you - "

"It can't be just me!" Kennedy interrupted. "It's ev - " Faced with multiple stares, and she broke off. "Check in from where? Is John Edwards making house calls?"

"Faith's not dead." Buffy didn't elaborate. "'Ev' what? Wanna tack on a few syllables?"

Insouciance dissolved into an uncomfortable squirm. "I just meant it could be affecting Faith. We don't know."

Spike sucked his cheeks in and folded his arms across his chest, his eyes a blue so pale and cold it was almost grey. "Minute ago you thought Faith was dead."

Kennedy's lips drew noose-tight, and she met the vampire's eyes with a defiant glare. "Until a few minutes ago no one bothered to tell me any different."

Willow broke the standoff with a small, diplomatic cough. "ANYWAY. We're trying to come up with a non-Nightmare-On-Revello-Drive way to contact the First Slayer. Assuming we can get her to talk."

"She's definitely on the pre-verbal side," Buffy said, scrunching her nose. "Also big with the homicidal mania."

"She spoke through Tara, last time," Willow countered. "Or at least, through your mental image of Tara. So the real thing... "

She beamed, and Tara ducked her head. "That's - I mean, that's the kind of magic I'm b-best at. Communication, synthesis, interpretation... it's worth a try."

"Whoa!" Kennedy flung up both hands. "I thought you people were all gung-ho for this demon-power story. Now you're talking like it's a person or something."


Willow nodded. "I mean, true, there had to be a flesh and blood first-ever one-girl-in-all-the-world once. Council tradition says that her name was Sineya - that's the name Giles used in the enjoining spell, when we made the Uber-Slayer to defeat Adam? But whatever the enjoining spell woke up - it might have, well, echoes of the real Sineya-if-that-was-her-real-name, but it couldn't really be her, because dead, obviously, and ghosts manifest in the material world, and the First Slayer only appeared in our dreams. And Giles says no human ghost could possibly last from the Stone Age to the present, anyway. Half-life. The ectoplasmic matrices break down, and they fade away after a few hundred years. Which is really sad when you think about it. You go to all the trouble to haunt someplace - "

"The First Slayer's more like... an avatar," Tara said, trying to allay Kennedy's obvious confusion.
"An archetype. The distilled essence of Slayerness."

"Which we accidentally poked up out of Buffy's subconscious," Willow mimed stabbing something. "Which, let me tell you, is one scary place. In theory, she ought to be pokeable through any Slayer's subconscious, given a sufficiently pointy stick. Maybe she can give us a clue what's wrong."

Kennedy edged closer to the couch, craning her neck to see Willow's notebook. "So what do I have to do?"

"We're not sure yet," Willow admitted. "There's this meditative ritual I want to try in Orpheia's Akhashic Guide, for the manifestation of the anima. I figure if we kit-bash that with a tailored summoning spell, and - "

"Yipe, look at the time!" Buffy leaped to her feet. "I'm supposed to meet - excuse me, rendezvous with - Riley and his Mystery Date at eight. Fill me in when we get back, Will."

"Nah." Spike shrugged into his jacket. "But I'll drop you off. Walk you to my car, little girl?"

"Only if you give me candy, mister. Later, guys!"

Buffy took his elbow with a flirtatious grin. "Only if you give me candy, mister. Later, guys!"

Kennedy's lip curled as Dawn shut the door behind them, and she rounded on the younger Summers with narrow-eyed disapproval. "Doesn't it bother you at all that your sister's with a guy who's kind of... dead?"

Dawn shrugged. "He's a consenting adult corpse, right?"

"Well, it makes me sick." Kennedy gave the couch a once-over for vampire cooties and then sat down close enough to Willow to contract a major infection. "So, tell me about this First Slayer chick."

Dawn gave a small, restrained snort and began collecting the dinner things, a plate here and a bowl there. She aimed a look at Tara over the top of her precarious armful, and jerked her head in the direction of the kitchen. Mystified, Tara trailed after her; she needed to put away the leftovers anyway, or try - fitting anything into the refrigerator was kind of like playing edible Tetris. Dawn dumped the dishes into the sink, walked over to the stove and switched the range fan on, muffling the sound of conversation from sensitive vampire ears. Dawn thought of things like that. "You realize Kennedy's totally crushing on Willow, right?"

"What?" Tara banged her head on the freezer door, bit back an intemperate word or two, and straightened. "No! That's not - she doesn't like vampires!"

"Excuse me? Personal experience with the smitten Slayer in play here." In a family which had elevated the eyebrow thing to a fine art, Dawn didn't win many points on style, but she got the message across. "Remember the last person who wore red silk and Eau de Fuck Me Silly to tell a vampire he had no chance with her whatsoever?" She slapped the back of one hand to her forehead and adopted an exaggerated Buffy-falsetto. "Spike, it can never be! You're evil! It would be wrong!" Dawn grabbed a bunch of celery and tango-dipped it over the counter. "Take me now, you dead, passionate fool! Puhlease. Look at her."

Tara peeked over the top of the refrigerator door. Willow was sorting spellbooks into piles while
Kennedy looked on - anyone can read this, Spike can read this, and where the hell is Giles when you need him? "Oh, yeah, I see what you mean," she said, solemn. "That's hot. I'd better just pack my bags now."

"Watch," Dawn hissed. Kennedy leaned close. Definitely in Willow's personal space, and okay, maybe her blouse was one button shy of indecent exposure, but lots of people wore their clothes that way. When Kennedy reached for a book her hand met Willow's and didn't flinch, but didn't linger, either. Willow, engrossed in literary triage, handed the book over with barely a glance.

**Kennedy didn't flinch.** Tara huddled behind her shield of chrome and white enamel, gut-punched with revelation. All her joints felt watery and her stomach seemed to have become a vast empty cavern threatening to suck all the air out of her lungs. Kennedy might hate vampires, but she wasn't physically revolted by them. She'd got it all backwards. Willow had fought hard to conquer her demons, literal and otherwise. Confronted often enough with *I can't love a vampire*, she wouldn't resort to magic to make Tara come to her, or attempt some desperate, dangerous ploy to change herself into something acceptable.

But she might just find herself a girlfriend who *could* love a vampire.

She'd worried so much over whether or not she'd have to leave Willow, it had never occurred to her that Willow might leave her. Even the obsessiveness of Aurelians had its limits; Spike had given up on Drusilla eventually. "It... it's not like there's a law against thinking Willow's cute," she got out at last.

"Fine." Dawn abandoned her celery beau to its vegetative fate and headed for the stairs with a flounce and a Theda Bara eyeroll. "Gazillion-year old ex-Key and reigning expert on the love lives of Slayers, but hey, don't mind *me* - I've got essay questions to fake."

Tara buried herself in the freezer, re-arranging things until her fingers were stiff with cold. Dawn was seeing things, and she was borrowing hammers, and if she tried one more configuration of leftovers, the entire refrigerator was going to collapse into Food-9. She slammed the door and walked back to the living room with calm determination. Dawn had left the *Sibley* on the TV tray, and Tara picked it up and straightened the spine, flipping through it at random in a concerted effort to distract herself from self-fulfilling prophecies.

... *in the veins of the Mohra demon flows the blood of eternity.*

She wasn't sure why the page caught her eye. She'd seen it mentioned once or twice as a component in some of the more powerful and dangerous healing spells. Terribly rare, terribly expensive. Nothing that would ever show up for sale on Anya's shelves.

"Sweetie?" Willow held out one of the books. "You think we'll need this one?"

"You never know." Tara tucked the *Guide to Demons* into a sweater pocket. If Willow noticed the renewed pounding of her heart, she didn't say a word.

*******

*When you're strange Faces come out of the rain When you're strange No one remembers your name When you're strange...*

*Raindrops hit the side windows running and raced each other to the back of the car as the DeSoto hummed along wet black streets littered with palm fronds and pulpy fragments of paper, heading for the shiny new Marriot by the freeway. The radio sputtered and an announcer interrupted Jim*
Morrison to warn of possible mudslides in the vicinity of Kingman's Bluff. Buffy watched the wipers dashing sheets of quicksilver to the right and left, bringing her closer to her rendezvous with every tick.

"...if they've half a brain between them, they'll attack through the sewers in the daytime, and try to catch us between the sun and a hard place. The lower level's defensible enough since we had the doors put in, 'less they bring explosives, but I want to set someone tunneling parallel to the sewer main outside the lower level doors." Spike had gone game-faced for the slight sensory edge it gave him, and his pupils flashed, tarnished pennies in a dark well. "Make a crawl space, like, with a few arrow slits for crossbows, or just for recce."

Buffy pinched her lower lip. "How many people can we afford to pull off regular work for that?"

"I'll put Denny on it. Not like he's good for anything else." Spike fidgeted, thumbs tapping the wheel, and considered. "Or we could just round up a few stray fledges, work 'em till they drop, and stake 'em after."

By vampire standards, working strangers to death in preference to his own minions made him a soft touch. "That doesn't seem very... sporting," Buffy said carefully. Sometimes she envied Willow and Tara - once Tara got used to the whole vampire thing (and of course Tara would get used to the whole vampire thing. Wouldn't she?) they'd have it made. She and Spike were always going to be engaged in a tug-of-war between It would be wrong and Yeah, so? "Killing them I'm on board with, but using them for slave labor and then killing them is... squicky."

Spike's forehead acquired a few more convolutions as he tried to work that one out. "We could pay them before killing them," he suggested, with only minimal sarcasm. "If they showed promise I'd be for keeping them, but seriously, love, how else do we get it done quick and on the cheap?"

The vision of half a dozen vampires punching a time clock and exploding into dust forced a snort of laughter out against her will. "I don't know! God, I'm turning into a demon OSHA inspector. What about magic?"

"Quick, yeah; cheap? Not if we want it to last more'n fifteen minutes before collapsing of its own weight."

Buffy acknowledged the point with a moue; there was a big difference between a spell that reamed out fifty feet of earth and a spell that reamed out fifty feet of earth, disposed of the excess fill in a safe and responsible manner, and provided drainage and support beams and a preliminary scrying to avoid bursting the odd gas main in the process. Spike leaned back, one hand draped carelessly over the top of the steering wheel. "We'll have a better idea how much time we've got once Evie's cradled in the bosoms of the ungodly and plucking their brains for us."

Evie had chutzpah, no doubt about that. She could see why Spike had made the impulsive decision to recruit her. Still... "You think she can handle that, first week on the job?"

"She's a clever bird." Spike shook a cigarette loose from the perpetually half-full pack in his pocket - would he use a cigarette case if she got him one, or dismiss it as poncy? - and lipped it, bracing the wheel with one knee while he felt around for his lighter. "About to graduate university when Dalton turned her. Wanted to be a marine biologist, as I recollect, or some egghead thing like that." Smoke streamed out the window and dispersed into the rainy night. "She was right hacked off about missing out on the cap-tossing - though come to think, she did go in the end. Ate the professor that gave her a B-.

"Keep talking. I'm starting to warm to that slave labor idea." Buffy laid her forehead against the
window and trailed a finger through the faint mist of condensation which bloomed on the glass. The problem with leading Spike to ethical water was that it made her think, too. At the moment her brain felt like one of those bent nail puzzles - somewhere there was a trick that would untwist everything into bright, shiny, simple pieces, but darned if she could figure out what it was. She couldn't afford to think of vampires as people. The lines that allowed her to function as a Slayer were already dangerously blurred, and handing out socks to the minions could only lead to badness. But some still small voice told her that thinking of them as a commodity was equally dangerous. Every one of the nameless, faceless vamps she'd sent to dust in the past had a past - had been a person, once, and if they weren't that person any longer, were still a someone, not a something.

Spike didn't think of it in those terms. He had his own lines in the sand, but they divided the people he cared about - vampire or human - from the rest of the world, whose continued existence depended solely upon how interesting or useful they happened to be to him today. Except his lines had gone smudgy, too, 'interesting and useful' grown to encompass a category of people so broad and vague that he could barely define it any longer, and got grouchy when asked to try. Their lives had gone from the stark clarity of pen and ink to a blurry watercolor brilliance.

Rows of rain-spangled cars shone diamond-bright in the headlights as they pulled up in front of the Sunnydale Marriott. "What are we doing here, Spike?"

She wasn't talking about the hotel. Spike's lion-gold eyes were pensive beneath that gargoyle brow, and what was she, really, that she found the savage lines of his demon face so beautiful? "I don't know. Got to do something, though, don't we? It's what we're made for, both of us." He toyed with his cigarette, rolling the slim white cylinder between nicotine-stained fingers, and looked up with a grin, half shyness and half deviltry. "'Spect we'll figure it out as we go along, like always."

He pitched the half-smoked cig end over end and got out to open her door for her, half-drenched in the time it took him to walk around the car. Buffy stood tip-toe, brushed lips to his cheek - cold as vampires were seldom cold in sunny California - and turned towards the sterile glow of the hotel doors. Spike caught her wrist and pulled her back, enfolding her like the rainswept night.

They clung together in a blind roaring universe of water. Spike's cold nose found refuge in tendrils of tawny hair curling at the base of her jaw, and Buffy pressed close, muffling the misty billows of her breath against his shoulder till warmth blossomed there like crocuses in winter. She laid a palm flat against his chest, mapping the place where his heart should have beat. She didn't miss the thump and rush. Enough to feel the solid swell of pectoral muscle tense and relax at her touch, and the 'singing thrill of Spike, right here! from her Slayer's senses. She let her hand slide down the firm plane of his belly, fingers exploring the interesting gap where his t-shirt was riding up - it was one he'd acquired the summer after her death, when he'd gotten so razor-wire thin, and it was a little too small for him now that there was a healthy amount of flesh between skin and bone. There were certain advantages to that, involving the ticklish, anticipatory twitch of cool satiny skin, and the tiniest wisp of dark hair trailing down from his navel, just begging to be tweaked...

"Sure you don't want to come?" she whispered.

Spike growled into the tender folds of her neck, lips teasing at her earlobe. "I want to come, all right. But I've got Evie to see to, Willow didn't fill the sodding gas tank like I told her, and this rain'll flush those Frewlar demons out of hiding. 'Sides, Captain America and Bucky'll likely talk freer if I'm not about." His tongue curled, and his eyes glinted in the aqueous light. Blue now; he'd gone human in her arms. "Just wanted to see you off proper."

It was refreshing that Spike was handling the Riley situation without a trace of the sulky jealousy still all too likely to erupt between him and Angel... but also fairly tasty to be seen off properly. "Mmm.
"You'll have to see me off improperly sometime. Bronze at eleven?"

"If it hasn't taken on two of every creature and pulled up anchor."

Spike's vehicular dinosaur forded the primeval swamp of the parking lot, and the wicked red eyes of its taillights faded into shrouds of rain as it disappeared down the access road. Buffy tilted her head back and squinted up at the hotel's facade, trying to read the room numbers around the scalloped edge of the awning. A raindrop seeped through a seam in the burgundy canvas and fell in her eye.

"Buffy! Ready to move out?" Sam Finn strode briskly through the front doors, an exceptionally wholesome Emma Peel in Kevlar and sleek black government-issue all-weather gear. Her low-slung utility belt bristled with assorted tracking and communications gear, grapples, a taser, and several mysterious items Buffy suspected were just there to make the belt balance. Riley loomed right behind his wife, sporting an even more impressive array of gadgets. They looked like they'd stepped out of the Sharper Image His N' Hers catalogue.

Buffy blinked and rubbed violently at her eye, hoping fervently that her mascara lived up to its billing. "More like swim out, but all rarin' to go." She hunched her shoulders in her silly bright teal windbreaker, feeling slightly underdressed. Rather to her disappointment, Mrs. Riley Finn showed no signs of being anything but a perfectly normal gorgeous, statuesque Amazon. It wasn't that she grudged Riley moving on, Buffy told herself sternly. It was just that the universe was a better, fairer place when all the guys who dumped her were cursed to wander the world, doomed never to experience perfect happiness. She was pretty sure it was in the contract somewhere.

"Here's our targets." Riley fanned a sheaf of laminated sheets in front of her, each one stamped all over with TOP SECRET, EYES ONLY, CONFIDENTIAL, and for all Buffy could tell, DO NOT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS. Most of the faces were vampires, shown in full-face and profile, both game-face and human. There were a few demons: a Fyarl, a Bracken or two, something that looked like Clem's older, saggier cousin, and one thing she couldn't identify at all. It looked like someone had ripped a couple dozen wanted posters off the wall of the Mos Eisley Post Office. "The ones with the red Xs through have been confirmed killed - either we found their bodies in the complex before we locked it down, or we've got reliable reports of their deaths later. The blue Xs are the one's we've recaptured.

"About half of the subjects had tracers implanted." Riley was punching coordinates into a Rockwell Collins GPS receiver. "We don't know how many are still generating a signal, or at what strength. The plan was to quarter the town in the van till we picked up a target, and then close on foot, but it looks like our lucky night." He tilted the unit to allow Buffy to see a detailed schematic of Sunnydale's streets scrolling across the tiny screen, which impressed her somewhat less than it might have before Willow had introduced her to Mapquest. "It's got a little something extra under the hood," he said with a grin. The flick of a button, and the view changed to the layout of the cave system. "Turns out that infrared satellite photos are good for more than finding Mayan ruins." The view snapped back to street-level again, focusing on the industrial park west of the hotel. "There's our boy."

A yellow dot zipped between the ghostly outlines of the buildings, heading away from the freeway. "Ooh, retro. Pac-Vamp."

The dot jittered and fuzzed out for a moment, then reappeared further down the street. Riley grimaced. "Either the tracer's running out of power, something's interfering with the signal, or it teleports," he said. "Sometimes it's all three. Let's go." He plunged into the rain, and Sam took off in perfectly coordinated unison. Buffy stuffed the photos inside her windbreaker and scrambled to catch up. Right. Of course. Not the leader of the pack, not tonight. She could do that.
Over hedges, around corners, between cars, her racing feet found the high spots of their own volition, and Buffy skimmed across the wet neon surface of the night, outpacing the raindrops. She caught up to Team Finn in a matter of seconds, and reined herself in to a jog. It had been a long time since she'd patrolled with anyone but Spike. Xander wasn't up to it anymore; even after a year of PT he still limped, and he and Anya were retired, anyway. Dawn had school. Tara and Willow came along occasionally, when they didn't have evening classes, but for the most part she ran with wolves. She'd lost the habit of holding herself to human limitations.

Not that Sam and Riley weren't good. They dodged from cover to cover, slipped single-file through the narrow slot between two barracks-style office complexes, alert, wary, silent as all get-out - but they weren't Spike, attuned to her every move and vice versa. There was distinct third-wheeliness in the air. Or was that fifth wheel? Had to be, because three made a tricycle. The pair of them dropped to a crouch behind a lone Subaru. "He's moving fast," Sam whispered, with a nod at the GPS unit. Buffy did a little bunny hop, trying without success to see over the Great Wall of Finn. Sam looked at Riley, biting her lip. "You think... ?"

Without a word, Team Finn split to cover the parking lot, skirting the shabby little oleander hedges which dissected the asphalt. The whole non-verbal communication thing was really irritating when it was some other couple doing it. Buffy did a quick eeny meeny and took after Sam.

Vampire, vampire, who's got the vampire? She stretched her Slayer senses to the limit, breathing in the chalky odor of wet stucco and the faint sickening smell of oil-slick pavement. The industrial park stretched away into the murk, rank upon infinite rank of featureless Lego buildings distinguished only by numbers half-obscured by rain and darkness. No go. Where instinct failed, thinkiness would have to suffice. If I were a vampire in this part of town, where would I be going?

"Damn," Riley muttered as they came together in the lee of the next row of offices. "Signal's gone again."

Buffy beckoned. "This way." Riley and Sam didn't follow immediately, much to her irritation. She whirled, dancing on her toes. "Hurry!"

Sam looked dubious, but Riley gave her a come-on jerk of his head, and this time they followed as Buffy tore off down the covered walkway fronting the nearest block of offices. The clack of her boot-heels reverberated off the concrete and her reflection capered from window to blank black window at her side. Rain slapped her in the face as the walkway came to an end, and she was out in the open once more, stake in hand, no, stake bad, they wanted this puppy undusted. She could sense her prey now, close, a tinfoil skittering along her nerves.

There - a shadow darting along the top of the cinderblock wall surrounding the park. For a split second the floodlights reflected sleek and silvery from its head. A second shadow broke from the insufficient cover of an oleander and made a panicked scramble for the wall. It was a skinny kid in ragged jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt, eyes mad with hatred and terror beneath a mop of unkempt black hair. Buffy half expected Spike to be crouched atop the wall, grinning down at the fun and ready to pounce, but there was a distinctly girly shriek and a windmilling of arms, and the wall-top shadow disappeared with a muffled thump.

The skinny kid snarled and made a predictable feint left before dodging right, worn sneakers skidding on rainbow slicks of oil. Buffy was where he was going before he was, meeting his bared fangs with a feral grin. "May I have this dance?" He fled, and she was before him again, doing a Gene Kelly round the nearest light pole. There was no challenge in a foe who couldn't fight back. "That's so like a guy, just hang around by the punchbowl all night." Sam and Riley pounded across the wet pavement towards her, eyes wide. "Oh well, you'd probably step on my toes anyway." She
hauled off with a straight right to the jaw. The vampire spun around and collided with Sam, who jammed a taser into his shoulder. The vamp's head snapped up, chin to the sky, and he convulsed, golden eyes rolling back blank and white in his head. He collapsed in a limp awkward heap on the pavement.

Riley rolled the body over with one steel-toed boot. "Damn, Buffy. How'd you know he'd break this way?"

"Easy. He had to be heading for Lincoln Avenue." Light failed to dawn, and Buffy elaborated. "He's got a chip in his head, right? Feeding opportunities therefore limited? Lincoln's Ho Central. All those seedy motels. He could get someone to hire him for a suck job there, easy." She wrinkled her nose. "Someone with no standards in personal hygiene, but - "

"Oh." She could have sworn Riley was blushing. "I didn't realize - "

Hopefully Sam appreciated having a guy who'd lived in Sunnydale for two years and never realized where the hookers hung out - the human ones, anyway. Riley bent to run one of his blinky devices along the creature's lanky torso. "Hostile Eleven," he said with a grin. "The genetic signature matches perfectly."

"Well, that was... anticlimactic." Buffy rubbed her knuckles and stared down at their first... victim was the wrong word, but she couldn't think of the right one. There was something ignominious about this; it was vermin control, not an epic battle of good and evil. But someone needed to spray for roaches. "There's another one out there." She started for the wall, but Riley grabbed her shoulder, his hand large and startlingly warm.

"Hold your positions," he snapped. "I'll check it out."

Buffy almost opened her mouth to object, but the look in his eyes and the minute shake of his head stopped her; this was something to do with his mysterious personal business. He disappeared into the shadows. Buffy watched the dark spot where he wasn't for a moment longer, itchy - she couldn't tell for certain if the second vampire was still anywhere nearby. Sam didn't look particularly happy with the situation herself, but she only pulled out her cell and dispensed terse directions to the pickup crew. That done, she hauled the groggy vampire up, snapped a pair of not-at-all-sexy manacles around his bony wrists, and dragged their captive under the minimal protection of the covered walkway. She leaned back against the cruddy stucco, a little too casual.

"Pretty lucky coincidence, you running into Ri the very first night we're in town. How often does something like that happen?"

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Buffy tucked her hands into her armpits. The rain was starting to soak through her less-than-high-tech windbreaker. Now that she wasn't moving, she was starting to get cold. "About once a week," she muttered. There was something in the other woman's eyes she couldn't fathom, an assessing look which went beyond the wariness a new wife might feel around an old girlfriend. "So, uh, congratulations, and everything. How long have you and Riley been married?"

"Our first wedding anniversary was in October."

Wedding bells less than a year after Riley'd left Sunnydale. Hmph. Never mind that she'd been lying awake nights a scant month later, calculating the correct angle from which to jump Spike's bones. That was, naturally, completely different. "Not a believer in long engagements, huh?"

"Not in our business." Sam looked at her, dark eyes under dark level brows, a perfect oval of a face - Raphael's Madonna and Kalashnikov. "I'll be square with you - I resented it sometimes, that he was spending time with me getting over you."
Sign here, and tell me where you want me to unload the shipment of awkward. "I hope you don't think - because it's so over. There's Spike, very much there's Spike. And you. And not that Riley isn't a great guy, he is, but we're just not... it didn't work out and... " Buffy covered her eyes with a groan. "Can I back up and maybe do this with hand gestures?"

"I didn't mean to put you on the spot." Sam shifted her grip on the taser with a rueful smile. "OK, maybe I did. Look, let's not talk about it." A silence almost as awkward as the speech followed. "So how did you and Spike meet?"

"We were in a band," Buffy deadpanned. She pulled the sheaf of laminated photos out of her purse and shuffled through them again. It was like looking over old yearbook photos - you know that guy, the one who threw the Jell-O at the gym teacher? This was the guy who sat behind him in algebra. "Hey!" She pointed to a mug-shot of a Bracken demon. "That's Susie! She's the relief bartender at Willy's. She's... Not exactly a friend, but not someone she'd expected to see flashy-thinged and carted away in a black helicopter, either.

"We got another positive ID? Fantastic." Sam whipped out her cell again. "I'll alert the team - two tags in one night is - " Slayer reflexes let Buffy grab her arm before she could hit the speed dial. "Whoa, there, Black Mamba! You can't just go all KGB on Susie. She hasn't done anything." Sam looked down at her. "Buffy... Ours not to question why. Our assignment is to retrieve or eliminate. Riley wouldn't tell you this," her voice dropped: quiet, confidential, serious, just between us Amazons. "But you need to know. He's putting his career on the line, making this end run around orders for your boyfriend. His record in Sunnydale's not good. I've seen the files - AWOL, assaulting a superior officer - the only reason he's not rotting in a military prison somewhere is that someone in Washington likes him. Friends in high places can only protect you so far."

"That's Riley's decision to make, isn't it?"

"Not saying it isn't. But it won't look good if our superiors find out he's subverting the mission objectives for one HST, much less two." She looked honestly perplexed. "You're not what I expected. Ri talked about you a lot, how you were this legendary warrior for good - "

"Yeah, well, I'm an independent contractor these days. What's going to happen to them? The specimens you collect?" Visions of the Initiative holding facilities rose unbidden from memory, featureless cages and electro-shock forcefields. Spike had been in one of those cages, once. At the time, she'd thought it was the funniest thing in the world. "I'm all for science, yay cell phones and Midol, but - "

Sam's shoulders rose and fell, unconcerned. "That's not my department, but they'll be studied, to see how the chips have modified their neural patterns and their behavioral responses to various stimuli. We're scientists, not the Spanish Inquisition."

"And what happens when the study's - "

At that fraught juncture the Herkimer Battle Jitney roared in through the main gates of the park, sending up twin arcs of spray from its massive wheels, and the hup-hup-hup crew poured out like ants, and in two seconds flat the fallen vampire was being prodded, poked, measured, and tagged by a swarm of ninja paramedics. A moment later Riley's head appeared atop the cinderblock fence. "Whatever it was, it got away from me," he said, a little too cheerfully. The rain was beginning to slack off, and patchy black holes were starting to appear and widen in the overcast sky. Riley stretched, flexing those mile-wide shoulders. "Not a bad night's work."
"Gonna get better, hon," Sam said with a grin and a Mona-you're-a-brick punch to his arm. "The Slayer gave us an ID on one of the missing."

"The Slayer is having second thoughts," Buffy interrupted. "Look, we went through this once with Oz, didn't we? Rounding up the dangerous ones is one thing, but Susie's not a threat even if she didn't have a chip. Bracken demons are harmless, unless you try to pat them on the back and impale yourself on the spines. And of course, the violet eyeshadow with her complexion? Huge mistake unless she enjoys looking like a giant bruise, but I don't see a warrant from the fashion police. You can't just... just kidnap her."

Riley sighed. "No promises. I'll talk to my commanding officer. Maybe we can arrange a release when the study's complete."

"Thanks." Would it torpedo Riley's military career if Susie just happened to get a phone call tipping her off that the Initiative was back in town? Probably not, and ever so much quicker than dealing with military bureaucracy. Buffy shuffled Susie's rap sheet back into the sheaf of photos as if that would hide her from the long arm of the law, glanced at the top photo and froze. Long dark hair, café au lait skin gone a shade or two paler in death. Middling-pretty face enlivened by wide sloe eyes, brimming with fear and fury in the picture before her. Hostile 6, vampire, female, est. 0-5 yrs post-infection.

Evie. Of course. She should have realized. Spike had said she was chipped.

"Recognize someone else?" Riley asked.

Buffy handed the photos back without a hitch. "Nope. 'Fraid not."

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Wesley's apartment was scrupulously tidy as always, full of ancient, breakable artifacts and angular furniture. No sybaritic overstuffed armchairs for Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. Even the lampshades were boxy. Beneath the austere geometry there was something humid and rotten, the lingering scent of decay and despair. Or maybe that was just Lilah Morgan's perfume. Cordy rubbed her temples and took a sip of the tea her host had provided - Wesley might be slouching around in designer stubble and modeling the John Constantine collection these days, but the tea was eternal.

"You're certain?" Wesley scribbled the address on a post-it pad. "Yes. You've been most helpful." He hung up the phone and leaned back on the low-slung couch, fingers steepled before his lean impassive face. "Bernard Crowley moved to California from New York in 1978 following the death of his Slayer, Nikki Wood. He relocated from Beverly Hills to Pasadena in '92 and has been living there ever since. There's no current contact between him and the Council - none they'll admit to me, anyway. Apparently he had some kind of falling-out with them over the proper course of action regarding Nikki's son - "

Cordelia looked up from her tea. "A Slayer with a kid? That's wrong and disturbing."

He shrugged. "Unusual, but not unprecedented. Not that long ago a girl of sixteen might well already be married when Called. I gather the normal procedure was to arrange for an abortion or an adoption, but Nikki insisted upon keeping the boy, and Crowley backed her up. He raised the child after her death. And that," he said with a grimace of mild frustration, "is the one and only thing which distinguishes him from any other retired Watcher the world round. The son enjoyed a brief career as a vampire hunter in his early twenties, but Crowley himself has no history of any particular interest in Angelus or in Angel. So the question is... why should he go to such lengths to kidnap Angel now?"
"No, the question is where did he take Angel, and how do we get him back," Cordelia snapped. "You don't seem to get that I woke up on the floor. With a paperclip stuck to my face. For this you pay, bowler hat man."

"Yes, I can see where that would inspire a quenchless thirst for vengeance." Wesley rose and paced over to the glass-fronted bookshelves, hands clasped loose-limbed behind his back as he regarded the irregular ranks of books and artifacts displayed thereon. "Crowley's place is the logical starting point for a search. Unless you feel it best to wait until Fred and Gunn return - "

God, it was so frustrating, that touchy, guilt-ridden pride of his. Cordelia's fingers tightened around the handle of the teacup, vestigial good manners all that prevented her from chucking it at his head. Angel had forgiven if not forgotten, but Wesley was still spanking his inner moppet, and she was beginning to suspect that his inner moppet got off on it. She, on the other hand... "If you don't knock off the jaded urban sorcerer act, I might. You opened a vein for him, so don't try to convince me you don't give a damn now. Just get in the car and - "

There was a knock at the door. The two of them exchanged a startled glance. "Who's that?" Cordelia whispered. "You don't actually know anyone anymore, do you?"

"Regrettably, no," Wesley murmured. He took a medium-vile looking dagger from the weapons rack by the bookshelf, and opened the door with silent dispatch.

Angel stood on the threshold, still wearing yesterday's clothes (uncharacteristically rumpled, as if they'd been stuffed in a locker somewhere), a fading scrape across his cheek the only evidence of foul play. Screw the angst. Cordy shot past Wesley and barrelled into the prodigal, flinging her arms around that massive chest in a bear-hug. "Angel! You're alive! More or less! What happened? How'd you get away?"

To her utter shock, he pulled her into his arms and returned the hug hard enough to make her squeak, and my, didn't it feel good, wrapped up in all that vampire muscle? "Mr. Crowley had a proposition for me," he said, big blunt hands sliding up to tangle in her hair. Omigod, he's... sniffing me?! "I admit it didn't seem very attractive at first, but in the end he made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

There was a secret humor in his tone. Cordelia pulled away, suspicious. "What's he up to? Some kind of Watcher Amway?"

Angel smiled. Not the sketchy upturn of lips that was all he'd usually commit to - this was a great big brilliant Irish grin, complete with a twinkle in those normally unreadable eyes. "Let's just say our little problem isn't a problem any longer."

And he kissed her. Kissed her with all the ease of two and a half centuries' practice, kissed her till her heart pounded and her knees went wobbly, though maybe that was just oxygen deprivation. It wasn't the first time; they'd done this before, once or twice... or thrice, who was counting? But it was always furtive and guilt-ridden, left them less rather than more satisfied. A stolen pleasure that didn't really count, like broken cookies, no calories. This kiss was definitely illegal, immoral and fattening. One big square hand firm between her shoulder blades - all, really, that was holding her up at the moment - the other cupping her ass, thumb drawing maddening circles. She clung to him like lichen to a mountain, God, he was so big all over, she could fall into him like falling into the earth itself, dark and secret and strong. Someone was making embarrassing little moany sounds... oh, right, that was her.

"You went to the shaman," Wesley breathed.
Angel broke off and gazed at Wesley over the top of her head. "Not exactly. But I think I can safely say my soul's not going anywhere for a good long time. Gonna ask me in?"

Wesley's throat worked for a second, the long pale scar rippling across his Adam's apple. "You've always been welcome in this house."

"Now that makes me very happy, Wes." Angel's eyes were scalpels, blunted, maybe, by this odd mood, but still capable of inflicting damage. "Not perfectly happy, but sometimes in this world we just have to settle. You know all about that, I guess. How is Lilah doing these days?"

The tone of his voice, the manic glitter in his eye, the offhand cruelty - all of it slid neatly into place, knives filleting the breath out of Cordelia's lungs more effectively than the kiss had. Something within her was wailing, It's not fair! I was good, I was careful! If this was going to happen anyway, why couldn't I have gotten one night to remember out of it? She forced words past the lump of sick, frozen terror in her throat. "Wesley! He's -"

Too late. A blur of movement, and Angel had flung her aside and slammed Wesley into the bookcase, one hand around his throat, the other ramming Wes's own knife into his gut. Glass shattered, the Euclidean purity of the shelves transformed in an instant to fractal chaos, and a small fortune in rare texts tumbled to the floor. Cordelia screamed and cast wildly around for a weapon - Wes had ten million antique thingybobs scattered around the apartment, surely one had to be within arm's reach.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, darlin'," Angel snarled. Wesley made a strangled croaking noise, turning almost black in the face as Angel's fingers dug into his windpipe. Cordelia froze, hand inches from the haft of a battleaxe, mesmerized by thin trickles of blood on Wesley's temple, red against the rapidly empurpling skin. Blood-flowers bloomed on his shirt-front, scarlet petals opening and spreading across the cotton. One of the worst deaths you can die, Angel had told her once. Not that he'd needed to tell her; she'd been there, still had the scar that was such a bitch to make up for bikini shots. "Or there'll be one less ex-Watcher in L.A."

Wesley's eyes were imploring: Kill him, though it destroy me! That was why Angel had rejected her as a hostage, she realized; Wesley wouldn't have hesitated. Her voice was eerily steady in her own ears. "You're just going to feel like shit when Tara puts your soul back, so -"

"Cordy? Shut the fuck up." He gazed at Wesley with a smile obscenely close to loving. "Don't look so glum, Wes. I'm going to give you what you really want. I told you I was going to kill you for what you did to my son. Took me awhile to get around to it, is all. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth - you've been begging for it, haven't you? But don't think this is all just fun and games for me, though it really, really is -" He jabbed the knife in further, gave it a vicious twist - "I've been thinking I needed to keep you guys off my back. Thinking I needed flunkies, minions, the usual - and then d'oh! It hits me. Already got 'em. They just require a little fine-tuning. You're gonna be my right-hand man, Wes. Just like old times. And Cordy can be... well, you don't actually know how to do anything, do you? Ah, hell, with those tits who needs talent? We need to find Connor."

"Do we?" Wesley choked out.

"Yeah, Wes, we do. He's family." He grinned, his teeth saw-blades in ivory, his eyes a sulfurous blaze in the shadows of his ridged brows. "And now so are you."

Cordelia lunged for the battleaxe. Angel turned, all smooth terrible power, and flung Wesley aside, a limp bloodied scarecrow. He wrenched the axe from her grasp, trapping her wrists in one hand, and hauled her up by the hair. "Cordy, Cordy, Cordy," he caroled. "You seem stressed. How about I just buy you a new wardrobe - that's the going price for a Get Out of Cordelia's Self-righteous
Condemnation Free card, isn't it? "

She wrenched at his arm, and might as well have been wrestling granite. He was always so infinitely careful with her, she forgot how inhumanly strong he was. The bones in her wrists were screaming under the pressure of his hand, a little metacarpal chorus of agony. "I'm not buying that that old goat could give you a moment of perfect happiness! This has got to be a spell or something! Angel, you've got to fight it! It's not real!"

Angel's eyes softened from teak to brown velvet, and his hands dropped to his sides. "Cordelia," he murmured. "It's - it's incredible! Your love has warmed my stony vampire heart! For you and you alone I'll give up evil and live the life of a virtuous champion!" He slapped her hard enough to rattle the teeth in her jaw. "Or not. 'Fight it, Angel!'" he mimicked. "You stupid cow. Of course it's real. It's the big damn hero who's the fantasy. And you fell for it, hook, line and sinker, didn't you? God, you're pathetic. Had a chance at power most humans can't even conceive of, and you gave it up - for what? To be with him? Well, here you are, no visions, no power, no purpose, and where's that grand romance you sacrificed it all for? You're useless. Useless to him, useless to yourself." He leaned in close. She could smell the meat-locker stench of recent feeding on his breath, and his eyes were great golden bonfires. His voice lowered, roughened. "But I've got a use for you, Cordelia Chase. Every time he looks at you, I'm watching through his eyes. Every breath he forgets not to take, I'm smelling your wet little cunt. Every time he thinks about you, every time he lies awake, every time he touches - "

Cordelia knee'd him in the groin and flipped backwards over the couch, landing hard on her ass. Angel roared and doubled over, careening around the couch after her and sending the end table flying. She crab-scuttled backwards, but Angel pounced, scary-fast, pinning her shoulders to the floor with two hundred-plus pounds of lustful demonic fury. His teeth were in her throat and she was writhing wildly beneath him, trying to get leverage and screaming Don't don't don't! and -

An arm came down like lighting and Angel arched backwards with a yell, clawing for the broken table leg lodged in his back. Wesley was standing, God knew how, a blood-soaked revenant with eyes dreadful in their calm acceptance of what was happening. I guess, Cordelia thought crazily, he's used to being cut open by now. Blood everywhere, great swathes and gouts of it. "Run," he rasped through bloody foam, and then Angel was upon him.

Cordelia ran. She veered round in the doorway, one hand to her ravaged throat, heartsick and dizzy. Angel looked up from his work, grinning, Wesley's blood on his lips, his blood on Wesley's.

"Go ahead, run," he purred. "We'll be along presently."
Chapter 7

Tara climbed the stairs, the Sibley Guide a talisman clutched hard to her chest. It had almost a week to nerve herself to this, in and around researching the First Slayer and taking care of the spell of confusion Buffy'd requested she cast on the Initiative equipment - only a simple glamor, but working out how to cast it at a distance had taken several days. She paused in the hall outside the door to Spike's office, reluctant to intrude uninvited. Instinctive tact prompted her to grant him the same privilege over her that the inexorable laws of magic granted her over him. A man in a household of women, no less than a vampire in a household of humans, needed a cave to retreat to now and then.

The room was small enough to feel cluttered even though there wasn't much in it: desk, chair, bookshelf, and a turntable perched vulture-fashion atop an assembly of milk crates crammed full of vinyl records in flaking, rat-nibbled sleeves. A Manchester United poster adorned the wall behind the desk. The only light was the glow of the computer monitor and a few strategically placed candles; the single window had been boarded over and now served as the frame for a surveyor's map of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, covered with cryptic Post-It notes on demon activity Spike didn't feel like entrusting to the computer.

Invitation wasn't long in coming; Spike spun his chair round, cell phone tucked in the crook of his shoulder, and waved her inside. "Look, just wake her up and tell her it's Sunnydale calling, or I'll jump a mail plane and rip your sodding - oi, Faith? Spike. Who's the wanker?" Tara couldn't catch Faith's response, but Spike laughed, a wine-dark vampire chuckle no creature of the night ought to be sharing with a Slayer at three in the afternoon. "Christ, love, pick a bloke with a brain in at least one head, can't you? Nah, business. Your replacement showed up the other night. Right. Proper kick in the teeth she is, too. Problem is, she's only got half a tank of demon juice, or whatever it is gets your mojo rising. Yeah, tragic. So, you perpetrated any dark rituals of vengeance of late... ?"

Tara picked her way to the straight-backed chair more or less reserved for supplicants - rather less than more at the moment; it was half-buried under a jackstraw pile of swords, axes, and sundry pointy objects. After a moment of study, she managed to ease a double-bitted axe to one side without toppling the whole assemblage, and sat down to pretend polite ignorance of Spike's half of the conversation.

"Right. Thanks, pet, and give the missus a fillip for me." He set the phone down and settled back boneless in his chair, hands draped casually across black-denim thighs.

"She hasn't... ?" Tara's stomach clenched in dismay. She hadn't realized until this moment just how much she'd been hoping that Faith would provide them with some kind of clue. She had no false modesty about her abilities; she was a skilled though not particularly powerful witch - in some respects, more skilled than Willow. But the Ritual of Restoration had stretched her magic to its limit and beyond. This spell would be, in its way, even more difficult. Many an overconfident wizard had discovered to their sorrow that constraining and dismissing a great power safely was not nearly so simple as summoning one up.

The upwards tick of Spike's eyebrow was far too knowing for her liking. "She hasn't," he confirmed. "Power to burn." He hooked the heel of one scuffed black Doc on the handle of the bottom drawer of the desk - said drawer, according to Willow's report, containing a pack of cigarettes, a black-and-white photo of Drusilla in a beret, a half-full bottle of Jack Daniels, and a modest collection of porn which Willow had declined to investigate further. A pretty paltry collection of vices, all things considered. "What's cooking, kitten?"

She laid the Sibley down on the desk between them, flipped it open. "Have you ever run into one of
"Mohra demon?" Spike did battle with the fine print for a moment before admitting defeat and retrieving his glasses from their Coventry atop the monitor. "Heard of 'em. Bigshot warriors of darkness, soldier boys for the Lower Powers with a perpetual hard-on for, guess what, ending the world." He snorted in mild disdain. "They while away the hours till that happy day taking down the shiniest white knights they can find. And they eat salt. Why?"

Tara swung one foot in a circumspect arc, mindful of the collection of steel blades an inch away from her ankles. "Have you heard anything about their blood having regenerative properties?"

That got her twenty-five degrees of head-tilt, inquisitive but unworried. "If you mean do they pop merrily back to life if you kack 'em wrong, sure. Higher grade of immortality than I was issued, that's for bloody certain." Both feet thumped to the floor and Spike leaned forward with a gesture of illustrative violence, glasses sliding down his nose. "What you've got to do to kill 'em, see, is gouge out the gem in the center of their - "

"So - so Mohra blood really does regenerate dead flesh?"

Spike froze mid-gouge, head-tilt thirty-two point five degrees, or 'Tell me you're not after something as daft as I think you are.' "Yeah," he said cautiously. "If you're a dead Mohra."

Some internal chord relaxed; another tightened to the humming-point. Her emotions were badly in need of tuning. "I th-thought that might be it. There's so many warnings in the healing spells that use it, to make sure it's always diluted... " Tara reached within for the calm center of self - it seemed she had to stretch farther every day. "Nothing will happen unless Willow wants it to. I swear that on my name and my life. But I want to give her a choice." It was an effort to get words out; her breath solidified in her throat. "I'm not absolutely positive of any of this yet. Magic theory is Willow's thing, not mine. But the demon that animates a vampire, it's not... not... there's no self there - it's formless, mindless. Like water, taking on the personality and memory of whatever body it's poured into. Something like the Slayermess, in an evil way."

Spike shifted uneasily in his chair, and Tara hurried on. "Vampirism spreads through a very specific ritual. You have to drain them, they have to drink some of your blood, and they have to die within a few minutes of that happening, right? Every time you sire someone you're performing a blood sacrifice and ritually preparing the corpse for possession."

"Takes all the romance out of it, putting it that way." The ghostlight of the monitor cast alien shadows in the hollows of Spike's cheeks and leached the crimson of the football jerseys behind his head to grey. This preternatural stillness wasn't a good sign; both enthusiasm and anger set Spike bouncing off the walls. Total quiescence could only mean he was undecided and thinking hard - and though he was surprisingly good at it when pressed, Spike hated thinking hard. He and Buffy had that in common.

"If the bond between the demon and the body created by that ritual is broken," Tara said very carefully, "Then the demon isn't able to inhabit the body. Usually the only way to break it is to damage the body in a few magically significant ways - a stake through the heart, or burning or beheading. But the demon can't thrive in living flesh - it can only seed in a dying body, and flower in a dead one. So I think... if the body came back to life... that would break the bond, too. The demon would spill out, dissipate, just as it would when a vampire is staked." She couldn't be uncertain. Hands, chin, voice, everything strong and steady. "Do you see where I'm going? This isn't a cure for vampirism. If you gave the blood to a normal vampire, you'd probably just end up with s-some kind of empty meat puppet - the demon would be gone, and Mohra blood can't call back a soul. But Willow's already got her soul. I - I think that if she took Mohra blood it could make her alive. Make
her human again."

Spike catapulted out of the chair, snatched up the *Sibley* and strode over to the bookcase, shoving it between *The King In Yellow* and *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. He turned, took one liquid menacing step towards her. "How're you planning on testing this little theory out? Spoonful of sugar to a few unwilling test subjects?" He leaned forward and grasped the spindles of the chair-back. His forearms grazed her shoulders, muscle and bone as hard as the oak behind her. "I suppose you want me to fetch you a few of these Mohra blokes?" He was up and away before she could answer, circling the desk in a flutter of displaced papers. "Praps it's slipped your mind. Bloody Vengeance Inc. doesn't deal in sentient demons - in order to keep you lot with souls happy, among other reasons. Ta ever so and don't let the door hit you in the arse on the way out."

"No! I don't - I thought - " Truly, she hadn't thought that far ahead at all. "I love her so much." Her only chance of convincing him lay in remembering that Spike did, too. Tara folded in upon herself, origami in reverse, head bent, hands tucked beneath her chin. "And I can't bear to be near her. I know you think that's my problem. But I *damned* her when I put her soul back, Spike, and that's not all. Magic's just a tool to you. You pick it up when you need it and put it down when you don't. But magic was Willow's life. Now it's gone - I thought that was only just, last year, but I'm not sure any longer. You can't have only justice, can you? There has to be mercy sometimes, or - "

"Has there?" Spike's eyes were the blue heart of a flame. "What mercy made the likes of me, love?"

She had to quench that heat. "You must have thought about what it means, a vampire loving a human? In the long term? In the really long term?"

"There is no really long term." Spike sank down in the chair behind the desk with an expression dangerously close to brooding. 'I've always featured myself bound for hell. Proud of it, in fact. Me an' Dru, we'd liven the place up, I thought.' One knee started up a nervous jog. "I talked to Angel some bit last summer, whilst he was wringing out the salt water. Said Darla'd told him, after those lawyers brought her back, that she didn't remember... anything, after he staked her. No flames, no tortments. Nothing." The muscle in his jaw leaped, then turned to steel. "Rather be damned than nothing."

Impossible to imagine that someone as fiercely vital as Spike would someday just... vanish. But it made sense; when the mystic bond which melded mindless, formless demon to undead flesh was broken, that flesh would crumble to dust, taking with it self and memory. Tara felt a sudden intense pity. Willow's path, and Angel's, was closed to him; his soul was gone beyond recalling, a willing ransom for Buffy's return to life. Nothing of Spike was imperishable, for all his immortality; he might live five hundred years, but in the end he would be nothing but the foam on the waves. "It doesn't have to be either. Not for Willow."

Spike scowled, fingers drumming the edge of his desk. Tara waited. He had more than once been kind to her, in his fashion, and that was a small marvel. It wasn't anything so simple as Buffy serving as his conscience that allowed him to sit there and regard her as something other than lunch - it was a complex tapestry of relationships and responsibilities stretching out through all of Sunnydale and beyond, anchored on the warp-threads of his own bloody-minded determination. He'd put it together one clumsy stitch at a time, and if you looked too closely it was full of snags and snarls.

But it was what they had. In a weird, backwards way, he'd become their conscience: every action got filtered through *Am I setting a bad example for the vampire?*

*Am I?*

Spike stiffened and half-rose from his chair, ears pricked.
"What?"

"Hush." He whipped off his glasses and tossed them on the desk, intent upon some distant sound, paying no attention to her. "Stay here. Upstairs." She rose and started to follow, and Spike grabbed her wrists with bruising force and all but shoved her into the desk. "Mind me!" he snarled. "You don't want to see this."

And he was gone.

*******

Sunlight pried at the edges of the blackout curtains and slunk away, denied entrance. Willow lay belly-flopped crossways over the bed, waving bunny-slippered feet in the air as she scrolled down the list of ingredients on her laptop's monitor.

"How come you have all this crap when you're writing on the computer?" Kennedy waved at the small stationer's supply worth of pens, pencils, and color-coded notebooks scattered across the bed.

Willow selected a felt-tipped pen from the multicolored array at her side. "You can chip a fang trying to nibble thoughtfully on a keyboard," she murmured. "And I like the paper smell."

Kennedy heaved a sigh and began prowling the room again, boldly going where no man was going, ever. The funky New Age-bohemian decor was beginning to get to her. Wasn't there a law about having this much batik in one place? She wandered over to the small cage sitting on a wicker table. A brown rat almost as bored as she was hunkered inside, gnawing on a piece of corncob. Kennedy poked a finger through the wire mesh. "Hey, Scabbers." The rat stared up at her with jet-button eyes and twitched its whiskers, then decided her finger was tastier than the corncob. Kennedy jerked her hand away with a yip. Crap. Why had she come over? Some vague idea about making sure Willow was doing the spell up right, but how the hell would she know? She was going nuts in here.

The itchy, twitchy, feeling between her shoulder blades wasn't helping. The Slayer in her, reacting to the demon in Willow, circling like a pair of those magnetized dogs. Did it bother Willow, too? Maybe not, if she was used to having Buffy around all the time. Kennedy snuck a glance across the room. In the diffuse marmalade light the vampire's skin was luminous, pearl and chalcedony, as if she and not the candles were the source of the room's illumination. Her hair parted along the pale perfect line of bowed neck, falling in sheaves like the leaves of her namesake. One slim hand tucked the errant strands of burning auburn behind an ear and dropped to the mouse. Point, click, highlight. Kennedy looked away, her heart pounding, and poked through the girly shit on the dresser. An unopened bottle of OPI Romeo and Juliette was gathering dust in the back, lost amidst the litter of Baby Oh Baby and Almay. Distraction, yay. Kennedy held the nail polish up to the light: ruby so dark it was almost black. Not exactly Willow's style, and sure as hell not Tara's. "You mind if I borrow some of this?"

"Go ahead. It's a relic of the short-lived vamp fatale phase. I have a leather bustier somewhere in the closet, but I forgot there's really no bust to tier." Willow tapped the pen against her chin. "Myrrh is out. Backspace the myrrh."

The mental image of Willow in a leather bustier was, um. Very um. With, perhaps, thigh boots. "What's wrong with myrrh?"

"It's all sacrificial and penitent and stuff. The First Slayer's all about the death, but not so much with the penitence. And Wise Men are not in the budget."

"I knew that." Kennedy sat down cross-legged on the end of the bed and unscrewed the lid. The
polish went on in smooth, glistening strokes, and she held up a hand to admire the effect. Sweet. She looked good today: strappy sandals, capri pants, and (completely by coincidence) a low-cut cream-colored silk blouse, the simple lines of which showed off a curve of shoulder and the column of her neck. Not that anyone was noticing. Not that she'd intended anyone to notice.

Willow erased myrrh, her lower lip protruding with a fierce kittenish concentration, and typed a hesitant acacia in the blank line. The moving cursor, having writ, just sat there blinking at her. She erased it again, replaced it with yarrow, erased that, growled and banged her forehead on the keyboard.

"Huh." Kennedy waved her hand to dry the nails. "I don't know a lot about magic, but I'm guessing 'Hjb4mlpn' won't cut it."

"It's a work in progress." Willow glowered at the screen. Kennedy scooted over to peer over her shoulder.

"No offense, but that looks more like my grandma's recipe for turkey stuffing than dark arts. Ritual cleansing bath? Come on, that's lame. If the First Slayer's such a badass, maybe you ought to kick it up a notch."

For a second her fingers tightened on the laptop, and Willow's eyes were tawny in the dim light. "This has to be a spell Tara can cast," she snapped. "She's not as powerful as I... used to be. It took her months to recover from putting my soul back."

Kennedy snorted and waved a drying hand at the screen. "If that's her speed in magic, no wonder it didn't stick."

Willow clenched fists and jaw. "You don't know anything about it!"

"How much do I have to know?" Kennedy grinned, hard and mean. "I can see you've got sharp pointy teeth and I can see Tara's got a big hole in her neck, so it looks to me like the 'vampire' part trumps the 'with a soul' part."

Willow was across the bed with bewildering speed, her eyes crackling with nascent gold. "You have no idea what you're talking about," she hissed. A white hand closed on Kennedy's blouse, bunching the thin silky fabric, and Willow's voice was as cold as her fingers. "Do you have any idea what I did with a soul? Before I died? There was a man. He was old and sick and stinky. I put my hand on his chest, and I reached in, and I stopped his heart. I pulled it out of his body, and I felt it grow cold in my hand. Then I took a knife in that same hand, and I slit him open, and I pulled his skin off, inch by inch. It was hard, and I kept poking holes in the thin spots. His blood ran over my feet and gunked up between my toes. I stuffed his skin with nettles and crumpled-up newspaper, and sewed his heart back inside with thread dyed in his own blood."

The vampire drew a ragged breath, her nostrils flaring to drink in - what? Fear? Screw that. Kennedy grabbed the laptop, holding it up like a shield. "Back off, or the computer gets it."

Willow snarled, "He was the first. There were others. Vampires just kill people. I destroyed them. Ground their bones to make my bread. They're gone. Bitting Tara? Stupid beyond belief, yes. Evil, no. I know from evil." She was right in Kennedy's face now, backing her into the headboard, the living woman's ribs heaving against dead ones, the beating heart hammering double-time for the silent one. The laptop slid to the bed. "When I kick it up a notch people get burned. In the 'nothing left but a greasy ash spot' way. Or they did before - before... " She gazed down at the laptop, and to Kennedy's horror a fat tear rolled down her nose and plopped down between 'qwerty' and 'uiop.' "You're right. It's lame. I'm lame. I'm a pathetic old horse who used to be a thoroughbred but got sold
to pay off the family's gambling debts and broke her knees pulling cabs and ought to be put down but everyone's too sorry for me - "

Her narrow shoulders twitched, shuddered, and collapsed in on themselves. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," Kennedy stammered as Willow melted into a blubbering heap against her collarbone.

"I used to be able to feel it!" Willow wailed. Ivory fingers raked the air, reaching for something elusive and mutable.

"It's okay, it's - oh, geez, stop it! I didn't mean it, it's a great spell!" Kennedy hauled the lachrymose vampire upright and gave her a little shake. Willow was as far as possible from inhuman perfection at the moment, all straggly hair and wet red eyes and snuffly red nose. Her mouth wobbled, pink and vulnerable. Fresh sobs shook her, and somehow Kennedy was holding her close, doling out shoulder-pats and inane, mumbled reassurances. Willow snorfled, her nose buried in the cleft of Kennedy's breasts. She looked up, flower-eyed and miserable, and the only possible solution was to kiss her.

So, kissing. Deep frantic kissing, lips and more lips and damn, she wished she'd put her tongue stud in, and she should stop this. Because there was someone... oh, yeah, that Tara chick. But hands. Hands hungry like the lips, arms holding her close and tight, and her whole body was zinging and thrilling with vampire! but it was a funny thing that when you turned those magnetized dogs around, you couldn't keep them away from each other, and God, Willow had the sweetest little tits, all shy and tender pressed against hers, little sugar-lump nipples in a demitasse cup of softness...

They broke away from one another at the same moment, Willow hyperventilating even harder than Kennedy was. "Okay. Okay. Spotting now. I mean, stopping. I mean, I would apologize, except this Did. Not. Happen."

Kennedy shook herself, too stunned to react. "It didn't! I mean, it did, but that's not me. I mean, I don't - " Her eyes widened with outrage. "You! You put a thrall on me or something! You made me - "

"I did NOT!" Willow scuttled to the far end of the bed, narrowly missing knocking the laptop to the floor. "No! No thrall! There is no thralling! It's a fluke. A fluke sans evening wear. And flukes lead to badness and anguish and someone getting rebar through the liver and I am not going there again and I love Tara, do you understand? We're going through a bad time right now and it's my fault and I'm not going to make it more my fault so if you do that again? I'll - I'll kill you! I will!"

" - not a poacher and there's no way I'd kiss you unless you put some kind of vampire whammy on me, because you're an evil dead monster and I don't care if you've got a soul! And if you so much as look at me cross-eyed again I'm gonna stake your ass to the floor and - "

" - tear your throat out and hide your body in the sewers and Spike will help me because he's evil and sometimes that's really handy and you think I'm joking but I'm not because I'm really not a nice person and I have no idea why Tara stays with me but she does and I will NOT hurt her, do you get that? DO YOU?"

Willow was approaching a panicky screech only dogs could hear by the end of her rant. Kennedy jumped to her feet and stormed towards the stairs, flinging over her shoulder, "The whole fucking neighborhood got it, you - oof!"

Kennedy whipped around, prepared to tear the cool solid thing she'd collided with into shreds small enough to make meatloaf. Spike looked down, regarding her with the eyes of a leopard sizing up the traffic at the waterhole. "Well, well, if this little tableau doesn't bring back fond memories. Only thing
missing's a broken nose."

Willow sat on the edge of the bed, plucking at the calligraphic streaks of polish that the young Slayer's half-dried nails had left on her blouse. Great. Hester Rosenberg, at your service. Kennedy had fled the field - quickly, and angrily, and shakily, and she'd have to go to Lolly's for more adverbs soon. Spike was at this very moment seeing Kennedy out the door, apparently under the impression that she might compound her amorous crimes by making off with the family silver on the way out. Any minute he'd come stalking back down the stairs - Spike could stalk very loudly when he put his mind to it - but she didn't intend to look up. She knew what kind of outraged disappointment she'd see in those eyes: murder, pillage and card-sharping might be all in a day's work in Spike's book, but failing to stand by one's woman was an unforgivable sin.

Booted feet assaulted the stairwell. "What the bloody hell was that?" Spike demanded.

There was no point in denying anything; he could smell the desire in the air as well as she could. In a way it made things simpler. "It's not my fault." Willow's lower lip plumped into a trembling pout. "All vampires are naturally polymorphously perverse, or something."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Bollocks. You don't see me stepping out on Buffy. And when I was with Dru I never fucked anyone else. At least, not that I didn't kill after, and I don't see the Mini-Bitch's head decorating the bedpost."

Willow drooped, her whole body wilting. "She touched me. No. She wanted to touch me. And I... " She ran out of air at the same time she ran out of words, and sat rocking back and forth, limply and miserable and silent, until Spike's sigh reminded her to breathe. She still had to remember to breathe sometimes; sometimes Spike had to remember not to. The bed creaked as he sat down beside her; a hand feathered down her neck and settled on her shoulders, stilling her with a touch. Willow slumped against his side and let him gather her in, inhaling cool comforting sire-scent as an antidote to the warm, seductive odor of humanity still all too thick in the air. Once you fought past the seventeen layers of snarly, snarky, prickly, and just-plain-mean, Spike gave good hug, at once muscle-y and yielding. She didn't particularly miss the whole penis thing, but guy-hugs? Nice. "No one wants to touch me anymore, well, except you right at this very minute, but by 'touch' I actually mean something naughtier, and by 'no one' I actually mean something naughtier, and by 'no one' I actually mean Tara."

"Figured."

"She tries so hard, but every time we're together it's like she's wearing a full-body condom. I miss the naughty touching." Willow wiped her nose on his t-shirt. Once upon a time she'd fondly imagined that being a vampire ensured freedom from icky bodily fluids. Ha. Not that Spike seemed to mind at all that much; she suspected that he reveled in the role of manly consoler amidst a flock of excitable females. "I love Tara. I barely even know Kennedy, but she made me feel... "

Spike stared off into the blind alleys of the past. "Like lighting just struck and the sun's come up at midnight. Like your skin comes to life where her hands pass."

Willow fingered the crusty nail polish. The spray of red was unpleasantly reminiscent of Tara's blood specking her robe. The room had grown very small around them, close and still and musty with the scent of dried lavender and rosemary and chamomile, the sweet smell of dead things. "When did you know?" she whispered. "That Drusilla wasn't... wasn't the one... ?"

Storm clouds of memory darkened his eyes. Spike would cheerfully relate tales about his adventures with Dru back in the day, but of the year between his leaving Sunnydale and his return he seldom
spoke. "Round about the third time she left me for someone else. Listen up. I'll admit it, I wanted to fuck Buffy from the first moment I saw her. Maybe I was a little bit in love with her from that first minute, too. But I wouldn't have done, not unless I planned on bringing Dru a nice fresh Slayer for breakfast the next morning. Because - " His hand tightened on her upper arm, fingers digging into flesh till she squeaked, and he emphasized each word with a little shake - "It would be wrong. You don't treat your lady like that."

"Oh, yeah, Mr. I-Haven't-Had-A-Woman-In-Weeks?"

Touche. Spike could muster a fairly impressive pout himself. "Doesn't count. We were on a break, nothing happened, and I'd most likely have killed you anyway."

He released her arm, and Willow immediately buried her face in his shoulder. His casual violence didn't frighten her any longer - what difference did it make between vampires, when the bruises healed almost before they could form? "Tara hates what I am, and how can I blame her when I've got this thing in me that thinks she's a hemoglobin-flavored Slurpee?" Her voice was a scratchy whisper. "I love her. I do. Why do I want to bite her?"

"You want to bite her because you love her, pet," Spike said tenderly. His fingers made scarlet ribbons of her hair, looping it round his palms. "We devour what we love, we vamps. Take it. Make it part of us. Make it ours. That's the way it works for us."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Willow wailed. "You don't want to bite Buffy! Why? Why can't I feel like that?"

Spike cocked his head, reflective. "Dunno. Used to. Outgrew it, I expect. Never really thought about it." He shrugged, indifferent to the mysteries of his own psyche. "I finally got through to Faith, by the way. She's fine."

"So the hoop's in our end zone." Willow glared over his shoulder at her laptop. "God, I'm so pathetic! I can't even put a simple spell together anymore! I can't do magic and deep down I want to kill my girlfriend. I can't even wish I were dead, 'cause hey!"

Spike's capacity for dispensing tea and sympathy was distinctly limited. "Yeh, love, you're a quarter past useless. Stakes are in the weapons chest if you want to end it all." His body went as tense in her soggy embrace as Kennedy's had been yielding, and when she looked up, his frown had returned, chiseling the lines in his brow deeper. "Would you wish you were alive?"

