House of Women

by nwhepcat

Summary

In the aftermath of another apocalypse, things are shifting for the residents of the Cleveland hacienda. Some go, other new ones come, and some must face shifting roles. A surprising new Slayer joins them, as well as a former Watcher and a newly-minted Guardian.

Notes

Warnings for one scene of unclear consent, one scene of homicidal jealousy (spell-induced), some transphobic remarks from minor characters, demon-summoning, mind fuckery.

Thanks to my readers on LJ, and those who helped me work out the gnarly bits.

"Just when I think it can't get any weirder around here," Rona mutters to Vi. They're at the back of the indoor training area Xander's just finished, starting the tai chi routine, which is a total snore. "Faith goes and brings home that freak. Who the hell's supposed to share a room with him?"

Jenny turns around and glares at her, and Rona gives it right back. That girl's the world's biggest kiss-ass. Watcher's pet. You can't say anything about Xander, and now that he's married Faith, she's off limits, too.
"Xander says Gabriel's a girl," Vi says. "The slayer line chose him."

"Well, who's to say the witch's mojo didn't just screw up the slayer line? She got her big explosion of slayers for the battle in Sunnydale, but maybe it didn't stop there. Maybe in three weeks, everyone's a slayer. Then Andrew can go kill vampires, and we can mince around the kitchen baking cakes." Not that she'll be hanging around here by the end of three weeks. Rona's about ready to resign from the Apocalypse-of-the-Month Club. They've got another tight-assed English guy, the white-haired psychic chick and the hermaphrodite. Seems like a good time to bow out. Preferably before the snow flies.

Vi doesn't answer. They've been tight since Sunnydale, but it's starting to feel like things are shifting. Vi used to agree with her on everything, but now sometimes she lets silence stretch out between them.

"Call me old-fashioned," Rona says, "but my definition of girl doesn't include a dick."

Perfect example. Silence. Stretching out.

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"Hey, Gabe," Yvette says as they're putting on their coats at the end of their shift. "You wanna go grab some pizza or Chinese?"

Gabriel tries not to wince. Yvette's nice enough, but she's been nursing a crush, and it's all too much to deal with right now. "I would, but --" Shit! Why'd I say that? "There's someplace I have to be."

"Oh. Sure." There's a thread of hurt in her voice, and Gabriel knows she wants him to backtrack and say he's really sorry, but he'd love to do it some other night.

But he isn't and he wouldn't and oh yeah, he's not a he. She's crushing over someone who doesn't even exist. Not that Gabriel expects her to figure that out. But it would be easier to have sympathy for her if she could get Gabriel's fucking name right. Nobody uses Gabe but the manager.

(But how weird is it to run across this guy, staggering and stoned to the gills, who saw right through to Gabriel's fucked-up heart? With one friggin' eye, the other one a dark hole in his face? Not only that, but to use the name only Gabriel's sister knew -- not that she understood that it was more than a game. You must be Elizabeth. Glad you could come. It makes her shiver, just thinking about it.)

"Have a good night," Yvette says. She works a little too hard at the breezy -- it comes across more like a gust.

"Hey, you too." Gabriel swings her pack over her shoulder and sets out for the brownstones where Xander and Faith live with all those girls. Girls who had something to do with all that shit at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, which is now mostly in ruins. Girls who came back with dripping swords, their clothes stuck to them with drying blood (only some of it red).

Gabriel had stuck around after Xander's safe return, helping to tend the girls' injuries and clean their weapons. They'd offered her a place to crash for the night and she'd accepted. Xander had offered her more, and she'd had to think about it.

He's asking her to step into a life where some weird suicide cult might kidnap you. Where you need a demon expert who can actually read the collection of musty old books in Latin and Greek and languages Gabriel doesn't even recognize. Where there are people who recognize who Gabriel is
and seem able to deal with it. She's not sure which of these things is more terrifying.

She said she'd think about it, and Xander backed off, but he still comes each morning, sometimes with Faith. It's the routine they've had since he's worked here: If they come together they usually stay, if not, Xander has a coffee and looks over the newspaper, then buys two to go.

He's offered Gabriel an open invitation to dinner at the hacienda, as he calls it. Casual, no pressure, but still scary.

She stands on the sidewalk, gazing up at the blue door in the center brownstone. She's so intent that she's startled when someone walks in front of her. The homely guy in the porkpie hat who comes to Starbucks sometimes. He gets odd looks when he comes in, and the baristas make little comments when he goes, but to Gabriel he's just a New York type. The kind of guy you see near an OTB. Seedy, but harmless.

OTB Guy nods a greeting, and Gabriel offers a "Hey" in return. After the guy passes, Gabriel takes a deep breath, lets it out, then climbs the steps toward the blue door.

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Giles looks up, startled by a knock at his door. It's early for Xander's habitual visit, and he rarely has other visitors at this time of day. He sets aside his book and steps over the Amazon box to reach his door.

He blinks. "Rona." In the months they've been in Cleveland, she has never come to his room. He stares at her stupidly for a moment. "You'd like to see me?"

"Yeah. Now I have. Thanks." She turns to leave.

"Wait. Please. Come in." He opens the door. After a moment's deliberation -- he wouldn't call it hesitation -- she steps inside. "I was surprised, that's all. Would you like some tea?"

"I'm not planning to stay long," she says. She looks around his room, taking everything in.

"Please, have a seat." Giles gestures to the chairs by the fireplace. It's a warm day, probably the last gasp of Indian summer, so the fire is laid but unlit. As they settle into their chairs, he says, "We haven't really had many opportunities to talk."

"You know how life gets. Busy." Her expression offers nothing but a blank wall.

More than blank, of course. Hard. Unyielding. Giles sharpens his attention. "My time is yours. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, really. I'm here because Vi talked me into it. I just came to tell you I'm leaving."

"Leaving?"

"I've been with you for what, six months? And you just noticed we've never had a conversation. Vi and I are good enough to swing a sword, but we're not your favorites. You keep collecting new slayers and crazy priestesses and stray kittens. Stand in line to brush my teeth and pee in the morning, and risk my life at night, and the only time I get a word from you is in the big pep rally before you send us off to fight, maybe die. Fuck that. I get shit from Faith because she doesn't think I'm intense enough. Well fuck that too."

He fumbles with his glasses. "Rona, I don't quite know what to say."
"Say goodbye. That's got as much chance of changing my mind as anything."

"My training -- and I'm not speaking of a few years, but a lifetime of indoctrination -- prepared me for one slayer."

"You should have thought of that before you made a bunch of them, then. Or didn't you think all your extras would live?"

The truth is like a spear through his chest.

"Seems you've got two pet slayers, not just one. So I don't buy the 'I only bond with one' shit."

"Believe me, I made my mistakes with Faith."

"Did you learn from 'em? Enough to bond with the ones you want to." She picks a book off the stack that just arrived from Amazon, a memoir of a transgendered girl. She drops it back onto the pile. "I'm already packed, so I won't be here for dinner."

"Rona, give us another chance." No, that's not right. "Give me another chance. I realize I've failed you. I'm sorry."

"Whatever," she says, and goes. He follows her to his door, but she shuts it behind her, and the next sound he hears is her footsteps on the stairs to the front door.

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Xander's about to knock at Giles' door when it's suddenly wrenched open, and Giles shoulders his way past. "I'm sorry, Xander. Not now." He hurries for the front stairs.

"Not another apocalypse," Xander moans. Giles doesn't put on that kind of speed for anything else. It's really not fucking fair, he's barely gotten over the last one. He follows. "Do we need to saddle up?"

"No, no. It's Rona. She's left. This is my sodding fault."

Not exactly a surprise. Faith and Xander have talked about the girl's perpetual disgruntlement, but neither of them has come up with any kind of solution. "What can I do?"

"I'm going to see if I can catch her. If not, I'll take the car and search the neighborhood. If you'd like to come--"

"Yeah, sure," he starts to say, but Giles opens the front door, catching someone else in the act of lifting a hand to ring the bell.

"Gabriel," Giles says.

"Elizabeth," Xander says at the very same time.

"I'm sorry," Giles says, "but we have a bit of an emergency. Welcome. Xander, you stay."

"You're sure?"

Giles is halfway down the front stoop by now. He flings a hand up in a half wave in answer.

"I'll talk to Vi," he calls after Giles. It takes a moment for Xander to drag his attention back to his new slayer. "It's not usually this chaotic -- well, no, actually it is. It's good to have you here."
"This isn't another one of those end-of-the-world dealies?"

"No. Smaller than that."

Xander's gonna like this kid.

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"The other girls training now," Xander says. "That's where Vi will be. You can come with me, hang out and watch some of the routine while I'm busy."

"Oh." It isn't exactly panic that crosses her face, but close.

"Too much too fast?" The invitation was just for dinner. "You could hang out in the kitchen with Andrew while he cooks."

"I guess it would be fun to watch everyone train," she says.

Xander grins. "He has that effect on everyone. C'mon, then." He turns to show the way.

"Um, wait. Can I--"

"You can hang out in the parlor a while, if that--"

"No, I'd like to go watch. I just -- Could we -- The whole Elizabeth thing."

"Did I freak you out with that?"

"A little. I'm just getting used to the rest of it. And I'm Gabriel at work."

Xander nods. "Things tend to move a little fast around here. I'll dial it back a bit." He leads her toward the training area, but turns back before they enter. "What about 'she' and 'her'?"

"That's all right. It's one of the things I'm getting used to."

"Okay. You've got a standing invitation to talk to me. Especially if you need to tell me something's out of your comfort zone. You're safe here. Uh." Xander scratches behind his ear. "Apart from the vampires and demons and apocalypse cults and zombies, I mean."

Gabriel blinks. "There are zombies?"

"Hardly ever. We haven't seen any in Cleveland yet."

"Holy fuck, Toto."

Xander opens the door to the training space, and sound assaults them. A handful of girls are paired off, the others watching as they fight hand to hand. Space is already tight here. He wonders how many other girls there'll be.

Xander waves Gabriel to a bench. "You can watch from there. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He gestures to Vi on the sidelines, who doesn't look surprised to be called away from the others. "We've got a situation, and I figure you might know something."

She nods. "I guess I do."

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Xander leads Vi to the area he's made his workspace for carpentry. It's the closest thing he has to an equivalent of Giles's fireside space. Now that he's got three slayers, maybe he should work on making something like an office. Then again, this is the place where he feels at home. The smell of wood shavings lingers here, calming him.

He gestures her to his stool. "Have a seat. Seems like you know what's up."

"Do you know why?"

She shrugs. "I know what she was unhappy about."

_Who doesn't?_ Xander thinks sourly, but he squelches that remark. It's not like this is the kind of life everyone wishes for. Rona won the lottery, but not exactly the one she'd probably dreamed about. "Tell me," he says.

"Those things that tore into the Hall of Fame. I guess you never saw them, did you?"

"No." He'd had visions of their coming, but in them he was completely blind. The sound of those visions had given him a sense of the scale, but he couldn't imagine what it would have been like to see them tearing through the skin of the building.

"She doesn't want a life where that kind of terror is business as usual, you know? She thought about leaving after Sunnydale, but I talked her into sticking around. It wasn't so bad until this last thing. Crazy, sometimes, but vampires and that we're used to. This end of the world stuff -- well, who really expects it to be a semiannual event?"

_Xander_ does, but that's just a sign of the life he's been leading these past eight years. "Like the lingerie sale at Dillard's, I know."

Vi gives him a look, and he decides it's an apt time for a sudden coughing fit.

"Yeah, well," he says at last. "That is one of the surprising things about the apocalypse business."

"Plus --"

"What?"

"She didn't feel like we mattered. Buffy and Faith do, but then we came along and we're like the red shirts, ya know? I know things were crazy leading up to Sunnydale caving in, and then right after, but Giles still never felt like our watcher the same way he's theirs. And then the new girls came, and they belonged to you, and there we are, still sort of pointless."

"Wow. Did -- do you know if Rona was planning to say this to Giles?"

Vi's mouth twists. "Did you ever know her to hold back?"

Right. No wonder Giles was so upset. _This is my sodding fault._ She had a point.

"Do you feel the same way?"

She lifts her chin. "Yeah. I kinda do."

"We're going to work on that." He's not exactly sure what that means. Is he taking her on himself? Can he handle three slayers, much less four? "Right now, though, do you know where Rona's
gone?"

"She wanted to go home."

He realizes he doesn't even know where Rona's home is. "Where's that?"

"Baltimore."

"Parents?"

"Her mom. Rona already called and told her she's coming."

"How's she going?"

"Her mom sent her bus fare."

Xander sighs. They should have been on top of this. Sent all the girls back for a visit home after the big Sunnydale apocalypse. Something more than just expect them to give more, with damn little acknowledgment of what they'd already given. They should at least give a girl airfare when she decides she's out of the game.

He flips open his cell, scrolls down to Giles on the speed dial. "Giles, how's it going?"

"Nothing yet."

"She may be at the Greyhound station. But I'm not sure you should go after her. She wants to go home, Giles. We can't, but she can. Maybe we should let her."

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Faith scrubs a towel over her face and slings it around her shoulders, then weaves her way through the girls to where Buffy stands. "Something's going on. Would you take them through the cooldown while I see what I can find out?"

"Sure. Let me know when you find out, will you?"

From the direction Xander took when he led Vi off, she's pretty sure where he is. It's the first place she'd look even if she hadn't seen him go. Faith heads for the workshop and finds him there with Vi. He looks grim; she looks about to cry.

"What's goin' on?"

"It's Rona. She announced to Giles she's leaving. Vi said she's going home to her family. Giles has headed to the bus station to see if he can mend fences, but she has the right to choose."

*The right to choose.* That would be a first. Rona had been there when Buffy and Giles had laid out the Big Mojo they planned and she'd agreed to it, but who's to say a 'no' vote would have counted for anything?

Xander sighs. "Thanks, Vi. You can go, get ready for dinner." As she goes he reaches for the soft whisk broom he keeps by his workbench, and sweeps off his work area. He never even thinks about starting work without doing that, but he also does it when something's bothering him and he needs something to do with his hands.

"So how're you doing with this?" she asks.
"I'm not devastated."

"Could have fooled me."

"Any of the other girls, I would be.\" He shoots a quick look toward the door and lowers his voice.
"Except maybe Vi. They both -- I don't know. They kept themselves apart, didn't really care about the thing we're trying to build."

"So you're upset because you're not more upset."

"Yeah. And I'm upset because of the ripples it might cause in the house, and I'm upset because we didn't notice things sooner."

"I've been watching 'em a while too. Neither one is as intense as I expect. Slayer line's been going a long time, back to when nobody lived all that long. A big crop of potentials is kinda the backup system, I guess. Some of 'em might not be ideal, but if you have an actual apocalypse, you use what's at hand. We forced a bunch of potentials, like hothouse flowers. If we hadn't interfered, they'd be living their lives, most of them not even knowing they're potentials."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm not even sure, babe. I just recently realized all this, that maybe I shouldn't judge them for not being as intense as me and B. But maybe that also means I shouldn't judge if they walk away."

Xander sets the brush aside. "Giles said he keeps making the same mistakes over and over."

She sees part of what upsets him is Giles's distress. But she can't soften this. "He's right, though. He does."

A breath hisses from him. "If Giles can't get this right, how the fuck am I supposed to do this?"

Faith reaches out to brush his hair from his eyes. "You stop believing he's the only one on earth who knows how."

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Everything's unsettled before dinner, in a way Kalindi hasn't seen before. The hacienda is often chaotic, but this is different. People are thrown off balance. She doesn't think it's because of the arrival of Gabriel, the slayer she dreamed about when Xander was missing.

She hopes Gabriel doesn't think so.

As Buffy led them through the yoga stretches at the end of their training session, Kalindi sneaked peeks at Gabriel, waiting on the bench. Back home she wouldn't have considered black pants and a white shirt to be an ambiguous clothing choice, but in the States it is. Her light brown hair reaches her shoulders, and she wears a lot of silver rings on her slender fingers -- the earring she knows about from her dream. Just to look at Gabriel, those are the only cues she'd think of as feminine, and that's as much from her upbringing as anything else. Lots of guys here wear jewelry, even earrings, and long hair.

But when Gabriel moves, that's when there's nothing ambiguous. The graceful movement of her hands when she'd helped Andrew tend the injured the other night. The way she walks, though she doesn't switch her hips like Betty used to, is still somehow female.

As they gather in the dining room, Xander is preoccupied with Buffy and Faith, and Mr. Giles isn't
around. Gabriel hangs back, watchful.

Kalindi knows what this is like, to be new. She also gets that this is about more than being new.

She does what her parents taught her to do whenever she spotted an unfamiliar face at church. She swallows her own shyness and approaches Gabriel. "Hi, Gabriel. I'm really glad you came. Why don't you come and sit by me?"

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There's a kind of buzz humming through the house that takes up everyone's attention, which lets Gabriel slip under the radar. She's actually more comfortable going unnoticed; it's when people pays attention to her that she finds herself in trouble -- at least it's been that way through the last few years of her school career. It has something to do with the older English guy and his abrupt departure.

She drifts up the stairs after everyone and hovers in the entrance to the dining room until the goth girl spots her and comes over to welcome her and invite her to the table. She's Kalindi, she reminds Gabriel, and she calls out to another girl. "Jenny, look, Gabriel's here."

"Oh, hey. A.L. said he invited you to come by some night. So we didn't scare you off with the axes and swords and stuff?"

Nearly, but she's not admitting that. "A.L.?"

"That's what she calls Xander," Kalindi says. "I don't actually know why."

"He pretended he was a baseball scout when I first met him," Jenny says. "He called himself A.L. Harris."

"Are you from here?" Kalindi asks. "We haven't had any local slayers yet."

Gabriel shakes her head. "I moved here a couple of months ago. Because of the dreams. I'm from New York City."

"My parents took me there one spring vacation," Jenny says. "We saw the Mets and Yankees and some Broadway shows. Times Square is a trip."

"It's kind of gotten Disneyfied," Gabriel says. "It used to be pretty skeevy."

"Skeevy?" asks Kalindi. There's something innocent about her vibe -- cornfed, Gabriel's mom might say -- that doesn't go with the goth persona.

"Gross. Kind of sleazy. So where did you come from?"

"Jenny moved from California, and I was in Papua New Guinea. It's near Australia."

"I thought you had some kind of accent, but I couldn't figure it out."

Everyone's standing around the table, but nobody's seated themselves yet. Andrew bustles in with a casserole dish and oven mitts up to his elbow, giving a little of the martyr vibe as he squeezes through to set down the dish. "Oh, Xander got you to come," he says to Gabriel. "I've been wondering if someone would get me some help. It's quite a job, taking care of a house full of women."

Who the hell is he, June Cleaver?
"Gabriel's a slayer, Andrew," Kalindi says. "And it's her first night here, we're not going to make her do dishes."

Xander takes a spot at the head of the table. "I'm not sure when Giles will get back, so let's go ahead. We have a new slayer to welcome. You all remember Gabriel."

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It's not quite the welcome celebration Jenny got, she thinks, or Kalindi after her, because the whole mood is smothered by the news about Rona. Jenny keeps her mouth shut. She doesn't see much reason to miss Rona and her constant bitching and snarking about A.L., but she won't say so.

Vi's the most upset, which is no big shock. Now that Jenny's on it she realizes Vi's been upset for days, but she's kept a lid on it. Of course Rona had shared her secret with Vi -- hell, she probably tried to get Vi to leave with her. Jenny's kind of surprised she didn't. Neither of them did anything without the other. Jenny tries not to wish she had.

A.L.'s upset too. Faith and Buffy are kind of grim, like this is a crisis they'll all get through (but not the end of the world), but A.L. is taking it personally. "Over the next couple of days I want some one-on-one time with everybody. If there's anything else festering under the surface, we need to bring it out. If it's something you can't or don't want to bring up to me, you can schedule it with Giles or Buffy. But it's not optional. It seems like a good time to take everyone's temperature. We've seen a lot of change the last few days, not to mention one of the scarier near-apocalypses, at least personally."

The change is more in theory than reality so far, at least as much as Jenny can tell. The white-haired psychic has come around a few times, but she hasn't been around for these dinners because she's still open for readings down at the Flats, and evenings are her prime working hours. Mr. Wyndam-Pryce has stayed on after the big battle, but Jenny's hardly seen him at all. He keeps his own hours, gets his own meals. She remembers him sprawled on the top floor of the Hall of Fame, under the sacrifice spell. The red slash across his throat, so much blood around him. A flashback to something that really happened; that was the way the spell worked. She'd probably crawl into a cave too, if that had been her.

Mr. Giles comes in halfway through dinner, but all he does is report that he couldn't persuade her to come back, then he retreats up to his room. It's not his announcement that sucks all the remaining air out of the room, but the slump of his shoulders and the flatness of his voice.

"I'm wondering if we should take the night off from patrolling," A.L. suggests once Mr. Giles has left. "Buffy, Faith, what do you think?"

The two veteran slayers look at one another.

"If everyone goes out there this mopey, someone's gonna get killed," Faith says.

"She's right," Buffy says. "And while we all know -- or at least the Sunnydale crew knows -- how much I love a good motivational speech, sometimes you just need to get your mope on. Nothing big is brewing, so what d'you say we send Xander out to buy a few gallons of high butterfat ice cream and we put in a DVD. Whoever wants to deal that way can gather in the living room, but if you need to do your own thing, that's fine. But tomorrow --"

"Tomorrow," Faith intones, "is another fricken day."

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They spend the rest of the meal throwing out suggestions for ice cream flavors and movies, which Xander decides is probably a good idea. Sometimes you just let the leadership go and let teenaged girls be teenaged girls. The movie choices are leaning a little toward the chick flick, so he decides he'll pay a visit to Giles's room while they're watching.

Kalindi jumps up to help Andrew clear the table, and Gabriel rises to help too.

"You shouldn't have to help," Kalindi tells her. "It's bad enough that your welcome dinner was so ..." She trails off, probably trying to come up with something nice to say.

"Depressing?" Xander suggests. "We're totally having a do-over on the welcome party."

Kalindi grabs a stack of dishes and a glass filled with silverware. "Don't feel bad, Gabriel. Xander said the same thing to me."

Xander turns to her. "Did we ever do your real welcome dinner?"

"You got kidnapped. Besides, my original party was fine."

"We need to have a mega-welcome party." As Kalindi follows Andrew down to the kitchen, Xander says to Gabriel, "Sorry tonight was such a downer. You want to stay for movies and ice cream?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You're also welcome to move in. Jenny's parents moved out here to be with her, so she lives with them, but all the other girls are here. If you want to join the happy chaos, let me know. We'd take care of your living expenses, so you could leave your job if you want. The training's pretty time consuming."

Gabriel nods. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to see how things go around here. I've already figured out I'm not your average slayer."

Xander touches her arm, a fleeting gesture. "I'm not sure any woman here is your average slayer. We can take things slow, just know that you're welcome."

"Thanks."

"Hey, A.L."

"Hey, what's up, J.J.? Want to come with me to get the ice cream and movie?"

"Well, I was thinking. The sixth game of the Series is on tonight. Much as I hate to miss out on the bonding, maybe it would be good to watch with my dad. He's been TiVo'ing them for me, but --"

"You could use a little bonding with him, in real time."

"Yeah."

"I think that's a really good idea. I can drop you on the way to get ice cream."

After Jenny says her goodbyes and makes a call to her parents, she and Xander head for the car. She's silent for several minutes, but it doesn't seem like she's listening to the pre-game show he's tuned in for her.

At last she turns to him. "I know you're upset, and Mr. Giles. But all I can think is what they say
about certain trades. Rona leaving, that's addition by subtraction."
"No, Jenny. I don't think so."
"She was a liability. She didn't take anything seriously."
"I know. But this isn't a game, isn't clubhouse politics. This is a war that never stops, and yeah, she's got free choice, but every soldier we lose, that hurts us."
"Maybe I should go back with you. Hang with everyone."
"They know you'll be back tomorrow. Not a soul has doubts about your commitment. I think it's wise, hanging with your dad. This hasn't been easy for him."
"I know," she says softly.

He pulls up to the curb, kills the engine. Jenny unlatches her seatbelt and gives him a fast hug.
"I'm taking you to the door, you know."
"Yeah, but." She doesn't need to finish the thought. She's especially careful about giving her dad the idea he's being replaced.

He doesn't take her up on her invitation to go in, even briefly. "High butterfat ice cream calls."

Jenny flips the lock, pausing as the latch clicks. "It'll be okay," she tells him.

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It's been hours since Gabriel's had a cigarette. Xander should be back soon, so she takes the opportunity to step out onto the stoop to have a smoke before the movie gets going.

Down toward the bottom of the steps, a figure hunches, sobbing. Some homeless person? she wonders.

Gabriel doesn't want to be the one to kick someone off the property -- it's not her property, and besides, when she first got to Cleveland, she spent a couple of weeks sleeping in the back of a car with a broken lock. Stepping out of the doorway, she lets the rectangle of light slant down the steps. "Hey," she says softly. "You okay?"

Sniffling, the person turns, and Gabriel sees it's Kalindi. "It's okay. I just ---" Then she breaks down into wracking sobs.

Gabriel moves to her, sitting on the step beside her. "Hey," she says again, feeling worse than useless. She puts a hand on Kalindi's back, which heaves with her tears. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't expect an answer, and she doesn't get one, just wet, snuffling sounds.

"You and Rona were close?"

Kalindi shakes her head, but the crying gets worse. Gabriel doesn't know what to say, so she just rubs Kalindi's back.

"I had a friend," Kalindi finally says, her breath hitching. "In PNG. Betty. She ---" A sob interrupts her. "Rona looks so much like her."
"Oh. You miss your friend."

She dissolves into the most heartbroken sobs Gabriel's ever heard. She moves her arm across Kalindi's shoulders, just as she'd do if it was her kid sister crying this way. "It's okay," she murmurs. "It's okay." Stupid.

"Every friend I've had --"

Gabriel can barely understand her, she's crying so hard. She wonders, as she sometimes did with her sister, if it's possible to sob yourself to death. "I'm sorry," she says, uncertain if this is any better than It's okay.

A car glides up by the tree in front of the hacienda. It's the one everyone piled out of the night of the big battle at the Hall of Fame. Xander emerges, a grocery bag in his hand. "Is everything all right?"

"All this is hitting Kalindi kind of hard," Gabriel says.

Kalindi sits up, palming black tears off her face. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry." Xander holds out the bag to Gabriel. "Would you give us a couple of minutes?"

"Sure," she says, relieved.

"Tell them to save us some, or die. Hold on --" He pulls the car keys out of his pocket. "Ask Faith to move the car. The tickets are murder."

Gabriel nods, takes the keys.

Xander sits on the stoop next to Kalindi, but calls out as Gabriel climbs the steps. "Hey. Thanks."

***

"I'm sorry," Kalindi tells him again.

"You don't have to be sorry for your feelings," Xander says. "Not here." Though it sounds like she's had to apologize for them or stifle them everywhere else she's lived. He finds his handkerchief, grateful to see it's still in a neat square, unused if a little creased. "Here."

She wipes at her eyes. "It's just, you don't need this on top of everything that's happened."

"Kalindi, this is my job. And much to my surprise it turns out I do need this. Talk to me. Is this Rona, or everything? And should we go somewhere warmer?" It's been surprisingly warm the last couple of days -- Indian summer, Jenny calls it -- but she's used to a lot warmer. "We could sit in the car."

"You just gave the keys to Gabriel."

"Right. Nice move, Harris."

"I'm okay here. I didn't mean to cause a big drama." Tears start leaking out of her again. "Claire said that all the time."

"That's a big part of this, isn't it? You miss her. And your folks and your running club friends and PNG in general."
Nodding, Kalindi twists the handkerchief in her fingers. "And Betty. Rona looks a lot like her. When I had the malaria relapse, during that spell, I thought she was Betty." She turns toward Xander, speaking with a sudden intensity. "We were so close that night, all of us, I mean. We all saved you, every one of us working together -- even Gabriel, who didn't even really know us then. And we came back, and we were wanlain -- sorry, it's hard for me to translate that -- we were like a family, really, and everybody was so giddy."

"Yeah. That was an amazing night." He smiles. "If a little fuzzy around the edges." He'd been stoned out of his gourd on evil cult mushrooms, but that hadn't stopped him from noticing the bonds between everyone. In fact, he'd seen them -- shining strands of light stretching from one shimmering soul to another. Funny how he'd forgotten that.

"How could we fly apart this way? And so soon?"

"It's hard to maintain that kind of emotional peak," Xander says. "Everyday life creeps in, usually with a vengeance, and you crash hard. As a group as well as individuals."

"You've been through this before."

"Usually once an apocalypse. You get through it, though. We always have." He's realizing this for himself even as he tells her.

"Even with Rona leaving?"

"People have left us before." He thinks of Cordelia and Oz and Riley. He tries not to think of Anya and Joyce and Tara. Spike, even. "It's hard, that's true. Tell you what. Tomorrow we'll get you set up with a phone call home, and one to Claire. In fact, you're probably not the only one who needs that. We're all new at this, Kalindi. Sometimes you're going to have to tell us what you need, all of you girls."

"Okay."

"I'm glad you're here."

Kalindi nods. "This is never what I'd have wanted, being sent away from my parents, from PNG. But I'm glad I'm here too."

There's a raucous burst of noise from inside the hacienda. "Sounds like they're getting to the rowdy part of the mopefest. You don't want to miss that, do you?"

She gives a shaky laugh. "No." She stands. "If Gabriel needs a roommate, I'd be happy to switch. She's really kind. I hope she stays."

"Me too. Thanks, Kalindi."

"You're not coming in?"

"In a few minutes. It's a nice night. It's supposed to get cold again soon."

"I'll see you later." She climbs the steps, lets herself into the house.

Xander sits for a moment, soaking up the warmth that somehow contains a kernel of winter. Enjoying the rising sound of the life inside the hacienda. His friends, slayers, his wife.

He draws in a breath, ready to rise and follow Kalindi inside, when he hears a voice from the
shadows on the sidewalk.

"You're quite good at this, Xander." Wes. He's been spending a lot of time in long walks -- something that people don't do around here, day or night. "Take it from someone who isn't."

***

"Wes, my man," Xander booms, and Wes nearly flinches. "I have an assignment for you."


Xander slaps the concrete step beside him. "Have a seat."

Xander has waded into demon battles with more enthusiasm than Wes is showing at the prospect of sitting by him, but after a pause Wes relents and settles in. "What is it you want? Translation? A fighter?"

"I want you to talk to Kalindi about Papua New Guinea, about your time there. She's homesick, and I think it would make her feel better to talk to someone who gets exactly what it is she misses."

Wes blinks. "Talk to her? Wouldn't it seem a bit ... forced? My just approaching her out of the blue?"

"One: no, it wouldn't. People go up to each other all the time to say, 'I hear you're from such-and-such place. I've been there.' And two: it won't be out of the blue, because you're going to be spending some time together, so it will be perfectly natural."

"Why is that?"

"You're going to help her construct one of these hash things."

"A what?"

"She's a, what is it called, a Hash House Harry."

"Harrier."

"Yeah, that's it. You've heard of them, then."

Wes nods. "There's a worldwide network. The whole thing started with some British expatriates. I've run into some harriers in my travels, in the ex-pat bars. They scarcely fade into the woodwork. Kalindi?"

"She's a multifaceted girl."

"Indeed she is. But she's rather young. Most harriers cheerfully admit drinking is a good part of the attraction."

"So I gathered from a group we ran into in the cemetery a while back. They did seem a bit hardcore. But I was thinking then, we could use it for fun and as a training device for the girls. We'll have our own private little club. Kalindi says by the time she was called, she already knew Port Moresby like the back of her hand, and had learned all sorts of tricks about laying trails and false trails, luring vamps into a trap. Those are skills that would help the other girls, plus it would be good for Kalindi. And I think Jenny could use an outlet for her competitive nature."

"It seems you've given this a great deal of thought."
"Does it?" Xander stretches out his legs, resting them on the edges of the steps below, and leans back on his elbows. "Truth is, I'm just pulling this out of my ass."

"Part of your plan does have the whiff. What makes you think I'm the person to work on this project with her?"

"You walk all over the damn place at all hours, even though this isn't a walking town. You haven't been killed or robbed, so you're apparently not trying to get yourself killed. And you need something to do, same as she does."

"Ah." A humorless chuckle. "Are you my watcher too, then?"

"I'm pretty much booked full-time, thanks. Y'know, I only agree with half of what you said before. You weren't very good as a watcher. The difference is, I'm using past tense, not present. Since you're -- again -- not dead, you obviously have managed to learn things during the past few years. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd learned a few things that would help you handle a slayer."

"It's a pity we'll never know."

Xander makes a noncommittal noise, and Wes casts a sharp glance at him. Xander gives him wide-eyed innocence, then draws his legs up again, knuckling the kinks in his back. "It's getting a little cool out here."