Willow pulled away with a sigh. "There's no good wishing." There had to be something that would give the summoning teeth, something that would tie it all together and make it - Oooh! Tie it all together! Willow dove across Spike's lap for the nearest pen of the half-dozen scattered across the bed, and scribbled bind smudge stick w/3 strands of vampire hair, add 3 drops Slayer's blood to - on her left wrist. She looked back over her shoulder at his pale face - set and yet agitated, like the marble bust of some particularly dissolute Roman emperor. "I did this to myself, right? I've just got to... live with it. Ha ha."

Spike sucked on his teeth, looking as though he didn't much care for the taste. "Seems there's two minds about that."

"All that stuff about turning human again?" She felt a pang of disappointment - would any of them ever really believe she'd learned anything from her past mistakes? "It sounded good on paper, but when I got into the nitty of the spells required it was awful gritty - "

"Tara found something. Special kind of demon blood. Thinks it might turn you human, on account
of you having a soul. I suppose it'd work on Alley Oop, too, come to think." Spike looked, if possible, even less enthused at the prospect. "If you wanted it, I could..."

He ground to a halt, seemingly unable to finish the sentence, and Willow felt the gap that always lay between them yawn to Grand Canyon proportions. She rolled the rest of the way off his lap and sat up. "Spike..." She laid a timid hand on his shoulder, thinking perhaps that he was the one who needed a hug this time. It would all change again. She'd lose this, this mentor-brother-father-friend sire thing which was unlike any other relationship in her life.

"'Love is not love, Which alters when it alteration finds.'" His voice was soft, and for the first time it struck her that Spike would lose something, too. Willow gave him a look askance, but the moment of vulnerability, if that was what it had been, was gone, and the trademark Spikey smirk was firmly in place once more. "Don't make much of it, pet. I once had a front-row seat when Dru killed herself a poet."

Willow thought about the battered and much-scribbled-in notebook which was the real reason she'd refused to snoop - ahem, investigate - further in The Vice Drawer. Some things were sacred. Of the same order as Doogie Howser fanfic. She gave him a secretive grin and flashed him a Vulcan salute. "Hail, geek-brother."

Spike cuffed her affectionately across the ear. "You want the trouble of a heartbeat again or not? Anya'll be gutted with me for losing a sale, but I've got a way round the company policy. Bloody Vengeance doesn't deal in sentient demons, but we kill 'em all the time when we're slaying, right? Long as we don't charge Tara, it's all right."

To be alive again, to have Tara in her arms and magic (maybe) in her grasp, to walk across the campus in full sunlight, to not have to explain to her bewildered father and disbelieving mother one more time that no, this was not a neurotic reaction to their deficient parenting skills... To be vulnerable to illness and age and weakness, to know that no matter how much you crammed into a day there wasn't enough time, there would never be enough time to learn it all... Willow's chest constricted and she swallowed hard. "I - I guess it wouldn't hurt to see if we could find some. Just to see - "

Spike nodded, the corners of his mouth tightening. "Yeah. Just to see."

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"Mohra? That sounds awfully...oh!" Buffy snapped her fingers. "Angel killed one in L.A. a few years ago."

"Of course he did." Someday, Spike reflected sourly, he'd come across something Angel hadn't done first, but today wasn't to be that day. "Don't suppose he thoughtfully stashed it in a freezer for us."

"Doubt it." Buffy pressed her nose to the glass in the door of the Magic Box, shading her eyes with her palm and peering through the blinds. "Anya? We're here!"

"What's a Mohra demon?" Evie asked, as Anya undid the deadbolt, opened the door and ushered the three of them inside. Willow and Tara were seated at the table in the rear of the store, with several musty tomes, the usual battery of candles, and a variety of spell-casting rubbish spread out between them on the polished wood.

"Nothing you need be concerned with," Spike informed her. He maneuvered around Anya and pulled out a chair. "Sit."
Buffy's unwelcome news about his new employee's position on Finn's Most Wanted List aside, the last several days had been uneventful, for which Spike was profoundly grateful. He'd set Denny to tunnel-digging, cautioned Evie to stick close to the crypt and keep an eye out for goons in Kevlar, and relieved his feelings by driving up to Topanga Canyon and hunting down the Gershon demon. He'd delivered his snarling and ill-smelling charge to its new owner last night, in exchange for a wad of cash that went a long way towards reconciling him to the injustices of the universe, even if — or perhaps because — most of it was earmarked for Dawn's college fund.

"What are they gonna do to me?" Evie asked, eying the witches uneasily. "Is this gonna turn the chip off?"

Tara shook her head. "No. But the Initiative people won't be able to track you with it. And if it works the way I hope it will, your chip will act as a... a focus to extend the spell to any other chips nearby. So Susie and any other chipped demons in town will be electronically invisible. More or less."

Evie looked dubious, but she shrugged and let Willow wreath her head with a strand of LED Christmas lights to which had been affixed assorted mystic trinkets. Tara chanted something Latinate and boring, invoking the moon or somesuch. Spike leaned against the bookcase, arms crossed, and watched with mild interest, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Mohra demons weren't so common he could afford to pass up a lead to one practically in his back yard. Bugger it all, he was going to have to go to L.A. He sighed. Not an enticing prospect, visiting his old grandsire. It had been fun, at first, rubbing Angel's nose in his and Buffy's relationship, but the novelty had palled quickly, and Angel's flint-eyed disapproval was just irritating now. But the old man owed him one for helping to pull him out of the drink last year, and would probably be more than willing to discharge the debt on something as inconsequential as the possible location of a demon.

Buffy settled beside him. "I'm thinking we should have a dinner party this weekend," she said, "and invite the Finns."

Spike blinked. He couldn't have heard that right. "We should what? With who?"


"You can't be bloody serious. And this is supposed to be... what, fun? You going to invite Clem and his missus too?"

"Actually, yes." Buffy had the look of determination she assumed when she had decided something was going to happen, damn it, or the Slayer would know the reason why. "And Sandra and her husband, and the whole gang. I'll make some calls as soon as we're done here. Look, making Evie into a chip-cloaking device is only a short-term solution. If we want to get Team Finn to see things our way, we've got to show them that our way works, right? That demons and humans don't have to be at each other's throats every second. Therefore, party." Her brows dipped together, thoughtful. "I wonder if I can remember Mom's recipe for those little quiche things."

Visiting his old grandsire was suddenly becoming far more appealing. Spike cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, hate to run out on you, but if Angel's our local expert on Mohra demons, the killing of, I'd best run up to L.A. this weekend to see — "

"Oh, no you don't." Buffy shook a finger at his nose. "You are going to be there, non-evilly interacting with humans in a way that shows Riley and Sam that you don't think of them as lunch any longer. That's the whole point." She gave him the big glossy-eyed pout which never failed to soften his heart and stiffen parts south. "Please? I swear I'll make it up to you later."
Oh, bloody hell. "Bit much to ask, not to think of that great hunk of beefsteak as lunch," Spike growled. "All right, all right, I'll be there. But I really do have to chat up Angel if he's got a line on these Mohra berks." He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and thumbed the number for Angel Investigations, but all he got was the answering machine. "Yeah, this is Spike. Looking for intel on Mohra demons. Buffy says you killed one a few years back. You got any details, 'specially on where it may have come from, ring me." He closed the phone, frowning. "Grand-dad's working banker's hours lately."

Buffy glanced up. "Huh. I got the machine when I called Cordy this morning, too. That's a little weird."

"Weird enough I ought to leave for L.A. immediately and sleuth about, conveniently missing the Party From Hell?"

She snorted. "You wish. Angel's made it real clear he doesn't want me trespassing on his turf, so he can keep his own back yard clean." But her frown didn't dissipate. Buffy Summers hadn't achieved legal drinking age by ignoring her instincts, and Spike had to admit that even his own less-sensitive premonitory powers were hinting at something rotten in the state of California.

Tara was winding up her chant, pale and exhausted in the fluorescent glow of the overhead lights. The candles snuffed themselves out all at once, and the ridiculous-looking crown of technological thorns Willow had assembled shimmered, wavered, and sank into Evie's skull like mist. Evie gave a startled yip and hopped out of her chair, and Tara slumped back into hers.

"You OK, sweetie?" Willow asked, handing her a glass of something that Spike's nose told him was orange juice heavily adulterated with herbs. "Here, this will make you feel better. Magical electrolytes," she added helpfully.

Tara nodded and took a sip, grimacing at the taste, and then downed the rest of it dutifully. Evie felt her head with both hands, fingers prodding at her singed-short hair. "I don't feel any different," she said. "You sure this worked?"

"Well, we won't know for certain until Riley tries to find you, and can't." Tara set her glass down. "But the aetheric resonances were what I'd expect them to be if it worked."

"Right," Spike drawled, giving Evie a finger-flick to the back of the head. "No more excuse for lazing about the crypt, then. Get out there tonight, get back to work, and don't get caught." He thought about it for a minute. "And while you're at it... listen for any gossip by way of Los Angeles. Your great-great etcetera grand-uncle's playing hard to get, and that's never a good sign."

"Red Three, do you copy?" The answer was a blast of static. Sam Finn grimaced and adjusted her headset. "Red Three, Red Five, acknowledge."

"Roger, Red Two. We're in position."

"Proceed to checkpoint. Red Three, hold your position." Sam cut the com unit and came out of her crouch. Urban demons were proving surprisingly wily. The Vartoq they were chasing tonight had eluded them twice already, but this time they had the slimy little bastard right where they wanted him. "Red One, I'm moving out."

She jogged down Main past the Sun Theater, eyes on the blip of golden light in the center of the scanner screen. A few onlookers turned curious heads at her passing, but to the uninitiated she was
only an overdressed runner with an unusually elaborate iPod. Within three blocks the scenery degenerated from quaint downtown to the grimy squalor of the docks. Riley had described Sunnydale to her so thoroughly and so often that she could have run the whole town blindfolded, but it still felt unnatural to be chasing demons through small-town California. The hunt and the kill were meant for blinding sun and sucking mud and the sultry green mosquito-whine of the jungle, not Starbucks and decaying warehouses.

Sam punched the magnification tab and the red dots of the other teams materialized on the scanner screen, spinning a web of blood to catch a particularly vicious fly. Any second their quarry would hear them coming, and... yeah! There it went, scurrying into a maze of dockside warehouses and abandoned storefronts. The Vartoq might try to get away along the surface streets, but there was a convenient manhole only a block away, and if it followed the pattern it had established in their previous attempts... "Come on, take the bait, fish-face," she muttered. And there it went, down the rabbit hole. Unless the Vartoq could body-surf through a sewage treatment plant, they had him. "Red One, target has gone to ground. Red One, do you copy?"

"I copy, Red Two." Riley's voice sounded strained, but the crappy connection made it hard to tell. "I'm with you. Keep on it."

"Switching to subterranean view." Streets vanished, replaced by the Sim City representation of sewer lines and electrical tunnels. The yellow dot was zipping full-out along the sewer main, heading for the sluiceway into the bay. Sam yelled, "Red Four, Red Three, mobilize!" and the red dots converged to cut their prey off from its avenues of escape, hounds on the trail of a treed cougar. Yellow reversed course, scrambling for the only clear exit. Sam whooped in triumph and slammed her fist against a mailbox as she raced past. "Cornered!" She broke into a pounding run, around the corner and down the alley towards the manhole cover the Vartoq had gone down.

Evrett's voice crackled in her earphones, distorted by spooky echoes. "Red One, this is Red Six. We have lost contact, repeat, we have lost contact!"

The yellow dot zigged where the sewer line zagged, and winked out like a will-o'-the-wisp. Sam skidded to a halt and struck the scanner with the flat of her hand, but the only thing on the screen was their own people milling about in confusion. "Red One. Come in, Red One!" No answer, not even static. Reception in Sunnydale was for shit, like the concentrated creepy-crawlies messed up the airwaves somehow. "Red Six, initiate standard search pattern from the target's last recorded position. Red Three, assist. Red Five, continue to checkpoint and keep an eye out. It can't have gone far."

"Roger, Red Two. Can we get the telemetry on that last sighting?"

Sam sighed, did a log capture, and uploaded the information to the com system. "Sending now." It wouldn't do any good - it hadn't the last four times this had happened. "Keep us posted, Red Six. Damn it, Gunnarson's checked the scanner relays half a dozen times."

Tiny cat-feet picked their delicate way up the back of her spine, and she whirled. No one, nothing, only a scrap of Doublemeat wrapper spinning in a vagrant breeze. Sam muttered a word her mother would have gotten out the soap for and searched rows of dark, grimy windows for movement. The wild pursuit had taken her several blocks off Main, and though it wasn't yet four o'clock, the insufficiently converted warehouses looming overhead left the narrow, grimy street in deep shadow.

What had Buffy said? The good news was that Sunnydale's vampire population was down. The bad news was that the remaining vamps seldom hunted alone. There was at least one established nest dockside, and though it wasn't likely that any of them would be out and about at this time of day, but... she caught movement in the corner of one eye. Double-dipped shit on a stick. Something told her that the dark figure slouched in the doorway halfway down the block wasn't after spare change.
"Red One. Come in, Red One. Riley, dammit, this is important!"

Nothing. Sam started walking with the swift, confident stride of someone who knew exactly where she was going, one hand unobtrusively loosening her taser in its holster. She hadn't gone five yards before she heard the footsteps behind her - which meant someone wanted her to hear them. Wanted her to get scared. Wanted her to run, to beg, to scream, to piss herself. You don't always get what you want, buster. The footsteps grew closer, closer - if the thing had possessed breath, she could have felt it on the back of her neck. Three paces behind, two, one... Sam spun around on one foot, opposing heel connecting solidly with her pursuer's jaw.

The vampire's head cracked against the dirty concrete. It shook its head, snarling, and kicked off the sidewalk with the power of an Olympic swimmer. Sam blocked its clumsy jab at the last possible instant, technique just barely beating inhuman speed, punched it in the throat hard enough to crush a human's larynx, and fell back to grab some much-needed breathing space. Her attacker was gaunt and shabby, its eyes bestial with hunger. Most vampires weren't especially skilled at hand-to-hand combat, just several times stronger, faster, and more tireless than the average human. A well-trained human fighter could take one down, maybe even two, but... "I just want to talk to you!" she panted. "Information. We can pay. We're looking for a Bracken demon who goes by the name of Susie..."

That got her a snarl and a roundhouse swing to the head. Sam pulled her taser. A second vampire, reeking of old blood and sewer funk, plummeted from the fire escape overhead and cannoned into her. Cold, dirty fingers clamped around her own, crushing hand and taser together. Her bones would break before the high-impact plastic would. Something twinged in her wrist and her fingers spasmed. The taser fell, skittering across the dingy concrete. Shabby's steel-toed boot ground down, and a second later the weapon was a smashed electronic beetle, case cracked open and its transistorized guts spilling out across the pavement.

Sam gritted her teeth and jammed her knee into Smelly's gut, using her free hand to work her sheath knife free of its boot-top confinement. The short blade plunged into the vampire's side, and its head snapped back with a wolf-howl of agony, but its grip never loosened. Fangs snagged in the tough fabric of her flak vest, and Sam strained for the wooden pallet leaning against the wall a few feet away, her heart pounding the drum solo from *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*. If she could tear free just one good-sized splinter...

Smelly leered, blackened lips peeling away from fangs almost as yellow as his eyes. "The old ones say you government types were something to be scared of once. You don't look scary to me, bit -"

Her fingers curled around jagged wood and the splinter ripped free with an adrenaline-fueled *crack!* Eight inches of yellow pine buried themselves in Smelly's back, sending him up in a poof of startled dust. Sam heaved herself off the wall, brushing the gritty remains of her assailant off her vest. "Yeah, well, you're not too bright." She turned the makeshift stake on Shabby, who yipped, leaped for the wall, and scuttled up and away roach-fashion. Why some vamps could do that and others couldn't Sam had never figured out.

"Samantha!"

She turned. Her errant husband was tearing down the street towards her, legs pumping, knuckles ghost-white around the stock of a repeating crossbow. *Big enough to hunt bears with a switch*, her father had said when she brought Riley home for the first time, and from the look on his face, right now the switch was optional. He was at her side in half a dozen long strides, and the guilt and anguish in those his eyes almost - *almost* - made her forgive him then and there. "Oh, God, Sam - you're bleeding. Let me see. Big warm hands cradled hers, and Sam realized, somewhat to her surprise, that her palms were pricked with red from a dozen tiny splinters. "God, Samantha, I'm so
"Sorry and twenty-five cents will buy me a gumball," she interrupted, taut and angry. She yanked her hand back and nursed it against her ribs. "Where the hell were you? I expected you to back me up! This is the third time you've gone missing in the last week, and I've covered for you, but damn it, Ri, we're a team, or we used to be." A huge welling ache boiled up under her ribs, threatening to burst her open. "Tell me you're under secret orders, tell me you're sneaking off to see your old girlfriend - just..." Her righteous fury devolved into pleading. "... tell me something."

"Sam, I'm - God, I don't know what I can tell you. I screwed up. I got distracted. I ran off chasing shadows. It won't happen again."

Weird how such a big guy could look so small. Sam raised an eyebrow. "So it is the old girlfriend, huh?"

It was supposed to be a joke, something to lighten the mood. Riley didn't laugh. He looked away, hair falling across his eyes, shame and anger locking his jaw. "Come on. We'll go to the base. You should get patched up."

"No," Sam said shortly. "It's just a scratch. I'll be fine. Let's just go back to the hotel and get changed.""

"Sam, I - He caught her shoulder. "I'm sorry.""

"So am I." And yet... how could she do anything but trust him, after all they'd been through together? She circled his waist with both arms, laid her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. "You can't keep re-making this choice, Ri. You can't keep letting her come between you and your duty. We didn't just lose the Vartoq this time, it led us into a goddam ambush. What are we gonna tell the Colonel, huh? Headquarters isn't going to be happy with our capture stats, and can you blame them?" She reached up and cupped his cheek in one hand, tilting his troubled face to hers. "There's one hostile we don't need to track down. One that would made Headquarters very happy."

"Spike's off-limits." Riley ground the heel of his hand into his brow. "God, I can't believe I just said that. But he's under Buffy's protection, and unless I can prove he's killing..."

Sam's mouth tightened. Riley Finn had kept a photo of the Slayer in his wallet for the first six months that Sam had known him. He'd take it out and show it to her, a battered, edge-worn 3x5 of the two of them standing together in front of Riley's dorm. The tiny, skinny blonde girl stared out at the camera with an expression both vulnerable and aloof, somehow not dwarfed by Riley's huge broad-shouldered presence. Riley's expression was goofy and adoring, Buffy's enigmatic, her smile as obscure as the Mona Lisa's, eyes and thoughts both elsewhere. Sam could have told him it was doomed from one look at that smile. "Buffy's protection," she said, her voice flat. "We both know she's got something to do with this. We weren't having all these problems with the tracking units before she showed up. I know she meant a lot to you, but... people change."

He sighed. "She's the Slayer, Sam. That doesn't change."

They talked little and touched less on the drive over to Buffy's place. They pulled up in front of 1630 Revello Drive at the last gasp of sunset, and Riley sat for a moment in the driver's seat of the rental Neon, gazing out at the rising tide of evening - shadows lengthening, melding, creeping across the street and lapping up the lawn. One by one, lights were going on along the street, checkerboards of amber and gold. Here, in the one neighborhood in Sunnydale where vampires walked openly among
them, children rode crazy bike-circles in the gathering dusk, laughing and unafraid.

Riley wasn't in any mood to appreciate the irony.

The vampire in question was out on the driveway, buried up to his elbows in the engine well of a taillifted monstrosity of a car - bone-white hair rumpled, engine grease blackening his knuckles, the smoulder in his eyes matching that of the cigarette dangling from his lower lip as he did mortal battle with the spark plugs. Python-coils of muscle flexed beneath that second-skin t-shirt as Spike threw his weight against the ratchet. This was what he was putting his career on the line to save, undead rough trade with a...

"Really nice ass," Sam observed, slipping out of the car. Still getting back at him for this afternoon, Riley supposed, not that he could blame her. "Guess I can see why Buffy keeps him around. The big wrinkly critter I'm still trying to figure out." She nodded in the direction of the porch, where a plump middle-aged blonde woman was talking animatedly to a Sharpeis demon. "You gonna sit here and sulk all night?"

"I'm thinking about it." That got him a tiny hint of a smile, at least. Riley got out of the car and followed Sam up the walk, guilt fighting for belly space with a growing feeling of dread. He wasn't going to be able to keep her in the dark for much longer. Shouldn't have kept her in the dark this long, but oh, God, he'd wanted one thing in his life untouched by the shadow of Sunnydale.

It shouldn't have surprised him that Buffy would have met new people in the last two years, but somehow it did. The woman and the... thing... on the porch waved at them, and Riley managed a half-hearted hand-flip in return. Dawn Summers was draped over the DeSoto's fender, shoulder to companionable shoulder with Spike, waving one sneakered foot in the air. Xander Harris, sporting a pronounced limp and a shirt crying out for a Carson Kressley bitch-slapping, emerged from the house bearing a six-pack. He tossed one to Spike and one to a barrel-chested, mustachioed man in a wheelchair.

"The trick is to keep 'em in order," the vampire was saying as they walked up the drive. "Cylinder numbers don't matter so long as you... grrnh!" The spark plug finally gave in, and he popped it out and chucked it to Dawn. "Bloody buggering hell, who tightened these fucking things?"

"Someone with super-strength and a bad temper?" Dawn suggested, all blinky-eyed innocence.

Spike gave the ratchet an admonishing shake in her direction. "You're not too old to be buried in a shallow grave and left for the hyenas." He ground his cigarette out on the sole of his boot with a sardonic glance at the new arrivals, and unrolled the pack from the sleeve of his t-shirt to select a fresh one. "Oooh, goody, it's Nick Fury and his Howling Commandette."

Xander broke into a huge, eager-puppy grin. "Riley Finn! My main military man!" Much testosterone-fueled backslapping ensued. "You look fantastic! A tad Heidelberg Academy, but - hey! So this is Sam, huh? Because it's your first time, I'm forgoing the jokes about nose-twitching and heading straight for the congratulations. It is congratulations, right?"

"Definitely congratulations." He returned Xander's grin gamely. For all his expansive good cheer Xander looked as if he'd aged ten years, not two - there were deep lines of pain around his eyes, and a fleck or two of grey in his dark hair. "I hear you've gone into the responsible adult business yourself."

Xander grimaced and slapped his game leg. "Yeah, well, not much choice there. The good news is that I now have so much metal in my body any vampire putting the chomp on me is gonna end up gumming his blood. But the only thing I'm fighting these days is Anya's nesting instinct. Which,
come to think of it, is a damn sight scarier than most demons." He gestured at the man in the wheelchair. "This is my boss, Max Murchison - we used to work construction together, and last summer he started a custom cabinetry company just in time to hire the handicapped."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch," Max said, scooting around the hood of the car and hauling himself up to sway over the engine opposite Spike. "We still got you beat. You're just a gimp. I'm a cripple and bleach-boy here is dead." He squinted at Spike. "You gonna break down and admit I'm right about the carburetor?"

Spike shot a truculent glare across the top of the disputed carburetor. "Look, Speed Racer, who's been driving this car for the last forty-five years, you or me? I rebuilt the sodding carburetor just last month, and -"

Both of them turned to Xander, who raised both hands and took a step backwards. "What? Don't look at me, I'm just here for the beer and the manly scratching." He stage-whispered to the Finns, "Flee while you yet can. This can go on for months. Civilizations rise and fall."

"Well, they can rise and fall after dinner," Buffy said briskly, hopping off the end of the porch and navigating the scarce driveway space between the Cherokee and the DeSoto. Riley smiled and nodded while she performed introductions - the blonde woman was Max's wife Sandra, and the Sharpeși demon was Clem, some shady associate of Spike's. She stood tip-toe to deliver a kiss to the hollow of Spike's grease-smudged cheek, smacking his hands when he tried to reciprocate. "Nuh-uh! Hands that touch Slayer before they touch soap get removed." Spike slammed the hood of the DeSoto shut, crooked his grimy fingers into claws and lunged for Buffy's pristine outfit with a manic leer. Buffy shrieked and bolted for the front door, in more apparent terror for her wardrobe than she'd ever been for her life. "Come on in!" she yelled over her shoulder. "Willow made place cards!"

Willow had, in fact, gone a bit overboard with the place cards. There were little American flags decorating his. Giles was gone, Dawn was all grown up, Xander and Anya were married and working on a family, and Buffy was living with a vampire, but at least Willow was still Willow. "Good job."

"You really think so?" Willow asked, pleased. "We weren't sure if we should seat people boy, girl, boy, or human, demon, human, and also I couldn't find any stickers that were really soldiery." She passed him a heaping plate of barbecued ribs and potato salad. "And I wasn't sure what to do for Sam's at all, but then I thought, 'Hey, Hello Kitty is universal!'"

"Can't argue with that," Sam said, examining her card with a diplomacy worthy of Kissinger. She took the green beans from Clem. "Did you want any of the -"

"Oh, no," Willow waved the proffered dish away with a regretful shake of her head. "Just blood for me, thanks - the solid stuff gives me the collywobbles."

Riley blinked. "It what?"

Willow blinked back, and edged her chair a little to the left. "Um. Buffy did mention that I had a really bad hair day a year or so ago? Did it not come up that there was some slight fanginess involved?"

"Oh, never mind about that," Anya said, thumping a box of Franzia down on the sideboard. "She's got a soul, blah blah yadda yadda. Look! I discovered that it comes in boxes now. Economical and stackable."

"Stackability's always the first thing I check for in a nice Cabernet." Xander spigoted her a glassful
with an approximation of a carefree grin. "Look at it this way, Ahn, it's a good thing the whole pee-on-a-stick thing was a bust or you wouldn't be enjoying the rectangular grape phenomenon as we speak."

"What's the matter, Harris?" Spike's entry into the grin sweepstakes was cheerily malicious. "Incipient patter of little feet making yours go cold?"

"No, he's been quite calm about it." Anya frowned and swirled her wine. "Too calm. I expected more hysterical blindness."

Sandra chuckled. "Wait till the rabbit dies."

"Oh, I'm looking forward to that part."

He wasn't very hungry, Riley decided. When Clem brought out the Pictionary, he escaped to the front porch and sat down on the front steps with his third beer of the night, paging through Buffy's photo album. Spike and Buffy at a carnival, standing in front of a neon-encrusted Ferris wheel. Dawn facing Spike across a bo stick in the training room at the Magic Box, disheveled and determined. Tara and Willow in gaudy sombreros, holding a plate of tacos. Xander tossing a pair of crutches into a trash can while Anya clapped. Spike and Willow at a table in the Bronze, mugging for the camera with goofy game-faced grins.

When all the faces in all the pictures began to blur into the one he least wanted to see, he closed the album and set it aside. Maybe Buffy had the right idea. Maybe once you let the vampires into your life, you could never really get rid of them, and your only hope was to stock up on pig's blood and make the best of it. But damn it, he couldn't accept that. There had to be a way free of... her. Riley took another pull at his beer, feeling leaden and fuzzy. He wasn't much of a drinker, not since leaving Sunnydale, anyway, and a couple-three bottles of Spike's Double Bock on a near-empty stomach left him... not drunk, but maybe a pillowcase or two to the wind.

He could see Sam through the front window, laughing, talking, charming the natives with recipes for plantain casserole and stories about demon-fighting in Belize. Tall and cool and confident, black-olive eyes and sleek dark fall of hair. His Amazon. Every moment made him more keenly aware of the distance between his body and hers. All he had to do to close that gap was get up and walk inside, reach out across ten feet of space and a million miles of explanations. It wasn't fair, damn it. He'd changed. He'd fixed his life, fixed himself, found a woman he loved who loved him back... and he was right back where he'd started.

The front door opened behind him and a blast of music and light and laughter swirled out onto the porch. "...you're the expert on the local demons," Sam said. "Any idea what's going on?"

Spike and Buffy exchanged glances. "Gib Cain!" Buffy said.

"Free-lance demon hunter," Spike elaborated, pouncing on the name. "Or used to be. Specialized in werewolves. Bout a year ago he signed on as an agent for a big black-market dealer out of L.A."

He smirked. "He's not got my sterling moral fiber, has our Gib, and the locals are skittish whilst he's in town, is all."

Riley snorted, loudly enough that Spike gave him a sharp look. Sam might not be as familiar with the vampire's threadbare bag of tricks and shifty little half-truths as he was, but she sounded skeptical nonetheless. "Cain, huh? Any idea who this employer of his is?"

The vampire shrugged. "Not so's I'd know him if I bit him. Some bloke calls himself the Doctor." He turned to Buffy. "Half a mo', pet, I just need to tighten those last two plugs."
Riley froze. He hadn't expected Spike to back up his cock-and-bull story with anything... real, but the Doctor was very real indeed, a black-market Moriarty with contacts in every major city from San Francisco to Mexico City. If Spike was involved with the Doctor somehow... Spike passed him by without a second glance and strode over to the car. Well, that was just great; he didn't even rate a snide comment any longer.

"Of course we'd love to help," Buffy was saying, "but Spike and I are in the middle of this big... project, and he's driving down to L.A. tonight, to, uh, meet a client. I can't leave her to fend for herself. Did I say 'her'? I meant 'it'. Itself. Because projects are gender-neutral. Anyway, this, uh, project could lead to us taking out a whole nest of upwardly mobile vampires of the unchippy variety, which kind of takes precedence over tracking down the chippy ones. But if I have any spare time later this week maybe I could ride shotgun again some night."

"We'll give you a call." Sam crouched beside him, arms folded around her knees, the umber silk of her hair falling across her forearms. She regarded him gravely for a moment, then, "Ri. You want to give me the keys?"

If she'd been angry, or disappointed, or... but she just sounded sad and a little tired, and it twisted his gut into shapes no three-dimensional object was meant to achieve. *Tell her, tell her, tell her...* But the words wouldn't come out, and Riley dug into his pockets for the car keys and handed them over in silence. Sam scowled, tossed her head and strode over to the driveway. "Hey. '59 DeSoto Fireflite, right? My dad runs a body shop in Des Moines, and he'd kill to get his hands on one of these babies."

Spike smirked up at her - she was an inch or two taller than he was. "Ah? We have something in common, then."

It took Riley a minute or two to realize that Buffy was still standing at the end of the porch, both hands braced against the rail, gazing out across the yard - not at the pair in the driveway, but at the darkness beyond: alert, watchful, sieving the night for prey. It wasn't that she was expecting trouble, he realized; she was just being the Slayer. Still. Always. The woman in front of him wasn't as blonde or as skinny as the one in his old photo, but that distance was still there, in the way Buffy held herself, the shadows in her eyes, the way she'd neatly separated herself from the rest of the party. For Buffy Summers, connection would always require a little extra effort.

But this time, this life, with Spike, she was making it, the effort she hadn't made for him. Ice-water realization hit Riley: for Sam he'd have to make the effort he hadn't made for Buffy.

Buffy straightened, fitting perky conviviality to her face so snugly that he might never have realized it was a mask, absent that unguarded glimpse. "Dollar sixty-seven for your thoughts. That's a penny, with inflation."

Riley picked up the album, riffled pages to the photo of Willow in game face. "So, when were you going to tell me that Willow was a vampire?"

"I never said she *wasn't* a vampire." Buffy perched on the railing, ice-cream cool in crisp white linen blazer and miniskirt over a black tube top. She took a dainty sip of her own drink - no Double Bock for her, just some girly ultra-light fruity thing. "Okay, okay, there just never seemed to be a good time to mention it. I didn't want you and Sam getting all stake-y and weird about it, and besides, Tara thinks she's found a way to change her back. So in a way Willow's practically not a vampire at all, so it wouldn't make any sense to tell you she was." Perfect white teeth nibbled her full lower lip. "She's like Angel. She's got a soul."

"Uh huh." From any sane perspective, Buffy's best friend had died, and Buffy was propping the
corpse up in the living room, but it was hard to see Willow as other than the chirpy young woman enthusing over the place cards. Maybe that had been Buffy's nefarious plan all along. "Buffy..."

"I really am glad you and Sam could come tonight. I wanted you to see..." She made an awkward, inclusive gesture with her wine cooler. "It doesn't always have to be fighting." There was a pleading note in her voice, eerily similar to the one Sam's had held earlier. "I hope it wasn't too much at once."

"I can honestly say that I've never had dinner with a demon before - at least, not where I wasn't the intended main course."

"Clem's a sweetie. They're not all evil. I mean, most of them aren't good, but... even the ones who are..." Buffy's eyes went irresistibly to Spike's silhouette, black as pitch against the pale concrete. "They can change."

Riley dug the heel of his hand into his forehead. He could feel a headache coming on. Go to hangover, go directly to hangover, do not get buzzed, do not have a good time. Buffy was still the Slayer, but what was the Slayer? "Change is a two-way street."

Her small pointed chin jerked up, but then Buffy stilled, all her attention diverted to the driveway. Spike was wiping his hands on a greasy rag, tense in the face of Sam's enthusiasm. "... would really help if we could get data from a subject where the chip produced substantive behavioral change - we could learn so much -"

"Said no." Spike stuffed the rag into a back pocket with an irritated twitch of one shoulder. "I've been one of your lab rats, and I'd rather gnaw my own foot off at the hip than do it again."

"Dr. Walsh's project was dismantled. Our mission objectives are completely different. The neural scan's nothing to be afraid of," Sam wheedled. "Totally non-invasive - well, mostly non-invasive, and it would only involve a few days of testing. A week at -"

The vampire wheeled on her, eyes paling to gold in the uncertain light. "Look, Boudicca, no means I won't sodding do it, so -"

"The bottle shattered and brown foam cascaded down the steps, filling the air with the scent of malt. Riley didn't remember dropping it, didn't remember getting up, didn't remember crossing the lawn. He didn't remember anything but foul demonic laughter and a sneering, yellow-eyed face, and Sam, white and strained against the brickwork as she clawed for a makeshift stake. He grabbed Spike's shoulder in a miraculous suspended moment and spun the smaller man around, slamming him into the car and spaying him backwards over the hood. He pressed the stake - of course he had a stake on him, this was Sunnydale - point-first into the silent chest beneath him. Spike wasn't the fine-boned, impossibly beautiful blonde he really wanted to kill, but he'd do, oh, yeah, he'd do. "This one's for real, Spike. I think you'd better watch how you talk to my wife."

Time crystallized around him, liquid to solid. Buffy was leaping the porch railing, grasping Sam's arm, holding her back. The beat of his own heart was as ponderous as Big Ben. The world was advancing at the pace of a glacier and grinding all before it into dust. Save for Spike's hands. Leisurley, graceful, inexorable, the vampire's right hand closed around the stake at the same time the left closed around Riley's throat. The lean, muscular torso beneath him convulsed, and Spike heaved them both off the car and stood up, holding him by the throat as easily as a man might hold a kitten - given the difference in their heights, not far off the ground, but far enough. He'd have bruises tomorrow, if there was a tomorrow. The vampire canted his head to one side, speculative. "There's a staggering number of people I'd feel bad about killing these days," he said. "You're not one of them. Understood?"
Riley glared down through a bruise-colored fog. Pain cleared his head; he could fight back - kick Spike in the nads, if nothing else - but he was too drunk to put up his best fight and not nearly drunk enough not to care. Spike tapped him on the nose with the stake, almost playfully, and released his hold. Riley's knees went out from under him as he hit the pavement and he thumped against the side of the car, drawing in great shuddering lungfuls of air.

The moment the Slayer let go, Sam was at his side, furious and concerned. "Damn it, Ri, you didn't need to - " She turned on Buffy. "You didn't stop him!!"

Buffy's eyes met Spike's, and her jaw clenched, mule-stubborn. "I didn't have to."

Riley rolled his head, working the vampire-induced kinks out, and fingered his aching throat. He should just have 'Sam is always right' tattooed on his ass and be done with it. "I... may have over-reacted. But dammit, Buffy... this is Spike we're dealing with. He's dangerous. You can't not see that. He hasn't got a soul, and sooner or later he's going to screw up, and screw up big."

Strangely enough, it was Spike who flinched. "Tell you a secret, Finn - sooner or later, so will everyone with a soul." His nostrils flared. "Thing about garlic is, it wears off. Might want to keep that in mind." He nodded to Sam with an unexpected courtliness. "No hard feelings, but make no mistake: you even think about putting me or mine in a cage again, and I will kill you - you and anyone else between me and the exit."

He spun on one heel and swaggered back up the walk, a move obviously left over from the days when he'd had the leather duster to billow dramatically behind him. Riley's brain sputtered into a panicked loop of He knows, he knows, he knows! and an absurd gratitude that Spike had half-strangled him, because now no one would think the tremor in his hands strange. Would anyone ask about the bruises when they went inside, or did Buffy's willful blindness extend to the rest of them as well? Sam held him, her body warm against his, and he yearned to bury himself in her and hide from the world, as he had in those first bad days.

Buffy looked at Spike's retreating back, took a deep fierce breath, let it go. "He's terrified, you know. Of what you did to him. Of ever being that helpless again."

Riley's bitter chuckle degenerated into a cough. "He's depraved because he's deprived? Somehow that doesn't make me feel any better."

Her face went beseeching. "Riley, it's not that I - Spike has to stop himself. You see that, don't you? Otherwise it doesn't mean anything. I'll help him any way I can, and that includes knocking him cold when he's too mad to think straight, but he's the one who has to... " She smiled, a hopeful, tremulous thing. "I can't make him what he isn't. I know that - God, do I know that. But I can help him be the best of what he is. And he is... " She hugged herself, small and savage in the night. "Worth it. I know what you're thinking, but three years ago you would have been dead right now. Can't you see how - how incredible that is?"

"Three years ago, he would have been dead right now." Or maybe not, thinking back on all the times Buffy'd had Spike in her sights and somehow failed to strike home. Was it more unnerving to realize that Buffy had changed, or to suspect that she hadn't? "You know there's going to come a day when whoever's in his way isn't someone he'd feel bad about killing."

Sam's hands bracketed on his shoulders. "Ri's right," she said. "He's a vampire, Buffy. A really pretty vampire, a really well-trained vampire, but just a vampire. An animal. Just like every other HST you've killed, every day for the last seven years."

The Slayer's big grey-green eyes didn't drop, nor her firm little mouth waver. "You're wrong. Spike
isn't just anything."

"That went well," Buffy said as the last car pulled away. She closed the front door and surveyed the wreckage with satisfaction: Par-TAY had been achieved. The living room was a wasteland of decimated appetizer trays, beer bottles, poker chips, and assorted Pictionary scribbles - no matter what Xander said, that was not Secretariat. Maybe some kind of aardvark. Dawn sat cross-legged in front of the fireplace, sorting her fantastic riches (in the form of I.O.U.s for kittens) into pedigreed and non-pedigreed piles, and Willow and Tara cuddled up on the couch cooing "No, I love you more!" at tipsy intervals, having made considerable inroads into the Franzia. "Didn't that go well?"

Spike chuckled. He was sprawled out in the armchair, a restorative tumbler of something considerably stronger than wine-in-a-box balanced on one knee, the only hint that the Finn Encounter had rattled him more than he cared to admit. "Ducky. If you don't count Harris wincing every time the little woman mentioned potential spawn, and Finn's little - " He intercepted her warning glance, set his drink down and stretched, eyes a-crinkle with mirth. "I had a grand time."

"So it was a little awkward." Dawn shrugged. "No zombie gatecrashers, no broken furniture, minimal bloodshed - by Buffy standards, that's a great party." Her eyes sharpened with the predatory acumen of Dawn Summers, Very Secret Diary Finder. "Unless something innnnnteresting happened while you guys were outside?"

"No! Or - well - there was an incident. A minor incident."

"Finn tried to slip me a long hard one," Spike confided. Buffy lobbed a poker chip at his head.

"It's not funny. They're already suspicious about the scanners going all wiggy - "

"Me!" Tara waved a hand proudly. "That was me. I did it. All of the, the spell thingies." She leaned over and wagged her finger under Spike's nose. "No frowny faces. Happy faces for my beautiful Willow-tree."

"Happy faces, sweetie." Willow gazed adoringly at Tara. "Are you tired? Should I put you to bed?"

Tara giggled, sleepy-eyed. "Yeah, put me to bed. And tuck me in." She held out both arms with artless insistence, and Willow, with a delighted smile, swept her lover up Rhett Butler-style and headed for the staircase. Tara looped her arms around Willow's neck, snuggling against Willow's shoulder - how much of that was Franzia and how much was renewed hope Buffy had no idea, but Willow didn't appear to be in the mood to look a gift witch in the mouth.

Spike watched the two of them disappear in the direction of the basement stairs with a disapproving sniff. "Glinda doesn't need Will human, she just needs to get shitfaced more often."

"I hope Willow remembers Uncle Rory's patented hangover cure. She'll need it." They were all so used to Tara being the sensible one, the calm one, the one who kept her head when all about her something something. Maybe they expected too much of her. Tara'd been stressed out enough dealing - or not dealing - with Willow's change of life this last year, and they'd all blithely expected her to take up all of Willow's magical slack, too. Plus she had to keep her grades B-ish or risk losing her scholarship. Buffy nudged a dropped stake out from beneath the couch with her toe, flipped it into the air, caught it, twirled it. "So this Moro, whatsit, Mohra demon - is it hard to kill? I didn't get much of a chance to check out Angel's technique."

"You should call him again," Dawn said. "You could be missing vital information. Like if he got
blood splashed on him when he fought it, did little pieces of him come to life? Did he go all Data and the Borg Queen?"

"Ew." Buffy wrinkled her nose. "I'll take my men dead or alive, thanks much, but not half and half."

"And on that disturbing note, I'm going to bed. Wake me if anyone loses a body part." Dawn shuffled her cattery in potentio into piles and deposited them on the coffee table. "No one mess with this, OK? It's a system, and everyone gets a share."

When her sister's footsteps hit the landing, Buffy toed off one pump and then the other and folded into the chair astride Spike's lap, wriggling a bit to accommodate the familiar bulge in his jeans. Only a courtesy hard-on, really; neither of them were particularly in the mood, but if she scooted an inch that way and settled against his chest just so... ah, yes, very nice. Cleanup, she decided, could wait till tomorrow morning. Right now there was the all-important task of teasing bleach-fried hair into curls, so he could growl and nip at her fingers and slick it down again. Spike raised his glass and offered her the last half-inch of amber fluid. What the heck; she wasn't driving tonight, and not finishing the glass was probably his concession towards virtue when he was. The whiskey seared its way down her throat and curled itself into a nice little coal-bed in her tummy. "Gah! Also mmmm. When are you leaving?"

"Midnight, or thereabouts." His hands rested lightly on the curve of her hips. There were inky crescents of grease beneath his close-bitten fingernails, and the smell of hot metal still lingered about him. His voice was the rumble of a well-tuned engine. "Carburetor my arse, the old girl's running like a dream. I used to keep her up proper, you know. Spit 'n polish. Only really went to hell on that drive up from Buenos Aires, after... didn't seem important, somehow, after that." White fingers delved beneath pleated white linen, strong thumbs stroked down the creases of her thighs to meet in the place where she lived. "Think if I got her steam-cleaned you'd see your way towards putting a new set of stains on the back seat?"

"You are so gross." Buffy squirmed, the better to fit his scratch to her itch. "Absolutely not. I don't know. Maybe." Under the layer of please-don't-tell-me crud, the DeSoto was incredibly hot, with the chrome and the tailfins and the whitewalls and the lightning-bolt side panels, but she'd always thought of it as the car he'd gotten for Drusilla. Making out in it was like wearing the old girlfriend's clothes, way too Vertigo for comfort. On the other hand, there was something to be said for claiming the territory of a rival. And that back seat was bigger than some hotel rooms. "You sure you wanna leave tonight?"

Spike pulled a sulky face. "No, but as the King of Pain seems to have gone off answering his phone - " He reached up to smooth away her frown-lines. "No worries, love. Odds are he's out having himself fitted for a new cape and tights, or he's nipped off to roger the cheerleader." He grinned. "Or both."

"FYI, if you ever want to get any again? Not loving the visual." It wasn't like her nigging little worry was a full-blown Slayer dream o' doom. Her track record for Angel-premonitions had pretty much sucked since he'd left Sunnydale, anyway. "You're probably right. But if there's anything wrong, anything at all, call me, OK? Getting into trouble without me? Not allowed."

"Wouldn't dream of it. It's not likely he'll be much help anyway. Mohras aren't thick upon the ground in these parts. Like as not Peaches offed the only one in North America, but I used to know this chap in Shanghai... " Spike trailed off, moody. "Love." There was real unease in his voice. "You've never said what you think of this idea of Tara's."

"I don't know." She rocked slowly back and forth, the coal-fire in her belly settling lower. "If Willow wants it - if they're careful - I mean, putting Willow's soul back was the best thing I could think of to
do at the time, but it would have been better if she'd never become a vampire to begin with. If this Mohra thing works, it's like a chance to make it never have happened, you know? But it did happen, and all these other things happened with it. I don't know if we can go back, Spike. What if we're not supposed to go back? That's what worries me."

Spike snorted. "What worries me is what if this stuff chases the demon out first, and Will falls to dust before it can heal her? How's any of us to know? I've done a spell or two at need, but I'm no wizard. If it's not sodding broken don't sodding fix it is my motto, but they're both mad to take a spanner to the works." His eyes dropped to the general vicinity of her bellybutton. "Gets a bloke thinking, though. Would you have me human, if you could?"

"What? No!" Where had that come from? "I mean, if you suddenly woke up with a pulse I'd deal, and God knows things would be a lot easier sometimes if you had a soul, but..." She'd dreamed about Angel becoming human, back in the day, rose-tinted fantasies about the life they could have if only. But Spike? They already had a life. "Would you have me human, if you could? 'Cause really not. I just play one on TV." She ground her damp crotch into his. "This is who I love, William. Right here. Right now."

Ah, there was that rumbly little growl, Spike on idle. Lips parted, tongues met in lazy feline caress. There was kissing, very vital kissing, important to the plot and full of necessary character development. The heady bite of alcohol mingling on their shared breath tickled her nose. He tasted of bad habits, of wild nights and lazy mornings, and screw Riley Finn and his two-way street. Maybe she had changed, but better that than stay frozen in amber forever. That was the whole point with Spike: here and now. With Angel it had been forever, a changeless idyll where she was eternally sixteen and he was forever the brooding, mysterious lover in whose arms she wanted to die. She wasn't going to die in Spike's arms. No, her whole body came to quivering life under his touch, so slippery-wet she was starting to make squishy noises. I love you. I don't have words for how much, so take this instead.

He fumbled with the top button of his jeans, eyes gleaming. His cock poked brazenly above the waistband, the heavy satiny head emerging flushed and dripping from the taut foreskin. It wasn't always hot and fast and frantic between them; sometimes it was like this, liquid and lazy, flowing and melting like quicksilver, like the globs in a lava lamp, till she couldn't tell where her skin ended and his began and it was her cock hard and aching, his clit slick and throbbing. The cold silver bite of rings against humid flesh made her gasp: one finger, two, three - my, what big hands you've got, Grandma. He growled, a primal, guttural note which went straight to her oh god can't even say the word how lame is that Spike says it makes it beautiful dirty good but I can't even think - OH!

She clasped his hips tight, those skater's muscles he loved bunching in her thighs, rolling his cock between their bellies. Taken by surprise, Spike echoed her soft startled gasp and milky spume geysered up between them, once, twice, and again. Not warm champagne exactly, but a very good year; she kissed the strong bitter spunk from his chest with needy little moans. When the tide finally receded, leaving her high and anything but dry, Spike was staring down at himself with wounded outrage. "That hasn't happened in - in - "

Buffy slid down his thighs and landed butt-first on the floor, loose and flushed and laughing. She undid a few more buttons and patted his flaccid cock as she'd stroke a puppy. "Poor Little Spike. I still love you." Little Spike, predictably, began to perk up under the attention, and Life-size Spike's dimples deepened around a sheepish grin. Another moment and they were both giggling helplessly, her head cradled in his lap. Out in the dining room the clock chimed midnight. Spike groaned. "Fuck it, I've got to get on the road."

He plucked at his sodden t-shirt and tugged it off over his head. Buffy squinted up at bare chest and
JBF curls and half-hard cock spilling out of half-buttoned jeans, and buried her face between his knees with a whimper. "You could fuck me instead." The universe was definitely askew when Spike was the one yapping about duty and she was the one trying to keep him in bed. Or chair. Or floor. She wasn't fussy. "Oh, never mind. I'll give them one more call while you change. Maybe someone will be up."

She hit the Hyperion's number on the speed dial and sat back to wait for someone to pick up. Two rings, three... under normal circumstances they'd both be simmering nicely towards a second happy right now. She slipped one, then two exploratory fingers beneath her skirt, and jerked them guiltily back out. It would be the definition of tacky to bring herself off while waiting for her old boyfriend to answer the phone. Spike came trotting back downstairs, changed and reasonably presentable, though it was still fairly obvious that he dressed left and Mother Nature had been exceptionally kind to him. He smacked his lips when he saw the position of her hand, bent down and purred, "Mmm, finger-lickin' good. Gonna spend the night thinking of me?"

Buffy stuck her tongue out at him. "Oh, like you're not going to be jerking off in every rest stop from here to - shh! Someone's - hello? Wesley? Is that you? You sound hoarse."

"Buffy," the cultured voice on the other end of the line replied. "Yes, I've been indisposed, but I'm feeling considerably better now. Quite the best I've felt in years, in fact. Can I help you?"

All of a sudden her Slayer senses were pinging like a Geiger counter, and a night of polyurethane fun was the last thing on her mind. "I was hoping to catch Angel," she said cautiously. "We wanted to ask him some questions about a demon he killed when I was visiting a couple of years ago. Is he there? I haven't been able to get through on his cell."

"He's probably let the battery run low again," Wesley said with an indulgent chuckle. Oh, that wacky Angel. "I'll give him the message, but I wouldn't expect to hear back from him immediately. He's working on an extremely important case."

"Anything that needs our help?"

Wesley's voice had the thinnest and sharpest of stiletto edges. "I believe he intends to consult you eventually, yes."

"Ooookay. I'll try to call him back tomorrow." Buffy hung up, and stared up at Spike. "Something's wrong. Don't ask me what, but it's blowing the grading curve of wrongness."

Spike nodded and shrugged into his motorcycle jacket, all business. "Didn't mention I was coming, did you?"

"Suddenly I didn't think they needed to know." They looked at one another. "God damn it," Buffy said very precisely. "Because two crises at once just isn't enough. I can't come with you. If I leave town while Riley's still on his scavenger hunt, and anything happens to Susie, I'm going to blow all the street cred I've got with the not-so-evil-as-all-that crowd."

"I'll handle it, Slayer. But if I can't get back in time, you'll have to meet with Evie." He cocked his head, shadow slicing down the hollows of his cheeks. "You all right with that?"

"I'll deal." Until now the min - employees had always been Spike's to deal with, and there was a mantle of razor-edged responsibility here that she wasn't sure she wanted to assume. But Evie's opportunities to pass on the information she was gathering were limited, and if Spike were delayed... "I'm supposed to meet Susie's aunt or semi-cousin or whatever she is at Willy's tomorrow night anyway. Birds, multiple, stone, singular."
Buffy stood on the front porch as the DeSoto pulled out of the driveway, watching until the taillights guttered and winked out in the distance, then sighed and turned to go in and change for an impromptu slay. The trouble with change was you were never sure where it was taking you until you were already there. She licked her lips, tasting the ghosts of whiskey and Spike. One way or another, she was still going to spend the night thinking of him.
There weren’t any skeletons and chittering rats in Antonia Corvini’s soundproofed, climate-controlled basement, any more than there was a cobwebby pipe organ in her Danish Modern living room. That would have been too, too, Hammer Films. But the basement smelled right, redolent with the delicious tang of human fear. Evie crouched in the corner, staring narrow-eyed at the two women chained to the far wall as if her gaze could do the job her fangs couldn't. Her agreement with Spike said no killing, but it never said she couldn't suck on dead people. And they were so close to death, their dull eyes sunk deep in bruised sockets and their cinnamon skin gone sallow beneath a livid mosaic of half-healed bite-marks. Their heartbeats were a slow, syncopated thud-thud, little engines that almost couldn't. The one on the left wouldn't last out the night. Die, you juicy little bitch. Come on, croak. You musta lost four, five pints. Fucking kick it so I can get the rest. They're gonna be here any minute...

On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, a windowless white van trundled up and down the streets of Sunnydale's posher neighborhoods. Its sides were decorated with a pert, frilly-aproned blonde brandishing a feather duster, and "Maids2Go!" written beneath. No phone number or website was visible, and a search of the Yellow Pages would produce no trace of its existence. But it just went to show that if you looked hard enough, you could get decent help these days.

Tanker came clumping downstairs, followed by a saturnine vampire in an navy-blue coverall and a peaked driver's cap emblazoned with the Maids2Go logo. The driver was herding a fresh pair of terrified women in front of him. The new girls were mostly unmarked, but otherwise interchangeable with the outgoing pair: middle-aged and careworn, dark-haired and dark-eyed. They huddled together at the foot of the stairs, clutching one another fearfully, and set up a wail of dismay at the sight of their predecessors. Tanker smacked the loudest one across the face in offhand irritation, and they subsided into whimpers and murmured Spanish prayers. Evie watched with interest; some of the meals on wheels had their tongues removed, but these two could still scream. Fuckin' A.

The woman Tanker had slapped turned big tragic Bambi-eyes on Evie. "¡Por favor - ayúdeme! ¡Tomaron mi Lupe!"

Evie sneered and flashed fang, chuckling as the woman cringed away. If they knew that they could beat her into the carpet with their handbags, if they'd had handbags, and she couldn't lift a finger to stop them - but they didn't, and for a minute, she could pretend to be the scourge of the night again. Or at least the scourge of the late afternoon.

Tanker strode across the basement and snapped open the restraints; the two women staggered as the manacles slid away from chafed wrists, barely able to stand. Tanker nuzzled the nearest one and whispered, "One for the road, sweet cheeks." Her fangs tore through the crusted scabs on the exposed neck, and Evie moaned out loud in jealousy and hunger. Tanker gave the woman a shove in Evie's direction. "Here, kid. Dig in."

The woman stumbled under the force of Tanker's blow and Evie was on her in a second, licking frantically at the sluggish flow of red. So good, so sweet, so goddam little of it - Evie pulled hard at the wound, sucking with mindless little grunts of pleasure. Nails dug deep into scrawny arms and fangs scraped raw flesh, and the woman shuddered and cried out, a long wordless gargle of despair. Ball lightning exploded behind Evie's eyes as the chip kicked in, and she dropped to the floor and howled, clutching her temples. Tanker doubled over laughing, and the driver sighed and rolled his eyes. He thrust a clipboard at Tanker. "Sign, please."

"Can't we get a third?" Tanker complained as she signed the driver's manifest.
"You're turning in two, you get two," the driver replied with a shrug. "If you blood-hogs had any self-control, we might have a few more spares on hand. We had to haul three empties out last week, we got all those border crackdowns in Arizona, the coyotes are charging a fucking fortune, container ships are stacked three deep in L.A. Harbor - half my goddam inventory is dead or wrung out with dysentery by the time it hits the States."

"Be still my shriveled-up heart." Toni Corvini swaggered down the stairs as Tanker re-fastened the manacles on the newcomers. Evie had been a little surprised to find that Corvini was a she, since Spike had called her a chap or a bloke or some other English bullshit, but Corvini had stepped straight out of Beebo Brinker, men's suits, ducktail, post-modern ennui and all. Pretty damn hot, actually, if you swung that way. Corvini inspected the merchandise with horse-trader's savvy, grasping each woman by the hair and yanking their heads up for an impassive once-over. "This one damned well better be pro-rated," she called after the driver, pointing to the scabbed-over bite-mark on the smaller woman's neck. "Next time send us some Koreans or something, huh? I'm getting sick of Mexican."

The driver shrugged and gave one of the trade-ins a shove towards the stairs. "Best we can do."

Corvini clucked her tongue in annoyance as he left, and shot a pointed glance at Evie. "Did you find Kite?"

"Tanker wouldn't give me any blood," Evie whined, balancing insolence with pleading. It was a trick, giving the impression that you were cunning but not particularly smart, but she'd discovered over the last week that she was fucking good at this Mata Hari stuff. "I'm not gonna tell you anything till I get someone to eat."

Corvini extended a finger and tipped Evie's chin up, studying her face with the same cool assessment with which she'd studied her dinner. Without warning she pulled Evie into a crushing, sharp-fanged kiss. Just as swiftly she shoved her away and drove a hard right into her jaw. Evie slammed into the wall and slid down, head spinning. "You don't take, little girl," Corvini purred. "I give. What I want, and when I want. Remember that, next time."

Next time, bitch, I'm gonna play cats-cradle with your guts and a telephone pole. Evie allowed the thought to show for an instant in curled lip and glaring eye, then tossed her head and schooled her face into lines of bland human composure. She pushed herself to her feet against the wall and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I got in to see Kite on Wednesday night. I told him I'd gotten real snuggly with you. What he and Amherst figure is that you'll hit whatever gang the Slayer weakens most and muscle in on their grounds, so I told him you had your eye on Nguyen... "

Like her dad used to say, you only needed half bullshit mixed in to make the flowers grow. Amherst didn't see Corvini and her four piddly minions as a threat (well, three now; Freddy was Slayer fodder as of Tuesday night, but that was what he'd been sired for - he'd even been wearing a red shirt) but Corvini probably wanted to think he did. Odds were good that that was exactly what she was planning to do: for a smart vampire, it was all about territory, especially in a town as over-hunted as Sunnydale. You staked out a piece of ground inhabited by enough humans to keep you fed, and defended it against all comers.

If things had been different, Corvini's gang might not have been a bad choice to throw in with. Bitch wasn't a half-bad kisser. But as long as Evie was packing hardware in her brain, they'd never see her as anything other than a tool to be used and disposed of. Spike's crew might be losers and weirdos, but at least they were all in the same boat, all of them reduced to animal blood and regret.

She'd just gotten to the best part when Linnet dashed breathless down the stairs. "He's here!"
"We'll finish this later," Corvini said, and gestured Tanker to follow her upstairs before Evie had a chance to wonder 'He who?'

If that wasn't an engraved invitation to eavesdrop... Torn between curiosity and caution, Evie cat-footed after them and crouched low on the top stair, her fingertips brushing the exotic patterns of the handwoven Turkish carpet. She could just see the visitor over the top of the couch.

The stranger in the living room was tall and clean-cut in a soldier-on-leave kind of way. Short dark hair, disturbed apple-pie face. He smelled like family in a way human language had no words for. That indefinable vampy knack for sizing up potential rivals told her that he was no fledge, but still a long way from his century mark - probably about the same age as Corvini or Amherst, turned some time around the middle of the twentieth century. He rose as Corvini entered the room, accepted a seat on the couch, and declined an offer of blood. "I'm pleased to meet you... " He paused, doubtful. "Miss?"

Corvini didn't move to alleviate his confusion. "Lawson, is it?" She lit a cigarette and sent an elegant coil of smoke in his general direction. "Got to say I'm curious about why someone from the big bad city is slumming around here. We don't have much to interest tourists since the Hellmouth closed for business."

Lawson smiled. "I'm here on my sire's behalf, not my own. Angelus. You may have heard of him."

Another puff. "Maybe. And more recently than you have, by the sound of it."

"Angelus?" Tanker broke into incredulous laughter. "You're digging this crap out of your ass with a shovel, honey. He's all souled up and pussified these days." "I talked to him yesterday," Lawson replied. "I was as surprised to hear from him as you are, believe me. He's had... I guess you could call it a change of heart, and he convinced me that he's got things planned. Great things. The Order of Aurelius has fallen on hard times, but that's about to change."

There was a conviction in his voice and a light in his eyes that made Evie cringe - she'd seen the like too many times before: burning in the eyes of the vampires who dug up the old Master's bones at the Anointed One's command; in the eyes of the nameless minions who gladly immolated themselves in sunlight to run Angelus's messages to the Slayer; in the eyes of Adam's followers. Whoever he was, Lawson was a man with a mission.

That was the thing about becoming a vampire - you woke up surging with power and hunger and the knowledge that you could do anything, anything at all, because all the petty little rules like Keep Off The Grass and Thou Shalt Not Kill just didn't matter any longer. You were the fucking Angel of Death, the alpha and the omega, a law unto yourself - at least till some older, stronger vamp dunked your head in a toilet and made you their bitch - and it was glorious. Some vampires plunged head-first into that eternal demonic now and never came out. But others... the aimlessness got to them after awhile. Caught between human and demon, between life and death, vampires were starved for purpose and meaning. Some of them were starved enough that they'd swallow anything, no matter how stupid, like pigeons who'd eat wedding rice and explode. Or maybe that was an urban legend, though exploding pigeons sounded like fun, and damn it she'd lost the subject - oh, yeah: Lawson.

Lawson opened his briefcase and produced a photo of a lank-haired, sullen teenaged boy, no different from any of a thousand other baggy-pantsed adolescent grease farms in Southern California. "For your reference. Remember, he can pass for human, but his scent will give him away. Here's my cell number. I've already spoken to Mr. Amherst and Mr. Nguyen, and to several other interested parties. Angelus will make it well worth the while of whoever finds him." He rose, and added, "If you happen to come across any other surviving Aurelians, Angelus is very interested in their whereabouts as well."
Shit. Evie measured the distance from the stairs to the front door - only twenty feet or so, but all four of them were between her and escape. Moving with infinite care, she slipped down the hallway towards the rear of the house, coming to a halt with a hiss of frustration. Late afternoon sun blazed through the French doors, drenching the end of the hall in light. Crap, crap, crap... She turned again and backed into the bathroom, locking the door behind her, and stood tensely in the middle of the tile floor, backed up against the sink.

"Actually, we may have something for you now, though naturally I'd require some compensation for giving up such a valuable minion." Corvini turned to Linnet. "Get Evie."

Linnet's footsteps passed along the hall and back again, searching, and then she pounded on the bathroom door. "Evie! Walkies! Get your ass out here!"

Panic surged through her, and Evie beat it back with a stick. What would Spike do in a situation like this? Open that door, take on all four of them at once, and hand them their dusty asses on a platter, that's what, but OK, what would Spike do if he wasn't a century-plus-old badass who'd forgotten more about dirty street-fighting than she'd ever know?

With one regretful look at the whirlpool tub she was never going to get a chance to try out now, Evie tore a couple of outsize Egyptian cotton bath sheets from the towel rack, whipping one over her head and one around her hand. She hopped up on the side of the tub and smashed her towel-wrapped fist through the bottom pane - yeah, Spike would probably have done it bare-fisted, but that just proved she was smarter than Spike in some particulars. Linnet's fist crashed through the bathroom door at almost the same instant, flailing around for the knob. Evie knocked the last shards of glass free, heaved herself over the sill and wriggled through the window. She landed hard and clumsy on one shoulder and rolled to her feet, fighting to keep the swaths of towel in place. Light seared her flesh through the cotton, and she ran, feet pounding, chest burning, streaking across the broad bare expanse of suburban lawn. The towel, and her shoulders, burst into flames as she leaped the fence into the neighbors' yard and stumbled blindly into the shade of the house next door. She dropped and rolled with a shriek of pain and terror, tumbling headfirst into the chlorine-scented haven of the swimming pool with a tremendous crash of water, and expelled the last of her breath in a bubbling roar of pain.

She opened her eyes to cool blue-green, and for a second she thought she'd burnt her retinas out somehow. Then she realized she was under water, sitting on the bottom of the pool. She grabbed the charred remains of the towel before it could drift away, and scooted beneath the diving board. Eerie, echoing shouts reached her from the world above, and Evie gradually realized that the searchers, presuming they'd dared to follow her at all, couldn't see her from above.

She extended an experimental fingertip beyond the protective shadow of the board, and pulled it back quickly. Her skin itched and burned in the filtered sunlight, but she couldn't burst into flame immersed in water. She was safe here, for awhile at least. The chlorine stung her burnt shoulders, and she whimpered a little bit, here where no one would ever know. She hadn't risked the sun since her first week out of the ground, and she'd forgotten how much it hurt. And Spike did this every day? Spike was a fucking idiot.

With the immediate crisis over, her thoughts scattered to the four winds. Spike. She had to let Spike know what was up. She had no illusions that Angelus cared about her in particular, but there was no sweet fucking way she intended to get caught up in some Aurelian Five-Year Plan. Angelus was one crazy bastard, and he'd gone through minions faster than the old Master had. She couldn't stay here forever - if nothing else, the family who lived here would notice her eventually, and call 911 to get the stiff out of their pool. She didn't dare go straight home while the sting was still on. Fuck, she was
thinking of the crypt as home now. Pathetic. She was scheduled to meet Spike at Willy's on Saturday night; she'd just have to lay low until then. There was an attic on Fremont that Spike maintained as a safehouse and bolt-hole. Maybe she could hide there. There was a manhole a block away. If she could get to the sewers...

But most of all... What the hell was going on in L.A.?

******

She drifts among beautiful people in Versace and Cartier, and she can't remember how she got to the party, or who invited her. Glasses clink and voices murmur in the background, and somewhere an orchestra is playing, tinny and far away like music on wax cylinders, notes melting into the air. Supercilious eyes assess her, dismiss her; conversations die away at her approach, only to spring to life in muted laughter as she passes. She tries to mingle, flashing her brightest smile, and little knots of guests close ranks against her, presenting a wall of stark feminine spines and forbidding masculine shoulders.

It's so hot under the bright lights of the ballroom. She's parched, but the refreshment table is a million miles away, and the waiters ignore her as they glide through the crowd tending to the needs of the real guests. If she can talk to someone, it will be all right. She'll be able to explain why she's here, and that's terribly, terribly important. She starts to speak, but the words die away in a painful rasp. It must be her choker. Black velvet, classy, with a diamond solitaire, but she's fastened it too tight, and it's cutting off her air.

She lifts her hands to adjust the clasp, and for the first time she sees him: there by the punchbowl, ladling brilliant red liquid into his cut-crystal goblet. He's big, with dark hair and heavy brows - a brown-eyed handsome man. The severe cut of his evening jacket emphasizes the deep chest and broad shoulders, and if he's only an inch or two above average height now, a couple of centuries ago he was a near-giant, and he still carries himself like one.

He's the one who invited her here, she's certain, but the knowledge brings with it a chill of fear. He looks up, and when his eyes meet hers, they're yellow. Lion's eyes, killer's eyes. He raises his glass to his lips, and it's a skull he's drinking from. Blood drips from his mouth and he licks it from his lips with a smile as he takes the first step towards her.

She wants to run, but she can't move. She fumbles with the choker, but she's only pulling it tighter. It's a brand of flame across her throat, a trail of acid. He's coming closer, and his smile is a shark-grin full of nested fangs, and she's got to run, got to scream, but her limbs are made of lead and she can't open her eyes and it's hot, so hot -

Cordelia came awake with a gurgling croak, scrabbling at the constricting bandages around her neck. Her throat was on fire, but she was shaking like Katharine Hepburn and her hands were freezing, clumsy Popsicle fingers pawing at the dressing. Her head felt three times its normal size. She tried to sit up, but the room... lair? tilted wildly around her, and she fell back into the stifling tangle of blankets and rugs.

She was in an abandoned warehouse. Of course. It was always a warehouse, and it was usually abandoned. Someone had tried to make this little corner of the huge echoing space more inviting, draped canopies of old curtains across the rusty scaffolding to form a kind of yurt. A kerosene lantern burned low in one corner of the tent, and layers of old carpet and musty pillows concealed the bare boards of the floor. The skylight overhead admitted the hazy glow of an L.A. midnight, stars near-drowned in ambient light. A lithe silhouette crouched watchful against the sky, perched atop a stack of crates. At the sound of her abortive struggle to sit up, it uncoiled and vaulted down. Connor's thin anxious face peered into hers, that irritating lank hair flopping half into his eyes. "Cordelia, don't!
You're going to pull all the bandages - crap. Cordy. Calm down. It's OK." He caught her frantic hands in his and pulled them down to her lap.

"Ghhhuuhhn!" OK? It's so far from OK that it's in another alphabet! Angelus is loose!

Slender, boyish hand on her forehead - and she thought her own fingers were cold. "Damn." The hand moved to her throat, surprisingly assured and gentle - well, he'd grown up in a hell dimension; he'd probably had to sew his own limbs back on more than once. Cordelia winced as his fingers probed her neck, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes, to her intense embarrassment. Unboyish worry-lines creased Connor's brow. "Don't try to talk. I need to change your dressings again, and it's going to hurt."

He filled a small pan of water from a ten-gallon Coleman cooler in the corner - one of those big ones they used on construction sites, Cordelia thought vaguely. He set the pan to boil on a little propane stove, and got out bandages and salve. Connor had adapted to the world of technology with ferocious intelligence and speed - that was Darla's DNA at work, she was pretty certain. "I hope you can understand me," he said.

Well, duh.

"I think you've got a... I don't know what you call it here, but the wound's gone bad. Vampire bites are dirty. I've tried to draw the poison out - " He dipped a clean rag into the boiling water, flapped it around in mid-air to cool and in one efficient, brutal motion ripped off the old bandage and slapped the hot wet cloth across her neck.

"Auuughg!" Cordelia wrenched upwards. Connor flinched, but he kept on working, holding her down with one inhumanly powerful arm braced across her ribs while the other hand cleaned the crusted blood away from the ragged tear in her neck. Oh, God, this was going to scar. She was going to have a huge freakish scar on her neck forever, because she didn't have Slayer healing, and she sure as hell didn't have medical insurance and even if she did it would probably be some grotty HMO which didn't cover reconstructive surgery. She sobbed, once, not meaning to. She didn't want to cry because it hurt, damn it, but another sob tore loose like an iceberg calving, and then global warming set in and they all broke free, her self-control dissolving into terror and salt water. Tears burned and stung and overflowed in her eyes, not because Angelus was loose upon the world, but because she was going to be ugly, and that was the last straw.

"I'm sorry." Connor kept saying, low and anguished and desperate. "I'm sorry, I know it hurts, I've got to do it or the poison will get into your blood and you'll - "

Call Buffy, damn you. Forget about me and call Buffy, or call Faith, whichever one warms the cockles of your pervy little heart more, and tell them Angelus is loose, and you did NOT just cop a feel because I can't deal with that now.

He smeared something greasy and stinky on her throat, and wrapped the bite up in clean bandages. Yeehah, the mummy lives. Connor rocked back on his heels, all angles and shadows in the lamplight. He looked tired and drawn, wizened beyond his indeterminate years, and no wonder. He was probably living on stolen Twinkies and Slim Jims these days. Or rats. Like father, like son. Cordelia giggled, or would have if her vocal cords weren't under construction. Her head was just getting lighter and lighter, and soon it would float up to the ceiling of the warehouse and bob out through the skylight into the cool night breeze, and wouldn't that be loverly?

"Cordelia." Connor was shaking her gently. "Cordy. I have to go. I've tried, I've really tried, but you need real medicine - there's got to be a physicker somewhere in this city, right? Wait here. Don't try to get up. If you need - if you have to - there's a pan right here, see?"
No, I'm just going to die of embarrassment right here and now. When the kid whose diapers you changed ends up changing yours, there's no point in going on.

She couldn't just let him rush out there without explaining what was happening. With a groan Cordelia realized that Connor not only wouldn't have paper or pencil handy, he might not even be able to read English - somehow she doubted that a thorough grounding in the classics had been a major part of Holtz's educational goals. She watched him disappear into the shadows with all his parents' noiseless, terrible stealth, and sank back into her musty-smelling nest, too exhausted to do more than lie there and stare up at the ceiling. How long had she been here? Days? Weeks? Her fingernails hadn't turned into claws or anything, so, days. Anything could be happening out there in the world beyond the skylight, while she lay here like a salted slug on a pile of rotting carpet in a deserted warehouse, expiring in slow motion of an infected vampire bite and her own BO. Angel. Angelus. She'd really had the small stupid hope, in the face of all reason and experience, that she could reach him somehow - that Spike wasn't some kind of super-special vampire anomaly, and that if Angel had really loved her, that love would survive somehow in Angelus, however twisted and stunted and sickened. And she wasn't going to deny it would have been pretty delectable to have evidence of success where Buffy had once failed. But it looked like Spike was a freak of nature, after all.

He had to be. She wasn't going to think about the other possibility.

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"I'm a little concerned about Angelus," Wesley said, selecting a blade from the gleaming array on the cloth-draped tray before him. "He's behaving rather erratically, don't you think?" He held the scalpel up and examined it: the blade was flaked obsidian, thin as paper, sharp as regret. He turned the next page in the grimoire, ran a finger across the intricate symbol illustrated there, and turned back to the slim dark woman cuffed naked and spread-eagled on the bed. "The left thigh, you think? Or perhaps the right breast would be more effective?"

Lawson shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Considerably." Wesley smiled down at the woman with an eerie benevolence. "Fred understands the need for precision in an undertaking such as this. Why, the slightest miscalculation in opening a portal can result in unimaginable agony as one's mind and body are stretched thin across dimensions and one's very soul frays away to tissue paper... " Fred shuddered in her chains, moaning into the duct tape sealing her mouth, and Wesley pressed the tip of the scalpel to one dusky nipple. A tiny bead of blood welled up, mother's milk for a demon child. "Don't pretend you don't love this, you little cocktease."

Lawson watched without much interest as Wesley bent over the small pointed breast in concentration, the scalpel carving an elaborate scrimshaw of crimson into the olive skin. Fred shivered like a fly-bedeviled mare. She'd stopped trying to reason with Wes a week ago, stopped pleading with him days ago, stopped screaming hours ago... but there was still a light in those dark doe-eyes. Wes was thorough, Lawson gave him that, but he wasn't sure if the younger vampire realized just what he was dealing with. There were some humans you couldn't drive mad because some little piece of them was already there. Not his job to hand out torture tips to the fledges, though. "So you think Angel's acting strange?" he asked.

"Mm." Wes bit the tip of his tongue in concentration. "It's difficult to say, of course, because my personal experience with Angelus has been so limited, but the Watchers' diaries chronicling his exploits in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depict a very... focused individual."
"Focused." Lawson got up and walked over to the window, hands in pockets. "That's a good way of putting it. He was focused as all hell when he sired me."

"Quite. And yet..." Wesley stepped back to inspect his work. Satisfied, he set the scalpel aside and insinuated a hand between Fred's blood-and-sweat-streaked thighs, whipping her reluctant flesh towards climax with the same brutal efficiency as he'd cut it only minutes ago. Lawson wasn't sure if that was part of the spell or just Wes getting his rocks off. "His current plans appear nebulous, at best. The simplest way to get what he wants is to kill Spike, and yet we're explicitly forbidden to do so."

Lawson frowned. He'd only been in California a few days, but it hadn't taken that long to realize that this Angel wasn't the same person who'd sired him. Angel 2003 was madder, badder, wilder, bolder, both more and less dangerous than the vampire he'd known sixty years ago. "I don't understand why he sent me to Sunnydale. The place is wide open - three or four gangs, a dozen little packs, all of 'em too busy squabbling over crumbs to care that the Slayer's picking them off like ducks in a shooting gallery. But he wasn't interested in any of that, only in whether I'd found any of the Old Master's get still alive. When he called, I thought - " He turned away from the window, head down, scowling. "I though he had a plan. A reason for me to - " keep existing " - be here."

"We need to be prepared for his obsession with the Slayer to resurface," Wesley said, observing Fred's shuddering rictus of an orgasm as if it were occurring under a microscope. "Despite his protestations otherwise, Angelus's actions regarding her, and certain other old - " His lips twisted in distaste, and Fred writhed at a particularly vicious tweak - "acquaintances... are often emotional and illogical. It was his downfall five years ago. We must ensure history doesn't repeat itself."

"And we do that how?"

Wesley stepped away from the twitching, whimpering form on the bed and wiped his fingers fastidiously on a linen towel. "I'm considering the matter. I believe we're finished here. I must fetch Drusilla; Angel wants her to observe Mr. Crowley when he arrives." He patted Fred's cheek. "Sweet dreams, my darling."

Lawson followed him out into the corridor and stood there irresolute. He wasn't entirely familiar with the Hyperion's layout yet, and hadn't yet taken the decisive step of unpacking his bags and settling into a room of his own. He liked the Overlook ambience of the old hotel - the dark paneling, the jade and port wine and tawny gold of the carpets and wallpaper, the lingering sense that this was a place which had seen horror upon horror, where pain and despair had seeped like old blood into the very walls. But it wasn't home, not yet, and maybe never.

He turned on his heel and headed for the stairs. Maybe he'd take a walk, find someone to eat. Angel had forbidden hunting within five miles of the hotel, and he'd have to stir himself if he wanted a meal before dawn.

Angel was in his office, laying down the law to the little gang of would-be Aurelians Lawson had fetched back from Sunnydale; he glanced up as Lawson strode through the lobby, but otherwise paid him no mind. Big surprise there. Outside the hotel the air was cold and heavy with the bitter, omnipresent tang of L.A. smog, and overhead a few brave stars penetrated the haze of city lights. Lawson crossed Crenshaw and headed west on Wilshire, boots crunching against fragments of glass and gravel on the sidewalk, steady as a metronome. He stuck out a desultory thumb as cars whizzed past. He didn't really expect anyone to stop, not at this time of night, and not in a day and age when there were so many human monsters in competition with the real thing, but you'd never go hungry underestimating the stupidity of humans in general.

Rossmore, Highland, La Brea... What exactly was he doing here, running the old man's errands?
Angel had called, and he'd come. Angel was his sire, but Angel had kicked him out of that sub to literally sink or swim. Angel had never bothered to introduce him to the rest of the clan - hell, Angel had never bothered, period. The fact was, he was a stranger, the outsider, the bastard son. Drusilla was the only person in the hotel besides Angel who knew him. Penn and Darla and Dalton and James and Elizabeth and Luke and the Master were names to him, nothing more, and all of them were dust now, anyway. The handful of distantly-related fledges he'd turned up in Sunnydale meant even less.

The only other name with a face to it wasn't here. Memories of miserable, sultry weeks in the summer of '44 drifted through his mind: haunting the New York docks, living off whores and transients and stevedores with blood tasting of tar and salt, Spike desperate to find a ship back to Europe and Drusilla, himself confused and overwhelmed as any new-risen fledge. Spike's impatient This is a neck, these are your teeth, the pointy bits go in there, and I'd give up those dreams of a healthy tan if I were you hadn't been much, but it was more than he'd ever gotten from Angel.

He found the kids staggering down Santa Monica Boulevard, just south of the Belvedere - three boys and two girls in with streaked hair and pierced noses and expensive orthodontia, a little too drunk, a little too rich, a lot too loud for their own good. What the hell they were doing there at four in the morning Lawson didn't know and didn't care. He shadowed them for a block, until one lagged behind the other four. He took the boy down from behind with a precision blow to the base of the skull, crushed his larynx and pulled the limp body into the shelter of the manicured shrubbery. No screams, no drawn-out terror, just the quick plunge of fangs into flesh and the blood hot in his mouth as he gulped down what should have been life itself. Sustenance, and nothing more. He took the boy's wallet as an afterthought and left him sprawled on the close-cropped lawn, listening idly to the heartbeat which labored and slowed behind him. He'd drunk his fill, and the kid might live, or he might not. Lawson wished he could bring himself to care one way or the other. Death should mean something. Should be a dark and glorious calling, not an act as meaningless as a man eating a Big Mac and tossing the wrapper aside.

A car flashed past, going east as he headed back, headlights sweeping along the road ahead. Brakes squealed and tires chewed gravel as the metal beast swung around, and headlights raked like claws across the night. Lawson stopped, hand raised to guard his eyes from the glare. A door slammed, another pair of boots crunched across the pavement. The driver strode forward with none of the usual caution of someone approaching a wandering hitchhiker, his lean frame haloed in halogen glory and the vast dark wings of his shadow stretched out before him. Lawson waited, mildly curious - maybe that was sufficient reason to let the guy live, for awhile, anyway, that for two seconds he'd made life interesting.

The man stopped, head cocked, his expression invisible even to vampire eyes - and then he lunged forward, enveloping Lawson in an enthusiastic and rib-crushing bear hug. "Lawson, you son of a bitch! Thought that mopey look was familiar! I haven't seen you since Paris! Where the hell have you been?"

"Spike?" Lawson broke into a grin and grabbed the smaller man's shoulders, squinting into the light. All the things he shouldn't say flitted through his mind - Why the hell aren't you back in Sunnydale, did Angel put you up to this, is this some kind of stupid test? What came out was, "What the hell did you do to your hair?"

"This? Went blond in '76. You're behind the times, mate."

Lawson laughed and cuffed the back of his head. "No, I mean that curly shit."

Spike poked at the crisp gelled waves with a slightly self-conscious grin. "Ah, the other half likes it.
that way. Look, I'm headed over to Angel's place - thought I'd stop by and pay my respects as long as I was in town. Fancy a lift?" He gestured at the car. It was the same old DeSoto, a bit worse for wear, and Lawson suppressed a grin. Spike had always prided himself on keeping up with the times, but he got as attached to favorite pieces of the past as any vampire.

"Sure." Give it a week or two, and Spike would be sawing through his last nerve, but right now that reckless ebullience was exactly what he needed. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw your face, but I should have figured that if the old man was calling in the troops, you'd be along sooner or later."

Surprise flashed through Spike's eyes, followed by wariness. "Right," he said. "Old Home Week."

So Angel hadn't summoned him, after all. Was Spike's appearance just a huge coincidence, then? Lawson mulled that over as he followed Spike back to the car, and decided he didn't care one way or the other about that, either. "So... Drusilla's not with you?" That was ambiguous enough not to reveal what he knew, and ought to net him a little more information. Obviously something serious had come between them, or Dru wouldn't be holed up in the top floor of the Hyperion mumbling about dead babies.

Spike lit a cigarette and inhaled, stoking its tip from red to brilliant orange. He recapped the lighter, smoke trickling dragon-fashion from his nostrils. "No. Third time you come home to another bloke in your bed's the charm. We've not been chummy these last few years." He tossed Lawson cigarettes and lighter, revved the engine and shot out into traffic.

Lawson drew flame from the dully gleaming Zippo and handed it back as the nicotine bite curled down into his little-used lungs. There was no pleasure in it, but that was true of most things these days. "The hell you say." He suspected there was more to it than that. Dru had been known to wander in the old days, both literally and metaphorically, but she'd always come back - largely, Lawson suspected, because no one but Spike could put up with her for long. "I've heard... all kinds of rumors. That you fell for the Slayer and went soft. That you'd gotten cursed with a soul too, or that you'd been captured by government agents and driven insane, or..."

That earned him a sideways smirk and a cocked eyebrow. "You going to require a demonstration of how soft I'm not?"

Spike didn't look soft, and he certainly hadn't felt soft in that brief roadside embrace. "I don't have any beef with you. It's true, then?"

"Some of it. Had a government microchip shoved in my skull for awhile, kept me from killing. Fell for the Slayer. Took an at-bat for the forces of goodness and light, not that they were any too pleased about it. No soul to speak of; they were going too dear. Close call, though." Spike related this as if it were the most natural course of events in the world, his cigarette tilted at a belligerent angle which dared anyone to object.

Lawson sank back against the black leather upholstery, his mind a vast blank hole of incomprehension. "So you're... what? A good guy now? A hero? A champion?"

"Champion my arse." Spike snorted derisively. "I'm William the Bloody, and I take care of my own. Slayer and me, we're a team. Sunnydale's ours, and all in it, and as Angelus can tell you, I'm passing fond of the rest of the world as well." He might not have bothered to assume the title, but his voice held all the confidence, all the arrogance of a Master staking claim. Angel wasn't the only one who'd changed in the last sixty years. "What you do on Angel's turf is his business, but if I catch you hunting mine you're dust, auld lang syne or no." Those cool blue eyes narrowed. "And speaking of Old Granddad, calling in the troops, is he? Since when do you come when Angel whistles?"
"I could say the same for you."

Spike's suspicious, sidelong frown was all the evidence one could ask for that he didn't have a clue what Lawson was talking about, but wasn't about to admit it. "I asked first."

"I kept an eye on him, you know." Lawson watched flakes of tobacco writhe and die in the glowing coal-end of his cigarette. "Checked in every decade or so, watched him sink lower and lower till he was eating rats in the gutter. Then a couple of years ago, I hear he's a goddam hero, with the Powers That Be kissing his ass. He's got a destiny." Lawson squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the thrum of engines and the rush of dark water and the knowledge that what he did mattered. "He owes me," he whispered. "He fucking owes me."

"Well, yeah, nice job if you can get it. Wouldn't hold my breath waiting for Peaches to pay up if I were you." Spike pulled up in front of the Hyperion, tipped his head back and blew a smoke ring. "Having a soul means never having to say you're sorry." He chucked the butt, hopped out of the car and stood looking up at the Hyperion's facade as if bracing for something, then headed for the lobby doors.

"Spike!" Lawson called after him. Spike halted and looked back, curious. "Why?"

The scarred brow and one corner of Spike's mouth flicked upwards in unison. "Why what?"

Lawson held out a hand, closed the fingers on air, grasping at nothingness. "Why did you do it? How did you do it?" Desperation and jealousy fought for first place in his voice. "I want... I need... How... how did you make it matter? Did Angel help you?" The way he never helped me?

Spike stared at him increduously for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed.

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The child in the corner was starting to smell. Nasty unwashed thing. Needed a scrubbing with good lye soap, strong and brown, till the bones showed through. Once someone else had attended to such things. Drusilla rose to pace the small room, thin white hands rubbing thin white arms, dark liquid eyes in a thin white face, like wells someone had drowned in. Grandmama would be cross if she found a dirty little boy among the teatowels, very cross indeed, and crosses burned so in the night, a-glittering and glowing... "Spike?" she called, tearing aside the curtains. The night came prowling in through broken window panes, sniffing disdainfully at the dusty corners of the room. Drusilla stood by the window, curtains in hand, no longer certain why she was there. Grandmama was gone, and Spike was lost to her. A car crawled by in the street outside, and a wild sob escaped her. She ripped the curtain from its rings in a cloud of dust and severed threads, wrapping it around her shoulders and shivering, shivering in the cold. "All lost," she whispered, mourning for the undead.

"Drusilla. What have we told you about taking meals up to your room?"

The new one was standing in the doorway. All bright knives and dark shadows, this Wesley was, brilliant and deadly as a needle in the eye. He extended a hand, cool and imperious. "Come away from there. I spoke to Buffy earlier. I don't believe she suspects, but Cordelia may have contacted her, and a Slayer's intuition can't be discounted. We should none of us take chances."

"There was fire here," she said, lifting her eyes to the charred ceiling. "Blood on the sky. I heard my Spike call out just now. Ashes, he was, mouth stuffed full of them, tongue a burning coal."

Wesley's eyes were steel. "Spike's not here, Drusilla. He's with Buffy. Come with me. Angelus will be needing you shortly." He added in more conciliatory tones, "You needn't stay here, you know.
There are plenty of rooms in better repair on the lower floors."

"Daddy doesn't love me. He sent me to Miss Minchin's and I never saw him more." Drusilla let the curtains fall from her shoulders and sat down in the high-backed chair by the green baize table. Red cushion beneath her, red carpet below - hadn't been red always, but the blood spread so. A rat bared yellow incisors and scurried away, naked pink feet with their sharp little claws scrabbling across the dead child's ankles. She took up the cards and fanned them out, sending ripples through the shallow pool of light.

Willie had been the Knight of Cups, riding through the sun, but she'd birthed him into darker waters and starrier skies. Her bad dog's teeth were blunted, but she gave him the card with bite, right in the middle of the table: Knight of Swords, reversed, a spike right through the head. Humming to herself, Drusilla clasped the deck to her breast and swayed to her feet, spinning in place like a humming-top. Better to shuffle the world than the cards. Giggling and dizzy she fell to the chair again and laid the cards out, snap-snap-snap. Wesley made as if to stop her, and then reconsidered, standing back and observing her with cobra intensity.

"This covers him, and that crosses him. You see?" She pointed to the first two cards, the Fool on the precipice, and the Tower struck by lightning, and clapped her hands in delight. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!"

Wesley made an impatient noise. "Go on."

Drusilla shot him a glance from beneath lowered lashes, sly and sweet. "Angelus gifted me a deck of human skin, once, all the cards tattooed and flayed so prettily from the bones. This one's not so nice, and the cards are all greasy." There was no honey between her thighs which could tempt this one - his heart and his loins were given elsewhere, torn in two right down the middle. But there were things he craved. She could see them, black worms behind the eyes. "Daddy doesn't love you, either."

Hands gripped the elaborate twist of her hair, jerked her head back with punishing force. Wesley's face loomed above her, steel turned to gold, the savage demon's mask poised to strike, and oh, her throat and breast so deliciously exposed! "No, he does not. But it is my understanding that love is optional in our present condition."

Drusilla shivered. "Pincers," she whispered. "Pinchers, tongs, pokers all a lovely cherry red..."

"All in good time, my dear." He shoved her back down into her chair. "Continue."

"This is beneath him, though she says otherwise." She turned up another card from the top of the deck, the maiden binding the lion's jaws with her bare hands. "This is behind him." The Magician, reversed. "Nasty little man. Blue sparks to tame a demon, blue sparks to set one free." Wesley was frowning now, trying to put the pieces together, but didn't he see that the pattern was already complete? "This crowns him, and this lies before him." Five men battling with staves, and a heart pierced with three swords. "Trouble and heartbreak, but isn't that just, when my cruel, cruel love broke my heart all into pieces? And never offered me a new one, no, not once!"

Her hands trembled as she turned over the final cards. Three cups spilt and two yet standing; the Moon, singing shrill mad songs in the night, Circe singing Ulysses home - that was her card, her very own. A happy family dancing beneath a rainbow sky. And the very, very, very last card: Death on his white horse, riding to a sunless dawn.

Wesley inhaled sharply. "Something is coming."
Drusilla's tongue ran round the circuit of her teeth. "Something's already here. My Spike's come to see Angelus, and Daddy wants to tear his cruel heart all asunder. Oh, I can't have that. It belonged to me once, and I'll not have it trampled by swine, no - if Daddy's got no use for it I'll take it back and eat it myself." She gnashed sharp white teeth. "Snap-snap." She rose to her feet, scattering the forgotten cards across the bloodstained carpet.

Wesley cried out as the future fluttered to the ground in leaves of cardboard. "Drusilla," he said tightly, "What do you mean, Spike's come to see Angelus? Does Buffy know - ?"

Drusilla looked around the room as if she'd never seen it before. Flies were gathering on the dirty little boy's eyes, but she paid no mind to that. She was a princess, above such things, and soon she'd have servants and cakes and the heart of her brave knight - though perhaps not the rest of him, because he'd vexed her a great deal, Spike had, and she didn't love him any more, no, not the least little bit. But Daddy would bring him home and spank him for her, and perhaps read them a story with a very, very nasty ending. "His chariot passed by," she explained with a beneficent smile. "All trailing banners and clouds of glory. I shall come downstairs now," she announced, "and have tea."

Wesley extended a stiff, angry arm and Drusilla pressed her fingers to her lips, stifling a squeak of delight. He was as brave as any other, but no knight - his heart was a shard of ice, and did it ever warm there'd be none of it left. But for now, for now...

She left the room and danced down the hallway, past other rooms with things that were also beginning to smell, light of heart for the first time in oh, forever.

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The Hyperion at four AM might as well have existed in a different dimension than the Hyperion at four PM. Dark foliage rustled ominously overhead, and Spanish moss would not have been out of place. Bernard Crowley walked stiffly through the courtyard and up the steps leading to the lobby doors, grateful for the years of discipline in subduing the uneasy flutter in his stomach at the presence of the supernatural. He paused on the threshold, his hand resting on the push bar. He needed no invitation to enter, but reluctance seized him nonetheless - or not so much reluctance, perhaps, as prudence. Through the submarine ripple of the heavy glass he could see that only a tithe of the electric lights were burning, their place usurped by the banks of candles more acceptable to vampire eyes.

The door opened with the same silent efficiency as on his last visit, but the lobby had changed. Heaps of smashed glass and broken furniture drifted in the corners, left over from his initial abduction of Angel, and added to by later struggles. Two or three filing cabinets, their drawers gaping and the folders in disarray, had been pulled out into the center of the irregular pentagram painted on the floor and partially burnt; flakes of charred paper and blistered paint littered the lobby. The detritus found in most vampire lairs - scraps and bones, victims' cast-offs - either hadn't yet had time to accumulate, or Angelus kept a tighter ship than most masters, but that this was no longer a habitation of humankind was painfully clear.

A little pack of vampires trooped single file out of Angel's office, half of them game-faced and glancing nervously back over their shoulders. The last one in line dragged a feebly-twitching body behind it, drawing a new smear of red across one point of the pentagram. Trying not to speculate on the identity of the victim, Crowley stepped aside and waited for them to pass. He'd known in a distant, intellectual way that there would be broken eggs involved in making his omelette. He hadn't counted on having to walk on the shells.

Two of the vampires broke formation and prowled over to him, snuffling and growling low in their throats, all golden eyes and hungry grins. A whipcrack voice from the balcony overhead barked out,
"Back, all of you!" and the minions cringed away like wheat before the storm.

Crowley looked up; a tall slender man in casual dress whose features were strangely familiar was descending the staircase, a languid, sloe-eyed succubus in grey silk and silver crepe draped on one arm. Pale as asphodel and thin as bone, Her lips were red, her looks were free... "Drusilla," he whispered, the name catching in his throat as a hundred tales of insubstantial dread rose up in its wake.

Dru aura roused at the sound of her name, a corpse-flower stirring to the semblance of life. She smiled at him with the seductiveness of a little child and twined one dark glossy plait around her finger. "You're not a nice old man at all." She lifted an entreating face to her escort and whispered, "May we have him for tea? He'd be dry and crumbly, like autumn leaves on toast."

"Not now, Drusilla," the tall man chided her. "He's a guest." He nudged the moaning thing on the floor with the toe of his shoe. "The rest of you, your dinner's in the basement. It's all you'll get, so don't waste any. Go to your quarters once you've fed, and report to me in the evening for your assignments." He nudged the moaning thing on the floor with the toe of his shoe. "And dispose of this. We can't afford to pamper cripples." He turned a tight, professional smile on Crowley. "Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, at your service. Do excuse the mess, Mr. Crowley. We're in the middle of a renovation, and our office manager has taken an unscheduled leave of absence."

Wesley... Crowley's heart lurched in his chest as fingers colder than Drusilla's closed around it. This was Roger's boy - accent on the was; Roger's boy no longer. He forced himself to meet the eyes in which no flicker of humanity remained, to take the dead hand and shake it. It didn't help that some cynical part of his mind was imagining Roger Wyndam-Pryce's acerbic reaction as something along the lines of, Vampire a whole week and still only a minion, boy? I expected better of you than that! "You haven't... spoken to your father recently, have you?"

"Not of late," Wesley replied. A golden sheen obscured the gunmetal-blue of his eyes. "But I'm quite looking forward to our next visit. Have a seat, and I'll let Angelus know you're here."

He'd been a fool to believe this could be - no, that it would be - done without spilling innocent blood. Too late to reverse that. Angelus had worked quickly, more quickly than he'd have thought possible, drawing to him all the fragments of his nightmare past and raising up new horrors to fill the gaps in the line. He didn't want to use those failsafes he'd warned Angelus about, not yet, but neither could he allow this to go on. Crowley skirted the piles of rubbish and sat gingerly down on the circular settee in the center of the lobby. Drusilla drifted away from her squire and pirouetted thistledown-light over to the front doors, her filmy skirts flaring out around her thin calves. For all her angularity she did not resemble a child; her body was a woman's, attenuated to bladelike sharpness, and her eyes, huge and dark as the night sky overhead, were freighted with torment at odds with her physical lightness. She pressed her forehead forlornly to the glass. "Spike?"

Crowley shuddered. His cell phone shrilled, shattering his morbid speculation, and he fished it hastily out of his pocket. Who could possibly be calling at this hour? "Hello?"

"Mr. Crowley," said Gregson's bland voice. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but we physicians keep such irregular hours. I'm sure you understand."

"Indeed. I was already awake, as it happens. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The crisp flap of papers being shuffled carried across the aether. "I couldn't help noticing when I checked my messages today that there was no word from you about my payment. Last week you assured me that it would be in my hands by now."
Watchers didn't sweat, but they might feel a certain amount of heat from time to time. Crowley glanced over at the window into Angelus's office. Wesley was leaning against the doorframe, handing Angelus a small silver disc, a CD or DVD of some sort. The vampires' conversation was conducted in voices too low for him to hear, but the important question was, could they hear him? It was very possible, but they were distracted, and even vampires had to be paying attention to what they heard to make much of it. Crowley cupped his hand over his mouth and lowered his voice. "There's been a delay in the delivery," he hissed. "I'm taking steps to deal with the problem now."

"Ah? I'm pleased to hear it. I should like to pay a visit to the patient and see how he's doing. Perhaps make an adjustment or two in the stimulant balance - with such a delicate and untested device, it would be a shame if it were to fail due to some unanticipated... bug."

Crowley went cold. "That would indeed be... unfortunate. Dr. Gregson, I am not in the habit of dishonoring my commitments. You will receive your payment shortly. Goodbye."

He slumped against the teal leatherette, fingers massaging weary eyes. He was too old for this. He'd left his vengeance untended for too many years, and instead of a grand Jacobean tragedy he was the inheritor of a tangle of petty bureaucratic details, each of which had to be shepherded to its tedious conclusion. He sighed and picked up the phone again, holding it tensely to one ear as it rang and rang again.

"Yeah?" a sleepy voice answered.

"Robin? Bernard Crowley. I'm sorry to wake you -"

"Wha - Bernard?" Crowley heard blankets being disarranged. "Are you all right? What's the matter? Do you need -" 

"Have you found the bag?" Crowley interrupted. "Forgive my brusqueness, my dear boy, but the matter's rather urgent."

"Bernard, it's four in the morning. Couldn't this wait until, oh, five or six?"

"No, it could not. I need it immediately." A note of desperation threaded Crowley's voice. He wondered what Wood would make of it. "I know the artifacts have sentimental value to you, but you've always known it was yours on loan. It belongs to the Council."

"As a matter of fact, no, I never knew that until you started badgering me for it last week." Wood sounded irritated, though perhaps that was understandable given the hour. "The Council's gotten along without it for twenty-five years. I've got very little left of my mother, and since when have you been so concerned with what the Council wants?"

Obstinate boy! He could be so like his mother. "I've... discovered some new leads."

Wood's voice was infinitely weary. "We've already talked about this. We've tried this already. Whatever's in that bag, you can't use it. I can't use it. There's only one person who can use it - two people - so if you've got new leads let's take those leads and the bag to one of the Slayers and let them slay."

He didn't have time for this. Minutes were slipping like water through his fingers. "I'm not a fool, Robin, and I didn't raise you to be one. The current Slayers are unreliable at best, traitors at worst. Buffy Summers is the last person -"

"Can we be sure of that? We've never met the woman. She's had some problems with the Council, but so did my mother. Look, I've got tomorrow -" More indistinct fumbling noises and a groan of
dismay - "today free. I'll drive up to Sunnydale and give her the once-over. If she's trustworthy, I'll give her the bag. If not..."

Crowley pressed a hand to his temple to still the pounding in his head. "No! It is absolutely essential -"

But Wood had hung up, and repeated attempts at redial only netted his voice mail. Crowley deflated, squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel the vampires' arrogant gazes beating down upon his shoulders, and he straightened, arming himself for battle once more.

"Mr. Crowley, Angelus will see you now." Wesley recaptured Drusilla and led her back to the office, where she clung to his elbow and stared at Crowley in fascination, her head tipped sideways and her black-cherry lips parted to show just the hint of pearl. Crowley edged past her with furled umbrella at guard, stiff and cautious as a cat on wet pavement. He'd not counted on her presence, and wished mightily that he'd had the chance to take a few mystical precautions.

The office wasn't the shambles that the lobby was, but the decor had changed in subtle ways. The stacks of case files and most of the occult reference books were gone, replaced by a more eclectic selection of literature. The weapons which had once resided in the case in the lobby now adorned the wall behind the desk, and the small objets d'art scattered across the shelves had a disturbing edge to them. Angelus, elegant in Natazzi charcoal herringbone and burgundy silk, was lounging in the huge leather chair, examining the disc Wesley had given him. He set it aside when Crowley entered and leaned forward. "Mr. Crowley. You've met Drusilla and Wesley already. Wish I could say it was a pleasure, but that would be a big fat lie, wouldn't it?"

A pale wormlike something rolled under his elbow, and the vampire picked the severed finger off his desk blotter with a grimace of annoyance, licked blood off the raw end and tossed it at the trash can. It bounced off the rim with a meaty splat and dissolved into dust in mid-air. Apparently, in some less savory part of the Hyperion, its owner had just been disposed of. Angelus folded bloodstained hands together on the desk. "Whatever can I do for you?"

"Fulfill the terms of our agreement, for one. It's been a week," Crowley snapped. "I think it's reasonable to expect some amount of progress in that time."

"You're all skin and no bones," Drusilla observed, tip-toeing up and tilting her whole body at an acute angle. She froze, an undead Degas, peering at Crowley through her fingers. "I could fill the hollow bits with candy."

Angelus's smile reached his eyes, and that was what was most disturbing about it. "Mr. Crowley, what exactly did you expect? Me to breeze down to Sunnydale, slap Spike with my glove and challenge him to a duel to the death?"

Crowley drew himself up with a sneer that needed no artifice. "I didn't expect this..." He waved a hand, indicating Wesley and the now-departed minions in the office beyond. "...exercise in self-aggrandizement."

"You said it yourself when you hired me, Mr. Crowley. Killing Spike isn't an easy assignment. I'm more than two and a half centuries old, and I didn't rack up that many birthday candles by taking stupid chances. You've waited thirty years. A few more weeks aren't going to kill you." Angelus smirked. "Well, maybe at your age, they will, but rest assured I've got more pain planned for Spike than you could possibly imagine. I'm a professional."

This wasn't going as he'd envisioned it. "Be that as it may, I must insist that you refrain from creating any more vampires. I want William the Bloody dead, not half of Los Angeles. I remind you, sir, that I am not without recourse. I can cause you to revert to your more conscientious self within twelve
Angelus traded an inscrutable look with Wesley. "A lot of things can happen in twelve hours, Mr. Crowley."

"Indeed. Please consider also that there are things besides drugs which I might have arranged to be inserted into a vampire's heart in the case of an emergency."

Those flat eyes and the long silence might have boded anything. At last Angelus nodded. "Sure. Whatever you say, Mr. C. The Sweathogs are right behind you."

Angel bounded to his feet as the front door of the hotel closed behind Bernard Crowley and rubbed his hands together. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Mr. Crowley has kindly dropped the keys to the cellblock door into our laps. It's jailbreak time." He swung around the desk and caught Drusilla's hands up in his own. "Drusilla, my gem, did you hear everything he said?" She nodded, her eyes wide and bright, delighted as a child with a secret. "And did you hear everything he didn't say?" Another nod. "Good. You've done so well, I'll have to think of a special treat for you. Now tell me: What's in the bag the Watcher's trying to give Gregson?"

Drusilla curled her arms above her head, swaying back and forth to her own silver-bell laughter. "All manner of cats, and they'll come out hissing."

"Damn it, Dru - " Angel reined in his exasperation. He'd never been as patient at cozening Drusilla as Spike was, but he knew that getting angry would just make her more incoherent.

She wasn't listening anyway; her eyes were fixed on eternity. "Old and cold and dark it is at the bottom of the well, deep, deeper, deepest, but this is deeper yet, out of time, out of mind, altogether out of the world. Our forefathers and foremothers, another quartet. Black is the color of my true love's heart, black and blue and burning, always burning." She blinked, coming to herself, and pouted. "You set me afire once, and burnt my face all off, but I didn't mind because I'm always burnt on the inside."

Angel caught her around the waist and pulled her close with a calculating brutality, twisting her slender wrist till the bones ground together and she hissed in pleasure. "I'll set you aflame again once I've got that bag, sweet, build you a bonfire of the old man's bones."

"Oooh, you say such dreadful things, it makes me all tingly." Drusilla shimmied against him, fangs snapping a hairsbreadth away from his cheek.

"Wes, I need you to go to Sunnydale. Take my car, and take Dru with you, if you think she'll be useful and you can keep her under control." Angel checked his watch against his innate sense of the night's passage. "If you leave now, you can get there just before dawn, and once in Sunnydale you can get anywhere you need to through the sewers. Find this Robin - Cordy's file said the last name was Wood - and get me that bag."

Wesley nodded, but made no move for the door. "Wouldn't it be far simpler to kill Spike? I realize he's a formidable foe in hand-to-hand combat, but this is the twenty-first century. There's no need to engage him in combat at all. A soft-nosed bullet in the brain will disable him quite nicely, and a follow-up crossbow bolt will dispose of him completely."

All the best minions started out as a pain in the ass, Angel reminded himself. "Yeah, and I could take half the town out with a truckload of fertilizer, too. Want to know why I don't?"
"Actually, yes, I would." Wesley's eyes met his, full of cool, barely-masked defiance.

Angel sauntered over to the taller man and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I can give you three good reasons." His fingers dug into the meat of Wesley's shoulder with inexorable pressure, centuries of power pitted against a bare week free of the grave. "Number one, I don't want Spike dead." A small noise escaped Wesley's clenched teeth, a cry of pain or pleasure or denial. He clutched Angel's wrist with both hands, just as Cordelia had, and with as little effect. "Number two, even if I did want to kill Spike, I'm an artist. My object all sublime, Wes." The muscles in Wesley's thighs were trembling now, his whole body rigid with the effort of remaining upright. "And number three..." Angel leaned closer, meeting those blued-steel eyes with his own. "We're not in it to the death. That's not what exalts us above the beasts. We're in it to the pain. You're learning that, with Fred, but what you've got to realize is that every kill we make deserves that much artistry."

Tendons bowed and joints buckled, and Wesley collapsed to his knees, his head thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut. Angel never slackened his grip. He stooped, his tongue tracing the corded muscles of Wesley's bared throat from clavicle to stubbled chin, felt the body beneath him tense and shudder as he passed over the angry welt of scar tissue. The Judas mark of Justine's knife was eternal, now. "You're a good boy, Wesley," he murmured. "Staying at home, balancing the checkbook, keeping the minions in line, and here I am fussing over the prodigal son. It's not fair, is it? What did you do to deserve this?" He vampéd out, fangs indenting the skin on either side of the scar, and growled, "Answer me!"

Drusilla watched wide-eyed and avid, twig-thin fingers caressing her own throat. Angel's fangs drew blood, and Wesley choked out, "Betrayed you... sire," and went limp, his spine curling in supplication.

One minute longer, and Angel's grip loosened. Wesley's head rested on his thigh, and Wesley's hands still clutched the hand which held him down. Angel stroked the short disordered hair and smiled. "Yes. Yes, you did. That's why you're here, Wes. To pay. That's why you'll do as I tell you, forever and without question." The bent shoulders shook, and the head beneath his hand nodded. "Good. Now, once you have the bag..." God, this was perfect, circumstance and opportunity unfolding like a puzzle-box with only one solution. "Kill him, and make it ugly. Stick around long enough to make sure Buffy finds the body, and that when she does, there's a heart-rending picture of Mommy the dead Slayer somewhere on it, and a memento or two carelessly left behind by his killer. Spike smokes Marlboro Reds, doesn't he?"

"I wouldn't know, but why - oh." Wesley's voice fell to a respectful hush. "That's... brilliant. On so many levels. Angelus, you truly are a master."

Angel waved a modest hand. "I do my best. Now get out of here before the sun catches you."

He sank down behind the desk as the chastened Wesley departed with Drusilla twirling dreamily in his wake, and contemplated the framed photos of Connor and of Cordelia. It had taken him a long time to realize what was truly important, and then only when Connor had stolen it from him. The Order of Aurelius had never meant anything to him. The Master's dreams of bringing back the Old Ones had been sentimental stupidity - even the debased lineages of demons still walking the earth considered vampires half-breed trash; to an Ascended One, vampires would be less than vermin. But old Heinrich Nest had gotten one thing right: he'd known the power of family.

No pain he'd suffered in the depths of Acathla's realm could match the agony of realizing that it was Buffy's sword which had delivered him there, and that he'd deserved to go. No demonic torment matched the anguish of seeing Connor snatched from his arms by his best friend, or the realization that his son had returned only to condemn him to a watery prison for eternity. Hell, his hell, wasn't
pitchforks and flames. Hell was other people, and he had never, for one minute, truly escaped it. He lived in hell, with every soul-dogged step he took. He created his own hell and drew it around him like a cloak, telling himself it was necessary, even noble. Even now, he could feel his soul squirming and stretching in its anesthetized cocoon. No... I shouldn't... They need...

*Is this the work of love?* he'd asked his sire once, long ago. *You never made me happy,* he'd spat at her two and a half centuries later, and he hadn't been lying; no more had the air he'd breathed or the beat of his heart had made him happy as a living man, but they were as essential to his existence as she had been. *Happiness* and *love* were fragile, human things, cobwebs easily brushed aside by time and chance. The passions of demons ran deeper, darker, more enduring.

His fingers traced the line of Connor's jaw, seeking out the fleeting resemblance to his mother's delicate blond beauty. Hell could not be escaped; the trick, then, was to bend Hell to your will. He would have this child of Darla's loins and his, have him, hold him, mark him, break him. He would have Cordelia, have her bountiful body and her barbed tongue, and Wesley with his yearning and sword's-edge loyalty, and Spike with his killer's hands and bruised poet's heart. Mark all of them, brand them to the bone, bind and preserve them or destroy them as seemed good. And then...

"... Buffy, and this is Dawn," said a voice in the lobby, proud as any indulgent sire, "and this is my girl Will - brilliant demon she makes, don't she?"

Spike was standing in the doorway to the office, showing off a fan of dog-eared photos to Lawson. In the last few years he'd abandoned the punk trappings one by one, and now he looked disturbingly normal - he could have passed for anyone's unusually good-looking, athletic, and sunlight-averse next-door neighbor, and if Buffy's neighbors noticed the battered knuckles at such odds with those elegant hands, they'd never be gauche enough to bring it up. Any day now he'd ditch the bleach for a trendy brown buzz cut, and the travesty would be complete.

Under Angel's scrutiny Spike stuffed the photographs hastily back into his wallet and the wallet back into his hip pocket. "Seems I've missed an episode or two. You mind explaining what's going on?"

Angel set the picture of Connor down and allowed himself a rush of nostalgia. The bitterness and rivalry couldn't be banished entirely, but they'd had good times, too. Spike brought that bitterness on himself with his unreasonable assumptions that human love could run in tandem with demonic desire, but with the soul clubbed into submission, Angel could admit that some of the bad blood could be laid at his own doorstep. "That might be a little difficult, Spike. I didn't expect you tonight. This is a surprise." And a potential problem; had Spike spoken to anyone else in L.A. who might provide an alibi for his upcoming debut as a murder suspect? "Wesley will be just devastated to have missed you. Lawson, take a walk."

Lawson gave him a searching look, but as always, obeyed orders and left without a word. He'd have to have a talk with that boy later and see what nonsense Spike had been feeding him; Lawson was still an unknown quantity in too many ways. Spike folded his arms across his chest and rocked ever so slightly on the balls of his feet, glancing around the room and taking in the alterations with narrowed eyes. "Yeah? And how is tall, dork, and stubbly?"

Ignoring the question, Angel strolled over and thumped him in the (still intimidatingly firm, if no longer quite as concave) stomach. "You look to be living well, boy. Come on, you can tell me - going off the leash when your girlfriend's not looking?"

Spike's left eyebrow migrated northwards, and he didn't relax in the slightest. "Sorry to disappoint. Domestic life, and all. Tara's a wizard with the pig's blood. Almost doesn't taste like shit when she makes it."
Angel began a slow, shark-like circling, while Spike eyed him warily. "Tara? The boring one, isn't she?"

"I wouldn't put it that way. She's why I'm here, in fact - she's in the market for some Mohra blood, and Buffy says you killed one of them a few years back. Thought I'd drop by and ask for some grandfatherly advice." He jerked a thumb at the devastated lobby. "But if I only get one question, I'm a bit more curious why the place looks like the Baudelaire orphans are chained up in the attic, and why you've got Unkie Lawson press-ganging fledges in my territory without a by-your-leave." Spike took a deep breath, head cocked, brows knit, and his frown deepened to a look of... well, it wasn't horror; he wasn't that far gone in his imitation of humanity. More like confused irritation. "Bugger, Pryce got turned, didn't he? I can smell the difference. Is that why the place is smashed up? And... sodding hell, Dru's been here! Was it her?" He grabbed Angel's shirt-front. "Tell me, you great beetle-browed gorilla!"

With great effort, Angel kept a straight face. "Yeah, sure, Spike. That's it. Drusilla turned Wesley. Now I've got to hunt them both down and kill them." The dawning panic in Spike's eyes was tasty enough to eat with a spoon. "Wanna help, you being a certified good guy and all?"

Spike stared at him, throat working, suspicion growing, and very slowly, he released his hold on Angel's collar. "Angelus?" he whispered. There was caution and wonder and confusion in his eyes, and fear - oh, yeah, under that swaggering exterior Spike knew fear, and plenty of it. "No. You still reek of soul." He looked around. "Where's everyone else? You haven't gone and turned all of them, have you?"

"Not yet. You think I should?"

Spike shook his head, bewildered. "What's got into you? This is going to kill Buffy!"

He pulled that out with the air of a magician flinging his best trick on the mercy of a tough house, and Angel laughed. "That's the idea." He threw a playful punch, pulled it short. "You don't get it yet, do you? I've moved beyond the whole soul/no-soul dichotomy, Spike. It's overrated. I've got a new gig now, and I'm putting the band back together. Whaddya say?"

"What do I say?" Spike bellowed. "Are you barking? You've spent the last two years looking down your nose 'cause I'm not moral enough to suit your lofty standards! Maybe you can switch the evil on and off like a leaky tap, but it's not that bleeding easy for me! Do you have any idea how many people I don't especially want to kill these days? Hundreds, mate! Maybe thousands!" He drove his point home with a fist-thump on the nearest bookshelf, toppling an entire row of existential philosophy. "What do you fucking expect me to say?"

"Well, in a word... thanks." Angel slung a companionable arm around the younger vampire's shoulders, grinning as all that lean muscle went rigid beneath his touch. He didn't expect this to be easy. He'd once tried to destroy the entire world to wipe out the memory of a Slayer's kisses and his own loathed pretensions of humanity. Spike had betrayed his demon heritage to help save it, not just once, but again and again. "You think I don't know how hard this is for you? You're right, I don't - but I know how hard it is for me, and I've got a soul. I know how damn near impossible it is some nights to wake up and walk among them, knowing you could reach out and -"

"Yeah, yeah, blood, power, insatiable craving," Spike interrupted, shaking off the arm. "Got the memo. I'm over that bit. Mostly. It's the moral conundrums that keep me up days. Such as WHAT THE HELL TO DO WITH WESLEY WYNDAM-PONCE!" He stormed across the office and flopped down in Angel's chair, glaring up at his grandsire. "We're running short of bloody Orbs of Thessulah, you know!"
"Yeah, pity about that. Look, the point is, you've run a hell of a race. I don't know another vampire in the world who could do what you've done - hell, I don't know another vampire who'd want to."

Angel leaned against the desk and clapped in slow, ironic applause. "Congratulations, Spike, you're the Temple Grandin of vampires. But the fact is, you're at a dead end. You've come as far as you can go without a soul, and since Buffy bites the dust if you try to get your soul back... well, you're at a bit of an impasse, aren't you? There's a glass ceiling on the side of goodness and light that you're never going to break through, and you've never struck me as a guy who's willing to settle for second best. Drusilla misses her boy. I miss him, too." For a second all pretense dropped. "I never had - I could never want - a better second than you, Spike."

A flight of might-have-beens took wing in those terrifying clear blue eyes. Twenty years they'd traveled together, twenty years of joyful, uncomplicated fighting and feeding and fucking, twenty years when it hadn't been Buffy's back that Spike had been watching. Family. Seconds ticked by as Spike sat transfixed by memory, and then he shook his head, slowly, and with something akin to regret. "It's too late for that, Angelus. Far too late. Haven't been a boy in a very long time." There was a wry and sorrowful amusement in his voice. "And barring that once, I never was yours, was I now?"

"I'm not talking about the past, Spike. I'm talking about the future." Angel leaned close and let his voice drop to a low, tantalizing purr. "We're not constrained by good and evil, you and me. There's a few hundred people you don't want to kill? Great. Don't kill 'em. There's six billion more out there that you don't give a damn for. And if it's Buffy you're worried about, hell, boy, you can make her one of us and bring her along if you want."

Quick as that, the nostalgic shadows crumbled away to nothing, and Spike's eyes chilled to chips of blue ice. "I'll see us both dust before I let that happen, grandsire. And come to that," he snarled, "I don't recall either you nor Dru missing me much when you had one another to amuse yourselves. 'Oooh, come along, Spike, let's be a family again, there's a few continents left you haven't worn horns on yet!'" His shoulders slumped. "You've had your little game, so just trot your soul out of storage and tell me where the others are. Took a liking to that skinny bird with the taco fetish when I was up here last, and if you've made a balls-up of turning her - "

He wasn't going to get any farther with this tonight. Best wait for Wesley's little project to bear its bitter fruit. Spike was nothing if not stubborn. He might as well have a little fun. "Balled her up?" Angel drawled. "Some one of these days you're gonna have to get over the Mommy issues, Willie-boy, and accept that she really did think that you were a talentless little milksop. In vampirism veritas - oof!"

In retrospect, cooler heads prevailing and such, throwing the desk had probably been a tactical error. For one thing, while it had knocked Angel back through the door and half-way across the lobby with an extremely satisfying crash, it had also jammed in the door-frame, and was now blocking the entire door of the office, trapping him inside while his furious grandsire systematically dismantled it on his way to getting back inside. Luckily Angel's taste in furniture was as rarefied as his taste in clothing, and the doorframe itself was sturdy pre-War construction. It was going to take even Angel awhile to smash through several layers of solid mahogany.

Spike shoved the last bookshelf into place front of the window between the office and the lobby and sat down in the swivel chair. He hooked one leg over the arm and twirled back and forth while he contemplated his options. Obviously he had to get out of here and let Buffy know what was afoot... but exactly what was afoot? Had Angel gone evil, or had those three months in a pineapple under the sea finally caught up and sent him off his chump? The buggering soul was still firmly in place, he
was certain of that, but it seemed to be firing a few cylinders short, and that was... incredibly confusing.

Shouts and snarls drifted in from the lobby, where a dozen strange vampires had erupted from the basement and were now milling around in confusion. Angel had called up the reserves. Luckily the reserves had about enough brain between them to fit into a teaspoon, but any moment now someone would come up with the bright idea of smashing the window and pushing over the shelves. There was a vent overhead, but ducts in the real world were never as convenient and spacious as the movies made them out to be, and like as not it would dead-end in an air-conditioning filter somewhere. No, he'd have to fight his way out.

The desk shivered in place, and an ominous cracking sound filled the room. Spike eyed the handy display of weaponry on the wall behind him - no crossbows, worse luck, but Angel probably hadn't wanted something that could so easily be turned against him in easy reach. Swords weren't his best weapon, but better than nothing, and if he could find something with a left-handed guard... Bypass the rapiers; for all their swashbuckling allure, a piercing weapon wouldn't do enough damage to slow a vamp down. Hand-and-a-half broadsword - no good; the fucking thing was almost as tall as he was. Hah, saber! Not a flimsy modern fencing sword but a good old-fashioned cavalry model that made no bones about being forged to kill. Short enough to use in close quarters, and vamp strength would make up for the lack of a charging horse behind it. He could lop a few heads off with this thing. Spike made a few experimental passes from high guard and crouched, waiting.

Outside in the lobby, the confused yammering had resolved into a chant of "One, two, three, pull!" With a wall-jarring shudder the desk toppled forward, peeling jagged shards of wood from the doorframe as it tore free. Before it hit the ground Spike was surging through the gap, coming down on the desk with bared fangs and a blood-curling roar. The nearest minion slipped and scrabbled under the unexpected extra weight, and a wild yell ended in a crunching gurgle as the desk crashed down. Spike wrenched a two-foot fragment of pine from the doorframe and plunged it into the heart of the minion to his right as he whirled past, and feinted from the head to the side, sword-blade whistling through the dispersing cloud of dust to find a temporary home in the left-hand minion's gut. Gore sprayed scattershot across the floor - bloody hell, was a mass slaughter in the vicinity going to set that pentagram doojigger off? Too late to worry about that now.

The minion whose belly he'd laid open was staring down at his innards in horror, frantically trying to stuff the shiny pink loops of blood-slick intestine back where they belonged. The three who'd taken his place were jittering just out of range, clutching makeshift stakes and nerving themselves for a mass attack. Spike balanced en garde atop the teetering desk, the tip of his blade revolving in deceptively lazy circles, ready to lash out in any direction. "Come one, come all, step right up and don't be shy! Bring the kiddies! Plenty of fun to be had for all!"

The stand-off couldn't last forever. One of the minions ventured half an inch too close, and leaped back with a yell, forearm sliced open to the bone. A quick glance showed that four of the most competent-looking of the minions were guarding the front door, and several others had disappeared, along with Angel himself, probably to get those -

**twang!**

Twist, lunge, slice, and one wooden shaft skidded along the blade and exploded into splinters as Spike tossed the sword from his left hand to his right and plucked the second bolt out of the air. In one deadly swooping motion he spun and aimed - just like darts - and hurled it back along its fatal arc. One of the two startled faces on the balcony dissolved into dust. Before the second archer could blink Spike clamped his blade between his teeth and leaped for the balcony, caught the railing in both hands and back-flipped up and over - Douglas sodding Fairbanks, eat your heart out. The
minion was still cranking a new bolt into position when Spike's sword clove a Northwest Passage between head and shoulders. He leaned over the balcony and roared, "You want to try that again, you cowardly bastards?" Bloody stupid, since catching a crossbow bolt in mid-flight wasn't a sitter even for a vampire as fast on the draw as he was, but they'd pissed him off. He hopped up onto the railing and flung his arms wide. "Come on, you sorry pieces of graveyard trash, is that all you've got? Afraid of one bloke with a pointy stick? Thought you were demons, not spaniel puppies!"

Another crossbow bolt sizzled through the air and clipped his thigh as he dodged, stinging like fuck-all. Blood seeped into frayed denim. "Missed again!" he yelled.

And then the minions were parting around Angelus's striding form as the bog-trotting bastard marched up the stairs like Sherman to Atlanta, leather longcoat billowing behind him. He stopped at the head of the stairs, standing foursquare with those massive shoulders looking to block the whole fucking landing, wielding a claymore the size of the Sears Tower and a smile that would have frozen the blood of Genghis Khan. "You want to play, Spike? Come pick on someone your own size."

He'd promised Buffy he wouldn't get into trouble. He should run. Scarper. Turn tail. Make like Brave Sir Robin and break for the door. He'd been lucky so far, but there were still seven, eight minions left, and Lawson and Wesley and Dru would show up any minute, and Christ, he couldn't run a sword through Dru in cold blood, could he? Untrained fledges were one thing, but he'd never, in all his days, managed to beat Angel in a fair fight.

Spike took a fresh grip on his sword, shook the blood and dust from his eyes, tongue-tip curling between his teeth in anticipation. Ignoring the burning in his thigh, he spun in place on the rail, stretched out one hand with an exultant grin and crooked a finger, beckoning. The fool upon the precipice. "Well, what are you waiting for, mate? Bring it on."
Chapter 9

The crash spurred Lawson downstairs at a run, his own feet swifter than the creaky old elevator. Halfway out onto the balcony overlooking the lobby he skidded to a halt, and threw a glance over the railing. A handful of the new fledges were deployed around the lobby, four of them guarding the front doors with a variety of ironmongery clutched in their hands, three more milling around the foot of the stairs holding crossbows like they'd never seen one before. Lawson groaned; not a single one of them was more than ten years out of the grave, and none of them had any real combat training, much less expertise in weapons that had gone out of style a century before their original birth. The first goddam thing he was going to do tomorrow night was head down to the L.A. Gun Club and round up a few dozen semi-automatics.

Angel was a different story. Hell, Angel was a whole different book. He swept across the balcony like a hurricane across Florida, swinging the claymore as if the wind itself bore the blade up. Spike dived off the balcony rail and tucked into a shoulder-roll barely in time to avoid the five-foot hunk of steel which came whistling down in his wake. The oak railing shattered like balsa, sending a deadly hail of splinters in all directions.

Lawson dodged the pencil rain and retreated to the comparative safety of the elevator door as Angel wrenched his sword free of the wreckage and spun to face Spike once more. The two older vampires circled, their faces streaked with blood and plaster dust, demon-masks painted in strokes of crimson and white. Angel attacked; Spike fell back, feinted, and thrust for the shoulder. The sabre's point sank home, but the flat of Angel's sword caught Spike with rib-cracking force and sent him flying across the balcony. Spike flailed for the shattered remnants of the rail as he went over, halting his fall with a shoulder-wrenching jerk, and hung there one-handed. His sword pinwheeled to earth below him, landing on the jade-green floor of the lobby with a ringing clatter. The minions at the foot of the stairs surged up, baying for blood, and the multiple twang of crossbows finally granted a stationary target filled the air. Spike howled, curling in mid-air as a bolt slammed into his kidneys.

Angel's lips curled in a lazy, what-have-we-here? grin. He strolled over to the edge of the balcony and stood with one Prada-shod foot hovering over Spike's white-knuckled hand. "Isn't this a bit of a cliché, even for you?" he asked.

"Sorry," Spike gasped, blinking blood and sweat from his eyes. "I'll try something more original." He reached around behind his back with his free hand, yanked the crossbow bolt free, and lunged upwards, ramming it through glossy patent leather and pinning Angel's foot to the floor. Angel toppled backwards with a yell and Spike hauled himself up onto the balcony using his grandsire's body as ballast. Angel tore his foot free with a roar and went for Spike's throat. The two of them rolled over and over, gouging, punching, kicking and biting, fists pulping faces and fangs ripping bloody furrows in each other's chest and shoulders.