"Xander," Wes says in a grim voice, "tell me you're not planning --"

"I'm planning nothing." He gets to his feet, stretches. "Like I said, I'm just pulling this all out of my ass."

Of course he lies, and of course they both know it.

"Night, Wes."

***

Xander lets himself in and peers into the parlor where Faith and the girls are sprawled in front of the television. She feels the chilly air radiating off him as he leans over her to kiss the top of her head. "You don't want to miss your movie. Give me the keys back, and I'll move the car."

It's some sappy chick flick -- she's pretty damn sure Julia Roberts dies in it. Or Debra Winger or somebody. She'd rather watch *Camille*. "Let's move it together."

"Oooh," says Kennedy. "See you in an hour or two."

She grabs her leather jacket on the way out.

"Mood seems a little better," Xander says as they start down the steps.

"Yeah. I think it'll be okay. Good call on the night off, I'm thinking."

"I'm glad I'm so smart. Someone better have left me some ice cream."

She glides her hand over his ass as he unlocks the passenger door for her. "Don't worry. You'll get your treat."

He hurries to slip behind the wheel. "Want to ride around, or stay parked?"
"Let's just sit a minute. Get the heat goin', though."

As Xander starts the engine, the radio blares on. Baseball noises. Baseball bores the panties off her, but here and now that might not be such a bad thing.

She slips her hand between Xander's thighs. "Check the lumber that guy's swingin'."

He puts his hand over hers, not to move things along, but to slow things down. He reaches out with his other hand to snap off the radio. "Can we talk first?"

"Can we talk after?"

"I think maybe it should be now." There's something troubling him. Seems like it's been trying to make its way to the surface for a couple of days now.

Faith's been waiting. She moves her hand to his cheek. "Sure, babe. What's bothering you?"

"As time goes on, things are getting a little less fuzzy."

"The magic mushrooms." Here it comes.

"Yeah." He's silent for a long moment. "So things happened when I was under the influence. Between me and Serafina, I mean."

"Things. Exactly what sort of things?"

Xander squirms. "You know how guys say 'It didn't mean anything,' like that's supposed to make it better or something?"

She loves him for knowing this is something only a worthless piece of shit would say. "Yeah ...?"

"Well, in this case, it really didn't mean anything. We were both out of our heads."

"You had sex."

A gust of a breath. "Yeah. We did."

Faith looks away from him. "You douche." She fumbles for the door handle, but as she gets it open Xander reaches across her to keep her from pushing it all the way.

"Faith, wait. Please."

She freezes, staring straight ahead for a moment, then turns back to him. "Psych."

"What?"

"I knew about that already." She cracks a grin. "Had you goin'."

"How?"

"Slayer dream. While you were still missing. Believe me, it freaked me the fuck out, because I thought I was losing you. Wasn't Serafina I was worried about, though."

"Believe me, she can't hold a candle to you. It kills me to think I could hurt you this way."

Faith touches his cheek again. "I know that. It was the he-priest and the she-priest goin' at it. I knew that even then. That's your one get out of jail free card, though. Happens again, and I splinter
your spine."

Xander lets out a shaky laugh, squeezing his eyes shut. Faith sees a silvery glint just below his left eye. "How did I get so lucky?"

She sketches her thumb over his lower lip. "Beats the hell out of me," she murmurs, then leans in for a lingering kiss. "But I know how you can get lucky right this minute."

***

Giles rubs his forehead as he rereads his diary entry. It's a fine line between owning up to difficulties and whinging, he knows, and he's not sure on which side of the line this entry lies.

He hears footsteps along the hallway, a tread he's come to recognize as Xander's. Wishing with great force that Xander will keep moving upstairs, he wills Faith to be hot on his heels and aching to tear off his clothes. To his dismay, the steps move directly to his door, followed by a soft knock.

Giles sighs and goes to the door, but only opens it a few inches. "Whatever it is, can it wait until morning?"

"I'd rather make it now," Xander says. There are two high spots of color on his cheeks, and his clothes are a bit askew. So that's why he and Faith are in no particular hurry to retreat to their room.

Giles releases another sigh and steps out of the doorway. "Of course. I've already made tea, and I believe there's enough for another cup." Not the most gracious of invitations, but Xander accepts and settles himself into one of the rockers by the fire.

Giles presents him with the cup and takes the other chair. "Now. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what you need, what I can do for you. I've been spending the evening making high-handed decisions about what Wes needs, and Kalindi -- but it seemed pretty presumptuous to start in on you."

"Wesley?"

"Yeah, I'm pulling him out of his cave. Not that I'm not a big fan of wallowing -- I just gave the girls the night off just for that -- but there's a shelf life. I asked him to spend a little time with Kalindi, help with her homesickness if he can. I don't know if you remember, but he said he spent some time in PNG."

"Yes, now I recall." He takes a sip of his tea. "Sound thinking."

"Well, maybe. The rest of my thinking was this: If he isn't a complete trainwreck at that, maybe we could assign him to a slayer."

Giles looks up from his cup, surprised. "Make a watcher of him again?"

"The thought crossed my mind. Why waste a resource we have when we have so few? And don't think I'm not noticing how we're talking about Wes when the question was what you need."

He pauses, looking into the fire. "It's not a question I've had much experience in considering."

"I know that. It's a brave new world now. If Buffy could consider the possibility of leaving and having a different life, it's not fair to deny you the same choice."
Eyebrow raised, he fixes Xander in his gaze. "You wish to replace me with Wesley?"

"Not in a million years," is his immediate response. "But I want you to think about what you need. A timetable for quitting this racket? Shifting the new girls to Wes if that seems possible, and going back to just Buffy and Faith? A couple of weeks of vacation, wherever you choose? A retreat somewhere, maybe with the coven? I'd like you to put some thought into this. Any answer's fine. Even keeping things exactly as they are. But you've been at this for over seven years, I'd hope you'd at least take a sabbatical of some kind."

"I've been 'at this' my whole life," Giles corrects him.

"Exactly. So sleep on it, but I want to talk about this some more."

Giles nods. "I will."

"And just so you know, just so there's not some midnight seething about hidden messages here, of course we want you to choose us. I don't know what I'd do without your advice when I'm uncertain and your steadiness when I'm freaking out and your 'Oh good lords' when I need to know just how dire things are. Maybe -- maybe I want you to know I can do that same stuff for you, too. That it doesn't have to be your job to be the strong one 24/7."

Giles fumbles with his glasses.

"One more quick thing," Xander adds. "I'd like to bring Wendy in to talk to her about whether she wants a role here. If she really is a new offshoot of the Guardian line, we should create a relationship with her."

"I had the impression that Serafina, as Faith has put it, freaks you the fuck out."

"Little bit," Xander admits. "But, as Faith also puts it, sometimes you have to suck it up and deal." He sets his tea down and rises. "I'll let you get back to your evening. Thanks for letting me impose."

"It's no imposition at all," Giles says. And despite his earlier irritation, he realizes this is true.

***

Xander looks in the window of the psychic parlor, which shows him pretty much the whole interior of the shop, except a tiny back room. The configuration of the place is odd and barely usable, the same shape Cordelia's desserts would come in when she'd say to a waitress, "Seriously. Just a sliver." There's enough room for a table and two chairs, with the cloud-painted wall behind serving as backdrop.

Those mechanical fortuneteller mannequins you see at carnivals and tourist traps have more space.

The smoke-colored cat Faith had temporarily adopted sleeps on the window ledge, curled up between a crystal ball and a brass statue of Kali just like the one Giles used to have. Otherwise, the shop is empty. It's early yet; she doesn't open until mid-afternoon, but he doesn't want tourists and frat boys interrupting them.

He's pretty sure she lives here, but he can't quite figure out the floorplan, whether her living space is upstairs or below street level. It's pointless to stand here contemplating her space issues. Stop delaying, he tells himself. Ring the damn bell.

But Faith and Giles are right. Serafina and her shop do freak him the fuck out.
Maybe he should come back later.

A quarter past hell freezes over, that would be a good time.

He takes a step back, and just then the cat raises its head and looks directly at him. It gathers its feet under it and stands, arching itself and quivering, then relaxing into an extravagant yawn. It picks its way through the collection of psychic parlor tchotchkes without disturbing anything, trailing its tail across the Kali statue just before it jumps down and ambles toward the back room.

A moment later Wendy emerges clutching a mug, looking like she's just settling into her morning. She crosses the sliver of a room in bare feet, jeans and tee splashed with paint, and unlocks the door. "Xander. Come in." Her hair's still pure white. He doesn't know why he would have expected anything else.

"Okay, that was freaky. Is that cat your familiar?"

She laughs. "She didn't come and speak to me in Sumerian or anything, no. I just bent to pet her, and then I knew you were there. You know I have a sensitivity sometimes when I touch people."

Yeah, he does know that. Which is why he's staying the fuck away from her. He nods.

"It works on animals too. Well, my animal. I have a pot of tea back there. Would you like some?"

Xander suppresses a smile. "That'd be good, thanks."

She closes the set of curtains that covers the lower part of the window, allowing clients to see the street outside without revealing the cards to people passing by.

"I'm not here for a reading," Xander says quickly.

"I know. I'm just not in my psychic regalia, and I don't really feel like bothering right now. Have a seat, I'll be right back."

He sits in one of the mismatched overstuffed chairs. Before he can think one more time about how this place weirds him out, the smoke-grey cat -- the unfamiliar who drew blood on every slayer in the house who didn't have sense to leave her alone -- jumps into his lap. She stretches her neck up to sniff delicately at his breath, then settles into a ball and falls asleep.

***

"Wow," she says as she sets the mug of tea before him.

"What?" Xander asks in alarm.

"She never does that." Wendy settles into the chair opposite him. "Lolo's always been a one-person cat."

"Do me a favor and don't ever say that."

She frowns. "Say what?"

"Wow. My friend and I came to see you in Sunnydale years ago. I told you about that."

"You were sparing with the details," she says wryly. "But you told me I saw things."

"You saw me here, finding my destiny. You saw Buffy, and how she'd change everything. You
saw Jesse's death. But before you said any of that -- or didn't, in Jesse's case -- you looked at me and said, 'Wow.'"

Her lips purse as if she's about to say it again, but she catches herself.

"The whole thing came back to me a while back. I went out to Sunnydale, to the crater, and I found one of your flyers. I'd forgotten all of it by the time I actually met Buffy, but everything came back, just like it happened yesterday. So I'm a little touchy about the word 'wow.'"

"Okay. Consider it stricken from the vocabulary."

Xander sips his tea. "Hey, this is nice." Giles would approve, but he keeps that to himself for now. "Anyway, I came by to see how you're doing. That was a pretty intense couple of days."

"More for you than me, I'd think."

"You get used to certain kinds of craziness."

"Used to being kidnapped by a doomsday cult that wants to blind you?"

Xander twitches a smile. "You'd be surprised. So how are you?"

"A little shaky. I took a couple of days off, then I opened, but I only did a couple of readings before I closed for the night. I seem a lot more open than I used to be. Where before I'd get impressions, but those readings, it was faster and more vivid than I'm used to. Maybe those mushrooms haven't quite worn off yet."

"Maybe," Xander says, using his dubious voice.

"But maybe not," she supplies for him.

"Maybe you're coming into some kind of destiny here, too. I know we talked about this a little the other night, but I'm not sure how much you took in. We're thinking you could be a new generation of this ancient order, the Guardians."

"I'm a little fuzzy on it still, but I don't see how it could be true. I've never heard the slightest whisper of it."

"You wouldn't have. They'd all but died out. Buffy met the last of the line just before she was murdered in Sunnydale. But these three lines, the Slayers and Watchers and Guardians -- they're all intertwined somehow, in ways we don't even understand. Giles and I, we think maybe when the Slayer line opened up the other two lines did too." He pauses for a sip of tea, watching the street outside her shop. Things are picking up a little in the Flats. "We do good things," he finally says. "What the girls did the other night. I don't know if you had the same visions I had, but what they did saved the world."

Wendy sips her own tea, gazing toward the street too. Xander eyes her; she looks haunted. "I got that, yeah."

"That's not the first time. Hell, I've personally saved the world a couple of times. So there's plenty of doomsday cult craziness, but when the dust settles, we know we've done something real." He grins. "Even if we can't tell anyone about it. So I've got some options I'd like to lay out for you, if you're ready to hear them."

There's a pause before she turns her gaze back to him. "As the clients like to say, hearing won't hurt
anything." Her tone is laced with irony.

"One option is jumping right in, exploring the whole Guardian destiny, while we see if this is something we fold into how we work. The Guardians were always hidden before, and the times they didn't stay that way, any Watcher who formed a partnership with them was immediately shown the door. There's no record of how these partnerships actually worked."

"Why would they ban that kind of cooperation? And since they did, why would you be thinking of skirting that ban now?"

"The old Watchers Council was a pretty Byzantine society of old farts. Not all of their policies were benign or even smart. We're building it up again, and trying to do a better job. Setting that aside, here's option two: Let us use Serafina's services now and then. We've got a young slayer who's got gender issues to work through. I don't know if she'd feel comfortable approaching it this way, but if she would, you'd be valuable. You already know the whole slayer deal. Saves a lot of time. Option three: If you're not comfortable with any of this right now, consider coming to Giles and Wes for help in dealing with how the psychic thing got ramped up. I don't know that they can help, but they're both smart guys." Xander sets down his mug. "I've yammered long enough. No need to decide anything right now, I just wanted to put it out there before Sunnydale Denial Syndrome has a chance to set in."

Wendy laughs.

"That's another reason we'd love to have you," Xander adds. "Someone who actually gets us Sunnydale survivors." He lifts the cat from his lap, only to find her still attached via claws in his lap and other important areas. "Cat," he admonishes.

"Lolo," Wendy adds, in the same tone, but Lolo stays attached. She reaches for the cat, and her hands graze Xander's, just before Lolo retracts her claws and relaxes into Wendy's grasp. She completes the transfer from lap to lap, and Wendy says, "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I can. I just rarely want to." He has no idea what she's talking about.

"Believe me, I find Rupert very attractive, but you do know he's sort of horrified by me."

Xander grins. Oh, that. The little high-handed plan he'd concocted even while telling Giles he wouldn't dream of doing such a thing. "There was a woman in Sunnydale who horrified him in some of the same ways. She turned out to be the love of his life."

"But if she--"

"He has a new life now." He rises. "Thanks for the tea, Wendy. Come see us."

***

Kalindi rolls up her sleeves and starts in on washing the bowls and pans Andrew has dirtied for dinner preparation. Kennedy and Jenny are rummaging in the refrigerator for juice, Buffy and Faith are heading upstairs. Vi has gone off to make a phone call. Kalindi's been looking around for her throughout the day, reassuring herself that she hasn't slipped off too. She puts another bowl in the drying rack and offers a prayer that Rona will make it back to Baltimore okay, and that Vi will get through her departure.

Andrew told her that the two of them had been inseparable since before Sunnydale sank into the ground. They fought in the big battle underground with the other new Slayers, while Andrew and Anya slashed their way through a vicious horde of Bringers until she was cruelly struck down -- he
talks that way pretty much all the time, like everything is a mythic story. It makes her nervous that Xander will walk in someday while he's making an epic tale of his old girlfriend's death. Or that Faith will hear him say Anya was the true love of Xander's life, and how magnificent she was. He's firmly convinced that Faith is "a rebound thing," which is a term she doesn't know, but she gets the drift.

He talks all the time. Kalindi knows he's lonely and that a kinder person would listen more attentively instead of wishing he'd give her a few minutes' peace. She looks out the kitchen window, dreaming and praying, and brightens when she sees Xander emerging from the garage into the garden. He looks so much better today. His dreams have stopped, she knows, and he looks more settled in himself.

Xander spots her through the window and gestures for her to join him outside. Making her excuses to Andrew, she grabs a jacket and hurries into the garden. "Let's go to the library and have a talk," he says when she joins him. As they walk, he says, "You don't have to do that, you know. Your job is being a Slayer, and any down time you get is your free time."

"I like doing dishes. It's relaxing."

He punches in the key code to the library. "Even with Andrew?" He gives his head a quick shake. "I shouldn't say anything. Some of us find him tiring to be around, that's all."

"He is sort of overwhelming."

"Anytime you've had enough, don't be shy about walking away. He's not going to give you an opening. How about here?"

It's not the main room of the library, with its beautiful bookcases and paltry (so far) collection of books, but a little lounge with fat leather chairs. "This is nice."

"I need to work on finding a space to consult with my slayers. Maybe a set time each day, too. Jenny and I get a chance to talk when I drive her home, but I'll need to work something out for you and Gabriel, if she stays. How about breakfast time for you and me?"

That's one of the few unstructured times at the hacienda. Everyone staggers their breakfast according to their preferred rising and showering times, with the most senior girls getting first choice. Kalindi, as the new girl, has to get up earliest, but she doesn't mind that. "That would be nice."

"There's a little fridge up here; we can stock it so we don't spend half our time together being talked to death. Another thing I wanted to ask you about --"

"Anything."

"I'd like you to set up one of those hash things. I asked Wes -- Mr. Wyndam-Pryce -- to give you a hand with that. I think that would be a lot of fun and be a cool way to train."

"I'd love that." But why Mr. Wyndam-Pryce? Why not Xander? "He's -- he's not going to be my watcher, though, is he? I heard he was one."

"Hey. I know you've had a lot of people walk away from you, or send you away, but believe me, you're not getting rid of me that easily. Wes is big on walking around, and I'd feel a lot happier if he had a slayer with him. I don't think he's always looking out for his own safety. Not that I want him to know that's part of the reason, but it is."
"He's really quiet. Does it hurt his throat to talk?"

"I don't know. He'll make a nice balance with Andrew, though, won't he?"

Kalindi can't suppress a grin. "I guess he will."

***

Gabriel, by some miracle, actually shows up for dinner again after the first night. It's a lot more normal tonight -- Giles is where he should be and the mood is better. Except for Andrew, who seems to be in a snit about something. Xander supposes his check-in with everyone, no exceptions will have to include him. He'll get around to it.

"I'm glad you came back," Buffy tells Gabriel. "We were a little crazy yesterday. And you know, when I first thought of letting the Slayer mojo out there in the world to make more than one at a time, I thought how amazing it would be to have the option to walk away. But then I didn't want to, and I guess it didn't occur to me anyone else would."

"How long have you been doing this?" Gabriel asks.

"Almost eight years." She looks over at Giles. "Wow, Giles."

"Indeed."

"How does everyone else fit in?" Gabriel asks. "I know some of you have known each other forever, and some are new, and some --" She flicks a quick glance toward Wes. "Some are both, which makes no sense."

"Besides Giles, who's my watcher, there's Xander and Willow, practically the first people I met when I moved to Sunnydale. And the whole slayer thing is supposed to be a solo gig, except for your watcher, but they wouldn't let me go into danger alone. So they've been part of this practically since day one of my life in Sunnydale."

"That may have had an even more profound effect on slayer traditions than the spell," Wes says. This might be the first time he's spoken up at dinner since he moved into the hacienda.

"Which you did not exactly approve of, back in the day," Buffy says.

"I did not." He ghosts a smile. "I was known to be wrong, back in the day."

"Faith and Wes came around the same time," Xander says. "Faith was called after Buffy drowned."

"I like to call it an Actual Death Experience, though it was short," she supplies. "And let's not forget Kendra. She was called before Faith."

Xander nods. "I was trying to simplify the story, but that's the wrong place to do it."

"It's a complicated story. But we need to make sure no slayer is ever forgotten."

"It's a rare thing for slayers to meet one another at all," Giles says. "At least, it was."

"Kendra was killed by a vampire, then Faith came," Buffy says. "Around the same time Giles ... had a fundamental disagreement on philosophy with the Council, so they sent Wes."

"So you two have been slaying together since then?" Gabriel asks.
Buffy falters here, clearly realizing there's a whole level of complicated that she's not sure how to express.

Faith steps in. "I ran off the rails and got evil, got in a coma, got in jail, wised up, got out. I came back about a year ago."

Wes takes a cue from her honesty. "I was sacked by the Council, traveled a bit killing demons on my own, then came to Los Angeles and worked with Angel. Faith invited me to stay on for a while after this latest apocalypse. For a while. He's still on the fence, then.

"Angel's a whole 'nother complicated story," Buffy adds. "But he fights the supernatural fight in L.A."

"The potential slayers started coming to us before the last big apocalypse in Sunnydale," Xander says, "and that's how we got Kennedy, Vi and Rona. Willow made with the big mojo, and the slayer line expanded, and we got Jenny, then Kalindi, now you."

"How many more slayers are there?" Gabriel asks.

"Nobody knows," Willow says.

"That's Modern History 101," Xander says. "How do you feel about going out tonight for your first hands-on vampire killing seminar?"

"Like in the dreams," Gabriel says faintly.

Xander nods. "Like that."

"A little sooner than I thought," she says. She looks around at the other girls. "Yeah. Let's do it."

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Faith volunteers to come along on Gabriel's first hunt, which seems to surprise Xander. "She's not crazy about hunting the cemeteries," Xander tells Gabriel as they're heading to the car. "She's all about the challenge."

Faith rides in back, letting him take the lead in explaining how things work. Rising vampires, ways to kill. Gabriel sits next to him, getting used to the feel of a stake in her hand.

"You've had dreams about this. Killing vampires."

She nods. "It was weird. I've never been good at anything athletic, never been a fighter. I've had the crap beaten out of me a bunch of times, but it's not the same thing."

"Boy howdy, it's not," Xander says. He shoots Gabriel a grin. "There was a guy I grew up with. Larry. He thumped me a good many times."

Gabriel regards him. He's big, broad-shouldered, normal-looking. She doesn't get why he'd be a target. "Why?"

"Like Everest. Because I was there. He thumped a lot of people, actually. You know how they always say people like that are trying to prove something?"

"Yeah. Not that it hurts any less."

Xander laughs. "Well, he was trying to prove something. Once he decided he didn't give a shit
about proving it anymore, he turned out to be an okay guy. Anyhow, I don't think you need to be a natural athlete for this gig. Channel your slayer instincts and strength, and you'll pick this up. Right, Faith?"

"Never met a slayer yet who didn't take to it. Even Rona. She didn't like the training, but she could fight."

"Okay," Gabriel says.

"You'll be nervous till you get your first vamp," Faith says. "That won't hurt, it'll keep you careful."

"Hey, I wanted to say something," Xander says. "Thank you for being so kind to Kalindi last night."

"Oh, I don't know how much I helped."

"A lot. Trust me."

"She was really friendly, right off. Even with everything that was going on." She hesitates. "But I -- never mind."

"You don't have to censor yourself around me," Xander says.

"I don't want you to think I'm being mean. Kalindi just -- what she looks like just doesn't fit at all with who she is. It's like she's doing the goth girl thing for Halloween or something, but she's so shy and sweet. It's jarring."

"Yeah," Xander says. "She's finding herself. She's a missionary kid, and she grew up in these really remote places. She didn't fit in there, and now she doesn't fit in here. I think it'll take a while for her to get who she is inside matched up with her outside."

Not as long as it'll take me.

They've been driving along a high stone wall. Xander turns into the first break in the stone work, a maintenance road, Gabriel guesses from the lack of a fancy iron gate. "I'll get that," Faith says and hops out of the back seat.

"Ready?"

She tells the truth. "I don't know."

***

Xander parks the car just inside the gate. "The newer section is a ways off, but I thought we could walk around, get a feel for the place. First time you walk through a cemetery at night is a little nerve-wracking, even without knowing you could run into a vampire."

"We don't know this is her first time," Faith points out. "There were kids in my town who'd go drinkin' in the boneyard."

"I've never been in one, day or night. They're all in Queens anyway. I only saw them when we were in a cab on the way to the airport."

An occasional breath shows up as a visible puff of mist, and most of the leaves are off the trees by now. There are no piles of leaves to scuff through, a secret pleasure Xander has discovered in
Cleveland. The groundskeepers are probably working every day to round up every free-range leaf and whisk it out of sight.

"Me, this brings back the whole high school era," Xander says. "Not that I went drinking in graveyards -- that would be suicide in Sunnydale -- but I met Buffy when I was a sophomore, and we did a fair amount of patrolling with her."

"You grew up in New York City?" Faith asks.

"Yeah. Manhattan."

"What was that like?"

Gabriel shrugs. "I don't have anything to compare it to, except movies. We didn't have big yellow school buses. I had a bus pass for the transit buses."

"Did you ever ride the subway?" she asks.

"All the time."

"We must seem like real hicks to you."

Gabriel laughs. "Believe me, anyone who goes around punching holes in vampires and killing big dragony god things doesn't really fit my mental picture of a hick."

"We're coming up on the new section," Faith says, "so look lively."

Gabriel drops her voice. "What's going to happen?"

"Most likely, damn little," she says. "We find a fresh grave, stand around waiting for a vamp to rise."

"Fledgling hunting is not her favorite slaying style," Xander says. "It's important, it cuts down the body count in a town like this, but it's not as challenging."

"Don't get cocky, though. I've run into some hardcore motherfuckers in graveyards."

"Where do you like to hunt?" Gabriel asks.

"The Flats, around the Hall of Fame, the college campus. The vamps here seem to favor the drunk and stupid, or maybe they just like the contact high." She points ahead of them and to the right. "There. Two o'clock. There's a fresh one."

"Vamp?"

"Grave. Or, as I like to call em, a watched pot."

The three of them stand at the foot of the grave, like they're paying their respects. Gabriel stabs her stake in the air.

"More like this," Faith says, and shows her an air-staking. "Watch me on the first one, and then we'll let you try one."

"Oh shit!" Gabriel exclaims in a near-whisper. "Look!" The loosely-packed dirt at their feet starts shifting, and after a moment a hand claws its way up to the cold night air.
The dirt continues to shift from the peak of the mounded grave as the vamp’s hand keeps clawing towards freedom.

Xander doesn't like this part much. He can't help thinking of Buffy waking up in her coffin, having to fight her way out of her grave because no one had thought to dig down and release her.

Faith heaves a sigh. "Like I said, like watchin' paint--"

The next thing they know, she's taken down by a flying tackle, sprawling her on top of the grave. A vamp in a metal band tee is on her back, yanking at her leather jacket.

"Sonofabitch!" she yelps.

Xander launches himself at the vamp, but it snarls and flicks him away like he's a June bug at a picnic. He lands hard, knocking the breath out of him. Faith tries to take advantage of her attacker's distraction, but the hand from the grave closes around her upper arm, making her howl.

As Xander struggles to fill his lungs, the metal vamp scrambles up and jumps her again. Gabriel lunges toward it and punches her stake through the black tee. The vamp roars but doesn't dust. It casts a wicked snarl over its shoulder at Gabriel, but stays with Faith, sticking a knee in her back and pushing her face into the dirt.

"Fuck!" Gabriel shouts. "What now?"

"Try again," Xander wheezes, but he can't get enough volume even to hear himself.

Gabriel's already on it, rushing the vamp again to try to yank her stake out and make another attempt. It won't release, so she grabs the vamp's hair and yells, "Stake!"

As Xander scrambles for his, Faith says, "Right hand," struggling to offer hers up, but it's the hand that is pinned by the rising vamp. The vamp on top clamps its hands around her throat.

Gabriel swoops down and grabs the stake from Faith's hand, then slams it into the vamp's back. This time she gets it right, and the vamp falls to ash. Without its weight to support her, Gabriel sprawls on top of Faith. Scrambling off, she reaches for Faith to help her up, but the unrisen vamp is hanging on, using her for leverage to break free.

Gabriel braces her foot against the fledge's forearm and bears down until Faith breaks out of its grip. She staggers back a step, panting, just as Xander manages to regain his feet.

"God damn," Faith rasps.

The vamp's head and other arm finally emerge from the dark soil, and it snarls at the three waiting by its grave.

"It'll be in a frenzy for food," Xander tells Gabriel. "That's us."

"Can I?" Gabriel asks.

"Have at it," Faith says. "It's why you're here."

The vamp fights its way through the damp dirt, freeing one leg.

Gabriel glances at Faith, who says, "Like they give a shit about fair play."
That's all the permission she needs. Gabriel grabs the vamp's hair to lift it upright, then stakes it. Its ashes mingle with the other's at her feet. She stands there a moment, panting, staring at the broken ground.

"What did I tell you?" Faith's voice is a little shaky. "Wicked boring."

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Gabriel's heart hammers in her chest. "Shit. Shit." She staggers to a low granite monument and sits on it. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Faith asks.

"I fucked up. I missed."

"You saved my ass."

"But I--"

"But nothin'. We all miss or freeze at some point. This slayer gig comes to us when we barely know what the fuck we're doing walking around in the world. It's a big fat miracle any of us survives our first fight. And Jesus Christ I got cocky tonight and I damn near died."

Xander's right there, slipping his arms around Faith's waist from behind. He stands there a moment, his forehead tipped to rest on her shoulder. It reminds Gabriel of the way they were in Starbucks when she didn't really know them, except for the dreams. After a moment, he draws himself up. "How about calling it a night? I think we're all vibrating a little too much to fight effectively. And two is a damn fine first night, Gabriel."

"I dunno, I felt really awkward."

"C'mon, let's head back to the car." They start to walk back through the graveyard, and Xander says, "I think I learned something tonight. Just because Kalindi and Jenny went out their first nights, doesn't mean that's how it should always be."

"They're better fighters?"

"They're experienced, that's all. Kalindi was out patrolling long before she came to the states; she had a mentor in PNG who taught her how things worked. Jenny was new to fighting, but she's had a lot of experience with physical training, since sports are her thing. If I'd been smarter, I would have let you settle in to train a couple of days first. Get you more acclimated before throwing you out here -- but let's wind up all the second-guessing by pointing out one more time that you kicked ass."

Gabriel says nothing to that. She still feels she was more lucky than good. Faith is quiet, too. When they get to the car, Gabriel gets there first and goes for the back seat so Faith and Xander can sit together. Xander settles himself behind the wheel, reaching out to caress Faith, smoothing a hand over her hair. She scoots closer to him.

"I never talk about this." Faith looks straight ahead through the windshield. "I've frozen. Couple of times. The faster you forgive yourself for it, the better off you'll be."

"What happened?" She's not sure she wants to know.

"First time, my watcher died."
Gabriel's never heard her sound that way, scared and small and haunted.

"Really old vampire named Kakistos. Vicious fuck." She snaps back to the present. "Let's fuckin' change the subject."

They change it to nothing for a few moments, everyone too charged up to switch gears. Finally Gabriel brings up something she's been wondering. "Xander, you're so matter-of-fact about this whole deal -- me, I mean. Not that I know how people normally react, since I've never said anything to anyone before this. But Jesus, it's weird that you're so normal about it."

Xander laughs. "It's always weird when I'm normal. I don't know, I was still in that visionary place when I saw you. And I ... I really saw you. And you were called as a slayer, it doesn't get any clearer than that."

"Not to mention the fact that he's spent some time in a body that didn't feel like his," Faith adds. "Because it actually wasn't."

"How's that?"

"Some ancient mojo we ran across when we were out patrolling. We got body-swapped. He's been a woman, I've driven a stick."

"Holy shit," Gabriel says.

"That was my first thought," Xander says. "Or first 4,217 thoughts."

"He's a lot more sympathetic when I bitch about being on the rag," Faith says.

"Holy shit." Gabriel seems to have lost all other vocabulary. "How long did that last?"

"Couple of weeks." Faith turns and offers Gabriel a grin. "It's how we fell in love."

"We're almost at the hacienda," Xander says. "Want to come up, or do you want to go home?"

*Home* isn't the word. It's a rented room, and depressing as hell. "Could I stay there tonight? At the hacienda? I'm still a little weirded out by tonight."

"Sure," Xander says. "Besides, you need to celebrate your first slaying with the other girls. This is big stuff."

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Giles is startled at the rap on his door. He thought all the children were still out on patrol. Putting his book aside, he rises and goes to the door.

"Wesley," he says in surprise. He often forgets that Wesley has stayed on here; he so rarely shows himself except occasionally at meals.

"I wondered if I could trouble you for some local maps," he says.

"It's no trouble at all," Giles says. "They're in the library. I can take you there, but I was about to have some tea. If you don't mind waiting ..."

"Not at all." He steps back. "I'll return in half-"

"Wesley," Giles cuts in gently. "I should have made myself clearer. I meant it as an invitation to
join me."

"Oh. Quite. Thank you."

Giles had seen him more than once in the past few months when he'd flown in for the wedding and later to help when Xander had disappeared. How strange to see him slip back to the uncertain manner he'd had when Giles first knew him. "Please. Have a seat. I'll put the kettle on."

Wesley is feeding a log into the fire when Giles returns from filling the electric kettle. His face is turned at an angle that displays the lurid scar slashing across his throat. _His greatest moment of brokenness_, that's what the priestess -- Serafina -- had said. Giles wonders what its story is.

"You've been exploring the neighborhood."

Wesley replaces the fire screen and straightens. "I've been taking random walks. It's not exactly done here, is it? It's almost as rare as it is in L.A."

Giles nods. "We've gotten out of the habit, with everything that's been going on, but Xander and I had taken to driving out to the art museum to walk the grounds."

"Xander's the reason I'm looking for maps." A brittle smile. "He's asked me to become a contributing member of the household."

Giles raises a brow.

"He's asked if I'd design a hash with Kalindi. Apparently she's quite a harrier."

"So I've heard."

"He thought it would make a splendid training exercise for the girls."

The kettle whistles and Giles rises to attend it. "It's a wonderful idea. It will give Kalindi a taste of home and let her shine at something. And Jenny loves competition -- it's a very constructive way of channeling that aspect of her personality. I think the others will enjoy it, too." He puts the lid on the teapot and casts an eye at the clock as he returns to the fireside.

"Xander's quite taken to this life, hasn't he?"

"His confidence grows with each girl he's found."

Wesley picks up one of the books from Giles's stack, one of the titles on transgendered persons. "Even the ones who aren't apparent on first sight."

"I think Gabriel's lucky to have found him. If she'd been called instead of Buffy, I fear I'd have bungled it badly."

"Don't sell yourself short," Wesley says. "Xander learned by watching, and he had a fine teacher. I wish I'd had a little less training and a little more ability to learn from example."

"We weren't exactly raised to value that kind of learning, though, were we? Not that most watchers had the opportunity we had. Two living slayers, two watchers. A watcher who'd survived his slayer's death was kept from the younger watcher who succeeded him. "I realize as we've worked to rebuild the Council that I've learned by watching too. Mostly things I'd like to avoid." He smiles. "As Xander says, we can make fresh mistakes."

He gives the pot a stir and pours two cups of tea.
Wesley cradles his hands around his teacup. This is a habit he's largely let slip away over the past few years. Coffee was the drink at the Hyperion. Not terribly good coffee, most of the time. He gazes at his milky tea, breathing in its scent, and wonders how he got so fucking lost.

"Why don't you tell me about it," Giles suggests in a quiet voice, and Wesley looks up in horror to think that he's spoken his thoughts aloud. "Believe me," Giles adds, "you're not the first watcher who's come to this place."

"I've no idea where to begin."

"The sacrifice spell," he prompts. "It brought something forth that seemed hidden to you before."

"Yes." Wesley glances up, but can't hold Giles's gaze for long. "That's quite perceptive."

"I had help. Faith remarked on it. She said she asked you about the scar at your neck and it seemed quite clear to her that something was interfering with your memory."

"Yes," he says again, then falls silent, listening to the soft crackle and pop of the fire. A section of log falls away with a hiss, its heart glowing red. "There was a prophecy. Difficult to find my way into -- I worked myself into a state of exhaustion trying to decipher it. I made some very grave errors."

"I dare say every watcher has done the same. The world still survives."

"The world has been changed. Mine is not the only memory that has been altered. Histories have been erased, others created in their place. The power that could do this -- I'm not entirely sure it could be benign, but I know I haven't the heart to change the world they made."

"I understand those feelings better than you'd suspect," Giles says. "Tell me more."

"Angel had a son," he says, but no more will come.

"In this altered world," Giles says.

"No. This much is true."

"That's impossible."

"Of course it is. But it happened. He and Darla somehow created a child."

"There was nothing in the histories."

Wesley looks away from the fire. "I'm not speaking of the histories," he snaps. "This occurred just two years ago."

"It cannot be. Darla was staked years ago, in Sunnydale. These must be your altered memories."

"Christ, it's impossible to tell a story to a watcher. It's no wonder so few of us find a mate without an arranged marriage."

To his surprise, Giles's response to his outburst is a chuckle. "Point taken. Go on. I'll restrain myself."

"This is where the prophecy comes in. A false one. I was led to believe the baby was in danger
from Angel. It wasn't hard to see how that might come about."

"Of course not. The moment of perfect happiness."

"I thought it best to get Connor out of Angel's reach. I planned to take him away, raise him myself." He fingers the scar at his neck. So strange that its existence has been smoothed over in his memory these last months, yet once more he's intensely aware of it. "I was tricked."

A soft knock sounds at the door, and Giles lets out an irritated breath. "Bugger," he mutters. He gestures to Wesley to hold on a moment, and goes to the door.

It's Xander, Faith and Gabriel, flushed with excitement.

"Welcome our new slayer," Xander says. "Two kills tonight."

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Giles blocks the door, flummoxed, and Faith gets immediately that something's going on. Jesus, not another apocalypse. She lays a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "We're interrupting something. C'mon down to the kitchen when--"

"Not at all," comes a voice from behind Giles. Wes. Relief rolls off him as he moves toward them, and Faith gets a strong suspicion what they've been discussing. "Congratulations, Gabriel."

"Guess I'm a real slayer now."

"You were a real slayer before," Wes corrects her. "You have more experience now, true. But you were a slayer the moment the power came on you. And from what I understand, you had already made a significant contribution." He glances at Xander.


Giles and Wes draw the story out of Gabriel -- still watchers, above all else. Gabriel keeps downplaying her part, but Faith and Xander set the record straight.

"I'm proud of you, Gabriel," Giles says when she's finished -- or they've finished -- her report. The right thing to say -- he must be getting past whatever personal crisis Rona's leaving caused.

A door bangs downstairs and the noise level spikes. "Guess the girls are back from the cotillion," Faith says, which teases a snort from Gabriel. "Let's go celebrate." To Wes and Giles she adds, "Come down when you can."

"Don't be silly," Wes says. "We wouldn't miss a moment." It sounds genuine, not like he's grabbing at straws to avoid whatever conversation he'd been having with Giles.

The second time through the story, Gabriel needs fewer footnotes from Faith and Xander. She's funny and dramatic and manages just a little bit of swagger. The other girls, especially Kalindi and Jenny, give her the welcome that they couldn't quite achieve during that first dinner.

It gives Faith a pang. She wishes she'd had this when she came to Sunnydale. Sister-bonding with the other slayer, without all the other shit. She's glad Gabriel has it. Maybe she needs it more.

Faith and Xander slip out early to set up a room for Kalindi and Gabriel to share. "I wouldn't have thought of pairing them up," she says as she shakes out a fitted sheet.

"I didn't. It was Kalindi's idea. They have a lot more in common than you'd think."
"They both have a helluva lot of heart," Faith says.

"They do."

She bends to tuck in a corner. "They're both damn lucky to have you. Same as me."

Xander drops his sheet on the bed and comes to her. "I could have lost you tonight."

She could make a joke about how she's harder to kill than that, but it's still too close to the bone. She lets him pull her into his arms.

He murmurs, "When I think how close--"

"Shhh."

Suddenly they're all hands and hunger and tongues and sawing breath. He backs her against the wall and she hooks a leg around his and his hands are fumbling with her jeans. They haven't been this feverish since the night of the body swap, when she'd done the same to him (to her own body), when they'd fallen on each other in a frenzy to explore each other from the inside.


"Crap." He disengages, but looks like he'd lunge on her again without much prompting.

"We'll do each bed together. It'll go faster than working on both at the same time."

"Yeah yeah." Somehow they get both beds made without them looking too sloppy. He grabs her by the hand and they start for the stairs, but then he veers suddenly, pulling her into the bathroom.

They pull at each other's clothes as he backs her against the door, sliding his hand once more down her jeans. He teases and withdraws, teases and withdraws, until she is arched against him, bruising his arms with her grip. Finally he takes her over the edge and she cries out, shuddering.

"How was that?" he gasps.

"Takes the edge off a little," she says. "I can probably make it upstairs now."

He slides his hand under her shirt and gives her a reason to hurry.

***

Gabriel slides under the covers in borrowed pajamas, leaving the light on for Kalindi. Tomorrow after her shift at Starbucks she'll go to her rented room and get her stuff.

Xander and Faith never did make it back to the kitchen to show her and Kalindi to their room, but Dawn ushered them to it and helped Kalindi bring her own things from the room they'd been sharing.

When Kalindi comes back from brushing her teeth, Gabriel's so startled by the difference she almost introduces herself. She can almost see why Kalindi chooses to pile on the goth makeup -- she looks so young and vulnerable underneath. It's hard not to stare at her naked face, so Gabriel rolls onto her back and gazes at the ceiling instead.

"Sorry you had to wait," Kalindi says. "You can turn the light off now."

Gabriel's still too wired to sleep, but she thinks it might be a good idea to switch the light off
anyway, at least this first night. She's certain Kalindi has never shared a room with a boy -- or someone who looks like a boy -- and keeping any reminders under wraps might be the best thing.

"Thanks for rooming with me," she says. "I didn't know if anyone would want to."

She hears the rustle of Kalindi moving under the sheets as she gets comfortable. "When I first came from PNG, I had this parade of horrible roommates. It made everything so much worse."

"Here?" Who could be shitty to Kalindi?

"No, before I got here. I was traveling with a missionary couple, and we stayed a while in California with some people there, then I went to my aunt's. The first girl decided I was stupid because I didn't know anything about the popular bands and actors and I thought all the wrong ones were cute, and the other -- my cousin -- thinks I'm going to hell."

"You? That's nuts."

"I don't know. I don't feel like the same person I used to be. Oh, I wanted to tell you in case last night made you worry, I promise I don't cry all the time."

"I wasn't worried. You were missing your friend. Do people have computers where you're from? Can you email her?"

"Betty's dead," Kalindi says. "I had to stake her."

Fuck. Of all the things to bring up. Dumbass. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things worse."

"You didn't. Actually nothing can make that worse. I miss her. She was funny and beautiful and boy crazy -- and they were a little crazy about her, too. I could talk about things with her that I couldn't with anyone else, though not everything."

Gabriel can't imagine there being anyone in the world she could talk to about everything.

There's a muffled shriek followed by laughter from the floor above. Faith and Xander's room is at the other side of the brownstone, but it's not that big a place. There have been little explosions of noise now and then since they went up.

"Betty would have thought they were hilarious," Kalindi says. "She was always reading the racy parts of books to me and Ikanau."

"They kinda make me happy in a weird way," Gabriel admits. "I'd see them waiting on line in Starbucks, and she'd be all over him. They've been through some shit lately -- sorry." A thought occurs to her. "Did you know them during the body swap?"

"The what?"

"Never mind." She wonders if she's supposed to mention it.

"I haven't been here all that long."

She tries to imagine that. Being dropped into another body to try it out for a couple of weeks. She tries to imagine sex from that weird new perspective. She's sure they had sex from the sly grin on Faith's face when she'd turned to him in the car. *It's how we fell in love.*

Kalindi makes a sleepy little noise and fusses with her pillow. "Goodnight, Gabriel."
"Goodnight." She listens for more noises from upstairs and imagines herself in Faith's body.

***

Kalindi is good at rising and slipping out first thing in the morning without waking her roommate, but Gabriel has her beat. She's made up her bed, dressed and gone before Kalindi even stirs. She left a note for Kalindi, saying she'd gone to her rooming house for her clothes and then to her shift at Starbucks. Starbucks is one of those places Kalindi hears about all the time now that she's in the States, but she's never been. Her parents were against drinking coffee unless you were an adult, so she'd never had it at all until she moved into the hacienda. It smells much better than it tastes, she's found.

She meets with Xander in the same little lounge area in the library house, where he sips coffee and she has tea and cereal. "How'd things go with your new roomie?"

"It went fine. She's a nice person." She wonders what her parents would think about Gabriel -- nice wouldn't be the term they would use, that much she knows. They'd probably think she's a sign of everything that's wrong with America.

"I think she's got a real soft spot for you. Thanks for being so welcoming to her."

"That's how I'd want to be treated. And that's what it says in the Bible, how you should treat people."

"Right," Xander says, and he shifts in his chair.

Kalindi keeps forgetting that talk like this makes him uncomfortable. It's probably worse now that she dragged him to church and he got kidnapped by that cult. "Sorry," she says. "I'll try to cut down on that."

"On what?"

"Talking about praying and the Bible and that. People aren't so used to it here."

"You should be who you are, Kalindi." The forcefulness of this statement surprises her. "It's my job to get to know you as a person, not yours to make yourself into someone who's easy for me."

The honesty of this is hard to take in. She sits back in her chair.

"Why do I get the feeling I said that all wrong?" Xander asks. "All I meant was you should feel free to be yourself."

"I know." Her voice comes out so small. "But that's not easy for you to take."

"For reasons that have nothing to do with you. The upbringing I had, for one thing. Religious stuff was really alien to me. I knew more Jewish traditions than Christian, because my best friend is Jewish. And the religious types I did have exposure to -- well, they all seem really keen on the end of the world. And eye pokeage. You see why it makes me a little nervous."

Kalindi remembers seeing him in the Hall of Fame, the dark gap where his eye should be, turning his face up toward the priest with a knife. She doesn't know how he can joke about it. "Can I ask--"

"Anything, Kalindi."

"What happened to your eye?"
"What I call your basic boy-meets-thumb story. Crazy guy in a Roman collar named Caleb. Coincidentally, he was all about the apocalypse too. So maybe you see why the words 'religious nut' roll so trippingly off my tongue. I'll try to curb that."

The image of what that must have been likes makes her shudder.

"Hey. No mental movies. Giles will kick my ass if he finds out I'm traumatizing my slayers. There's something else I need you to talk about before Faith and I head out running. Willow sorted out your home school placement tests, and you're ahead of the game in most of your subjects, but for some reason you're down on the science. You know what's going on there?"

She does. Her parents insisted she refuse any instruction which went against their teachings. "No, I don't," she stammers. She doesn't want him thinking she's a religious nut too.

"Check in with Willow when you and Wes are finished with your walk. She said she'd be glad to tutor you."

Faith leans in the door frame. "Hey, lover. You ready for our run?"

"That's me," Xander says to Kalindi. "Drop the bad news and run." He winks. "Don't worry. You're smart. You'll get up to speed in no time."

She's not so sure.

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Kalindi seems as uncomfortable with this arrangement as Wesley feels. It's not entirely easy to tell: Beneath her mop of dyed black hair and her goth makeup, it's hard to read anything. He'd take her silence for surly teen diffidence, had he not been around her more. She's shy and awkward, more than anything else.

Wesley thinks of his own changes in image in his younger years. Some of them must have seemed as ludicrous to others as Kalindi's persona does to him. Rogue demon hunter -- Christ. He hadn't even had the excuse of being a teenager.

He feels ridiculous by his proximity to her, not to mention the obvious difference in their ages. What must it look like to observers? He makes no moves that might be mistaken for inappropriate interest.

He has lost all ability or desire to make small talk -- not that he ever had any great facility for it. He maintains the habitual silence of his solitary walks, and Kalindi seems too cowed to initiate any conversation herself. She allows him to take the lead, and he directs their path to the university campus, where at least he might look less like a Humbert Humbert.

At times she drifts away from him, caught up in evaluating her surroundings. It's only then that he remembers the purported reason behind their walk. She takes out a little notebook whose red cover is elaborately embroidered fabric, like Chinese silk. She makes a few notes, but doesn't share her thoughts with him. But then, why should she? He's given her no reason to believe they might be welcome.

Damn Harris for putting him in this position.

Pushing himself to speak feels almost like the first time he'd tried to talk after Justine slashed him. The memory, so long suppressed, is unbearably fresh. Without volition, his hand rises to touch the scar. "What do you think?"
She seems almost as startled at the sound of his voice as he is. "Oh. Well, I ... Well, it has potential." A polite lie, that much is plain.

"You're not excited, though."

Her blood red lips twitch a little smile. "Meh, my friend Claire would say. I like terrain that's kind of rugged."

"Ah. Where are you used to hashing?"

"Back home in Moresby. That's in P--" She realizes Wesley has stopped in his tracks, and stutters to a halt.

"You've hashed in Port Moresby?" he says, incredulous.

"That's where I lived, until late summer."

Of course, of course, that's the reason Harris wanted him to spend time with the girl. There are so many contradictory aspects to her that he can hardly hold them all in his head at once.

"You sound like you know it," she says.

"I traveled in Papua New Guinea a number of years ago." He'd made a study of sanguma -- attack sorcery -- as his thesis before his certification as a watcher. "Not that many expatriates traveled the city streets on foot," he says.

"I know. The hashmen get a special dispensation for being crazy, I think. Did you like it there?"

"It's not an easy place," he says. "For travelers, for locals. But it rewards one with a lavishness that's hard to believe. I've never been so astonished -- on a daily basis -- as I was traveling there. Such wild beauty."

She nods. "I wish I'd been able to travel with my father more. He went up into the highlands, all the remote places. I loved every part of it, though. Even the buai-stained streets in Moresby."

"You miss it."

"For all kinds of reasons."

They're all exiles here, Wesley realizes. This girl, the Sunnydale contingent, the boy slayer Gabriel, Wesley himself. All of them cut off from home in some fundamental way. Perhaps the departed slayer -- he can't remember her name -- never fit in precisely because she had a place she could envision returning to.

"We'll find something better," he murmurs.

"Beg pardon?"

"A route for your hash. We'll keep coming out to explore until we find something suitable."

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Giles feels restless. The slayers are training, Xander is busy with some project he uses as therapy, Dawn is working on Sumerian translations that he's promised to check for her later, Wesley is poring over maps on the dining room table, that insufferable boy is downstairs in the kitchen.
Giles has spent the afternoon in the library looking over Robin's latest shipment of books. While this is something that normally soothes him or inspires him, today he finds himself impatient with the task.

Xander's questions have unsettled him. What does he need? Time away? Another focus for his work? Another life completely? How necessary is he, anyway? To see Xander grow into his new role has been exhilarating, but it shows Giles how he'd let the Council mold him and limit him in ways that he's not sure he can transcend. It inspires him to think a watcher can be more than was encouraged or allowed in the past, but it makes him aware that he's more of the old guard than the new.

With an irritated huff of breath, he abandons the books mid-sorting. Let the library wait. Perhaps an expedition to the specialty grocer would be the very thing right now. He can restock the pantry with Marmite for Kalindi and himself, and look for some other treats she might enjoy. Brave as she is, she's homesick, and Xander told him Rona's departure affected her surprisingly deeply.

He hunts up the car keys and heads out into a blustery late October day. Paper cutouts of green witches, orange pumpkins and black cats greet him wherever he looks. The cats put him in mind of Serafina's cat, who'd looked just as menacing in smoke grey, back arched, spitting and hissing. And clawing. Faith wasn't the only slayer who'd come to him for first aid, though she'd been mauled the worst.

Poor Faith. She'd been so worried for Xander, so frightened of losing him. As Giles dabbed at her wounds she'd made herself vulnerable in ways she never had before. Like Xander, she's come so far since the fall of Sunnydale.

How far have I come? It's an uncomfortable question to contemplate. He discovers he's thoughtlessly piled so many things into his handbasket that they're beginning to slide off onto the grocery floor. He deposits the handbasket into a cart and keeps shopping.

Has he risked himself at all, opened himself in the way Xander and Faith have? Or has he entrenched himself in his old ways, even as the work of the council shifts and changes around him? If he hasn't grown in the same way Xander and Faith and these brave young slayers have, it's largely because he lacks the courage to be open, to make himself vulnerable.

He shoves his cart to the checkout and hands over a credit card without taking note of the total.

When thefuck did I become Quentin Travers and Roger Wyndam-Pryce?

He stuffs the receipt and card into his wallet and gathers up his purchases. Bundling the bags into the boot, he looks back toward the store and the hissing black cat taped in the window.

At the light where he normally turns for the hacienda, he goes straight. He finds himself in the Flats, parking in front of Serafina's storefront.

He feels like a fool, but he takes that as an encouraging sign. When had Quentin or Roger ever felt like fools?

No witches or cats taped in her window, just her customary flyer. 99% accurate. It makes Giles grin.

He pushes through the door.

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Serafina's settled into an overstuffed chair with her bare feet tucked beneath her and her cat in her lap, holding a book in an awkward grip to avoid interfering with the beast. She looks up at the sound of the bell and offers a warm smile. "Rupert."

"Hello, Serafina." He feels like a complete berk.

"Wendy's fine. Everyone who rescues me from giant lizard gods gets to call me Wendy."

"I'm afraid I had very little to do with the actual rescuing."

"I heard it was a collaborative effort."

He smiles. "Wendy, then."

"Please, sit." She gathers the cat in her arms to its squawk of protest, rising from her chair. "Can I get you something? Let me put on some tea. It's a pretty raw day out there." She's wearing a long caftanish thing, batiked in smudged purples with spirals and jagged lines, the sort that's endemic in new age so-called bookshops. Still, she wears it rather well.

Giles doesn't really want some dreadful Lipton swill, but he accepts her offer and she disappears behind a curtain, the cat in her arms. He hears the clatter of a tea kettle and then crockery, then she emerges, catless. A mob of students in costume flashes by the front window. It's a few days early, but Americans are fond of stretching their holidays.

Wendy crosses to the door and locks it, flipping the sign in the door to the side that says "closed," then draws the curtains that obscure the lower half of the window. "I haven't decided what I'm doing about Halloween night," she says. "I'm guessing business would be good, but it gets crazy enough around here on a normal weekend night."

"And I suspect you're a bit gunshy after being abducted from your own workplace."

"A bit," she says wryly. The kettle whistles and she hurries to attend it.

Giles takes it as a good sign that she doesn't return immediately bearing mugs with teabags. More clinking of pottery, and she comes out empty-handed. "A few more minutes," she says.

"You're welcome to spend the evening at the hacienda, if you'd rather avoid the Flats," Giles says. "I can't promise we won't have our own band of rowdy youth, but it's safe to say they won't have drunk themselves paralytic."

"I'll keep that in mind. Be right back." She returns to the back room, then comes forth with a tray bearing mugs, a teapot and a plate of scones, which she sets on the table. Wendy stirs the pot just as Giles would, then pours the tea through an ornate silver strainer that she places over each cup. "I imagine you take it milky," she says, handing him the small cream pitcher. Once he's finished adjusting the lightness of his tea, she does the same, then settles back into her chair. The cat appears, seemingly out of nowhere, to assume its rightful place on her lap. "Rupert, what brings you here?"

He hesitates. "I don't know." He hadn't meant to be quite that honest about it. Once it's out, he seems unable to stop there. "I find myself feeling rather restless. At loose ends."

"Would you like a reading? As a gift, I'm not drumming up business."

"Oh good lord no." Again this pronouncement is much more unembroidered than he'd intended. "I mean--"
Wendy laughs. "No worries. Let's just call it a social visit."

Looking at it this way, he'd almost rather have the reading. What does he have to say to this woman? This is where following impulse leads, especially random, unfocussed impulse.

"It's good to talk to someone from Sunnydale," she says. "I can't bear to use it for effect, as part of the persona. But telling casual acquaintances where I'm from -- it's Oh my god, where were you when it fell in the sinkhole. Sometimes I just want to talk about this place where I lived a good chunk of my life. Xander said the same thing, about someone who *gets* the whole Sunnydale vibe. But in some ways it was just another town, and freaky as it was, there are things I really miss, and they're the same kinds of things you'd miss about anyplace."

Giles sips at his tea. After watching the care she took with it, he's not as surprised to find it's quite good. "What do you miss?"

"I miss living near the ocean and the weather there -- or blessed lack thereof," she says. "But that's sort of generic California. The things I miss about Sunnydale -- I loved the movie theater, that it hadn't been hacked into a sixplex. I miss the flower shop on the corner, because Ramon had such an eye for putting together combinations you'd never expect, but that looked so amazing and beautiful. And he always made me feel like the most rare and gorgeous flower in the shop, every time I went in."

Giles is astonished by this outpouring. He has not really thought about this at all, what he lost in Sunnydale that had nothing to do with it as the hellmouth and everything to do with it as a town. He feels almost as though he slept through his seven years there.

"I miss being known in places like that," she goes on. "In the dry cleaners and the bank. Having a history. I miss having that kind of relationship with my clients, too. I had regulars in Sunnydale, and here it's just college kids on a goof, more often than not. I miss seeing things unfold in their lives, always in ways I couldn't quite imagine even though I'd seen them. I miss my stitch 'n' bitch group. I miss the Book Crossing people, and finding the books they left in the Espresso Pump. And don't get me started about the Pump -- I was two punches away from getting a free coffee when I left. The coffee in this city, it is *dire.*"

Giles chuckles. "You do indeed have much in common with Xander. He's switched his allegiance to Starbucks."

She makes a face. "Their coffee tastes burnt to me. And the Pump was more than coffee. I miss the open mic nights they had at there. You played and sang there a few times, then you dropped out, which was too bad. I liked hearing you."

He finds himself flummoxed by this. He'd almost forgotten that self, groping about for something to do as his slayer seemed to need him less and less. Suddenly what Wendy says about history makes perfect sense. How strange it is to know that someone remembers that self -- someone outside the circle of people that he expects to hold his history.

"Do you still play?" she asks.

"No," he stammers. "My guitar's back in England, gathering dust."

"That's too bad. Anyway. I've been monopolizing the conversation long enough. Tell me what you miss."

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This is not at all the sort of conversation Giles expected to be having. It's definitely not the sort he does very well. He begins slathering jam on one of the scones. "I miss my flat there," he finally says. "Though I actually left it a year and a half or so before Sunnydale's collapse."

"Tell me about it."

"It was rather economical in size, but comfortable. Filled with books." He gazes out the window for a moment, eye caught by a pair of young men in costume pausing in the middle of the sidewalk to kiss and clutch at one another. It reminds Giles of himself and Ethan in the first flush of their acquaintance. He forces his attention from them. "Quiet, most of the time. The entrance was off the street, facing a sunken courtyard. It suited me."

"I think I know that place," she exclaims. "Those apartments on Olivera Street, right?"

"Exactly."

"I took a look at it. I'm a horrible lookie-lou."

"A what?"

"Someone who goes to all the open houses with no intention of buying or renting. I love looking at people's places. That was a very sweet apartment. Like a hobbit hole."

Giles is sure he's not meant to envision himself as Bilbo Baggins -- elderly, solitary, hairy in the wrong places, with peculiar habits -- but he does. "I don't know that I'd describe it quite that way," he stammers.

She ignores his discomfort. "I can see why you liked it. The layout was great, and it just had a good feel. Some places do, even if there's a million things wrong with the structure or the layout, and you just like them, against all reason. Others, you walk in and don't like the way a picture's hanging, and it's a deal breaker. So what else?"

"What else?" he echoes stupidly.

"What do you miss about Sunnydale?"

He struggles to think of something that meant something to him, a place that he can describe with half the eloquence she's devoted to the florist's shop. Was there any place, any person he related to on their own merits, apart from how they connected to Buffy or some crisis?

"I quite liked the desert," he finally says. "The way you feel about the ocean, I had a similar feeling about the desert. There was a sacred site where I sometimes went." He can't think now why he spent so little time there. He'd only done so when there was some urgent need, never for himself. "But Sunnydale itself -- I never let my guard down for long enough to become attached to those simple things. Places were little more than potential battlegrounds. People were divided between those we fought and those we tried to save." He looks out onto the street, looking to see if the kissing boys are still somewhere in sight. They're gone, or lost to the swirling masses of youths. "I find I'm in danger of doing the same thing here."

"There's always time to change."

Giles shakes his head. This is training, so deeply ingrained in him that he can't see a way of rooting it out.

"I always find it useful to have a reading whenever I feel really stuck," Wendy says softly.
When I feel really stuck. The phrase sounds ludicrous falling from her lips. He can't imagine Wendy feeling trapped in a rut under any circumstances.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind? I'd love to gift you a reading."

An odd sensation buzzes through him. "Yes, I will," he says. "I'd believe I'd like that."

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The cat protests again as Wendy rises to move to the low table set against the wider end of the sliver-shaped room. As she flips up the altar cloth that covers it, Giles realizes it's actually an old card catalog cabinet with the legs shortened. She slides open a drawer and extracts a silk-wrapped bundle, which she sets on the table.

"I have a lot of different decks," she says, "but I think we'll go traditional with you. You know the Rider-Waite?"

"I do, yes."

"It's always been one of my favorites. I love Pamela Coleman Smith's illustrations -- they're so full of feeling. She was the first painter Alfred Stieglitz ever exhibited in his gallery, actually. He championed a whole string of women photographers and painters before Georgia O'Keeffe. He believed women had this purity and innocence of vision -- translation: primitive and childlike, which is the same happy horseshit white men of that era said about people of color, too. I kind of hope Georgia thumped that notion out of his head."

Giles vows never to think of this woman as silly again.

She grins. "In a purely metaphorical sense, of course."

"No doubt," Giles says drily.

"So. This is the point where I always give the speech about intent. If you come in with the idea that this is all crap, that's all that'll come out in the reading. The cards don't waste their time with someone who refuses to be open. Since I opened here I do a lot of readings that are worthless, because a lot of my clients don't take that to heart, so just keep in mind I'd be happier to give you a good gift than a worthless one."

He remembers the times he and Ethan fooled around with the Tarot compared with the one reading Jenny Calendar had done for him. "I understand that, yes."

"I know I don't have to give you the 'None of this is set in stone' speech. You just spit in the face of prophecy, and something tells me that wasn't your first time."

This raises a smile from him.

"So. One last thing before we get started. If there's some kind of question life's bringing up for you, different spreads approach them in different ways. The Celtic cross and past/present/future are the most common ones I do, but the Gypsy wish spread is very popular around here."

"No," Giles blurs, startling not just Wendy but himself as well. "There are two rather long stories connected with that, but let's just say no to the Gypsy wish."

Wendy nods. "I never argue with gut feeling. The decision spread is probably my other most-requested. I've got some others. The karmic spread, the life mission spread, though that one's a bit
elaborate."

"Let's keep it simple," Giles says. Though god knows nothing in his life feels simple right now.

"How about past/present/future? That's a simple seven-card spread, but it's really valuable for someone who's taking stock." As Giles nods, she warms their tea from the pot, then moves the plate of scones aside. Once she settles back into her chair and takes the silk-wrapped cards into her hand, the cat leaps into her lap and curls into a ball.

"It's quite a different cat from the one we sheltered," Giles remarks.

She begins shuffling the cards. "Lolo definitely belongs to her space and her person. And if I haven't said how much I appreciate you all taking her in--"

"You have. And we were glad to help. It's Faith who did the most in that regard. And now that I think of it, Faith and Lolo are quite a bit alike."

"Then I'll have to get to know her better." She sets the deck before him. "Hold your question in your mind as you cut the deck, putting the cards into three piles."

It's difficult to concentrate on one question, everything boiling up into confusion about his new role. Giles decides the confusion is his question, and separates the cards as directed.

"Now, choose the pile you'd like me to deal from."

He taps the middle pile.

She gathers the piles back into one, with the center one on top, then swiftly deals seven cards in a straight row. "Wow," she says. "I promised Xander I'd stop saying that, but I don't think I've ever seen five of the Major Arcana in a seven-card spread. There's some powerful energy going on here. You remember what I said about nothing being set in stone?"

Giles nods.

"Well, you can kinda toss that out the window. This spread's heavy on the destiny. It's more about being ready for it and meeting the challenge than changing what's coming."

_Same as it ever was_, he thinks.

"Other things I'm noticing just looking at the spread as a whole: The only two cards that are in a reversed position are Minor Arcana cards. So again, your Major Arcana are very powerful forces. There are three cards that show two pillars, representing duality. There are colors that seem to predominate in your past and your present, which might be something to look at."

Giles cradles the tea mug in his hands.

Wendy gathers her white hair in her hands, then lets it tumble around her shoulders again. "Ready?"

Giles nods again.

She makes a V of two fingers and points at the first two cards. "These two cards represent your past. This is the only place where all the cards are Major Arcana, so destiny was particularly strong here. Does that make sense?"

"I was born and raised to a calling, yes. It was never considered that I'd do anything other than
what I'm doing now."

"See, that's something we don't see much of in the US. I'm not sure I've ever had a spread with a past this strong." She takes a sip of tea. "So what have we got here? The Sun, which is all about mastery and balance, achievement and happiness. And next to it, the Heirophant, whose crown signifies heaven and robes signify earth. His position is to bridge the unseen realms and the masses. He prizes conformity, a kind of universal code in approaching the higher realms. This card often shows us someone who himself has conformed for the greater good. Just looking at the juxtaposition here, I'd say that conformity is what your destiny required, and there was a time when you thrived in this. Your success made you happy."

It's been a long time since he felt he thrived. When he first came to be Buffy's watcher, before the shattering losses in the wake of Angelus, yes. And before, believing he'd be the equal to any challenge. So easy to believe before the reality of a flesh and blood slayer.

"There's a lot of red showing up here, too. Which can have a lot of meanings. Danger, aggression, power, desire, passion for life."