The minions had backed off again, uncertain of their chances of hitting Angel in the mêlée - not that a few of them might not be considering the option, but firing at Angel and missing would invite a fate not to be contemplated. Lawson couldn't fault them for either impulse. This wasn't a formal challenge, but the very fact that Spike was another Aurelian with no small reputation of his own made it more than a personal quarrel. No matter that Spike had less than zero interest in vampire politics - if Angel couldn't defeat Spike decisively, it would undermine Angel's authority all the same.

The combatants slammed against the wall in front of him and bounced off again - Lawson wasn't even certain they realized he was there. If he stepped in now, his support of his sire would both
strengthen Angel's hold on the others and shore up his own uncertain credentials as one of Angel's inner circle. It would put him one up on Wesley in the constant struggle for their sire's favor and attention. It would force Angel to...

To what? However belatedly, Angel had already confirmed him as a member of the oldest and most feared vampire clan on the planet, and given him a measure of trust and responsibility. Given him a mission, outlined a plan. What more did he want? What more was there to want?

The elevator pinged, and the doors whooshed open behind him, disgorging a minion just up from the basement. She leaped out and bulled past Lawson with a whoop, waving a flamberge with an enthusiasm which far outstripped her skill. She aimed her blade straight for Spike, whose head Angel was doing his damnedest to remove from his shoulders.

Lawson was no stranger to decisive moments. The day the bombs had fallen on Pearl Harbor. The day he'd walked into the recruiting office. The day he'd looked into Angel's eyes and said I'm the only one. Looking back, it seemed strange that all of those moments had come while he was a living man. Had anything he'd done, anything he'd decided, since dying mattered? He'd been the best vampire he could be, but the lives he'd shattered, the people he'd killed, all would have come to their ends one way or another if he hadn't happened by. Death was universal; he was merely one of its particulars.

He reached down, picked up a fragment of the shattered balcony rail, took two steps forward and coolly inserted it between the minion's shoulder blades. She and her weapon crumbled to dust as Spike jabbed both thumbs into Angel's eyes. Angel released his grip with a bellow of half-blinded agony, and Spike staggered to his feet and reeled back, eyes coin-bright and blood streaming from his flared nostrils. He looked from Angel to Lawson and back again, reached some decision of his own, and bolted for the elevator. Lawson ducked in after him and slapped the close door button. The machinery lurched and grumbled into motion.

"I could smell Taco Girl on that bint you staked," Spike gasped. He straightened himself to his full and not terribly impressive height against the elevator wall and spat out a tooth. "Where is she?"

"Basement," Lawson said, tucking his makeshift stake into his belt as they shuddered to a halt. "Lingerie, notions, and captives." He dug his nails under the brass plate of the elevator controls and pulled; the control box tore free of the wall in a shower of sparks and a bouquet of curling wires. "It'll take awhile for Angel to get the minions under control and go around to the service stairs. You've got a few minutes." He led the way out into the basement, through stacks of featureless crates and cast-off furniture shrouded in the dust of half a century's abandonment, over to a large pair of double doors, and flung them open. "There's an exit into the sewers just off the pool."

Spike snorted. "What, no bowling alley?"

The empty pool made an eminently practical icebox, pre-equipped with drains; all you had to do was hose off the mess every couple of days and toss any bodies into the sewers, where the local scavengers would make short work of them. Lawson flicked the lights on and cocked an ear to the moans and whimpers below. Half a dozen heartbeats tripped away in asynchronous terror. That was down two. The fledges must have been hungry.

Spike knelt on the deck, looking down into the drained hollow. Wesley's toy and the random meals were chained to the pool ladder. Reddish-brown smears of blood stained the cracked plaster, along with less palatable substances. Irritation flickered across his mobile face, and Lawson wondered if that was that what the good guys were supposed to feel in a situation like this. At least Spike felt something, he thought sardonically. Puts him one up on me.
"Keys," Spike demanded, extending a hand - of course there would be keys, and of course Lawson could produce them. The younger vampire obliged, plucking the key ring from its hook and tossing it over. Spike caught it and dropped down into the pool, grunting in pain as he landed, and limped over to the huddled captives. "Right, you lot, let's get a move on."

Spike wasn't a very inspiring figure: with one rapidly blackening eye, a gaudy selection of bruises, and bloody bite-marks lacerating his shoulders, he looked worse than the vamp fodder he was supposedly rescuing. But something in his eyes got the captives shuffling to their feet nonetheless. The snick of tumblers falling into place, the metallic rattle as a waterfall of chains cascaded to the plaster, and it was done.

Lawson frowned as Spike hoisted the last of the woozy, fang-scarred prisoners up to catch hold of the ladder. He couldn't see the point of the exercise. "Angel will round up another batch of them by tomorrow."

"That's tomorrow." Spike clambered out of the pool, a half-conscious Fred slung over his shoulders. "Where's the bald chap?"

"Gunn? I don't know." Lawson took Fred off his hands, half supporting her weight. "Angel had him locked up somewhere that Wyndam-Pryce couldn't get at him."

"Fuck it, no time," Spike muttered, with an aggravated glance at the little huddle of captives.

"Oh, we've got time," Lawson said, tightening his hold on Fred until she squeaked. "Time enough for you and me to have a talk. You can tell me what I want to know and walk out of here, taking her with you - " He patted Fred's cheek, and she looked up at him blurrily. "Or you can keep playing dumb, and force me to finish what Pryce started. Maybe you've still got enough juice to take me, but maybe you don't, and I can damn sure keep you occupied till the old man shows up."

Dark brows lowered over eyes several degrees colder than they had been a moment ago, but Spike didn't move - no doubt just as aware as Lawson of the shape he was in and his chances against a fresh opponent. "Care to tell me exactly what piece of vital information I'm concealing about my person?"

Silence stretched taut between them. "I need to know that there's a point to all this, somewhere, somehow - what we are, and what we do," Lawson said at last. "I don't know if Angel made me wrong, or if part of his soul got... stuck in me somehow, but the killing, the destruction... none of it means anything! I thought Angel could - he says he's going to rebuild the Order of Aurelius, but that's just more of the same.

"I talked to a lot of vampires in Sunnydale. Most of them think you're crazy. Even your own minions." His hand tightened on Fred's throat, feeling her bird-fine limbs tremble and shiver against him. "But you know what? They follow you anyway. Because you're crazy."

Spike scowled, and there was no answer in the bruised and bloodied planes of cheek and jaw, the impatient blue eyes, no clue in the irascible quirk of that scarred brow. "Mate, you want to natter on about life, the universe, and everything, get me good and rat-arsed some night I'm not running for my life. There's a time and a sodding place, and this isn't either."

Panic shot through Lawson like fire through the California scrubland. What if there really were no answer? "Not good enough! Tell me, damn it, or Fred here will regret it!"

"What do I look like, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi?" Spike snapped. "It's not like there's a sodding manual! Slaughter and mayhem don't turn your crank any longer, find something that does. Collect
stamps, join the Wank Of The Month Club, start at A and insult everyone in the phone book - pick one, and leave me out of it." He looked down at Fred, eyes narrowing, turned on his heel and stalked towards the exit, shoving past the confused prisoners. "Cheers. Enjoy yourself. I'm off."

The dramatic exit was somewhat marred as he caught the toe of one boot in a tangle of discarded chain, and half-stumbled with a curse. Lawson bit back disappointment. Spike was only doing what any sensible vampire in his situation would do, cutting his losses and getting out. Hell.

But Spike had never been a sensible vampire. The stumble turned into a spin, and Spike whipped around like a released slingshot, kicking the chain straight at Lawson's head. In the same instant Fred sank her teeth into his hand - a minor distraction, but an effective one. Lawson flung up one arm to block the chain and Fred squirmed out of his loosened grasp, snatched the shard of oak from his belt and would have rammed it home in his heart had Spike's fingers not closed on her wrist at the last instant.

"Oh, no, you're not gonna stop me," she said, glaring wild-eyed up at Spike. "Uh uh. I'm real sorry, but he's gonna have to die. I'm thinkin' something with ants. How much of a vampire can get nibbled away before they dust? It's a question, a real question."

"Scientific inquiry later, love," Spike said, taking away the stake and tucking her under one arm (with some difficulty, as she was almost as tall as he was). He eyed Lawson with disfavor. "You're obviously mad as a hatter, so I'll make allowances."

Without warning he lashed out with the butt-end of the stake, and Lawson yelled as a fireball of pain exploded in his nose. "But not many. Lesson the first, when you're asking advice of your elders and betters, bloody well mind your manners. The bona fide white hats aren't nearly so forgiving as your loving nevvy."

Lawson closed his eyes. The steel-wool rasp of desperation in his voice was more eloquent than the words. "Spike - I can't go on like this. I get nothing, nothing from being a vampire, and I don't know how to be anything else."

Spike sighed. "Neither do I, mate. The fault's not in our sires, but in ourselves." Shouts and the pounding of footsteps on the stairs interrupted them. He straightened, weariness forgotten, and bellowed at the captives, "Don't fucking well stand there, run, or I'll eat you myself!"

Moments of decision. Moments that, when you looked back, defined your entire life, or death. Pick one. Lawson shook his head. "No. Go ahead. I'll hold them up. I don't think he saw me stake that girl upstairs; it happened just as you were trying to gouge his eyes out. Besides, he's a dick, but he's still my sire." He cocked his head, tongue curled against his bloodstained teeth. "Coming with?"

"Been staked. Hurts like fuck."

If that was an out, Lawson wasn't taking it. "Yeah, well... that offer to get you drunk still good?"

"Always. Glenlivet, neat, as long as you're buying," Spike hefted the stake with a wry smile, and plunged it without hesitation into Lawson's chest.

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Crouched on the rooftop, a pipestem gargoyle gazing down at the bright sterile windows of the building on the corner opposite, Connor pondered his options. The medicines he needed were in there, but getting hold of them had proven to be a thornier problem than he'd anticipated. The white-clad woman at the front desk had first tried to shoo him away to the free clinic downtown, and then threatened to call out her guards if he didn't leave. The shifty-eyed man in the parking lot who'd
offered to get him what he wanted for a price was asking for more than his meager funds could cover. Breaking in would be simple enough, but medicines here came in the form of tiny featureless pills, not the herbs and potions he was familiar with. He couldn't read the local language well enough to tell what was what.

With a sigh of resignation, Connor dropped over the side of the building and skinned down the drainpipe. He was just going to have to enlist someone who could. He comforted himself with the thought that he'd be killing two birds with one stone. A scouting mission into enemy territory was long overdue, and if he could liberate someone from the Hyperion who could help him out of his own dilemma, so much the better.

Connor had never heard of the saddest words of tongue or pen, but if anyone had asked him what the sweetest were, he'd have answered without hesitation, "I told you so." He'd known, in the same way he knew that the sun would rise in the morning and rocks would fall when you dropped them, that Angel would turn on them sooner or later. And now everyone else knew it too, but since all of them were dead, delirious, or captured, his opportunities for gloating were limited. In a way it was his own fault. He'd had the chance to take Angel out for good last summer. Instead he'd chosen to pursue his father's - his real father's - plan of vengeance. It was painful to admit it, but Holtz had been wrong, blinded by the smoke of his long-burning hatred. In the long run, vengeance was too costly. It was much better to take your enemies out hard and fast, the first chance you got.

It was getting on for five in the morning as he approached the hotel. There was still an hour or so till full dawn, but low down on the eastern horizon, the sky was taking on a luminous pewter sheen. The Hyperion's battlements loomed high overhead, a castle to be stormed, and a single lighted window squinted blearily at the coming dawn.

What there wasn't was any sign of a lookout at the front gate, and that was weird. Angel hadn't yet started recruiting local vampires, mainly because there weren't any local vampires stupid enough to lair within two miles of the Hyperion, and the Sunnydale imports were as yet unfamiliar with the territory. They patrolled the neighborhood aggressively nonetheless. Twice in the last week he'd run afoul of vampires nosing around his lair. The first time there'd only been one, and he'd disposed of it quickly. The second time there'd been three, and he'd stayed hidden until he was certain they'd left. It was only a matter of time before someone found him out.

Now, though, there was no sight or scent of a sentry. Connor melted into the shadows of the entryway to the office building across the street, straining his eyes to catch any sign of movement in the foliage of the courtyard, or anyone lurking beneath the trees lining the sidewalk in front of the hotel. What did the uncannily deserted posts mean? Simple malingering, or was something else going on? Suspicious, he retreated half a block to Norton and slunk down the side street, slipping from shadow to ink-blot shadow in the eaves of the storefronts. The bandana he'd used to wash Cordelia's wounds was still in his back pocket; he tore a thin whippy branch from one of the trees, tied the bloodied rag to the end, and poked it cautiously around the corner. After ten minutes of vamp-fishing and no bites, he gave up: there weren't any of the usual lookouts at the side doors or the service entrances, either.

Connor debated a quick reconnaissance. His ears were as keen as any vampire's, and once inside he should be able to tell quickly if there were any human survivors, and get a rough idea of where in the building they were. On the other hand, it might be a trap, possibly not intended for him, but deadly even so.

A grating noise further down the street made him freeze. Flattening himself to the wall, Connor peered around the corner, his vamp-bait fluttering forgotten to the pavement. Half a block away, the manhole cover in the center of the street hiccupped, then flipped upwards with a loud CLONK! and
shivered to rest on the pavement like a settling quarter. A head gophered up out of the hole, its features in shadow and its unruly hair a flat shocking white in the street lights. Connor's lips drew back from his teeth as he caught the faint scent of vampire.

The vampire hopped out onto the street, a lithe silhouette crouching beside the manhole. A sinewy arm reached down and hauled a smaller, slimmer figure out, then a larger, bulkier one, and another, and another, until there was a small herd of people that Connor's nose informed him were unmistakably human - and pretty ripe humans, too, stinking of blood and filth. They milled around in blinking confusion on the pavement. A couple of them started sobbing at the sight of open sky.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" the vampire snarled. "Get out of here, and be quick about it. Sun's almost up, and I'm not going to fry shepherding you gits home."

"But I don't know where I am!" a woman wailed. 

"Sunset and Camden," the vampire growled, "And if you're not elsewhere inside five minutes, you're going to be inside me."

"Wilshire's two blocks thataway, and the number 20 bus runs every half hour." That was - Fred? Definitely Fred, sounding bone-tired and on the verge of slipping back into wall-scribbling mode. "But don't you go back up by the hotel, go around that way." She pointed down the street. "Spike, you got money?"

"Yeah, but -"

"Give it here." Fred plucked Spike's wallet from his hand and thrust a handful of crumpled bills at her fellow-prisoners. "That oughta be enough for all of you. There's a 7-11 two blocks east where you can get change, assuming they don't think you're crazy people, which they might, 'cause honest, you look like crazy people but it's a big help if you talk to each other and not to yourselves. Now hurry up, all of you, or you'll miss the bus and Spike'll eat you and that would just be unfortunate. Shoo!"

With many an apprehensive look, the little crowd of ex-prisoners wandered off down the street. The vampire watched them go, one hand clenching and unclenching at his side, and a gleam of predatory calculation in his eyes. Fred's eyelids fluttered, and Spike whirled, catching her before she could slide to the ground. "Come on, pet, don't go south on me now," he crooned.

Fred stirred in his arms and mumbled something incomprehensible about pancakes. Connor could see, now, that her reedy limbs were covered with bloody scrawls of runes, reeking of dark magic and ill intent. He was no stranger to torture, dealt out or received; he'd been weaned on pain and privation, and he harbored a certain amount of scorn for Angel's human minions, who imagined that their lives had been so hard. The mean streets of L.A. and even the slave-pens of Pylea were nothing compared to the blasted wilderness of Quortoth and Holtz's harsh and unyielding brand of... well, he'd thought it was love at the time, and nowadays he tried not to think about it at all. Still, his gut stirred uneasily at the sight of those lovingly-inflicted wounds.

Spike, still cradling Fred in his arms, looked up with a growl and a blood-red flash of pupils - he must have caught Connor's scent. Connor expected to see ridges and fangs, but the vampire's face, when he straightened and faced the darkness, was wholly human. "Come on out, whelp," he said, in a voice stripped of menace by weariness.

Connor weighed fight against flight - Spike wasn't much bigger than he was, and obviously in bad shape. There wouldn't be a better time to take him on if it did come to a fight. On the other hand, was it worth a fight? Fred didn't look like she was in any condition to break into the surgical center. He
didn't owe her anything after she'd sided with Angel against him. He could find someone else. But then... with anyone else, he'd have to waste time explaining.

Besides, more than anything else he wanted Fred to gaze up at him with big dark doe-eyes and say in a trembling, penitent voice, You were right, Connor. He's a monster, and we never shoulda pulled him out of the ocean.

He stepped boldly out of the shadows, facing Spike down. "I know you," he said. "You're the one who helped Wesley and Faith pull Angel out of the Bay."

"And you're the chap who put him there," Spike replied equably. "Can't say as I don't understand the urge." He glanced to the east and hoisted Fred up over one shoulder. "Sorry, mate, no time for autographs."

"I don't think so." Connor moved to block Spike's path. "You're a monster. Just like him. You're not going anywhere with her."

"Yeah? Well, if I stand here with her, we'll go up in flames in about fifteen minutes, and I'm bloody well not letting you drag her back in to Daddy, so - "

"You think I'm working with him?" Connor spat. "I'd kill him first. Or myself."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Classic cry for attention. Mark my words, at the end of the day all you want is a pat on the head and a lolly from your Da."

"Oh, yeah? You're the one who helped rescue him," Connor retorted, dripping scorn. "You're his friend."

"If I weren't otherwise occupied, I'd rip your tongue out for that," Spike snarled. "Angel and me, we'll never be friends. Now, Fred's hurt and I'm combustible, so get out of my way and let me get her to my car or I'll give you a taste of what I gave your old man just now."

Connor scowled. Aspersions cast against Angel's fighting ability carried an unaccountable sting, if only because they reflected indirectly on his own prowess. He eyed Spike's bruised face and bloodied body with a sneer. "What, beating your face repeatedly against my fist - wait, you have a car?"

Holtz had taught him to look at any new element entering a situation as something to use to his advantage, and car opened up sudden vistas of possibility. Spike was a monster, but he was a monster with wheels, and he was working against Angel for some reason. "I've got a... a friend. Cordelia - you remember her? Angel attacked her, and the wound's festered. I need medicine for her, and I need to get her to a safer place. I know someplace I could take her, but it's across town, and I couldn't carry her there without hurting her - but you've got a car. Help me, and I'll let you bring Fred along. It's a human's place, so Angel and his minions can't get in. They'll be safe. And the person who owns it knows about vampires, so she'll know not to invite them in - she's got wards. It's - "

Spike cut him off. "Car's this way. Come on."

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"So let me get this straight," Angel said, his voice the thrum of an electric knife. "The six of you couldn't catch up to one kidney-stabbed, beaten-to-a-pulp vampire who was nursemaiding an entire herd of half-drained humans down two hundred yards of wide-open sewer pipe?"

The row of unhappy minions ducked heads and shuffled feet, elbowing one another until the smallest
one was shoved forward, a flock of undead penguins offering up a sacrifice to the leopard seal. The scapegoat's eyes glazed with panic. "He went topside," she croaked. "It was almost dawn."

"Almost dawn," Angel repeated. He strode over to the window, ignoring the stabbing pain in his shoulder and the grinding of small bones in his foot, and jerked on the sash. The curtains flew open and a wash of silver light flooded the room. The minions cringed back against the far wall, crying out and flinging up their arms to shield their eyes. "It sounds to me like you people aren't really familiar with how much light a vampire can stand. I think a demonstration is in order."

He grabbed the nearest minion by the scruff of the neck and thrust him through the window in a crash of shattering glass, out into the open air. "Notice," he said blithely, "that indirect light is merely uncomfortable, not fatal." The fledgling screamed and writhed like a speared trout in his grip as the first rays of sunrise broke over the LA skyline and lanced across the rooftops. "Direct sunlight, on the other hand..."

Angel's arm remained rigid as iron as the rising sun sliced down the Hyperion's wall and flayed the minion with a blade of fire. His hair blazed up in a crown of flame, and his screams were lost to the rush and crackle of burning. Skin charred, guts boiled, bones incandesced into traceries of living coal, and as the agonized, upturned face dissolved into ash in the wind of its own destruction, Angel let go.

A shower of sparks spiraled down to the street on the morning breeze, and Angel yanked the blinds down and turned to face the others. He held up his scorched fist, the arm blistered all the way up to the elbow. "You had him in reach and you let him go," he snarled, "because you're afraid of a little sun. You're Aurelians! Pathetic, inbred, last-chance Aurelians, but when I give you an order I expect you to carry it out or die trying. Is that understood?"

A few nods and whimpers. The woman they'd pushed to the fore fell to her knees. "Master, I - I followed as far as I dared, and I saw - he left with a boy." She held out a scrap of red cloth. "He dropped this."

Angel took the offering, eyes slitting as the scent reached his nostrils. Connor. "For that you live. You three, go round us up some fresh blood - I know it's daylight. Be inventive. You, go see to Lawson, you, get this mess cleaned up and get that window fixed, and you," he pointed to the one who'd given him the bandana, "come with me."

The minion followed him down the hall at a respectful distance, awe in her protuberant eyes. He didn't have to think of her as 'the minion'; he remembered her name, because he remembered everything. He just didn't care. Perhaps he'd kill her, too, just for the hell of it... but no, she was the only one who'd showed even the dimmest spark of initiative. They hadn't wanted to catch up. Spike had cut and run, a tacit admission of defeat, but he'd left a trail of destruction behind him - minions dead, Angel wounded, Lawson very fortuitously staked not quite in the heart. These were young, stupid, Sunnydale vampires, to whom Angelus was a distant, defanged boogyman, and Spike a real, ever-present menace. Big mistake on their part, and they might not survive learning otherwise. Back in his own room, Angel tossed a first-aid kit at the minion and stripped off his blood-soaked shirt and ruined shoes. He sat on the edge of the bed while she cleaned and bound his wounds. He felt edgy, in need of a kill or a fuck or both, and the minion didn't look up to satisfying either craving. She was thin and mousy, with an unfortunate mole on one cheek, and she'd die with the same drab dullness with which she lived. He'd hoped that at least a few of Lawson's catch would be worth keeping, that he'd have a few competent family lieutenants trained up before he started recruiting local vampires. So far he'd been disappointed. The Master had been fussy about whom he sired, but his descendants hadn't been nearly so discriminating - and of course, Buffy had taken out all the truly dangerous members of the Master's court years ago.
He was going to have to turn Gunn, no matter how pissed off Wesley might get; he needed both competence and loyalty. Lawson's dealings with Spike made him suspect now, a liability. If he weren't so short-handed, he'd stake the possibly traitorous bastard. *If you can take him, of course.*

The muscles in his jaw tightened. There wasn't any if about it.

*Yeah? Spike could have won that fight. Not easily, maybe, but you think about that, old man.*

His soul might be doped into quiescence, but the self-doubt it engendered could still sink its claws into his gut, turning on him with the same diabolical guile that his demonic urges employed. He'd lost fights to Spike once or twice in the past, but those infrequent defeats had always been due to Spike cheating somehow. In a straightforward brawl, there had never been any doubt in his mind that Spike would lose. Until tonight. And worse, Spike knew it.

Angel straightened and smacked the minion away with a grunt of annoyance. "Get out." She bobbed her head and scurried away roach-like, slamming the door behind her in her haste. Idiot, and get of idiots. He rose and flexed his shoulder, testing the give of the bandages and wincing a little as the wound twinged, and pulled a white wifebeater out of the top drawer. He'd heal in a day, and he'd given Spike something to remember him by, but it was damned annoying.

A glint of light on the dresser caught his eye as he shrugged into the undershirt. It was the DVD Wesley had given him. Clips from the surveillance cameras that the Mears boy had planted on Buffy last year, Wesley claimed, including a few scenes of Buffy and Spike sparring. An underground classic, no doubt. He picked up the silvery disc and flipped it over. The label was a cheap home-stamped thing featuring an improbably busty blonde doing questionable things with a stake and the title 'Sizzling Action With Cold Dead Seed.' "Aw, Wes, you shouldn't have," Angel murmured. "I didn't get you anything."

He limped over to the entertainment center, slipped the disc into the tray of the DVD player, lowered himself onto the bed with a stifled hiss of pain, and clicked the remote. He'd miscalculated. He wouldn't do so again. Spike wasn't a fledge any longer, but a vampire in his prime, and since taking up demon-fighting, he'd honed his considerable skills to a razor's edge on creatures which far outstripped him in size and strength. And there were those clandestine nips of Slayer's blood - a savage growl rattled the bars of Angel's chest. That blood was *his,* his to savor, his to spill. He jabbed the play button with one thumb, imagining it was Spike's eye socket. He never got tired of fights he couldn't lose, and the reason he didn't lose them was that he knew his enemies. *Doing my homework like a good boy, Wes.*

Whoever had burned the DVD couldn't edit for shit. Scenes were clipped short or bracketed by unrelated snippets of action - or more often, inaction. He fast-forwarded through fifteen or twenty minutes worth of barely-visible humping before the abrupt cut to the well-lit training room at the Magic Box. Pause, play.

- *Buffy's fist to his nose. Spike drops, sweep-kicks for her knees. She leapfrogs over his leg and lashes out mid-air with a kick of her own, one-two to the head. He goes down and kips up again, catching her with a double-handed blow to the jaw as she comes down. She staggers, rolls, somersaulting to her feet and launching herself at him again. Spike grabs her ankle in mid-air and twists - she's slammed against the wall, kicking off to -*

The scene cut short, replaced by an out-of-focus shot of Buffy's bedroom. Angel hit rewind, and the blurry figures squiggled back into position. He unleashed the deadly choreography again, frame-by-frame, move and counter-move coming so quickly the camera captured only their blurred ghosts. The remote was in his left hand now, as his right crept downwards to cup hardening flesh.
They are beautiful when they dance, two magnificent animals, all sleek rolling muscle and sinuous curves. They've both filled out in the last year; the spectacular cheekbones that always make Angel's fingers itch for a pencil are sheer cliffs rather than cavernous hollows these days. Beneath her tank top, Buffy's breasts bob and jiggle. Pebble-hard nipples tent the thin pink cotton, a siren summons to the answering bulge in Spike's jeans. Buffy's eyes are diamond-bright, eager, and Spike's grinning, breathing hard.

Angel was breathing hard and fast himself, fondling his aching erection through his trousers. He could imagine the whiff of her, sweat and arousal and rich hot blood pumping just beneath the fevered skin. He knew the taste of that blood, salty and metallic, the taste of seawater, the taste of womankind. Wherever Spike had been, he'd been first, and likewise with Buffy. His fangs grew sharp and his cock throbbed at the memory. Squeeze, stroke, from root to head and back again, tight as a Slayer's virginal cunt, hard as a naive young fledge's humiliated tears. There was nothing they could discover of one another that he had not laid bare long since.

Right, said the sardonic voice in his hindbrain. You fucked her twice. She doesn't remember the second time and believe me, the first time was - well, hey, I guess it was fine for a terrified virgin and a guy who'd been dating his right hand for the past century. And Spike, of all the times you knocked him around, the one he remembers is the one that ended with you on your knees calling him Will...

Angel snarled, groaned, straining suspended half-way between release and agony. Elastic scraped scratchy tracks down the underside of his cock as he yanked the waistband of his sweats down over his hips. Freed, his cock sprang up to slap against his belly, the milky droplets already seeping from the head spattering damp spots on his undershirt. Remote. Where was remote? For that matter, where was hand? Hand, meet cock. Get better acquainted. Fast forward.

Front yard. Fireflies overhead like tiny Japanese lanterns. Spike lounging against the rough bole of the oak tree, his pale flesh luminous in the night. Buffy leaning into him, gold into silver. Spike lifts her up and spins her around, bracing her back against the tree. His lips move against hers; he's reciting Marvell as she undoes his fly. He's half-erect already, drawing arabesques of pearl on her belly. Her mouth captures his and poetry is swallowed in a kiss. Her legs entwine his waist like ivy, bare toes curling and flexing, and he's inside her now, vaster than empires and more slow, fucking her hard against the tree. Oh yeah. Make her scream and beg and bite her, rip her open, make Valentine's lace of her entrails - he's not biting her, God damn it, Spike, you don't have a soul, what the hell is your excuse? Poser, pussy, cunt-licking failure of a demon! There's bark in her hair and she's biting his shoulder to muffle her screams. They topple heedless to the grass, an avalanche of flesh, and the camera goes dark.

Was this romantic bullshit all there was? Impossible that the mask wouldn't fall sooner or later, and they remember what they were to one another, demon and slayer of demons. He stroked harder, working the foreskin over the head, pinching, tugging harder (Darla's fangs as she swallows him whole, Drusilla's ecstatic screams as the whip comes down). He thumbed the remote with one hand and himself with the other, and oh, yeah, paydirt.

Bedroom. Spike splayed out, naked, erect, bound. White skin, red stripes, dark curling hair. Buffy stands at the foot of the bed, dark lashes sweeping flushed cheeks, Spike's belt in her hands. She doubles it, snaps it, and the crack of leather is gunshot loud. Spike's hips jerk; his balls are tight and almost as dark as the coarse hair they rest in, his leaking cock swollen to impossible dimensions. Buffy crawls onto the bed, stalking him like a lioness, and straddles his lean hips. She's playing with her breasts as she sinks down on him, head thrown back, eyes near-closed, taking him in inch by inch. They gasp in unison as she begins to move.

Yes, oh, yes, this was more like it. He had the rhythm now, hard and relentless.
She rides him mercilessly through three explosive orgasms, and he's still hard. She writhes and
gasps and pants, taunts him into game face and fucks him back out, bites his small taut nipples till he
roars and strains against the ropes, and the bed-frame shudders dangerously around them. Crack!
goes the belt. Buffy's whipped it around his neck and yanked it tight, and Spike's whole body
convulses with something so far beyond pleasure not even seeing it play out across that endlessly
expressive face can convey the intensity.

A spasm wracked him, and Angel fell back shuddering and unfulfilled, balls aching as if he hadn't
come at all. He threw his head back against the headboard with a roar of frustration. On the TV
screen the masque continued, spectres caught in an eternal passion play.

*He spends and spends and spends within her, everything in him emptied out, and sinks back at last,
utterly, paradoxically replete. Buffy collapses on top of him, herself spent, kissing the fading lines of
red, curling around him. She nuzzles him, cheek to cheek, vampire-fashion. Casually, Spike reaches
up and wraps a hand around one of his bonds, snaps it, and holds her close. As one, they draw
breath.*

Kill them. Kill them both. No, fuck them both, fuck them blind and bleeding, they have no goddam
right to be happy when I have - I have -

This rage was not a demon's rage; this jealousy was not a demon's jealousy. This was the isolation
and fury of the man, who still, after all these years, needs killing. He wasn't jealous of them, but of
what they had, what remained forever beyond his reach. A whisper in the night, a shadow in the
corner of the eye, an elusive scent - *scent!*

Angel grabbed the bandana and crushed it to his nose. *Yes. Her* scent, lingering just beneath
Connor's. Of course. Find one, and he'd take them both. How would his boy's blood taste, when he
finally bound that rebel child to his side with bonds he couldn't break?

He clutched the bloodstained bandana, thrusting into the crumpled cloth, seeing Cordelia's cool dark
beauty, flawless face, lush body. That body helpless beneath his, his cock lost in the valley between
her breasts. Connor's face in the background, helpless and worshipful, watching as Angel took back
what was his by right. Her neck bared to his fangs, her blood flowing down his throat like metallic
sunshine, her screams ringing sweetly in his ears and her heart slowing and ceasing forever before
she rose again as a fit consort for the master of the Aurelians - he would have that, have her, soon.
Tonight, tonight -

Angel's climax hit like a freight train, hips arcing up off the bed as jizz splattered across his belly. He
came again, and again, bucking and thrashing against the mattress, and in the bowels of the Hyperion
the minions shuddered at their master's roar of triumph.

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Three bright strands of copper braided with a piece of red string, the whole wound carefully around
the smudge stick: celery, acacia, yarrow, goldenseal, each herb chosen carefully both for its
properties and its effect on the others. The portable spell circle, spread out on the minuscule square of
carpet between the bed and the door of her room, inscribed with ominous sigils in red and black
Magic Marker. Six candles set carefully around the perimeter of the circle, alternating black and
white. An altar set up on the cheapass dresser, right in front of the flickering TV set, the brazier
smoking gently beneath the yellowed NO COOKING ALLOWED IN ROOMS sign. All these
things had failed utterly to transform Kennedy's cruddy little rent-by-the-week room into a haven of
all things magical.

In fact, Kennedy thought, the whole thing was pretty damn lame. But she'd seen enough results so
far to keep her thoughts to herself. Along with her hands and her eyes and any other body part which might accidentally come within five feet of Willow Rosenberg, which was really difficult in a room the approximate size of an ant farm. But Willow had insisted that the spell had to be done in Kennedy's place of power, or as close as they could come to it, and at the moment, this was it.

"You're sure about the blood?" Tara asked, reading over Willow's neatly printed spell. Kennedy couldn't have said whether her tone was worried, accusing, or frightened, which probably meant it wasn't any of those things, and she was driving herself nuts. "This is a little more... intense than I was expecting."

"I know you can handle it," Willow said, arranging a small magnet and the crystal with Kennedy's aura-picture in front of the brazier. "You were Ghede's horse, weren't you? It was Kennedy's idea, really. The spell just wasn't coming together - more of a dis-spell than a spell, you know? - and she reminded me that the First Slayer's on the dark and ancient side, and it's not gonna manifest for some weenie little herbal bath." She began circling the brazier with whitish, lumpy objects. Bones? Suspiciously human bones? Oh, no, couldn't be, because where would a vampire get human bones? Except of course from the steaming bodies of -

"I thought you were going to throw those out," Buffy said from her cross-legged perch in the center of the bed, where she was grinding something green and gooey into something green and gooier in a mortar. She wrinkled her nose in disdain. "Don't they have Acathla cooties or something?"

Willow clasped the last bone protectively to her breast. "I prefer to think of it as a long and distinguished mystical pedigree," she replied. "These bones have been through two and a half re-soulings, three major conjurations, a de-lusting, and that... incident."

Tara winced. "The one we decided never to mention again?"

"That's the one." Willow regarded the bone dubiously. "Maybe I should throw them out."

"Herbs go squish now," Buffy announced, holding out the mortar. "Next?"

Tara produced a small silvery knife with a triangular blade. "Kennedy? If you'll hold out your hand..."

Yeah, right, I'll let the witch whose girlfriend I just macked on come at me with a knife. That's the ticket. Kennedy swallowed and held out her hand, relieved to see that it didn't tremble. So far Buffy and Tara had said and done nothing to indicate that they knew what had happened that afternoon in the basement, and she'd been avoiding Willow's gaze so assiduously that she had no idea if Willow was nervous or not. Kennedy wasn't reassured by the general silence. Even if Willow kept mum, Spike knew, and he could be plotting to use his knowledge of her flagrante delecto to his advantage. It was obvious he wanted her gone. He could turn Buffy and Tara against her, and God, what if Travers found out? Would he decide that she was just as contaminated as Buffy was? For the first time a thrill of real fear ran through her.

Tara mistook her shudder for aversion to the knife. "I'll be quick." She lowered the point of the athame to Kennedy's palm with clinical precision, and drew a slim red line with one swift slash. It felt like a paper cut: one moment of numb burn, and then a throbbing ache as the skin parted and the blood welled up. Tara turned her hand over, and the crimson drops splashed down into the mortar, mingling with the pulpy green of the mullein and valerian.

"And just a spritz of extra-virgin olive oil..." Willow mixed with verve. "Voila. Magic pesto."

Buffy laid a hand on her shoulder. "Crucial thing? Don't let it con you into thinking it's in charge."
Kennedy nodded. "Yeah. Got it."

"I think we're ready," Tara said. She stepped into the spell circle, held the still-bloody athame high and intoned, "I call upon Sineya, first of the Ones. I offer my tongue to she who is without words that she may speak." Without a flinch, without a wince, she licked the bloodied edge of the knife straight on.

Willow dabbed the blood-and-oil mixture on Kennedy's forehead, breastbone, and palms. The pungent mixture trickled down cold and gelid to her eyebrows, and stung as it worked into the cut in her hand. Willow turned to Tara, who opened her mouth, and Willow let three drops of the mixture fall onto her tongue. Tara knelt and inscribed 'Head' on the first of the white candles with the point of the athame, leaving tiny bloodstained curls of wax shavings. "Ignite!" The candle flickered to life. "Here do I light the first Lamp. May it be a beacon to that which we summon."

Buffy, anxiously consulting her copy of the spell, took the smudge stick and held it over the brazier till it caught, sending heavy roiling clouds of white smoke up towards the ceiling. She waved the smudge stick around the altar, setting everyone except Willow coughing, until Kennedy managed to wedge the front window open. They had, luckily, thought to take the battery out of the fire alarm first, though Kennedy suspected it was probably dead.

"Is anyone going to notice the smoke?" Willow whispered.

"They'll just think it's pot," Kennedy said with a shrug. "Let's get on with it."

Tara repeated the process with the second and third white candles, inscribing them with 'Spirit' and 'Heart.' "Here do I light the second Lamp. May it illuminate the passageway between worlds. Here do I light the third Lamp. May it bring enlightenment within as it brings light without." She held out the athame, and Kennedy took it with a nervous breath.

Kennedy knelt down, extended her wounded hand over the nearest black candle, and squeezed out a last drop of blood. "I beseech Sineya to speak to her daughter this night. As these candles burn, so burn the hearts of Sineya's children for her wisdom."

As her blood hit the candle-wick, all three black candles burst into eldritch flame, blue and baleful, and the smoke from the incense billowed up around them in choking clouds. Tara's head jerked back and she uttered a strangled cry, collapsing to the floor. Kennedy started to get up, to do something - that was what she was for, wasn't it? To do something about... about... things like this. The room swam in dim smoky circles and her head throbbed. There wasn't any air. She was choking, smothering, dying -

"Aaah!" Kennedy shot upright with a gasp. The air in her lungs and her aching throat was clean and pure as no air on earth, not a single molecule of burned hydrocarbon sullying its crystal clarity. She looked around. The sky overhead was a brilliant blaze of blue, the sands which stretched off to the horizon a bleached bone-white. Heat waves shimmered across the dunes, turning the desert into a melting Daliesque dreamscape. Here and there an outcropping of rock, a gnarled mass of dead root and trunk, or the skeletal remains of some vanished leviathan broke the surface.

Blinking the grit from her eyes, Kennedy got to her feet and looked around. She was alone.

"No," Tara said. Kennedy whirled around. Tara stood on the baked earth where she absolutely hadn't stood a second ago, a light breeze ruffling her wheaten hair. At her side crouched a thing barely human, tattered remains of clothing winding like gravecloth about its dark limbs and white streaks of mud caking its savage face, outlining the skull beneath the skin. "You're not alone. That's the problem."
"Is that her?" Kennedy demanded. "Is she the First Slayer? Sineya?"

"She has no name," Tara said. "She's grown beyond the curse of human features."

The dark angular creature rose from its crouch and Kennedy realized that it - she - was human, after all, a human body moved from within by something wholly inhuman. She prowl ed across the parched sand between them and stood upright, studying Kennedy with chill, alien eyes. "Thief," she rasped, and turned away, lip curled in contempt, loping away across the dunes.

Kennedy stood open-mouthed for a second, too stunned to do anything else. Was it talking about Willow? She couldn't think what else she might have stolen lately, and hell, it wasn't like Willow hadn't - she broke into a run. "Hey! Come back! I came here to find out why I don't have the power I should have!"

Heat blasted up from the ground, and shifting sand sucked and clutched at her boots with every step. She caught up to the lean dark figure and grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around. "What do you mean, 'thief'? Answer me, damn it!"

"Rrraarrghh!" The face that rounded on her was as demonic as any vampire's, wild tawny eyes and sharp white teeth bared in an inhuman snarl. "We live in the kill," she rasped. "We are born and we die in the kill. Alone!"

Fingers thin and knotted as twigs and as strong as steel wire closed around her throat as Kennedy kicked and pummeled at her opponent. They tumbled together down the sloping face of the dune, sand pouring in scalding showers around them. At the bottom of the hill she scrambled to her feet, coughing; Sineya had vanished.

Tara sat a little higher on the dune, arms folded over her bent knees. Along the crest of the dune marched a line of women, of girls. Buffy Summers was at the head of the line, and right behind her was a dark-haired, dark-eyed vixen in black leather who had to be Faith. She gave an insouciant puff on her cigarette and waved. Behind her were... shit, Rona, and Vi, and Soo-lin and Chloe and Molly, and a couple she didn't recognize, little kids almost, couldn't be more than fourteen.

The First Slayer prowled among them like the shadow of death, reaching out claw-like hands for the youngest of the girls. "No!" Kennedy yelled, scrambling upwards through an ever-growing avalanche of sand. "You can't have them!"

"Blood is her due," Tara said. "Promised, sealed, and delivered in the time before time. Such bargains are not lightly broken."

"What bargain? I haven't - "

Tara stood up. "You have your answer."

"No! I don't! I don't have a fucking clue!" Kennedy yelled. She lumbered up the dune towards Tara, slipping and falling back a foot for every one she gained. "Is there some goddam cryptic quotient you've got to fill for the month?" She grabbed Tara's shoulders and began shaking her unresisting body back and forth like a rag doll. "Explain to me exactly what's going on, or - "

"Raaaugh!" Something leaped on her from behind, not the First Slayer - it was some kind of demon, all horns and fangs and bright green scales. It lashed its barbed tail and dug its claws into her back, trying to pry her away from Tara, but damned if she was going to let go before she had her answers -
"Hey, B. Think we ought to do something?" Faith asked.

Buffy blinked, looking down at the brawl at the foot of the dune. "I don't know," she said. Her head felt muzzy and light. "It's not our dream, is it?"

Faith took a drag on her cigarette and scratched her head. "Guess not. Still..."

"Doing stuff is what we do." A cold nose nudged her fingers and she reached down absently and patted the shadow-beast at her side. It was so much better behaved since she'd started letting it out at night. "The question is, who do we do it to?"

"Well, they aren't going to be much help." Faith jerked a thumb at the girls behind them. "Not in the shape they're in."

Buffy looked. None of the girls' shadows showed more than a flash of paw, a Cheshire Cat blink of sullen golden eyes. "That's never going to work." She knelt down and opened up the bag, plunging her hands in up to the elbow and drawing up spread fingers dripping with ashen mud. She clapped both hands to her cheeks, cold in the hot sun. "Time to get my game face on."

"You sure about that?" Faith asked. "There's no going back, you know. And there are other ways." She pointed to the tower, looming over the tallest of the dunes, its shadow as black as pitch.

Buffy stared down into the depths of the bag, doubt nipping at her. Faith was right, of course. That would be the easiest way. But... she looked up into the eyes of the youngest girls, huddled together at the back of the line. "You think you're going to get all of us up there? No longer an option, I'm thinking."

Faith gave a little 'just sayin' shrug.

"It'll be easier if I go first," Buffy said resolutely. She smeared the mud across her forehead in the mask older than counted time, down her nose, there and there and there. Getting it right was important, because she could only do this once. Something was buzzing, distracting her from her task. Flies, or mosquitoes - were there mosquitoes in the desert? Buffy slapped at her arms, trying to still the insistent chirping whine. Where was it? The thing sounded as big as a crop duster, for crying out loud -

She rocketed up, dizzy and gasping for breath. She was sprawled on greasy asphalt between a battered blue Lincoln and a towering Dodge Ram in the parking lot of the Sunset Arms Motor Lodge. Her head ached and her cell phone was going crazy in her purse. Rolling over, with a whimper at what extended contact with oil-encrusted gravel was doing to her pink suede jacket, she could see Kennedy was curled up on her side a few feet away, twitching as if in the throes of some violent dream. There had been a dream. Something about a desert, or luggage? Slayer dreams were usually unforgottably vivid, but this one slipped away in a swirl of sand and sun-glare, leaving her with the uncomfortable sense of having tapped into someone else's phone line.

The door to Kennedy's room gaped wide, and Willow emerged from a cloud of turgid yellow-grey smoke with Tara's limp body cradled in her arms. She laid Tara down on the pavement with panicky care, smoothing her hair back from her forehead, and looked over at Buffy. "I practically had to peel Kennedy off her! Is she breathing? I can't tell! They're supposed to fog up a mirror, but I don't have a mirror, because why would I carry a mirror, and also, if she's not? Vampires can't do CPR! Buffy! Can you do CPR?"

Buffy rolled to her knees and crawled groggily over. Why couldn't vampires do CPR? If they could smoke and heave martyred sighs and sing Barry Manilow... maybe Angel just hadn't known CPR.
"Willow, stop with the mouth and start with the ears. You can hear her heartbeat, remember?"

"Oh! Oh, right!" Willow gazed worriedly into Tara's shuttered eyes. "Can you turn off your cell phone?"

"Eep. My bad." Buffy stood up and walked a few feet away — oh, great, people from neighboring cabins were opening doors and twitching aside curtains to see what the smoke was all about. She caught a glimpse of a late 90s Neon peeling out of the parking lot of the motel across the street, and something about the driver — no. Too far away, too much else going on. "Hot plate short-circuited!" she said, with a feeble wave at the spectators. "Everything's fine! Totally calling 911!"

She squinted at the phone's readout. Whoever was calling wasn't satisfied with voice mail, apparently; this was the third time they'd called. The number wasn't familiar, and it was a Sunnydale area code, so it couldn't be Spike checking in from L.A. Who on earth... ? She glanced over her shoulder. Tara was sitting up and coughing, so the vampire CPR question was thankfully moot. "Hello? Buffy Summers. Kinda busy at the moment, so - "

"Miss Summers?" The voice was deep, rich, educated, and no one she knew. "My name is Robin Wood. I believe I have something that belongs to you."

The motel was the sort that rented rooms by the hour, equipped with a stained mattress, matted and ancient shag carpet, and a television which could also be rented by the hour. Its single mean window was mostly blocked by a hulking old air conditioning unit. Even to Riley's human senses, it smelled of sweat and sex and despair. He'd spent too many nights in rooms like this.

In that tawdry setting, the girl seated before the empty mirror was like Kino's pearl - lustrous, glowing, and destructive. She ran the brush through the crackling mass of her golden hair one last time, white arms curving like the necks of swans. Perfect. She was perfect. Perfect tits, perfect ass, perfect face, perfect white teeth that morphed into perfect white fangs. A marble Galatea, still a step away from life. Maybe that was why it was so hard to take her out of the world; you didn't meet perfection often.

Harmony Kendall made a moue at her absent reflection. "So Rileykins, have you made the deal with the Slayer yet?"

Riley's fingers closed around the stake behind his back, feeling the comforting solidity of the oak against his palm. Today he was going to kill her. Today he was going to walk out of the door and into Sam's arms a free man. He should have done it the first night he'd rolled back into Sunnydale and discovered her waiting for him - hell, he should have done it two years ago in that Mexican suck-joint. "No, I haven't, and I'm not going to."

Her fists went to her hips and her face twisted in a girlish pout. "Rileeeeeey! You promised!"

Perfection? Bull. She was shrill and stupid and shallow, someone he'd never have slept with regardless of species if he hadn't been drunk and depressed and certain he was on his way to a quick, messy death in the South American jungle. He'd made the mistake of looking into her eyes, the morning after, past the stupid and the shallow to the hope he'd seen too often in his own mirror: Maybe this time he really loves me. Sick at heart and stomach both, he'd left her, and never darkened the door of another vamp brothel since.

Ever since that day a part of him understood why Buffy had never been able to stake Spike. But it wasn't a part of himself he wanted to pay much attention to. "I didn't promise anything," Riley
snapped. "You're trying to blackmail me, remember?"

The pout acquired reinforcements in the form of arms crossed defiantly beneath the pneumatic bosom. "Well, I wouldn't have to blackmail you if you'd just be a gentleman and protect me!"
Harmony got up, tossing her hair dramatically. "But since you're being such a dick about it, I guess it's time to tell little SaMANtha about our understanding."

"We don't have an understanding! We had a one-night stand, before I was married - "

"It doesn't have to be one night," Harmony cooed, sidling up and running a finger along the line of his jaw. Her other hand drifted downwards. "I can make you feel sooo good. You do like me just a teensy bit, don't you? Even when you're a big ol' grumpy bear? After all, either you've got a stake in your pocket, or - " A disappointed look entered her eyes. "Oh. You do have a stake in your pocket."

"Harmony, I kill demons for a living! Of course I have a stake in my pocket!"

She shrugged, popping her gum. "You never know. I mean, Spike? You'd never think such a little guy would have such an enormous - "

"I really don't want to hear about Spike's - "

"- ego, but he's so full of himself that - oh, wait, sorry, I'm blackmailing you! I forgot!" She sashayed over to the phone. "Do you have to dial 9 on this thing?"

Riley snatched the receiver from her hand. "Damn it, don't you get it? I can't guarantee Buffy will lay off your boyfriend! I don't have any pull with Buffy at all! Go blackmail your other ex. He's the one sleeping with her."

Harmony rolled her eyes. "Duh! THAT wouldn't work. Buffy already KNOWS I slept with Blondie Bear." A Malibu Barbie smile lit her face. "I bet she just writhes every time he accidentally screams my name in the throes of passion."

That Buffy writhed every time Harmony's name came up was actually a good bet. "Have you considered just asking her not to kill you? God knows half the other demons in this town seem to have a pass for some reason or other - "

"Hello?" Harmony thwapped his forehead with a perfectly manicured fingernail. "Are you not listening? Buffy is my NEMESIS!" She began pacing agitatedly back and forth. "I'm not meeting you in sleazy motels and burnt-out buildings for the kink factor, mister! I have refined tastes! I have to be totally vigilant, because the minute I let my guard down the Slayer will be hot on my trail, hounding me mercilessly in her never-ending quest for vengeance! I mean, how else do you explain it?"

"Explain what?"

"The TIMING!" Harmony waved her hands. "She always concentrated on slaying those crypt-trash vampires hanging around in the cemetery before, but the very minute I get back to Sunnydale and meet a nice guy who appreciates me for my finer qualities, the Slayer goes all vendetta-y on poor Mr. Amherst! Coincidence? I don't think so!"

"Of course," Riley muttered. "Why didn't I see that?" He frowned. "Do you smell smoke?"

He pulled the dingy curtains aside and peered through the slit of fliespecked glass above the air conditioner. Across the four lanes of desultory weekend traffic on Lincoln, one of the somewhat less sleazy motels across the street was on fire... or at least, the parking lot was a haze of yellowish
smoke, billowing out of the doors and windows of one of the units.

"Omigod!" Harmony wailed, throwing herself at Riley's chest like a salmon swimming upstream, oblivious to her technical advantage in strength. "She's trying to burn me out! Save me!"

Since the smoke was thinning and fading even as they watched, revealing an indistinct trio of figures stumbling around the parking lot, that didn't seem too likely... until a gusty breeze whipped the lingering smudge away, and the figures resolved into Willow, a dark girl he didn't recognize, and Buffy. How the hell had she come to be here, of all places? Any second she might look across the street and recognize his rental car, or worse, him. Buffy might not be hounding Harmony, but he was beginning to feel as if she were hounding him.

"I'm leaving," he said, prying Harmony's fingers from around his neck.

"Good idea," she said breathlessly. "You draw her away so I can escape! Oh, Honeypunkin, you're so brave!"

"Yeah, I'm a hero all right." He could plunge the stake into her back right here, right now, end this farce in a shower of dust. He'd done it dozens of times before, and he could do it again, because she wasn't human, wasn't pitiable - she was a monster who'd killed hundreds without remorse and would kill hundreds more if he didn't -

Riley burst head-down into the sunny midwinter morning, leaving Harmony gnawing her knuckles in the shadow of the door. Self-disgust roiled in his gut as he flung himself into the rental car and gunned the engine. He wheeled out of the potholed motel lot and turned blindly at the first traffic light that presented itself, then again, and again. When he looked up at last, the Neon was nosing down a familiar street, and an equally familiar ivy-girded wall loomed to one side. Restfield Cemetery. He pulled over to the curb and got stiffly out of the car, standing on the leaf-strewn sidewalk and gazing through the rusting, vine-bound bars. Through the gaps, tombstones gleamed white in the winter sun.

The side gate was locked, but it was an easy climb. Riley stood in the middle of the broad rolling lawn, listening to the complacent twitter of starlings. In daylight the cemetery looked completely different, a haven of serene, sunlit marble. Even the grass was still green in places, where the overhanging trees sheltered it from Sunnydale's infrequent frosts. The peace might be illusory, but it was seductive. Riley shoved his hands into his coat pockets and scuffed down the gravel path that wound towards the center of the cemetery.

He had to pull himself, and the mission, together somehow. Harmony was just a stupid, petty distraction, but he couldn't afford stupid petty distractions. Barton and Randall were checking out the leads he'd gotten at the dinner party, but he didn't expect them to find anything - even if Buffy and Spike had been telling the truth about the Doctor having agents in Sunnydale, he couldn't believe that that was the whole story. The Doctor had agents all the way from Seattle to Houston; he must have had one in Sunnydale for years. That wouldn't explain the sudden convenient disappearance of all their targets. No, something else was going on, and Buffy had to know what it was. He kicked a rock. It ricocheted off a mausoleum half sunk in moss and spangled into the gloomy shadows of a live oak.

"Ow!"

Even in Sunnydale, trees didn't complain when you chucked a rock at them. Not often, anyway. Riley dodged behind the nearest tombstone, his hand closing on his taser before moving on to the butt of his Army-issue Beretta. No vampire would be sneaking around in broad daylight, but there were plenty of diurnal hostiles who could be lurking in the shadows.
Silence and the occasional chirp of birdsong reigned over Restfield. One of them had to move first. It was a battle of wills, and Riley won. A dark, broad-shouldered figure in a long trench coat broke from the shadows to the rear of the mausoleum, heading for the fence. Mud smeared the man's knees and shoulders, and a large leather satchel bumped at his side. Riley whipped out the taser and fired. One of the prongs embedded itself in the man's back, but the other went wide. With a curse Riley exploded from cover in a low diving tackle. He rammed shoulder-first into his quarry's knees, taking them both down, rolled once through the litter of dead leaves and acorns and came up astride the grunting, leaf-spattered heap of his opponent. Riley slammed the stranger one-two in the jaw, and it occurred to him somewhere between the first punch and the second that he might be pounding some innocent groundskeeper into jelly.

The professional forearm-block which stopped the second punch reassured him on that point. Riley contorted to avoid the murderous jab to the heart with the steel-cored stake which followed - the point would tear right through the light Kevlar of his flak jacket if it connected. Underneath the enveloping folds of the trench coat, the stranger was as big as he was, and in just as good shape despite looking ten or fifteen years older. Granite-hard eyes glittered beneath the brim of a battered leather hat until Riley's fist pulped one of them shut. The stake came at him again, and Riley twisted at the last moment - the point burned along the flesh of his forearm and plunged into the man's own satchel, pinning it to the damp ground. The man rolled away and the satchel ripped free and burst open, spilling a gristy tangle of claws and teeth and scales from a dozen different demon species. Tightly-corked glass bottles and Ziploc bags containing squishy lumps of flesh in every shade imaginable rolled every which way across the grass.

With a bitten-off yell of rage the man tore himself free of Riley and lunged after his scattered loot. Riley surged to his feet. His boot came down on the interloper's hand, and a second later the barrel of his Beretta jammed against the man's temple. His quarry froze on his hands and knees, shoulders knotted with fear, and Riley wasn't the kind of guy who went out looking to beat things up to salve his pride, but damn, that felt good.

"I'm betting you're the famous Gib Cain," he said.

"What the hell of it?" the man snarled.

What do you know, Spike had been telling the truth for once. "I like to know who I'm threatening. Adds the personal touch." If anything could salvage this disaster of a mission, it would be getting a solid line on the biggest black market dealer in Southern California. Riley glanced at the cornucopia of demon parts strewn about them and began reeling in the taser prongs. "Now what do we have here? Gathaur scales, a Fedmach'kroth's tongue..."

"Yeah, and so?" Cain sneered.

"Pretty small potatoes for the Doctor, isn't it?" Riley waved at the assortment. "More like the kind of thing some two-bit independent operator might go after. Last year the Doctor cleared a cool fifty million in Hombja'moleev musk alone, didn't he? You'd think a warlock with the power to use the stuff wouldn't need it, but I guess there's pathetic losers in every line of work." He eased off Cain's hand and backed up a step or two, nudging the nearest plastic bag with the toe of his boot. The powder inside shifted with an iridescent shimmer. He'd seen its like before - once he'd even gotten a look at the creature which produced it, chained to a concrete block in a dingy hut, its rainbow moth-wings in tatters from the constant scraping. It had tried to bite through his skull and suck his brains out. "Now this... this is more like it. Triathskai dust, isn't it? And pretty high quality by the color." He picked up the baggie and shook it, avoiding looking too long at the hypnotic oil-slick slither of colors within. "Nasty stuff, but oh, so profitable."
"I'm not breaking any laws, soldier boy," Cain spat. "Out in the real world, word is demons don't exist."

"That's the cool thing about the unit I work for," Riley said pleasantly. "It doesn't exist either. You know a guy named Ethan Rayne?"

A wary frown creased Cain's brow. "Chaos mage, wasn't he? Nobody's heard from him in years."

Riley grinned. "Exactly. But let's face it, Cain, you're small potatoes too. My bosses don't give a damn about you, and neither do I - but they do give a damn about your boss. I'm gonna take you in, and you're gonna have a nice long talk - "

Apprehension silvered Cain's eyes, quickly replaced by cunning. "We can talk now, kid. You know a guy named Spike?"

"We've met."

A tell or two must have undermined his poker face, because Cain relaxed visibly. "He's got that effect on people. Goddam bloodsucker. Look, I'll play straight with you. Yeah, I've done a few jobs for the Doctor, but I've done jobs for a lot of people. And I've got more witnesses than you can count who can testify I've only been in Sunnydale off and on. You want an agent in place, you don't have to look any farther than that crypt over there." He pointed towards the center of the graveyard. "Where do you think I got this stuff? Look, it's even got their logo on the bags!"

Several of the baggies were indeed stamped with the red axe of the BVI logo - not the pixie dust, but that didn't mean anything. Even Spike wasn't idiot enough to slap his personal trademark on quasi-illegal euphoriacs - and if he was, Anya would have stopped him. "The Slayer told me about Spike's sideline," Riley said, expressionless. "She assured me that Bloody Vengeance Inc. doesn't trade in anything addictive or dangerous."

"Yeah? You really think your Slayer tells you everything?" Cain asked, getting to his feet. "I've run into her before, you know. She's always been soft on demons, even before she started fucking them." He brushed grass off his hat. "You said it yourself - I'm small potatoes. Let me walk, and I'll show you something I guarantee you'll find interesting."

For a moment Riley hesitated. "Let's see it. Then we'll talk."

Cain smirked. "Come on, then."

Riley expected Cain to lead him back to Spike's crypt, but instead the man took a circuitous route through the tombstones, weaving through hedges and irregular rows of marble and granite monuments until they came to an open grave, or what looked like one. Cain hopped down into the muddy earth at the bottom, reached down and grabbed something that turned out to be the handle of an earth-smeared trap door. He grinned back at Riley. "Hope you're not claustrophobic. I took out the sentry, and in the middle of the day they're all asleep, but we're still gonna have to be careful."

That explained the mud. The tunnel was barely large enough to crawl through on all fours; if you could see in the dark and didn't have to breathe, it might have been bearable, but even for a vampire it couldn't have been pleasant. Riley tucked his pistol into the front of his belt and crawled after Cain, alert for a possible ambush. The tunnel ended in another trap door which, for all its rustic make, opened on hinges as smooth and noiseless as metallic silk. This door opened into a larger, partially-excavated runway which seemed to parallel a sewer main; it ended in a jumble of shovels and buckets propped against a wheelbarrow. Amber light seeped into the end of the tunnel from the chamber beyond, and Cain held a ghostly finger to his lips and motioned Riley after him.
Riley drew his pistol and advanced, step by careful step. He barely recognized the lower level of Spike's crypt - he'd been down there once or twice, years ago, but then it had been a damp, unfinished hole in the ground, decorated with moldering bones and a few decaying coffins. Now it was better equipped than some dorm rooms he'd stayed in. A handful of guttering candles cast their mellow glow over the chairs and tables, the TV and the bookshelves and the mini-fridge and the dartboard and the curtained-off shower and a couple of X-Box controllers and... Jesus Christ, Buffy could have moved in here instead of Spike moving into the house on Revello.

Just now he was surrounded by the uncanny stillness of sleeping vampires. A new nest must have taken over the crypt after Spike had vacated it. Riley caught his breath in his teeth; if he could have muffled his heartbeat with a hand he would have. But it was too late; from one of the alcoves came the snuffle and snort of someone waking. "Who's there?" a voice said, sharp and suspicious. "Denny, is that - ”

"Human!" another voice yelled. A blurred shadow flashed across Riley's vision and the candles flicked out. Darkness fell, full of golden eyes and savage growls. Riley spun, but Cain was gone, vanished back down the tunnel. He cocked, aimed blindly towards the sound of the voice, and squeezed off three shots in rapid succession - he might not hit anything, and a handgun wasn't much use against a vampire even if he did, but the crack of the Beretta in the enclosed space was deafening. A couple of anguished wails followed by blundering crashes bore witness to the effect on sensitive vampire ears. Riley retreated towards the tunnel and fired again, but he'd misjudged in the dark, and his shoulders bumped against the cool, root-laced earth of the crypt wall. One pair of cold calloused hands wrenched the gun from his grip while a second pair grabbed for his wrists. A third pair snatched the taser. Riley struck out with fists and feet and elbows, feeling the crunch of flesh and bone as he connected. A chill ring of metal rammed up against his temple, accompanied by the deadly snik of the Beretta cocking, and Riley, like Cain before him, froze.

A match hissed and flared to life with the stink of sulfur, and flame blossomed on half a dozen candles a minute later. Two vampires were holding him down, one on each side, and a third, a tall, balding vampire with eyes as cold as the barrel of the pistol he had leveled at Riley's head, watched the proceedings with interest.

A dishwater blonde in an oversized t-shirt and bunny slippers was peering down the tunnel, calling frantically, "Denny! Denny!" There was a swelling bruise on her cheek and her nose looked like it might be broken; he'd done some damage, at least. She turned to the balding vampire. "David, he's not answering!" She whirled on Riley, fangs bared, tears streaking her freckled cheeks, and jabbed the taser at him menacingly. "You dusted my brother!"

"Nadia, calm down," David cautioned. "You know this one belongs to the Slayer."

"I don't give a damn! He killed Denny, the bastard! I'm going to rip his goddam eyeballs out and play marbles with 'em!"

"Spike said - "

"Spike's not here!"

A small dark vampire woman with a strangely familiar face stalked up and slapped Nadia hard enough to shock her out of game face. "Spike may not be here, but I am, and you can fucking well wait till your Master gets back to kill this chulo! What kind of fucking example are you setting for the new guys?" She waved at the quartet of vampires clustered blinking in the far corner of the room.

"Look, maybe we should go," one of the putative new guys said, nervously fingering the hem of his t-shirt. "We just figured that with that LA big shot trying to move in that maybe Spike wasn't offering
such a bad deal after all, but if you guys are having problems, I hear Rack's looking for muscle, and
he's always got someone to eat - "

"Sit down and shut up," the dark-haired vamp girl snapped.

"Christ on a crutch, Evie, a week ago you were the new guy!" Nadia snarled. "Who forgot to die
and made you boss?"

This wasn't some new nest moving in on Spike's old territory, this was... minions. Spike had
minions. Riley fought back hysterical laughter. It wasn't a laughing matter. He could count at least
half a dozen shadowy, golden-eyed figures besides General Woundwort here skulking around the
corners of the crypt, plus the four new guys, whatever that signified. Which meant - Oh, God, it was
funny, it had to be or he'd start screaming - that Spike was running the biggest vampire gang in
Sunnydale.

"Evie's right, Nadia," David said shortly. "At the very least we can discuss the matter with the Slayer
tonight. Mr. Finn, please remember I have a gun aimed at your head, and no compunction about
using it. Did you stake Nadia's brother?"

"I never met the guy," Riley ground out through clenched teeth, "but if I had, damn right I would
have staked him."

"He's telling the truth," another vampire said, ghosting in from the tunnel. "Denny's scent-trail ends
where it intersects the older one left by Cain. Cain's second trail and this guy's are half an hour newer
and don't come within twenty feet of Denny's dust."

David's serpentine eyes blinked once. He lowered the Beretta and ejected the remaining clip, tucking
the ammunition into his shirt pocket. "Well, then, Mr. Finn, it appears you're only guilty of
trespassing and breaking and entering. Elise, Nadia, track Cain as far as you can. We have Spike's
permission to kill him, but I think capturing him would be more prudent. He may have information
we need. Fernando, get a couple of those bear traps out of storage and plant them in the access tunnel
in case he comes back." He waved to the vampires holding Riley. "You're free to go, Mr. Finn. Next
time, I suggest you knock."

Five minutes later Riley stumbled out of the crypt's front door to the tune of Evie's hand planted
firmly between his shoulder blades, his empty gun in hand. "Get lost, meat-sack," Evie said. As she
slammed the door shut behind him, her sullen little face was momentarily framed in the barred grille,
and Riley realized in a flash where he'd seen her before, and not just where he'd seen her - where
Buffy had seen her. The binder full of target photos.

Spike was harboring Hostile 6... and Buffy Summers had known all along.
The East Hills Teen Center was the most depressing place Spike had inhabited in years, and he'd lived in holes in the ground. Bare floors, a broken-backed couch, a battered ping-pong table, piles of magazines so old that the average dentist's office would have chucked them in shame. So far as Spike could tell, the whole thrust of the place was to make an abusive home life look cheery in comparison. The bathroom was like something out of a 30's flophouse, but there was a shower, and it was at least intermittently hot.

Standing in the rust-stained tub, he locked his hands behind his head and stretched, gauging the progress his body was making at mending torn flesh and cracked bone. There was still a deep ache in the small of his back where the crossbow bolt had gone in and torn out again, and Angel's sword had cracked a rib or three which would take another day to heal completely. But the minor wounds were closed already, and the bruises were fading from blue-black to yellowy-brown. Good.

He turned off the tap, toweled excess water from his hair, and dressed quickly in the spare clothes Connor's friend had tossed at him - worn blue jeans and a 'Monsters of Rock' t-shirt, not exactly his best look, but better than his current blood-and-sewer-muck-encrusted ensemble.

It was a comforting measure of the menace that he could still project when he wanted to that none of the half-dozen kids lurking at the opposite end of the hall had rifled through his things while he was getting cleaned up. Spike shrugged back into his jacket, dropped into one of the ratty hotel-style armchairs scattered across the rear of the hall, and dug his cell out of the pocket. The kids watched as he punched Buffy up on speed dial, passing whispered judgment he could have listened in on had he cared enough to concentrate. Thin, frightened girls in Super Bitch t-shirts, arrogant boys with baggy jeans hanging low on their hips, talking a little too loudly of their toughness to be convincing. These were the lost ones, runaways, panhandlers, thieves, budding junkies and would-be whores whom no one would ever miss if he dragged them out the back door and drained them dry in the alley. His natural prey.

One of the girls, bolder than the others, sidled closer and smiled. Spike smiled back, giving her the look, the one that said she was the most important thing in the universe. She froze, poised between dread and fascination. He could hear her heart tripping in her chest, smell fear and curiosity edging into arousal. With one twitch of his finger, one curl of his lip, he could reel her in or scare her off. Six billion people you don't give a damn about.

He had a head-full of complicated chains of relationships: That chit there, could know Buffy's father's girlfriend's grandmother's mechanic; you never know. Better not kill her. But the farther he got from Sunnydale, the more tenuous the connections were, and the harder it was to remember exactly why the fourteen-year-old tart in bad mascara was off-limits. Still, fuck if he'd give Angel the satisfaction of being right. He widened the smile, revealing lengthening fangs, and the girl broke and scampered back to the haven of her peers. That's right, Little Red. Run while you can. Big Bad's hungry.

Hi! You've reached Buffy Summers's voice mail! Leave a message and I'll get back to you soon, unless I don't.

"Buffy? It's me, love. You were right about His Nibs." Christ, he couldn't do this. News this bad should be broken in person, when she could weep and rail and take out on him the fury she'd never allow herself to believe was for Angel. But he couldn't leave her completely in the dark, either. "Wyndam-Pryce's... gone. Fred 'n Cordelia and Angel's brat're safe, for now. Dunno what's come of
the others. I'll be heading home for reinforcements as soon as I can." He hesitated. It was inadequate, but... "Love you."

He flipped the phone shut, stuffed it back in his pocket and slumped back in his chair, resisting the urge to ring her up again just to listen to the sound of her voice on the recording. He'd dosed down in worse places. He could just catch a few hours' shut-eye right here, make a dash for the car, and be back in Sunnydale before sundown...

"Buffy, huh? How times have changed."

Spike opened one eye. Connor's friend was looking down at him as if he were a particularly exotic roach she'd discovered under the sink, arms crossed beneath the baby-blue folds of an old blanket. She was small and blonde and vulnerable-looking, with a sweet soft round face scarcely older than those of the kids she was playing shepherd to. Her eyes, though, were anything but soft. Connor stood a few paces behind her, shoulder to shoulder with one of the other shelter workers, the tension in his body screaming that he had a stake behind his back. Spike considered pulling himself out of his slouch and decided it would be a waste of valuable energy that could be put to better use mending those cracked ribs. "Anne, is it? You know Buffy?"

Anne gave him a look of cool appraisal. "We've met. I came from Sunnydale, originally. I know you, too." She raised her chin a fraction, and the morning light played across the old scar on her neck - a pale, ragged double crescent, low and to her right, just over the carotid artery. Cordelia's wound might look like that, five or six years from now. "You don't remember me at all, do you?"

Spike sucked his cheeks in and shook his head, uncertain what she expected him to say in response. Angel remembered everything, but he wasn't so blessed - or cursed, depending how you looked at it. After a hundred and twenty years, even the memorable kills began to blur together. "Should I?"

"You tried to eat me once."

"Ah." Well, that was awkward. He shifted resentfully. Couldn't humans let bygones be bygones? Had he ever held that business with the fire axe against Joyce? "I'm sorry?"

Anne's eyes remained flinty. "Are you really?"

Trick question. "Close as I can come to it," Spike said at last. "Don't want to eat you now, glad I made a cock-up of eating you then. Specially seeing as that means you're here to lend a hand." He could tell from her expression that it wasn't enough, but it was the best he could do. It was definitely time to change the subject. "How's the girls?"

"Fred's fine. All she needs is sleep and a few decent meals. Cordelia... she needs a hospital."

"No hospitals," Connor interrupted. "They're public. Angel's minions could walk right in."

"Boy's got a point," Spike said. "But is this place any better?"

"Believe me, if I hadn't wanted you to walk in, you wouldn't be in any condition to walk out," Anne said. "This is the best-warded building in East L.A. I figured after the zombies - " Her eyes narrowed. "Actually, I was surprised you could walk in at all. So surprised that I asked a friend to check you out to see if you had a counter-charm we should know about."

"Filled with the milk of inhuman kindness, that's me," Spike muttered. Wards were probably as buggered up as the spell on Rack's place. Bloody amateurs."

"And I told her that no, you were just an expert at poking your nose in where it wasn't wanted."
Startled, Spike sat up for a good look at the man standing beside Connor, took in the lined face and the short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, and inhaled sharply. The scent clinched it. He didn't bother to keep the incredulous note from his voice. "Bloody hell! Tanner? What are you doing here?"

Daniel Tanner sat down on the edge of the nearest table, hands clasped between his knees and a quarter-inch of smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He was lot cleaner and a little better fed than the last time Spike had seen him, and his general air of rumpled world-weariness was tempered by the sly humor lurking in his dark eyes. "This minute? Providing character references for vampires. In general? Freelance geomantic consultant. Business cards and everything." He inclined his head towards at Anne. "I help out here every now and then. Figured I might as well put my talent for homelessness to good use."

"Well, bugger me gently with a chainsaw." Spike fought off an answering smile. Not like Tanner was near and dear, but right now anyone who wasn't trying to introduce his small intestine to a hunk of pig iron was a mate. "So, guard or inmate? You still an utter sodding loon?"

The half-smile threatened to turn into the real thing. "Little bit. You still an evil soulless bastard?"

"Little bit." To hell with it; Connor and Anne's baffled faces were worth an all-out grin. "Look, mate, I'm knackered. Give me a few hours' kip and I'll be out of your hair. I'll even nip out and nick what Miss California needs before I head home."

Anne glanced from Tanner to Spike and back. "All right. If Dan says you're okay, you can stay. But I need to know what kind of trouble you're dragging after you. What's the deal with you and Angel?"

Dan, was it? Spike raised an eyebrow. "Anyone susses that out, Oprah's got a book deal waiting. Hasn't lost his soul, but it's definitely got a few dings in it. You acquainted? If he's got an invite, I'd revoke it toot sweet."

"He helped me out of some financial difficulties once." Anne waved around at the Spartan common room. "Where do you think I got the cash for those wards? This isn't exactly a moneymaking proposition." She caught her lower lip between her teeth and turned away, thinking. Spike had subsided into the nappy embrace of his armchair and allowed his eyelids to drift half-shut again before she turned back. "There was one thing I always wondered about, after I left Sunnydale. What happened to Billy Fordham?"

Billy who? Spike pawed through the dustbin of his memory. "That git who wanted me to sire him?" He wasn't going to have to pretend to be sorry about that, was he? "What d'you think? Gave my word, didn't I? Never promised to wipe his arse for him after, though. The Slayer did for him, like she does for most fledges."

Anne studied his face intently, her lips pressed tight as the corners of a military bunk. "Good." She tossed the blanket at him. "Get some sleep. You look like you need it."

Spike turtled down inside the collar of his jacket, inhaling the phantom smells of home. He was never going to figure out the vagaries of the souled, but the conversation had accomplished one thing, at least. He felt less adrift. Tanner. Old name, new place on the list. Anne. New name. Both Sunnydale stock, too, next thing to one of his own. Tanner, Anne, Cordelia, Fred, Gunn (hadn't seen a body; therefore, Gunn), Hank, Linda, Tia Maria Consuela... did the green bloke count, being a demon? And what had become of him, anyway? Connor? Family, no matter how annoying the scrawny little pup was.

A dozen names in a city of millions, the warp and woof of that cobweb-slight tapestry of
connections. Spike closed his eyes, and counted the people he didn't particularly want to kill until he drifted off to sleep.

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"... so then out of nowhere, this demon jumped me." The vivid tactile memory of a sinuous body writhing against her own, and sun-warmed scales sliding beneath her fingers made Kennedy shiver. It had started out as an attack, that was for sure. "Then I woke up and Willow was, uh, pulling me off Tara. Sorry about that, by the way."

"Hey, who hasn't tried to kill their friends in a mystic trance at least once in their lives?" Buffy whipped the Cherokee into the last space in the parking lot of the Sunnydale Marriott, and winced as the bumper groaned against the fender of the car alongside. She craned worriedly out the window. "Did that sound paint-scrapey to you?"

"God, you're such a girl." Kennedy grinned. "Seven-time savior of the world, foiled once again by parallel parking."

"You? Can go subvert yourself." Buffy tucked her keys in her bag, frowning. "Dreamwise... you're sure you couldn't hear anything the people up on the hill were saying?"

Kennedy got out and eyed the bumper, but she couldn't tell which of the several dings and scrapes was the most recent. She folded her arms and leaned across the engine-warmed hood, feeling the fiberglass dimple ever so slightly under her weight - maybe there was something to be said for Spike's solid steel monstrosity. "Nope. Too far away, and I was kind of busy." She picked at a hangnail. "Isn't it a little weird, you being in my dream?"

Buffy was doing that eye-avoiding thing she did when something made her uncomfortable. She fiddled with her bag, needlessly re-arranging compact and lipstick. "I don't know. Faith showed up in one of my dreams before. I think - I think we're all connected, somehow."

"Slayer long-distance plan, huh? The coverage is for shit."

The Sunnydale Marriott was everything that the fleabag on Lincoln wasn't, new and clean and multi-storied, but something was making Kennedy's spidey sense tingle. She scanned the spacious marble-floored lobby while Buffy stabbed the elevator call button. Nothing in sight but a tired-looking businessman checking in, and a few suitcase-laden gurneys by the service elevator. Maybe it was just the hotel creep factor; no matter how bright and new the carpet and the paint, there was something spooky about those lines of numbered doors. She nudged Buffy's arm. "Hey. You getting that vampy feeling?"

"No... " After a moment, Buffy added grudgingly, "You're better at that than I am. Gimme a 'Polo!' when we get warm."

With every floor that the elevator rose, the jitters increased, and by the time the bell dinged for the tenth floor, Kennedy's Slayer sense was screaming and her bones were three feet to the right of her skin. "This Wood guy didn't say what his family heirloom was?" she asked as the elevator doors whished shut behind them.

From Buffy's distracted expression, she could feel it now, too. "Not in the sense of employing nouns and adjectives. He said it was an important piece of Slayer history, dropped a few Watcherly names, and made with both the cloak and the dagger." She consulted the scrap of paper on which she'd written the mysterious Robin Wood's room number. "1046 - this way."
Their footsteps hush-hushed on the thick patterned carpet. The entire hotel was a sound-eating monster. Kennedy shoved her hands in her pockets. "Thanks for asking me along."

Buffy shrugged, downplay city. "You're a Slayer, it's Slayer biz. No big. Besides, if this Wood guy turns out to be, gasp, shock, horror, lying, I may need backup."

Somewhere up ahead, a door closed and a woman laughed, a lilting, delirious trill that sent tendrils of ice twining out along Kennedy's nerves. A man's harsh rebuke, muffled by distance and acoustic ceilings, cut the unnerving giggle off. Kennedy's cocky grin faltered. Buffy's face went white, and she broke into a run.

The door to the stairwell was closed as they rounded the hall corner, and no one was in sight. 1042, 1044 - Wood's room was only a few doors away from the stairs. Tiny dark spots freckled the clean new carpet; Kennedy bent to touch one, and her fingers came away stained with scarlet. Left, right - check on Wood or follow the eerie laughter? Buffy's words from the cemetery came back with a boomerang kick: every choice a Slayer made had a life hanging on it.

Buffy rapped sharply on the door to 1046, and the echoes died away in the silent hall. "Mr. Wood? Hello? It's Buffy Summers." No answer. Buffy twisted the knob hard and slammed a shoulder into the door. Brass shrieked and dented in her grasp, and the wood of the door-frame cracked along its length. Buffy skipped back a step and looked at Kennedy, wordless, imperious command in her eyes. Kennedy didn't argue, or catalogue all the reasons that Mr. Wood might not answer; if they interrupted him on the pot, they could apologize later. Together they jump-kicked for the door.

Jimmy Choo and Sketchers hit the door one-two, and the entire latch mechanism ripped free of the wood as the door flew open. She and Kennedy toppled through the doorway in unison, and in unison they froze.

"Oh, God," Kennedy whispered, clapping a hand to her mouth. She wasn't some green kid. She'd killed vampires. Lots of them. Two in carefully supervised Council training sessions, five or six in the wild. One of them she'd caught in the act of feeding. She'd seen the ragged wounds in the victim's throat, seen the blood welling through the torn skin. She wasn't naive, she wasn't squeamish, she didn't faint at the sight of...

Robin Wood had been a handsome man once: tall, dark, and athletic, with a fashionably shaved head and sharp goatee. Death bleached the warm brown of his skin to a sickly ochre, clashing with the blood soaking his tailored charcoal suit. His killer had propped his corpse up against the headboard of the bed, head tilted to expose the torn throat, and the empty, crusting eye sockets stared blindly up at the ceiling. His eyeballs were cradled in the red-smeared hollows of his outstretched palms, a mute offering to indifferent gods. Upon the mirror over the dresser crude letters of blood spelled out QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES? Latin, she knew, something famous, but she couldn't remember what it meant. Another hand had scrawled on the wall above the bed MAMAS BOY. Kennedy turned aside, gagging.

A distant, wondering pity blossomed in Buffy's eyes, as if at a pain she could recognize in others, but no longer remember for herself. Her hand hovered within an inch of Kennedy's shoulders. "It's all right if you... It's... it's different when they're having fun."

Kennedy swallowed hard and straightened, shaking off the pat on the back that wasn't. Buffy closed her eyes, opened them, turned on her heel and headed for the hallway. "Let's go."

Kennedy gaped. "What? He's - "

"Dead. If we hurry, maybe he'll be the only one." She rounded the door and collided with a wall of
The newcomer was a big guy in camo, blue-eyed, snub-nosed, and hunky in a red state kind of way. "Buffy!" He looked over their heads into Room 1046 and those hall-wide shoulders sagged. "Damn it! Too late."

"You saw who did this?" Buffy demanded. "Which way did they go? Got an ID?"

"Sam's on it." He slipped past Buffy and into the room with an economical grace surprising in a man his size. "We think they were heading for the sewers via the hotel basement. As far as ID goes... " he hesitated, with a significant look at Kennedy.

"She's on the team," Buffy said, no qualifications, no explanations, and for a minute Kennedy wished she really were on the team. Only a minute. The team was freaking nuts.

Riley gave Kennedy the military once-over, then shrugged. Maybe Buffy didn't notice the cool hostility in his eyes, or maybe she just didn't want to. "Sam and I were in the café downstairs eating lunch. She said something about two people in costume behind me, going through the Staff Only door. I looked up at the mirror behind her, and I could see the door closing, but there wasn't anyone there." He spread one hand; the conclusion was obvious. "She followed them, and I tried to backtrack and see where they'd been." He pointed to the bloodstained carpet in the hall, and his eyes were grim. "Wasn't difficult."

Driven by an urge to do something, anything useful, Kennedy walked over to the bed. The contents of a wallet were strewn across the bloody coverlet and the carpet, a flurry of official confetti confirming that yes, this was Mr. Robin Wood of Beverly Hills, California. Something about the name was familiar, though she couldn't remember Ms. Chalmers ever mentioning it.

Buffy followed her and began sorting through the papers. Kennedy frowned; looking for next of kin wasn't their responsibility, was it? The police took care of that. Riley had finished his quartering of the room, and was talking quietly into his cell phone, something about sending a team over stat. He hung up with a curse. "Sam lost them in the sewers, but I've got a team on it. Sam says there's definitely two of them, a man and a woman. The man was wearing a long dark coat. The woman was wearing an old-fashioned dress. She never got close enough to hear what they were saying, but Buffy... they both had English accents."

"Out-of-towners," Buffy said. She held up a fan of yuppie food stamps, crisp new twenties straight from the ATM. "There's still money in his wallet. Locals would have stolen it and made it look like a robbery."

Riley bent over and picked up a cigarette butt, holding it delicately in his big fingers. It had burnt out on the flame-resistant carpet, leaving a small black scar. "They weren't trying to be subtle, that's for sure. This is a no-smoking floor. It's not Wood's. And there are bloody footprints in the bathroom. Really nice imprint of a Doc Marten sole."

"Lame attempt to pin it on Spike, huh?" Buffy flipped the wallet over, and her eyes widened. "Nikki!"

"Who?"

"A Slayer." Buffy held out the wallet. Framed in plastic was an old photograph of an athletic young woman with a 70's 'fro, arm in arm with an Asian man. "A couple of years ago this bigshot in the LA magic scene, Magnus Bryce, got the idea to raise a Slayer or two from the dead to be some kind of magical bodyguard. I was one of the Slayers on his short list. Nikki Wood was another. I saw the
files, after - there was a copy of this photo in them."

Kennedy eased the photo free of its casing and flipped it over. Mom & Dad, 1975 was written on the back in fading ballpoint. She held it up, comparing Wood's ravaged face to the photos. She couldn't have pinned it down to one feature, but there was a resemblance. Something in the bones, blood calling to blood across the generations. "This guy is - was her son?"

"That must have gone over big." Buffy took the photo back and replaced it carefully in the wallet along with the rest of Wood's ID. "The Council barely tolerates us speaking to other human beings, much less breeding with them."

"Maybe she got knocked up before she was called. Nikki Wood... " Kennedy scowled and tugged on her lip. "I know I've heard that name somewhere else."

"Spike killed her," Buffy said flatly. "It's probably in the Slayer Handbook."

""Mama's Boy,"" Riley said, just as flat. "Well, there's Spike's motive."

Buffy looked at Riley as though he were a kid whining for a Snickers bar when she was trying to buy asparagus. "What motive? Look, I know you're mad at him, but Spike is in L.A.. And if he wasn't? If Spike had killed Christopher Robin here, he wouldn't leave the body lying around for me to find. And if he did? I've seen Spike kill, boys and girls, and there are no artistic tableaus and quips about janitors on the wall. There are just dead bodies, and lots of them." She tossed the wallet back on the bed. "Wood called me less than two hours ago and claimed to have some super-secret Slayer doojiggy he wanted to give me. Looks to me like someone else knew he had it, and got here first."

Riley's mouth acquired a bitter twist. "Really? And I've got what besides your word that any of this is true?"

Double-take on the Buffy front. "Since when do you need more?"

"Since I saw Hostile Six in Spike's crypt not three hours ago!"

The blood exited Buffy's face stage left, and Riley prowled forward like a hunting tiger, facing Buffy down across Wood's grotesque corpse. "You're so sure your precious Spikey hasn't killed anyone, but Spike doesn't have to kill in person when he has a whole crypt full of minions who can do it for him. Somehow that little detail got left out. There was more pleading than anger in his eyes. "Tell me you didn't know about this, Buffy. Tell me Spike's been lying to you, too. Tell me, and I'll believe you."

For half a second Buffy's face was perfectly blank, and then she was nose-to-chest with him, clenched fists trembling at her sides. "I didn't tell you because it was none of your business! Evie's in the middle of infiltrating Amherst's gang for Spike - for me! Do you have any idea how hard it is to get an in with the Mayor's old cronies when half the police force is still in their pockets? I've been looking for a chance like this for six months! If I turned her over to you for who knows how long - "

"And you couldn't tell me this? Couldn't trust me to - God, you haven't changed a bit, have you?"

"Not after you were so eager to Gitmo Susie, no!"

"Oh, that's right, the Bracken demon." Riley's face could have been hewn from granite. "What vital undercover mission is she involved in? Chilling Spike's beer? Or does she front for his drug-running? Playing bartender at Willy's would be a great way to - "

"For his what? I told you, Susie's completely harmless!" Buffy exploded. "Have you ever seen a
Bracken demon who wasn't? Look, you turn up a chiphead who's an actual threat, and I'll get my pom-poms out of storage and cheer you on as you haul them away, but you know what? You're not going to find any here because any of them who WERE a threat would have run off to L.A. as soon as they escaped and - "

Enough was enough. "SHUT UP, BOTH OF YOU!" Kennedy yelled. Riley and Buffy, who'd obviously forgotten she was in the room, froze in mutual They started it! Kennedy jabbed a finger at Wood. "In case it's slipped your minds, dead guy! Me, I think Spike'd kill someone for pocket change, but dammit, Buffy's right. If Spike did this, or ordered it done, he's a moron. If he's really in L.A., he'll have an alibi. Buffy claims he's got all those minions under control. So we should be able to, I dunno, measure their fangs or something, and find out if any of them did it."

"She's right," Buffy said, abandoning her eyeball duel with Riley. "Look, Riley, I... do the police-handling thing, please? We can talk about this later. I'll call David."

Riley held the great stone face a second longer, then nodded, whipped out his cell and strode out into the hall. Kennedy heard him talking rapidly with the 911 operator as he headed for the elevator.

In the absence of an immoveable object to fling herself against, Buffy slumped dispiritedly into the chair by the window. Kennedy hitched a hip onto the table. "Lemme guess. History?"

"Old boyfriend." She arched a brow beneath her fingers. "Out of curiosity, are old girlfriends any less psycho?"

"Not so's you'd notice." Kennedy swung her foot. "He got a case?"

Buffy snorted. She got up and turned Wood's head to one side. "Spike's left-handed. He bites to the left. Whoever killed Wood bites to the right. Plus look at the spacing of the marks." Her small strong fingers pulled the torn flesh of the neck taut. "Whoever bit Wood is bigger than Spike."

Kennedy couldn't resist. One eyebrow canted in innocent challenge. "And you know the exact size of Spike's bite how?"

"From tripping over people he's bitten," Buffy said acidly. "It's a memorable experience."

"I notice none of your reasons is 'My precious Spikey would never kill anyone.'"

"You noticed correctly." Buffy dropped into the chair again. "But not here, not now, and not like this." Warily she pulled her cell out and punched speed dial for the crypt. "David? Slayer. You're up? Good. We've got trouble. I see. No, I was just going to call him. Right. Willy's, tonight at seven. We have a lot to talk about." She leaned back and massaged the bridge of her nose. There were tired little lines etching at the corners of her eyes.

"You told me that Spike had minions," Kennedy said at last. She jerked a thumb at the hallway. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"You needed to know. He didn't." Buffy leaned back and stared up at the stucco-patterns on the ceiling. "I always hated being the Slayer," she said. "Hated the responsibility. Hated that I had to - to make decisions. I couldn't see anything good about it - it wrecked my grades and my social life and my parents' marriage and yeah, solipsistic much? But when Kendra came along, and then Faith - I hated that I wasn't the only one any longer. That I wasn't special. And I especially hated that they loved what they did. That they... they were better at being me than I was."

"You feel that way about me?" Kennedy was a little surprised at the sting in her voice.
Buffy shook her head in swift denial. "No. I mean, don't get me wrong, you really, really, really annoy me. But... " She nibbled on her lower lip. "When I hated being a Slayer, I didn't want anyone to share it."

"Afraid you'd lose your 'No one can understand my pain!' club card?"

"Something like." Buffy made a wry face. "It's different now. Since I came back. I don't hate being a Slayer anymore. I mean - " her eyes strayed to the bed. "I hate that stuff like this happens, but I don't hate that I've got the power to stop it. Kendra told me once that being a Slayer isn't what you do, it's what you are. Riley told me that being a Slayer was just a job. He was wrong."

She sat up, earnest. "But Kendra was wrong too. A Slayer is what I am, yeah - death is my art, my gift, whatever, though really a gift card at Saks I'd have been fine with. But it goes both ways. I'm what a Slayer is. I've got other gifts, and so do you, and so does every girl out there with the potential to be called." Buffy's eyes shone with fierce purpose. "We don't have to be just killers. We can make ourselves more than that. We can be - " She broke off with a shrug and a sheepish smile. "That part I haven't quite figured out yet."

Outside in the hallway a radio squawked. Buffy stood and stretched, hands clasped over her head. "That's the police. Get ready for fun."

Kennedy scarcely noticed the officers piling into the cramped hotel room, caught up in her own uncomfortable revelation. Buffy Summers didn't trust her All-American ex, but Buffy trusted her, trusted the fate that had made them both Slayers. She wasn't just in, she was in. Mission accomplished, right? So why did she feel like crap?

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Cordelia lay in a fitful doze in one of the four Army surplus cots in the cramped little room euphemistically labeled the girl's dorm. Connor hated it; it felt like a box trap, and he expected the walls to close in at any minute. An attempt had been made to brighten up the room with posters of young, pretty people he didn't recognize, but it was only a place to sleep at need, not a place to live.

He sat beside the cot, guarding Cordelia's restless slumber. She was so beautiful. Even now, thin and feverish after a week of illness, her damp hair a tangle of sable against the worn white cotton of the pillowcases, Cordelia Chase burned with an inner light. Connor leaned forward and smoothed a lank strand of hair away from her face. As his fingertips brushed the hot, dry skin of her cheek, Cordelia's lashes fluttered, wrestling a dream beneath bruise-blue lids. She butted her head into his touch and nuzzled blindly against his hand, murmuring words too soft and sleep-drugged for human ears to catch. Connor scarcely dared breathe.

"Angel..."

His fingers closed hard on the blanket, compressing the thin folds into a hard twist of wool. Holtz had told him a story, once, of a hunter who kept his heart from breaking by binding it with three iron hoops. Snap, snap, snap. He stood up fast, kicking the rickety folding chair aside with a screech of metal on linoleum that he half-hoped would wake her. It didn't. Probably just as well. Eyes open, eyes closed, it didn't matter - she didn't see him. He was lost behind Angel's hulking silhouette.

He rested his forehead against the doorframe, blinking as blistered paint went out of focus before his nose. They called Quor'toth a hell dimension, but the only pain he'd felt there had been physical. It didn't matter, he told himself resolutely. He had work to do. A back-handed swipe across his eyes
smeared any tell-tale traces of moisture away into the thin layer of general grime.

When he'd left the main hall a few hours ago, it had been empty save for Spike cat-napping in a chair. Now Anne and a couple of the other volunteers were hanging makeshift crosses by each window, and Tanner was reading from a worn leather-bound book, "... his verbes, consensus rescissus est."

The remaining invited vampire was awake and twitchy, pacing the length of the room and back like a loose-limbed, bleached-blond cougar. A rapt audience of teenage girls packed the sofa, following Spike's every move. Several of the boys lounged indifferently nearby, pretending they weren't listening.

"... garlic's not worth fuck-all unless you're trying to make your vamp snuffle himself to death. And unless you know exactly where the heart is and that you're strong enough to punch through ribs to get at it - " Spike demonstrated with a swift jab to an imaginary opponent, " - leave staking to the experts."

Several of the girls oooohed!, though it was hard to tell if they were applauding Spike's technique or his biceps. Connor crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. He had muscles too. They just weren't so... obvious. He clenched a surreptitious fist and prodded at his upper arm with one finger.

"Mostly likely you can't kill a vamp, but you can make it hard enough it's not worth their while to kill you." Spike caught each pair of worshipful eyes in turn, cobra and snake-charmer in one. "Never go quietly - won't help you if you do. You get cornered, scream. Kick 'em in the balls if they've got balls. Keep a lighter on you, set 'em on fire. Better yet, don't get cornered. Stick to crowds and bright lights and always have someplace you can call yours, even if it's a cardboard box."

"Say I wanna kill you," one of the boys challenged, nudging his companion in the ribs. "Any tips?"

"Say your prayers, stick your head between your legs, and kiss your arse goodbye," Spike drawled. "But lucky for you, you're not up against me. Angelus's minions aren't the brightest, or they wouldn't be his minions. They're stronger and faster than you, so sod fighting fair. Taser's best, if you can get your hands on one. Drop a vamp like a stunned ox, that will. You got someone you're none too fond of, you can dope 'em up with tranquillizers and use 'em for - " Several of the girls looked appalled. Spike took note and grimaced. "Right, never mind that one. But a shotgun's good, too."

"I thought vampires were immune to bullets," the second boy muttered.

Spike's eye-roll started out yellow and finished up blue. "We're not bloody Superman. Bullets hurt. Hollowpoint ammo's brilliant for vamps. Go for the shoulders, knees - can't catch you if we can't move, yeh? Blow their sodding faces off. I guarantee that by the time they heal, you'll be dead of old age."

"What about crosses?" A buxom girl in corn-rows tossed her beaded hair and fingered the necklace in the cinnamon cleft of her breasts. "I always wear this, so they can't touch me, right?"

"Jenna, innit?" Spike ambled over to the couch, his voice falling to a smoky rumble. "Believe me, pet, when I want to reach out and touch someone... " His hand snaked out, and Jenna squeaked as the necklace disappeared. Spike extended his clenched fist, uncurling smoking fingers to reveal the tiny gold cross crisping his palm, eliciting startled shrieks from his audience. "I can do it - ow, ow, ow, fuck!"

"I don't get it," Connor muttered as the girls crowded forward, cooing like a flock of concerned pigeons.
"It's pheromones," Tanner said gravely. "When I was in high school, there was this guy with a letter jacket - "

Connor's ears burned. "You never said you were a wizard," he accused. Middle-aged shelter workers weren't supposed to have mysterious pasts.

The older man shrugged, composure unruffled. "I never said a lot of things. Do you really care about the story of my life?"

Well, no, he didn't. Connor flipped the hair from his eyes and jerked his chin at Spike, who'd tossed the cross back to Jenna and was sucking on his burnt fingers. "You told Anne you knew him. Did he try to eat you, too?"

"Nope. He saved my life. I tried to suck his brain out. It's a long story." Tanner tucked the spellbook under his elbow and rocked on his heels. "I was telling Spike earlier, there's a place a couple of miles from here, out on Graves near the Garvey Reservoir. The Gregson Clinic. Very exclusive. They treat both human and demon patients, and they might be willing to sell you what your friend needs with no questions asked."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Connor demanded. He strode over to Spike and thumped him none too gently on the shoulder. "Cordelia's worse. We need to leave."

The vampire glanced through the nearest window at the sun, hanging swollen and orange on the smoggy western sky. Connor expected an argument, but Spike just blew out his cheeks and fished his car keys out of his jeans. "Right, then," he said, with a glare at his new fan club. "You're on your own. Try not to embarrass me and get yourselves killed straight out of the gate."

Connor jittered by the Center's front door, watching the sun sink lower and trying to drag Spike after him by the gravitational force of his will. They had a goal, they had a car, what was the problem? Spike took his excruciating time gathering his things, checking his voice mail, looking in on Fred and carrying on low-voiced conversations with Anne and Tanner.

"Just watch your step," Tanner said at last. "Gregson's a big name in black market demon organs, and the word is he's not terribly worried about where he gets them." He looked pointedly from Connor to Spike. "He's always looking to expand his own personal collection, and somehow I think he'd find both of you interesting specimens."

"This Doctor Gregson wouldn't commonly be known by the definite article, would he?" Spike asked, testing the points of his canines with his tongue. "If so, I've got a bone or three to pick with him. Preferably his bones. He human?"

"Slod demon. He's passing."

"Just what I wanted to hear." Spike flung his jacket across his shoulders with a matador's flare, flipped his keys into the air and caught them. "Come on, sprout, time's wasting."

The first time Connor had ridden a motor vehicle, he'd been clinging to the top of a Number 17 bus. Subsequent and more conventional rides with Fred and Gunn and Cordy over the summer had failed to capture the rush of that first wild careen across L.A., but Spike's driving style came close. He'd been too worried about Cordelia the previous night to pay much attention to the drive over, or perhaps Spike had tempered his vehicular brinksmanship in deference to his passengers, but now the vampire took on the road two falls out of three. The DeSoto ran down SUVs and terrorized Mini Coopers, bulling through traffic by sheer intimidation.
Headlights blinked to brilliant life in front of them as the sun set, sparkling oil-slick rainbows from the whorls of grease on the blacked-out windows. Cigarette in one hand and a sports cup of pig's blood from the cooler in the trunk wedged between his knees, Spike threw his head back and sang along to Blood, Sex, and Booze, a study in road rapture sketched in fading bruises. Braced against the dashboard, Connor laughed with a surreal, suicidal joy he hadn't felt since Quar'toth. "You should go faster!" he yelled, and Spike kicked up the radio, stepped on the gas, and whooped as they scraped between the median and a Honda Civic by the width of the paint on the bumpers.

"How do you do it?" He'd barely realized he was speaking aloud till the words came out, and the minute they did, Connor wished he'd nailed them to his tongue.

"How do I do what?" Spike yelled over the radio, tapping his cigarette ash rather haphazardly out the window.

Connor slid down the seat in a creaking of leather and scowled out the window. "Back at the Center. They know what you are. They should - but they - they... notice you."

Spike's eyes grew wicked, mirroring the hellfire glow of his cigarette. "Ooooh, someone's soft on the cheerleader, are they?"

"Shut up."

"Bit perverse, innit, seeing as she changed your nappies and all?" Spike grinned around the filter of his cigarette. "And I speak as a bloke with some experience in the perverse."

"Shut UP!" Connor snarled, fighting an urge to grab the wheel and run them into the nearest semi. "You don't get to talk about her like that! Cordelia's brave, and smart, and - she's a champion, and you're just - " He broke off, chest heaving. "You're just a monster."

"Takes one to know one."

"I'm human!"

"Yours truly walking into your cozy little room with no view last night sans invitation says not," Spike said, stretching luxuriously behind the wheel. "Look, you want Queen C, just wait ten years. She'll have a wrinkle or two to her name and your voice may have broken by then, and she'll be flattered as all hell that a younger man wants to shag her. Right now there's easier ways to piss the old man off."

Connor shot a poisonous look in the vampire's direction. "I dunno, fucking his last girlfriend worked OK for you."

Spike's hand shot out, fast as he'd snatched Jenna's necklace, and grabbed Connor by the scruff of the neck, thumb pressing iron-hard and cold into the carotid. Connor lunged dizzily across the front seat to ram stiffened fingers into Spike's not-quite-healed crossbow wound. Spike yelped, and the DeSoto swerved wildly into the next lane as the vampire banged Connor's forehead into the dashboard.

There was a wild flailing moment of Connor kicking and struggling while Spike growled, "Hold still, you pestilent little nit!" and tried to wrestle the car back under control one-handed. Brakes screeched and tires squealed, drowning out the shrill electronic beeble of Spike's cell going off. Behind them there was a horrific crash as the Durango which had braked to avoid them was rear-ended by a Chevy Impala. Six or seven cars back, the lights of a highway patrol car burst into bloody glory and the wail of a siren split the darkening air. Spike floored it with a curse, and the DeSoto
shuddered and leapt forward with a roar. For a second, blinded by the black racing wind outside the windows, Connor thought they'd get away clean, but then the patrol car broke free of the crush and roared after them, howling on their heels. A solid wall of traffic ahead of them forced Spike to brake, and the patrol car pulled up alongside, trying to herd them to the shoulder.

"I know those city guards!" Connor yelled. "They're crazy! They don't care who they kill!"

"Take the wheel," Spike said, and crawled out the window.

Connor grabbed the steering wheel just as the car began to drift, and tried to remember which of the pedals on the floor was the brake. Wait, there were three of them - what did the third one do? A horn blatted to his left and Connor looked up frantically from the pedal puzzle, leaning close to the peephole in the windshield and crouching over the wheel.

Spike was crouched on the rim of the window, halfway in and halfway out, clinging to both sides with enough white-knuckled force to dent the door-frame. "Get your ass out of my face!" Connor hollered, and Spike laughed and stood up in one acrobatic twist. He swayed violently, leaning into the wind with his shins wedged against the sides of the window, and then he leaped. For a second he hung suspended in the strobe-flicker of headlights, and then he landed on the hood of the patrol car with a thump, game-faced and still laughing. He pressed his flattened, bestial nose to the glass of the windshield and mouthed a sharp-fanged, "Boo!"

The patrol car spun a hundred and eighty degrees, Spike starfished to the hood, and screeched to a halt aghwart the two center lanes. Connor clenched his teeth, closed his eyes, and slammed down on two pedals at random. Luck was apparently with him - the DeSoto screeched to a gear-stripping stop fifty feet down the highway from where Spike was punching a hole through the shatterproof windshield of the cop car and ripping the radio bodily out of the dash. The vampire straightened and hurled the black box over the median, where it struck sparks across four lanes of oncoming traffic and plunged into darkness, wires trailing behind it.

Two officers piled out of the patrol car, faces white with terror, pistols trained on Spike's slim shock-headed form. A shot rang out; Spike staggered and spun as a .9mm round tore through his side. He clasped his heart melodramatically, twirled round twice, and toppled off the hood. The cops edged cautiously around the car - and Spike hopped to his feet, blew a kiss to the officers and took off with vampire speed, which meant that to human eyes he'd virtually disappeared on the spot. Half a second later he was wrenching the driver's door of the DeSoto open and shoving Connor aside.

"Why did you do that?" Connor yelled. "We're supposed to be getting Cordelia's medicine, not playing games!"

"Seemed like a good idea at the time!" Spike killed the headlights, threw the car into reverse, backed up and roared down the exit they'd just passed. Connor thumped back against the seat as they whipped down side streets, turning corners at random until the huge grassy bulwark of the reservoir loomed up out of the night ahead of them, a vast pit of darkness in the encircling cityscape. The DeSoto rolled to a halt on the shoulder of the access road, and Spike bent over the steering wheel, clutching his bleeding side and giggling till tears ran down his cheeks. And Connor, without the slightest idea why, found himself laughing hysterically along with him.

"I thought you said that bullets hurt," Connor said, as soon as he could breathe again.

Spike wiped his eyes and slumped down into the buttery black leather, still giggling. "Yeah, well, some things are worth a little pain."

******
Buffy punched her speed dial and listened as Spike's voice mail picked up - again. Spike. Leave a message and maybe I won't kill you in the morning. BEEP. She suppressed the urge to pretend the phone was Spike's head and bang it against the nearest curb. Where did he get off, leaving her cryptic messages about Angel and then not answering his phone? Stupid vampire. At least it was ringing, which meant that it hadn't gone up in dust with him, and Spike was a big strong vampire and could take care of himself and why the hell didn't he answer?

"No luck?" Riley asked.

His tone was diplomatic enough to bring peace to the Middle East. Buffy briefly imagined his head taking the place of Spike's in the curb-bowling championships, then dismissed the fantasy with a guilty twitch. Somehow it wasn't quite as cathartic when directed against the human and breakable. "It's early," she said, placing a hand on the handle of the Alibi Room's front door. "He's probably asleep."

Riley's look was dubious, but then, so was her argument - he knew as well as she did that Spike was an early riser for a vampire, and besides, it was after six. It was easy to forget that Riley Finn hid a pretty sharp mind behind the jock facade. She couldn't afford to let her guard down.

Beyond the door was a typical Saturday night at Willy's: a few dozen humans eyeing their drinks, a half-dozen vampires eyeing the humans, and a random sprinkling of demons, drinking, dancing, and bellowing threats at one another over the blare of Bare Naked Ladies on the jukebox. In the booths in the back, dark figures huddled together, plotting darker deeds. Of course, the mix was different than it had been a few years back. Lots fewer vamps, and most of demons were species who posed a greater threat to the stray cat population than to mankind at large. Not that Willy's was wholesome family entertainment, but...

The room fell silent as she walked in, and several members of the crowd began edging towards the exits. But a pair of vamp hookers turned their attention back to their johns with an air of relief, and a family of Anamovic demons nodded with wary respect as she passed their table. "Slayer," the eldest of them said, hesitant. "We've been having some trouble with a Glarghk Guhl Kashma'nik raiding the trash cans..."

"On it. Just don't ask me to pronounce it."

The Anamovic ducked its head and smiled, and Buffy felt perversely irritated. Fear she got. You demon, me Slayer. The respect made the back of her neck prickle. When had that happened? Why had it happened?

Behind the bar, Susie straightened, wringing the washrag with which she'd been polishing the Formica in both hands as Buffy sauntered up with Riley looming at her heels. The robin's-egg blue of her spine-bases had paled to an ashy grey, and her eyes were white-rimmed with panic.

"Don't shoot!" Willy yipped, ducking behind the cardboard standup of a beer bottle in a football helmet. "I surrender! She's right there!"

"Willy, you're flunking labor/management relations big time." Buffy folded her arms and leaned against the counter. "Susie, it's OK. Agent Finn's not going to touch you; you've got my word on it. Bud Light for him, Tab with a twist for me."

"Slayer, you know we don't got - " Willy started to complain.

Susie reached under the bar and produced a can of Tab - the Alibi Room did not, in fact, serve Tab, but Susie had long since worked out that keeping a six-pack on hand made for a happier Slayer, and
The delegation from Bloody Vengeance Inc was seated in the two booths at the back. David and Anya had commandeered the larger of the two, and sat opposite Nadia and Clem. Evie straddled a backwards chair at the end of the booth, and Elise, Fernando, and three unfamiliar vampires crowded into the second booth, eyeing her uneasily across the tops of their blood smoothies. Without Spike to explain the niceties of vampire custom to her, Buffy couldn't be certain, but she was betting that Evie's escapades had won her a promotion. Clem threw her a little wave and a thumbs-up. David rose and waved her to a chair. He didn't offer one to Riley. "Allen, Nita, and Diego," David said, pointing to three newcomers. "Spike still has to vet them."

Buffy nodded and took her seat with an aplomb she was certain was shower-curtain transparent. "I have good news and bad news," she said. "What do you have?"

Half an hour later, she was still listening intently as Evie related her adventures. "... so I snuck out underneath a pool float and got to shadow." Evie took a healthy swallow of B-neg and scratched at the healing burns on her cheek. Willy didn't part with human blood cheaply, but this was, after all, a business dinner, tax-deductible and everything. Besides, Evie looked like she needed it; her face and forearms were covered with a lichenous mottling of new pink skin and red-brown scabs. Young vampires didn't heal as quickly as their elders. "First I thought I'd just hide out until tonight, but then I figured I should see if that Lawson guy was feeding Corvini a line. So I went back to Kite that evening and told him I had some dirt on Corvini, and yeah, it sounds like Amherst sent a couple of fledges to L.A. too. So did Nguyen, and scuttlebutt has it that Lawson rounded up half a dozen loners on his own."

Buffy frowned and ran a finger across the table top, doodling through the watery pattern of interlocking rings surrounding her Tab. "All fledges, right? No right-hand vamps?"

"Right," Evie agreed.

Riley re-directed his gaze from his untouched beer to Evie. "What's that mean?" It was the first time he'd spoken since sitting down. Half a dozen pairs of unfriendly yellow eyes bore into his, but Riley didn't so much as blink.

"It means that none of the gang leaders trusts or fears Angelus enough to accept an alliance," David replied. "Even if he's offering one. They're only sending minions they can spare, or that they want to be rid of. Angelus has been out of the game for years, and the last time he showed up he left the Order of Aurelius in tatters. He's still got reputation enough that they don't want to offend him unnecessarily, but he's not powerful enough or close enough to really frighten them."

"Which is of the good for us," Buffy said. "We're not going to have to worry about the locals unifying under his lead. Yet."

David shook his head. "Give Angelus a month to build a real power base in L.A. and it'll be a different story."

"He's not going to get a month." Buffy bit down viciously on her slice of lime. She needed information, damn it. Did Angel have his soul, or not? If he didn't, well, they could rustle up another Orb of Thessulah somewhere. And if he did... she shied away from that question.

My city, he'd said, and full of hot, wounded pride, she'd honored that demand, even when outrageous rumors had floated back from L.A. on the vampire grapevine. A roomful of lawyers, a miracle baby - that Angel had had the gall to get on her back about Spike when Darla had a bun in
the oven still infuriated her, though deep down she knew it wasn't a rational fury; Angel hadn't even
known about Connor's existence when he'd come to Sunnydale trying to save her from herself.
Darla-boinkage, with intentions of soul-lossage aforethought. Not something she could easily
forgive, because damn it, she'd be the one who had to kill him. Again.

Angel's city, Angel's problems. None of her business, not anymore, until the bodies started piling up.
She and Angel were over. Still... yeah, she still loved him, in the part of her heart that was still
sixteen. It wasn't fair that the two of them still had all these complicated tangles of guilt and longing
and anger tying them together. Or at least she did; she had no idea what Angel felt any longer.
Sometimes she wondered if she ever had known what he felt. She'd kept so much inside that last
year they'd been together, love and resentment and lust and confusion, stuffed it all down into a tight
hard ball and nailed the storm shutters of her heart closed over it. That was what Riley had gotten -
battened-down Buffy, braced to weather another storm. She wondered if he had ever realized just
how great a compliment she'd given him when she told him that loving him was relaxing. After
Angel, she needed to relax.

"Right," she said briskly. "So you know what I said about having good news? I was lying. What we
have is a messy murder with some circumstantial evidence linking it to Spike, and that links it to you
guys by proxy. What with all this shiny new information I'm thinking it's connected to Angel's little
breakdown somehow, but I need hard proof that none of you did it. And no, I'm not gonna take 'I
was with him!' for an alibi, unless the him is Clem - or Anya, in which case 'her,' because no
offense? but the rest of you are evil."

"None taken," David murmured.

Buffy held up her cell. "I snapped some pictures of the body before the forensics team showed up,
and Agent Finn managed to get one of his people on the scene to take some measurements. I'm
sending Willow over later, and all of you will be good little minions and do exactly what she tells
you to do. Anyone gives her any lip, they're dust. Capisce?"

David nodded. "Understood."

"Any chance that if we get someone up to the hotel room where he died they can get a scent of the
killer?"

Nadia snorted. "After half the police department's tromped in and out of the place? What do you
think we are, werewolves?"

"Worth a try. Elise, you head over there later tonight. Pretend to be a maid or something, and see if
you can smell any other vamps." The whole minion, er, employee arrangement was undoubtedly
evil, and asking Elise to pick up her drycleaning on the way, even just this once, would be bad and
wrong, but sometimes it was awfully nice to deal with people who didn't argue with you, and if they
did, you could kill them. "Now. One last thing," Buffy reached into her coat pocket and tossed the
little plastic bag down on the scarred tabletop. "This came from the crypt. Explain."

David hefted the Tricycle dust, or whatever it was called, turning it over in his long pale fingers,
examining the fall of iridescent powder within the plastic baggie. He looked up, his expression as
controlled and his olivine eyes as unreadable as ever. "It's not ours."

"You're positive?" Buffy asked.

"If you had any idea what this was, you wouldn't have to ask," Anya said. "We specialize in spell
components. Triathskai dust's a hallucinogen. Extremely addictive, extremely dangerous, extremely
valuable."
"Are the... um... Triathskai nice demons?"

"Are you kidding? They'll bite your head off soon as look at you." Anya plucked the baggie from David's fingers. "And believe me, you don't want to know about their mating habits, unless razor-sharp proboscises turn you on. But they're intelligent, sort of, so even if the dust didn't have a one in four chance of turning your brain to chop suey - and not good chop suey, either, the gloopy canned kind - it's nothing we'd carry."

"Besides, it's way out of our league," David put in. "The dust supply line for the West Coast is sewn up by the Doctor."

"Well, that's a pretty big fat clue, then, isn't it? Someone's trying to frame us," Anya said crisply, "and it's someone with resources." She bounced the baggie in the palm of her hand. "This has a street value with an aesthetically pleasing number of zeroes at the end. Golly, who has Spike pissed off lately who has lots of money, a multinational organization, and the West Coast distribution of Triathskai dust in his back pocket?"

Riley's jaw tightened - he was in for some serious TMJ problems if he didn't relax. "Fine. You have a case. But I can't afford to take your unsupported word for something this important. Maybe Spike's operation isn't dealing in dust - but maybe Spike decided that if he can't beat the Doctor, he's better off joining him. Maybe someone from out of town killed this guy Wood. But there are way too many coincidences here to - "

Buffy sighed, and stabbed her speed dial again, more to have something to do with her hands than out of any hope of getting an answer. One ringy-dingy, two ringy-dingies...

"If you're not Buffy you're sodding dead."

She melted down into her chair in stupidly giddy relief. "This is my lucky day, then."

There was an unidentifiable and alarming crash in the background. "Look, pet, bit busy."

"Angel. Soul. Yes or no?"

A moment of silence. "Can't tell. Gone spare in any case, building the New Aurelian Order or some such rot. Could be a spell, or maybe the soul got to be too much for him and he's snapped." The worried edge in his voice belied the flippancy of his words. "Going to have to rally the troops and take him down fast if we don't want him getting too big for our britches."

She felt sick, glad she'd skipped dinner and even gladder she'd resisted the doubtful temptations of Willy's nachos. It was happening all over again. But it wasn't going to happen the same way if she had anything to say about it. "OK. You know he's been recruiting here, right?"

"Yeah, had a chat with the recruiter. Can't imagine that's gone over well with the kids back home."

"Very much not. In fact..."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

A quick glance at Riley. Oh, he wasn't going to like this. Not one teensy tiny bit. She wasn't all that zippity doo da about it herself. "It can't come from me. They wouldn't listen. You've got to get back here, and - Spike, someone killed a man here, a guy named Robin Wood. Nikki's son." She heard the sharp intake of breath. "They set it up to look like you did it. Riley thinks - "

Spike swore softly. "When did he die?"
"Between eleven and two this afternoon."

"Got a dozen human witnesses who can swear I was elsewhere. Tell Finn to bugger himself with whatever's closest and least comfortable. Any other cock-ups I need to know about?"

"Eh. The Doctor's trying to frame you for drug running. Gib Cain planted some freaky dust in the crypt. No biggie."

His growl raised goose bumps even at a distance. "I told Cain I'd kill him if I caught him on my ground again."

Buffy's stomach iced over and her heart slid pell-mell down the slopes. "I can't let you do that. He's -"

"Human, yeah, noticed as much. But he's fucked with me once too often. You see him, tell him he'd better not be on my ground when we all meet up again, and that way everybody's happy."

"We'll talk about it when you get home." She clicked the phone off, schooling her face to a chipper calm and hoping it concealed the churning stomach and shaking hands. By Spike's lights, he was just issuing fair warning. She'd always known that someday they'd be vampire and Slayer again, not Spike and Buffy, but she was going to put that day off as long as possible. "David," she said, "I want everyone back at the crypt in half an hour for testing on the Wood biz. And then I want Gib Cain. Alive and unharmed. Get him for me, and get him for me now."

David looked at her - unlike Riley, he'd heard the whole conversation, and he was smart enough to understand the implications, even if most of the rest of the minions weren't. He regarded her with a detached interest. "You understand I won't go against Spike's direct orders?"

She didn't rise. She didn't have to. "I understand that I'm Spike's full partner in this business - and everything else. I understand that I'm the Slayer. The question is, do you understand?"

David remained perfectly still, studying her with that mild and utterly inhuman gaze, but in the end it was his eyes that faltered. He nodded, slowly. "I think you've made yourself clear. If we run across Mr. Cain, we'll deliver him to you in the same condition in which we find him."

She took a swallow of her Tab as David got up and beckoned the rest of the vampires to follow, feeling the burn of carbonation all the way down her throat. Maybe he'd bring her Cain. Maybe he'd kill Cain himself, and then she could stake him. Either way, it would break the stalemate between her and Spike. Spike would be pissed off, but she'd deal with that later.

"I have to get home," Anya said, checking her wristwatch. "I'm ovulating, and Xander's expecting me back by nine. Should I expect you to show up at the Magic Box with a warrant to look at our books, Agent Finn?"

Riley shook his head, and Anya raised an eyebrow and sashayed out. Riley watched her go, then returned to the study of his beer-bottle label. "They certainly follow your lead," he said, peeling a strip of blue and silver paper away from the dark glass. He nodded in the direction of the Anamovics. "I'm impressed by your... rapport with the hostiles."

"There is no rapport," Buffy said, sliding her Tab across the table on a trajectory that turned her careful pattern of condensation-circles into a shapeless wet smear. "There's choosing your battles. Spike and Anya have forgotten more about demons than the Council ever knew. If I use what they know, I can pick my targets. Get allies and informants and make plans, and actually make a difference instead of just treating the symptoms night after night. When there's only one of me and"
hundreds of them, it kinda makes sense to concentrate the firepower on the biggest and bitey-est, doesn't it?" Does't it?

"You can't nursemaid him forever." At her questioning look, Riley tapped a thumbnail on his bottle cap. "Spike. Someday you're not going to be there. And it'll kill you. Is that fair?"

"No." She did get up this time, slinging her bag over one shoulder. "It's not. Neither was Mom's tumor, or Angel's curse, or Dawn getting the good hair genes, or Dad living with a woman who's not nearly skanky enough for me to hate her properly. Come on. Willow and your guy should have the equipment set up by now."

She tried to ignore the looks of non-total-Slayer-loathing and the couple of outright smiles she got on the way out. There was too much going on right now to let herself get rattled by... by what, Riley's factual observations about Slayer/demon relations? By the uncomfortable reminder that there were times that no matter how hard Spike tried, he wasn't human, and she couldn't slip up and treat him like one? It wasn't like she was some kind of demonic Michael Corleone, after all. She was just... adaptable.

Outside Willy's was a bright blue recycling bin, wheeled up from the alley. A crudely-lettered cardboard sign entreated customers to keep the parking lot free of broken glass. She tossed the Tab can into its bright plastic depths, taking a meager satisfaction in the clunk when it hit bottom. She'd been afraid, once, that loving Spike would destroy her. Maybe part of her still was, deep down. But she'd been afraid that loving Angel would destroy the world, once, and she'd kept on doing that, too.

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"Who was that?" Connor hissed.

Spike ignored the edge of suspicion in Connor's voice and tucked his cell back into his jacket. "The Slayer."

"That's not Faith's voice." On the floor, the pharmacist, whose badge proclaimed him Doctor Nakamura, moaned and tried to sit up. Connor smashed him over the head with the bedpan again and he went limp. The boy had technique, had to give him that.

"I said THE Slayer, not a Slayer." Spike turned in circles, eying the pharmacological bonanza on the shelves overhead and the bins under the counter: Pills of every size and color, multicolored powders, syrups in murky bottles of blue glass, a wild array of tinctures, infusions and poultices. A computer with a brand-new flatscreen monitor glowed sedately in the corner. The counters were crowded with pill-cutters, labels, gelatin capsules, mortars, and tiny scales, but the clutter was disappointingly modern. What the place really needed, Spike thought, was a stuffed crocodile and an astrolabe or two.

Getting into the Gregson Clinic had been easy. As it served patients of the demon persuasion, it was a twenty-four hour operation. All they'd had to do was stroll in and chat up the admitting nurse, whose unnaturally bluish hair might have been evidence of either demon ancestry, punk pretensions, or a hairdresser with a long-standing grudge. The silly cow had practically wet herself giving them directions, and with minimal recourse to the large, helpful color-coded maps of the facility on the walls, they'd taken the elevators to the second floor, found the pharmacy and introduced themselves to the harried-looking young man behind the counter. He'd walked in figuring to snatch what they needed for Cordelia and get the hell out; he'd had his fun for the night. Buffy's call had changed everything. Gregson had thrown down a gauntlet, and Spike had every intention of picking it up and cramming it down the Doctor's throat. No time like the present.
Spike dropped to one knee, removed Dr. Nakamura's glasses, and peeled back his right eyelid, studying the contracting pupil. He had a good deal of expertise in telling exactly when a bloke who'd been bashed about the skull was merely out for a bit and when he was polishing up his harp preparatory to a permanent departure, and he judged Nakamura would be safe for awhile. Maybe he shouldn't have cold-cocked the git, but said git had started asking questions Spike was in no mood to answer.

The pharmacy consisted of two connected rooms, the front one serving as a waiting area for patients or doctors to hang about while getting their scrips filled, the back room housing the pills and the equipment. If they hid Nakamura in the back and locked up as they left, it might be hours before anyone found him.

Connor flung open a cupboard and rummaged through the rattling bottles. "There are hundreds of these things! Which one is right? Cordelia could be dying!"

"Not likely in the next half-hour," Spike said. "Look for anything that says 'antibiotic.'" He scanned the labels on the bulk pill dispensers, squinting at the unfamiliar names. Clarithromycin, Cefoperazone, Troleandomycin - what the bloody hell had become of plain old penicillin, or was that out of fashion now? He had a vague memory of hearing something about resistance, ten or fifteen years back, but as vampires didn't get infections, he hadn't paid much attention. Besides, humans dying horrible deaths while they waited in vain for their pills to take effect had struck him as pretty funny at the time. Bugger. "Here, just take some of each."

As Connor filled a zip-loc bag with a rainbow assortment of pills that probably wouldn't kill Cordy any faster than the infection would, Spike surreptitiously slipped on Nakamura's horn-rims. The sodding things were just far enough off his own prescription to give him a headache, but it made reading the labels easier. He skimmed down the row of bins and made a few strategic withdrawals of his own - painkillers and amphetamines were as good as cash on the demon black market. He'd learned the hard way that Buffy got unreasonably stroppy if he sold the things, but he could always trade them for information, or pass them out to the minions as treats for good behavior. Pity the days when any doctor worth his shingle had a stash of cocaine lying around were long gone.

As Spike distributed his brain candy to various jacket pockets, Connor held out two bags, bulging with pills in pink and green and yellow like mutant dinner mints. "Is this enough?" He nudged Nakamura's shoulder with the toe of his sneaker. "I think he's waking up."

"Not any more," Spike said. "Leaving that meddling bastard Cain alive's just made Gregson think he can push me around. Has to stop, here and now, and as I'm here now, I'm going to stop it. You've got what you need; you can scarper on back to the car if you want."

He appropriated a clipboard from the nearest counter, shoved the borrowed glasses up his nose, and
marched out of the pharmacy with the assurance of a man who had every right to be parading the halls of a demon clinic with a small fortune in stolen Vicodin in his pockets. Directly across the hall from the pharmacy were a pair of computer labs bracketing the cool room for the server. Spike tried the door, peered in, and grinned. He waved to the security camera in the corner, walked round the humming cluster of machines to the tangle of cables leading to the power bar along the wall, reached in, and flipped off the surge protector. On the way out he ripped half-a-dozen coils of blue T100 cable free of the router for good measure. Curses and shrieks of unmaidenly dismay erupted from the nurses' station and a couple of the labs as the server went down and the surveillance cameras spazzed into static. Spike slipped out and walked with unhurried swiftness towards the elevator.

"Where are you going?" Connor was hurrying after him, a far-too-adult annoyance twisting his youthful face. Spike rounded the corner into the second floor lobby. The nurses at the station were all crowded around the computer or making frantic calls to the IT department; no one noticed a white lab coat ushering a patient into the elevator.

"Upstairs," Spike informed him. The elevator pinged and they stepped in. Spike waved the key-card at the sensor and hit the button for the fourth floor. The elevator pondered for a moment before deciding the key-card was legit, then lurched into motion. The doors whooshed open on the restricted floor, and Spike paused, listening for approaching footsteps. He could hear raspy breathing in a couple of the nearest rooms, and the whir and bleep of monitors, but beyond that, nothing. The acoustics in the clinic had been well-designed - to muffle the screams, perhaps.

There was no nurse's station on the fourth floor. Here, according to the helpful wall charts, were private rooms and operating theatres for the... special cases. Doors were reinforced, and the few that were open revealed stark tables fitted with restraints that might have been fun in other contexts, but here held a definite air of menace. Trays full of gleaming scalpels and clamps and drills sat uncomfortably close at hand, and all the windows were barred. Spike ignored the urge to sightsee and prowled down the long, single hall - he wasn't here to gawk at the accommodations. What he was after...

"Hey! What are you - "

Spike spun the clipboard at the uniformed guard, knocking the radio from his hand, and leaped, lab coat billowing - sooner or later he was going to have to get another duster, no two ways about it. The guard vamped out, but instead of going for Spike, he dashed for the radio, which had spun away to bounce off the baseboard of the nearest wall and into an empty room. Spike put on a burst of speed and tackled the guard from behind, wrapping both hands around a boney ankle and yanking his legs out from under him. Connor leaped over the two of them as they rolled across the floor and came down on the radio, smashing it.