Giles thinks of his period of rebellion -- which he suspects may have been destined as well. His time with Ethan had been ruled by desire for men and women, desire for power, and certainly had been a period of grave danger that roared into the future after him on several occasions. Giles wonders if, so long after his last appearance, Ethan's about to unleash chaos on his life again.

"The next three cards represent the present." She sips her tea again, considering. "Twice more you've got the two pillars or towers. Duality -- positive and negative influences, or to put it in more black and white terms, good and evil. I think you've had to be that black and white about it, considering your reality. Here you've got a Minor Arcana card trying to break that strong grasp of destiny, right between the Moon and the High Priestess. There are several different meanings the Moon can convey. The full moon rules emotion, and so it can refer to a time of intensified emotion. It also deals with intuition, dreams of portent and psychic flashes. If you've been having dreams or intuitions about something happening, this might be an indication that you're right. It can also mean events that aren't foreseen, or if you want to be literal, it could refer to things that occur under cover of night." She offers a little smile. "I gather that's never too far off base."

Giles reflects her smile back to her, but he feels it's surely a weak imitation. "It certainly applies, yes."

"I wouldn't discount the emotional sense, either. The next card is the King of Cups, reversed. In either position, the King is a man of emotion, though it may be like a deep-running current. In this case, there's something going on emotionally that he can't quite handle. He's been cast into heavy seas and risks being overwhelmed. You can interpret that in different ways, so if there's one that clicks for you -- or an interpretation you really hate -- that might be something to look at." Wendy fusses with her tea mug, but doesn't drink. "It could be indicating a shy man, and nothing more. It could mean he's being called on to handle a situation in with maturity and wisdom, but he's just not up to it for whatever reason. Or he could be dealing with losses that are causing him to overreact or else to withdraw -- either by being emotionally distant or and becoming reclusive. If nothing leaps out at you, think on it for the next few days, or watch what comes at you."

"Christ. "Could it just mean that I'm British?"

Wendy laughs, and he finds he quite likes the sound of it. "It might. Your third present card is the High Priestess. Another card that's all about duality, positive and negative, male and female. There's a lot that's partially hidden here -- the veil behind her obscures the sea, her cloak hides the scroll of divine truth. So this one's about half-seen truths, hidden realms and intuition. It could also
represent an intuitive woman, but what it's telling you is this is a valid, valuable way of understanding the world, so stay open to it. All three cards have a lot of blue in them, which usually represents calm and thoughtfulness, but here --" She shakes her head. "It doesn't seem to fit with the turmoil that's going on. Ocean depths, that's what I'd go with. There's plenty more to you than what shows on the surface."

Despite this comment, Giles feels more revealed than makes him entirely comfortable. He makes an effort not to squirm.

She taps the last two cards. "And we have more contradiction in your two future cards. You've got Major and Minor Arcana cards, reversed and upright, with no one color that predominates in this part. You've got the Eight of Wands, reversed. Upright, it's about efforts that are bearing fruit. Travel and work flying toward success. So reversed the wands or arrows seem to be falling to the ground. There could be conflict or jealousy, or delays. You might want to bring about delay yourself, though. Sometimes this card represents emotion out of balance, and since you've got some other cards that lean that way, watch for anger and other strong emotion. Slow things down, step back and watch before you act out of emotion."

Wendy taps her finger on the Eight of Wands. "So. Big downer. But right next to it, you've got Strength, a great card. I love her because she's another woman who's got the love for a fierce kitty. See? She's not just controlling the lion, she's tickling his chin. And he's licking her hand. This card is all about love conquering fear, which is really what strength is. There's this song by Jimmie Dale Gilmore, 'Midnight Train,' which is kind of a Buddhist country-blues song. It's about death, but it's about choosing love over fear. A song that's about how to approach death which is really all about how to live your entire life. This is an awesome card, because it's not telling you that you have to go find strength, it's reminding you that you already have it. So. The overall picture. Duality seems to be a constant in your life. You may be in rough emotional waters -- stop and try to be aware of that when things get overwhelming. Listening to your intuition will be valuable. You're ready for the challenges that might be coming if you let strength conquer your fear."

She sits back in her chair, as if exhausted. "So. How's your whiplash?"

Giles laughs weakly. "Rather pronounced."

"Does it make sense?"

"Quite a bit of sense. You have a gift."

Wendy shakes her head. "That was just the cards. Sometimes I have flashes of intuition. Apparently I had one the first time I met Xander, though I don't remember that reading."

"I believe he remembers it well enough for both of you."

She mirrors his smile. "I think so. I hope I haven't traumatized you too."

"Not at all. But I confess I'll be mulling this over for a while."

"Of course. Be good to yourself the next few days while you do."

"I seem to have purchased an entire carload of British comfort foods on the way here, so I believe that was already in the, em, cards."

Again, she laughs, and he enjoys the sound of it. Exhausted, he thanks her and takes his leave. As he opens the door to go, he turns back. "Do come spend Halloween with us." He gestures toward the street. "Don't waste your evening on this clueless lot."
Wendy has hoisted the smoke-grey cat up to nestle under her chin. "All right. You've got a deal."

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Much to his irritation, Wesley keeps finding that his thoughts return to the challenge of devising a hash route. It annoys him that Xander's plan to draw him into the life of the house is stronger than his desire to be left alone. A light tap at the door fuels his impatience. "Who is it?" he calls out.

Frowning at the response, he goes to open the door. "Did you just say 'the British food fairy'?"

"I did," Giles confirms. Uninvited, he steps in through the not-terribly-adequate opening Wesley has deliberately left. He carries two plastic grocery bags in each hand. "I seem to have run amuck in the import food shop. I keep a few things for myself and Kalindi, and apparently I slipped into a fugue state when I stopped by today. I thought there might be something you'd like from the motherland."

Wesley can't quite get a sense of Giles's mood. It seems unsettled, yet oddly buoyant. Wesley wonders if he's been drinking. He doesn't smell of alcohol.

"Just stock the pantry," he suggests pointedly, "and I'll raid it whenever I'm inclined."

"Not with that swarm of locusts. Only the Marmite is safe. I'll share some packets of Jaffa cakes after dinner tomorrow, but if I leave it all downstairs it'll be gone by morning. Let's see what I have here." He sets two of the bags on Wesley's desk, heedless of anything he might have been doing there. "There's quite a lot of chocolate; I suppose the Halloween decorations everywhere were an undue influence." He rummages through one of the bags. "I have Cadbury Fruit and Nut, Dairy Milk, Flake, Nestle Lion Bars and Aero, jelly babies, licorice allsorts, Turkish delight, Maynard wine gums, Dairy Toffee. Nothing?" He starts in on the second bag. "Here we've got Churchill's shortbread, HobNobs, crumpets, Devon cream, lemon curd, Tiptree's orange/malt whiskey marmalade and their green fig preserve, kippers, anchovy paste, mushy peas, Heinz baked beans, and in the other bags I have some Woodpecker and some Guinness." Finally he looks up. "Surely there's something that feels a bit like home."

It's Chinese food with Fred that would feel like home. "Did you get any Ginger Nut?"

"I thought so." He dives back into one of the bags, then emerges triumphant, offering the packet of biscuits. "There's nothing else?"

"A Cadbury Flake bar, if you've enough." His father never allowed them in the house when Wesley was a child, deeming them too messy.

"Have two."

Wesley's curiosity gets the best of him. "Your absence at dinner caused a bit of a stir."

"Oh?" Giles seems suddenly vague. "Oh, yes. I'd quite forgotten dinner."

"You were still on your shopping fugue?"

"I, em, did a bit of rambling." He turns toward Wesley, a jar of fig preserve in his hand. "How -- if you don't find it too intrusive, how have you found outliving your destiny?"

"I beg your -- my destiny? You mean being a watcher?"

"Yes. We've both been groomed for it, felt the weight of destiny rather heavily. How did you move
beyond that?"

Wesley offers a wry half smile. "It rather helps having been sacked by the Council."

"Not necessarily," Giles says pointedly.

"Ah. Yes, I suppose. Well, in my case I found a substitute destiny. Much the same as the old one, without the official bureaucracy one could throw about. Is there something --?"

Giles waves a hand. "Change and middle age. It's bound to blow over when I'm dead." Again, his manner seems curiously ... fizzy. He bends to gather up the bags at his feet. "I'd best be delivering my treats to Kalindi before it gets late. If you think of something that would give you the warm, fuzzy -- make that dank, grey -- feeling of home, you know where to find me."

Wesley trails after him to the door. "Yes." He opens the door for Giles. "Thank you for thinking of me."

He flickers a smile. "Well. It's only right to share the bounty. Good night, Wesley."

"Good night." He closes the door and stands beside it, frowning.

*How very puzzling.*

***

Kalindi settles into her chair with her milky tea and toast and marmalade, while Xander pours milk into a deep bowl of Cocoa Puffs.

"I'll probably regret these when the sugar rush wears off," Xander says, "but I got to them before the slayers descended on them, and you have to celebrate those small triumphs."

"I've never had those."

"Want a taste?" Xander passes her the bowl.

She's hesitant at first, then digs in his spoon and tries it. "Wow," she says, passing back the bowl. "Those are really sweet."

"Yes," Xander agrees happily. "Yes, they are."

"Want to try my toast and marmalade?"

"I'm not really a marmalade guy, but I'm game." She passes over her plate and he samples it. "Hey. Pretty nice."

"Mr. Giles bought it for me at the British food store. A lot of what I ate in PNG was Australian, which is more like British than American food. He got me some things yesterday so I'd feel a little more at home."

"That was good of him. Is it working?"

"In a way. In a way it makes me miss home more." She sips her tea. "Mainly it's the people who are making me feel welcome here. Mr. Giles and you and Gabriel especially. Dawn's been really good to me too. Jenny -- I'm not sure she gets me, but she makes me feel like we're wanlain because you're my watcher too."
"I'm glad you're feeling welcomed. How'd things go with Mr. Wyndam-Pryce yesterday?"

She hesitates.

"You can be honest, it's just me and you."

"I could tell he didn't want to be there at first, but he seemed to be warming up a little after a while."

Xander nods. "It has nothing to do with you. He's dealing with some things. We'll see how things go. If it's not good for both of you, we can forget the idea."

"I'm willing to give it some time. And I think the hash would be fun."

He finishes off his bowl of cereal and sets it aside. "Anything else on your mind right now?"

"Well," she says, then hesitates. "I'd sort of like to go back to the hospital chapel and see Pastor Marlene. I want to let her know you're okay, and make sure she is."

"That never occurred to me, but that's a great idea. I do really like her. Also, what about going back there on Sundays? You probably want to do that."

"I'd like to, but I don't know if anyone would want to come too. It's probably asking a lot of you, considering last time."

He removes a small notebook from his pocket, scrawls a note inside. "We'll work something out. But definitely, we'll get you over to see her before then. Today, if you want. In fact, why don't you and Wesley explore that area for the hash route, and you can stop in to see her then?"

"That would be great."

"Tell her hello for me." He closes the notebook and slips the notebook back in his pocket. "I think I hear Faith thumping up the stairs. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about this morning?"

"Just a question. I don't know if you'd know."

"Ask away."

"Do you know who Emma Frost is?" There are so many references she doesn't get, movie stars and singers she doesn't know.

Xander blinks at her for a moment, then his face darkens. "Sonofabitch!" He jumps up and thunders down the stairs.

***

"Sorry," Xander mutters as he passes Faith on the stairs. "I've gotta take care of something real quick."

He cuts through the back yards to the center brownstone and bursts into the kitchen. Andrew's at the kitchen island, muttering over a package of chicken, a cookbook and a piece of notepaper. Unfortunately, Willow, Kennedy and Dawn are sitting at the table, Dawn with the newspaper, Willow and Kennedy making with the conspiratorial lovers' murmuring at the other end.

Lovely. An audience.
Xander doesn't care. "Andrew, what the *fuck* is your problem?"

Andrew doesn't look up. "I don't have enough chicken breasts to double this recipe, and there's not enough--"

Xander slaps his hand on the island countertop. "Andrew. Put down the fucking cookbook and look at me."

He does, but there's attitude. "What?"

"That's what I'm asking. What the hell is your deal? Kalindi's down here helping you out because she's a sweet person, and god knows what you're telling her the whole time. If it's bitching about me, and about Faith, she doesn't need it, and neither do I."

He cocks his head in this funny way he has, and Xander realizes it has a cornered-rat air to it, the panicked/defiant poised/coiled energy posture of *Which path do I take?* Only with Andrew it's *Which lie do I tell?* "Why? What did she say I said?"

"Well, that's the funny thing. She didn't. She just asked me if I know who Emma Frost is."

His chin comes up. "What makes you think it was me?"

"Oh, come the fuck on. Nobody in this house but me and you would know that name."

"Guys?" Dawn interjects. "Xander --"

Xander holds up his hand, keeping his eyes fixed on Andrew. "Dawn, I'm sorry, but this needs attention. Andrew, if you've got any problem with me and my own very private grieving process and how long or short it seems to be, there's nobody you should be discussing it with but me. No, wait. If you've got a problem with that, you should just shut the fuck up, because it's *none of your fucking business*."

"She wasn't even gone six months when you --"

"What part of 'none of your fucking business' don't you understand? Anya wasn't Jean Gray, got that? She made a real difference and she died a hero's death and I loved her -- and that last part, incidentally, is also none of your fucking business. This is real life, not a comic, this is infinitely more complicated than the Marvel verse, and okay, I can't believe I just said that because *nothing* is more complicated than the Marvel verse, unless maybe it's the DC verse. Whatever. It's not something for you to comment on to my slayers. Ever."

Andrew plants his fists on his hips, which makes Xander long to plant his own fist somewhere too. "All you want me for is to cook and clean and do laundry, keep my mouth shut and be cheerful."

"I personally don't give a shit if you're cheerful or not, but the rest pretty much covers it."

"Okay, Xander?" Willow says. "Needle's approaching red zone." She's left the table and is approaching the island.

Andrew's not appreciating her defense. "I didn't mind all that much until *he* got here. Gabriel. *He* gets to be a slayer. I've been helping you out since Sunnydale, and nobody ever asked me if I wanted to be a slayer. Then he comes, and right away he's an insider. It's not fair!"

"Gabriel's transgendered, you twerp," Willow says. "She's a slayer because she's a she."
"So somebody you like and want to let into the club gets to be an honorary girl. Well if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck and pees --"

"Andrew!" Xander snaps.

He does that prissy thing with his lips. "I'm just speaking truth to power. Everybody takes me for granted, and nobody helps but Kalindi."

"Nobody's holding a gun to your head," Xander says. "In fact, if you want a better metaphor, it's more like you're a wad of gum we've had stuck to our shoe since Sunnydale. If you want to scrape yourself off at long last, have right at it."

"Maybe I will."

"Fine. Don't let the screen door hit you on the ass on your way out."

"Fine. Just watch me." He yanks his apron over his head and throws it onto the counter, then heads for the kitchen stairs.

Xander turns to watch his progress and sees their shouting match has gained a sizable audience. He sighs. "I guess I just made a big household problem here. I'll deal with it just as soon as I get back, but I think I need to go on my run now."

***

"You want to tell me what that was all about?" Faith asks once they're a few blocks from the hacienda. She can tell he's still furious from his unaccustomed speed.

"Not especially."

"You protectin' your precious little wifey, or is there something you're hiding?"

"Neither." Sounds like a lie.

"Slow the fuck down, you'll give yourself a stitch. Then tell me who this Emma Frost chick is."

Xander's pace falters and he nearly stops.

"Kennedy said that was all that set you off, just the name. So tell me who the hell you two were yellin' about down there."

"Emma Frost isn't a real person, she's a character."

"Sure. Which explains why you were having a shouting match about her."

"He was using the reference to snark about me and you to Kalindi. She goes down to the kitchen and helps him out, and he spends the whole time bitching me out to her."

"So who gives a fuck?"

"I do."

"Why do you give a damn what that watery little shit thinks?"

"Because it was as much about you as about me."
They're caught at a light, jogging in place, when an old woman with a cart full of laundry joins them and they clam up.

"Let's forget the run and grab some coffee," Faith suggests.

"That's not the most private place."

"No one stays at this hour, it's just people grabbin' and goin'."

He huffs a sigh, his jaw tensed. He doesn't want to talk about this at all, she knows.

"You made a promise not to keep shit from me."

"I know."

"I'd rather hear something I don't like hearing than have you hold things back from me."

"I know." He sighs again. "All right. Let's go." The light changes and he moves forward at a run, but she catches his arm.

"Let's walk." She slips her hand into his.

Xander looks at her in surprise.

"So what's the deal with Emma Frost that just her name makes you go ballistic?"

"It's so complicated. That was a dig on about five different levels, that's why it pissed me off."

"Okay, well who is she?"

"Emma Frost is one of the X-Men."

Faith laughs. "This is comic book shit?"

He colors. "Yeah, well."

"And what's the deal with the X-Men again?"

"They're mutants. So Emma was Scott Summers' second wife."

"And who the hell is Scott Summers?"

"He's, uh, one of the X-Men too." He mumbles something she doesn't catch.

"What?"

"Cyclops. Scott Summers is Cyclops."

A curt laugh gusts out of her before she can stop it. "Sorry. That little fucker is some piece of work."

"Oh, he's even cleverer than you think. Scott Summers' first wife was Jean Grey, Phoenix. She was killed by a big bad and Scott hooks up with Emma, and everyone thinks it's way too fast."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch." They've made it to Starbucks. He opens the door for her and they join the long line
to where Gabriel is taking orders. "That's still not every level of nasty. The one that doesn't work is where Scott and Emma have a telepathic affair before Jean's death. There's more, but let's forget it."

"Let's not."

"You've got the gist. The rest of it is gratuitous shittiness."

Faith glowers. "Tell me."

"Well, for one, Emma Frost is not a stranger to the bustier. She puts the yay! in busty-yay."

"And for another?"

"She starts off evil. She goes good, but there's a level of doubt among some characters about how sincere her change in path is. This is the crap he's muttering about to Kalindi while she's helping him in the kitchen."

"Who knew you could insult somebody with fuckin' Shakespearean complexity through comic books."

"It's a talent," Xander says.

"Little fuck," Faith snarls, just as the customer ahead moves aside and leaves her standing at the counter.

Gabriel's eyes widen.

"Not you," she hurries to say. "Andrew. There was excitement after you left."

Gabriel calls off their drinks without waiting for the order. "Pastries?" They order and she puts their scones into bakery bags. "What's up with Andrew?"

"He may be history," Xander says. "I kind of told him to take a permanent hike."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Take your break with us if you want, and we'll fill you in. We'll probably still be here."

They grab their coffees when the barista has them ready and find a table in the corner. Faith goes to work on her blueberry scone. "So, now that we've thoroughly explored the douchery that is Andrew, how about you telling me why that made you go so completely apeshit?"

"What, that wasn't enough?"

"You've been pretty easygoing lately. I thought those evil cult mushrooms had mellowed you completely. I've never heard you go off like that."

Xander fidgets with his scone. "Buffy has. And Willow. Even Giles. It's just been a long while."

"What set you off?"

"I dunno."

"Ya think maybe some part of you believes he might be right?"
The scone crumbles under his nervous fingers. "What? No! Jesus. Except maybe the part about you
doing nice things for a bustier."

"I don't mean the shit about me. What I thought was that maybe he hit some guilt button. Some
part of you that thinks maybe you should still be suffering, and that you're a crappy person for
moving on this fast."

"No," he says again, too fast. "Maybe. No. I have zero regrets or reservations about falling in love
with you, I want you to know that."

"I do. But I happen to know the part of the brain that measures your general crappiness level has
nothing to do with reality. You might feel it, even if you don't think it."

Xander slides the cardboard sleeve up and down his cup. "I don't know. Maybe. Yeah. Probably.
Which doesn't mean Andrew isn't wrong and annoying and a douche."

"I know. But he's also the one who figured out where the cult had you. If it wasn't for him, we'd be
living in a world of shit."

"Yeah, but I'd have been the high priest of shit, so it wouldn't have been all bad from my point of
view." He fools with the sleeve some more. "Do you think I should run back to the hacienda and
beg him to stay?"

Faith chews at her lower lip. "I don't know, babe. Me, I don't know why the fuck anyone's trusted
him all this time. He fuckin' murdered one of his best friends, right?"

"Yeah."

"On the other hand, like he points out, my history ain't exactly stellar either." She frowns into her
coffee. "Let it be. If he's gone, he's gone. If not, maybe he'll try to shape up, and no harm done."

"Okay."

"Good. So, is this Emma Frost hot?"

"Hotter than the hottest thing on a planet of hot."

She slips her hand between Xander's thighs and nibbles at his ear. "Do tell. Start with the telepathic
screwing around."

***

Andrew's made good on his threat by the time he and Faith get back. Xander goes into a confab
with Giles. "I guess we should convene a meeting," Xander says. "Maybe at dinner, since Gabriel
will be off work by then."

"Assuming there is dinner," Giles says drily.

"Oh hell. Well, it's all my fault, so I'll spring for pizza tonight. I apologize for being a hothead. This
is the kind of thing that should be a group decision, not one person deciding someone's been voted
off the island."

Giles nods. "It was a rash and impulsive and undemocratic act, and I for one plan to stand you to a
pint."

Xander swallows. "Fair enough. I'll take it like a man."
Giles claps him on the shoulder and laughs. "Allow me to translate that. I'd like to buy you a beer."

Xander regards him. "You've been in a funny mood. Anything to do with missing dinner last night?"

"Perhaps." His secretive little smile says more than perhaps.

"Oh, is this one of those Private Grownup Things?"

The smile deepens. "It's just a bit soon to say anything."

"Well, you know I'm here when it's not."

"You'll be the first," he says. "And I do mean it about the beer. I'm considering abandoning the recluse lifestyle."

Oh yeah. Something's up, all right. "How about tomorrow night? I don't want to look like I'm celebrating or anything."

"You're right," Giles says. "Of course."

Xander starts to leave, then pauses. "Seriously, do you think I've made a big mistake?"

"Not at all. A big mistake is one that gets your slayer killed. This is no worse than small-to-medium."

"How come the reassuring things you say are never all that reassuring?"

"Xander, mistakes are inevitable. Perhaps you should welcome them -- the smaller ones, at any rate. They're how you learn."

Xander sighs. "You're impossible."

***

Giles spends the hour before dinner in the library, taking up the task he'd abandoned the day before. He finds once more that he's having difficulty concentrating. Remembering not only Wendy, but the cards she'd read for him, and the themes which kept cropping up.

The King of Cups turned on his head. Emotionally cut off, overwhelmed, shy, British. He wants to dismiss this all as shite, but he knows he can't.

Duality. Good and evil, the battle he wages outside himself and within. The dutiful watcher and the rebel.

Intuition. This one bothers him. He's been taught to discount vague feelings and indistinct internal alarms. Books are what he's been trained to look to, not his own sense of dread or portent. And damn his mind, when Wendy told him to listen to his intuition, it had willingly supplied Ethan. Was there something -- No. Giles had thought of him in response to Wendy's comments about the past, that's all.

Perhaps he should talk about this with Wendy. The urge brings forth a rueful smile. It's not elucidation he's after, but a chance to see Wendy. He sets himself a goal. If he manages to process five more books before dinnertime, he'll allow himself a phone call.

***
Xander floats his household maintenance plan over dinner. He's riding on a wave of popularity thanks to the pizza, and his plan doesn't hurt either, since he suggests one of the watchers (including one ex-watcher) take a turn at cooking every day. "Unless some big apocalypse is brewing, there's nothing keeping us from putting in a couple of hours making dinner every few days. If we have one slayer helping out for the last hour, that means only one time a week for each of them. Dawn and Vi can be Wes's helpers. Lunch can be a little less elaborate. We'll put out cold cuts and stuff, everyone can make their own sandwiches. As far as laundry goes, that's one slayer's job per day. We'll make out a schedule. Get up a little earlier, put in a load, shouldn't be hard."

"Right," says Kennedy. "Running the washing machine while people are taking their showers, that's going to go over bigtime."

Shit. "When did Andrew do it?"

"In the afternoons while the slayers are training," Dawn says. "Before he got dinner started."

"This is getting complicated already. Okay. I'm gonna work on a schedule, I'll get this figured out."

"What about housecleaning?" Vi asks.

"I'd forgotten about that completely." Xander sighs. "When did he do that?"

"That was during the mornings," Dawn says. "He was very fond of vacuuming the hallways outside the sleepyheads' bedrooms."

"You being one of the ace sleepyheads in the house," Buffy points out.

"Hey, I just figured the slayers should have first crack at the shower, since they're the elite fightin' force."

"Uh huh. So sleeping in is your contribution to the cause."

"Exactly!"

"Nice try, Dawnie."

"Okay, I'll try to figure something out there," Xander says. "In the meantime, pick up after yourselves, all right? Which you should do anyway."

"Is there some other way we can get all these jobs done?" Vi asks.

"Yeah, we could hire a mute and illiterate manservant," Xander says. "I'll get right on that."

"Babe," Faith chides gently.

"Sorry. Look, I know it's a pain. But there's eleven of us, and we're trying to replace one person. There's no reason this shouldn't work out, if everyone's willing to put in a tiny bit more effort."

***

As the slayers are drifting off to their rooms or toward the television, Giles spots Gabriel heading for the front door with a saucer in hand. He follows her and steps out into the chilly night air.

"Mind if I cadge a smoke?"

She turns toward him, surprised. "I didn't know you smoke."
"I did when I was your age, back in the Precambrian. Now and then the urge comes on me."

She slips the pack from her shirt pocket, tapping the bottom against the heel of her hand before she extends it to Giles, then takes one for herself. "I'd never have guessed Precambrian. I wouldn't have made you as any older than the Cambrian."

Giles chuckles. "You're too kind. Most of this lot wouldn't have caught that joke at all." He leans into the light Gabriel offers, filling his lungs with smoke.

"I spent a helluva lot of time at the National History over the years. I usually headed there when I ditched school." As Giles moves to sit on a step, she hastens to add, "I wouldn't. I did last night and thought I'd never get warm again."

"Thanks for the warning. You first appeared when things were a bit chaotic -- has anyone thought to ask where you are in your schooling?"

Gabriel's cigarette glows in the darkness. "Um. No."

Giles reads the sullenness that's crept into her tone. "You've not finished, then."

"This would've been my senior year. Look, I'm not going. I've had enough of that shit." She sounds more like an adolescent boy than she has since Giles met her, playing tough, revealing scared.

"We can take care of that. Have your parents any idea where you are? When did you actually arrive in Cleveland?"

"Late July. I told them I came here to join a band with people I met online."

"They weren't concerned about that?"

"I laid good groundwork. Emails, pictures, a MySpace page, the works."

"And they just allowed you to leave."

"I kinda gave them the choice that I could go and they'd know where I was, or else I'd go and they wouldn't. And I think they were secretly relieved. My dad's been talking about running for mayor. I don't exactly fit in to the sort of official family portrait he wants in his campaign brochure. Even if I don't go the distance and wear skirts and get boobs, people will know something's off about me."

"A lot more is known about these things now. I should imagine New Yorkers are more aware than-"

"Oh hell no. Even if I was normal, the idea of having the press up our nose all the time--"

Giles bends to tap his ashes into the saucer. "It would be a nightmare for most youths your age, even if they weren't facing the additional pressures you are. And speaking of that issue, I've purchased a few books that might be illuminating, if you care to read them."

"You didn't have to do that."

"When I first met Buffy and Xander and Willow, I was the school librarian. It was secondary to my calling -- my cover, actually -- but it always made me glad when I could put a book into a student's hands that might make a difference. Since you said you hadn't done any reading on the subject, I thought they could be useful."

"Thanks. Yeah. I'd like that." She shivers and mashes her cigarette butt into the saucer. "Should've
worn my jacket. I'm going in."

Giles follows suit. "Thanks for the cigarette. It's a vile, unhealthy habit and you should quit. There. I've done my duty."

Gabriel grins. "Anytime."

***

Gabriel's curled up on her bed with one of the books Mr. Giles gave her. She went for the memoir first. She wishes she had a cigarette, but she sucks on a pen instead. It's not much of a substitute.

Kalindi comes back from her morning shower and starts to slip out of her robe before she realizes Gabriel's still there. She emits a little shriek, apologizing.

"No worries," Gabriel says. "Though I can go downstairs if you'd rather."

"No, it's okay." But she keeps her robe on.

Gabriel puts her book aside. "There's something I want to ask you. Can I watch you put on your makeup?"

"Sure." Kalindi unwrap her towel from around her head and scrubs her hair with it. "Or I could do yours for you. I'm not sure if I'd be any good; I've never done that before."

"That would be fun," Gabriel says, "but I haven't showered yet. So it would get washed right off."

"The goth makeup feels really weird the first time. Well, it did for me, anyway, but I'd never been allowed to wear makeup before. But it might be good to try it out when you know you'll just wash it off."

Gabriel wonders if this is just Kalindi's discomfort with the idea of her in makeup. Then again, she's the one who offered, so Gabriel shrugs. "I don't care one way or the other."

"I might do a lousy job, so let's do it now. If it comes out okay and you want to, we can always do it again."

Gabriel makes a quick trip to the half bath downstairs to wash her face, then settles in to let Kalindi go to work. Though she's never made someone up before she goes at it like she knows what she's doing, moving the lamp for better lighting and tilting Gabriel's chin with her finger as she works.

"Have you ever worn makeup before?"

"Just some lipstick and eye shadow. Stuff I could steal from my mom when she wasn't home. She doesn't wear all that much herself, though the last I knew some political consultant had told her she should start so she wouldn't look haggard on TV."

"Your poor mom. I thought it was hard enough having my mother and aunt tell me what I could put on my face."

"Yeah, and it's not even her career, it's my dad's. That's why I was happy to take off and chase the weird dreams I was having."

Kalindi puts away the makeup sponge. "You want to see each step, or the whole effect when I'm done?"
"I'll wait for the full thing."

Kalindi starts brushing some blush on her. "This is just for contour. You don't want the healthy glow. As my friend Claire says, it ruins the look." She works a moment, her brush skipping over Gabriel's face. "You should do this with everybody. I think that would be fun. Everybody's got such a different style. Faith and Buffy -- I think you'd look nice in her color range, or Dawn's. Vi might be a little purply for you, but you should try it for fun. I don't know if Jenny wears anything at all. I don't think so."

"What's her story? You think she's gay?"

Kalindi's mouth drops open and she manages a squeak, but nothing else.

Shit. "I didn't mean to be rude or anything, just curious. Forget I asked."

"No, I just. It never occurred to me. It never occurred to me to occur to me. How do you tell?" Poor Kalindi, caught being an outsider, trying to hard to catch up in a rush.

"In New York it's kind of a subcategory of people watching. You've never heard of gaydar?"

"No. You do remember I've been living on a remote jungle island for years."

Gabriel laughs. "Well, it's just ... I don't know. You look for cues, subtle and obvious. And sometimes you're dead wrong."

"How would I know what lesbians even look like?"

"Usually by seeing lesbians. Which, y'know, you do every day over the dinner table. Willow and Kennedy."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they're a couple."

"Wow. So am I the naivest person alive?" She remembers what she's doing and puts away the brush she's been holding and rummages through her makeup bag.

"Listen, I lived in New York all my life. I see thousands of people every day, a lot of 'em out and proud. I've got a database, that's all."

"Close your eyes," Kalindi orders.

Gabriel closes her eyes and Kalindi goes to work. Gabriel says, "It's nice that you take people for who they are and not what you've already assumed."

"You're such a kind person. Tell me if I'm too rough or anything." Kalindi smudges the shadow she's applied with her thumb.

"It's not kindness, it's the truth."

Kalindi goes silent as she keeps working, and Gabriel wonders what's going on in her head. The conversation with Mr. Giles makes her wonder what her parents would think if they saw her right now. Who do they miss? Is it anyone who really exists, or their fantasy of a teenaged boy? What would her sister think?

Kalindi steps back and Gabriel hears things rattling around in her makeup bag. "Okay, now your
lips."

It's strange to have someone else putting lipstick on her. Not that this whole event hasn't been a little weird.


There's an antique mirror on the wall, and Gabriel makes a cautious approach. 'Holy shit! Oh. Sorry."

Kalindi's grinning, though. "It's okay. It's really not you, but it's fun."

She's not shittin', it's really not Gabriel. She kind of sees the appeal for Kalindi, though. It's such a mask, and Kalindi's so naked in every other way.

She stares at herself.

"You know what you should do? If we can find a camera, we should take a picture. You should do like I said, have everyone make you up, and take pictures of all of them, and see which one you like best."

"Huh. I guess I could." She could also take a picture of her goth self and put it on her band's MySpace as one of her bandmates. That would be so funny in a twisted way. "I have a camera."