"Intruders on level four!" the guard howled, and Spike clawed his way up the squirming vampire's body, grabbed a double handful of scalp, and hauled backwards till he heard vertebrae crunch. The body beneath him went limp, and the guard-vamp's eyes bugged out. Spike clamped a hand over his mouth. "Tell me where the organ bank is and I'll kill you 'fore this has a chance to heal crooked. Keep mum and I'll chop your bits off and leave you a pretzel-shaped eunuch for the rest of fucking eternity."

A garbled bleat was the only answer. Spike scrambled to his knees, knelt on the guard's chest and slapped him across the mouth hard enough to rip his lower lip open on his own fang-points. "Fourth door... left," the guard croaked. "Elevator. Never get in. Retinal scan... "

Spike rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. Everyone knows the answer to that one." He crooked two fingers. "Right or left?"
"I thought you were going to kill him," Connor said as they hurried down the corridor a few moments later.

"I will. Soon as we don't need this anymore." Spike tossed the blood-smeared, grape-sized orb of flesh up and caught it. "With luck everyone's busy dealing with the computer fuckup, and won't notice he's missing. Here we are."

The doors swung open on a huge, chill, chrome-plated cavern of a room, windowless, lined with freezer compartments. Shelf upon glassed-in shelf filled the center of the room, housing bell jars ranging from salt-cellar tiny to turkey-roaster huge. Within each jar, something throbbed or pulsed or quivered. Hearts, livers, lungs, glands of every shape and function, pink and red and purple and bile-yellow. Huge translucent sheets of skin, wrinkled or pebbled or feathered, pegged out on stainless steel tables and nourished with glowing tubes of nutrients. Horns and claws and eyeballs, antennae and proboscises, scales and teeth, a disemboweled demonic Noah's ark. Spike stared, torn between awe and a feeling it took him a minute or two to identify as revulsion. He'd seen more gutted corpses than he could count, and done his fair share of the gutting. This was different from Angelus's bloody artistry, from Dru's mad whims, from his own carefree slaughter. The methodical bloodlessness of it all made him come over a bit queer. No one had gotten any fun out of these deaths.

"What is this?" Connor whispered.

"Gregson's collection," Spike whispered back, and then, louder, "The common stuff, anyway. Wager he's got his prizes in a vault somewhere."

"Why are we here?"

Spike bared his teeth. "Why d'you think?"

He picked up a tubular stainless steel chair and swung it at the nearest shelf. Half a dozen jars rocked, toppled, and exploded in a shower of glass, and half a dozen unidentifiable lumps of flesh bounced to the floor with a splat. For a second Connor just stared at him, and then the boy grabbed a chair of his own and got into the spirit of things. Spike bashed and smashed with joyful abandon, punted football-sized hearts into wastebaskets, squashed gooseberry-sized eyeballs like grapes underfoot. He grabbed the handle of the nearest freezer and yanked it open, spilling out vials of demon blood onto the floor, popsicles of topaz and emerald and carnelian shattering on the linoleum.

If he hadn't still been wearing Nakamura's glasses, he'd have missed it. But there it was on the label: Mohra, 10-13-01 EXP 12-31-06. Well, what did you know - this was his lucky night after all. Brilliant. Spike pawed through the remaining vials and found two more with the same label. There was a small cooler on the nearby counter; he grabbed a couple of cold packs from the freezer, tucked the vials in beside them, and sealed it up.

A swift glance revealed Connor hacking sausage-sized lengths off a cats-cradle of bright purple intestines. Spike hopped an overturned shelf, skidding a bit in the multicolored smears of goo on the floor. "Come on, sprout, we've had our fun. Time's wasting."

They were almost to the elevator when he remembered the guard. Could leave him, of course; he didn't mind the Doctor knowing who was responsible for the carnage. Pretty much the point of the exercise, after all. But he'd promised to dust the stupid wanker, and Spike made few enough promises that he prided himself on keeping them - to the letter, anyway.

Ahead of him Connor skidded to a stop in front of the elevator and stabbed the buttons. Both of them jumped as a klaxon went off.
"Christ on a sodding minibike," Spike snarled. "They're onto us." He thrust the cooler full of Mohra
blood into Connor's hands, and tore off down the corridor.

"Spike!" Connor yelled. "Get back here, you asshole!"

"Half a mo! Got someone to kill!" Spike pounded down the hallway, linoleum tile a blur beneath his
feet. He grabbed the doorknob of the room he'd left the guard in as he raced by and swung into a
skidding turn, sliding across the floor on his knees. The guard stared at him, something like gratitude
glistening in his one remaining eye, blood and lymph weeping from the ruined socket of the other.
Down the hall Spike could hear shouts and the crackle of a police radio. Fucking hell, the LAPD's
finest, and all of them human by the scent of them.

He grabbed the guard and hauled him up onto the exam table, ripping the badge and nametag off his
uniform jacket, and skinned out of the lab coat. He wrestled the guard into the lab coat, snatched up
the billed cap and jammed it down over the blazing platinum beacon of his hair - that was it, thirty
years was enough, he was done with the fucking bleach.

He was morphing into game face when the rest of the guards burst in. "I've got this one!" he barked,
in what he hoped was a passable American accent, and wrenched the guard's head a hundred and
eighty degrees on his shoulders. Spike thumped ungracefully to the floor as the body exploded into
dust. "Did you see the others? Two went down the staircase and the third one took the elevator up to
the roof!"

For human wizards, for true demons, for the members of the LAPD who happened to be in the
know, vampires were nothing - forgettable, replaceable cogs in the demon machine. For the last
century Spike had carried on a single-handed crusade to change that little fact of vampiric existence -
I'm William the fucking Bloody, LOOK at me! Now he hunched his shoulders and ducked his head
and pulled up every memory of every excruciating ball and dinner party he'd suffered through in his
living days, trying to summon up that talent for invisibility he'd spent the last hundred years trying to
eradicate. Christ, he was still wearing the sodding glasses.

For a minute, it almost worked.

The four officers drew their pistols as one and fired. Shots ricocheted through the room, spanging off
the reinforced walls and gouging holes in the concrete. Those were no .9mm rounds; they were
packing a serious non-regulation punch. Spike rolled behind the exam table and kicked the tray of
instruments with all his strength at the doorway. It careened across the room and into the two
foremost policemen, knocking them back into the two behind, and sending clamps and scalpels
flying. Spike leaped atop the exam table, kicked off and dove through the door over their heads,
slamming shoulders first into the wall of the corridor opposite. He twisted in mid-fall to land in a
crouch, came out of it with a feral snarl. The policemen were turning, aiming, firing, but he was Neo
and they were stuck on the wrong side of the SFX divide. No vamp could keep up the super-speed
forever, and at this rate he was going to burn out and collapse any minute now, but it beat a bullet in
the head; he didn't want to find out how long it took to re-grow brain tissue.

Spike plucked two pistols from outstretched hands before the third and fourth went off at point-blank
range, hollowpoint ammo exploding flesh and bone in brilliant red flowers of agony. He wanted to
laugh; at least they were following his sage advice on vampire-killing. He staggered, snarling,
cocked the two pistols he'd nabbed and backed down the corridor, firing randomly. A man screamed
and went down, clutching his thigh; another spun round, blood bubbling up from the hole in his
chest. Might be his first human kill in years, and no fucking time to enjoy it. One hammer clicked on
an empty cartridge, then the other; Spike flung the pistols back in their faces and ran, white-hot coals
stitching his ribs and blood soaking his clothes. He could feel the black tide of exhaustion rising; he
still wasn't completely healed from his little encounter with Angelus. Another shot rang out and pain ripped through his thigh. He skidded round the corner into the lobby and fuck, fuck, fuck, there were two more policemen stationed at the stairwell.

And they went down like sacks of potatoes when Connor rabbit-punched them from behind. "Come on!" he yelled, and Spike gathered his last reserves and leaped over the stair-rail, plummeting down four stories. With a curse, Connor leaped after him, and in the rush of wind before they hit, Spike laughed. The kid was all right.
Sunday morning, coming down. Angel sat at his desk, head bent between bull-broad shoulders, forehead resting on clasped hands. Trying to decide if certainty was worth the loss of another minion. It was almost a week now since Cordelia Chase had fled, and neither of the two teams he’d sent to sniff her out had come back. That it had been almost a week and the forces of goodness and light hadn’t descended upon the Hyperion *en masse* argued that she’d run afoul of something that thought she smelled tasty, and was no longer a threat. Unless Spike’s little visit earlier tonight had been a scouting expedition...? But no, he’d bet body parts — his own, even — that Spike’s surprise at his grandsire’s current condition had been genuine.

Spike’s visit was just a stupid coincidence. But that stupid coincidence changed everything.

Out in the lobby the new recruits scurried antlike, lugging buckets full of rubble. His office was open by necessity, the shattered remains of the door propped up against the registration desk. Every shovel-scrape and broom-scratch came one stroke closer to exposing a nerve. At three A.M., a relay inside the implant in his chest would click over and flood his body with liquid joy, but either that wizened bastard Crowley was fucking with him, or he was developing a tolerance for the Doximal. Every night, withdrawal started just a little bit earlier. It wasn’t shakes, or cold sweats. He could endure that. This was worse.

2:51 A.M. Angel’s muscles tensed at the sound of footsteps in the courtyard, and the creak of the lobby door. Wesley. No. The thing that opened the door and paused with such controlled competence to direct the minions in their tasks wasn’t Wesley. *I killed Wesley.*

Weeds of guilt, uprooting the paving-stones of determination and will. Out in the lobby, the thing that wasn’t Wesley issued instructions to the minions in dry, precise, tones. Angel’s fingers tightened on the edge of the desk. His hands were trembling, and he’d close his eyes if he dared, but what he’d see painted on the back of his lids didn’t bear thinking of. Had Spike gotten away? Or had he allowed Spike to get away? Had the rot spread that far?

2:53. Hold on.

*Where’s Cordy now? Alive? Dead? Blood on her face, God, so much blood and she tasted so good. Deep down you’ve always wanted a taste, haven’t you? What a piece of work you are, Liam-my-lad.*

2:55. Wasn’t a soul supposed to mean more than this? The defining characteristic of humanity, and he could drown it in fifty milligrams of horse tranquilizer. If he’d known that, he’d have had Darla shoot him up with morphine a century ago, and God, given the choice of doing something or just sitting here and waiting for that glorious freedom to return...

He’d do something. Now, while he was in control, or out of it. Call Buffy. Faith. Someone.

2:57. The office’s land line was dead, yanked free in Spike's fight with the minions. Angel's hand lunged for his cell phone almost of its own volition, fingers stabbing clumsily at the buttons. Fucking *hell,* he’d existed two and a half centuries and still couldn't master a half-ounce scrap of plastic and
printed circuits.

Hi! You've reached Buffy Summers' voice mail...

"Buffy," he choked out. "It's Angel. You have to..." He couldn't finish the sentence. The phone slipped through his lax fingers, clattering to the rubble-strewn floor. He wasn't thinking straight — it didn't matter. Spike had gotten away, and Spike knew everything. And once he told Buffy, no matter how much it hurt, Buffy Summers would do her duty.

Again.

2:59. He could put her through that. Again. Or... he could end this. Here, now, and for good. That scrap of doorframe, right there. Now. Before it was too late. Fingers closed around splintered wood, quick and certain now. No way in hell is this a dagger that I see before me. Raise it to heart level, brace the jagged end—

3:00.

Cramps seized his chest, sharp and agonizing, rocking him backwards. He dropped the makeshift stake with a gasp as bliss diffused cell by cell through undead flesh, driving pain and doubt before it. Oh. Yeah. Daddy's home. Sine waves of pain and pleasure peaked and diffused, leaving him shaken and breathing in short choppy gasps.

Angel raised his head, wiped the sweat from his brow and willed the breath from his lungs. That had been way too fucking close. He couldn't risk another night like this one. But with any luck, he wouldn't have to.

He heard Wesley send the minions on their way and looked up to see his second in command picking his way through the debris, his lips twisted in fastidious disgust. He cradled a battered leather satchel in his arms. Drusilla waltzed through the rubble at his heels, her pale spidery fingers weaving invisible webs in the air. Wes halted in the doorway to the office, his eyes going from the ruined shelves to the collection of scrapes and gouges the desk had acquired from its brief career as a doorstop. "Vampires are notoriously poor tenants," he observed, "but this is beyond the pale."

Drusilla looked around at the wreckage, her eyes like dark stars, and clasped her hands with delight. "My Spike's been here," she said in a confidential whisper. "The candles are all blown out and the cakes have all been eaten."

Angel surged to his feet, fists braced against the desk. "Yes, Spike was here," he snarled. "Which means he wasn't in Sunnydale, and our little divertissement with Crowley's brat was wasted effort. As of now, we're recruiting. I want half a dozen prospects by the end of the week. Loyal, reliable, smart but not too smart." He fell back into the chair. "Tell me you found what I sent you for, Wesley. I'm not in the mood for setbacks right now."

Wesley dropped the bag on Angel's desk with a deferential lowering of eyes, and stepped back. Angel picked it up and tested the weight, feeling the contents clunk and slide within. Their prize certainly didn't look very impressive. Just a satchel of worn brown leather, with a shoulder strap and double buckles holding it closed. About the size of an old-fashioned doctor's bag, maybe. It stank of magic, old and dark. "Have you opened it?"

"That seemed... unwise while we were en route," Wesley replied.

"Huh." Angel set the bag down on the desk blotter and flipped the catch, revealing a book wrapped in oilcloth and a wooden box, its edges worn smooth by the passing of countless hands. He tossed
the book to Wesley and hefted the box. Something inside rattled. "Let's see what our Watcher pal expects to pay his doctor's bill with."

The hasp snapped with a brittle *crack!* in his ungentle fingers, and the box fell open. Inside was a pentagonal slab of stone, incised on one side with concentric grooves, and half a dozen flat metal cut-outs: stylized monsters, elongated witch-doctors, terrified victims. Angel scowled, examining the tablet. "This is the price of a soul? Looks like Fred Flintstone's record player."

Wesley, already engrossed in the book, turned a yellowing page reverently. "Sumerian," he breathed. "Early Sumerian, too, if I'm not mistaken."

Drusilla stretched out a timid finger, stroking the book's spine and drawing her hand back with a hiss. "Bone of our bone, this is. But not written for us. Watcher's words, all laid out neat and proper."

Angel slammed the box down on the desk, sending tin cut-outs flying. Gregson collected exotic demons - or parts of them, anyway. He'd expected the box to contain some rare and powerful piece of shriveled-up spleen, but this bunch of two-bit mystical junk? Still, if Gregson wanted it that badly... "Well? Can you translate?"

"In time. It's not a simple language," Wesley replied. "But I'll endeavor not to make a lightning-summoning spell out of a recipe for beer."

Probably that was hilarious, if you were Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. "We don't have that much time. I need a translation stat - not the whole damn thing, just the gist. I want to know what we're bargaining with." Angel dropped into his chair, leaned back, and propped his heels on the desk. "It's a few hours yet till dawn. Take Dru and bring me Crowley, in one piece. It's time to eliminate the middleman."

Wesley nodded, tucking the book beneath one arm. If being immediately dispatched on another errand bothered him, it didn't show in his expression. "Very well," he said. "Come along, Drusilla."

Angel waited until they were gone before picking up the cell phone again. He punched in the number with practiced ease. "Doctor Gregson? It's your favorite patient. Uh huh. You don't say. Spike's been a busy boy tonight, hasn't he? Well, I've got a proposition for you, Doctor. Something I think will make us both very, very happy."

******

Ye Grapes was located in Shepherd's Market, a staunchly traditional establishment of wood paneling, dark red walls, and a moderately alarming display of creative taxidermy. A not-so-traditional sign near the bar advised the clientele that Thai food was available in the restaurant upstairs seven days a week. It was also a carefully considered distance from the Council's Mayfair headquarters - not so close as to make it a favored spot for the hurried Watcher in search of lunch; not so far as to make it inaccessible by foot. At mid-afternoon most of its booths were empty. A disinterested woman stood behind the bar, polishing glasses, and a few regulars lounged in the back, carrying on the rambling, interminable argument about cricket which had been in progress since Giles had started frequenting the place.

Giles sat in his customary nook, engaged in a staring match with the stuffed trout in the glass case on the wall opposite. On some days he suspected that the trout was winning. The battle of wills with his piscine nemesis was thankfully interrupted when the pub's front door banged open on the blustery winter day outside. A gust of wind blew a yellow Mackintosh in from the rain-wet courtyard. Its inhabitant stood for a moment in the doorway, shaking mud from his boots and scanning the room for familiar faces. Catching Giles's eye, the newcomer made his way between the tables, shedding
the Mackintosh as he went and revealing a short, stocky man with basset-hound eyes and a balding pate.

Sam Zabuto looked like hell. His dark skin was grey with fatigue, and he'd lost weight. It wouldn't do to say as much, of course. So Rupert Giles merely raised an eyebrow and slid a second, untouched pint across the table. Zabuto settled onto the bench across from Giles and accepted the glass with a grunt. Giles sipped his own beer and waited. Half the trick of espionage was knowing when not to ask questions.

"Heard from your Slayer lately?" Zabuto asked at last, staring into the tawny depths of his glass.

"Buffy's not my Slayer any longer." Ever since he'd returned to England, Giles had been playing the part of the ex-Watcher at loose ends, abandoned by both the Council and the rogue Slayer who had no further use for his guidance. He'd puttered about with his biography of William the Bloody, pathetically eager to talk shop with such old mates as would still associate with him. It was an easier part to play than he'd have liked. "But yes, she keeps in touch. I had a phone call a few days ago." And an e-mail this morning. It would have been both untrue and unkind to say that Buffy only wrote to him when she needed help, but trouble certainly made her a more assiduous correspondent.

"You're luckier than you know, Rupert." Zabuto rubbed dark-circled eyes and raised his glass. "Here's to the only Watcher ever to lose his Slayer twice."

Giles raised his glass, and a second eyebrow, in turn. "Perhaps we've different definitions of luck." Was Zabuto already drunk, at this hour?

Zabuto snorted, running a hand over the close-curled nap of his hair, or what was left of it. "You have no idea. It's not like it used to be when we were in the Academy. You're well out of it." He took another swallow, regarding the pattern of suds that sloshed down the side of his glass with glum disfavor. "Travers hasn't a sodding clue. Bloody desk jockey. Never had a Slayer of his own."

"That is traditional," Giles said, in as neutral a tone as he could summon up. Inwardly, every muscle thrummed in anticipation. His admittedly vague plan upon returning to England had simply been to discover what information Quentin Travers had purged from the Council archives along with the truth about Slayer origins. But increasingly, over the last six months, he'd caught whiffs and rumblings of something deeper and darker. Something that would draw new lines in the face of a loyal Council man like Zabuto, and put a tremor in his fingers. "The head of the Council is supposed to remain unfettered by personal considerations."

"There's unfettered, and there's inhuman." Zabuto sighed and shook his head. "But you didn't come here to listen to my troubles. When was the last time you talked to Bernard Crowley?"

"Crowley?" Giles didn't bother to hide his startlement. "It's been months. I met him for an interview last July, spoke to him for half an hour or so, and haven't been in contact with him since. He wasn't precisely cooperative." Not that he could blame the man. He studied Zabuto's face covertly for any reaction to his news. He didn't want to push Sam too hard; this was the first real break he'd gotten, his first and perhaps only chance at obtaining some serious information. "Was there anything in particular... ?"

Zabuto laced his fingers around his glass, his eyes intent upon Giles's face. "Did he mention anything about an artifact that might still be in his possession? Something related to Slayers?"

"I can't recall anything of the sort." Giles sat back and removed his glasses. "I can consult my notes, of course, but I'm certain I'd remember if he'd mentioned anything of the kind. Can't you ask Crowley yourself?"
"Crowley disappeared a month ago. Closed his bank accounts, let go his housekeeper, turned off his utilities." Zabuto fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and produced a coin, a worn Roman denarius Giles remembered him fiddling with whenever he was uncertain about something. Now he rolled it back and forth between his fingers, heads and tails and heads again. "How badly would you like to get back in the game, Rupert? Reinstatement to the Council, all the black marks off your record? Maybe even a Slayer of your own again. One that's not quite so independent."

If ever a conversation called for lens-polishing, it was this one. Giles took a restorative swallow of his own beer. He could have stayed in California. It wasn't as though Buffy no longer had any use for him. No matter how skilled she became at dispatching the forces of evil, nor how great a practical knowledge of the demon world Spike possessed, neither of them were experts in the field of mystical research. He could have done good there. But the Hellmouth was closed, his Slayer was a grown woman, and he wasn't certain he could bear losing her a third time. It was time to move on. Whatever quarrels he had with Travers, being a Watcher had been his life, and the old disciplines were bred into blood and bone yet.

But not so deeply as to make him forego all caution. "That's an extremely generous offer, Samuel. Generous, perhaps, beyond the bounds of possibility."

"A personal stake in the outcome," Giles murmured. It really was a pity he'd never had a chance to talk to Crowley in depth. When the two longest-lived Slayers in recent memory both had families, and the Council simply ignored the fact... "I'd heard something about his falling-out with Armitage." In any organization, there was bound to be gossip when a respected colleague got the boot. In Crowley's case, speculation had run wild among the Academy students and the junior Watchers, much of it salacious - what possible reason might a middle-aged man have to be so attached to the child of his nubile young ward? "But I never heard anything about him taking Council property when he left."

"Unless it was something old Cuthbert wanted gone." Zabuto threw a wary glance over one shoulder, as if he expected to see Travers skulking about on the street outside. "You know as well as I do the Council keeps its secrets close. A little too close, sometimes. Armitage only confided part of what he knew to Travers when he retired. But we know this much: There was an artifact, once passed down from Watcher to Watcher, only to be used in a dire emergency. To make a Slayer... more. Whatever power it granted wasn't without price, and Armitage deemed it too dangerous. If there's any clue in your notes, any hint Crowley let drop about where this thing might be - or hell, where he might be right now - it could be your ticket back into Travers' good books."

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The obvious question was 'Make a Slayer more what?' but Giles disliked being obvious. He replaced his glasses, regarding Zabuto over the rims. "I'm led inescapably to ask, Sam, what emergency is so dire that it's become essential to find this object now, after it's been missing for almost thirty years? Not to mention making Travers so grateful for its resolution that you can even begin to promise me a reinstatement?"
Zabuto's shoulders sagged. "I've told you more than I should have already. But this is much bigger than Council politics, and if there's any chance at all - Rupert, we could be looking at the end of the entire Slayer line."

"That's rather extreme, isn't it? Was no one Called when you attempted to kill Faith Lehane?" Giles was gratified to see Zabuto flinch. "The Council keeps records on hundreds of potential Slayers, and there are hundreds more whom we've never located. Even if there were no active Slayer at present - " Three active Slayers, in fact, but Faith's current whereabouts was none of the Council's business, and his own knowledge of Kennedy's existence was none of Zabuto's.

"Hardly." The humorless rictus serving Zabuto for a smile grew wider and more pained. "We have a new Slayer. We have three dozen new Slayers. And that's the problem."

"Three doz - " The words That's not possible had dropped out of Giles' lexicon years ago. It wasn't even very difficult to surmise how it had come about: two Slayers in the last ten years had died, and modern medicine had brought them back again, to fight on in company with their successors. Whatever old dark magic it was that summoned a new Slayer upon the death of the old recked nothing of CPR or shots of adrenaline; when the Slayer's heart stopped, a new Slayer arose, whether the stoppage proved permanent or not. "You bastards," Giles breathed, at once horrified and admiring. "You did it again."

"And again, and again, and again," Zabuto agreed glumly. "Your Slayer's a rogue. The line ran through the Lehane girl, and there she was, behind bars, serving a sentence for murder. The world could have been without a Slayer for decades. Travers put it to the Council that we had no other choice but to retire Ms. Lehane. It's been done before, when the candidate was particularly unsuitable, and she'd certainly shown herself to be that." He grimaced. "But then this chap in Research, Sanjay Gupta, suggested that we try instead to replicate what happened to the Summers girl the first time she died, when Kendra was Called. Travers agreed. It was seen as a more humane solution."

Did Sam believe that, Giles wondered, or was it just a little honey added to sweeten the pot for his benefit? Faith and Angel were convinced that the Council's attempt on her life last year had been deadly. Zabuto gave an irritated snort. "That idiot vampire stepped in and made a muddle of everything, of course. But a new Slayer was called. A very talented girl from an old Council family. We couldn't have asked for better. But then Gupta had another brilliant idea: if we stopped the heart of the new girl, we could call another Slayer, and so on, and so on. We wouldn't need to depend upon any one Slayer. We could command an army."

Giles sat back, wishing he had something rather stronger than beer to hand. "So you simply began killing teenage girls on an assembly line, as it were?" Tampering with a blood ritual thousands of years old, which no living Watcher truly understood - who could possibly have predicted that something would go wrong?

"It seemed to work so well at first." Zabuto stared moodily into his beer. "But gradually we realized we'd made a terrible mistake. The new girls were clumsy. Weak. Relatively speaking, of course - they were strong by normal human standards, but compared to what a Slayer should be, they fell short. Even our first candidate's not quite up to snuff. And the more we called, the farther short they fell. We've had Gupta and a dozen more of our best people working on the problem for a year now, and as best they can tell, it's a failsafe built into the calling itself. There was never meant to be more than one Slayer at a time." The older man's hands fistied on the dark wood of the table. "Travers is starting to talk about failed experiments and making a clean slate of it. These girls aren't rogues or murderers. They're good girls, who could be good Slayers. We fight monsters, Rupert. I don't want to become one."
"Dear Lord." Giles removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He ran over the contents of Buffy's last email: Crowley's adopted son found dead in Sunnydale, paired with mysterious hints of a lost Slayer artifact. It went beyond coincidence; whatever Robin Wood had meant to give Buffy must be the object that Zabuto was looking for. And some unknown third party had wanted it badly enough to kill for it.

How much of this could he trust Sam with, with the lives of thirty-odd girls on the line? "This item Crowley may or may not have... can you be certain it would work for more than one Slayer at a time?"

"I can't. But damn it, Giles, these girls aren't slates to be wiped clean. If there's any other way, any other way at all - "

Giles rose to his feet. "I can't promise anything, Samuel. But I think it's time someone tracked down Bernard Crowley."

*******

Sneaking into the city morgue so that Willow could make impressions of the bite marks on Robin Wood's neck was a lot more boring than it sounded. Tara'd cast a minor glamor which made them appear to be morgue attendants, and all Kennedy had had to do was keep a lookout while Willow CSI: Sunnydale'd the body. The most exciting part of the morning had been Willow's hair catching fire in a stray sunbeam as they snuck out through the parking garage.

Things hadn't gotten any more exciting back at the crypt. Kennedy leaned against the ladder leading to the upper level, scowling. Lack of sleep and the pungent scent of quick-set resin was a one-two punch to the brainstem, and she was nursing a killer headache. The only consolation was that the minions, rousted from their beds in the dead of morning, looked as groggy and grouchy as she felt.

The egg timer dinged, Gong Show loud, and several minions winced. Way-too-chipper Willow wriggled the tray of solidified dental alginate off Evie's fangs. "All set!" she announced, and looked a little disappointed when her pun elicited only a disinterested growl or two from her audience. Evie dropped the bumpy, pulled an ew-face and stalked off, hacking and spitting ostentatiously. Willow deftly spooned a dollop of gluey liquid from each of two bottles into a small mixing bowl. After a minute's vigorous stirring, she poured the resin into the alginate mold, and laid it next to the molds she'd already taken from David and Elyse, each one neatly labeled with the vampire's name. She waved to the minion at the head of the line. "Next!"

All very scientific, and all complete bullshit. Buffy and Willow would argue they were doing something productive here, eliminating suspects, but the truth was they could have eliminated all the suspects in five minutes on the end of Mr. Pointy. Kennedy still felt like heaving whenever she thought of Wood's mutilated body. A vampire had done that, and even if it hadn't been one of these exact vampires, Buffy was kidding herself if she thought these exact vampires wouldn't have sat back and made popcorn while it was done.

"No way, you souled-up freak." Nadia shook her head, backing away from the goop-filled tray Willow was waving under her nose. "No way am I getting that disgusting stuff all over my fangs!"

Evie, now swinging her feet atop a crate stenciled in red with ASSORTED SKREWT PARTS, rolled her eyes. "Oh, for cripes' sake. It tastes like spearmint, you big pussy."

Kennedy caressed the length of ash wood at her side. "It's cake, goop, or death. And we're out of cake." Please, pick death.
It was more than a little infuriating that Nadia's gaze slid sideways, to the niche where Buffy had retreated to take a call on her cell phone. Buffy Summers wasn't the only goddamn Slayer in the universe. "Like I'm afraid of a half-powered runt like you," Nadia sneered.

Willow's lower lip started to wibble, because the alginate was going to set up in a few seconds. Creepy Accountant Vampire, otherwise known as David, sighed, unfolded himself, and administered a smack to the back of Nadia's head. "Spike's orders are that we cooperate with the Slayer in his absence."

"Spike was supposed to keep the Slayer out of our hair," Nadia muttered. "Fine, then. Whatever." Her eyes flared yellow, and her forehead convoluted in ridges of bone. She bared her fangs for Willow - and then whirled and broke for the tunnel leading to the sewers.

Kennedy was after her in a heartbeat, stake in hand and a grin of savage exultation splitting her face. Action. At last. Behind her, running footsteps - Buffy getting off her ass and giving chase, probably, but Kennedy wasn't about to give the older Slayer a chance to catch up. She swerved around a pyramid of crates, kicking back accidentally-on-purpose as she ran, and the precariously stacked boxes came crashing down, blocking the mouth of the tunnel. Ignoring the startled yells and flailing behind her, she pounded down the corridor after Nadia. The vampire was faster than she was, but that didn't matter. She knew Buffy'd arranged with David to have the newly-installed door to the sewers locked.

Nadia was hammering furiously on the door when Kennedy caught up with her, desperate blows that made the hinges groan. Kennedy stabbed for the chest with her stake and Nadia ducked, sliding beneath her arm with a hiss. Kennedy let momentum spin her around, back to the door, and lunged again. The vampire rushed her in a blind, panicked fury, kicking and biting and pulling hair. Fuck, the trailer-park fu was strong in this one. Not in Spike's league, but Nadia wasn't a wet-behind-the-ears fledge, either. In the narrow confines of the tunnel there was no ground to give up, and Kennedy was only landing one blow to every two or three of Nadia's. She blocked the vampire's snapping fangs, ramming her forearm against the monster's throat. Head, belly, chest, head again. A rib cracked. Blood spattered the clean new bricks to each side of the door, and Kennedy wasn't sure if it was hers. Pain exploded at the back of her skull as Nadia slammed her against the solid oak planks. She could see fangs gnashing only inches from her nose, smell the rank stink of blood on the vampire's cold not-breath. Feel the growing tremor in her own arm. She had only seconds until her not-quite-Slayer strength gave out.

I'm going to die.

Any ordinary human would be dead already. She wasn't ordinary. But she wasn't quite extraordinary enough. It wasn't fair. She'd never gotten the chance -

How many Slayers, over how many thousands of years, had thought those exact thoughts, as death closed in?

In the blurred corner of Kennedy's vision, a hand fell on Nadia's shoulder. The vampire's vicious, terrified face disappeared, torn away between one reflexive gasp of breath and the next as Buffy Summers flung Nadia head-first into the tunnel wall. With a sickening crunch, the vampire crumpled to a heap on the tunnel floor, her straw-colored hair matted with blood.

Buffy gave the limp body a disdainful nudge with the toe of her boot and inspected the damage to her manicure, avenging Valkyrie to Legally Blonde in six seconds flat. The look she gave Kennedy wasn't much more tolerant. "What exactly was that supposed to be? Did you have an extra helping of
Stupid Flakes this morning, or what?"

Kennedy righted herself, cheeks burning. She couldn't deny the stupid - she'd never let a vampire corner her before. She knew she couldn't win a straight-out slugfest. But this time it hadn't mattered. "I can't just - last night - fuck it, Summers, someone needs to die for that, and I need to kill them!"

"Someone will. The right someone." Without warning Buffy's fist lashed out, cracking hard into Kennedy's jaw. "That's for lying to me," she snapped, before Kennedy could retaliate. "That was Giles on the phone. My Watcher. Who's been talking to Kendra's old Watcher about the shenanigans in jolly old Watcher's Headquarters." She planted both fists on her hips, her eyes as cold as the skating rink in January. "When Travers ordered Faith killed to Call you, I thought it was the sickest thing I'd ever heard of. Turns out I've got a deficient imagination."

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck... Kennedy wiped the blood from her mouth. "OK, fine. I didn't tell you everything. Have you told me everything?"

Expression not the least bit thawed, Buffy folded her arms. "Pretty much yes."

Kennedy slumped back against the wall and closed her eyes. Darkness looked too good, so she opened them again. "I volunteered, you know. They didn't fucking drug me against my will or anything. Ms. Chalmers - my Watcher - told me what they were trying to accomplish, and unlike some people, I think it's a fucking privilege to be a Slayer, so I said yes. Hell yes. If one Slayer's a good thing, a hundred of them would be a hundred times as good. And when we found out it wasn't working... I wasn't lying when I said it was my idea to come here to find a cure, either. Ms. Chalmers knows all about it, but it was my idea."

The older Slayer cocked her head. Her words hit as hard as her fist. "Did you know Travers was planning on killing all of you and starting over?"

She didn't want to admit it to Buffy, but... "I'd heard stuff," Kennedy said, grudging every word. "But you always hear stuff. My Watcher wouldn't -"

"My Watcher drugged me and threw me to a vampire nutcase, just to prove a point." Buffy regarded her coolly. "And Giles has the lowest skeeve quotient of any Watcher that ever Watched. If you're going to hitch your wagon to the Council's star, you'd better get it through your head they'll go Cold Equations on your tushy the minute the fuel runs low. How do you think you got Called in the first place?"

"So what?" Kennedy yelled. "You said yourself Faith Lehane's not dead!"

"No thanks to Quentin Travers. Lucky for you and your friends-and-relations, it sounds like the thingybob Wood was trying to get to us may be the solution to all your problems. Now we just have to find it." Buffy slung the comatose Nadia over one shoulder as if she were a singularly unpleasant baby in need of a burping, and started back down the corridor. "I hope we didn't bust her teeth out, or it'll mess up the mold."

Kennedy goggled. "You're not seriously planning to keep going through with this forensics bullshit, are you? She ran! That proves she's guilty!"

Buffy glanced back, narrow-eyed. "I don't stake vampires for running away. I stake them for killing people. With her dope of a brother gone, Nadia's gotta realize Spike and I both know she's got a lot less reason to stick by his rules. It would be awfully convenient for everybody if her fang marks matched the ones on the corpse, whether she actually killed him or not. I catch a killer, Spike cans a minion who might cause trouble - win-win. The thing about being evil," she said reflectively, picking
her way through the debris of the ruined crates, "is you expect everyone else to be evil too." She strode into the barracks and dumped Nadia's unconscious form on the nearest cot. "Here, Wills, she's still all bumpy. Have your wicked way with her."

A few minutes later, Willow wriggled a newly-solidified mold off of Nadia's fangs, and got busy with the resin again. "Tell me she did it," muttered Kennedy.

Willow shook her head, dismayed at this speculation in advance of the evidence. "Got to let the resin set first." She popped another finished cast out of its mold, and inscribed 'Fernando' on it in careful black Sharpie letters. "OK, look." She placed several casts of the bite marks from the body side by side in the middle of the table. "There were two sets of fang marks on the body. One of them's smaller and narrower than the other - I'm guessing man and woman." She placed the casts labeled 'David' and 'Fernando' next to the larger one. "You can see Fernando's jaw's too large to match. David's is about the right size, but he's got a totally different fang pattern going, here and here. And we'll have to wait till he gets home to be sure, but I'd rule Spike out for that, too - he's got that one crooked tooth, you know? And I don't see that on any of these bites. Evie's too small to match the woman, and Nadia - " she consulted the egg timer, and popped Nadia's cast out of its mold. "Size is close, but Nadia's got an underbite." She spread both hands. "And the three new guys, none of them match up either. Whoever killed Robin Wood isn't in this crypt."

"Son of a - " Kennedy slammed a fist down on the table. "Then where are they?"

Willow looked at Buffy. Buffy looked distinctly unhappy. "Something pinged the wig-o-meter about Wesley when I talked to him on the phone. Spike confirms the wig factor and says something's up with Angel." She drew a deep, pained breath. "Spike isn't convinced he has, but we can't rule out the possibility that Angel's lost his soul again. Odds that it's a coincidence that we're getting a splashy vampire murder in Sunnydale at the same time all this is going on? Not good." She squared her shoulders. "Just a hunch, but I'm betting our magical McGuffin's on it's way to Los Angeles."

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Winifred Burkle had never been too good at the comfort stuff. Escaping, yeah. Resisting when she couldn't escape, yeah. Enduring when she couldn't resist, oh, yeah. But doling out the comfort afterwards was never her thing. She could put together a mean first aid kit, but she'd always preferred that someone else do the actual binding up of wounds, 'cause for some reason patients took badly to their physician poking at the squishy red stuff and saying things like "Ooh, now that's interesting! I've never seen a bone do that before!"

So when Connor dragged Spike back to the East Hills Teen Center in the still dark hours before dawn, Fred resisted the natural urge to indulge her curiosity as to exactly what effect hollow-point .38s had on vampire anatomy. Considering the reasons she had to want to replicate that effect on a particular vampire, she felt she was being pretty darn generous. Instead she appropriated the pharmaceutical loot the two of them had brought with them, and set off to dose Cordelia.

Cordelia lay restless in her narrow cot, huddled in a feverish tangle of blankets. Fred emptied the contents of the Zip-loc bag on the shabby little bedside table and fetched a Dixie cup of water from the tiny, rust-stained sink in the dorm bathroom. She set the cup on the table and surveyed her options: pink and yellow and blue and white. One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small. Connor hadn't labeled anything, but not-that-distant memories of high school pharming parties were as good a guide as any to the most likely candidates.

Fred set the chosen few aside in a careful mosaic on the table and bent over the cot. She smacked Cordelia's cheek, lightly at first, then harder. "Cordy! Wake up!"
"Uhhhh..." Cordelia's eyes slitted open, bleary and unfocused. "Where's Ang...?"

"Still evil." Fred stuffed the pills into her mouth and following them up with a tap water chaser. The resultant coughing fit led to a fair bit of back-pounding, but in the end, she was pretty sure she'd gotten two or three of the most promising candidates down Cordy's throat before she lapsed back into her stupor.

The metal folding chair where Connor'd been keeping his vigil was still sitting forlornly beside the cot - the boy'd looked ready to pass out when he hauled Spike's pasty white ass over the threshold, so he most likely wouldn't be using it for awhile. The chair, not the cot. And hopefully not this cot. None of them were up to dealing with Connor's Mommy issues right now. Fred plunked herself down in the chair, wincing a little as the half-healed cuts on her back touched metal. Maybe she should be grateful that Wesley hadn't carved his initials on her butt. Or on consideration, no. She owed Wesley, all right, but not gratitude. She glanced out the window; sun wasn't even up yet. She closed her eyes. Just for a minute. Or maybe two.

When she opened them again, the winter sun was slanting in through the clouded glass of the window, and the shadows on the flaking stucco of the warehouses across the street said it was well past noon. Fred groaned and rubbed her eyes, then scrambled to her feet, heart pounding. But aside from the crick in her neck, things seemed pretty much as she'd left them. The only sounds were the muted voices of Anne's kids down the hall, and midday L.A. traffic on the street outside. Cordelia was still out, but her color was better, and her sleep seemed deeper and quieter. She laid a hand across the other woman's forehead. Least the fever seemed to have broken. Good thing. She had to pee something fierce.

One of the things that you learned to appreciate, living in a dimension where emptying your chamber pot into the street instead of just pissing directly out the window was the ultimate in sophisticated plumbing, was flush toilets. Business concluded, Fred sized up the shower possibilities. The bathroom door didn't have a lock, but the lure of soap and tepid water was enough to overcome that quibble. No sense in sitting in her own stink for longer than she had to; Cordelia was ripe enough for the two of them. Pulling a washcloth and a thin white towel from the rack beside the bathroom door, she turned on the water and skinned out of the baggy jeans and loose cotton hoodie Anne had pulled out of stores for her. She stood shivering on the worn linoleum for a moment while the spray reached the hottest it was going to get, then stepped into the tub.

Her hands went about soaping and scrubbing, and Fred watched them with a detached curiosity, as if they belonged to someone else. There on the pale skin of her left wrist was the first of Wesley's sigils, all scabbed over now. He'd rubbed some kind of dye into the cuts, so they healed in thin black lines. Like the faded pinprick of ink between her knuckles, where she'd stabbed herself with a quill pen in art class when she was fourteen. There were seven of them, each one separate and distinct of design. Beautiful, in a sick sort of way. Wesley hadn't been satisfied to carve any ol' set of magical symbols into her flesh. Nope, these were portal-opening runes, set to turn her into the very thing she feared and hated most. Killing her in the process, most likely, but that was the least of it. Runes of opening on each wrist, precise and tiny. Maze-like sigils of pathfinding on each thigh. Celtic knots wreathing her left biceps, a sunburst beacon between her shoulder blades. And the new one on her breast, a lightning bolt-mandala sort of thing. Still sore, still seeping a droplet or two of blood when she moved too quick. Had Wesley had time to rub the ink into this one? And if he had, was it still fresh enough she could scrub it out?

Fred dabbed experimentally at the cuts with her washcloth. The soap stung, and the harsh fabric left the skin red. Maybe a little harder. Hurt, but what hadn't hurt lately? Just a little harder. The wounds
were open and bleeding now, the washcloth stained a brilliant red. *Gonna wash that man right outta my... titty.* Fred giggled. Didn't have quite the same ring to it. The giggle cracked, broke, dissolved into a sob. It wasn't supposed to be like this anymore. She was supposed to be safe. Angel was supposed to be the man who saved her from the monsters. Wesley was supposed... was supposed...

She was sobbing all out now, shuddering against the tile while the spray beat down on her head. Scrubbing violently at the raw skin of her breast while blood and soapsuds poured down her chest and belly, dripped down her thighs to swirl away down the drain all Janet Leigh. Someone pounded at the door, and the cold science-y part of her brain muttered *Stupid way to go crazy with a gut-shot vampire just down the hall!*

The door flew open and Fred had one foggy glimpse of a lurching grey-robed figure through the lime-crusted shower curtain before it tore aside. "Need... shower... NOW!"

Fred flung the soap at the invader's head. Quick as that she twisted the bloodstained washcloth into a rope of wet terrycloth ready for flicking and ducked into a defensive crouch. "You stay back!" she yelled.

"Auugh!" Her attacker batted the slippery missile away and stumbled back against the sink. Clouds of steam parted, and her boogeyman was revealed as a blanket-swathed Cordelia Chase. "Oh, God! Fred!" Fred yanked the curtain shut. Cordelia yanked it back open. "I just need you to know this is *not* a lesbian thing."

The world spun dizzily, a vortex of blood and steam and stinging spray. Winifred Burkle took a deep breath and pulled herself upright, hands groping for a hold on the wet tile. She held the washcloth beneath the shower-spray, squeezing it till the blood ran clear. With vast dignity she stepped out of the shower and turned off the tap. "I'm done with it now."

She left Cordelia blinking in confusion behind her. Fred stood in front of the dorm's single flyspecked mirror, clutching damp towel and rumpled clothes to her chest. She dropped the bundle to the floor and cocked her head, inspecting her reflection critically. She couldn't wash the marks away, any more than she could any of the less visible scars she'd acquired in the past five or six years.

Fine, then. Wesley'd put them there, but they were hers, now.

Spike was propped up on the couch in invalid splendor when Fred shuffled into Teen Center's common room, peering from the depths of her hoodie like a turtle from its shell. She'd only met Spike once before, when he'd come to L.A. last fall to help Cordy pull Angel out of the Bay. Angel had a lot to say about him afterwards, but she suspected that Angel's account of him was maybe a touch biased. Not that she was ready to invite him into her apartment, if she'd had an apartment, which she didn't, so moot point. The vampire was surprisingly alert, considering it was the middle of the afternoon and someone had employed an entire mummy's tomb's worth of bandages to keep his insides from becoming outsides. "Hey. You're lookin' a lot less dead."

"Mutual." Spike's nostrils flared in a way that should have made her want to keep as much sharp pointy wood between the two of them as she could scrounge up, but all things considered, Fred felt they were over that part. Spike had pulled her out of the deep end in more ways than one last night. "Um." She swallowed, uncertain. "So, uh, Spike. 'Spect I have to thank you. And Connor. Though I'd really rather not. Thank Connor, I mean, but you do what you gotta."

Spike ducked his head, almost like he was embarrassed, but the front door banged and the lanky middle-aged guy - Mr. Tanner, that was his name - who helped Anne out sometime entered bearing an armful of greasy, fragrant paper bags and a four-pack of pig's blood from a local carneceria. Tanner deposited his bounty on the seen-better-days coffee table with a laconic, "Better eat fast, or
the kids’ll get to it."

If Spike found the scent of pork less enticing than the scent of slightly bloodied Texan, he didn’t show it; he grabbed a carnitas taco and a styrofoam pint of pig and set about demolishing both in short order. Fred didn’t need a second invitation. The scent of Gardunos take-out was the nearest thing to heaven she’d ever smelled. She dove into a mouth-watering sea of green chili burritos and nachos gooey with cheese, and only came up for air when she realized that Spike was looking at her with a weird sort of wistfulness in his eyes, like she reminded him of someone. "I don't have cilantro in my teeth, do I?" she asked.

The vampire looked away and licked the clots from the rim of his second pint. "I've a soft spot for scrawny, half-barmy brunettes. Might as well take advantage of it."

"Thanks, I think." Fred sucked neon-orange juice from her fingers and picked out another taco. "So what do we do now?"

Lust for blood of whatever species temporarily sated, Spike pulled out a cigarette and his lighter in an attempt to satisfy the lust for nicotine. He flicked the Zippo once, then again when it failed to produce more than a feeble spark. Spike scowled and shook it. Lighter 3, Spike 0. "I'm off to fetch the Slayer as soon as the sun sets. Best defense is blowing the hell out of the other bloke's offense. We've got to hit Grandad hard and below the belt, 'fore he builds up some real power."

"Anne and I renewed the wards on this place this morning." With a perfectly straight face, Tanner added, "There's an minor anti-combustion spell in the mix. They won't be much use if Angel tries high explosives, but at least it'll stop the kids from lighting up in bed. Luckily the kitchen's all-electric."

Spike put his cigarette away with a disgusted snort. Fred wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "Spike's right, we can't just sit here. Or even wait for him to get back. Angel's - what I don't get is, even if he's lost his soul, and can I say that's just shoddy workmanship? I met Angel's vampire self, back in Pylea. And it wasn't... I wasn't afraid of it. Much."

An odd look of nostalgia softened Spike's eyes. "'s different in Pylea. I had a first-row seat for how much when the Slayer and I were there last fall. Man or demon, all or nothing. The demon in us wants blood and destruction, and it's not fussy about how it gets 'em. Demon's what makes a vampire dangerous." His mobile lips sketched wry amusement. "It's the man in us makes us cruel."

Fred contemplated her half-finished burrito. Something inside her was struggling to get out, and it wasn't too much Mexican food. "Angel wasn't cruel. Not to me."

Spike shrugged, wincing a little as his bandages pulled. "Then he'll want to make up for it now. Always an over-achiever, our Angelus."

"You're telling me." Cordelia appeared in the hallway leading to the dorms, Anne at her side and half-supporting her, and a sleepy-looking Connor trailing behind like an anxious whippet. Being Cordelia Chase, she'd managed to make limp terrycloth look like a fashion statement, even scrounging up a scarf from somewhere amongst the donated clothing bins to conceal the scars on her neck. She looked like deep-fried shit on toast, and Anne, Fred suspected, was doing more to hold her up than Cordy would ever let them know. But it took more than a chunk out of her neck to keep Cordelia down.

La Chase commandeered the least-ratty of the ratty armchairs, and examined the remaining contents of the take-out bags. "So much for the major trauma diet." She selected a burrito as if it was radioactive and handed off the rest of the bag to Connor, who dug in with far less compunction.
"Anne's brought me up to date on the Angel sitch. First item on the agenda, rescue Gunn. Second item, get Angel re-souled - or if we can't, kill him. Third item, massive redecorating." She rounded on Spike. "I'm gonna make one thing real clear right now, Fangs For The Memories. If Buffy wants to tag along, great, but Angel's our responsibility now. I sat around once watching the bodies pile up while the Chosen One angsted about killing her vampire boyfriend. Been there, done that, got the bloodstained upholstery. Not happening again. Capisce?"

Spike's eyes flickered yellow. "Ex-boyfriend."

"Sure. She's totally over him, no conflict at all, we'll be scattering his ashes in no time," Cordelia shook her burrito under his nose. "I'll believe that when I see it. Does anyone have Faith's number? We need to get her on a plane for LAX yesterday."

"Uh, Spike," Fred interrupted, before anyone's teeth got any pointier, "Did you hear anything about where Gunn was being held?"

The vampire shook his head, sullen. "Somewhere Pryce couldn't get at him, is all I know." He glanced at the nearest window with a barely-audible growl at the sun's tardy descent, tossed back the last of his blood and stretched, testing the repairs his body was making. From his expression, they got a C-.. "Likely not anywhere near the rest of the Happy Meals, or I'd have smelled him."

Fred rubbed her arm in sympathy - the healing cuts on her wrists itched something fierce. "Safe."

Spike looked dubious. "Safe's a relative term."

"No, no," Fred sat up straighter in her chair, tucking a strand of still-damp hair behind her ear. "The safe. From when the Hyperion was a workin' hotel, you know? They had a walk-in safe, so's the guests could leave their valuables with the management. Reinforced walls and a big ol' door with a combination lock - even a vampire'd have a heck of a time beating it down. It's this little room just down the hall from Angel's office, and he's the only one with the combination. Bet ya anything Angel's got Charles stashed in there."

Connor was looking at Cordelia, his thin features knit in that habitual sour frown. Fred wondered if he had any other expressions. Funny how things worked out, that the boy who'd betrayed them all last summer and sent his father to a watery grave was now their only able-bodied defense against that same father. "So how do we get to him?" Connor asked. "Anne's no fighter. You two are in terrible shape, and Spike's not much better, and he's leaving town anyway. They're going to be on guard now. I might be able to get inside, but getting out isn't going to be easy. Especially with a prisoner who may be injured. It's not like we can walk through walls."

And it all came together, just like that, click-click-click like Tetris pieces falling into place. Fred grinned. "Actually," she said, "We can do exactly that."

Everyone stared. Thinking she was crazy again, no doubt, and maybe they weren't all wrong, but that didn't matter now. She held out one arm, rolled up her sleeve. "Wesley gave me a little idea, carvin' me up like he did. Maybe we can't walk through walls here, but there's worlds right next door where there's no walls to walk through. If we could open a portal to one of those worlds, walk to wherever Charles is, pop back into our world, and take him back out the same way... "

"You can't just open a portal anywhere!" Connor objected. "We'd have to find a thin spot. It took me years to find the way out of Quortoth!" But Cordelia was matching Fred's excitement. "That's right, you weren't around for Lorne's big breakdown, were you? How do you think we got Buffy and Spike to Pylea to find his cure, after the hot spot for it cooled off?" She sat back, beaming like a cream-fed cat, provided it was fat-free cream.
"No!" Spike was on his feet as if he'd never been shot at all, rapidly sharpening canines bared in a snarl. "In fact, hell no! If you think I'm putting the Bit within a hundred miles of Grandsire when he's on the rampage - or if Buffy'd allow it - !"

"Bullshit!" Cordelia might not have fangs, but she was every bit as savage as the vampire. "Dawn's the same age Buffy was when she started the Slayer gig, or older. Old enough to suck it up and do what has to be done, or at least make up her own mind to run away like a big fraidy running thing, and it's not like we're sending her in there to stake him with a butter knife!"

"She'd be safe here," Anne put in. "At least, if the wards here don't interfere with opening a portal."

"Turn in enough boxtops and you can send away for the balls to tell Buffy about that yourself."

Spike snapped, and then sat abruptly down on the arm of the couch as his half-mended body rebelled, one hand clutching his belly. Teeth gritted, he stood again. "I can't wait for sunset. I'm off. I'll be back with Buffy and the witches by tomorrow night. With any luck I'll have reinforcements with me, and I'll need to doss 'em down someplace that doesn't need an invite." He shot a disgusted look at the hallway, where a knot of curious teens was accumulating. "Nor come with an all-you-can-eat idiot buffet."

"Wait, wait, who's Dawn?" Connor broke in, frown giving way to bewilderment.

By golly, he did. Have other expressions, that is. Probably she ought to keep count for posterity.

Fred leaned over and patted his hand. Equations spun in her head - she could use the Pylean coordinates. They were old friends, and it was just a matter of compensating for the slightly different latitude and longitude. "The Key to the Universe. Try to keep up, hon."

Someone was fumbling at the door. Gunn tensed. Not that he could put up much of a fight, what with the leg irons chaining him to the wall, but maybe he could posture insolently. At least a day had passed since the muffled sounds of the fight had died away outside. Hard to tell, since there were no windows in the vault. Just a six by ten room, walls scarred where the rows of old lockboxes had been torn out: one door, one bucket, and one Charles Gunn.

He'd lost track of how long he'd been in here, and for some reason that bothered him a hell of a lot more than the pounding in his head and the hollowness in his belly. His concussed brain wouldn't let it go. Kept tallying up the sleepings and wakings and passing-outs, till it all ran round in circles and he drifted off and damn, lost count again. It had been about a week, he was sure of that. He'd counted up a hundred times - the first night, when he'd walked up to the Hyperion's front door, and Angel had met him with the grin that said everything had changed. The second night, when he'd tried to escape, and Angel had him chained to the wall. The third night, when the thing that used to be Wesley Wyndam-Pryce paid a visit to his cell, and told him in exquisite detail what he was going to do to Fred. The fourth night...

The reinforced door swung open with a faint hiss, all but silent on well-oiled hinges, and Gunn blinked into the unaccustomed light. Disappointment weighed him down as two of Angel's minions shuffled into the vault, even as relief bubbled up like Pop Rocks. If the cavalry did ride to the rescue, no one knew he was in here, and he wasn't sure if yelling inside the vault carried into the lobby as well as the reverse. The old room wasn't air-tight any longer, if it had ever been, but a long, slow death of hunger and thirst wasn't much of an improvement over asphyxiation.

Or maybe Angel would just kill him tonight.

The taller of the two minions, a large phlegmatic woman wearing a bright fuchsia track suit, held up
a pair of handcuffs and jingled them. "Angelus wants to see you. You gonna let me put these on, or do we have to knock you cold?"

Maybe he could have taken these pisseants down if he'd gotten the drop on them on the street, but it wasn't happening tonight. Gunn shrugged and held his hands out. He might get a better chance to make a break for it by playing along. The smaller minion, a nervous little guy in glasses and a toothbrush mustache, edged closer, snapped the cuffs on and jumped back like he expected Gunn to explode before inching forward again to unlock the manacles chaining his leg to the wall. Emboldened by Gunn's lack of resistance, Mustache gestured towards the door. "Let's go."

The wreck of the lobby wasn't much of a surprise, considering the ruckus he'd heard earlier. There weren't many clues to what had gone down, but if Angel was still in charge, nothing important had changed. No human bodies lying around, at least. 'Course Angel would've fed them to the minions before the blood spoiled, so not all that reassuring. His escorts didn't give him much rubbernecking time, hustling him down the hall and through the lobby. A glance through the double glass doors to the courtyard showed it was just past sunset outside. So much for making a run for the door and losing them in the sunshine.

Angel was sitting behind the desk in his mostly-cleaned-up office as the minions ushered Gunn in. The vampire leaned back in his chair, fingers laced behind his head, that asshole grin plastered across his face. "Hello, there, Charlie boy."

He wasn't alone. Wesley and an ethereal brunette who had to be Drusilla flanked an elderly man seated in and bound to a straight-backed chair. Gunn had heard a lot about Angel's insane get, but he'd never before met her face to face. He wasn't sure this counted, since this chick was definitely not all here. The old man exuded the aura of tweed and steel that screamed Watcher, and the eyes that met Gunn's for a brief moment were fearless but bleak.

The old Watcher's attention, like that of everyone in the room (except Drusilla, who was testing the blades of the weapons displayed on the back wall with a finger, and squeaking in delight when she cut herself) was on the collection of weird shit on Angel's makeshift desk. A five-sided slab of stone, about the size of a dinner plate, sat in the center of the desk alongside a musty-smelling leather-bound book. Scattered around them were a collection of metal cut-outs.

"Not looking so hot, Charlie. Rough week, huh?" Angel rose to his feet and sauntered around the desk, sizing Gunn up with a sorrowful shake of his head. "Well, all that'll be over soon. One way or another. Here's the deal. " He jerked a thumb at Wesley. "We've got a little disagreement going on, me and Wes. See, he just wants to kill you. Or maybe feed you to Fred, if he catches her again. She'd be a fun vampire, doncha think?" He strolled to the center of the office, hands clasped behind his back, and turned on his heel to face Gunn again. "Me, I think that's a waste of resources. I don't think you'd be much fun, but I've got big plans, Charlie boy, and between you and me, Wesley's just a tad high-strung." Wesley's jaw tightened, but Angel ignored him. "I need a level-headed kind of guy. Which would you rather be, dead or undead?"

Gunn gave Angel an impassive stare. "I think you better pray Wesley wins the argument."

If anything, the grin got wider. Angel turned with an expansive wave at the elderly Watcher. "I don't think you two have been introduced. Bernard Crowley, Charles Gunn. Charles Gunn, Bernard Crowley, the man who made me what I am today."

Drusilla flitted away from the wall-mounted arsenal with a clucking noise and caressed the old man's brow. "He's ever so clever, is Mr. Crowley."

"The hell?" Gunn gaped at the old man. Crowley didn't respond - his face might have been carved in
granite. Old, wrinkly granite, but still up there on the Mohs scale. "I though Watchers were in the
business of staking soulless fiends, not making 'em."

Angel chuckled. "That's the beauty of it, Charlie. My soul's right where it's always been. Crowley's
little innovation just makes it... irrelevant." He gave the Watcher a playful cuff on the shoulder.
"'Course, he had help. Doctor Gregson did all the grunt work. And all this stuff - " he waved at
the agglomeration of objects on the table, " - makes up the worthy Doctor Gregson's fee. Which is odd,
because Gregson collects rare specimens of demon organs, not proto-Sumerian artifacts. Don't you
think that's odd, Charlie? I could wait a couple of weeks for Wes to translate all that Babylonian
babble and find out what this thing does. But why bother when we have the horse's mouth right
here?"

Crowley's granite lips shifted along a stony faultline. "We've been over this, Angelus. I'll die long
before you can break me. When my associates fail to receive my all's-well, the device will cease to
operate. By tomorrow morning the drugs will be out of your system." He spat, the runny glob of
phlegm dribbling down the vampire's silk shirt front. "I wish you the joy of recovery."

Angel slapped the old man across the face. Crowley's head rocked back on his shoulders, a trickle of
blood running from the corner of his mouth. With a fastidious curl of his lip, the vampire produced a
pocket handkerchief and wiped the spittle off his chest. "The funny thing about associates is that they
like to be paid." He indicated the contents of the bag. "And they're not always too fussy about who
pays them. Oh, and about the whole torture biz... that's what I'd be doing if I were incredibly stupid.
Which, sadly for you, I'm not. I can always torture you later. Take it away, Dru."

Lithe as a python on the hunt, Drusilla twined herself around Crowley with a delighted little trill of
laughter. Her long white hands cupped the withered old face, and the Watcher stiffened in revulsion,
but those delicate fingers had the strength of a vise. She stared deep into his eyes, lips parted,
humming tunelessly. "Ooooooooh," she said after a long moment, "I can't see myself."

"Dru," Angel growled. Drusilla pouted and shot him a mischievous look. She ran one hand over
Crowley's head, tracing invisible patterns on his skull, her fingers ruffling the fine wisps of remaining
hair. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her head drooped until her forehead was pressed to the old
man's. Her boney chest heaved, once, and then she drew back, her great dark liquid eyes wide open
again. "Look at me, my sweet," she whispered. "Be in me."

Crowley jerked violently beneath her, trying to pull away, and Gunn lunged forward, only to be
dragged back by the minions. Why was he even here? What was the point of making him watch
this? Not like he needed more reasons to hate Angel right now. Drusilla ignored the interruption,
pulling Crowley's head to her breast and making little "Shhh, shhh," noises, a mother soothing a
grotesque infant. "See with your heart, my pet."

Her hand passed over his eyes, and when it came away, the Watcher's cheeks were wet with tears.
"Robin," he choked. He was staring straight at Gunn. "Oh, Robin. My dear, dear boy. I'm so sorry.
I've been such a fool."

Fuck. That was why. "I'm not Robin, whoever he is," Gunn started, but Crowley continued as if he
hadn't spoken, or as if he'd said something entirely different. "I did it for you, my boy - if you believe
nothing else, you must believe that. For you, and your mother. She deserved a better memorial than
this."

"Ask him what the artifact does, Charlie," Angel said softly.

"Like hell I will."
Angel shrugged, examining his nails. "OK. Then we'll kill him and wait for Wesley to translate. Dru's had her fun - you want to do the honors, Wes?"

Drusilla made a disappointed moue. Crowley turned a contemptuous gaze upon his former colleague. "Wesley Wyndam-Pryce," he slurred, "Your father would be extremely disappointed in you."

"Ah, well." Wesley stepped forward with a precise, vicious little smile, fangs descending as his face distorted in ridges and lumps of bone. "What else is new?"

Hell, Track Suit must have wrestled for the East German Olympic team. "Wait!" yelled Gunn. Angel held up a hand, and Wesley froze, a low growl rumbling in his narrow chest. Dam, damn, damn... He needed the information as much as Angel did, if he intended to get out of here with anything useful. "For the love of little green apples, Mr. Crowley. How do we use this thing?"

"It's not the right time, Robin." Crowley's rheumy old eyes blinked at nothingness. "The Lehane girl can't be trusted with this kind of power. And as for that Summers creature... no. Never! Travers is an idiot, and he's seen to it that future generations of Watchers will inherit his ignorance. No, it's better that we keep it secret. Guard it for me, Robin. Keep it safe, until a worthy Slayer is called."

Angel bent closer, his eyes glittering. "Must be some pretty hefty mojo," he breathed. The look in the old man's eyes was one Gunn would have killed to see in his own father's. Whoever the hell this Robin had been, exploiting his memory like this was obscene. He'd hate himself in the morning, and likely the old man would too, but they'd both be alive to do it. "Uh... I will. But can you explain to me again exactly how it works? So when that worthy Slayer comes along, I can tell her?"

Crowley shuddered, arthritic hands crab-fisted against his thighs. "When the Slayer's power is not sufficient for the task at hand, this is the final option. It's all in the book, my boy. The shadows tell the story. Her story."

"Don't they always?" murmured Drusilla, drawing one blood-red nail across Crowley's brow. Her pale pink tongue darted out to touch the beads of crimson welling up in its wake, and she pressed her lips to the Watcher's forehead in a mockery of a kiss. "And they all lived unhappily ever after."

"Shadows?" Angel exchanged a look with Wesley.