"Put on something black, or it won't look right." Kalindi roots through the closet until she finds a long jacket and an antique white silk scarf. "How's this? And put your black pants and boots on. Let's go out in the garden."

"Wait, no. I don't want to traipse through the whole house. I'm not really ready for everyone to see me, y'know?"

Kalindi deflates. "Oh. I was just thinking about all the dead leaves and that. It would look so gothy."

It would look so cool on the fake band's MySpace page. "'Kay," Gabriel says. "Let's do it."

***

"So okay," Xander says over the music in the pub. "That was not the most stellar success."

"It was a sincere effort," Giles says.

"What, is that British for 'sucked'?"

"Em, yes, I suppose it is."

Xander would swear that was a giggle that Giles just drowned in his pint of darkish beer.

"Look on the bright side," Giles adds. "By the time your casserole was ready it was late enough that everyone was hungry. They did finish it off."

True. And the Jaffa cakes Giles contributed for dessert helped quiet the heckling. "Laugh all you want, Giles. Tomorrow's your turn, and we'll see how funny it is then."

"Yes, well."
"Did you happen to catch Gabriel and Kalindi this morning?"

Giles shakes his head. "No, what happened?"

"Kalindi was taking pictures of Gabriel out in the back. Kalindi all bare-faced and Gabriel done up in the whole goth thing. They looked like they were having a great time."

"Ah. They're both relaxing a bit."

Xander eyes him. "Yeah, that seems to be going around."

"I suspect much of that has to do with you."

Xander shrugs. "Things were already happening. I remembered this the other night, but I never told you. When you all brought me back from the happy fun cult party, before the happy fun cult shrooms wore off, I could see all these lines that connected everyone to each other, like shining threads. It was amazing and beautiful, and every time I remember it, I can't believe how I ever could forget, but then I do, until the next time I remember."

"I agree. Things were already happening. But they were happening in large part because of your influence."

"You're giving me a helluva lot of credit, Giles."

"All of it deserved. And I want to say this: It's been a pleasure to see you since the visions stopped. I've never seen you so full of confidence and joy, or so attuned to the people around you. And everyone's responding to you."

Xander feels moisture gathering at the corner of his false eye, and an ache in his throat. He raps his knuckles on the tabletop. "I believe this is my round," he says. "Same again?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Be right back."

***

Giles watches Xander join the mob of people awaiting the barkeep's attention, waiting for the telltale movement of his hand to his left eye. There's a delicacy to the motion, because otherwise the prosthesis can become dislodged. The gesture has become a clue to Xander's physical or emotional state, as the false eye tends to tear up when he's overtired, upset or swept up in strong feelings.

There. He touches the skin under the left eye first, then the whole one.

Xander is far more used to the King of Cups turned on his head, not this possibly new and improved Giles (or possibly just Giles in a strange mood). It will take some time for him to adjust.

Lord knows, it will take some time for Giles himself to get used to it.

Giles gazes around the bar: scarred wooden tabletops, autographed picture over the cash register of some beefy, crewcut celebrity with Buddy Holly glasses, the antique jukebox that's been pumping out country-western music.

The door opens and blasts him with cold lake air, and he glances over. A newcomer has entered the bar alone, a thin blade of a man with a black topcoat, a silver handled cane and thick hair as white
as Wendy's.

Despite the hair color, something about the man makes him think of Ethan. The shape and grace of the hand unbuttoning his coat, the arrogant tilt of his chin. He turns his head and meets Giles's gaze, and a sardonic smile touches his lips as Giles feels the jolt of recognition.

The man is Ethan Rayne himself.

Ever aware of the dramatic moment, Ethan pauses to let the fact of his presence sink in. After a few skittering beats of Giles's heart, he approaches, and Giles sees the cane is more than vanity. Ethan has picked up a rather pronounced limp. As he draws nearer, Giles sees he has also acquired a thin scar that slants across his lips and down his chin. Somehow it doesn't mar his looks, and Giles would not be surprised if it were a magnet for lovers of either sex.

"Well, well. I'd thought that business with the Hall of Fame had the whiff of Rupert Giles. The California hellmouth spit you out, so you had to find another."

"Sod off, Rayne."

"Oh come now. Why so bitter, Rupert? I'd say you got the best of our last encounter. Though I did have free accommodations and meals for something like eighteen months, so I suppose I should thank you for that."

"The Initiative?" he blurs.

"Your little soldier boy mates." He stands close enough that Giles can see his coat is an expensive one. He smells of Gauloises, just as he had back when they were in London together. "They did grow to be rather a bore after a time."

"You were a danger to everyone you came near. I have no regrets about letting them take you. Did they manage to make you safe?"

An insinuating smile. "You'll find out, won't you?"

Giles's fist clenches with the urge to smash his pint glass in Ethan's face.

"Oh, do calm down," Ethan says. "I've not come to wreak havoc in your little world. Though that would be fun. I thought it was high time we made peace after all these years."

Giles comes off his stool and reaches across the table to seize Ethan by the collar. "The only peace you'll have is by leaving me and my people the fuck alone."

"'Your people,'" Ethan echoes, letting the words roll across his tongue like fine wine. "Could they be the same people you had before, or have you found some new ones?"

Giles has no doubt that Ethan knows damn well the answer to this question. He tightens his grip. "I mean every word I say. Bugger off or I'll make certain you regret it."

"Kind of you to take an interest in my state of mind at long last. You've never given a toss how I've felt up to this point."

Giles releases his collar and gives him a slight shove backward. "Leave. Now."

"Charming to see you, as always." He sketches a sloppy salute and takes his leave.

Giles stares stupidly after him, hearing the blood roaring in his ears. The temptation to chase after
him, pull him into an alley and beat him senseless is strong. But the cane and the stiff-legged gait
give him pause.

Could that have been the Initiative?

*Bollocks.* He was up to something, and his appearance was a part of whatever it was.

Giles looks for Xander at the bar, alarmed at the possibility he'd witnessed what just transpired.
But Xander has worked his way to the front of the crowd at the bar and is busy counting his
change. He lays a tip on the bar, hoists the two pint glasses and begins making his way through the
 crush.

"Sorry," he says when he reaches their table. "Took longer than I expected. Hey, Giles, are you all
right?"

Ethan has tainted the lives of Buffy and her friends enough times already. "It's nothing important.
Just a bit of a headache," Giles says.

"You need to get away from the smoke and the noise?"

"No, I'll be fine. It's good to have a night out for a change."

But his shoulders are thoroughly knotted, and no amount of bitter will soothe the tension.

***

Giles rummages through the kitchen cupboards, grumbling. It's altogether too early for this,
especially after a sleepless night. "Where is the sodding cookbook?" he mutters.

"He probably took it with him," Kennedy says from the breakfast table.

"What?"

"It was his, wasn't it? He was always writing notes in it."

"He what?"

"Sweetie, don't," Willow says. "Giles is still a librarian at heart. You're causing him pain."

"He wrote in the margins?" Of all the uncivilized habits the young wretch had, this was possibly
the worst.

"Notes about the recipes," Kalindi offers. She's by the counter waiting for her toast. "'Too much
salt,' 'better without chiles,' notes like that. Sometimes things like, 'Xander's favorite' or 'good for a
bad day.'"

That takes the wind from Giles's sails. Irritating as the boy was, it would not have occurred to Giles
to keep track of such things. The whole room falls silent for a moment.

"I think it had the food allergies list, too," Willow says.

*Jesus wept. There are food allergies?*

"We'd better get that list started around again," Kennedy suggests. She rummages in the drawer
closest to the telephone for a piece of paper.
"Right," Giles announces, apropos of nothing. "Right." He grabs a jacket off a hook by the back door and exits, a Jeez, what's with him? floating into the garden behind him.

_Ethan Rayne, that's what's with me_, he thinks as he stalks across the leaf-strewn garden to the garage.

Wendy had been right. His training had been wrong. What book could possibly predict Ethan Rayne and anything he might do?

Giles _had_ had a flash of intuition -- more than one, considering how many times Ethan has crossed his mind lately. Wendy had told him to heed it, but his bias toward the rational had kept him from realizing he was onto something. How do you listen to something you've been told all your life that you must discount? Giles had shown how well he followed his training during the desperate search for the cult that had abducted Xander. Wesley had thought the Parthi Codex held the answer, and Giles had refused to believe it could be useful until it was nearly too late, because the Council had always said the Codex was worthless. And the Codex was written wisdom -- even when discarded, it was higher on the scale than mere intuition.

Could it be that contact with the Guardians was forbidden _because_ they encouraged watchers to heed their intuition? Perhaps if the old guard were still around, Giles would be a non-person, his diaries burned. He suspects his diaries would have been binned in any case.

He parks outside the Barnes & Noble and looks about for the cookbook section.

All the books in the world, he thinks again, and none of them could predict Ethan. He has no particular interest in the end of the world. Most of what he does is for the sheer amusement value of the chaos he creates.

How much worse will his actions be if motivated by vengeance?

Eighteen months held captive by the people who would build an Adam. Abandoned, forgotten -- even by the man who'd been responsible for his imprisonment.

When the complex in Sunnydale had been sealed, Giles had assumed the entire project was scrapped. But when the military police had taken Ethan, Riley had said -- Nevada? Nebraska?

He had never been held in Sunnydale, if Riley had been correct. Never had the opportunity to escape during the chaos that ensued when Maggie Walsh's secret project went wrong.

Eighteen months of hellish treatment, most likely.

Of course he'd want vengeance.

Giles finds a duplicate of the cookbook Andrew's been using and takes it to the counter. He tosses the book on the passenger seat and aims his car for the grocery. At the sight of the black cats and pumpkins in the window, however, he drives on.

_Bugger it. We'll all survive pizza a second night in a week._ Most of the hacienda's residents will cheer that turn of events, he suspects.

Intuition is what he'll need to counter any attack from Ethan.

Once again he makes his way to Wendy's storefront.

***
The streets of the Flats are relatively quiet at this hour, and Giles finds Wendy's door with a closed sign hanging at eye level. He looks about for a doorbell, but there's nothing. He peers in the large shop window, but there's no sign of life except Wendy's grey cat basking in a slanted patch of sunlight, asleep.

Giles is surprised at the profound disappointment he feels. It has less to do with the notion of a professional consultation than the hope of seeing Wendy again. Not since the first time around with Olivia has he felt this kind of anticipation at the thought of spending time with a woman.

He considers knocking, but Wendy's no doubt matched her schedule to the rhythms of the neighborhood. Waking her would be thoughtless.

Sighing, he touches the window glass, preparing to walk away. Just then, Wendy's cat opens its eyes and stares directly at him. Its eyes are a remarkable color, a shade of green he is wholly incapable of describing. It rises and saunters off toward the back area of the storefront.

Well. No sense standing out here looking like a prat. He turns back toward the car. As he's unlocking the door, he hears a voice call to him.

"Rupert!"

Wendy's at her door, the cat on her shoulder, twitching its tail round to swat her arm. Instead of her psychic regalia, she's wearing jeans and a vivid blue sweater. Her feet are bare.

She waves him into the shop. "You didn't knock."

"I didn't want to wake you, if you weren't already up."

"You're welcome anytime." She closes the door after him, making sure the sign still indicates the place is closed, then draws the curtain across the lower half of the window. "Tea's already brewing. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please." He settles himself into one of the chairs and after a moment she's joined him, placing the tray on the table.

"Your cat -- Lola, isn't it?"

"Lolo. Short for Havea Lolo Fonua, the Polynesian goddess --" She sees the blush that's crept on his cheeks and grins. "You know your goddesses."

"Ah. Yes. I'll do my best to stay on her good side." Christ! He sounds like a git. A git with impure intentions. His cheeks flame and he stammers.

"Oh, she likes you, don't worry." Wendy stirs the pot and pours his tea. "You were about to say something about her?"

"Yes. Well. I've quite forgotten -- no, no, I remember." He sounds stupider by the moment. "She gives -- this might sound silly, but she gave the impression that she went off to announce my presence to you just now."

"Xander said the same thing. She sort of does. I often get impressions from people when I touch them, and I definitely do from Lolo."

"So she informed you someone was at your door," he says dubiously.
"She told me it was you. Scratchy fabric man who smells of tea and old books. Not a great translation, but that's the gist."

"Now you're having a bit of fun."

"Not at all. That's a very complimentary description, by the way. She approves of everything but the tweed. So what brings you to the Flats at this time of day?"

Giles pours milk into his tea. "Intuition. I'd hoped to follow up on that. And --" He decides to take the risk, considering he's sounded like an idiot already. "And I wanted to see you."

"I'm delighted. I've been looking forward to Halloween. Isn't that a big night for all of you, though? Won't you be out working?"

"It's rare that anything happens on Halloween. That statement has come back to bite me, but generally the bad things living on the hellmouth consider it a night for tourists and they stay home watching the telly."

She laughs. "That's an image."

"You'd be surprised."

"So tell me what's this about intuition? Something's on your mind, I can tell that, and it's not trivial."

"No, it's not. I see a ... potential problem on the horizon. Something that my training doesn't exactly prepare me for."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not in specifics, no." No sense drawing her into any kind of mess with Ethan. He remembers how quickly the events with the Gentlemen brought a crashing halt to things with Olivia. Even though they'd seen one another on a few occasions during the time he'd lived in England, their relationship had never been the same.

"Is this something about me? Xander said I might be part of this Guardian line and there's traditionally been a huge chasm between them and the Watchers. The Sharks and the Jets and all that."

Amazing how she can tease a laugh from him even when he's troubled. "No, it's not that."

"Good. Well, I could do a reading. If it's a decision you're facing, I could do that spread, or if not, I do a daily three-card reading for myself. We could do that, see if that illuminates anything."

"Let's try that one," he says.

Again she brings out the Rider-Waite deck, directing him to concentrate on the issue as she quickly shuffles and divides the cards into three piles. "This time take a card from each pile," she directs, and he does so.

They both gaze at them for a moment.

"Okay," she says. "The Chariot, the Six of Swords reversed and the Page of Swords reversed. Notice anything here?"

"Another Major Arcana card," Giles says. "And again, both Minor Arcana cards are reversed."
She nods, but doesn't comment.

"Duality rears its head again," he adds.

"Exactly. And the other thing I notice again is a lot of blue, which turned up in your present the other day, too. Which I associated with hidden depths, things being more than they seem to be on the surface. So. Let's start with The Chariot. It's a destiny card, and as you said it smacks you in the face with the duality thing. The prince is driving a chariot drawn by the two sphinxes, representing both sides of human nature, light and dark, sunlight and shadow. The prince has them under his control, but there's an interesting detail here -- there are no reins. He's guiding them using his focus and strength, but he'll have to maintain his vigilance to keep them under his control. Notice the canopy above with the stars on a blue field. That means he's under divine protection. That's important, but it's still up to the prince to keep things on track."

Giles suppresses a sigh. It's always up to the sodding prince, isn't it? That's good news, he supposes, when it comes down to destiny, but it's tiring nonetheless.

"Remember the strength card in your last reading," Wendy says. "You already have what you need."

"Yes," he murmurs.

"Now, we've got two Swords cards. That suit didn't come up at all in your last reading. Swords relate to power and action or obstacles to those things. Your Six of Swords is reversed. Upright that generally relates to the end of a difficult cycle." She turns the card upright to show him. "See, the woman and child look full of sorrow, but they're moving forward. The choppy waters are behind them, and the sea ahead is calm. Reversed, the news isn't so good. The boat is swamped and the people inside are cast overboard. Remember for you water may mean emotional waters, and you seem to get a reversal in those Minor Arcana cards with bodies of water. Keep that in mind and keep a handle on your emotions -- but don't cut them off. This card may mean you'll feel trapped in a difficult situation. The way out may require you to go inside yourself for the answer, find a new way of thinking about things." She looks up at him and smiles. "You are already beginning that process. The fact that you're here means you're looking at things in a new way."

His former mentors at the Council would say it means he's finally lost the last scrap of his sanity, but never mind.

"The Page of Swords reversed isn't all that bad," she continues. "It can mean unpredictable behavior or sudden events, some kind of unexpected twist."

*Unexpected Twist being Ethan Rayne's middle name.*

"This card gives you a heads up, which is a positive. You won't be so spun if you know something's coming. It also relates to truth that refuses to be silenced. The Page is always about communication, and you see from his grip on his sword that he's not going to be dissuaded from delivering his message. He has a strong desire to speak the truth, and truth is not a harmful thing. It can cause a certain degree of upheaval, but the outcome will ultimately be worth it."

"So," he says with the same intonation Wendy gives the word, and she smiles. "I'm being told to hang onto my nonexistent reins."

"Something like that. I hope this is helpful."

"I'm not sure. I'm sorry."
"No need to be sorry. A lot of times I have to mull things over, see how they fit, or how these bits of knowledge are going to help me. And if you do want to talk things through, I'd be glad to be a sounding board."

"Thank you. I think for now I'd best get back to the hacienda and see about getting lunch ready. We've lost our cook, and it's my turn today. I will see you tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

Once more he makes it to her doorway before he turns back to her. "One thing. Should you meet a man with white hair and a cane, keep clear of him. No matter how charming he may seem."

"Rupert, what's this about?"

"I can't say, but it's important."

"Okay, which person in this room sounds like a melodramatic fortune teller?"

"The one who's leaving this room," he says, and he departs.

***

Wesley is already at work on the project he's begun -- a serious paper on the Parthi Codex and the manifestation of its prophecy -- when someone knocks at his door.

He shoves his glasses up far enough to rub at his eyes and goes to see who it is. He wouldn't mind another Flake Bar, if it happens to be the British Food Fairy. Otherwise, he'd prefer to be left in peace. He's already agreed to take Kalindi out for another hash planning session later in the morning.

It's Faith. "There's a watchers' meeting down in the kitchen," she announces before he has a chance to ask.

He sighs. "Is it necessary?"

"Probably not, but you'll be glad you went. This is in the 'news you can use' category of meeting, not the 'pointless bullshit.'"

"Could I just have the bullet points?" He'd been in the middle of a thought, and his fingers itch with the desire to get it down before it's lost.

"Look, Wes. No one understands better than me the urge to hole up and think about where you are and how the fuck you got there. But I also know it's just as crucial to put in some time doing something that takes you out of yourself."

Wesley regards her. "How did you find a way to do that in prison?"

"Luck, most likely. There were a couple of things I found. I worked in the prison kitchen, for one."

"They let you near knives?" It's out before he can stop it, but she doesn't seem offended.

"I scrubbed pots for a year before I got anywhere near those, and by the way they chain them to the counter, when they're not locked in a cabinet. Anyway, I liked the rhythms, the hot water, and the jobs I did once I got rotated off dishwashing. You can think about things, if you're in the mood, but you can let everything drop away, lose yourself in what you're doing."
"What was the other thing?"

"What other thing?"

"You said there were two things that took you out of yourself."

She looks away from him. "There were some poems," she says quickly. "About nature and that, mostly. They made me feel less penned in."

Wesley nods. "Thank you. I'm sure that's not something you've shared with everyone."

"Doesn't quite suit my style, does it?" She's already trying to back away from the intimacy she's shared with him, but he decides not to let her.

"It's personal, that's all. I know that doesn't always come naturally to you -- your trust has been abused at times. I appreciate it."

Faith shrugs, stuffing her hands in her pockets. "Well. Brave new world and shit. Brave new Faith, anyway." She turns toward the stairway. "Be there or be square."

Once he and Giles and Xander are assembled in the kitchen, Faith says, "Not that I'm not enjoying the shit out of watching you guys flail, but I'm gonna take pity on you now." She shows them things she's learned in the kitchen -- tricks that make the work go faster, but also strategies and organizational skills. Perusing the Wednesday supermarket ads, reviewing the contents of the fridge to see what needs to be used up. Planning a week's meals with a minimum of pain.

She stays with them through the process of planning and making a shopping list. "Next week we'll have coupons ready, but this week you'll have to look at the flyer in the store. Judging by the fridge, we could get through today without a grocery run, but tonight the little hellions will be out trick or treating from six o'clock to eight. I asked one of the neighbors how much candy to get and he said, 'Twice as much as you think you'll need, then a couple more bags.' Wouldn't be bad to get on that -- could be the stores are cleaned out already, so it might take more than one stop to get stocked up. We don't want to be known as the house that gives out crap candy. Only thing worse is handing out apples or toothbrushes. Now. The event you've all been waiting for: Knife Skills for Young Watchers."

Faith demonstrates by chopping her way though a mound of vegetables and meat for soup in a dazzlingly short time. "I'm a little rusty," she says when everyone's exclaimed over her prowess. "Been a while since I've made dinner for 800."

She turns the knives over to Wes. "You finish getting dinner started, Xander and I will make the grocery run. A race of people that prefers warm beer, god knows what passes for good candy with them."

"Thank you, Faith," Giles says. "This is extremely helpful."

"Well," she says. "Guess I learned something at the California School for Girls." Despite her dismissal, Wesley can see that Giles's praise has touched her. Such depths to this young woman.

Wesley wishes yet again that he'd done better by her from the beginning.

***

Despite their previous conversation about Papua New Guinea, Wesley and Kalindi make the drive to the hospital in silence. She's such a quiet girl, so watchful. She makes him uneasy, makes him
feel as though he's oppressing her in some way, which of course makes him feel oppressed.

As they turn the corner nearest the chaplain's office, Kalindi emits a squeak and breaks away from him. "Pastor Marlene!"

She throws her arms about the chaplain, which Marlene happily reciprocates. "Kalindi, how wonderful to see you. I heard you came by yesterday."

"I wanted to let you know Xander's okay. We got him back, and he's okay."

"Those robed people. Were they the same ones that were on the news?"

Kalindi nods. "They're gone now." She turns toward Wesley. "Oh, this is a friend, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. This is Pastor Marlene."

He takes the hand the chaplain offers. "We've met. I was a guest at Xander and Faith's wedding."

"Of course. I thought I'd seen you. Good to see you again."

"Why don't I leave you and Kalindi to catch up with one another," he suggests. "I'll come back in twenty minutes or so."

Marlene ushers the girl into her office, and Wesley goes in search of a coffee bar. He finds the gift shop first and pokes around inside, looking at the floral arrangements and Mylar balloons and stuffed animals. He thinks of the last time he was in hospital. Angel arriving empty-handed, the better to snuff out his life. Fred entering his room not carrying with a balloon or a plant, but a box containing his things from the Hyperion office. Don't come back. Ever.

There were other times, of course. Gunn squeezing his hand, refusing to leave his side. Wesley wheeling himself to Cordelia's bedside for a vigil as she whimpered and thrashed and cried out. It's just that the sacrifice spell has made the events surrounding his betrayal of Angel so painfully fresh in his mind.

"Is there anything I can help you find?" the volunteer in the gift shop asks.

"No. Thank you." He drifts out of the shop.

He finds a waiting room with a blaring television; he drops into a chair and ignores what's on the screen. At the break between shows, he goes back to the chaplain's office to find Kalindi. She's at ease, laughing with the chaplain, but when she spots Wesley, she settles back into a more somber mode.

It irritates him, but in a moment he understands why. She reminds him of himself, so vigilant and quiet, hoping if he can't please his father that he can at least fade into the scenery and go unnoticed. In a heartbeat, his annoyance is washed away, swept up in a current of compassion.

He joins them in their chatter, and even extends an invitation to Marlene to join them at the hacienda for the evening.

"I'm trick or treating on the kids' ward until seven or so," she says. "So I couldn't come until after that."

"You're trick or treating?" he asks.

"A few staffers dress up and go room to room and deliver the treats."
"Oh, come in costume!" Kalindi says.

"There's been talk of a showing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show,*" Wesley adds, then silently curses himself. She's a minister, she won't want to watch Susan Sarandon prancing about in her underclothes --

"Oh, I haven't seen that in ages," Marlene says. "That would be fun. You're still in the Inn, right? The brownstone up by the campus?"

"That's us!" Kalindi throws her arms around Marlene again.

As they resume their explorations of the city, Kalindi hums and engages him in bursts of chatter. He almost makes a joke about the illegality of *bouncing* when one is a goth, but he doesn't want to make her self-conscious.

He tags along, letting her happiness rub off on him.

***

The hacienda is swirling with activity. Zombie Xander is answering the door and distributing candy to the neighborhood children, while pirate wench Kennedy and fairy Buffy are making drinks for the of-age residents. Peter Pan Gabriel is in charge of the music, which Giles is endeavoring not to find dreadful. Giles himself is wearing a thrift-store shirt that is the antithesis of Scratchy Fabric Man, an appallingly shiny petrol-based material that would probably burn as long as the Cuyahoga River should he put a match to it.

"Hey, look who's here!" Xander calls out from the doorway, and Giles eagerly turns toward his voice, startled to see the woman who enters the foyer.

It's Wendy, but she's undergone a startling transformation. Her hair is smoothed and swept back into a twist, and she wears a sleek, undoubtedly expensive suit with heels and stockings. On someone else, he might find her expertly applied makeup terrifying. "Like the costume?" she asks when she joins him by the table.

"It's quite a metamorphosis."

"I could say the same for you. Wow, that shirt."

"I saw it and thought perhaps Lolo would appreciate the lack of scratchiness."

Wendy rubs the shirt's hem between her fingers. "Hm. I think she'd be more likely to pee on it, to tell you the truth."

"She's welcome to it, as long as she waits until I've removed it."

"The flares are a nice touch too. Ooh, and huaraches."

"She's welcome to all of them." He finds he's reached out and cupped her elbow to keep her standing close to him. "I'm delighted you came."

"So am I."

He feels absurdly shy and eager, and he gawps at her for a moment before he realizes he hasn't offered her a drink. "Cider? Beer? Carbonated carcinogens?"

She laughs. "Whatever that is you're having."
He fetches her a Woodpecker, receiving a violent nudge from Faith as he passes her. When he returns Willow is asking her questions about the Tarot, and then she gets drafted into doing short readings until the doorbell stops ringing and someone announces the movie's starting soon. Giles catches her hand and leads her downstairs to the kitchen to talk where it's quiet. They sit at the table with no illumination but the soft glow from the light over the sink, and they exchange first-date talk about their histories and likes and dislikes.

They find themselves on the topic of Sunnydale again, and Giles asks Wendy whether she was born there or was a transplant.

"I moved there about ten years ago," she tells him. "You'll think I'm a complete airhead if I tell you how that happened."

"I'd never think that."

She smiles. "You used to."

Giles vehemently denies this and she lets him get away with it.

"I was just going through a bad breakup. I used to listen to this goofy quiz show on NPR, Whad'ya Know?. Every week they'd pick a town to feature on the next show by throwing a dart at a map. The day I realized I'd had it with mooning over my relationship, I decided I was moving to the place they announced, wherever it was."

"Sunnydale?"

Wendy nods. "I should have taken a hint from the fact that the next week they featured a totally different town, somewhere in Maine. I guess they read enough of the local rag to decide the comedy potential wasn't that great."

"And did you decide on Cleveland the same way?"

She smiles. "I did have kind of a bad breakup with Sunnydale, didn't I? No, I just ... well, every time I turned around, there was a song on the radio about Cleveland, or some mention on TV. Seriously, every day there seemed to be something. So I did a reading to see if that meant anything, and I decided it did. And here I am."

"I must say I'm grateful to popular culture for contriving to lure you to another hellmouth."

"Me too."

"Despite your kidnapping at the hands of a doomsday cult?"

She responds with a shrug of one shoulder and a quirk of her lips. "It happens."

Giles finds himself tracing a thumb over those lips. Wendy tips her face upward and he leans in for a kiss. Soft and undemanding, ready to take things at her pace, but it kindles his desire for her.

"Oh," she breathes as he withdraws, and then she closes the distance between them, offering her parted lips for another kiss.

***

Soon the sound of their quickening breath blends with the distant throb of the music from the movie upstairs. Sighs and whispers and little humming noises and the rustle of clothing as they
explore one another.

Giles drops a hand to Wendy's knee, surprised to encounter the sheer fabric of stockings instead of her skin. The unexpected barrier heightens his desire with a small internal lurch akin to walking on a landscape that suddenly drops by two or three inches. He gasps and Wendy draws in a shuddering breath in response.

Without warning the kitchen lights blaze, blinding them.

"Hey now," Dawn's amused voice calls out. "No necking down -- oh. Sorry. I just came down for more soda." She hurries across the kitchen to the fridge, where she reaches in for a pair of six-packs.

Giles sighs. "Can I help you carry anything?"

"Oh god no. Just keep on with, um, what you were doing." Her own cheeks flushed, Dawn hastens back toward the stairs. "I'll get the lights as soon as I put these down, okay?" She doesn't wait for an answer but scurries back upstairs.

Giles groans. "Now you see the drawbacks of communal living." He takes off his glasses and rubs his shirt tail over the lenses. Now for the logistical conversation, which will be a cold splash of water on the fire they'd been kindling. He tries to begin it, but it all comes out as stammering.

"Come out to my car," Wendy says. "I brought something for you, but it didn't go with my costume, so I left it."

A blast of cold, fresh air might do him some good. Giles accompanies Wendy to the street in front of the hacienda, where she opens the trunk to reveal a guitar case inside.

"I want you to have this," she tells him.

"Wendy, I -- it's too much."

"It was my brother's. I've kept it because it was so dear to him, but someone should be playing it. I'd love it if that someone was you."

"I -- I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Just enjoy it."

"I most certainly will." As he reaches into the trunk to take it, an explosive pain blossoms within his skull. He clutches his head and staggers against the car.

"Rupert?"

"Christ," he mutters, but his voice sounds strange to him.

Her hands brace him. "Rupert, what's wrong?"

Despite her efforts, Giles slips to one knee.

Wendy turns and shouts toward the house, but the others are unlikely to hear.

As Giles sags against the bumper, a man runs up to them. He's dressed up as a punter. "What's the matter?"
"It's his head," Wendy says. "Do you have a cell? He needs an ambulance."

"No, but I'll stay with him. You run to the house."

She touches his face. "Rupert, stay with me. I'll be right back."

As she races up to the house, the man guides Giles down onto the pavement, then removes his own jacket and folds it, tucking it beneath Giles's head.

The pain in his head grows worse, wrenching a cry from him.

The man puts his hands on Giles's shoulders. "Hang on, big man. You're in for a helluva ride, and there's nothing either of us can do."

More pain and pressure and everything goes dark.

***

It doesn't take Gabriel long to see that Kalindi's uncomfortable with the whole Halloween agenda -- or at least how it's done hacienda-style. The costume part doesn't bother her; Dawn and Gabriel dressed her as a gypsy, and she clearly loves the skirts and jewelry. But she quickly removed herself from the dining room when the Tarot cards came out, and she bailed fairly early on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, even though her preacher friend Marlene had come and had settled in to watch.

Gabriel finds Kalindi in the little room off the living room, the pocket doors closed. "Hey. Mind if I hang out with you?"

"You don't have to. Watch the movie if you'd rather."

Gabriel shrugs. "I've seen it. It's kind of *meh* on TV." Telling her about the people who go to the theater to dress up and line dance and sing will probably make Kalindi feel even more weirded out, so Gabriel abandons that train of thought. "Whose magazine?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just picked it up and started flipping."

She sits next to Kalindi. "*Lucky*. I love that magazine, but it's super moronic. There aren't any articles, just captions, and it's all about shopping."

Kalindi manages to crack a grin. "I can tell you love it."

"Oh yeah. I love girly magazines. Oh god, not *girlie* magazines with the dirty pictures and all. Girl stuff, fashion and makeup and shit like that."

"You should see if Buffy will take you shopping for makeup," Kalindi suggests. "She did for me after my aunt threw all my things away."

"Huh. Maybe."

They start paging through the magazine together, pointing out outfits and jewelry and shoes, smelling all the perfume ads. They're so involved that they jump when someone starts hammering on the front door. Gabriel gets up and slides the pocket door partway open just as Xander heads to answer the knock. Xander has borrowed the baseball bat that's part of Jenny's costume.

Gabriel hovers in the doorway to watch as Xander peers through the peephole and then quickly works the lock. There's an urgent exchange that she can't make out, but then Xander turns and calls
into the living room. "Call 911! It's Giles, he needs an ambulance." Then Xander runs outside, bare feet and all.

Buffy jumps up from the love seat where she and Dawn were leaning against each other. "Dawn, can you --"

Dawn's already scrambling for the phone. "I'm on it."

Buffy rushes after Xander, and Kalindi slips out the pocket doors and follows on her heels.

Kalindi loves Giles. Gabriel heads outside too, wanting to support her.

When Gabriel hits the top of the stoop, she sees Wendy kneeling beside Giles, calling his name. Xander goes to his other side, going to his knees and saying, "Help's on its way, Giles. Just hang in."

Buffy reaches the street and says, "Did something hit him? What's going -- you."

"Joltin' Joe has left and gone away," he says.

"What have you done to Giles?"

"Whoa whoa whoa," cries the guy, who turns out to be the OTB guy Gabriel's seen at Starbucks. "I had zilch to do with this, slayer."

"Then why are you here?"

Kalindi calls out, "Don't hurt him! Please!"

Buffy's not having it. "This little worm knows something. What are you doing here? You brought me a slayer. Don't tell me you're taking one of my people to restore the balance."

"That's not how it works."

"You're here for a reason." She tightens her grip on the guy's throat. "Tell me."

"I've been around trying to see how my little slayer's been doing, that's all. This --" He gestures down to Giles, who is still motionless on the pavement behind a car. "This is something we can't affect."

Xander looks up at her. "Wendy said he just grabbed his head and collapsed. What if it's a stroke?"

Kalindi makes an anguished sound, while Buffy slams the OTB guy back against the car. Her gauzy fairy wings bob crazily with the movement. "It's not a stroke!" she yells at him as if he's the one who made the suggestion.

Kalindi dashes down the stairs. "Buffy, please. I know he wouldn't do this."
Gabriel follows. She's never in her life broken up a fight, so she's not sure what to do, but she gets a hand on Buffy's shoulder, and then Xander appears at Buffy's other side. "C'mon, Buffy. Giles needs us." By now the sirens are wailing in the distance.

She lets go of the guy. "He knows something about this."

"All I know is it's something we can't touch, either one of us." He's not defiant, but sort of sad and resigned.

"He can't die," Buffy whispers. She looks down at where Giles lies on the street. "Oh god, Xander, he looks just like--" The rest of the sentence is lost in sobs as Xander puts his arms around her, careful not to crush her drooping fairy wings.

Then the rescue squad comes screaming around the corner, washing everything in blood colored light.

***

"It'll be okay," Xander murmurs into Buffy's hair, and she must believe him, because she pulls herself together by the time the paramedics settle themselves and their gear on the street beside Giles. Wendy tells the EMTs what happened as they start checking him over.

As they start asking about Giles's medical history, Buffy and Xander take over with what they know.

"Any past head injuries?"

"He's had some concussions," Buffy says. "What, Xander, maybe three or four that we know of?"

"Something like that."

"He plays a lot of sports," Dawn adds. Apparently she's the one person in their group that recognizes that getting bashed over the head isn't an everyday occurrence for normal people.

"Anything you've noticed that's unusual?" The EMT turns to Wendy. "What was he doing leading up to his collapse? Did you notice any distress?"

"We were necking," Wendy says without embarrassment. "We were both startled when someone came into the kitchen and flipped on the lights, but there wasn't anything extreme about his reaction. We came out here after that to get something from my car, and that's when he clutched his head. That's the first sign of distress he showed. He collapsed right away."

"Anyone else notice anything in recent days? Headaches, unusual behavior?"

"I think he was stressed about work this past week," Buffy says, "but that seemed to be easing the last couple of days."

"What does he do?" asks the EMT.

"He's a teacher," Xander says. "Oh, and he complained of a headache the other night. We went out for a couple of beers. I went for a second round, and when I got back I could tell something was wrong. He said his head was hurting. And before that -- well, he was unusually emotional. He said these really effusive things about me, about my work and who I am. That's not usually his way." His throat tightens. "Do you think somehow he knew? Or that this was a symptom?"
"No," Wendy says emphatically. "Sorry, I don't mean to butt in. But Rupert and I had been talking recently. About not being emotionally closed off. If that was unlike him, I think it's because he was trying to be more open."

The EMT turns back to his colleague and they lift him onto the gurney.

They all watch, barely breathing.

"Buffy," Xander says. "Buffy." He puts his hand over hers. "Buffy. Please don't break my arm."

She loosens her grip. "Oh god, I'm sorry. Did I --?"
"It's fine." Actually it hurts like hell, but it's a distraction, at least. Xander looks back toward the house and sees the stoop is now full of worried slayers. Their silent arrival reminds him of the playground scene in *The Birds*, which is not the most comforting image.

Marlene has an arm around Kalindi, speaking to her in a voice so quiet Xander can't hear. Both their eyes are closed. Jenny's parents are comforting their daughter and the other slayers are mostly clinging to each other. Gabriel stands near Kalindi, her arms wrapped around her own body.

Faith moves to Xander, slipping her arm around his waist. "What happened?"

"We don't really know. He just collapsed."

Willow separates from Kennedy and joins them. She looks a breath away from crumpling into tears.

"His vitals are strong," says the EMT. "We'll get him into the hospital now and see what's going on. Who's his next of kin?"

"I am," Buffy says without hesitation. They get Giles loaded onto the ambulance and Buffy climbs in to sit by him.

The others stand and stare until the doors close on him and the ambulance pulls from the curb, lights and sirens going.

Marlene is on her cell, alerting the hospital that she has a friend on the way and will be arriving herself in minutes. "Can I give anyone a ride?"

"That would be great, yeah," Xander says. Willow, Dawn and Faith climb into her car, which turns out to be the one Buffy slammed Whistler into. He's long since faded into the night, as silently as the girls had appeared.

Wes makes his way through the knot of slayers. "What can I do?"

"Stay with the girls. They're going to be weirded out. At some point there'll be insurance stuff to take care of, but I'll let you know about that."

Wes nods. "Keep me posted."

"Wendy. Did you want to ride along too?" It would be a crowd, but they can probably squeeze her in.

"I'll drive. I'll see you over there."

He thinks about Giles, trying so hard to open up emotionally. Xander decides to follow his lead, reaches out and takes Wendy's hand. "I'm glad you'll be there for him. He'll be okay."
She squeezes back. "Boy, I hope so."

***

Giles wakes with a splitting head, squinting in bright sunlight. He discovers he's sprawled on a bare mattress on a scarred wooden floor, in a room that smells of incense and hashish and shagging. Has the punter brought him here? He tries to lift his head, but can't manage it. The room spins, and he closes his eyes, groaning.

"You're awake, then?" inquires a library-quiet voice. "How do you feel?"

"My fucking head hurts." His own voice sounds strange to him.

The mattress shifts and then there are gentle fingers massaging his temples. "It's no wonder."

Giles has no idea what that's meant to imply, but the question refuses to leave his brain and travel to his mouth.

"Just relax. I'll take care of everything."

The touch at his temples is as much caress as massage, which he finds vaguely alarming. Who the hell is hovering over him? Reluctant as he is to open his eyes, he has to know. He squints into the sunlight, trying to make out the face leaning over him. Long, lank hair, wire-rimmed Lennon glasses, a strong jaw that's totally out of proportion on such a thin face.

Giles's breath catches in his throat.

He knows this face intimately.

It's his own, nearly thirty years younger.

The lips smile, with just a hint of mockery. "Good morning, sunshine."

***

They've been waiting a long time. Dawn has curled up across a couple of chairs, her head in Buffy's lap. Faith leans her ponytailed head on Xander's shoulder. The heat is for crap in the waiting room, so her legs are cold. What a stupid time to be caught wearing a skirt. Especially a stupid fuckin' poodle skirt.

The doctors and nurses come out occasionally to tell them what's going on -- blood test, urine test, CT scan, maybe an EEG and a lumbar puncture, depending. They ask all kinds of questions the EMTs hadn't covered: where Giles has traveled, whether he's ever had malaria, if he's taking any medications, more about the head injuries. Every one of them goes first to Wendy in her designer executive bitch suit.

The doctor comes out to explain the CT to them, and he does it again.

"It's them you should be talking to," Wendy says, gesturing to the zombie, fairy, pirate, poodle skirt girl and -- well, Faith doesn't know what Dawn's supposed to be. She's wearing a green shirt with a bunch of old-timey keys sewn to it. "I'm as much in costume as they are, and they're as much adults as me."

The doctor tells them they've assessed Giles's level of consciousness, and his score is not the lowest possible, but it's not good. The CT scan hasn't showed any sign of aneurism or tumor, so
they're investigating other possibilities. A nurse follows with a clipboard straining with paperwork for Buffy to sign, permissions for more tests and emergency surgery if it's needed.

After they've gone, Xander kisses Faith's hand that's entwined with his, then rises and walks out of the waiting room. She wants to go with him, but he would have asked her if he wanted her.

Wendy apparently does want her. She offers to make a cafeteria run and asks Faith to come with her. Turns out the cafeteria's closed at this hour, but there's a row of machines just outside.

"How bad do you think this coffee is?" Faith asks.

"Dire. I'd guess." She hesitates, then says, "Faith, I wanted a chance to talk to you. I'm getting a very strong vibe from you --"

"In my neighborhood we call it the stink-eye."

Wendy smiles nervously. "Mine too. I don't know if Xander talked to you about things that happened when the cult had us --"

"I dreamed about it. There were magic mushrooms, you two screwed."

She lets out an unsteady breath. "In my right mind, that's the last thing I'd do. I was with someone who cheated, back before I came to Sunnydale, and being the other woman is high on my list of shitty things to do."

"I got no problem with you on that. I told Xander that's past, as long as it stays in the past."

"That's not what the stink-eye says. Unless this is something about Rupert?"

Faith waves a hand. "Giles gettin' laid can only lead to good things, I'm thinking. What I heard, he hasn't been serious about a woman for five or six years."

"Really? I thought he was with the woman who was his partner in the magic shop."

"Anya? No, she was Xander's fiancee."

"Oh. Xander told me Rupert had someone in his life who was not what you'd expect, and I got the distinct impression something had happened to her."

"This was before I knew him, so you'd have to talk to one of the others. But yeah, he was in love with a woman and she was murdered. I think he closed himself off for a long time after that. He wasn't the same watcher to me that he was to Buffy, and I think maybe it was because I remind him of her." It occurs to her she's talking way too much. "Shit, don't mention anything about that. I haven't told anyone, not even Xander."

"Don't worry, I'm good at holding secrets."

"I guess you would be."

"So this tension I've been feeling between us. I'd like to get it out in the open, see if we--"

"I know what it is," Faith says abruptly, as the realization dawns. "It's that suit. Reminds me of this lawyer I knew in my wild and crazy days. And when I say wild and crazy, I mean I was crazy and what's the word? Feral. She hired me to kill somebody. She dressed just like that."

"Like I told the doctor, this is a costume. I went to the consignment shop and got the outfit that was
the farthest thing from me that I could find. So if you ever see it again, it's probably because I'm going for a bank loan. Are we good?"

"We're good. Hang around, give Giles something to live for."

Wendy digs in her bag for a five to feed the change machine, and they start punching buttons for coffee and tea.

***

This is impossible. Giles tries to speak, but can't.

"Go away, Rupert."

The youth leaning over him does not go away. "Close your eyes."

He doesn't want to but he does, under the hypnotic touch at his temples.

"Better?"

"God, yes."

"You know I'll always take care of you."

"Last night --" He wants to remember but he can't, not quite. Rupert's hands soothe away his vague memories of panic and dark.

"Two nights ago. You were brilliant."

"Two? What have I --"

"Shhh." The mattress dips as Rupert straddles him, barely missing a beat as he keeps rubbing his temples. "You've been sleeping. Hush now. You've earned your rest."

Giles tries again to speak, but his jaws -- his whole body -- are paralyzed.

"Relax, Ethan," says the voice above him. "Just let yourself go."

What? No. He tries to open his eyes, but he can't.

He spins down into the dark.

***

Giles awakens before his host does. His eyes, his body will not obey him, so he lies still and waits. Though his eyes are closed, he can tell the light has changed. Late afternoon, he'd guess. He makes use of the senses he can, listening to the street noises, assessing the room's temperature. It's stifling.

There are no sounds within the room. Rupert's either out of the flat or asleep.

Finally his body makes demands that cannot be denied, and he rouses, groaning, and shambles to the bog. He pisses, washes up, splashes cold water on his face, then peers into the cracked, freckled mirror.

Jesus wept. Giles had hoped it was a dream, but it's not. Ethan Rayne's face stares blearily back. Not yet twenty, hair even longer than Rupert's, quite the beautiful young man.
"Christ, you're a stupid git," he mutters to his reflection. He fumbles for his toothbrush and scrubs away the nasty aftertaste of the mushrooms. God, but they taste evil.

He changes into clean clothes before he rummages for the hash. The smoke settles his stomach and his head, and he doesn't mind the haze. He drops into the tatty club chair by the window and contemplates the evening ahead.

Giles had no question how he'd gotten here. You've never given a toss how I feel. Egotist that he was, Ethan had found a way to ensure Giles would have unwilling access to his every passing thought during their time together.

The Page of sodding Swords indeed.

How can he possibly break Ethan's spell if he's trapped in a body that's not under his control?

How will the people he's left behind possibly break it if he's never told them Ethan is in the game?

Christ, he tells himself, you're a stupid git.

***

Morning arrives and there's been no change in Giles's condition. They haven't transferred him to a room yet; they're waiting for staff and openings for the rest of the tests they need to do.

Activity at the hospital is picking up, and Xander's acutely aware that the zombie look is a little tired. He goes into the bathroom to wash off the makeup, but there's still fake blood all down his shirt and considering the context, it's just not funny anymore.

When he returns to the waiting room, Wendy's passing out cups of coffee -- the marginally better stuff from the cafeteria.

"I'm wondering if maybe we should take shifts," Xander says. "Go home, get a couple of hours sleep then come back to relieve the ones who stay."

"And get some normal clothes on," Faith mutters.

"I can drive," Wendy offers. "I have to feed Lolo, and while I'm home I'll try to get some sleep."

"I'm staying," Buffy says, and Dawn jumps in with a "Me too."

"Will?"

"I'm staying too."

"C'mon with us. You're dead on your feet."

"I'm not on my feet."

"I was trying to be delicate," Xander says. "C'mon. It'll be a while yet before any of us can get in to see him. It'll be better if you have some sleep and you're not so off balance."

"Okay," she finally says.

Everyone clusters around them when they arrive at the hacienda. "We don't know anything yet," Xander says. "There's been no change. They don't think it's a stroke or tumor, but otherwise, it's anyone's guess."
"They haven't any theories?" Wes asks.

"None that they're sharing," Faith says. "I'm goin' upstairs." She looks so bleak.

Jenny reaches out and brushes her arm. "I'm sorry. He's your A.L., isn't he?"

"Nobody's A.L. but A.L.," Faith says. "But you're right, he's important to me." She looks toward Xander. "Babe?"

"Be up in a minute or two."

She nods and climbs the stairs.

Kennedy enfolds Willow in a hug. "You're trembling."

"Just tired," Willow says.

"C'mon then." She leads Willow up the stairs.

He spends a little time with the girls until Wes gently shoos them off to their breakfasts and showers.

"How are you holding up?"

"I think you've figured it out. Pretty rocky. Thanks for --" Xander gazes at the floor. "They have some kind of scale for comas. That's what they're calling it, a coma. The range is from 3 to 15."


"Oh." He remembers Cordy and his throat tightens. "I'd forgotten. How could I have forgotten her?"

Wes puts a hand on his arm, which Xander might have thought would be weird and awkward, but it isn't. "You've seen very little of her for nearly five years. It's not surprising. So they've assessed Giles?"

This is not helping the tightness in his throat. "He's a five." Almost as low-functioning as it gets.

"Do you think it could be something mystical?"

"It's been dead quiet around here since the whole Hall of Fame thing."

"Perhaps an aftereffect of the sacrifice spell?"

"Everyone went through that, except me and Wendy. Everyone else is fine. Hell, Buffy died, and she's doing fine."

"She is, however, a good deal younger." Xander shakes his head. "I don't think it's mystical. I almost wish it was. We have a pretty good track record with that. This --" He takes an uneven breath and swipes carefully at the skin below his left eye. "Sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry about," Wes says, brisk but gentle at the same time. "I thought, if I'm not being too presumptuous, that I would work with the girls today. Keep up their training schedule. Physical activity and routine will settle them a bit, I think."
"Good thinking. I'd appreciate that. Shit. It's my turn for dinner, isn't it?"

"It's already in the slow cookers. I decided to take advantage of Faith's lesson."

"Thanks. Routine, yeah. Routine is good. Thanks for stepping in."

"It was time I made a contribution. Now you. You're swaying on your feet. To bed with you. I'll be listening for the phone, in case there's news."

"Thanks," he says again, and heads for his room, unbuttoning his zombie shirt as he climbs the stairs.

***

He nurses his gin and lemon, his eyes on the ginger-haired girl standing at the bar. She wears a microscopically short dress that favors her legs. It's a bit of a tent, with a patchwork of multicolored Liberty of London print, but he intends to see her out of it before too much time passes.

She's with that pompous ass Sutcliffe, but that only adds to the challenge.

She listens, nods, interjects the prompts of a dutiful girlfriend, or one auditioning for the role. Ethan watches her, imagining himself in bed with her as she writhes beneath him. After a while she becomes aware of his scrutiny, turning her thick-lashed gaze on him.

He flickers a smile, tips his glass a fraction of an inch in salute. Her teeth nibble daintily at her lower lip, then she turns her attention back to Sutcliffe.

Rupert returns to their table, dropping a fresh pack of Gauloises before Ethan. "Do you fancy her?"

"I have a weakness for ginger-haired girls."

Beneath the table, Rupert's hand glides over his thigh, then retreats. "Is there anything you don't have a weakness for?"

Smiling, he takes up the cigarette pack. "When I find out I'll let you know."

"Who is she?"

Ethan shrugs. "I'll let you know that, as well."

His unknown, unwilling passenger would cry out, if he had a voice. Giles knows full well who she is -- what a disaster she'll be.

Dierdre Page.

***

Buffy and Dawn haven't come home by the time Xander wakes, so by the time he and Faith arrive at the hospital, he looks for them in the waiting room.

"Any news?" he asks needlessly. If there had been news, they'd have called.

"They're doing another test," Buffy says. "They're hoping to find what's going on before they have to do the spinal tap, I think."
"I think you two should head home for a while." Xander hooks the keys from his pocket, dangles them in front of Buffy. "You both need some rest."

"I'm fine," Buffy insists.

"You look more zombie than fairy," Xander counters. "Trust me. You've got me totally out zombied."

"I had a thought," she says. "What if all this is Andrew's doing? His revenge for being voted off the island?"

"I'm the one who did the voting," Xander says. "Why would he go after Giles?"

"Maybe he didn't," Dawn says. "Do you think that schmuck could hit the broad side of a barn?"

If anything could make this worse, it's the thought that Giles is in such dire shape because Xander flew off the handle.

Faith clearly gets that, because she rubs a hand along his shoulder blade. "I think it's medical. Plenty of things happen for no apparent reason."

"That's been my thinking all this time," Xander says.

"He's such a weasel," Buffy says. "Andrew, not Giles. Maybe he's around, close enough to see how we're getting along without him. And when he sees that we're not panicking, he decides to throw a little chaos into the mix. And you can't realize how terribly, tragically wrong you were to make him leave if you're the one in a coma."

"Wow," Xander says. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Trust me, I've had months worth of unpleasantness at the hands of Andrew and his fellow weasels. Time loops, invisibility, thinking I accidentally killed someone, and oh yeah, let's not forget being made to believe that the previous six years of my life -- including all of you -- were some psychotic delusion. We've seen exactly how much suffering that little asshole is willing to inflict for his own personal gain. Maybe we should never have trusted his rehabilitation."

"Especially," Dawn says, "when we've seen what honest rehabilitation looks like." They've clearly been through all this together while they've been sitting in the waiting room.

Xander slips an arm around Faith. "So what do we do?"

"What if we have Willow do a locator spell? Did she come with you?"

"She crashed hard," Faith says. "She was still asleep when we left."

Buffy nods. "I can't use my cell in here and I didn't have time to bring it anyway. I'll go home, talk to her about this and get some sleep."

***

Within a fortnight everyone in London knows who the ginger-haired girl is.

As it turns out, she's a new addition to the band Sutcliffe's in, and it isn't long before every bloke in town is sniffing 'round her.

Sandie Shaw, Cilla Black and Pet Clark have disappeared from the charts by now, but there are
murmurs that Dierdre's star could rise even higher than theirs. Her beauty, her talent -- even her name has the proper ring. The right number of syllables, the arrangement of consonant and vowels seemingly designed to trip off a DJ's tongue.

If she can untangle herself from Sutcliffe and his band, who are utter rubbish. Bowie-influenced, overblown tripe about magic and demons. Obvious posers, Rupert grouses, and Ethan can't help but agree.

It's almost more than Ethan can stand, going to their every club appearance. "The sacrifices one must make for love," he tells Rupert.

"I'm not in love with her," Rupert grumbles.

No, but he's in love with Ethan, isn't he?

Much as Rupert moans about the music -- which is crap, apart from Dierdre, Ethan knows that -- he can't resist this.

Witnessing the chase.

He devours every comment, drinks in the avidity of Ethan's gaze, even though it's not directed at him. The flush of Ethan's skin is mirrored in Rupert's own. He stands behind Ethan in the crush by the bar, his hips snugged against Ethan's arse, his hand gripping his arm. Murmuring in Ethan's ear, he narrates a scenario of his own creation, involving Ethan and Dierdre shagging. Of course Rupert knows every last note to hit to get a reaction, relishing his uneven breath, the warmth of his skin. Rupert works him into a state, and then they race back to the flat and fuck.

Occasionally they make it only as far as the alley behind the club.

The price Ethan pays is having to listen to Rupert drone on about the band, which is crap, and Sutcliffe's guitar playing, which is doubly crap, crap to the tenth power. Rupert's guitar mad, worships at the feet of Clapton and Beck, and he can go on for hours once he gets a few pints into him. Ethan finds the technical talk dead boring, but he loves watching him talk. Hands gesturing, eyes glittering, voice rising with excitement or scorn. Either way it's full of passion. Ethan tunes out the actual words and just takes in his gestures and intonation.

Which lands him in trouble if he gets caught, but since trouble usually leads to pleasantly rough sex, Ethan arranges getting caught more often than not.

Ethan chases her all summer, long after he'd normally grow bored. Rupert taps into his obsession, feeds it, feeds off it. He helps Ethan cast minor spells to advance his cause with Dierdre, to little effect. Ethan half wonders if Rupert's casting his own spells behind Ethan's back, designed to thwart him, prolong the chase.

He almost doesn't mind. The obsession is delicious in its way, better than hashish, better than mushrooms, almost better than magic. He cuts back on everything but the magic.

It's almost anticlimactic when he does get his chance.

Not a carefully orchestrated chance meeting, not an audacious gambit for an audience between sets.

He's surprised when it happens. During a quick run to the corner shop for a packet of Gauloises. He's unkempt, wearing a dodgy shirt he'd tossed on before he left the flat.
She's just coming from the record store, carrying her purchase.

He nearly crashes into her, sputters an apology.

Dierdre smiles. "Oh hullo. I know you."

***

Giles watches it all unfold, helpless to change anything, unable to speak one word that might prevent all the death that would come.

At first he'd struggled against his confinement, ransacking his memory for any spell that could have caused this or might break him free. He tried to find some way to signal to his friends what has happened and who is behind it, but he could not locate his own body at all.

He has been cut adrift.

Exhausted by battering himself against the walls of his prison, he then subsides, telling himself to wait, watch and learn. But it's more than watching, of course. Giles feels every physical sensation, every emotion or thought that Ethan experiences. At first it causes a kind of vertigo to live remembered events through a consciousness that's just a step or two away from that of his younger self. But that disconnect, along with the strangeness of seeing his own face looking back at him from somewhere other than the mirror, eventually fades.

What was it he'd told Buffy when his past had caught up to him in Sunnydale? *I fell in with the worst crowd that would have me.* But it wasn't quite that simple. He had collected that crowd, beginning with Ethan.

Ethan had been the perfect foil for him. Giles had wanted rebellion, and Ethan pushed him to a level he'd never have expected -- and Giles had reveled in it.

And then Dierdre had come along, and changed the game entirely.

***

Faith is relieved to see Wendy's left her executive bitch outfit at home, arriving in jeans and cowboy boots, her hair all loose like that Emmylou singer. Her handbag looks like you could sling a baby in it, and there are beads hanging off it every which way.

"Any news?" she asks.

"They haven't found anything wrong with him. He's in a room now, and Xander's with him. They're limiting him to a short visit every hour."

"Are they planning more tests?"

"It didn't sound like it. They're just gonna try to keep him stable. He's breathing fine on his own, anyway."

"That's good news." But she doesn't have the good news face on; she looks down at the rings she wears and Faith can tell from her breathing that she's about to cry. After a moment she gets a grip and looks up. "We keep assuming it's medical. But maybe it is mystical. Rupert was unsettled about something. We talked about it -- I think he'd had some kind of intuition that trouble was coming, but he wasn't raised to believe in that, so he was struggling with it. He wouldn't really tell me anything, except to be wary if I saw a man with white hair and a cane. Does that sound like
Faith shakes her head. "Nobody I can think of, but Xander's known him for years longer than I have. We'll ask him. And Willow's doing a spell to search for Andrew, just in case. Buffy thought maybe he'd try something to prove how necessary he is."

"Something like this would take a lot of power, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah." She sighs. "Probably more than that little prick has."

"Could he have any other enemies?"

"Could have a lot. From the cult thing that just happened, from the fall of Sunnydale, from anything that hates the Council -- or even some survivor from the Council who hates him. They can be a ruthless bunch of bastards if you're not with the program, and he's crossed 'em a few times. Buffy and I have too. Maybe we're lookin' at a coup attempt, I dunno."

"Does any one of them have white hair and use a cane?"

"None that I met. I mostly had experience with their goon squad. Wes would know. I'm gonna head outside and give him a call."

The November day is raw, with a pale, watery sun barely showing through the mass of gray overhead. The lake wind knifes through her as she walks toward the smoking shelter to use her cell.

Once Wes is summoned to the phone, his first words are, "Is there news?"

"No, there's no change. The tests haven't turned anything up yet. Wendy and I were wondering about the chances of it being mystical."

"Yes, Xander and I discussed that briefly. We didn't explore the topic in any depth. He was terribly tired. I've been giving it some thought when I can."

"Not that I'm a bigtime grudge holder, but when Wendy asked about possible enemies I thought of the Council. They're not huge fans of any of us. Think we could be looking at some kind of takeover attempt?"

"If that were true, where are they? Wouldn't they be stepping in to complete their coup?"

Faith deflates. "Yeah, well, that's a hole in that theory, ain't it? Reason I called, Wendy said Giles warned her about a man with white hair and a cane. There's no one I can think of who fits that description, but maybe you knew someone in the Council."

There's a brief silence, then Wes says, "Quentin Travers' brother. Magnus. His hair was gray, and he did carry a walking stick." He pauses. "'White hair.' It's unlike Giles to be so imprecise in his language."

"Maybe the guy's aged since you saw him."

"I'm not even certain he's still alive. The destruction of the Council's headquarters killed a great many members."

"Would he have it in for Giles?"

"I suppose it's possible. Certainly Quentin found him a thorn in his side. I --" There's a long pause.
Faith's stomach sours at the dread that seems to ooze out of that one word. "Spit it out, Wes."

"I could ring my father. He would know if Magnus Travers is still alive, and possibly his whereabouts."

"I guess it's time we follow any lead," she says.

"Yes." There's another pause. "I'll let you know the moment I learn anything."

Shivering, Faith tucks her phone into a pocket and heads back into the hospital.

***

"You know me?" Ethan echoes stupidly. "Oh. Yes. I come to see the band now and again."

Dierdre Page smiles, making it perfectly clear that she knows exactly how many times he's been to see the band. "I've heard about you," she elaborates. "You're Ethan Rayne."

"You have?"

"You know Tommy, don't you?"

"Ah. Yes. We were schoolmates. "When this conversation has taken place in his imagination, he's been much smoother. And Sutcliffe has been left entirely out of the discussion.

"I've heard it said that you're a bit dangerous," Dierdre says, in tones that indicate that she doesn't view this as a drawback.

"Really?" Ethan smiles. "I'm quite flattered. May I buy you a pint?" He desperately hopes he has enough dosh in his pocket to pay for it.

"It's so dreadfully hot. I'd love a shandy."

Making a parody of a gallant gesture, Ethan ushers her into the nearest pub. He slips his hand into his pocket, attempting to assess his financial situation without being obvious. At least it's Declan tending bar. There's a better-than-slight chance he'd accept an IOU or a blowjob should Ethan come up short.

As it happens, Ethan scrapples up enough change to pay for Dierdre's shandy.

She raises an eyebrow when he returns to their table. "Nothing for you?"

"I was just on my way back from the Three Crowns when I ran into you."

Again her smile makes it clear she knows him for a liar. "You're very gallant, for such a dangerous man."

He's not quite sure if he's being mocked, but it doesn't matter. A surprising ripple of pleasure courses through him at the thought that she sees through him. "I suppose I've a bit of the highway man in me."

"And what woman can resist that?" she murmurs, and he knows he is utterly lost.

He offers her one of his Gauloises and lights it for her. "And why do they say I'm dangerous?"

"Oh, the standard reasons. You're a known heartbreaker. But I've also heard you have some
knowledge of the dark arts."

He lights his own cigarette. "And what do you think of these character flaws?"

Dierdre laughs softly. "My heart is quite resilient." She executes a well-practiced French inhale, then releases the smoke. Turning toward him, she parts her pouty lips slightly.

Ethan leans in toward her, the leather of the banquette creaking softly. She does not pull away, so he kisses her.

She opens to him immediately, avidly, as much the aggressor as Ethan is. He has never known a girl who kissed this way, at least not without half an hour of teasing and coquetry to keep her reputation relatively intact. They might wish to be seen as liberated, but they don't want to be thought easy. Dierdre's kisses are as demanding as Rupert's. The instant he makes this association, his mind leaps to the scenarios Rupert has spun out for him as they watch Dierdre at the microphone, and his body has its customary reaction.

When they break to take a breath, it hardly seems real. He feels as though Rupert is whispering this entire interlude to him as they watch her onstage, and somehow Ethan's mind has made it seem real. He blinks, but it's still Dierdre gazing back at him, her face flushed, lips swollen.

"Well," she breathes. "You have hidden talents." She brushes his lips with her thumb, which sharpens the ache in his groin. "I'm surprised your reputation doesn't include this. I'll have to see that it does." She slips her fingers through his hair and draws him toward her. He parts his lips to receive her.

Just as their lips touch, she draws back with a small shriek. Her forgotten cigarette, burning down between her fingers, has dropped its long ash onto her lap. Her frock, made of petrochemicals, is quickly melting away.

Without thought, Ethan mutters a quick phrase in Latin, and the heat dies and the damage ceases. But there is a hole in the skirt of her frock the size of his palm. "Christ," Ethan exclaims. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so." Hand shaking, she crushes her cigarette out in the ashtray. "I'd best get home and change."

"I realize you're at the fashion vanguard, but I'm afraid this is more daring than the law will allow."

She looks down and sees what he does. White thighs and a flash of knickers. "Oh. I suppose the record store bag, if I hold it just so ..."

"I'd lend you my shirt, but it won't reach."

Dierdre comes to a decision. "My flat is close by. Could I persuade you to go there and bring me another dress?"

"No gallant, dangerous or otherwise, could refuse you."

She fishes her keys from her bag, then directs him to her flat. There's nothing for it but to leave the shelter of their table and do her bidding, raging erection or no.

Her flat, in a modest building, manages to be both posh and bohemian at the same time. Though he's aware of his mission, he takes a moment to look about. Two Pop Art artworks dominate the
The urge to have some small piece of Dierdre seizes him. Nothing of value, nothing she'd miss. He slips one of the smooth pebbles into his pocket and rearranges the rest, then he lets himself out and locks up behind himself.

***

Giles remembers this day. The last gasp of summer, with its oppressive heat. Ethan's joke about being the kind of kisser who sets a girl's knickers aflame.

He remembers the shag they had, as Ethan described the kisses he'd shared with Dierdre and his eerie feeling of being caught in a fantasy scripted by Rupert and made real. He remembers Ethan's body pinned beneath his, his wrists caught up over his head, as Ethan confessed his desperate arousal over that pint of shandy, fueled by his thoughts of Rupert and the scenarios he detailed over and over.

He remembers how things changed after this. How, despite the erotic charge the three of them created together, Ethan began pulling out of his orbit and into Dierdre's.

How this hot, humid day was also the last gasp of what had been between Rupert and Ethan.

***

Wesley grips the telephone handset, then releases it. This requires finesse, something he so clearly lacks when he speaks with his father.

If the Council is behind what's happened to Giles, there's a good chance that Roger Wyndam-Pryce himself is involved. And if they're not -- well, no good can come of admitting the vulnerability of the Cleveland contingent. Wesley would not put it past his father to attempt to gain the advantage while they're all off balance and Giles is out of commission.

What on earth had he been thinking, to promise this? Surely he'll botch it, make the situation worse than it already is. Perhaps he should tell Faith that the whole idea was a mistake.

No. They need all the intelligence they can gather. He's no longer a boy who can be intimidated, outmaneuvered or bullied by his father. Wesley thinks of Kalindi and her determination to do what she must, no matter how frightened she is.