"Look at the center of the disc." Wesley pointed to the pentagonal slab of stone. "Traces of wax. I believe the central indentation is meant to hold a candle. And these grooves in the stone... they're the correct length and depth for the bottom of each of the metal silhouettes. These stains, here and here - rust." Excitement raised his voice, and for a second he sounded so much like his old self that Gunn could have wept. "The metal figures must be inserted into the grooves around the disc's edge at intervals, so that the light from the candle projects their shadows on the wall."

"Cute." Angel flicked the metal demon with a fingernail, producing a tinny clink. "So what the hell does Gregson want with it?"

Gunn didn't respond. Angel aimed a vicious kick at his knee, and Gunn hit the floor with a strangled yelp, his chest aching with the effort of not screaming. Angel dropped to a crouch beside him. "Listen to me, boyo. There's nothing more pathetic than a vampire turned with no arms and legs. I can and will peel you raw, one inch at a time, and feed you on naught but the scraps of your own hide." He grabbed one of Gunn's fingers and wrenched it backwards. Bone crunched. "Or better yet, I'll have you watch while I do it to the old man - he'll last a good bit longer than he's thinking he will, I'll wager."
"Fuck you, Angel," Gunn snarled, cheek hard to the filthy, bloodstained carpet. "If the bombs fall this minute, and there's only one wall left standing in the whole goddamned world, I will find that wall, and I will nail your sorry ass to it."

Angel chuckled. "I like the way you think, Charlie. Now ask the nice man what Gregson wants with this toy."

"Beware, my boy. You must stand ready to contain the demon." The old man's response to Gunn's strained question was almost too low to hear. "It's not enough for her to look. She must see."

"What must I see, my darling?" cooed Drusilla, coiling herself in the old man's lap. Her voice was a hypnotic purr, her golden eyes as unblinking as any cobra's.

"Nikki?" The old man buried his face in his bound hands. "I was wrong, Nikki. You were right. I should have let you - I was so afraid I'd lose you to the power."

"Never, my love. I'll be right behind your eyeballs, always and forever." Drusilla licked his cheek and looked over her shoulder at Angel, coy. "Might I open my present now? Will it taste of old books and vinegar?"

"Not until we find out more about this thing," Angel growled.

Drusilla slipped off Crowley's lap with a disappointed hiss. "You promised me a present of my very own! That's three hundred years you've missed my birthday, and I'm only a hundred and sixty-nine! You're a wretched Daddy!"

"And you love me for it, kitten. Go find someone else to eat." Angel stroked his chin, thoughtful. "Contain the demon... Gregson deals in demon organs... Get a candle, Wesley, and let's fire this baby up."

Wesley, who'd already procured the required candle, lit it and dribbled a few careful drops of wax onto the slab. He affixed the candle upright in the center. "If this device is intended to give a Slayer more power..." He flicked the light switch off, and shadows leaped up around the perimeter of the room. "You're aware that Rupert Giles confirmed last year that the power of the Slayers was ultimately demonic in origin? There were always rumors, when I was in the Academy, but the senior Watchers always kept a close guard on their tongues." He hesitated for a moment over the pile of cut-outs, then selected the one depicting a trio of tribal figures. He eased it into one of the grooves.

At once a shadow army capered to life on the walls. A distant drumbeat sounded, and then faltered to silence.

They waited. The only sound was Gunn's harsh, pain-filled breathing. Crowley began sobbing quietly.

"Perhaps the order is important," Wesley muttered, replacing the tribal cut-out with one of a cringing girl. Nothing. He opened the book, flipped through the pages. "If you'd given me more time to translate this..." He replaced the girl with a silhouette of the new moon, rising over a craggy landscape. At once the drumbeat began again, and the candle flickered brighter. "Of course. Before all else, the world."

Wesley added the demon figure, then the trio of men. An inhuman growl and the sound of voices chanting joined the drumbeat, shadows moving to the rhythm of Gunn's heartbeat, the raw throb of pain in his hand and his knee. As Wesley fitted the last of the cut-outs into place, the slab of stone began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and the shadows lurched to cinematic life on the walls: monsters chasing, shamans chanting, girls screaming.
"The book!" Wesley exclaimed. "It's in English now! You cannot be shown. You cannot just watch, but you must see. See for yourself, but only if you're willing to make the exchange." A blue spark blossomed in the heart of the candle-flame, expanding swiftly to man-sized as the device spun faster. "A portal. It's a device to create a portal. But to where?"

"That's easy enough to find out." Angel grabbed Mustache, who gave vent to a startled "Yeep!"

Crowley's head, which had been sunk upon his wasted chest, snapped up, his eyes sharp and lucid. "Wait!" There was a note of panic in his reedy voice.

"Too late!" Heaving the protesting minion up by collar and the seat of his pants, Angel flung him square into the shimmering blue light.

A brilliant explosion of light left the vampires blind and the humans nearly so. Mustache screamed, a high, thin yodel of despair, and dissolved into ash. In his place, a demon perched on the desk, a spiny orange horror ringed with a dozen six-foot tentacles. It swivelled the cluster of shiny black eyes atop its probably-head back and forth around the room, made a warbling noise, and launched itself at Angel.

Gunn had to give Angel props - soul or no soul, he was a hell of a fighter. Angel dropped, and the demon soared over his head. The vampire vaulted the desk and was at the back wall of the office in one superhuman bound, ripping a scimitar from its mounts and whirling to meet the demon's charge. Track Suit was heading for the door, Drusilla had disappeared, and Wesley, with remarkable aplomb, was gathering up the pieces of the shadowcaster, which the demon's leap had scattered across the floor. Two of the demon's tentacles lashed out, wrapping around Crowley as another half-dozen darted at Angel, trying to get around the sweeps of his blade. A sucking maw lined with razor fangs opening in the thing's spiny hide, ready to envelop the old man chair and all.

"God damn it."

Gunn rolled, sweeping his good leg around to hook his foot behind the leg of Crowley's chair. He doubled up, drawing his knees up as fast and hard as he could. The chair teetered, tipping backwards. The demon, off-balance, loosened its grip on Crowley. Angel saw his chance and swung, his sword slicing deep into the creature's eye-cluster. The demon wailed, a long bubbling ululation, and collapsed, deflating like a punctured balloon.

Crowley was staring around the room, confused and for the first time frightened. Angel wrestled his sword free of the rubbery orange carcass and straightened, breathing hard - why the hell did vampires do that? He swiped an ichor-streaked hand across his forehead, his hair standing up in sticky spikes in its wake. With a kick at the dead demon, "Never seen anything like this bad boy before, and I've been around. That explains why Gregson wants the damned thing, anyway." He made a smoochy noise in Gunn's direction. "Aw, Charlie, I didn't know you cared. Sorry, Wes, you lose. Charlie's practically one of the family already."

His knee felt like someone had inserted a red-hot inflatable cantaloupe into the joint. "Didn't do it for you, asshole." Gunn struggled halfway upright and looked at Crowley, whose granite face had gone to ruin. "Hey, man. You OK?"

"I'll survive." Crowley sounded like he thought survival was a character flaw. His frail tweedy shoulders, so straight before, were bent low in defeat. "I contracted with Gregson to use the shadowcaster for a month, and collect all the specimens he liked." Yeah? And who's Gregson gonna be throwing through the portal to get them? flashed through Gunn's mind. The Watcher continued, "He's a fool. You're all fools. The true power of the shadowcaster is beyond any of you. Only a Slayer can pass through the portal unscathed."
Angel smirked. "All right then, boys and girls. Let's find ourselves a Slayer."
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to betas Brutti_ma_buoni, Deb C, Typographer, Diebirchen, Lookingforoctober, Slaymesoftly, and Rainkatt. Any remaining mistakes are all my own!

Usually Anya found inventory invigorating. All those tidy lines of jars and boxes on the shelves translating into tidy columns of figures marching down the page, making order out of chaos. Vials of belladonna, cartons of jackalope antlers, jars of cockatrice combs in formaldehyde: everything neatly counted, stacked, labeled, and ticked off on her clipboard, fuel for her meticulous computer files. Each one told a story: this crate of assorted finger bones, for example, Item #A25. She recalled distinctly the night she’d acquired it, standing on the wharf last November with the rusting hull of the ship looming overhead. The sight of the crate conjured up the slap of oily black waves lapping against the pier and the iodine reek of seaweed as she haggled with the captain. Finger bones of what, the manifest hadn’t said, but there was no denying they’d been a bargain. It was all deeply satisfying.

Usually. Today was an exception.

This search was a wild goose chase; she knew her own stock, and there were no more Orbs of Thessulah in the Magic Box. There probably weren't more than a dozen left in the entire world. When the Ritual of Restoration had been lost, the manufacturer had understandably gone out of business. She had calls out to all her contacts, and she’d spent hours scouring eBay for certain obscure keywords. She had bots set up to bid on half a dozen items with blurry photos and even blurrier descriptions, most of which would probably turn out to be millefiori paperweights, but if there was an Orb available, she’d already taken all the necessary steps to find it.

But humans, she had come to realize, needed to do things, even when there wasn't anything to be done. She'd scorned that mortal impulse to busywork once, but she understood now. It was how you dealt with being powerless.

Maybe she should try another search term or two when they were finished here. Just in case.

Resolutely, Anya wrenched her thoughts away to more pleasant topics. She and Xander had had inventive and exciting sex the night before. According to the directions on the box, it was too early for the test strip to show anything conclusive, but she'd pee on it when she got home all the same. Their baby was bound to be precocious. Perhaps in a few years there'd be a mini-Anya or mini-Xander standing beside her, eyes wide and attentive. The thought brought a smile to her lips; in a mere five to seven years, she could be instructing her and Xander's offspring in the sacred mysteries of commerce. Hopefully it would inherit her head for numbers. At least, if...

The smile fled. They'd been trying for months. According to her gynecologist, her eggs were healthy and fertile. Xander's sperm, likewise. So why wasn't anything happening? Was there some demonic technicality to her human form that neither she nor modern science could detect, which was preventing the conception of what would undoubtedly be the handsomest and most intelligent baby on earth? Had D'Hoffryn done something vengeance to her out of spite when she'd refused his offer to return to Arashmahar? She ground her teeth. Maybe it was time for a few choice words with the
"Have you checked behind these boxes?" Dawn asked. She was standing on tiptoe, on the highest rung of the stepladder, in the dimmest and most spider-infested corner of the basement, engaged in a rummage through the cartons of mandrake root on the top shelf. Exactly the sort of dangerous thing Anya would never allow her own daughter or son to do. "Or what about the corner over there? There's room to stash something behind that big statue thing. It looks like no one's moved it in five years. Or five hundred."

"It's an Olmec sacrificial altar," Anya informed her. "If you want to crawl behind it to look, be my guest. Just mind the roaches."

"Roaches?" Dawn's enthusiasm for the hunt waned audibly.

"Well, there is an opening to the sewer down here, you know." Anya smiled (Smile #7, Helpful and Encouraging, Not At All Implying That the Customer Had Asked a Silly Question).

Dawn descended the ladder with reluctance, and eyed the hunk of Meso-American stonework dubiously. "Do you think Angel's really lost his soul? I mean, how happy can the guy get these days, all things considered?"

"You'd be surprised." Anya pulled out a box of freeze-dried rats' tails and inspected it. As expected, it was devoid of anything not rat. "It won't make any difference in the long run, anyway. Even if he has lost his soul, and even if we find an Orb and put it back, sooner or later he'll just lose it again."

Compressed in the gap between the Olmec altar and the basement wall, Dawn made a face, whether at the dig to her sister or the immanent prospect of roaches was impossible to say. "I could never see the point of the happiness clause anyway. If I wanted to curse a soul into someone, I'd make darned sure it would stay there."

"The curse was about vengeance." Anya returned the rats' tails to their places. "The point isn't to keep other people safe; it's to make Angel suffer. Probably the Kalderash intended to tell Angel what would break it, so he could suffer even more knowing he could never dare to be happy. It's what I would have done."

"I just hope Buffy gets down to business more quickly this time."

Dawn's voice was muffled by several tons of basalt. "Hey! Just because she had gooey feelings for Angel years ago doesn't mean..."

"It's not that easy eradicating gooey feelings! They're the emotional equivalent of roaches. I've completely moved on to domestic bliss with Xander, but when that nasty little man made Olaf reappear at our wedding I can't say I didn't note the pleasing circumference of his biceps. Olaf's, that is, not the nasty little man's. Um, don't tell Xander I said that. His biceps are enticing too." Anya's fingers tightened on the clipboard, and her voice grew fierce. "We're -- we're going to have a baby. Soon-ish. And I'm not going through nine months of unattractively swollen ankles just to provide Angelus with a light snack! I need to know how Buffy's going to deal with this if we can't get an Orb, because if she can't..."

A long silence from behind the statue. At length, "Hey, I'm not the guy's biggest fan, either. Outside of that time he kidnapped me and tried to feed me to Drusilla - wait a minute." Rustling and thumping noises ensued. "There is something back here!"

Anya's eyebrows shot up. "Really?" Had Giles stashed something behind the statue without telling her? Or more likely, stashed something behind the statue and forgotten about it through his...
constitutional aversion to modern inventory tracking techniques? "What is it?"

"I don't know. Hand me the flashlight." Minutes later Dawn emerged from behind the statue, cobwebbed and grimy and clutching a lacquered bamboo box the size of a pencil case. A series of elaborate pictograms were inscribed in bright orange upon the glossy black surface. "That's one of the Pockla dialects, isn't it?" she asked, tracing a pictogram with one finger.

"It is." Anya frowned. "How did you know?"

"I saw some in one of the grimoires." Dawn waved the question away. "It was labeled 'Representative Pockla Heiroglyphs' or something. They're demon healers, right? What's inside?"

The box was unlocked, and the catch proved simple. The interior was lined with red velvet, and inside were thirty-six hollows, six of which were empty, and thirty of which cradled ampules filled with an oily yellow fluid. Anya picked one up and snapped the top off, sniffed the contents, poured a drop onto her finger and dabbed it with the tip of her tongue. Neem oil, cottonseed extract, and the unmistakable tingle of Hursk venom... Somehow the basement seemed colder. Probably a draft from the sewers.

"This box isn't dirty enough to have been back there for very long," Dawn began, and then, noticing Anya's expression, "What's the matter? It's not poison, is it?"

"I don't know. Nothing. No, it's not poison. It's an herbal mixture. Most often used as a... as a male contraceptive. Was there any paperwork with this? A packing slip, an invoice, anything?"

"I didn't look." Dawn poked at the ampoules. "This one's got something underneath it... here." The packing slip was written in a curious brown ink on a many times folded square of onionskin paper. Anya unfolded it with shaking fingers. Dr. Gahvrakh's Most Efficacious Elixir, 36 ampoules. Take Monthly As Directed. No Refunds. The buyer was listed as A. Harris, at the Magic Box's address. Anya stared at the box, stomach clenching. "I never ordered these."

"But it's got your name on it, doesn't it? Maybe it was a free sample that came with something else? What are the -- "

Dawn's question was interrupted by a loud banging from upstairs, and Anya wasn't sure if she were glad or sorry. "I'll be right back," she said, eyes narrowing.

It had been centuries since Anya had felt it worth her time to be embarrassed about anything, but the muddle of disbelief, shame and anger battling it out within her now was coming close. The sign on the front door said very clearly "CLOSED, Please Come Again!" and she would have been entirely within her rights to ignore whatever illiterate or inconsiderate person was defying its strictures, but at the moment she was in the mood to imitate a Mantis demon and bite someone's head off. Preferably a male, A-for-Alexander-shaped someone, but the intruder at the door would do.

As she cleared the top of the stairs, the pounding began again, harder now. The front door rattled with the force of the blows, turning the ordinarily cheerful jangle of the bell to an alarm. The lights were off in the front of the shop, and the sun was sinking low in the sky outside, but she could still make out shapes looming through the glass. Three or four of them, at least. It was still too early for them to be vampires. Perhaps she'd let the police tell them off, instead. "We're closed," Anya shouted. "Come back tomorrow during regular business hours."

"I just need to use your phone," the largest of the shapes replied. "It's an emergency."

"I'll call the police for you." Edging behind the counter, Anya grabbed the phone and began dialing
911. Crap, the line was dead! Who cut phone lines anymore? Where was her cell? She'd left her purse right here somewhere --

Glass shattered at the front of the shop. The door flew open and five or six men in dark clothes and ski masks flooded in, armed with crowbars and baseball bats. Anya couldn't tell if they were human or vampires, and at this point it hardly mattered. "Tell Spike that Doctor Gregson sends his regards!" the man in the lead yelled and brought his bat down on the counter-top with a crack. Anya screamed, snatched up the display rack of costume jewelry sitting by the cash register, and flung it with the accuracy of terror. The invader flinched as cheap quartz pendants and pot metal rings rained down on his head. Anya leaned across the counter, yanked his ski mask over his eyes, and ran for the basement stairs. She reached them inches ahead of her half-blind pursuer, whirling and slamming the door shut in his face; blood was soaking his mask where a flying ring had nicked him through the eye-hole, and it served him right. Anya turned the lock and shot the deadbolt. She'd thought it was wasteful when Giles had insisted upon installing a bolt on both sides of the door, but she blessed him for it now.

"Anya, what the hell?" Dawn hollered from the foot of the stairs. "What's going on up there?"

Anya leaned against the door -- solid wood, thankfully, far less vulnerable than the glass-paned front door. They could escape through the sewer exit if they had to, but she wasn't about to abandon the field before calling in reinforcements. "We're being attacked, as usual. Do you have your cell phone? Call the police, and Buffy, and . . ."

Dawn was already stabbing numbers. "Yeah, I need to report a break-in at the Magic Box, 5124 Maple Court. I don't know. We're locked in in the basement. How many?" she mouthed at Anya, who held up the requisite number of fingers. "Five or six, we think. I don't know. Okay. Okay."

Click -- stab stab stab. "Buffy? It's me, some guys are attacking the Magic Box - I don't know! No, I already called the police. We're locked in the basement. We can make a run for it through the sewers if we need to. I know, I know! God, Buffy, I'm not six! I know. Fine." She bit her lip and glanced Anya's way. "Buffy's at the airport picking up Giles. It's going to take at least fifteen minutes for her to get back here."

There were different noises coming from the shop now -- smashings and crashings and crunchings and splinterings. This was no robbery. "Call the crypt," Anya ordered. Dawn looked at her, startled; Buffy had made it abundantly clear that Spike's minions were not to be messed with, and in the ordinary way of things Anya would have agreed. Most vampires were none too bright, and might decide to join in the smashing for the fun of it. But this was an emergency. "Call them."

With a gulp, Dawn attacked her phone again and handed it over to Anya as it picked up. "David," Anya said briskly "someone's attacking the Magic Box. A quarter of the stock is Spike's, and his people have an obligation to protect it. Send someone over now."

*******

I've been drivin' all night, my hand's wet on the wheel
There's a voice in my head, that drives my heel

White lines disappeared beneath the DeSoto's long, black hood as its eight-cylinder maw devoured the highway. Spike's fingers drummed a tattoo on the steering wheel, and his eyes flicked from the road ahead to the rear-view mirror, alert for the tell-tale glitter of blue and red. For a nerve-wracking minute longer, the highway patrol car hugged his bumper, then swerved into the next lane and roared away into the night. Spike exhaled ten minutes' worth of held breath and sank back against the worn leather.
Last night getting pulled over had been a lark. Now it was a looming disaster. What the hell had he been thinking, to make such a show of himself? True, neither his prints nor the DeSoto's plates were in any police database. In the old days, any policeman foolish enough to pull him over had ended up as lunch, and since the chip, he'd been careful out of necessity. But it wasn't a car that blended into traffic, and Los Angeles was a city wise to the ways of demons. The only mention of his exploits in the news had been a brief squib about two officers in critical condition after a shoot-out; one benefit of robbing a demon's lair was that demons paid well to be kept out of the headlines. Still, it was sheer luck he hadn't killed anyone. Angel was on the rampage, up to God knew what villainy that Buffy would feel obligated to put a stop to, and what was he doing? Arsing about trying to impress Angel's scrawny get. *Oooh, look at me, I'm the cool vampire. Much cooler than your fuddy-duddy Dad.* Pathetic.

*Sunnydale Next Three Exits* flashed past the window. The speedometer needle was creeping inexorably upwards again, and Spike forced himself to ease up on the gas. This was the trouble with batting for the team of goodness and light; you couldn't have a spot of fun without it coming back to bite you on the arse. He didn't have the luxury of not caring about the consequences any longer. He was Marley's bloody ghost, lumbered with iron chains of cause and effect, and he forgot that to his peril. Or more to the point, Buffy's peril.

Still... no denying it had been fun, letting loose like that. William the Bloody, nigh-unstoppable force of chaos and destruction. He'd almost forgotten what it was like, the rush, the crunch, the screams, the rank, delicious scent of terror. Not that he didn't get plenty of aggro fighting at Buffy's side, but it was all so... regimented. And this was to be his life for the next... five, ten, fifty years? Given time for sober reflection, he'd choose Buffy over the thrill of the kill any day, for as long as he could get her. But sober reflection wasn't always an option, and there was a certain guilty relief in that thought, and why the bloody hell should it be guilty relief?

He shook himself irritably. He'd told Buffy once that he'd ruined himself for real evil working with her lot, that he could never go back to what he'd been. Which was true enough, but he wasn't any too clear on what he could go forward to. One day she wouldn't be at his side any longer, and what would he be then, with no chip to restrain him and no soul to guide him, and sober reflection, as noted, not always an option?

Not that having a soul seemed to give Angel all that sodding much guidance.

His cell went off, and Spike jumped half out of his skin, snarling curses as he fished it out of his pocket. "This bloody well better be good."

"Spike!" It was Dawn, a note in her voice that lifted his hackles. "Are you on the way home?"

"Yeah. Where are you? Where's Buffy?"

"I'm at the Magic Box, with Anya. We were in the basement looking for an Orb of Thessulah. These guys wanted to come in and Anya told them to come back tomorrow, but they broke the front door open, and they're busting everything up, and we're down in the basement with the door locked, and the police and David and Buffy are on their way, but..."

To hell with caution; he floored it.

*******

Pain, blinding and absolute.

Evie woke with an indrawn breath so sharp her unaccustomed lungs ached. The agony in her skull
vanished as quickly as it had come, and the scream tearing its way out of her throat collapsed into a strangled gasp. For a long moment she lay stunned and shivering in her cot, braced for the pain's return, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. It didn't come, but she still felt shaky and nauseated. What the hell was wrong with her? Had she dreamed about killing? Would that set the chip off?

At last she rolled over and sat up, chafing her healing arms to ward off a chill deeper than her own undead flesh. The rest of Spike's gang was still grabbing much-needed Zs before their lord and technically-not-master got back from L.A., and the barracks looked like an after-hours morgue, with only the occasional grunt or snuffle distinguishing the occupants of the other alcoves from corpses in truth. The beat-up digital alarm clock on the dresser told her it was late afternoon. At least it wasn't playing "I Got You, Babe."

With a groan, Evie gave up on sleep and dragged herself to her feet. The curtains shielding the archway which led to David's quarters showed a blade-thin slit of light — of course he'd be up, burning the midday oil. Evie wasn't sure she'd ever seen him sleep. She rummaged in the dresser for clean clothes and ran a comb through her hair, grimacing at the short, frizzled wisps she could see out of the corner of her eye. She'd charred a lot of it off in her sunlit dash two days back, and it was going to take a while for it to grow out again. Probably looked like shit. Maybe she'd go Corvini's route, buzz it short and butch it up.

More or less presentable, she padded towards the light, past the other alcoves and the wall where Nadia slumped in her shackles. It should have made the place more homey, having a captive strung up like that, but somehow it only made the tension worse. Everyone was on edge. In any other gang, Nadia would have been blowing in the wind by now for disobeying orders. The only question would have been whether or not her boss felt like excising a few body parts first. But in any other gang, she'd never have had to worry about being framed for killing someone.

Behind the hanging curtains, the door at the end of the short tunnel was open. The room behind it wasn't that much bigger than the alcoves in the main barracks, but it sported a mini-fridge and a crammed-to-overflowing bookshelf in addition to a cot and dresser, along with a little workbench in the corner crowded with paint pots, spray primer, and half-finished wargaming miniatures. Even David was a closet loser. He looked up as she entered, unsurprised; he was sitting on the edge of his cot, entering figures in an old-fashioned ledger. Evie was a little disappointed that he was using a ball-point pen instead of quill and ink. Candlelight gleamed off his bald spot. "Yes?"

"Couldn't sleep." Better not mention the chip. Just its presence made her enough of a liability; if it was going on the fritz, even Spike might decide she was more trouble than she was worth. "Heard anything?"

"Elise found nothing at the hotel, as expected, and Spike is on his way back to Sunnydale." David consulted his watch. "He should be here within the hour." He set the ledger aside, regarding her with that reptilian stare.

Evie frowned, picking at a loose thread in the hem of her t-shirt. "I just keep thinking... what the hell does Angelus want here? The Hellmouth's closed. Why the fuck would he take the trouble to frame Spike? Or recruit here when there's hundreds of vamps in L.A.? I know he's loco, but . . ."

"He's unpredictable, yes," David agreed. "And the last time he was here, somewhat irrational. But there's method in this particular madness. If Spike hadn't happened to go to L.A. at the precise moment he needed an alibi, framing him would have provided the Slayer with a distraction for the time it will take Angelus to gather his strength. As for the other. . . you're Dalton's get. What did he tell you of the history of the Order of Aurelius?"

Evie shrugged, "Not a lot." Actually her sire had talked her fucking ears off about the Order, but
she'd always found that it paid to keep some kinds of knowledge close to your chest. "What everyone knows, I guess. Some twelfth-century nutcase called Aurelius foretold the rise of the Anointed One, and a bunch of other nutcases down the centuries believed him. They thought he'd bring back the Old Ones and annihilate humanity or some shit like that."

"Mmm." David looked like she was failing the essay portion of the test. "And the Anointed One arose as Aurelius foretold."

"I know, the creepy little *pendejo* was in charge when Dalton turned me. And Spike torched him inside of six months." Evie snorted. "All that destroy-the-world bullshit sounds shiny, but I got just one question: if humanity gets annihilated, then what the fuck do we eat?"

"You're being facetious." David's mild tone had acquired an edge. "But you make my point for me. The Anointed One was the prophesied leader of the Aurelians — and Spike defeated him. I don't believe that was a coincidence. If Angel intends to . . . " His cell phone buzzed. "Pardon me. Bloody Vengeance Incorporated, David spe. . . ah, Mrs. Harris. Indeed? How many? Very well, I'll send someone over directly."

Five minutes later, the rusty old Ford van that Bloody Vengeance Inc. used for deliveries was bucketing down Wilkins Boulevard towards downtown Sunnydale. Evie was crammed into the back seat between a bleary Allen and a grouchy Denita — Diego, the bastard, had called shotgun. The sun was still doing a Flying Wallenda on the western horizon, and Evie scrunched down between her larger seatmates. In theory the grease smeared over the windows would keep them from doing anything but smoking a little, but after her swimming pool adventure, she wasn't too eager to pan-fry herself again.

"It's extremely likely that these are Cain's men," David said, sweeping the wheel around and swerving into an alley to cut across to Maple. "This could be a distraction to get us out of the crypt, but Elise and Fernando should be able to hold off any assault there long enough for us to deal with this. Remember, hurt them as much as you like, but leave them alive."

"Is Spike really gonna care if we kill these guys?" Denita asked, understandably skeptical.

"Probably not." David's lips twisted in distaste. "But bear in mind that the Slayer is on her way as well, and Spike takes her displeasure very seriously. Besides, we'll want to question them."

Lucky for her, Evie thought, this was one test she couldn't fail. She'd bet a pint of Willy's best that David had taken all the new employees on this gig precisely in order to see if any of them would snap and go for the neck when presented with human prey.

David pulled out of the alley and onto Maple, and Spike's DeSoto roared past on their right, missing the van's bumper by a hair. It screeched to a stop in front of a fire hydrant, and Spike catapulted out of the driver's seat, his eyes molten gold and his fangs bared. He was limping slightly, and the patchwork of bruises across his face confirmed that he'd been in one hell of a fight not that long ago.

"You lot, with me," he snarled, striding across the sidewalk. "Evie, stay here and give a shout when you hear sirens."

The front door of the Magic Box hung askew, and overturned racks and smashed display cases spilled their contents across the threshold and out onto the sidewalk. Shouts and crashing noises issued from within. Evie inhaled; the invaders were human, all right. Fuck. No point in arguing. She'd be useless in a fight. The others plunged through the door, leaving her to twiddle her thumbs on the sidewalk, her ears cocked for the sound of approaching cop cars. Sentry was better than nothing, but if only she could bite . . .
She barely had time not to take a breath before a wave of excruciating pain knocked her off her feet. Evie crumpled, both hands clutching her head. Her knees hit the sidewalk and the pain was gone, leaving her panting and dizzy. The grain of the cement swam before her eyes. God damn, the roots of her hair hurt! What the uncle-fucking hell? Could she not even think about biting people without the chip firing now? She didn't have time for this shit. Whimpering, she bit her lip and struggled to her feet, broken charms crunching under her sneakers.

Someone had smashed the store's overhead lights while her head was exploding, and the only illumination inside was the anemic light of evening pouring through the broken door. Dark figures struggled and snarled amidst the wreckage, human and vampire indistinguishable in the gloom. Cain's people had the numbers, but Spike's were stronger and faster, and the attackers couldn't see in the dark. The sickening snap of bone was followed by a scream. Someone flung a display case through the window, and a knot of humans and vampires -- that is, vampire -- that is, Spike -- crashed through the window after it.

Feet and fists flailing, the mass of struggling men cartwheeled out onto the sidewalk, scattering knock-off Zuni fetishes in their wake. Evie dodged, but her foot skidded on a lucky money cat, and she went down hard as the brawlers collided with her head-on. A man loomed over her, his weight pinning her arms to the pavement, his stone-eyed face distorted in a savage rictus that rivaled any vamp's game face. Scent confirmed what sight was too busy panicking to deal with: Gib Cain. Rules or no rules, chip or no chip, like hell was she letting her other fang go without a fight. Evie drove an elbow at his face. Bone and cartilage crunched, and the chip... Did nothing.

The shock was greater, somehow, than if it had fired. Evie froze. Cain bellowed in pain and clutched his nose. Blood gushed over his hand, and the bright coppery scent flooded her nostrils. That was all she needed. She vamped out with an avid snarl and lunged upwards, a shark riding a red tide of hunger and fury. She might be missing a fang, but the teeth she had left were plenty sharp enough to do the job.

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Angel wouldn't have heard her leave, but Drusilla had packed a lunch, and it screamed so. Her sire leaped to his feet as she strolled across the lobby with her big leather trunk, and cut her off before she could reach the doors.

"Dru! Where d'you think you're going?" His hand closed on her upper arm, hard enough to bruise. Drusilla tossed her head and dropped her luggage. The luggage shrieked. Angel spun and kicked it, and the lock snapped. The moldy leather trunk popped open, spilling Miss Edith, a chipped tea set, seventy-two tarot cards, a tangle of bloodstained dresses, and a scrappy ten-year-old out into the ragged red pentagram inscribed upon the Hyperion's lobby floor. (Not all the scrub-brushes in all the world could make that clean again, not if all the maids in all the world wore their fingers to bony stumps.)

The Lunch drew breath for another shriek, and Drusilla caught her eye. "Hush," she murmured, taloned fingers flexing on air. "Bye, baby bunting, Mama has gone a-hunting, to catch a little rabbit-skin, to eat her baby bunting in..." The Lunch's pupils dilated, and her heaving chest stilled. She huddled on the lobby floor, a rangy bundle of half-grown limbs, and Drusilla gave her an approving pat on the head. "There's a dearie." She looked up at Angel, reproachful. "Waste not, want not!"

Reproach was lost on him. His grip tightened deliciously. "Drusilla, I don't have time for your foolery right now. Go back to your room. If you're bored, you can go out with Wesley tonight and make us some new playmates."
Drusilla made a circle of thumb and forefinger, observing Angel through a spyglass of flesh. For all he puffed and roared, the soul was still there, a vile squirming thing coiled like a maggot in his heart. A maggot drowned in absinthe now, but every night it would twitch and wriggle to life, nibbling and gnawing away from the inside. Let it bite. She drew herself up, very fine in plum satin. "Shan't. You promised me dolls and dresses and a new family to hurt me very nicely, but Wesley doesn't love me, and you didn't let me have my present. So I'm running away from home." She nodded, decisive. "As this isn't home, I shall find home first, and then run away from it."

The noise Angel made was halfway between a growl and a groan. "It's daylight out there!"

Without a word, Drusilla produced a frilly black-lace parasol from the rubbish spilling out of the trunk and snapped it open.

Angel heaved a sigh and ran one hand through his brush of hair. "All right, Dru, what's the matter? Hasn't Wesley been attentive enough? Do I need to speak to him for you?"

"A good caning," Drusilla replied, reflective. Perhaps if she made him angry enough, Daddy would spank her. "He'd like that. He's all full of ink-scratch and broken glass, muttering and mumbling all the night long. He sounds so cross in Sumerian, and who wouldn't, with that metal Slayer taking bites out of his skull?" With a wriggle and a rustle of silk she freed herself, spinning out of reach and peering at him from behind her parasol. "Goodbye, dear Papa." There was alarm in his eyes; her Daddy might not love her properly, but he needed her. Needed the voices that whispered in her ear, at least. Best remind him, now and then, that she was indeed a princess and not a goose-girl. "I'm off to seek my fortune, all in my Sunday best."

"Dru, you know I need Crowley until we know exactly what the shadowcaster does. And he's all dried up anyway. Wouldn't you like a better present?" Angel glanced at the lobby doors, which were swinging open on the tall, balding frame of Doctor Gregson. "Come on -- anything you like. Name it."

Triumph flowered in her breast, red and gold. Darla had always said that Angelus needed to be managed properly, and she was being oh, so proper! Drusilla slyly lowered her parasol and her lashes. "Truly anything?"

"Anything." Angel grabbed her and lifted her bodily up, carried her into his office, and plunked her down in one of the less-battered chairs. "If and only if," he said, tapping a finger to her nose, "you stay right there where I can keep an eye on you." He turned back towards the doctor. "Come on in, Doctor Gregson. We've got a lot to talk about."

The doctor accepted Angel's offer of a chair with ill grace. Curled like a mouse in her corner, Drusilla considered Doctor Gregson: Human in seeming, but not in substance, he trailed a perfume of antiseptic and despair. "Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief," she sing-songed. "You're the one our dear cousin James engaged to slit him from guzzle to snatch last year and make him proof from all harm for a year and a day."

Gregson frowned at her, and then his expression cleared as he recollected what she was talking about. "It was only for an hour, young lady." James had used that hour to attempt his revenge upon Angelus. An hour wasted, that. The doctor turned back to Angelus, and Drusilla licked her lips and settled into her corner, a cat satisfied that she was perched in front of the correct mouse-hole.

"It's all very well to say that Mr. Crowley has, er, abdicated his responsibilities in this venture." Gregson folded his hands, long surgeon's fingers interlocking. Scalpel-wielding hands, Drusilla thought, flick flick flick. "But Mr. Crowley and I had a business agreement. In exchange for installing the Doximal pump, I was to have unlimited access to the shadowcaster for a period of no
less than one month. If he’s defaulted on his agreement, I’ve got no choice but to repossess the pump, and believe me, I can hire a corporate wizard who can do so from a safe distance. Unless you can offer me some form of equivalent payment, of course.”

Angel leaned back in his own far less battered chair, a knowing smirk playing about his lips. "Crowley was playing you for a sucker, Doc. Only a Slayer can pass through the shadowcaster portal unharmed."

Gregson made a dismissive *pfft*. "So he informed me. I'm only interested in the byproducts of other people passing through the portal. I'm a businessman, not an adventurer." A scowl darkened his high, glistening brow. "A businessman with some significant losses of stock to make up."

Angel raised an eyebrow. "My clinic was vandalized last night. A number of extremely valuable specimens were destroyed or stolen." The doctor's expression grew ever more sour. "Luckily there was sufficient security footage left to identify the perpetrator. A business rival of mine. It's so aggravating, dealing with amateurs."

Drusilla drew in a long hissing breath and leaned forward, the silk of her gown rustling like the voices of dead. *Naughty, naughty Spike.* She could still smell him in the air, leather and ash. Always so hungry, her Spike. And so she was, come to that. Out in the lobby the Lunch was creeping towards the front door; she raised a hand and beckoned. The Lunch regarded her with a hopeless whimper, and began to crawl towards her on hands and knees across the rubble-strewn floor. Drusilla took the girl upon her knee, stroking her matted hair. She set her fangs delicately against the flutter and throb of blood in the child's slender throat. Dark liquid eyes panicked, hitching breath; pulse growing weak and thready as her kiss lengthened.

"Spike paid me a visit my homeowner's insurance won't thank me for last night, too." Angel's bared teeth shaded towards fangs. "Here's the deal. You want access to the shadowcaster? You've got it. You can have all the demons it can spit out, in perpetuity. In return, I want you to give me complete control of the Doximal delivery implant. I want the remote control and the dead man's switch disabled, and I want refills. There can't be an infinite supply of the drug in there, and I plan on unliving a long, long time." His eyes glinted yellow. "I might even be able to help you with your Spike problem."

"Rest assured, I've already arranged to send Spike a very sternly worded message." Gregson pursed his lips, as if weighing the freshness of a peach. "As for your offer, making the modifications you want without removing the device -- I assume you'd rather it remain *in situ*? -- will be... challenging. And while I understand that you can't be held responsible for Mr. Crowley's failings, it's an unfortunate fact that he was already behind schedule in his payment. I'm afraid I have to demand some form of assurance before I can consider accepting your offer. The four weeks of unrestricted access to the shadowcaster I'm due, for example."

The girl in her arms gave a keening whimper. Cradling the warm limp weight in her lap, Drusilla crooned a low, wordless song to the rhythm of a failing heart. James's dust had wept so on the wind, for days and days after his sad demise, driving her quite frantic.

Angel shot an irritated look in her direction and leaned back, the King in his counting-house, accounting out his money. "If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd suspect you think I'm stupid. This is a Slayer artifact, Doc. One of a kind. But I'll tell you what I can do -- there's a completely unique demon in one of the upstairs suites. You can have it right now, and any others that, uh, become available in the process of testing. In exchange, you start work on the modifications right away."

"You drive a hard bargain," Gregson sighed. "But I can't afford to pass by an opportunity like this
over trifles." He rose to his feet and offered his hand, which Angel ignored. After a moment he let it drop to his side. "I'll send my people around to remove the corpse within an hour. No sense in letting it decay further. I'll have a preliminary plan for the first stage of modifications to the device to you by day after tomorrow."

Foolish Papa, to desire the Slayer-trap so. Couldn't he feel it spit and spark? Couldn't he see the capering black shapes that ring-around-a-rosied him, metal teeth gnashing, clawed fingers clashing? Best give it to the doctor and be done. But that was none of her affair. Angelus would have his present, and she would have hers. Drusilla leaped to her feet, toppling the Lunch's pale, lifeless body to the floor, and seized the cuff of the doctor's jacket. Gregson drew back, but she held him fast, as poor Janet must, lest the Fairy Queen snatch him away. "You're the Doctor, the man with the knives. I know all about you." She fell into a sing-song chant: "Bits and bobs, shreds and slices, snips and snails and demons' tails."

Doctor Gregson glanced down at her, eyebrows raised, and extricated his sleeve from her grasp. "I don't take psychiatric cases," he said. "There's a clinic in Las Vegas, however. . . "

"Don't mind her. Drusilla's got some invaluable talents, but she lives in a world of her own. A really annoying world of her own." Angel pulled her off the doctor in exasperation. "Dru, the grownups are talking."

Drusilla rounded on her sire, claws out, hissing. "No! You promised me whatever I choose, and this is what I choose." They forgot, all of them, that she'd been on her own now for ever so long, and grown ever so wise. She turned back to Gregson. "What's the price of a heart?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, do listen!" Weren't doctors supposed to be clever? "It's very simple. My Spike left me lost and lorn, all for the Slayer's sake, and after I made him especially, too! I want his heart for my own again, and then the Slayer may have the rest of him, for all I care." She shook a warning finger beneath Gregson's nose. "I don't want it all gone to dust, though. I should like to keep it in a velvet box and take it out and sing to it once each day for a thousand years. It will be my dearest keepsake, besides Miss Edith and the star that shines over my shoulder."

"That's not even possible, " Angel began, but Gregson held up a hand. His eyes gleamed like foxfire. "Perhaps not so impossible as all that."

Angel looked skeptical. Such a hard head her Papa had, to match his hard heart — would that Spike's had been harder as well! "Yeah? I seem to remember James going poof like any other vampire after you removed his heart. It just took him a little longer."

"Indeed. And it might take longer yet, with the proper preparation." Oh, this Doctor was a mad one, to be sure, his test tubes already a-bubbling. "The problem of vampire organs disintegrating when the parent vampire dusts is a long-time obstacle in my business. I've never discovered a solution which was commercially viable, but on an individual basis... " He turned to Drusilla and bowed slightly. "I think, madam, you might find the results satisfactory." He smiled at Angel, thin and oily. "If somewhat expensive."

Drusilla clapped her hands, shivering in delight. "Oh! I shall pick out a velvet box directly!"

"Dru, are you sure... ah, hell!" Angel's annoyance vanished in a savage grin. "It's poetic. Do it, Doc. I can't think of a better way to get Spike out of my hair." He bent and kissed the top of Drusilla's smooth dark head. "Sometimes, sweetness, you do earn your keep."
It was a measure of the blind will to survive, Bernard Crowley mused, that even when there was only one choice remaining, it could still take so long to nerve oneself to take it.

The young man who wasn't Robin watched him guardedly from across the cell. Charles Gunn, that was his name. Free of Drusilla's thrall, Crowley could see that Gunn bore Robin very little resemblance, but it had taken him most of the day to achieve that state. He could recall ranting, weeping, raving: arguing with his long-dead Slayer, pleading with Robin to forgive him. Now, clear-headed but exhausted, he huddled against the bank of old strongboxes in the rear of the cell. Angelus's minions had ripped a number of them out of the wall and smashed them open, looking for treasures left behind by long-departed guests. The holes leered at down at him, a lopsided, skeletal grin.

Gunn was not at his best, either. They hadn't bothered to set his broken finger, of course, and his hand had swollen to match his knee. Still, he was young and strong, and more than fit to do what Crowley needed him to do. The only hitch was the one respect in which he did resemble Robin: they were both incredibly stubborn.

"It's very simple, young man! If I die, the Doximal pump shuts off. Angel returns to himself. There is simply nothing else for it," Crowley snapped. "You must kill me, and it must be quick. I'm certain he's taking steps to obtain more of the drug somehow."

"Ain't happening, old man!" Gunn held up his manacled hand, mummified in torn strips of shirt. "Not even if I wanted to, and I don't want to. Look, this Robin guy -- he was someone you cared for, right? And he's dead, and it's your fault and you feel like shit. I get why you'd wanna fall on your sword, but damned if I'm going to hold it for you."

Crowley reached up -- he was handcuffed, but Angelus had not, apparently, felt it worthwhile to chain him to the wall. He grabbed the lip of the nearest strongbox cavity, hissing as the torn metal edge sliced his fingers. He levered himself to his feet, and tottered across the few feet separating them. "Don't be sentimental. You'd be surprised at what you're capable of."

Gunn met his eyes squarely. "No. I wouldn't. And that's why it's not happening. Whatever secrets you've got squirreled away, they're not so important that . . ."

How could the young be so world-weary and yet at the same time so naive? Crowley shook his head. "The only reason they haven't killed me already is that they believe I can give them more information. Unfortunately, they are correct. I was trained before Quentin Travers purged the Council archives. Do you have any idea what that means?" he snorted. Of course not. None of these children could. "The damage that monster could do with the shadowcaster goes far beyond summoning a few paltry demons. Angelus has already tried to destroy the world once. Do you really believe he won't try again? We can't take that chance. I took an oath once, to do anything within my power to save the world. If the only way I can fulfill that oath is to die. . . " A shudder ran through him at the memory of cold hands and colder eyes. "I can stand up to torture, but I can't stand up to her."

Exasperated, Gunn shook his head. "Man, I'm starting to see where Wesley gets it from. He used to talk like that when he got his Watcher on, and I didn't much like what he had to say, either. I'm not killing anyone who can't grow fangs."

"Then you're a fool." Crowley's shoulders slumped in resignation. He had hoped. . . but it had been a coward's hope, that he would be spared this. If a mortal sin was to be committed, better he commit it who was already damned. Turning away, he hobbled back to the rear wall, perusing the empty slots.
with a connoisseur's eye. "I let the girl I loved like a daughter go up against William the Bloody unaided rather than risk the consequences of using the shadowcaster. And Quentin Travers, fond as he is of power, was content to let it stay lost when I kept it after Nikki's death. Acatla was a child's toy compared to . . . Ah, well, I see I can't dissuade you. It has been a pleasure knowing you, young man."

"You're not done knowing me yet." Gunn braced himself against the wall with his good leg, shoving himself upright.

Crowley set his shirt-sleeve against the edge of a strongbox slot, catching the cloth in the points of the torn metal, and began working his arm back and forth. It was a good quality shirt, hard for an old man to tear. He had been something of a dandy in his day, and it was hard to let the old vanities go. He could hear the clink of chains as Gunn shifted position behind him. "There's no way you're gonna get a rope long enough to hang yourself out of that," Gunn said. "You think you're gonna slit your wrists and bleed out or something?"

"Certainly not. That would take far too long," Crowley began working on the other sleeve. "If you do escape, tell Rupert Giles. . . tell him that hubris is Angelus's besetting sin. Better to reign in hell, and all that. Look it up - Paradise Lost, Book I, line 597. Can you remember that?"

"Book I, line 597," Gunn repeated, with the air of someone humoring a madman. "But . . .

Crowley bent to retrieve the fallen scraps of cloth in a series of arthritic jerks, wadding them in his fist. Carefully, he plugged each nostril with a wad of cotton-rayon blend, then stuffed the remainder into his mouth and swallowed hard.

Immediately his body revolted. He doubled over, choking violently. Gunn pushed off the wall with a yell, but the manacles pulled him up short. Four minutes without oxygen before brain cells started dying. The need for air was overwhelming; his head pounded, his lungs ached. Dimly, over the stuttering roar of his own blood, he heard his cellmate shouting: "Hey! Angel! Anybody! Your prize Watcher's choking to death in here! Don't you vamps have god damn super hearing? Someone get in here, now!"

How long? Four minutes, four hours, forever. Black stars swam before his eyes. The door crashed open and one of the higher-ranking minions dove past Gunn, sliding to his knees at Crowley's side. The minion thrust a hand down Crowley's throat, pulling the soggy, crumpled wad of cloth free, as Crowley tried feebly to bat him away. Air rushed into his lungs, but the dizziness didn't abate. Pains now in his side, shooting down his left arm. His heart clenched and shivered within his chest. Ah. That's right. Angelus's minions had failed to capture his Lidocaine when they'd captured him. He hadn't taken any in two days.

How very fortunate.

"Give him some goddamn CPR!" Gunn yelled.

Through the grey haze overtaking his vision, Crowley saw the vampire cock his head, the indifference in his eyes at chilling odds with his open, boy-next-door face. "I don't know CPR."

Thank God.

"Don't you die on me, old man!"

Too late for that. His gaze was already focused on another shore. Crowley did not think he would see Nikki there, or Robin. Doubtless he was headed for warmer climes than they. But he forced it

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The old Watcher sprawled in the middle of the room, a scarecrow figure of skin and bone. Gunn slumped against the wall, the defeated curve of his spine a signal of exhaustion and despair; for the moment, anyway, Crowley's death had taken all the fight out of him. Lawson knelt at the old man's side, gazing down at his blue and waxen face. Wyndam-Pryce dropped to his knees beside him, his mouth a pruny twist of disapproval. Despite the plain lack of a heartbeat, he laid two fingers alongside the withered throat, feeling for a pulse. Finding none, his frown deepened. "Why didn't you try to sire him?"

Lawson contemplated the dead face for a moment longer, then reached down and closed the old man's eyelids. "I couldn't be certain how long he'd been choking when I got here. If there was brain damage, siring wouldn't fix it."

A muscle in Pryce's jaw jumped; he didn't like having his relative inexperience as a vampire thrown back at him. "Crowley's mind contained priceless knowledge," he reproved. "Salvaging even a portion of it . . ."

"He might have refused to drink anyway. He had something he believed in enough to die for."

"He was a Watcher."

Pryce said it as if that were all the explanation necessary. Lawson was seized with a sudden curiosity -- did Pryce struggle with the same malaise he did? "Do you ever miss that?" he asked. "Having a . . . greater purpose?"

"What makes you think I don't have one?"

Pryce's smile was grim. "The Watchers very nearly destroyed me. I intend to return the favor tenfold."

"What the hell is going on down here?"

Angel's voice, cold and menacing, interrupted any chance at further exploration. He stood in the doorway, shadowed by the inquisitive Doctor Gregson, and took in the wreckage with one comprehensive glance. Lawson got to his feet and held up the gummy wad of cloth. "Sir. He tore this off of his shirt and swallowed it. I don't know if the choking triggered the stroke, or if he was due for one anyway, but either way, he was gone before we could get to him."

Heat-lighting flickered in his sire's eyes. "That's the second time a prisoner's been lost on your watch, boy. Any particular reason I shouldn't kill you?"

Lawson stiffened. "That's up to you, but I won't sit still while you do it. Can you afford to do that right now, sir?"

Spike would have gone for his throat at that, but Angel wasn't so easily baited. Behind the impassive face, Lawson could see him considering his chances: his own partially healed wounds, the fact that Lawson was a match for him in weight and reach, and his current shortage of capable lieutenants. He laughed, short, sharp, and ugly, and gave Cowley a contemptuous kick to the head. "If I weren't on a deadline, I'd dust you right here, but you've got a reprieve. Make the most of it." He rounded on Gregson, who was watching the proceedings with the prurient interest of a man observing a four-car pileup. "We're going to have to bump that surgery up. The Watcher may have been bluffing when he said there was a deadman switch, but I'm not going to risk calling it."

Gregson nodded, producing a cell phone with the flourish of a stage magician. "Very well. I'll
contact the clinic and make the arrangements. We should be ready for you within an hour."

"Great. I'll be there as soon as I sort things out here." Angel jerked a thumb at Crowley's body. "Take that to Drusilla, and tell her she can do as she likes with it, and make sure he," he gestured towards Gunn, "doesn't strangle himself with a twist-tie or something. Charlie-boy here is joining the family as soon as I get out of surgery. I need at least one minion with both balls and brains. When you've cleaned up this mess, take Dru and go hunting. I want at least three more decent recruits by the weekend."

He turned and started for the door. Wesley's already pinched mouth tightened further, and Lawson's fists clenched in frustration. "I have a question, sir."

Pryce prudently took a step or two aside. Angel turned, eyes golden, and for all he was still bruised and limping from his encounter with Spike, his shoulders were still very broad and his fangs very sharp. "You do, do you?"

Lawson met his eyes. "What exactly are we doing here? Are we trying to rebuild the Order of Aurelius, or kill the Slayer, or find your kid, or what? Here I am, playing errand boy one day, killing a few drunk college kids the next, and for what? What's the point?"

Push the old man hard enough, and he'd bite. Angel moved then, one hand clamping around the younger vampire's throat and slamming him hard up against the ruined bank of safe-boxes. "What's the point?" he snarled, fangs inches from Lawson's nose. "This is the point! There are seven billion people out there, living their dull, stupid, pedestrian lives, and too many of those people have forgotten that the only thing that gives those lives meaning is the fact that at any moment, we can end them. We are the flame in the darkness, the shadow on the moon, the rattle of their final breath. We are artists, boyo. Artists in fear, in pain, in death. And as Spike might say, the world is our bloody canvas." A disdainful sneer curled his lips. "I carve my masterpieces in flesh and blood and souls. And if that's not meaning enough for you, Sammy-boy, you're no get of mine."

His head ringing, Lawson swiped a hand across his mouth and licked the blood from his fingers. Spike had told him, all those years ago, that scrambling for Angel's approval was a fool's game, but part of him had hoped, all the same, that some day his sire would swoop in, dispensing wisdom that would make sense of his peculiar vampiric ennui. The loss of that hope bit more painfully than any set of corporeal fangs could. "Just one more thing. You ever read Paradise Lost?"

"You need help on your book report? Of course I've read Paradise Lost." Angel's eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask?"

Fuck you too, old man. Whatever the hell Crowley had meant by that reference, Angel could figure it out on his own. "No reason."

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Wesley stood at the top of the steps, watching as the Gregson Clinic's ambulance pulled up to the curb, and Angelus disappeared within. The car purred to life and pulled away, vanishing into traffic. No more than twenty-four hours, Doctor Gregson assured them. Well and good, but twenty-four hours could be an eternity. The Slayer was surely on the alert by now, and Sam Lawson was increasingly a problem -- he'd left half an hour ago, ostensibly to begin his search for the new minions Angelus had ordered, but Wesley honestly wondered if they'd ever see him again. Which might be for the best. Had he been anyone other than Angel's guilty-secret get, Wesley was certain Lawson would have been a pile of dust under some minion's broom by now. Angel's soul might be quiescent, but Wesley was not so foolish as to imagine that it exerted no influence at all. Angelus delighted in keeping his lieutenants at one another's throats, but while that might keep them from
uniting against their master, it also lead to the sort of disaffection he could see growing in Lawson's
eyes day by day. If he, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, were in charge...

Put that thought aside. There were some things it wasn't safe to think about, particularly when
Drusilla was about. Wesley had no illusions that Angelus had assigned him to look after her simply
because he thought they'd make a pretty couple.

"Knock, knock."

Startled out of his reverie, Wesley looked down. Standing at the bottom of the hotel's front steps was
a small man in a rumpled grey suit and a fedora. Bright, shrewd eyes flicked past Wesley to the
Hyperion's dark and none too tidy interior. "Hey, I love what you've done with the place. The big
guy at home?" He strolled past Wesley, unfazed by the vampire's attempt to block his passage.
"Sucks that nobody needs to ask for an invitation to a vamp's house, doesn't it?"

"Here, stop that!" Wesley grabbed the little man's shoulder and whirled him around, or tried to; the
rumpled man brushed his hand away as if it were cobwebs. He shook his head and made a *tch*
noise.

"What, Angel never mentioned me? Name's Whistler. Pleased to meet you." He stuck out his hand,
which Wesley, after the fashion of his sire, ignored. After a moment Whistler withdrew it with a
sorrowful headshake. "Nobody's neighborly anymore."

"Angel did, in fact, mention you," Wesley said frostily. "You're the Balance demon who originally
engaged him to become a champion of the Powers. But in case it's escaped your notice, it's Angelus
who is currently in residence, and he is no longer the Powers' willing pawn, nor am I. If you're
looking for a champion of goodness and light, look elsewhere."

Whistler flung himself down in one of the overstuff scarlet chairs which had escaped the earlier
carnage, and laced his hands behind his head. He addressed the vaulted ceiling, or something beyond
it. "Man, what do they teach them in these schools?" Returning his gaze to Wesley, "OK, I'll use
small words. I serve the Balance. Not good, not evil, balance." He held both hands out, miming a
scale. "And I'll tell you, it's been a wild ride in these parts the last few years. There's been a lot of
argument upstairs about the way we ought to handle things from here on out." He leaned forward.
"But then what do you know, a little bird tells me that Angel has the shadowcaster, and that opens up
a whole slew of possibilities." He grinned. "Whether or not he's using it at the moment, he's still the
vampire with a soul. Prophecy Guy. And there's one humdinger of a prophecy waiting in the wings.
One that makes the Shanshu look like chump change. So I'm here to make him an offer he can't
refuse."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Took me long enough.

As always, I cannot thank my beta readers enough: Typographer, Slaymesoftly, Torrilin, Rainkatt, and especially The_moonmoth, Apprenticebard, and Feliciacraft, who make concrit hurt so good. This chapter would be vastly poorer were it not for their efforts.

Cain was no easy mark. He spat blood in her face and flung himself backwards, scrabbling in the rubble for a splinter of wood. By the time Evie scrubbed the red from her eyes, he'd found one, and was driving it towards her chest in adrenaline-fueled rage. She rolled aside and the point gouged her arm as it drove past her, heading for the pavement.

Somewhere in the background, the screech of tires announced the arrival of another car. Doors slammed, voices clamored, and footsteps pounded past to join the brawl behind her. Spike's voice shouted, "Slayer! Over here!" Cain was on her again, trying to use his superior weight to take her leverage away. Evie snapped at his arm and shoved him off, rolling him over in the wreckage as he stabbed for her heart a second time. Fuck. She was a moron. She had strength and speed going for her, but she'd never been a fighter, didn't know any fancy moves. And who knew when the fucking chip would kick back in and render her helpless again? If it did, she'd just screwed up her pretty sweet deal with Spike's gang by attacking this bozo. And if it didn't...

She'd think about that later. For just a second, his jugular was exposed.

Blood. Cain's scream was choked by her fangs, and the fight around her faded into a voluptuous red haze as Evie gulled him down, a salty crimson river. The only thing that mattered was the warmth flooding through her body. The influx of stolen life stirred the sluggish machinery of her undead cells to divide and grow, speeding her healing the way bags of cold, half-congealed pig's blood could never do. She would have roared in triumph, but that would have meant removing her teeth from Cain's throat, and she wasn't finished, not by a fucking long shot. His thrashing limbs grew limp; his heart pounded, slowed, faltered. "Not so easy to push me around now, is it, cabron?" she snarled into mangled flesh. When his heart shuddered to a stop, his death would be the biggest goddamn rush she'd ever — "AAAAAAHHH!"

Lightning seared through her brain as the chip struck. A hand grabbed her shoulder and ripped her free of Cain's body. Evie struck out blindly, growling. Her new assailant growled right back, and the pain and the blood-haze receded enough that she could see it was Spike, fangs bared and eyes blazing gold. He heaved her into the air and shook her like a terrier shaking a rat. "What were my orders, you dimwitted cow?"

Orders. Oh, yeah. Oh, shit. Evie settled her brow ridges into a sulky scowl and swiped the back of her sleeve across her gore-smeared mouth. "It's not my fault! He was trying to stake me! The fucking chip went out!"

Spike backhanded her across the face, sparing none of his strength, and it was a damn good thing her canine hadn't grown back in yet, because he'd probably have knocked it loose again. "What's that
tuppenny piece of silicon embedded in, a bath sponge? Thought you were supposed to have some semblance of a working brain about you!" The scorn in his voice would have made her hot with shame if she'd still possessed working capillaries. "If Gib sodding Cain dies, it'll be because I killed him, and no one else, you hear me? The next time — "

Sirens were wailing, closer by the second, and Evie realized that the sounds of the fight in the Magic Box had dwindled away to the occasional moan or curse. A brace of police cars and an unmarked sedan pulled up, disgorging a horde of cops and a short, stocky Asian man in a neat dark suit and tortoiseshell glasses. A slim white girl with long dark hair shoved past the broken door of the Magic Box and limbo'd through the festoons of yellow crime scene tape which were rapidly enveloping the storefront like the web of some technologically-inclined spider, followed by the owner — Evie didn't know her well, but her scent was confusing: human, but with the faintest whiff of demon about her.

"There's not going to be a next time," a hard voice interrupted. The Slayer materialized at Spike's side, a wicked-looking stake at the ready. A step or two behind her was a tall, professorish-looking man, human, but gripping his own stake with depressing confidence. "Stand aside, Spike," she said, in the tones of someone who expected to be obeyed without question.

Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck fuck. She knew how to read people, and she knew how to play them once read. It was how she'd survived this long, unable to bite. But a huge part of playing someone was not to get too cocky. Spike might have some kind of weird soft spot for her, but Evie wasn't dumb enough to think that if it came down to her or the Slayer, she'd be anything but dust on the wind. If she wanted to unlive the night, she had to get out of here, and preferably out of Sunnydale entirely. She felt a strange pang of disappointment at the thought. It had been... nice, having a job, a purpose, regular meals, for a little while. Doing something she was good at, for people who appreciated that she was good at it.

And that, she told herself sternly, was how fine upstanding evil vampires were lured into becoming big Slayer-whipped pussies like Spike. The very fact she was starting to get comfortable here was reason enough to get the fuck out of Dodge.

Spike took a step backwards, out of the Slayer's reach, and set Evie down, keeping a good grip on her shoulder nonetheless. Evie wriggled a little, testing the give in his arm, but there wasn't any. "We're having a moment here, Slayer," he said, clipped.

Buffy shook her head. Her jaw was tight, her lips were set, but there was more weariness than anger in her eyes. To the Slayer, staking her wasn't anything personal. It was just part of the job. All in a day's work. Evie didn't matter to the Slayer any more than some random human kill mattered to Evie. It was a weird realization, and Evie wasn't sure she liked it. Because Cain hadn't been some random kill. Cain was personal. He was her fucking nemesis. You got a bye for your fucking nemesis, didn't you?

"Moment's over." Buffy raised her stake. "And so's she."

"He's not dead." Spike sounded more irritated than anything else. He waved his free hand at Cain, whose chest still rose and fell in jerky, painful heaves. Evie had to admit the guy was tough. "He's still gurgling away, and - " An ambulance howled up to the curb, or as close as it could get, given the van, Buffy's Jeep, Spike's DeSoto, and a handful of police cars splayed at random angles in the street, and paramedics joined the milling crowd. " - they'll take him to hospital inside of ten minutes, where it's even odds he'll pull through." Evie would have bet that the odds were a lot lower than that, but she wasn't about to argue the point.

"That doesn't matter." Buffy's calm, utterly reasonable voice was scarier than any amount of yelling or raging. "She tried to kill him. Period, end of story, " She took a deep breath. "I hate to say it, but...
the whole minion thing was an experiment. And I'm starting to think Kennedy's right. It's not working."

Spike's jaw twitched, and his eyes narrowed, blue and cold. There was something weird about the fact that when he was dead serious about something, he went human. "We had a deal, Slayer," he growled. "And as long as Cain's not dead, it's still in force."

The Slayer's sea-ice grey eyes met his blue ones, just as chill. "Spike, do not start splitting hairs with me now. It's obvious that the only thing keeping her in line was the chip, and if it's not working anymore — " Her shoulders sagged a fraction. "Riley warned me something like this would happen."

"Oh, Riley," sneered Spike. "Of course the bloody chip kept her in line! What it's for, innit? And now she knows she's got to do it herself." He gave Evie a shake. "Don't you?"

"Uh — " Evie blinked up at him stupidly. Her head was ringing from the chip, and the strobing lights on the police cars were making her eyes tear up. Everything was happening way too fast. The chip was working, and then it wasn't and then it was — what if it happened again? How could she tell? What if it went bad for good? Did Spike actually think she'd want to stick around if it did, when she could be a real vampire again? Strike out on her own and be the terror of... well, the terror of one dark alley, so long as some older, stronger vamp didn't shove her out, or someone like Corvini didn't press-gang her as Slayer fodder, or... fuck. She needed time to think about this shit. "It started working again," she offered. "The chip. So we're fine, right?"

Behind them, the cops had swarmed over the Magic Box, reading rights, taking statements, and enveloping the Magic Box in crime scene tape like industrious blue-clad spiders. Suit-and-Glasses emerged from the scrum, picking his way towards them through the rubble. He nodded to the professorish guy. "I'm Detective Charles Ng. I don't believe we've met. Hello again, Ms. Summers, Mr...." He raised an eyebrow at Spike. "...Williams?"