He draws in a breath, mentally rehearsing his cover story. Breathing out, he reaches once more for the phone.

"Mother, it's Wesley. How are you?"

She brushes aside the question, as always, with a sunny and superficial answer, then turns the question back on him.
"I'm good, things are good here."

"I've been hearing about the terrible fires in California. Are they near you?"

"Not at all, Mother. I've been doing some work in Ohio. On secondment, but it may work into something permanent."

"Ohio must be colder than you're used to."

"Quite a bit, yes, but I'm rather enjoying the change of pace." Is he any less superficial than she is? "I was wondering -- is Father there?"

She tells Wesley he's tinkering in his workshop, and goes to fetch him. Ah yes. He's on a strict schedule, even when relaxing. From 7:05 to 8:15, puttering, from 8:15 to 9:10, tinkering. Then his bedtime reading: browsing through textbooks in search of facts that need correcting, which will necessitate a crisp letter to the publisher in the morning.

As always, when his father comes on the line, he asks what's wrong. The implication, of course, being that he would never talk to his parents at all unless he needed something, unless there were some situation that he could not control without his father's help. This, of course, is very nearly true, simply because his father makes any exchange at all so unpleasant.

"Nothing's wrong, Father. I merely realized you and Mother didn't know my latest news."

"She said you've been transferred. Things at Wolfram & Hart finally got out of hand, did they?"

Wesley closes his eyes, feeling his jaw muscles tense. "Not at all. I came out to Cleveland for a wedding, and it turned out they needed my help. When that matter was resolved, I was invited to stay."

"Cleveland? You mean that mess Rupert Giles has created? Why is it no surprise that he should need your help?" The clear implication being, naturally, that no one else would.

"I wouldn't say it's a mess, not at all. There's a great deal of energy and emotion, as you'd expect in any group of teenaged girls, but Giles and Xander Harris are doing wonderful work here. And I've been working with slayers again."

"God help us all," is his father's supportive response to that. "What Giles has done with the slayer line has implications we can't even begin to see yet."

Yes, like the return of the Guardians. Wesley decides to leave that surprise for a later date, but the thought of his father's reaction prompts a little thrill of Schadenfreude. "Well, the situation was dire, and the Council wasn't exactly on hand to offer support, was it?"

Silence stretches out for a moment, which may be the first time Wesley's ever rendered his father speechless. Then his cold tone crackles over the line. "I presume you're referring to the deaths of so many of your former colleagues in the Council? All of them better watchers than you'll ever be."

Wesley forces himself to relax his death grip on the phone. How could he have thought he'd ever get the best of his father, even for a moment? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I should hope not. You were raised to have some decency, after all."

"I merely meant Giles and Buffy were forced by circumstance to do something radical and bold, and it was a success. The world did not end."
"Not yet. But the ramifications may take centuries to sort out."

Speaking of bold. Few apart from Roger Wyndam-Pryce could pull off pooh-poohing an averted apocalypse.

"It's late," his father says. "If you've no other reason for your call --"

"Just one quick question," Wesley says. "I was wondering if you could tell me what became of Magnus Travers. Was he in the Council Headquarters when --"

"The sacrifice of your former comrades means so little to you? You don't know who fell and who survived?"

All Wesley can do is stammer.

"Never mind," Roger says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It's not important. He died in the attack. What is it that prompts you to ask?"

He stutters out the story he's rehearsed, that Robin Wood encountered someone on his travels who'd sent greetings to Wesley and Giles, but he could no longer remember the man's name. All Wesley had was the description. Though the story seemed plausible when he'd worked it out, the silence that ensues makes it sound hollow and false.

A thought occurs to him. "Perhaps it's someone else he met, a survivor of the attack who might now use a cane."

His father's voice is cold when he answers. "Neither of the two survivors of the explosion actually has legs."

Which means they have a lot in common with the survivor of a conversation with his father.

Wesley stumbles through a goodnight and hangs up. He leans back in his chair, staring into space. It's almost forty minutes later when he emerges from his fog, then he reaches for the phone once more to call Faith and tell her he's satisfied that the Council has nothing to do with Giles's condition.

***

_Ethan hurries back to the pub with Dierdre's frock._

_She favors him with a dazzling smile and a casually possessive kiss on the cheek as he delivers it to her. "Not only are you a lifesaver, you have marvelous taste. That's my favorite frock, you know."_

_"Is it? You were wearing it the first time I saw you." Once it's out, he wonders if he should have said it. He sounds like a schoolboy with a crush._

_She smiles and reaches out to toy with a lock of hair at the nape of his neck, twisting it round her finger. The gesture nearly drives the breath from him. "You are a treasure," she says, and touches her pale, frosted lips to his. "Be right back." She slides out of the banquette, clutching the new frock to her to cover the damaged one, and disappears into the loo._

_He gazes at the ghostly pink print of her lips on her nearly full glass of shandy. She's been nursing it; perhaps she doesn't want this interlude to end anytime soon either. He'd consider dashing home to retrieve some more money, but he doesn't want to leave her again. Anything could happen, now that she's not pinned to this banquette by the lack of a wearable frock. Sutcliffe could happen by,
and that would be the end.

Dierdre returns to their table in the new dress, her lipstick shade adjusted to complement its hues, her hair smoothed and shining. Tucking the ruined garment into the record store bag, she says, "It makes much too amusing a story to throw it out."

Ethan touches a finger to the bag. "What have you bought?"

She slides an album out of the bag. "Birthday present for Tommy. He so loves Argent, and he's been wanting it."

"But they're not your favorite band?"

She cocks her head, and her hair swings in a glossy curtain. "I find them a trifle ... bombastic. But then, the same could be said for our music."

"You don't agree with the band's direction, then?" Perhaps she will break away and become a star after all.

"There are things aside from the music that make it worth my while."

Ethan doesn't ask what she means. Sutcliffe himself, no doubt.

"There's another present I have for Tommy," she says. "It's really quite extravagant." Emphasizing the factor that compensates for the music.

Ethan wonders if he should extract himself before she brushes him aside. He decides, however, that he'll endure a little humiliation later for the pleasure of her company now.

It's a surprise, then, what she says next. "He'll never know if I share a little with you, will he?" Abruptly she pushes the album back into its bag and slips out of the banquette. "Come on. It's back at my flat."

It feels quite different to be in Dierdre's flat when she's there too. Its poshness is offset by the casual way she behaves here. She kicks off her shoes, tosses her purchase and her handbag onto a chair. "Have a seat," she tosses over her shoulder as she crouches by the table in the niche, reaching beneath it. She withdraws an ornate box, antique and totally out of keeping with the rest of the flat.

Dierdre sits close beside Ethan, seemingly unaware of how her frock hem has slipped up and exposed a great deal of leg. "This is absolutely astonishing," she says, and opens the box. Inside is a plastic bag hashish, and she sets about constructing a joint with the hash, some tobacco and five skins. Her movements are as practiced and adept as her French inhale.

"You do more than dabble in magicks, don't you?" she asks.

Ethan isn't quite sure how he should answer. He decides on an air of false modesty. "I've studied a bit."

"You and your friend. There are quite a few rumors about him as well."

"Ah." He wants to steer the conversation away from Rupert but the warmth of her body so close to his has shut down his mind completely.

"At any rate, while you were fetching my dress, I realized how lucky I was to be with you. If you
hadn't acted so quickly, I could have been seriously hurt."

Without his meaning it to, his gaze falls to the lap of her new frock. "I'm glad I could be of assistance," he stutters.

Dierdre sets aside the box and the joint, leaning across his own lap to reach for the record store bag she'd tossed in a chair. This time the air is quite driven from his lungs. She hands the bag to him, lightly rubbing a hand on his arm. "Why don't you put this on?"

He draws the frock from the bag and looks at Dierdre, utterly confounded.

She laughs in delight. "The record, silly."

Ethan blinks. "But. The birthday present."

She takes the antique box up and returns to her task. "You have a birthday, don't you?"

By the time he gets the needle set at the first song, Dierdre has lit the joint and when the first curl of smoke reaches Ethan, he knows this hashish is every bit as potent as she'd said. He sits next to her as she passes the joint to him. "Hold Your Head Up" fills the room, a song he could happily have gone without hearing ever again. But now, as he draws the smoke into his lungs, its insistent beat seems to be leading him somewhere, giving him shape and substance when it feels the hashish is dissolving him.

Side One of the album plays over and over as they share the joint, then begin a serious exploration of one another. Again and again that rhythm tethers him to reality yet pulls him closer and closer to something unknown and unknowable. The first track is playing yet again when Dierdre leads him to her bed and offers Ethan what he suspects is the third birthday gift she'd been planning for Tommy.

***

"I gotta kill something," Faith mutters as they walk through the parking ramp. A man locking his car door shoots them a nervous look and she gives him a bright and very fake smile.

The man fumbles his keys, dropping them on the cement, and crouches for them, not taking his eyes from the two of them.

"I could definitely kill a pizza right now," Xander adds. "Supreme with double cheese and anchovies."

Faith scoffs. "V&T's double cheese is like a 13-inch dick. It's just gonna choke you, and the experience isn't all that much better. Completely overrated."

Xander almost chokes himself. "Why honey, I never knew you felt that way about my thirteen-inch dick."

Faith sputters a laugh and bumps her hip into his. "Smartass." They reach the car and get in. "Seriously, drop me off at the Flats. I'll catch a cab home."

"Is this how you were when I was kidnapped by the cult?"

"You know it. And when you got nabbed and hauled back to prison by those asswipes from Sunnydale."
"Y'know, I'd been doing a pretty good job of repressing that, thanks so very much."

She sinks into a sour silence.

"At least he's not any worse."

Wrong thing to say. "Babe, he's a 5 on the fuckin' coma scale, about the only way for him to get worse would be to stop jerking when they stick a pin in him." The woman knows her comas, he forgets this sometimes.

He shuts up, and after a moment she says, "I'm sorry. I know you're trying to keep the whole positive outlook thing going. It was just hard seeing him all wired up to monitors and shit. It brought back a lot."

"Yeah," he says softly. That's all they say until he drops her at Front and Old River Road. He catches her hand and kisses it. "Sure you don't want me to come with?"

"You need to sleep. I'm not fit company for anyone anyway."

"You be careful. You haven't had any more rest than I have."

"I'll kill a couple to take the edge off, then be right home." She leans in and kisses him, then gets out of the car.

Tired as he is, he still shambles into the kitchen to find something to eat, and finds Kalindi and Gabriel playing Scrabble at the table. They're pretty far into the game. "Hey," Xander mumbles.

"How's Mr. Giles?" Kalindi asks. "Sit down, let me get some dinner for you."

Xander means to protest that he can get his own, but instead he sinks onto the chair she's just vacated. "Thanks. He's not any better, he's not any worse. They haven't figured out what's causing it."

"Back home they'd call that sanguma," Kalindi says. "Is a sandwich okay? There's roast beef or ham."

"Ham's good, thanks. Just a half, I'm going right to bed after. Sanguma -- oh, that's what they call attack sorcery, isn't it? We've been trying to think of who might be behind something like that." A thought occurs to him. "Do you think Whistler would have done this?"

"No," Kalindi says instantly. "I know he's a demon and all, but he helped me. I haven't been very kind to him either; he manages to be irritatingly cryptic about everything, and the demon thing really scared me. But he's not bad."

"Yeah, Buffy said he's on the side of balance, and that he helped her at a really bad time. But she doesn't exactly trust him."

"I've seen him around, too," Gabriel says. "At Starbucks, but he's never talked to me, other than
ordering coffee."

"Why the fuck is he around if he's not up to something?" Xander blurts. He scrubs his hands over his face. "Shit, sorry, Kalindi. I'm so tired I can barely talk."

"It's all right." She sets a plate in front of him with a half sandwich on it, along with a Sam Adams. "How's Buffy doing? I got so scared the other night. I didn't think anything ever made her cry."

Xander nods and speaks around a bite of sandwich. "Seeing him like that gave her the wig." He swallows. "A few years ago she came home and found her mom sprawled out like that. She'd just died. This is rough on her and Dawn, because Giles is the closest thing to a father figure that they've had for the last eight years, but it's especially hard on Buffy, because she's the one who found Joyce."

Tears glimmer in Kalindi's eyes. "Oh, how awful."

"I wish you could've known Joyce. She was a pretty cool lady." This remembered loss suddenly makes him aware of how precarious things are for Giles right now, and a knot rises in his throat. "I'm gonna take this upstairs with me. Thanks, Kalindi, it's exactly what I needed."

"Xander? When you go back to the hospital, would you find Pastor Marlene? Ask her to pray for Mr. Giles, and for everyone who loves him."

She asks so matter-of-factly, like the word "pray" is something that can roll off anyone's tongue the way it does from hers. He can't really imagine himself doing this, but he's her watcher, and this is what she needs to feel safe and accepted. "Of course. I'll look for her first thing." He takes his plate and beer and heads for the stairs. "Goodnight, girls."

***

Having Dierdre Page, as it happens, is not so very different from pursuing her.

Considering that she'd treated him to Sutcliffe's birthday gifts, he'd assumed that "Tommy" was soon to become a thing of the past. But they are still the public couple, more and more frequently mentioned in the pretentious music rags that are sprouting up all over London. The band is no less dire, but no one seems to care anymore. Record executives sniff around Dierdre and Sutcliffe and their mates as avidly as Dierdre's admirers have been all along, and Ethan still watches the band from the back of the club, Rupert still standing behind him murmuring into his ear.

Now it's not just imagined sexual scenarios he's scripting for Ethan. Rupert fuels his jealousy and frustration, whispering poisonous questions and speculation. What d'you suppose they were doing last night?

It's a sign of Rupert's own frustration, and Ethan's part in that. When Rupert had first fled Oxford, Ethan had been the most dangerous person he could find as a vehicle for his rebellion. But he wants to go faster and farther than Ethan is ready to take him. It causes friction between them. That causes heat, as friction will. Sexual heat and boiling tempers on both sides.

It's a Friday night, almost a week after his latest shag with Dierdre, which accounts for Ethan's foul mood. The band is playing a set with new songs. Darker and more complex and still shite, for all their ambition. Rupert has released his grip on Ethan's arm for a pint of bitter, but he still keeps up his stream of suggestion and speculation, this time centered around a new player. Philip Henry has made an appearance tonight, after rumors to that effect for weeks.

He's barely older than Ethan, but he's already A&R man for a small label that carries a lot of
weight in the music world. If he wanted to he could make Dierdre Page the star she deserves to be, even with the albatross of that wretched band still chained round her neck.

She sings just for Henry, sitting with his mates at a table up front, lips pouting or curving into a private smile in between songs.

Rupert notices and begins murmuring about her pale lips, what favors they might be bestowing on Henry later on. As he begins to elaborate, he touches the nape of Ethan's neck with a cold fingertip that had been wrapped around the pint.

Ethan whirls to face him, sloshing his own ale on his Lord John trenchcoat. "Stop it."

Rupert gives him his own private smile. "Or what?"

"Sod off, I mean it." He slams his half-full glass onto the bar and pushes through the crowd to the door.

Of course Rupert will follow. Ethan had to tack on that "I mean it," which never fails to undercut whatever he says before.

It's cold and pissing down rain as he reaches the street. He turns his back to the wind to light a fag, and by the time he draws the smoke into his lungs and looks up, Rupert is there, leaning against a pillar, smirking.

"I'm not in the mood for games," Ethan says, and manages this time not to add a statement of how very much he means it.

"I'm not playing," Rupert assures him.

Right. He does always mean business, even when it comes to rebellion. If Rupert were ever as serious about Oxford and this secret organization he hints about, he'd be frightening to behold.

"I'm going home."

Rupert falls in step with him. "She's doing all this for your benefit, you know."

"What part of 'sod off' was unclear to you?"

"The trick is to decide whether she's tormenting you because you're terribly important, or because you're nothing."

Ethan flicks his cigarette aside and turns on Rupert, giving him a hard shove with both hands. "I've had enough of this."

Rupert seizes him by the lapels and pulls him into an alley. "That's funny. 'Enough' usually means you're just getting started." He pushes Ethan against the brick wall, fingers fumbling at the buttons of the long coat, his leg pushing in between Ethan's.

"Go on, say it," Rupert hisses in his ear.

"Stop it." His breath is as rough as the bricks at his back. "I fucking mean it." The only phrase that's even weaker tumbling from his lips than "I mean it."

Rupert takes it as the invitation it probably is and Ethan, as always, lets him.

***
Wesley is scrubbing the last of the pots when Buffy finds her way to the kitchen. "I thought you'd be down here taking a break, not being the scullery maid."

"I don't mind. It's restful in its way. Gives me a chance to think through problems." He upends the pot on the dish rack. "I haven't seen much of you. How are you doing?"

"It's hard," she says. It seems for a moment as if she'll say something more, but she doesn't.

"No change, then?"

Buffy shakes her head.

"He means a great deal to you. A second father."

"A first father, if you want to know the truth. My dad was not big with the actual, y'know, fathering." She waves a hand. "Sorry. I don't mean to get into all that."

"No need to be sorry. Have you eaten? Let me get something for you."

"Oh, no I couldn't -- well, actually, I could. Eat a horse, in fact."

He begins to rummage in the refrigerator. "You're in luck. I believe we have some horsemeat lasagne left."

"Wes. When did you develop a sense of humor?"

"It's still a work in progress." He opens a plastic container and begins spooning lasagne onto a plate. "Sorry. It's the really dreadful looking slow cooker kind, not the careful assemblage."

"No worries," she tells him. "As long as it's edible."

"How about Dawn?"

"She went right up to bed. I'll leave her a note that it's here in case she gets up in the night."

Wesley covers the plate with a paper towel and sets it in the microwave, then pushes buttons.

"You're managing to cook and work with the slayers?"

"As I said, the food is quick and inelegant."

"How about the slayers?"

"Doing quite well, actually." The microwave beeps, and Wesley presents her with the plate, some silver and bottled water. "I think they're happy for the distraction of work. Gabriel twisted his -- pardon, her -- knee, so she's resting with an icepack, and Kalindi's fussing over her."

"Oh, Kalindi's a total sweetie."

"That she is." Wesley cracks open a bottle of water for himself and joins her at the table.

"When I think of the way her parents treated her, I just want to smack them."

"Treated her how?"

"Locking her in the pantry, only letting her out to pray over her. Sending her halfway round the world because she didn't measure up to their standards. Letting her aunt ditch her too."
He feels a chill pass through him at the very first example. "They locked -- Christ." Wesley looks away from her, rubbing a hand over his face. "One wonders why some people are permitted to breed at all."

When he looks back at Buffy, she seems to be studying him rather closely. Hastily, he says, "I've been mulling over the possibility of some kind of attack sorcery."

Buffy nods. "We've been over it and over it while we're sitting around the hospital."

"Perhaps if we sort out what's different. Who or what is new in your lives here?"

"You, for starters." Buffy's mouth quirks in a half grin. "You haven't decided to do the old Single White Female on Giles, have you?"

"Good god, no," he says, prompting a brief appearance of an entire grin from her. "I'm just ... pitching in."

"If nobody's said it, thanks for that. This is wonderful, by the way." She jabs her fork toward her dinner. "Let's see, there's also Gabriel, and Kalindi hasn't been around for that long, either. But I can't see either of them being behind something like this. Kalindi adores him, for one thing. And Gabriel adores Kalindi."

"What if it's inadvertent? Something supernatural that swirls around them, though they're not directly causing it?"

"You're reaching, Wes. There's Wendy, though. She's new and she's supernatural."

He considers this. "I don't like it. She seems genuinely fond of Giles, and I do believe she was as much a victim of the cult as Xander was."

"But maybe the Guardian thing. Maybe they're not as benign as all that. I've been all 'go, Guardians, go' because the Council hates 'em so much, but maybe they're right this time."

"I can't see it. Sorry to be so vague, but it feels off."

"Yeah," Buffy says, and relief seems to course through her. "Me too. She does seem really fond of him, and I think I was seeing something spark between them. I'd like that for him." Suddenly tears are threatening to spill down her cheeks. "Dammit. Things were looking up for him. He was happy. Last time that happened --" She chokes off that thought and rubs away the tears.

On impulse, he reaches across the table and takes her hand. "I know. But don't count him out. As the Council well knew, he's strong and he's stubborn."

She snuffles but nods. "You're right. Okay then. What aren't we thinking of?"

"What if we forget what's new? What's old? Who might come back for a bit of revenge?"

Extracting her hand from his, Buffy rubs at the frown lines between her eyes. "We've gone over this too. The list's about as big as his library. He made tons of enemies in Sunnydale. But most of 'em are dead. Well, there's Mr. Original Bad Penny. Ethan Rayne. He showed up in Sunnydale three -- no, four times. Always created maximum chaos. But we haven't seen him for maybe four years. And there's something about this that doesn't seem like his style. It wouldn't interest him. Bad stuff happened, we're coping. It would bore him silly."

"Anyone else?"
"Whistler. He's not exactly an enemy. I'm not sure what he is. A demon, he told me that much. And balance between good and evil is his gig. Which side of the teeter-totter is he sitting on now? How do we tell?"

"Perhaps we find him and ask."

"Maybe." A breath gusts from her, and he can see her deflate like a three-day-old party balloon. He touches her arm again. "Buffy, why don't you go to bed now. Give the question more thought when you're rested."

"Maybe," she says again. "Yeah. I think I will." She shuffles toward the stairs, then turns back. "I'm glad you're here. You've turned into quite a watcher."

"No," he says softly. "I've just been around the demonic block a time or three."

"Deny it all you want, but I know from watchers. I have the best." She turns then and stumbles up the stairs.

***

Sudden as a shift in weather, Dierdre changes toward him. Accepts his invitations, issues her own, which could easily be viewed as velvet-sheathed demands. Ethan's happy to comply.

He's now in her inner circle, even in public. He sits at a table near the stage for the band's performances, finds himself in the company of Philip Henry and his record label counterparts, being treated to the pricey booze on someone's expense account.

Dierdre buys him clothes that suit her taste, turning him into something of a peacock. She dictates which shirts he should wear which nights so they don't clash when they're out together. It amuses him to let her costume him, to be part of the visual effect she creates in public.

He disobeys her edicts now and again or appears at her door without warning, just so she doesn't lose interest.

One early November afternoon, Ethan picks up his cigarettes and the new NME at the newsagent. The wind flaps his coat about his legs as he crosses the street to the pub. An impulse takes him past the door of the pub and on round the corner to Dierdre's flat.

He rings the bell and thumps at her door for a long while, despite the glare of the old cow peering out of the flat next door.

At last he hears the sounds of someone moving around inside, and the door opens a sliver. "Ethan, darling." From what little he can see, her hair is tousled, and the silk kimono she clutches to her gaps open above and below her fist, revealing bare skin.

Christ. She's with Sutcliffe, no doubt. She still shags him as well. There's no point trying to stop Dierdre from doing what she wishes to do. Still, he strokes the back of the hand that grasps the edge of the door. "I've come at a bad time?"

"Not at all." She opens the door wider and retreats from the doorway so he can enter. As he steps inside, she puts her hand to his arm to steady herself, and the kimono falls open.

"Are you well?"
“Just a bit tired.” Her voice sounds odd and distant. She weaves back to her bedroom, beckoning him to follow. The flat has an odd smell, smoky, but not tobacco or hashish. The robe falls completely away, slipping to the floor, as she stretches out onto her side on the bed. She seems almost as weightless as the silk as she touches down on the mattress. Her eyes are unfocused, yet glittering, as if she has a fever.

Ethan places his hand to her forehead, expecting the skin to be hot and damp, but it feels normal. There’s a bandage wound round her arm just above the elbow. “Dierdre, what happened to your arm? Are you hurt?”

"Aren't you a darling. It's nothing to worry about." She smooths a languid hand over the sheet. “Come sit by me and light me a cigarette, won’t you?”

He opens the fresh packet and does as she asks, handing her the fag once it’s lit. With her other hand, she seizes his coat and pulls him to the mattress beside her, curling onto his lap as she draws in the smoke. It feels so strange to sit with her this way, her bare porcelain skin against the blue wool of his coat.

"Utterly delicious," she murmurs.

“What is, Dierdre?”

"Everything. The smoke and the smooth cotton and the scratchy wool and the sound of your voice and the molecules of air. It's like I've never been alive before."

It’s the most cliched remark he’s ever heard from her lips, but then, she is high. Ethan slides downward over the sheet to lie with her, snuggling his arms around her. "And what marvelous gifts of the chemists have you been sharing, sweet?"

"Nothing so prosaic as that." She passes the cigarette back to him. "It's nothing I can explain, darling. I'll have to show you." But before she shows him anything, she drifts into sleep, leaving him to slither out of his coat as best he can. He finishes the cigarette, stroking her ginger hair, wondering what put her into this state.

Ethan’s nearly drowsing himself when he hears someone fumbling at the lock. He shakes Dierdre awake, calling her name. "Someone's breaking in."

She blinks sleepily. "It's all right." God, she’s beautiful, even in her disheveled state. "It's just Tommy."

Her statement, to his dismay, turns out to be true. Sutcliffe trundles into the flat bearing a bags from the curry shop. He clearly has the same reaction to Ethan’s presence.

Dierdre sits up and pulls her kimono on again, a little more successfully this time. "You're an absolute lifesaver," she tells Sutcliffe, souring Ethan's memory of their own first meeting. "Do be a darling and bring me a plate."

Sutcliffe brings one for her and another for himself, settling in with no intention of offering anything to Ethan. The two of them glower at one another as Dierdre makes small talk about NME’s new direction and local bands and clothing boutiques, until she finally says, "Oh, men. You can be such a bore sometimes. Honestly, it's time you two kiss and make up."

As if they've any small talk to make with one another.

But Sutcliffe seems to take her suggestion literally. "Don't be daft," he snaps.
“Right,” Dierdre says coldly. "Leave, then. I'm too tired for this nonsense."

Perhaps he should. But Sutcliffe has locked Ethan in his gaze once more. "What do you say, Rayne?"

"Say?"

Sutcliffe is loosening his tie and advancing on Ethan.

Ethan looks toward Dierdre. "You can't mean this literally."

Her exquisite mouthtwists in a smirk. "You can't tell me you've never kissed another man. I've seen you, with that friend of yours."

She has? She's been watching them in the alley behind the club, then.

Her eyes glitter avidly. "Go on."

Sutcliffe curls a hand round the back of Ethan's neck, and Dierdre makes a soft little sound in her throat that spurs the both of them on. A throb rises in his groin, and Ethan can't tell if it's due to the kiss or knowing it's being witnessed by Dierdre. The kiss, flavored with spice, turns into several, and Ethan's heart is pounding by the time they break apart.

"Now, isn't that better?" Dierdre says, in the tones of a preschool teacher. "But didn't I say kiss and make up?"

Sutcliffe makes no protest this time, just begins unbuttoning his geometric print shirt.

"Don't be a bore, darling," Dierdre says in response to Ethan's hesitation. She rises and slips her arms about him from behind, fumbling with his buttons. "I'd have you myself, but I'm absolutely knackered."

Sutcliffe drops his shirt onto the floor, and his trousers follow. Ethan notices a tattoo above his elbow, on the inner part of the arm, at the same place where Dierdre's arm is bandaged. It's not the usual sailor's tattoo but some kind of symbol -- that's as much as he takes in before Dierdre draws him back down to the bed, cooing to him and stroking his skin.

Her hands rest lightly on his shoulders as Sutcliffe moves in on him, but he's pinned as though she is applying more than her slight weight. Sutcliffe teases him with tongue and teeth and hands, while Dierdre marks him with her fingernails, soothes him with her liquid voice, urging the two of them on.

When they finally bring him to release it's like nothing he's ever known.

***

Faith tosses a battered newsmagazine onto an empty chair and shoves her hands through her hair. "I'd kill for a fuckin' cigarette."

"You quit months ago."

"I know. But this is, whatd'y you call 'em, extenuating circumstances. I need something to do with my hands, and I've been through these stupid magazines a dozen times already."

Xander remembers Kalindi and Gabriel playing Scrabble at the kitchen table. "Why don't we play a game? Maybe the gift shop has cards."
"It's fricken late for the gift shop. I'll try the gas station across the road. If they don't have cards, they'll have cigs, for sure. Wendy, you want anything?"

"If they've got those SoBe drinks, I like the white one."

Faith grunts. "The spooge flavor. All right." She waves off Wendy's attempt to reach for her wallet. "Xander?"

"Caffeine me. Whatever looks good and strong."

She nods and goes.

Xander tells Wendy, "I think you should go in and see Giles next time they let him have a visitor. You've been here all this time and haven't been in."

"I'd like to, if you're sure."

"He should know who all's here for him. Maybe it's all sinking in on some level."

"I believe in that," Wendy says.

"Then go and talk to him, touch him."

They fall into silence. It's surprisingly unawkward, and he wonders if that's because of the time they spent merged under the spell of the cult.

Before long, a nurse comes and ushers Wendy into Giles's room. Xander finds himself staring vacantly at the television in the waiting area, which someone has turned to mute. He has no interest in what's on, but he doesn't make a move to turn it off. If someone told him it was some demonic device sucking the soul right out of him, he wouldn't be surprised.

He hears the rustle of cloth beside him and turns, expecting Faith but instead it's the chaplain. "Oh hey, Marlene."

She greets him. "I heard you were looking for me."

"Oh." His mouth goes dry. "Well. Yeah. Kalindi wanted me to ask a favor."

"Of course."

"She, um, wondered if you'd, y'know. Put in a good thought."

She smiles. "Pray?"

"Yeah. Yeah. For Giles. If you -- if it's not --"

Smiling, she places a hand on his arm. "I already am."

"Good. Um, good. Um. And, um, for all of us. Who care about him. She wanted you to include them too. Us."

"I have been. You don't have to feel awkward asking for this. It's what I do. I pray for people, if they want, or with them."

"With? "For is fine," he blurts, then clears his throat. "She distinctly said for, that's perfect. That's good. I'll tell Kalindi. She wanted to be sure."
Marlene smiles again. "She knows I'm praying, for all of you. I think she wanted to be sure that you know, too. And I know she's praying. Kalindi's young, and there's not much she can do, but she knows this is something she can do, and it's powerful."

"It's not a kind of power I'm used to."

"It's just as easy as talking to a friend."

Xander picks at a cuticle. "I have my moments when I'm not so good at that, either."

"That's true of all of us. And it's true sometimes when you're talking to God. Even for me, sometimes. Oh, hey. Here comes your bride." She greets Faith, who offers her something from the gas station.

"We've got Cokes, some ginseng crap, and that SoBe spoo-- uh, pina colada thing."

"No thanks, I need to be checking in at the nurses station, see if anyone else has been asking for me."

As she goes, Faith eyes him. "'Anyone else'? You were askin'?"

"For Kalindi." Weird as he'd felt about asking, though, it does make him feel better knowing Marlene and Kalindi are praying for Giles, and the rest of them.

"I like her." Faith reaches into the bag she brought back from the gas station. "How about gin?"

"I don't think they'd let us."

"Cards, dumbass." She peels the cellophane off a deck as if it's a pack of cigarettes, and slides them into her hand. "Where's Wendy?"

"With Giles."

She's still shuffling the new deck as Wendy returns to the waiting area. She glances up, then does a classic double take. "What is it? Is he better or worse?"

"Neither, but when I touched Rupert's hand, I got some very strong impressions. Maybe there's something there that'll help us help him."

"What'd you get?" Xander asks.

"Well, this seems kind of crazy. *The Count of Monte Cristo.*"

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Dierdre shrieks and moans in ecstatic fervor, her hair whipping round her face. Her hips twitch forward and back, forward and back, her hand reaches toward the lights above her, fingers splayed.

"Fucking hell," Ethan gasps, but he cannot hear himself.

She shrieks again and he feels as if his spine is being peeled right out of his body. Her cry becomes a moan as she staggers forward a step, grabbing the microphone stand with both hands, growling the refrain: "Take it all." Her head bows, and damp clumps of hair curtain her face. The screech of distortion and feedback rises, deafening, and then cuts off, leaving the club in stunned silence. It's several heartbeats before the crowd reacts at all, then the wave of applause and shouting is almost
as loud as the band. Ethan suspects every man in the room is as hard as he is.

Dierdre leans into the microphone, her hands still clutching it. "That's all, good night." She reels away from the microphone like a blind woman. Ethan hastily rises to help her offstage, but Philip Henry reaches her first. Ethan lets him attend her, changing course and shoving his way to the bar for a gin. He gets stares as he passes. Dierdre had sung the song directly at him, and he's certain they believe the song is about him. He knows better.

It's about Eyghon. Ethan has heard about it by now, seen the aftereffects of possession by the demon in Dierdre, Sutcliffe and, just recently, Philip Henry.