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it," Spike replied blandly. "Oi! David! Round up our lot and give evidence to the nice policeman."

"Detective Ng." Buffy relaxed slightly. "Good to see you. You're getting all the weird calls now, I guess. This is my Watcher, Rupert Giles. Giles, Detective Ng is the one who investigated when Warren Mears murdered that girl last summer, remember? We've got a professional understanding."

The Watcher looked the detective up and down with an air of wary skepticism, but accepted his proffered hand nonetheless. "Ah. My pardon; working so... directly with the local authorities is a bit new to me."

"It's proven to be a profitable association for both Ms. Summers and the department so far. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Giles," the detective replied agreeably. He jerked a thumb at Evie. "Is this one in my wheelhouse, or yours?"

"Mine," Buffy and Spike said in unison.

"Look, we haven't got bloody time for this!" Spike sounded ready to bite heads off.

"You're right." Buffy nodded at Evie. "We don't."

She moved. Spike moved faster, flinging up one arm to block her incoming stake and shoving Evie away with the other. "Run!" he snarled, and tackled Buffy straight-on.

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Surprise pinned Buffy to the pavement as Spike barreled into her. By the time her brain caught up with the action her legs had already drawn up in reflex, ready to kick out and send him flying the instant they hit ground. She should have felt betrayed, but the emotion surging through her was only frantic annoyance at having to deal with this now. Why did Spike have to pick the most inconvenient times for his lack-of-moral crises? The Slayer-voice in the back of her head was pointing out that she'd always known that sooner or later, the day would come when they'd be at each other's throats again, and there was an entire bonfire's worth of splintered wood all around them, so why wasn't she grabbing any of it? A much less objective part of her told the Slayer-voice to stuff it. Today wasn't going to be that day, not if she could help it.

They hit hard, Spike on top of her, and she flung him off immediately. She bounced to her feet, and Spike landed on the curb with a whoof and staggered drunkenly to his. By the way he was moving, he was a hell of a lot worse off than he'd made out on the phone, but there wasn't a fleck of yellow in his eyes. "Spike — " Before she could get the next word out, he crashed into her again, a parody of his usual grace, and knocked her flat on her ass. He enveloped her in a sort of desperate bear-hug, pinning her arms to her sides while she bucked and kicked beneath him. The minions gathered around their scuffling forms, a ragged semicircle of yellow eyes and bared fangs. Except for David, who was still in his human face, and watching the whole spectacle with the detached interest of a bookmaker setting odds. Maybe it hadn't been such a great idea to announce that she was having second thoughts about their continued existence while they were still in earshot. "Damn it, Spike, she's getting away!"

"That's the — OW! — idea!" Spike yelped as she head-butted him and followed up with a fist to his belly. He rolled off and lay there on the sidewalk groaning, clutching his abused middle.

"Hey," the biggest of the minions rumbled. "I thought the deal was you protected us from the Slayer."

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing? I don't roll around in piles of kindling for my health. Stand off, you miserable gits, or I'll stake you myself." Spike levered himself slowly and painfully to his feet, and despite the fact that he obviously wasn't in any condition to make good on his threat, the minions shuffled back a step or two. He tugged his t-shirt into place and raked a hand through his hair, dislodging assorted fragments of Anya's sadly diminished inventory. "David, once the plods are done with 'em, get everyone back to the crypt. I'll be along presently."

Detective Ng looked at Giles. "Do they do this all the time?" he asked.

"Regrettably, yes." Giles eyed the two of them with exasperation. "If you're quite finished...?"

Buffy took a deep breath and counted to... well, three; she didn't have time to waste counting to ten. Dawn was all right; the Magic Box was smashed, but Anya had insurance; the apocalypse was taking place in L.A. for a change; and no one was dead... yet. By Sunnydale standards this was a fantastic night. "For the time being. Detective, I need to check on the stuff in my wheelhouse — if you need anything from me, you've got my cell. Giles, here's my keys — take the car and get Dawn and Anya home. Willow knows you're coming. Call Xander... and I guess Kennedy, too. We need a full-blown Scooby meeting, stat. Spike and I will catch up when we're done here."

Anya dug her heels in — literally; she was standing ankle-deep in rubble. "I can't leave. I have to call my insurance agent. Also, if Angel's lost his soul, again — "

"Then we'll put it back, again!" Buffy snapped. She tried to like Anya, she really did, but sometimes...

"How?" Anya pulled out her phone and jabbed buttons angrily. "Willow's useless now. Even if we
can find another Orb of Thessulah, Tara's not strong enough to cast the spell a second time. Re-
souling Willow nearly broke her. And — " She looked close to tears. "What good is any of this,
what we do, when it all just keeps happening again and again, and people lie to you about important
things, really important things — "

"We'll call your agent before we leave," Giles interrupted smoothly, taking Anya's elbow and
steering her away. "I'm sure you have excellent coverage."

Buffy shot him a grateful look and went back to glaring at any of the minions who looked as if they
were getting ideas. There was arguing and there was milling around, but half an hour later, she and
Spike were standing shoulder to shoulder on the curb, she unobtrusively supporting him as they
watched Ng's men bundle Cain's men into squad cars. David was herding the minions back in the
direction of the van. A chilly breeze whipped along the sidewalk, scattering the detritus of the attack,
and overhead stars flickered behind a veil of scattered clouds. Spike extracted an already-grubby
handkerchief from a jacket pocket and blotted the crusted blood from his nose. "Nine rounds with
Angel and hardly a scratch," he grumbled. "Five seconds with you and it's straight for the nose."

"You deserved it!" Buffy snapped back, suppressing the urge to cuddle him and make cooing noises.
Hardly a scratch, yeah, right. "Are you going to explain what all that was about?"

Spike started to heave a sigh, winced, and pressed a hand to his side. There was a wet sheen to the
fabric of his t-shirt there when his fingers fell away. With the same dogged determination which was
currently keeping him upright, he started, "You told me once, 'You may not have a soul, Spike, but
you've got a brain, so use it!' So here's me, using it. Evie cocked up in the heat of the moment, right,
fine, got the memo. But the knobber's not dead, and it's not like other members of our merry crew —
vampires, even! — haven't sown bloodshed and destruction in their wakes in the last year. Bint
deserves another chance."

She really, really wasn't ready for this particular conversation now. Or ever. "Spike, there's a
difference between giving Willow, or even you, another chance and giving one to Evie. Willow's got
a soul, and you — you — "

"Yeah, me." Spike was starting to sway a little. "You saying I'm only standing here because I'm a
good lay?"

"No!" If he hadn't been so obviously ready to fall over, she would have punched him again. It was a
question she'd asked herself often enough, and the answer wasn't one she liked much. "Why do you
even care?" she demanded. "I've seen you stake a minion for breathing funny when they weren't
even breathing! What's so special about her?"

The patrol car flasher pulsed behind them, its waves of light washing over the planes of Spike's face
"Do you have any sodding idea..." He stopped, began again. "Look, if you need to chat someone up
about the burdens of Slayerness, you've got Faith, or that Kennedy bint. You may not like 'em, but
they're there. If Will wants to have a heart-to-heart about vampires with souls, she's got Angel. At
least when he's not completely barking. I've got... there's no one who knows what it's like, yeah?
Having a chip shoved in your head. How it twists you round, makes you feel things you shouldn't
feel, want things you shouldn't want, till you wake up some evening and you realize — " Spike
squeezed his eyes shut. "Maybe it was never the chip after all, maybe you really are this perverse and
pathetic." He opened his eyes again, and his mouth quirked in rueful resignation. "I thought... I
dunno, maybe if I kept her 'round long enough, she'd get to tolerate some of you, the way I did, and
I'd..." He sounded as if it were a shameful failing he was admitting to. "Have someone to talk to.
Someone that gets it."
Oh, God. He's trying to make himself a BFF. With about as much success as he'd had making himself a girlfriend, probably, and Evie was a lot more dangerous than the Buffybot. "Spike..." She tightened her arm around his waist and he leaned gratefully into her shoulder. It was unnerving, this occasional reminder that for him, saving puppies and Christmas was like her taking up a career of robbing banks. "You've got it wrong," she said after a moment. "It's not that I can't see... potential in some vampires. I can. Too often for comfort. I love you, but you're not some special unique snowflake. Probably there are other vampires out there who could do what you've done if only I could stick a chip in them for a few years and find the right incentives... but I can't be sure of that. And if I let the wrong one go because... because I let myself think of them as a person, then other people, human people, will die."

"And that's bad, right," he muttered. Not even sarcasstically, just as if he were checking to make sure. "Then stick to our original agreement, Slayer. If Cain dies, she's dust. If not..."

Frustration boiled up in her. "Spike, her chip's starting to malfunction! Just like Riley said it would! Either it's going to go out and she's going to kill someone, or it's going to turn her brain to mush! Did you ever think that dusting her might be kinder to — " No, he wouldn't have. Spike didn't do kind. Except, unaccountably, when he did. "It's not like we can just send her out to have it repair — " She cut herself off mid-word, just as Spike burst out, "Why not?"

They stared at each other. "Riley says the program's been canceled."

"Riley says!" Spike replied scornfully. "They wouldn't be here if they didn't think there was something in those tinkertoys worth salvaging."

He had a point. "Gah! All right. But whether Cain dies or not, if she even fantasizes about laying a fang on anyone else I'm going to turn her into charcoal briquets. Deal?"

"Deal." His mission accomplished, Spike's shoulders slumped. When he spoke again, his voice was lower. Not defeated, just...matter of fact. "Finn's right, you know. Sooner or later, I will fuck it up. Almost did already. Only the luck of the draw I didn't kill one of those sodding cops at Gregson's. Didn't even want to kill them, particularly. Just wasn't thinking, and they were in the way, and it was fun. Seriously, love — how's it any different? Between me and Willow, and her? I need to know."

The note of desperate inquiry in his voice made her chest hurt. Buffy clenched her jaw in frustration. It wasn't just pure selfishness on her part, was it, wanting to keep her friend and her lover in her life? There was something real here, something worth fighting for. "I don't know. It just is." And that wasn't enough. She reached up, cupping his face in her palm, thumbing the arch of his cheekbone. "Look, you and Willow may screw up, but..." She paused, groping for the right words. "You try to do the right thing. That matters for... not everything, but a lot. Even if you can't ever be really good, you're trying to be... or at least act... not evil. And she isn't."

He let out a breath, nodded. Relieved, because she'd given him a rule he could follow, a guidepost in the trackless ethical swamp he navigated daily. "Yet."

"Fine. Yet." She gave him a little shoulder-thump, that being one of the few places he wasn't dented or leaking. "Is your spleen going to stay inside if I let go of you?"

Spike looked down at himself, and his laugh was half a groan. "Wouldn't bet on it. I could sleep for a week. Fuck, I'm an idiot."

"No argument from me." Buffy glanced around; the minions had departed, and the last of the squad cars was starting to pull away. She'd gotten into the fight too late to do more than help with the clean-up, but she hadn't come out of it completely unscathed. She let her left hand slip down the angle of
his jaw, pressing her skinned knuckles to his lips. She felt the muscles of his torso go tense beneath her other hand, felt the cool huff of breath as he inhaled the blood-scent and snorted it out through his nose, a ritual to banish temptation. "I've got an owie. Gonna kiss it?"

He really did groan this time, but then his tongue flicked out, cool and soothing on the torn flesh. He cleaned the blood from her hand as though it were a sacrament, tongue-tip exploring the tender webs of flesh between her fingers, lips tickling her palm, leaving no inch of skin untended. Just a lick, just a nibble, but hopefully it would give him enough healing oomph to get him through the night. When he finished, they stood there for a long moment, leaning into each other, her breath a faint mist in the chilly air, his invisible but no less present. Reluctantly, Buffy drew away. "OK. If we're going to nip this Angel situation in the bud, we need to break out the clippers now. What we talked about on the phone, you still up for it?" Spike nodded. "Good. Go rally the troops, and make sure Evie hasn't eaten an orphanage or something. I'll find Riley and see if I can convince him that his guys could use a little R&R in L.A. And then..." She glanced up at the sky; much as she wanted to leap into action right now, they needed time to regroup. "Come home and maybe we can get some sleep after we fill everyone in."

Spike looked ready to argue, but another twinge from his ribs seemed to make him think better of it. He nodded and headed off down the rubble-covered sidewalk towards the DeSoto, trying without notable success to disguise his limp. Buffy watched him go, hugging herself. Some day. Some day...

But not tonight. "Spike," she called after him. He turned, eyes questioning. "So is this thing with Evie officially the first time you've ever given a crap about someone who's not connected to me somehow? Or have you been doing it on the sly for a while now?"

The expression on his face might have been absolute horror, but it was dark, so she couldn't be sure.

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"So's I'd have someone to talk to," Spike muttered as he wrenched the steering wheel and slewed round the corner towards Restfield. He hadn't even fully articulated his reasons for hiring Evie to himself before Buffy'd sprung the question on him like that, and now — was this really what he'd come to? Rescuing the inhabitants of Angel's larder had been easy to justify: it would brass Angel off, and it was what Buffy would want. But this? Going to bat for a sodding minion who'd rightly sneer in his face at the very idea? Two years ago he'd have sneered along with her. And yet here he was, with a larger-than-he'd-like-to-admit part of him still thinking this was a corking good plan. He vamped out with a frustrated snarl, then shook off the ridges and pulled his fangs back in. No. No. He had enough holes in his torso at the moment to remind him where going off half-cocked got him.

A glance up at the sky as he got out of the car told him that it was closing on midnight. The moon was rising in the east, waning but still more than half full, and Restfield's wrought-iron gates loomed ahead of him. He could spare a minute for a restorative cigarette. Lighter, fags, flame: yeah, that was better. Spike leaned back against the gatepost with a sigh, drawing in smoke and rationing it out through his nose. Thank Christ and the Surgeon General that at least his second-favorite vice had turned out to be unequivocally evil.

Ought to just stake the chit now and be done with the whole mad idea. That was what Buffy wanted him to do, wasn't it? Or... had she not been mocking him, after all? Was trying to convert a monster to the path of — well, usually trying not to kill people — more the right thing to do than knocking one off? Wasn't that what Buffy was trying to do with him? And if so, should he be more narked off if his stunning good looks and winning personality weren't the prime factor in their equation, or if they were? And sod right things to do for coming in so many contradictory flavors, anyhow. Christ, he wanted to kill something. Killing things was simple. Satisfying. Except it wasn't any longer —
simple, anyway. Fuck. This was bleeding impossible. He took another drag, scowled at the glowing coal of his cigarette. Bugger what Buffy wanted for a moment; what did he want?

You already know, mate.

A chill pricked the fine hairs on the back of his neck and slithered down his spine to curl sick and hollow in his gut. It had been a relief, running into Tanner and Anne and Connor and Fred, and even sodding Sam Lawson, in L.A. He'd told Buffy once that the only reason she'd lasted so long as a Slayer was ties to the world, but he was in the same boat when it came to this trying-to-be-good business. That cobweb-thin net of connections with Buffy at the heart of it was the only thing holding him back — and far from struggling against it, here he was, Gulliver cheering the capturing Lilliputians on.

He wanted... friends.

"You fucking pussy," he whispered, appalled. Being love's bitch was one thing. Transcendent, in its way. Mere liking's bitch, on the other hand... bloody sick-making, was what it was. Contemptible. And the worst part was, it didn't matter. Whatever token revulsion he felt now, he'd get over it. Talk himself around somehow. There was some flaw bred into the heart of him, going all the way back to his human days, a thing that hungered for belonging as desperately as his body craved blood. When first he'd risen to his new life at Dru's side, he'd told himself he didn't need it any longer — taken particular glee in driving a spike through the hearts (and heads, and other assorted body parts) of those who'd denied it to him. For a century and more he'd convinced himself that he'd slain the longing in his own heart as well.

But the chip and its enforced helplessness had given that longing room to grow again, and over the last year it had unfurled in the sunshine of his girls' regard, whispering Feed me, William, into his ear. Now it waxed monstrous, invading roots and treacherous shoots twining all through the rest of him. He should have realized that his little epiphany about Will and Tara was only the beginning, that the rot had spread far deeper than ever he'd imagined. Piece by piece the old, familiar Spike was being quarried away, replaced by... what? He couldn't make out the shape of the thing he was becoming.

With a growl, he whipped out his cell phone and punched up a number, resolutely ignoring the fact that he had it memorized. A moment later a sleepy voice crackled, "Any, is that — "

"Harris? Spike. Just calling to tell you that I bloody well hate you and hope you die covered in weeping pustules and reviled by your nearest and dearest at the earliest opportunity."

There was a moment of silence. "It's okay, Spike. I hate you too."

"Bloody right. And... and so's your mum." Spike hung up, feeling vaguely foolish. Enough of this bollocks; rooting about in his own navel-lint wouldn't get him anywhere. He'd made his decision last year, thrown in his lot with the forces of goodness and light whether they wanted him or not. No sense whinging about it now. Wasn't as if he was handing out sweeties to orphans on the streetcorner, was it? Whatever good turn he was doing Evie, it was for his own benefit first and foremost. So that was all right.

Wasn't it? Bugger it all, this was exactly why he needed someone to talk to.

Spike tossed his cigarette aside and popped the boot of the DeSoto. Beneath the nicotine, the taste of Buffy's blood lingered on his tongue like a benediction. He palpated his ribs, testing the extent of his healing. Still sore as bugger all, and where the bullets had penetrated there were multiple stabbing pains when he inhaled too deeply. Limp was improving, though. He felt like the arse-end of a rough
Saturday night, but he'd do. None of his current crew had been picked for fighting spirit; if anything, the opposite. Even knowing he'd already had seven bells knocked out of him, if any of them decided to make trouble, they'd most likely pick stealth or treachery. Removing the cooler with the Mohra blood in it, he strode through the gates and down the gravel path towards the Alpert crypt, like a man expecting he'd find everything in order when he arrived.

Elise was perched atop one of the lesser mausoleums, one of their standard sentry posts. She eyed him warily, but made no overt challenge as he walked up. "David get everyone back all right?" Spike inquired. Business as usual, nothing to see here.

She hesitated for a moment, then hopped down, dreads swinging. Elise was tall and rangy, with a high-cheekboned, austere face at odds with the lush curve of her lips when she smiled, which wasn't often. Spike had never inquired as to why she'd hired on with Bloody Vengeance, and she'd never volunteered the information. She cocked her head now, sizing him up. "Yeah," she said. "Everyone except for Evie, and she just dragged her sorry ass back here fifteen minutes ago."

"Small favors." Spike paused to light another cigarette, for dramatic effect and whatever infinitesimal good the extra minute's healing time would do. Maybe he should start carrying lucifers for times when an extra few seconds of posturing were crucial. "Come on in, then. I want everyone to hear this."

The staff of Bloody Vengeance Inc. was assembled in the candlelit front office when he opened the inner door of the crypt: David cool and collected as always, Evie fearful and trying to cover it up with bravado, Elise and Fernando wary, and the new recruits milling nervously in the middle distance. Clem had weekends off, so no airing of dirty laundry in front of the true demons necessary. Spike strode in with all the confidence he didn't feel, folded his arms, hitched one hip up on the reception desk, and stared each pair of golden eyes down, one by one. "Can't leave you lot to your own devices for twenty-four hours before you bollocks it up, can I?"

"Diego said that the Slayer's coming after us," Fernando said, a challenging note in his voice. "What are you gonna — "

"The Slayer," Spike cut him off, "is sticking to our deal. Which means — " He turned a hard look on Evie. "You'd bloody well better hope that Cain's physician is a sodding miracle worker, because the moment he joins the choir eternal, you're dust." Evie wilted. "You want to run, there's the door. But if you run, she'll catch you, and if she catches you, I won't interfere again. Got it?"

Evie swallowed, nodded. Spike's eyes swept the room. "Good. Where's Nadia?"

"Downstairs," David replied.

"Get her."

He waited while Fernando went to fetch her up, ash accumulating at the end of his cigarette. "Right then," he said, when the miscreant had been deposited unceremoniously at his feet. "You bloody moron. You didn't kill the berk, did you? So what the fuck did you break and run for?"

Nadia glared. "They — the Slayer was gonna — "

With an impatient growl, Spike reached down and yanked her upright. "Trump something up and stake the lot of you regardless? For fuck's sake, if she wanted to stake you, she wouldn't bother with a trial first!" Stubbing his cigarette out on the desktop, he got to his feet and started to pace, prowling the length of the crypt and back. "Let me explain the situation, in words small enough that the best and brightest among you may be able to translate into grunts and hand signals for the rest. Angel's
lost the plot, gone barking, two cards short of a full deck. Dunno if he's misplaced his soul or not, and it doesn't matter — he's wedged it into his pointy Neanderthal skull that he's the second bloody coming of Aurelius, or something equally barmy. Any of you possess enough long-term memory to recall what he was like the last time he got ambitious?"

Uneasy murmuring and jostling of shoulders confirmed that they did. "He's already sending out scouts. Snaffling up the vamps he thinks are worthy of his exclusive little Aurelian club. That's why you're here, innit?" He indicated the new recruits — bugger, what were their names? Diego, Thingy, and Wossit? — and garnered a few tentative nods. "Thought so. We've been pissing around gearing up for a cattle raid from the locals, but that's nothing compared to what's coming. Soon as Angel gets his house in order down in L.A., he'll come marching up here trailing Armageddon in his wake, looking to go two rounds out of three with the Slayer."

More uneasy murmuring. Spike braced himself; this was where he really had to sell it. Bully, brag, and bribe in equal measure. "Yeah, you heard me. There's gonna be war. But it's not going to be on his terms. Slayer's doing some recruiting of her own as we speak. We'll have allies, strong ones." *I hope.* "Insults aside, I hired you lot because you're smarter than the usual run of stake fodder. And we're not the only vamps in Sunnydale, are we? You think that any of the other gang bosses are happy about the prospect of Angelus prancing in here and taking away our town? If we move fast, we can hit him now, low and hard, and catch him with his knickers round his ankles, before he can raise and train enough fledges to have the numbers on us. We'll bloody well show him who's worthy!"

David's eyes glittered in the uncertain light of the candle-flames, and his face was strangely eager. "Do you seriously believe that you can convince Amherst or Nguyen to follow your lead?"

"Won't know till I try," Spike shot back. It occurred to him that in a way, this was what David had been urging him to do all along. Well, balls to that; there was no way in hell he was going to nursemaid Sunnydale's entire vampire population once this immediate threat was disposed of. He might have conceded to a perverse yen for companionship, but a chap could be a bit more selective than that. "They won't get a better offer from Angelus, that's for bloody certain. And you know as well as I do that His Nibs doesn't look kindly on neutral parties."

He vamped out and bared his fangs in a savage grin. "Now, if you'd rather turn tail and run, as I said, the door's that way. Just keep in mind that once you leave, you're fair game for whoever catches you first. If it's the Slayer, she'll just kill you. If it's Angelus...." He let the sentence trail off with a suggestive lift of one eyebrow. "So what do you say?"

The rest of the minions exchanged looks, jostling one another, and behind them their shadows leaped and danced across the crypt walls. Spike figured he had about a fifty percent chance of convincing them; they weren't fighters, this lot, and right now it could go either way. Then David smiled a tight, economical smile, as if he had a ration of good cheer he didn't want to squander too quickly. "I see no reason to terminate my employment with Bloody Vengeance Inc. at this point." A second later, Evie took a step forward.

"I'm in," she said, jaw clenched. "I served under that dickhead once, and I'm never gonna do it again. This is my town and I'm sick and fucking tired of running away."

"Me too," said one of the new recruits. Points for Wossit, Spike thought. Make a note. Fernando and Elise were nodding, and the rest of the newcomers, and Nadia —

"No," she said, backing towards the door. "The only reason I signed on with you was to keep Denny safe. He's gone. I quit. I'm out of this dump." She spat in disgust. "Have fun kissing the Slayer's ass, all of you."
"Your loss," Spike drawled. "Don't let the door smack your bum on the way out." Nadia stalked out, lip curled and her narrow shoulders twitching, and Spike watched her go. Pity. She'd been a decent worker. The moment she cleared the outer door, "Elise, Fernando, I believe we've got a trespasser on the premises. Deal with her, won't you?"

Elise grinned, fangs lengthening. "Anything you say, Boss." She and Fernando vanished, and a second later, a scream pierced the darkness, and abruptly choked off.

"For a second I thought you were going to let her go," David murmured.

Spike leaned back against the nearest desk, arms folded across his chest, trying to determine if he felt any other sort of pity or not. On the whole, he decided, not. Which was also a relief of sorts. God, he was tired. Let Buffy be waiting for him at home, was all he asked. "When she could trot off to Amherst, or worse, Angelus, and tell them everything? Not bloody likely. I may be working with the white hats, but I'm not completely daft."

One corner of David's mouth twitched upwards in the barest hint of an approving smile. "Good to know," he said. "Good to know."

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Trudging towards Willy's place on her wild Finn hunt, Buffy marshaled her arguments — Hey, Riley, remember my other vampire boyfriend? The one you turned yourself into a human pincushion to 'understand'? Between Giles's unexpected visit and Spike's shenanigans, she'd managed to keep herself too busy to really think about what might be going on with Angel. No, Angelus. Because he had to have lost his soul, no matter what Spike thought. There wasn't any other explanation. She wouldn't let there be.

Angelus wasn't the most powerful foe she'd ever faced. Glory, the First Evil, Adam, the Mayor, heck, even the Master... powerwise, they all left Angelus in the dust. But none of them had been so... personal. Her brain did a half-twist every time it skirted close to what Anya hadn't said, the unasked question on everyone's lips: How long is it going to take you to kill him this time? She shivered, though it wasn't really that cold.

Her boots were already crunching on the cracked asphalt of Willy’s parking lot, and she could barely remember how she'd gotten there. When she reached for the tarnished brass of the door handle, it jerked away from her fingers, and she was face to face, or more accurately face to collarbone, with Sam Finn. Absorbed in the screen of her comm unit, Sam didn't even notice her, and only Slayer reflexes prevented a sitcom-level collision.

"No, sir." Sam sounded nervous. Jittery even. Watching a five foot eleven Amazon jitter was an educational experience. "You know how unreliable the equipment's been lately. I'm sure he just got held up. Of course, sir. I'll let you know as soon as I do." She flicked the comm off with a worried frown, and registered at last that she'd almost trampled someone underfoot. "Buffy. Sorry, I'm on duty. Is there something you needed?"

"Since you mention it, yes." Buffy fell in beside her with an undignified little half-skip to keep up with the taller woman's stride. Where was Riley? "That case Spike went to L.A. about has blown up in the worst possible way, and I was hoping I could count on your team for backup."

Sam raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "In L.A.? I think you're forgetting we're not free agents here. We can't just go AWOL on a whim." Acid tinged her voice. "Particularly when we're way behind on our collection schedule because the instruments have been so wonky."
Crappity doo dah. Whatever potato salad and charades had done in the way of converting Sam to Team Demons Yay!, Spike going into asshole mode and roughing Riley up had thoroughly undone it. In retrospect, maybe she should have gone with the little quiche things. "But Riley's in command of this mission, right? He can, like, improvise if the situation changes? And believe me, it's changing. If I can just talk to him — "

"He's not available at the moment." Sam marched over to her car, parked in the island of light from the single streetlamp overlooking the parking lot. Buffy had an odd flash of deja vu as Sam wrenched the door open and swung inside, shoving the key into the ignition as if it were a stake going into a vampire's heart. Well, of course; it was the same white Neon she and Riley had arrived at the party in.

The car's headlights blazed to light, illuminating the dingy houses across the street, bare yards and suspicious eyes peering at them from behind drawn curtains. Suddenly it all clicked. "You don't know where he is," Buffy challenged.

For a second she thought Sam was going to deny it, but then the other woman's head fell and her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "He's going to get us both court-martialed if — " Sam shook her head in frustration. "If it was just between us, that would be one thing. But it's affecting the mission, and I can't — I can't keep making excuses for him." She added, almost too low to hear, "I wish he'd just talk to me, you know?"

Buffy felt a pang of unwilling sympathy. "He does kind of have a strong silent fetish. Granted, after living with Spike, sometimes a strong silent type would be a relief." Through the window, she caught a glimpse of the comm unit Sam had tossed to the seat beside her, displaying a street grid devoid of targets either friend or foe. Riley didn't have a chip in his head, so no way Tara's spell could be affecting him. He must have turned his GPS off deliberately. Slayer intuition or just the Buffy kind, she learned to trust it over the years. "I know where he is. And I'll bet I know why. I saw this car leaving a motel on Lincoln a few days ago, and I'm pretty sure patrolling wasn't involved." Technically, she was betraying a confidence here, but at this point, surely Sam had a need to know? "When you got married, Riley did tell you about his, um, experimental phase with vampires?"

"Yeah." Sam threw the car into gear (of course she knew how to drive stick). "But I'd swear he was clean. He's not showing any of the signs. No lethargy, no anemia. And a vamp bite's not like a needle track — you can't hide it between your toes."

"He might be mixed up in something... normal," Buffy ventured. "Gambling, or, or reefer madness. But — " She remembered the mystery stalker on their earlier patrol, the one with the girly shriek. "But either way, skipping out on you... that's pretty serious, right?"

Sam's lips pursed as if she'd bitten into a lemon. "The Army frowns on that sort of thing, yeah."

"So if I help you make sure that his superiors don't find out about this, will you at least come hear me out about the L.A. deal?"

There was an increasingly fraught silence. Narrowed eyes. Possibly the theme music from *High Noon* playing in the background. "Are you blackmailing me, Summers?"

"No! I mean... yeah, I kind of am." This was necessary, Buffy told herself sternly. Skeevy, but necessary skeeve, and it wasn't like she hadn't stolen, lied, and killed in the service of the greater good before. "Look, I don't have time to strand you on a desert island and win your trust with seaweed, or whatever. I have an incredibly dangerous situation in L.A. that I have to stop right now, and I need your help. I'd love it if you volunteered that help, but if you won't, well, you'll thank me
when the world doesn't end." She looked Sam in the eye. "That's the stick. Here's the carrot. I've been thinking about your 'mission,' and I think someone's decided to reboot Maggie Walsh's original project, the one she had before she took stupid pills and started building Adam. Remote-control vampire soldiers, right? Or something really close to it?"

"That's above my pay grade." Sam's poker face was good, but not quite good enough.

"I can get you volunteers. To test the Chip 2.0 I'm sure someone's working on right now." Ideas half-formed since her earlier talk with Spike crashed into each other, faster than her words could keep up. "The vampires who live off the bite junkies — they kill people sometimes, but it's mostly by accident. It's bad for business. Offer them something that would keep them from killing off their clients and keep me off their backs? At least some of them would go for it. Plus there's a minion of Spike's who, uh, might be interested."

"That's...a very interesting offer," Sam said slowly. She sounded as if she were considering it seriously, at least. "But I'm a little surprised that you're OK with this."

"I am a million miles from OK with it," Buffy shot back. "I think it's a terrible idea. But it's not like I can stop the Army from trying it, and I need your help. So if you help me, and I help you, and in the process, I'm in a position to do something when your black ops remote-control-vampire project goes completely haywire? I'm calling it a win."

Sam's appraising look went on several minutes longer than Buffy was comfortable with. "You're a lot more... practical than Ri thinks you are," she said at last. "I suppose living with a vampire will do that to you. But I'm more practical than he thinks I am, too. You've got a deal. Now get in the goddamn car and tell me where to find Riley."

Practical. Sam was right; living with a vampire was a series of carefully negotiated compromises, and occasional knock-down drag-out fights, on both sides. It was too late to worry about slippery slopes now; she was already slaloming down an ethical black diamond run with only one ski. But at the foot of the hill, they were more to her side of the middle than Spike's, weren't they?

God, she hoped so. Buffy got in the goddamn car.

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A few bland, modern Best Westerns had infiltrated the ranks, but most of the motels along Lincoln were little 50s and 60s-era bungalows ranging from kitschy to dilapidated. At the Desert Palms, a neon golfer swung his flickering club beneath an electric palm tree, while glowing red and blue letters advised travelers that AIR CONDITIONING was theirs for the asking. A dozen cabins in various shades of peeling pastel paint horseshoed around the pool, and queen palms leaned at crazy angles overhead, their shaggy heads swaying slightly in the February breeze. California Gothic. If only, Riley thought, he had a pitchfork.

"It's not like I'm asking for much!" Harmony pouted. She wriggled across the bed towards him, trying for sweet reason, vampire style. "I don't know why you're making this so difficult. I mean, she totally dumped you for Spike, didn't she? I'm giving you an opportunity for revenge. You should be happy! Just kill the Slayer for me, and I'll be out of your life, and SaMANtha doesn't need to know a thing." Her voice modulated from whine to wheedle. "Please? For me? You know she never understood what you needed like I do, baby."

"For the last time, I'm not killing Buffy!"

Harmony broke into a flirtatious grin. "If that's the last time, then if I ask you tomorrow you'll say
The idea that this creature understood him on any level was sickening, moreso because her insistence wasn't completely delusional. They really had shared something that night in Mexico. The raw need he'd once spoken of to Buffy, yeah, but something beyond that: a moment when she'd made him laugh, and for an instant broken him out of the prison of his own regrets. But one moment couldn't erase what she was, and he wasn't going to let it erase who he wanted to be. This was the last time she was going to drag him to one of these sordid rendezvous. Tonight he was going to man up and kill her. Absolutely, positively —

A boot hit the door with a resounding crash, snapping the flimsy lock and sending it slamming inward. His wife stood framed in the doorway, a Kevlar-clad Fury with bared teeth and blazing eyes. Buffy was barely visible behind her, standing on tiptoe in a vain attempt to see around Sam's shoulder. Panic warred with a strange sense of calm – he was screwed, but at least the agonizing fear of discovery was over.

Harmony's china-doll eyes went wide. "The Slayer! She's found me!" She flung herself at Riley, entwining him like an undead boa constrictor. "Riley, punkin, save me!"

Riley staggered under the onslaught – she wasn't that heavy, but she'd caught him off-balance, her dead (literally) weight hanging from his neck. One flailing arm caught the back of the crappy motel chair, which snapped off and sent both of them tumbling to the floor. Harmony's wails intensified to supersonic proportions as she realized that she was surrounded by a spinney of splintered chair-rungs. She leaped away as if Riley were a hot crucifix and dove behind the bed, raising her hands in a not terribly convincing Michelle Yeoh imitation. "You'd better just watch it, Slayer! I've been taking tae kwon do lessons!"

"Harmony? Why are you even in Sunnydale?" Buffy sounded affronted by Harmony's existence. "Your sister said you were working for a law firm in L.A.!!"

"A person's allowed to come home for Christmas, aren't they?" Harmony sniffed.

"It's February!"

The epic confrontation of Harmony and her nemesis took an abrupt back seat to Sam's epic confrontation with him. Sam stood over him, every line of her body sketched in cold fury. He'd seen her this angry before, but never at him. "What the hell is going on here?"

Riley gulped air through his bruised windpipe. "It's not what it looks like! I can explain — " He could pour out words from now till eternity, and there would still be no explanation he could give her, or himself, that would make his presence in this room comprehensible. "She's been trying to blackmail me. I'm sorry, I thought — I thought I could get rid of her. I was going to do it tonight, I swear." Wretchedly, he hung his head. "God, Sam, you were my new clean start. I never wanted you mixed up in...." He waved a hand at the squalid little room. "This."

"God damn it, Ri," said Sam. She wasn't crying, too mad for that, but the hurt in her words was a palpable thing. "I'm not your fucking fresh start, I'm your wife! Why the hell didn't you tell me what was going on? That's been the worst part. I couldn't believe you'd be involved in anything so terrible you couldn't talk to me about it." She nodded at Harmony, a freezing contempt in her eyes. "Did she bite you?"

"No!" Riley spat out the word like poison. But that wasn't strictly true, and he had to come clean here, or he was doomed. "Not recently. Once. Before I met you."
"Like I would." Emboldened by the fact that she hadn't been dusted immediately, Harmony straightened up, brushed splinters from her skirt, and attempted hauteur. "I only bite people who ask me very nicely now. It's way tidier. No gross smelly corpses to clean up in the morning. Besides, Mr. Amherst gets me real imported sea otter. He knows how to treat a lady, unlike some bleached-blond jerks I could name. I haven't bitten one single person in Sunnydale, so if Buffy stakes me she's broken her own stupid rules. So there."

"You just asked Riley to kill me!" Buffy exploded.

Harmony rolled her eyes. "But I didn't try to kill you myself. Besides, we're nemesises. It's what we do." A malicious smile lit her flawless face. "If you're just getting your jollies by harassing all of Spike's old girlfriends when they hit town, you'd be better off going after Droodzilla than me."

"What?" Buffy raised her stake in surprise, and Harmony backed up against the wall with an eep. "Drusilla's in Sunnydale? Tell me about it, or I'll make the maid's job a lot harder."

"She was in town," Harmony clarified. Sullen, she looped one golden curl around a finger. "The other night. And she had some new English boy-toy in tow. They stopped by Mr. Amherst's lair to pay respects. I think she was trying to make Spike jealous, making a big splashy kill in his territory, but since he was out of town, they left."

Riley could see where this was headed. Of course. Fob the blame due to Spike off on some convenient out-of-towners, and the vampire would come out of this smelling like roses, while Riley Finn ended up reeking of what they grew in. Not that it wasn't his own fault for not staking Harmony when she'd first started stalking him. "How do you know they'd made a big splashy kill?"

"Because the blood was splashed all over them, duh! And she was babbling about it, till the boy-toy made her shut up." Harmony sniffed. "He was all about this grody old handbag they'd stolen. He tried to convince Mr. Amherst that it was some kind of big deal, but there are some styles that never come back in." She gave Buffy's outfit a once-over. "As you should know. Are you going to let me go now?"

"Leave Riley alone from now on," Buffy said, voice hard. "Or I'll forget how many people you haven't bitten, and remember the ones you have. Now get out. Oh, and tell your sugar daddy that Spike's going to have a proposition for him soon, and it's to everyone's advantage if he accepts."

"Fine," muttered Harmony. She edged around the end of the bed, keeping a wary eye on both Buffy and Sam — he, apparently, didn't rate — and flounced out through the remains of the door with head-toss and a disdainful, "Some people can just never be happy for others."

Buffy sighed and turned to face him. Once she would have been the one raging at him, but times, he guessed, had changed; now she was all business. "So. Put that together with the bite mark evidence and Spike's alibi, and are you satisfied he had nothing to do with Robin Wood's death?"

Damn it. He couldn't ignore evidence, no matter how little he liked it. Harmony had no reason to lie to them, not about this. Riley gave a grudging nod. "Yeah."

"Good. Moving on." Buffy nudged the shattered chair with the toe of one boot, suddenly cheerful. "You know, it's actually a good thing that you didn't stake Harmony right away," she said. "Otherwise it might have been a lot harder to clear Spike."

"Don't rub it in," Riley muttered. He straightened, feeling a million years old.

"Riley. Tell me one thing. Why didn't you just stake her?" Sam asked. Her level brown gaze
demanded a straight answer, one that might make or break his marriage. "You must have had opportunities."

Riley took her hands, hoping his grip could convey what his words couldn't. "I was going to. Just before you broke in." And a hundred times before that. She had to realize he meant what he said, had to hear the sincerity, the misery in his voice, didn't she? "God's honest truth, Sam? I don't know. I wanted to, half a dozen times. I just... something always made me hold back." He trailed off with a helpless shrug. "It's not because I don't love you. If you don't believe another word I say, you've got to believe that."

"I know why." The last thing he wanted right now was sympathy from Buffy, and he was living in an Alanis Morissette song, because she was probably the only person who could give him any. "Just once, you looked into her eyes, and saw someone. Maybe only for a second, but you can't unsee it. You can't slay a someone. You can only kill them, and that's... so much harder." She looked at Sam. "Mrs. Finn, your husband couldn't stake her because, well, he's a fundamentally decent person when he's not being a macho idiot." Riley didn't dare look to see if his wife's expression had softened. Buffy went on, "You just have to remember that in Harmony's case, she was an evil, vicious, supremely annoying person —"

"I have super hearing, Slayer!" a distant, aggrieved shout came from outside. "And I am not annoying!"

Buffy snorted. "Like I said. Come on, let's go."

Thankfully, Harmony was gone by the time they headed for the car; Riley insisted on paying the night clerk for the damage to the room before they left. He glanced ruefully at the wrecked cabin as they walked to the car; could he justify putting this on the Army's tab as collateral damage in a hostile-tracking exercise? Probably not. Sam's back was military-stiff as she strode out of the manager's office ahead of him. Her look told him this wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. But she was a professional, and so was he, and they had work to do. She'd hold back until they were alone. He clenched his jaw in resolve; he could never allow this to happen to him again. Whatever weakness in his psyche had led him to this night, he'd root it out, starve it, make certain it never had a chance to bring him this low again. And like it or not, it wasn't his wife who could show him the first step. "How the hell do you do it, Buffy?" he asked, as Sam went round to the driver's side of the car to unlock the doors. "How can you put Spike in one box, and all the other vamps you stake without a second thought in another, and keep them there? Keep them from... bleeding over?"

In the glow of the neon palm tree, her smile was small and sad and one hundred percent Slayer. "I can't."

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Spike was waiting for her on the porch when Buffy got home, smoking a cigarette. He'd been there long enough to scrub up and change – instead of looking like an undead raccoon who'd been run over by a semi, he looked like an undead raccoon after a three-day bender.

"The Finns are right behind me," she said. "Is everyone else here?"

Spike snorted. "In body if not in spirit." He pitched his butt into the roses and followed her in.

Once inside it was obvious what he meant by that. Willow had made coffee, but caffeine seemed likely to just make everyone crankier faster. Giles was jet-lagged, Dawn was falling asleep, and Kennedy eyed Giles as if she expected him to sprout horns and start seducing her to the demon side
of the Force. Buffy had no idea what was going on with Anya and Xander, but the cold shoulder Anya was giving him could have generated enough snow for Mammoth Mountain to open a month early. Riley and Sam, when they entered a minute later, were unnaturally expressionless and polite. Tara had retreated to the kitchen under the guise of assembling snacks. And Spike hadn't even bothered goading the others into fighting for his amusement, which was a measure of how tired he had to be.

Taking up her very best inspiring-Slayer-speech stance in front of the fireplace, Buffy sensed rather than saw Spike glide in behind her, propping himself against the mantelpiece at her shoulder. A fraction of the tension within her eased. If nothing else was going right, at least she had him back at her side, and he was keeping the jealous vampire crap to a minimum. "First order of business," she said, her briskness only a little forced. "Agents Finn and Finn have agreed to help us out with our current problem, and — " she shot a questioning look at Spike, who nodded, "and we'll have some help from Spike's crew, too.

"So let's sum up. The Watcher's Council tried to make a Slayer army, and ended up with an unusually-athletic-teenaged-girl army instead. Kendra's old Watcher thinks they're going to try to erase their mistake lethally. Angel's lost his soul, and he's up to something in L.A. He's turned Wesley into a vampire — " Anya shrugged, and Giles, Willow and Xander made pro forma murmurs of dismay, but everyone else exchanged blank looks; Wesley Wyndam-Pryce was ancient history so far as Sunnydale was concerned. " — and sent him and Drusilla to Sunnydale to kill Nikki Wood's son and steal the magical Slayer doojiggy he was bringing us. According to Kendra's old Watcher, said doojiggy was designed to boost a Slayer's power, and therefore," she took a breath, "We head up to L.A. ASAP, put Angel's soul back, and use the doojiggy to repair Kennedy and her not-quite-Slayer pals back home. Neither easy nor peasy, but at least it's uncomplicated. I like uncomplicated." She couldn't entirely keep the savage out of the satisfaction in her voice. "And if Travers tries a final solution on a few dozen full-powered Slayers, he'll deserve whatever he gets."

"B-but what does Angelus want with something that makes Slayers stronger?" Tara blurted out. Everyone turned to look at her, and she flushed. "It's just... we think he sent Drusilla and Mr. Wyndam-Pryce here to steal it, right? So he must have found out about it before we did, and wanted it for something."

Willow's porcelain brow wrinkled. "Giles, do you think he knows about the Council's problem?"

"Unlikely," Giles said. "It's a closely-guarded secret. Bernard Crowley did live in Los Angeles, and he's recently disappeared, so it seems logical that Angel learned of the artifact from him somehow. It's conceivable that he simply wants to keep it out of our hands, but we can't discount the possibility that he has some other purpose for it. There must be a reason Quentin Travers and his predecessor were content to let Crowley hide it away for thirty years."

Buffy tried to curb her impatience. All of that was irrelevant, if only.... "And if we put Angel's soul back, we can just ask him. Will, what's the outlook on the resouling front?"

Willow's shoulders hunched in apology. "Partly cloudy, at best. We have the revised Ritual of Restoration I made last year. Since I can't put the pow in that kind of power any more, I was thinking I could adapt the ritual for a whole coven, which would split up the power requirements. That's going to take a good solid week of book-hitting, minimum, and also? We don't have a coven. Or an Orb of Thessulah, but Anya's looking for one." She made an unhappy gesture with one hand. "Basically? It's doable, but not quickly."

Her heart sank. A week. Maybe longer. How many people could Angelus kill in a week? She'd always tried to avoid thinking about that, back in the bad old days. She couldn't snap at Willow; that
 wasn't fair. One way or another, Angel had always been her problem. Even if it was Willow's own fault she was all powerless now, when they really needed a soul pulled back from the aether. But Willow knew that as well as she did, and looked miserable enough about it.

Tara's eyes were glued to the toes of her ballet flats. "I — I'm willing to try — "

For a second hope flared, bright and treacherous, but then conscience stabbed it in the heart. Anya had been blunt earlier, but she was right: the Ritual was well above Tara's magical weight class, and casting it a second time might destroy her. Losing your magic is as bad as losing your soul, Willow had said once. Worse, because losing your soul doesn't hurt once you've lost it. "No," Buffy said. "No, I can't ask that of you. Will, keep working on it. Until then — "

"Here's a radical thought." Kennedy was on her feet, her whole body a challenge. "We kill him. What is this, the second or third time this Angel guy's lost his soul? How often does it have to happen before someone decides he's a menace? If Summers here won't do the job, then I will."

"That sounds pretty damned good to me," Sam Finn chimed in. "Why else did you call us in, Buffy, if not for that? I meant it when I said we were behind on our collection schedule. If we divert to L.A. to help you now, we're gonna need an awfully convincing reason to hand the brass back home."

Gah, if she was going to compromise her morals and blackmail people, couldn't they at least have the consideration to stay blackmailed? Every minute they sat here and argued was a minute more when Angel (no, Angelus) could be out doing — things she wasn't going to think about. "Fine. I can talk to some people who can talk to some other people, and you'll get your subjects, all of them." Buffy carefully avoided looking in Tara's direction.

"Of course, all of those people will be way more willing to talk to each other if I can guarantee them that the chips will be removed before they start frying brains, and that the owners of the brains will be released unharmed."

Sam looked unconvinced. "You know damned well that some of these demons are killers — "

"Then I'll kill them," Buffy snapped. "After they're de-chipped. My demon street cred's built on the fact that I keep my word. Even to killers." She looked around the room. "If we can't put Angel's soul back right away, we'll take him prisoner and keep him locked up until we can. Anyone else have objections to the plan?"

"Love," Spike said with reluctant determination, "I'm not convinced he's lost it. He kept going on about how he was beyond good and evil, and in my experience, it's only punters with a guilty conscience stashed away somewhere do that." He looked at her, that desperate thirst for understanding in his eyes. "And soul or no soul... is he trying?"

"Et tu, Spike? Maybe it was a good sign for his moral development that he was willing to argue with her like this, but right here, right now, it was like a knife in the back. With equal reluctance, Xander said, "Buffy, you know I love you to pieces." He wouldn't meet her eyes, and Buffy's stomach sank under the weight of dread — a part of her had been waiting for this all along. "But I'm with Sam and Kennedy and God help me Spike on this one. How many times can we go through this? We need some other plan besides sticking another psychic band-aid on Angel's gaping metaphysical chest wound."

Buffy could feel the heat spreading over her cheeks and the tips of her ears flaming. There were words boiling up like magma in her throat, unforgivable words about "Kick his ass," and the hypocrisy of certain vampires who were willing to go all out to save their undead BFFs and not her undead exes, but before she could say anything they'd all regret, Tara stood up.
"Wait.." Her voice was squeaky with nerves. "There's something I could try. A sort of variation on a location spell. It could tell us whether Angel's soul is in the aether or not. That would give us something solid to go on, right?"

And she was saved. Buffy took a grateful breath. "Yes. Please. How long will it take?"

Tara looked flustered, as if she hadn't expected Buffy to take her up on it. "Um. Not long, if we can find the components. Do you h-have anything that used to belong to Angel?"

Buffy shot a dire look at Spike, who jammed his hands into his pockets and looked mulish. "As a matter of fact, I do. Just a minute." She dashed off upstairs. On her dresser was her jewelry box, one of the few things her father hadn't packed off to Goodwill when she'd been dead. Mainly because Dawn had saved it. And in the jewelry box... she never wore it any longer, but she'd never been able to bring herself to get rid of it, either.

A few minutes later she descended the stairs once more, a silver cross on a delicate chain in one hand. She held it out to Tara. "I don't think it belonged to Angel for long, because really not his style, but he did give it to me." She bit her lip. "Will it work? What else do you need?"

Tara took the necklace, the sinuous links pooling in her hand. "We can try. Okay, I need an assaying scale, a feather, a rock — granite would be good, or basalt...."

Dawn and Willow scurried off to find the necessary items. Buffy watched, arms folded and face stony, as the spell took shape: A pigeon feather in one tray, a stone from the Summers' garden on the other, a circle of candles around them, and the necklace dangling pendulum-fashion over the whole thing, suspended from a hastily-procured wire CD rack.

Tara knelt on the carpet before the table, lighting the candles one by one, widdershins. "The feather represents the aether," she said, at Buffy's questioning look. "The stone represents the earthly sphere. If I were trying to do this for Spike, it would just spin around and go nowhere, because his soul's not in either place. But if Angel's lost his soul, the necklace will be pulled towards the feather; if not, towards the rock." The last candle lit, she closed her eyes and laid both hands flat on the table. "Powers of the East, heed me. I, Tara Maclay, call upon you. Heed me, hear me, in the name of Osiris, who walks in the land of the living and the land of the dead; in the name of Persephone, born of spring and wed to winter..."

She could still hear the echo of his voice in her dreams, sometimes, so like Angel, and yet so unlike: Take all that away and what's left? Buffy forced her muscles to relax. She knew which direction the pendulum would swing.

Didn't she?

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Angel floated towards consciousness like a man rising from deep water, for a moment suspended between the artificial rapture of the drugs and the unceasing torment of the soul (in its way, just as artificial, wasn't it? Imposed from without rather than arising from within?) For that moment, neither Angel nor demon, just a guy whose father had named him Liam, and who the hell was that anymore, really? Angel was a construct, but you couldn't build without raw material; surely that must mean he had the makings of a good man in him, somewhere.

It was just so much more fun to be a bad one.

Hand on his shoulder, shaking. "You awake yet? Sheesh, what's a guy got to do to get a prophecy
fulfilled around here?"

Hospital scents flooded Angel's lungs as he inhaled. Right. He was back at the clinic again, swaddled in clean white sheets, his chest banded in fire where they'd sliced him open a second time. No restraints this time. His arms felt like lead, but when he managed to get them moving, his probing fingers found the rim of a small plastic port set between two ribs on his left side, just below the pectoral muscle. He had a vague memory of Doctor Gregson explaining his plans for modifying the Doximal pump just before he'd gone under; that had to be for the refills.

The doctor was nowhere to be seen now. Hovering at his bedside was a ferrety little man with an impatient expression on his all-too-familiar face. "Whistler. Get lost."

"You remembered," the little man said. "I'm touched."

"Sure and I'm the one who's touched if I fall for your bullshit a second time." Angel tried to sit up, and thought better of it. Even vampire healing had its limits. "You've got nothing I want. The last time I got a taste of humanity I couldn't spit it out fast enough."

"Hate to break it to you, but once the Rosenberg chick got a soul, the Shanshu Prophecy went up for grabs, and to be honest, your chances aren't looking too good." Whistler pulled up a chair and sat down. "But that's old news. I hear you've come into possession of a little doo-dad the Watcher's Council had squirreled away."

How the hell had Whistler come to know about the shadowcaster? Angel studied that deceptively human face, but the little shit had no tells. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, you do." Whistler leaned back in his chair and shoved his hands into his trousers pockets. "The shadowcaster's powerful, but its application is what you might call limited. Only a Slayer can use it, and the Council's been too chickenshit to let that happen for the last few centuries." He cocked an eye at Angel from beneath the brim of his hat. "Go on. Ask me why."

Angel's lip curled in a derisive smile. "If you're trying to convince me that it's too dangerous to use..."

"Would I do that to the guy who unleashed Acathla? Far from it. I'm trying to convince you that whatever you've got planned for it is thinking too small." The little man extended both hands, framing an imaginary picture. "Mauritania, 1685. Arab invaders had raised an army of djinn, and the Watcher on-site made a judgement call. The Slayer — her name was Nkiruka — used the shadowcaster and gained incredible power. She allied with the local obeyifo leader to send the djinn packing. On the eve of the final battle, her Watcher wrote his last letter, describing the happy couple: 'On the battlefield, they are without Peere, and the Djinni scatter before them as Leaves before the Wynd. It is said that in the Heat of their Paffion they glow, as doth an Ember plucked from the Fyre, and I fear that in my Haste to avert this Disafter, I have unloosed a far Greater Ill upon the world.'"

"When Council Headquarters finally got that letter, thirty Watchers offed themselves inside a week rather than face what they thought was coming." Whistler's tone had turned ghoulish. "Premature, the way it turned out. Nkiruka and the vampire she allied with both died in the final battle."

Angel bit back his sarcastic retort before it could form. Whatever else you could say about the Watchers' Council, they weren't prone to mindless panic. It occurred to him that maybe it would be to his benefit to play Whistler's game for a while. The fact was, he didn't have a real plan for the shadowcaster yet, and Crowley's untimely death had derailed his attempts to learn more about it. Whistler obviously had inside information, maybe even more than the old Watcher had possessed. "So this thing supercharges a Slayer. Fine. But even a supercharged Slayer's only one girl. What's
Whistler was watching him intently now. "There's a prophecy. One as old as the universe itself. They say that about all the prophecies, but anyway, it's old. A Slayer and a vampire — an extraordiary Slayer and an extraordinary vampire — will come together and give birth to a new world. A world that will supplant this one, like a chick hatching from an egg, and sweep this tired old place away like the failed experiment it is. Buffy's not the first Slayer to cozy up to the undead. Common it ain't, but it happens. Raises a warning flag. Add the shadowcaster into the mix, and you've got metaphysical dynamite." He leaned back in his chair. "You tried to destroy the world once, sure. But any dope with a hammer can smash something. What do you think about remaking it instead?"

That wasn't what he'd expected to hear. Angel quashed an unwilling spark of interest. He didn't like to admit, even to himself, that Lawson's jibes had hit a nerve, but perhaps it was time he started thinking about a larger canvas. "I don't think you'd like a world made in my image."

"Not just your image. You provide only one half of the balance. Buffy Summers provides the other. Honestly, I thought she'd fulfill the prophecy last year when she and Spike fucked the Hellmouth closed. Close, but no cigar. Guess someone wasn't worthy."

That was a transparent attempt at sucking up if he'd ever heard one, but the idea of Spike failing to qualify for anything was really, really goddamn satisfying. "How do you know it wasn't Buffy who didn't make the cut?"

"Let's just say there's this whole Wille zur Macht component somebody's lacking in, and it ain't Summers. Closing the Hellmouth sets her up as a Slayer who's done something no other Slayer has ever done. And you're still the first vampire with a soul — so if you're thinking about getting rid of it on a permanent basis, I'd think twice if I were you. You two, you've got a connection. Fate. Destiny. Whatever. You can't escape it, but you can be its bitch, or its master. Your choice."

He'd have liked to break into incredulous laughter, but it would probably burst his stitches. He really needed some blood, preferably fresh and human. Where was the call button for the nurse? "Just how stupid do you think I am?" Angel asked. "Do you seriously expect me to believe the Powers are behind this?"

Whistler shrugged. "Did I say they were? Look, I've been playing errand boy to the Powers for a hell of a lot longer than you have. Born to it, you might say." A fleeting look of bitterness crossed his face, and Angel stowed it away for future reference. "I've been a good soldier. Followed orders. The needs of the many, etcetera. But we don't have Balance. Not really. We got a teeter-totter, back and forth, nobody ever wins, nobody ever loses, and nothing ever changes." The bitter edge was back. He leaned forward, hands on thighs, intense. "The Powers are all about the status quo. What I'm talking about is a revolution. You claim you're beyond good and evil, so how about putting your money where your mouth is? Whaddaya say, Angel — does godlike power and forging a new universe in the fires of Creation sound like your kind of deal?"

The shark-toothed grin Angel could feel spreading across his face had nothing to do with a Doximal high. "Now that, little man, is a proposition after my own heart."

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As the chant built, Tara felt the energy rise with it, stronger, more complex with every iteration, straining against her as a ridden horse strains against the bit when it desires freedom. This was what she was best at. Spells of communication and finding, spells that made connections. Shooting fireballs and flinging ethereal knives, that was Willow's forte, or had been, but here, in her own
sphere... she was good. She forgot that sometimes. Her mount was high-spirited and willing; her will and her words the rein and saddle, bit and spur which guided it. Tension hummed in the lines; the reins tautened, and she gentled the magics as she'd gentle a fractious horse. With a deep breath she gave the power its head and let it run. Last year a god had ridden her, and she'd learned something from the experience. The plea she issued was no order, but a request. "Where wanders the soul of this man, Liam of Galway?"

There; her mount scented home. Someone, far away, cried, "Look! It's moving!" The power reared, exulting, and the world rushed towards her at a gallop. All of a sudden she was splayed on her knees in the Summers' living room again, gasping for breath against a pounding headache. Thrown. But not before her race was run. Blinking spots from her eyes, Tara looked up to see the necklace standing out at an angle, pulled towards the hunk of river rock from the front yard as strongly as if it were a magnet.

Buffy was staring at it, her eyes haunted, her mouth a forlorn O. "I don't understand," she whispered. "How could he...?" Her voice firmed. "No. There's got to be something else going on. He wouldn't just — he couldn't! We have to get to L.A., now, and find out what's going on."

"Well, if that's the plan, we'd best step lively. I did for a few of Angel's minions while I was up there, but he'll turn more." Spike poked at his ribs, as if testing their readiness to be broken again. "But we haven't even touched on Chase's mad idea for Niblet."

Dawn turned on him, eyes narrowing. "Wait, what?"

"I still vote for dusting him." Kennedy's fists were balled at her sides. "That's the only way to end this for good."

Immediately, everyone was arguing again, auras sizzling with the sickly pea-green of old grudges and half-healed wounds. Tara was too spent and dizzy to keep track of it all. Cold hands took her arm, and for once the inhuman strength in them was a comfort. Willow was helping her to her feet. They'd be warm hands soon enough, Tara promised herself. When this thing with Angel was over.

"You OK, sweetie?" Willow asked, her face a study in pride and apprehension. "That was — wow. The cloaking spell you did on the chip-heads was pretty impressive, but this — this was like a step above anything I've ever seen you do before."

"It's still about two steps below where I need to be." It probably wasn't fair that she listened extra-hard to catch any buried note of envy in Willow's voice, but if it was there, it was buried very deep indeed. Which made her feel relieved, and then feel bad about feeling relieved, and then feel resentful about feeling bad about feeling relieved, and couldn't they just re-set the clock somehow, because she was so tired of everything being so complicated between them? And that made her feel guilty, because things were way more complicated between Buffy and Spike, and Buffy and Angel, and Buffy and just about anyone, really. Her head still hurt. "I don't feel so..."

She almost fell over. Willow caught her and eased her down into the armchair, dabbing a tissue at her face. It came away stained with red. "Your nose is bleeding! Here, sit down and eat something, you need to get your blood sugar up." She regarded the cluster of slightly withered grapes on the snack tray doubtfully. "Fructose is fructose, right? I'll get you some tea."

She dashed off towards the kitchen. Willow fussing. Willow fussing was nice. Concentrate on the nice. Ignore the surreptitious (hungry) looks at your nose blood. Because that's only temporary now. Tara nibbled on a proto-raisin and looked around the living room. Everyone else seemed to have cleared out while she wasn't looking. Spike and Buffy were whispering to one another at the foot of the stairs; Buffy had the expression of someone who was staunchly ignoring every word she was
hearing. After a moment she headed upstairs. Spike sighed and passed a hand over his face. He looked about as bad as she felt.

"You OK?" Tara whispered. "You look a little... roadkill."

Spike's mouth twitched in a half-smile. "Mutual. Piece of advice, pet, just because you can walk through a hail of bullets doesn't mean you should." He leaned against the bannister. "Got what you were looking for, though. The Mohra blood. It's on ice over at the crypt now, any time you and Will want to give it a bash."

"W-what? Really? So soon?" Excitement took fear two falls out of three, and she tried to keep her voice from shaking. She wasn't ready. They hadn't come anywhere near creating a spell to utilize it safely. But, oh, to have Willow back, the real, whole, warm, living Willow — best not put it like that to Spike, though. "I mean, thank you! But, but I thought Mohra demons were really rare?"

One foot on the stairs, Spike shrugged. "Got lucky. I had to break into a demon clinic to fetch antibiotics for Chase — long story, but they had some Mohra blood in storage. Clinic's owned by the same arsehole who busted up the Magic Box, so I figure he owes us."

This probably wasn't the time to argue about Spike's peculiar ideas of retroactive morality. And she didn't really want to, not when the means of restoring Willow was only a hop, skip and a cemetery away. She tottered up out of her chair and pulled the vampire into an impulsive hug, and for a moment the dead-cold-creepiness of him didn't matter at all. Spike froze, and then after a second returned the hug, awkward and one-armed. "Wasn't anything," he muttered.

"It's a lot to me." She let him go before she could do anything really embarrassing and soppy. "How's Buffy?"

Spike grimaced. "You saw. Thing is, even if she's right, there's not just Angel to deal with. Pryce was a hard enough customer when he was human, and Dru's a bloody force of nature. Not to mention he may have turned that Gunn bloke by now. We can't just shove souls into everybody. Not practical."

"I guess not." She couldn't blame Buffy for being willing to try anything to save Angel — hadn't she done the same for Willow? "Isn't there any other way to stop him? Besides the dusty way, I mean?"

He sighed, and headed after Buffy. "You come up with one, pet, we're all ears."

"Here you go," Willow said brightly, emerging from the kitchen with a steaming mug from which wafted the heavenly smell of peppermint. "What are you doing up? You really need to rest. Sit back down and I'll give you a head rub — I warmed up my hands over the teakettle, so no icy finger issues."

Tara allowed herself to be led back to the chair. Willow's hands had already cooled a little, but that was all right. It was only temporary, she reminded herself. Only —

Oh. Oh.

The chill in Willow's hands was suddenly nothing to the ice in her own belly, as Tara realized that the other plan, the alternative, the thing that could potentially fix Angel for good, was sitting in Spike's crypt right now. And all it would take was giving up her heart's desire.
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