His hand shakes slightly as he raises the glass to his lips.

"Bloody hell," says a voice in his ear. Rupert. "Why aren't you backstage shagging her senseless?"

Ethan turns and meets his gaze as he drains his gin. He thumps the empty glass on the bar and turns away to go to her.

The strangest thing happens then. It's as if he's seized by something from outside of himself, that makes him turn back to Rupert. "Stay out of this." Just as suddenly, he's released by whatever it was, and a wave of fatigue and near-nausea rolls through him, staggering him just as Dierdre had been left reeling after the song.

Rupert's lips twist into a defiant smirk, but Ethan doesn't stay to hear his response. He makes his way backstage, where Dierdre is entertaining her crush of admirers. "Ethan, darling." She reaches a hand toward him and takes his when he reaches her. "I'm very tired," she says, dismissing the others.

"What did you think?" she asks, once they are gone.

"You were magnificent, my love. London has never seen anything like you. Everyone out there -- you're all they could talk about."

She bestows her most beautiful smile on him. "I have something for you. Back at my flat."

Usually it's dawn before they make their way to her flat after a show, but she leads him there without delay. She removes his clothes and her own without the usual erotic flourishes, and bids him lie down on her Egyptian cotton sheets.

Dierdre disappears down the hall for a moment, and once more something surges through him, telling him to flee, grab his clothes and go, run naked down the streets if he must, but go now. He reaches for his cigarettes instead and it subsides, another wave of fatigue washing over him.

Dierdre returns bearing a tray, but instead of cheese and bread or drinks, it contains a bamboo reed and a bowl of black liquid. She sets the tray on the nightstand, lights some candles and straddles him. "Give me your arm."

She picks up the reed, which has a needle-fine blade fixed to it. "You still want this, don't you? To call on Eyghon."

Again he feels a push. Something within him and yet outside of him that tells him to say no, to walk away from Dierdre and end all this.

Ethan locks his eyes on hers and the voice dies away. "Of course I do, darling."
She smiles, dipping the needle into the ink. Then its point penetrates the skin of his arm.

***

Weakened by his efforts, Giles can only ride along for whatever comes next. Ethan's mistakes. His own mistakes. It's hard to say whose were more disastrous.

He sees the defiance flare in his young self's eyes in response to Ethan's warning -- rather, his own warning -- and knows, at this point in his relationship with Ethan, it will only fuel Rupert's obsession with him.

He gathers his strength to try again. He hopes he can stop this before the demon takes Ethan, before Giles finds himself riding along in that ecstatic state. The bite of the needle, the sure touch of Dierdre's hands as she marks Ethan as the demon's, reminds him of that wild rapture.

He has to stop this.

Yet at the same time he craves it.

***

Xander has called the house for Wes. "I know it's late, but we need some brainstorming. Can you bring over anyone who's read *The Count of Monte Cristo*?"

"Don't forget Jenny," Faith prompts. "I know she's read those old knights in armor stories. Maybe she likes the swashbuckling stuff too."

"Good thinking. Wes, try Jenny too. Her number's programmed into the phone. You can swing by and get her on the way if you need to."

"We'll be there as soon as we can," he says, and hangs up.

Xander shivers in the cold night air. "I don't know. It seems like a stretch."

Faith nudges him. "Say it."

Puzzled, he looks at her.

"This is your chance. One of your favorite movie cliches. I can't believe you're not gonna say it."

He frowns a moment, then brightens. "It's crazy, but it just might work!"

"That's the damn ticket!"

And speaking of crazy, it makes him feel a whole lot better once he's said it. He slips the cellphone into his pocket and his arm around his wife, then they head back inside.

They end up with Wes and Gabriel, who've read it, Dawn and Buffy, who've seen the new Jim Caviezel movie version, Faith, who's seen numerous movie versions, and Willow, with several tabs open on her laptop. They've also brought three Thermoses of decent coffee at the instigation of Gabriel, who is hailed as a hero. Wendy takes notes.

"Okay," Faith starts. "Let's remember all we can about the basic story. Classic revenge story about a guy who's framed and sent to prison, then escapes to destroy the people who set him up. Any of that ring any bells? Beside the obvious one?"
Wendy raises a brow. "The obvious one?"

"I forgot we have some newbies here," Faith says. "Me. I spent some time in the slam."

"Well, since I'm the one who brought you back to Sunnydale," Willow says, "I think we can rule out the sneaky revenge thing."

"Do you send people to prison?" Gabriel asks. "I mean, don't you just kill stuff? Vampires and demons and that?"

"Occasionally there are humans who are on the wrong side," Buffy says. "We fight them and they generally go away." Xander knows what she doesn't want to say in front of Gabriel and Wendy. Sometimes they die. "Like I said to Wes, there's Ethan Rayne, the Energizer Bunny of Annoyance, but this is so not his style."

"What other elements should we think about?" Wendy asks. "Beyond the bare bones of the story."

"There was a girl," Gabriel says. "The guy who gets sent to prison is going to marry her, and the guy who sets him up ends up marrying her instead."

Buffy eyes Wendy. "I guess you'd have said if you had a hyperjealous ex."

"I would. My exes have come equipped with very low ambition, in general."

"What else?" Wes asks.

"Nobody recognizes him," Faith says. "He comes back rich, calling himself the Count of Monte Cristo, and nobody realizes it's the same guy."

Wendy offers, "When I told you about the man Rupert warned me about, none of you said he sounded familiar. He mentioned white hair and a cane -- those could be new elements, then. Especially if this man spent some time in prison. There was something else he said." She closes her eyes. "He said he could be very charming."

"Charm isn't something we run into a lot," Buffy says. "This is zero help. Somebody we won't recognize, who might have been in prison. Like Gabriel said, we do demons for the most part, and there aren't exactly demon pri-- oh god."

"What?" Willow says.

"Demon prisons. Sound familiar?"

"Oh shit," Xander murmurs. "The Initiative. They had Oz for a while."

"No," Willow says emphatically. "He wouldn't do something like this, and he's got no ax to grind against Giles anyway."

"No. Ethan Rayne," Buffy says. "Remember? He came that last time and nearly got Giles killed, and Riley had him taken away. He said they had some facility in -- in -- Nevada, maybe? So if he really got taken there, maybe he didn't get out when the whole thing in Sunnydale smashed to pieces. Maybe he's been there all this time." She looks to Xander. "We forgot about him. Even after what happened to Oz, when the whole thing about room 314 came out, we just forgot we'd left him in their hands. We always forgot him, when he wasn't right in our faces. I loathed him, no question, but I wouldn't have wished the Initiative on anyone."
"If Giles knew Rayne was back," Xander says, "why the hell didn't he just say something? We've wasted days trying to figure this out."

"Because Ethan reminds him of when he was young and stupid. It mortified him that I had to find out about the whole Eyghon thing. He nearly refused to tell me about it at all, even though he expected Eyghon to kill him."

"Are you convinced it's Rayne?" Wes asks. "You've discarded the idea more than once."

"That was before I thought about him being in the hands of the Initiative," Buffy says. "They very well might have tortured him; they didn't seem to have any morals stopping them from that sort of thing, even though he's human. It's him, I'm sure of it."

"He's always played the trickster," Dawn says. "But he's got a reason for the slow-burn revenge, and Giles is the person he'd blame."

"So where is he?" Faith asks. "And how the hell do we stop him?"

***

He expects to meet the demon the night Dierdre tattoos him, but she sends him away. Henry wants to meet with the band. Contracts will be signed, recording sessions booked. "Wednesday," she tells him. "Promise." She trails a fingernail down the center of his chest and beyond, drawing a sharp hiss from him. "Would you like a little something to whet your appetite, darling?"

She doesn't wait for an answer, but dips her finger into a vial and then presses it to his lips. Ethan greedily draws her finger into his mouth despite the bitter taste, sucking at it until she makes her own involuntary noise of pleasure. Again she straddles him and surrounds him with her heat, and time stretches and bends back on itself as she rides him. More than once she brings him to the brink but slows or stops her movements until at last he begs for release.

She slips away from him instead. "Wait. Save it for the demon."

"You can't be serious," he protests.

"It'll be worth it," she says. "It will use every ounce of frustration and lust and play it back to you like a feedback loop. And when it gives you what you want, you'll feel like you've been cracked open and scooped out. It's brilliant, you'll see." She gives him another taste from the vial, then puts him out the door like a tomcat.

When he finds himself at home, he has no memory of how he got there. He has no shoes and the knees of his trousers are ragged and torn, like the skin below and the palms of his hands. There's a song pulsing through his blood, almost breaking through to where he can hear it in his mind, but stopping just short.

When Rupert comes home, Ethan is still sitting in the hallway just inside the door of the flat. "What the hell are you doing there?"

"Waiting," he says. "Is it Wednesday?"

Rupert just curses and stumbles past him. He hears the rustle of bags and the bang of the silverware drawer, and the smell of curry reaches him.

"I wanted to smell the sea," Ethan says, "but it was just a tangle of coat hangers."
"What?" Rupert crouches beside him. "What the fuck have you taken?"

"Shaving cream," he explains. "It's quite green-eyed."

"Christ," Rupert mutters. "You've been with that bint, haven't you?"

"Carved the carriageway, then handed me two toads for the cycle."

Rupert hauls him to his feet and into the main room, depositing him on the dingy mattress. He yanks Ethan's clothes off, cleaning the cuts on his hands and knees none too gently. "Did you crawl home?" he asks, and then as Ethan begins to answer, adds, "Never mind, shut up. What the hell is this?" He unwinds the gauze Dierdre has wound round his arm. "Christ, you idiot. What is this thing?"

Ethan is beyond speech, drifting on the drug. Giles feels it tugging at him too, but gathers himself for one more warning. "It's death," he says. "It eats souls. Randall. Scratch it out. Now, while you still can."

"Who the fuck is Randall?" Rupert asks.

But Giles is taken by the undertow, pulled far out of the reach of thought and speech.

He wakes in the grip of a crushing headache. Moaning, he squints against the light. He fumbles for his cigarettes in the pile of clothes beside the mattress, lights one.

"Wakey, wakey," Rupert chirps, all too cheerfully.

"Sod off."

"Someone was spectacularly high yesterday. What the hell did you take?"

"I have no idea." As he brings the cigarette toward his lips, he sees the freckling of scabs on the palm of his hand. Gingerly he fingers the skin there, then turns over the other hand to see it's in the same state. "How did that happen?"

"I suspect you crawled home, at least part of the way."

Ethan moans again and shuts his eyes. The mattress dips beside him, and Rupert rubs at his temples. The hypnotic movement awakens other aches, but reminds him of the promise Dierdre extracted from him. "Stop."

Rupert takes the cigarette from his hand, takes a drag, then crushes it out. "Your little songbird made quite the proposition to you the other night. Let's hear all about it."

"Not to me," Ethan murmurs. Why he's admitting this, he's not sure. He may still be high, he suspects.

"Oh, bollocks. She sang right at you." Rupert's hand has drifted to Ethan's hip, where he draws the same lazy circles against his flesh as he'd made at his temples.

His body begins to respond. "Piss off," he says dreamily.

Rupert persists instead. Teases him with fingertips and tongue and teeth until Ethan's breath is ragged.

He gives Rupert a hard shove, taking advantage when he's off balance and scrambling from
beneath him. "Get stuffed!"

"So says your mouth. I'd say it's been outvoted."

"Too sodding bad. I made a promise." He's not sure he did. He thinks what he did was take orders. It doesn't matter which; the result is the same.

"Right, then," Rupert mutters. He fumbles for Ethan's cigarettes and slips the pack in his pocket. "I'm going out."

A wave of dizziness sweeps over Ethan. He falls back onto the mattress and finds himself drifting once again.

***

"Will, can you do a locator spell?" Buffy asks.

"I can try, but I'm not hopeful. We don't have anything that belongs to him. We haven't even seen him in, what, four years? I had zero luck finding Andrew, so I have my doubts. He's a helluva lot better with the magicks than Andrew."

"Perhaps a more conventional approach," Wes says. "I spent several years at a detective agency, after all. Despite the unorthodox nature of most of our cases, a certain amount of the work involved the basics. We could search local hotels, if you think he'd still be around."

"Oh, he'll be around," Buffy says. "What's the point of causing maximum chaos if you're not around to see it?"

"As you've stated before, if chaos is his aim, he's surely been disappointed," Wes says. "You're coping, and coping well, all of you."

"Well, you've contributed to that, Wes," Xander says.

"Now that I'm convinced it's Ethan, and think I know why," Buffy says, "I'm a lot less comforted by how well we're doing. He could be torturing Giles, for all we know. Maybe he's crazy as --"

She knows if she says one more word she'll lose it.

Xander rubs her shoulder. "We'll find him. You figured this out, so we're closer to rescuing Giles than we've been."

"We can all join the search," Wendy says. "I'll get the phone book and make a list of hotels. We can split them up."

"You know he's not using his real name," Willow says. "And asking around about men with white hair and a cane is probably going to get us a police lineup at the old folks home."

"This is probably a long shot," Wendy says, "but do you have any pictures of him?"

"No," Buffy says.

"Gabriel," Faith says. "Can you draw people as well as you did that diagram you drew from your dream?"

"Yeah, I'm actually pretty good at faces."

"Do you think you could do a police sketch type thing?"
"I've always drawn from models, but I can give it a try."

"I'll redouble my efforts to find Whistler," Wes says. "If Rayne is dedicated to maximum chaos, as you put it, Whistler as an agent of balance no doubt has an interest."

Wes goes to see what he can do; Wendy goes to borrow a phone book and find a notebook. When she returns, she tears a few sheets out of the notebook and hands the rest to Gabriel.

"I think, out of all of us, I've seen him the most," Buffy says, "so why don't I start?" She's never described a face this way before: its angles and the lines of the lips and eyes. She's never watched a drawing take shape based on her words. Gabriel scowls and erases small sections, reworking to get things right, but she's amazingly close.

When the drawing's finished, Buffy stands. "I'm going out for some air. When they say we can see Giles, somebody come out to the steps out there and let me know."

Wendy gestures to catch her attention. "Do you mind if I come with you? I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

She'd rather be alone; this whole crowd thing is wearing on her. But Wendy's the one who got them this far, so she nods. Wendy hands her project over to Dawn, who takes over.

"I was hoping you could tell me more about this Ethan Rayne," Wendy says, "about what happened the times you saw him before."

"I don't know, Wendy. I have such a strong feeling Giles wouldn't want you to know some of this. I can tell he really likes you, but he's really private about bits of his past."

"I know, and I respect that -- up to a point."

Buffy raises her brows.

Wendy chews her lip a moment. "I keep a lot of confidences too. Normally I'd never reveal that I did a reading for someone. But these are unusual circumstances, and it relates to why I'm asking about Ethan Rayne. So, I did a couple of readings for Rupert. I think one of them was after Rupert had seen this man -- after the reading he warned me about the white-haired man."

"Giles? Had a tarot card reading?"

"Believe me, I got a strong sense it was out of character for him. I'm trying to fit some things together. That's why I'm asking about Ethan."

Buffy does some lip nibbling of her own. "Okay. He'd hate this, but if this might help, okay."

"When was the first time you saw him?"

"Halloween." She frowns. "Five, maybe six years ago. Do you remember the Halloween when all these kids turned into their costumes? Everywhere you looked it was zombies and pirates and ballerinas and Frankenstein monsters."

"Oh god, I do remember that. He did that?"

Buffy nods.

"Why? What did he gain from that?"
"Shits, apparently, followed by assorted giggles. Which tells you much of what you need to know about Ethan Rayne."

"Why Sunnydale?"

"Because chaos is extra fun in the hellmouth. It's like the little chocolate jimmies on your ice cream. Though I think the fact that Giles was there entered into it too."

"They had some kind of history."

"Megahistory," Buffy affirms. "When we saw him again -- we're not actually sure he'd left, it was just a couple of weeks later -- anyway, that time it was definitely because of their history. Something came after them. Specifically targeted them. Some thing they'd summoned in the past, a long time before."

Wendy snugs her big woolly hippie shawl around her. Buffy wishes she had a big woolly hippie shawl. November in Cleveland is cold.

"Anyway, that's when I found out they had a history. Ethan disappeared once we took care of that nasty, and we didn't see him until about a year later. That one was charming. He enchanted the band candy. All the adults who ate it turned into teenagers again."

"Oh god," Wendy says again. "I was premenstrual that week. Let us speak no more of it."

Buffy cracks a grin. "Are you sure? The most insignificant detail could be crucial."

"Bon Jovi records were played. Fan letters were written in sparkle pen. It wasn't pretty. What prompted that? Shits and giggles again?"

"And money. He was paid for that. Diversionary tactic while some sacrificial thing was going on. We found out in time, put a stop to it. The last time was about a year after that. That's when he was taken away."

"What was his game that time?"

"It was more focused than usual. Maybe he'd gotten himself on Ritalin. He turned Giles into a demon. I very nearly killed him. Giles, that is."

"Was there some kind of point or message to any of these performances?"

"If so they were too obscure for me. Oh, I remember Giles said Ethan warned him about the Initiative -- this massive government project that was going on in Sunnydale. Then things got nasty, and there was Giles, waking up a demon."

Wendy gazes out into the dark, watching distant lights along the roadways. "I turned up a card in that last reading, the Page of Swords, reversed. It signifies a messenger who won't be turned away. I was trying to fit that with Ethan somehow. It can also indicate a teenager."

"Don't eat any strange chocolate bars."

She laughs. "Don't worry."

Dawn finds them then, telling them Giles is allowed a visitor for a few moments. Buffy follows her sister back inside, her cold cheeks burning in the sudden warmth.

Wendy says, "Do you mind if I come in with you, just for a minute?"
Dawn shoots her a look, but Buffy says, "Come on ahead."

Buffy enters first. She touches Giles's arm. That weird tattoo peeps from the sleeve of the hospital gown. She's so rarely seen his bare arms, and she's just now realizing it. "Hey," she says. "We think we figured things out. Looks like Ethan's in town. We're looking for him, and we're gonna get you back."

There's nothing, of course, but the sound of monitors and pumps. Buffy's throat tightens.

"Hey, Wendy's here."

Wendy takes his hand. "We're coming for you," she says. "It'll be all right." She rubs her thumb over the back of his hand. "I keep thinking about the Page of Swords. The messenger. Guard yourself, but stay open, too. There's an answer, but you have to be willing to see it."

Buffy shoots her a look, which she returns unapologetically.

"I've still got the guitar. It's waiting for you." Wendy squeezes his hand and releases it. Murmuring her thanks to Buffy, she leaves the room.

"Hold on, Giles," Buffy says. "Like Wendy says, we're coming."

***

Things move fast for the band after this, and for Ethan too. Dierdre quits her job at the boutique on Kings Road and the others leave theirs to devote their days to the recording sessions. She demands Ethan's attendance at the sessions, and Philip Henry doesn't deny her, so he puts in the same long hours as the band and goes home with Dierdre when the light begins streaking across the sky.

Henry is producing their album himself, and he makes Spector look like a sweet-natured creche worker. He shouts and berates everyone but Dierdre, threatens, bullies, demands take after take. When they're too exhausted to continue, he passes out white pills.

It seems Wednesday will come and go without an introduction to Eyghon, as Henry drives the band as he has throughout the week. The drummer, however, tells Henry to staff it, he's going back to his job at the garage. "I've had enough of this bloody mumbo jumbo anyway, it's not why I joined the feckin' band."

Henry isn't the slightest bit concerned. "I've got someone. He can be here by tomorrow." He gets on the phone to make it happen.

Dierdre tells the others that Ethan is ready to make the acquaintance of Eyghon. Ethan expects Henry to forbid it, to send them home to sleep (if they can), but instead he allows them to perform the rite in the recording studio, and joins in himself.

The bass player, who is not an initiate, is dispatched to the recording booth to record whatever transpires.

Dierdre withdraws a vial from her bag. Unlike the one she'd used on him before, this one has a white screw-on top, not a black. "Like I showed you," she says as she hands him the vial.

He dips his finger into the liquid inside, and Dierdre takes the vial from him, closing it again. At her direction, he settles himself among the bright embroidered pillows they've brought into the studio. Candles flicker around him in the darkened room. He sees the glow of lights in the control booth, casting eerie shadows on the face of the bass player. Tiny points of candleflame reflect in
Ethan slips his finger into his mouth, waits for the dreaminess to come over him as the others begin to chant.

Instead, he tumbles into a black void.

***

"An extraordinary high."

Giles remembers telling Buffy this, but he had wondered if the memory of it was magnified by time. It's not. If anything, the experience is even more powerful, more ecstatic than he'd remembered.

Eyghon descends on Ethan's sleeping form like a raptor swooping down to snatch up its prey. The demon makes itself at home in Ethan's skin, distorting it with glimpses of its true form. It reaches for Dierdre, who goes to it greedily. Philip Henry and Sutcliffe take their pleasure with one another and then with the possessed Ethan.

Giles, the unwilling passenger, resists the seductive pull as long as he can, but his defenses are quickly overwhelmed.

Power and sex and a rush like no drug he'd ever taken. It shames him to admit it, even to himself, but he's missed this without knowing it.

He has no idea how long things go on before the others begin chanting again, extracting Eyghon from its host. Ethan collapses like a marionette whose strings are cut. Though Ethan will remember nothing of the possession itself, the euphoria that follows will last for days.

Henry feeds them in the studio's main office, propping them up with more of the pills. When the new drummer shows up, Henry sets them right back to work.

The drummer is taciturn Mancunian in a drape jacket and brothel creepers, legs long and thin as drumsticks in his drainpipe trousers.

He is introduced by one name only. Randall.

***

The first thing Wesley does after he and Gabriel leave the hospital is give the girls a status report. "No change, although we may have a lead on who's behind this. My attention will be on information gathering today, so I'll have to ask you to see to your own meals today, and your own training."

"I'll make dinner," Kalindi volunteers.

"Thank you, I appreciate that very much."

"I could help with the training," Jenny chimes in. She glances around, cheeks reddening. "Not that I'm saying I'm an expert or anything, but at least I could lead some drills, just for the exercise."

Wesley nods and thanks her. "The older members of the household will be busy today, canvassing hotels looking for Ethan Rayne. I can't hazard a guess as to when we'll all be home." A thought occurs to him, and he pulls one of the photocopied flyers from his pocket. "You should all be
aware of this man, too. His name is Ethan Rayne, though he may not call himself that. He's an old enemy of Buffy and Mr. Giles. If he makes an approach, keep well clear of him, and call one of us immediately."

The girls pass the paper around, murmuring remarks.

"We're also hoping to find Whistler. Does any of you happen to know where he stays?"

"I've seen him hanging out on the stoop across the street," Jenny says. "I don't think that's where he lives, but maybe one of the guys I see him with knows."

"Perhaps," Wesley says, but he's doubtful.

"Sometimes he's at the Starbucks," Gabriel says. "I didn't know he was this Whistler guy until I saw him after Mr. Giles got sick. He didn't talk to me the way he did Kalindi, and he wasn't a regular the way Xander and Faith are, but he was around sometimes."

"You have a shift there this morning."

"Yeah, in --" She glances at the clock. "Shit, in twenty minutes. I've gotta go shower and change. Can you drive me? Otherwise I'll be late."

"Of course, go on up."

Wesley takes a few moments himself to wash up and change clothes. He drops Gabriel off at the door to Starbucks with barely three minutes to spare, then finds a parking space. If he's extraordinarily lucky, he might find Whistler already there; in any case, he could use a large container of coffee before he goes searching.

Gabriel is tying her apron around her under the glare of her manager when Wesley joins the queue. She works her way through the waiting customers with friendly efficiency, calling off drink orders, serving up pastries.

"He's not here," she murmurs as Wesley pays for his coffee. "Good luck searching. I'll call if I see him come in, but I probably won't be able to talk. I'm already getting the stink eye."

"Try to keep him here if you can, but don't put yourself at risk."

Gabriel's manager, who's been hovering close by, closes in.

"Thanks," Gabriel chirps. "Have a good day."

Wesley circles back to the hacienda, and approaches the building across the avenue, where a couple of men in work uniforms are having a smoke and making jokes which abruptly cut off as he draws near.

"Good morning," he says. "I'm looking for someone who sometimes takes his break out here. A white man who wears a porkpie hat. His name is Whistler."

One man shakes his head with a terse "Can't say I've seen him," while the other makes no response at all.

"Ah. He helped my friend the other night when he fell ill on the street." Wesley makes a gesture toward the hacienda. "We didn't really have a chance to thank him. If you happen to see him, I'd appreciate it if you'd send him over."
"What happened to the sister?" asks the man who hadn't spoken.

_Sister. Whistler's sister?_

"Fine-looking sister with dreads."

"Oh. Yes. Rona. She missed her family, so she moved back east. Well. Thank you for your time."

As he waits for a break in early rush hour traffic, he spots a figure on the stoop of the center brownstone, half obscured by the large elm in front. At the first pause in the steady stream of cars he sprints across the street, causing horns to honk and tires to screech and fingers to jab the air.

"Well," says the man, pushing up the brim of his hat and squinting into the watery November light. "Look who's back in the fold."

"Whistler," Wesley says.

"In the flesh. So the big man's still on his journey?"

"Journey? What do you know about this?"

Whistler stretches his legs out down the stone steps. "The old man's wrong about you. But then, a lot of people are. Maybe you most of all."

"I haven't time for this. What do you know about Giles? Is Ethan Rayne behind this? How do we bring Giles out of this?"

"You can't. There's something at work here. You can't rush it."

"Why should I trust you?"

"One thing they don't tell you at the academy. Watching is hard. Humans feel they've gotta do. But what you've gotta do right now is the hard thing. Wait. Watch. That's what he's doing."

"Who? Giles?"

"That's what it's all about this time."

Wesley hears a screech of tires and blare of horn, and reflexively turns. After a flurry of curses, the near-accident resolves itself and the great flood of traffic resumes its pace.

When he turns back, Whistler is gone.

---

_Ethan watches from the control booth as Randall savages the drums, his left arm held at a peculiar angle, his lips pulled back in a snarl to reveal broken front teeth. He flails at the drums as if he's trying to fight his way through them._

_For all that he looks like a madman when he plays, Randall's addition takes the band to a new level. Where their rhythms had been straight-ahead and boring, they've become complex. With their framework, Sutcliffe's songs don't seem half so pretentious as they did. It's like they've chucked all expendable ballast out the window, and without the drag of those plodding beats, the music soars._

_Henry brings the band into the studio to listen to the latest takes, and informs them he's scrapping_
all the pre-Randall recordings. He grants them two days off to rest, telling them when he expects
them all back at the studio.

"What happened to you?" Ethan hears Henry ask Randall as he's waiting to file out of the booth.
"The arm and your teeth."

"Got bashed up, didn't I? That fucking copper up in Manchester. You know the one, Gene Rhymes-
with-Cunt."

Dierdre turns back toward Ethan then, informs him that he's to come with her.

"I need to go by my flat," he tells her. "Get some clothes."

"Don't be silly, darling," she says. "You won't be needing clothes."

He forgets about Randall entirely.

He and Dierdre spend the next two days in a haze of sex and chemicals. Henry has introduced all
of them to some of the more exotic pharmaceuticals to be had, and made sure that they can, in fact,
have them.

As they're lying in a tangle of sweaty limbs, Dierdre tells him at great length about what he'd done
when he'd been possessed, how it had felt to be fucked by the demon. "It's fantastic, such danger
and power pouring itself into you." Her long fingernails poke and scratch at his tattoo, which is
still tender and flecked with scabs. It hurts, but it's also intensely erotic. "Just wait until you feel it
for yourself." She straddles him then and describes it all for him again, riding him, her hands
clamped round his upper arms, her thumb digging hard into the dark stain she'd etched in him.
When he writhes and cries out it's as much from pain as pleasure.

In the watery light of the winter dawn, Ethan does return to his flat to retrieve some clean clothes.
He finds Rupert sprawled in a chair, smoking and listening to a record.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

It's a question he heard hundreds of times from his father, and his standard answer snaps out
without thought. "Out." Ethan doesn't wait for further commentary, but has himself a shower in
tepid water as the pipes bang and rattle, then dresses and makes himself a hasty breakfast of beans
and toast.

Rupert is rabbiting on about the music, some American guitarist named Nils Lofgren and his band,
explicating why he's a genius while Ethan just wishes he'd shut up and let him listen. What he can
hear isn't like anything Ethan's heard before, but that's the same of his vocals. Alternately pure and
gritty, the lyrics and the music carrying them wavering between sweetness and desperation. The
refrain of one song catches his ear the way hearing one's name in conversation does.

Love you like rain, darlin'
Always fallin' just to pass my way ...

Ethan puts a couple of fresh shirts in a bag along with a few other things, and slips on his Lord
John coat.

"Where are you going now?" Rupert demands.

"The studio. I'll be gone for a while."
"For Christ's sake," Rupert says. This is the phrase that launches a thousand complaints, in Ethan's experience.

"For Christ's sake," he counters. "If I wanted a fucking inquisition every time I left the flat, I wouldn't be paying London rent. I'd have just stayed with the bloody parents." He fumbles for his lighter, realizes he's left it in his other jeans and goes to retrieve it. Back at the door, he tells Rupert, as coolly as Dierdre would say such a thing, "This has gotten to be a bore. Pack up your things and clear out before I get back."

He's gone before Rupert can respond, arriving at the studio in time to hear what Philip Henry's been working on during the band's time off. It's a loop of sounds from the night Eyghon possessed Ethan. The hair bristles at Ethan's neck as he listens, but Dierdre strokes his shoulder blade as the sound on the tape rises and falls.

"That's me?" Ethan asks, stunned at the inhuman sounds.

"It's Eyghon," she says.

Henry makes no comment, just goes on to play them the track he's been mixing. The tape loop added to their recording of "Take It All." The loop is so far down in the mix that it's nearly subliminal, but it doubles the intensity of the recording.

"It's brilliant," says Dierdre.

"Fuck me dead," exclaims Sutcliffe.

"When do we summon it again?" Dierdre asks.

"Put in a good day's work" -- which they all know might stretch anywhere from twenty to seventy-two hours -- "and we'll call it again."

***

"You know, I like her," Buffy says to Xander as he turns the car onto Lakeside.

The hotel search is underway, and he and Buffy have the downtown area. She has her church school disguise on, minus the big cross, while Xander is dressed in a suit. Wendy had gone home to put on what Faith calls her executive bitch suit, then is picking up the other searchers.

"I really want to think she's the one," Buffy continues. "If anyone on this planet deserves to find love and happiness it's Giles. And it's kind of cool to have someone around who gets the Sunnydale expat experience. To hear her story about what happened when she ate the band candy."

"I sense a big but coming. Wait, that sounds like a phrase that could lead to sudden death or at least loss of limb."

"No, I get it. And -- I guess there is a but. I don't know. Hearing her stand by Giles's bed and tell him there's a message in this, to stay open to it. I don't know. It didn't sit right with me. When demons screw with us we don't invite them to family counseling, find out what they need. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And her hair's turned white, and so has Ethan's. It's reaching, maybe, but the coincidence makes me uneasy."
Xander pulls the car up in front of the Holiday Inn. "Yeah, I can see that."

"But you've got a but."

"I do. I trust Wendy. I shared consciousness with her during the time we were under the cult's influence. She's new agey as all hell, but she's not a danger."

"She says she did a reading for Giles. Actually, I think she said she did a couple."

"Then he clearly likes her a lot, because that's so not his thing."

"So then it's a crock, so the whole 'stay open' thing is too."

"I don't think so. It's just a way of seeing that doesn't resonate with Giles. Giles is book guy, not intuition guy. She's got a talent. She freaked me out, she was so on target about things."

"What things?"

"You, for one. Jesse and I went to see her about a year before you showed up, and Wendy predicted you. Not that I realized that, or even remembered when you showed up -- it didn't hit me until a few weeks back. She was was less inscrutable about Cleveland -- she told me I'd find my destiny here. Which I thought was hilarious at the time."

"Wow."

"Yeah." A car honks at them from behind. "Guess we'd both better get to it. You have your sketch and your list?"

"Yep."

"Good luck. I'll hit the three hotels on Euclid, then get back to the hacienda and wait for backup calls."

She gets out of the car and strides toward the hotel entrance, in world-saving mode -- or Giles saving, which is the same thing -- once more.

***

Much as Randall's presence improves the band, Henry still demands and abuses and requires endless takes before he's satisfied with a track.

Ethan watches from the control booth until at last Henry tosses him out for being too fidgety. He suspects the white pills, even though he's coming down from them, and coming down hard. He has a smoke in the alley behind the studio, startled to find it's full dark. Time folds and collapses under Henry's tyranny; he'd have sworn it had been no more than four hours since they'd started.

Without warning, he's hit by a wave of vertigo which recedes just as suddenly. Crushing his cigarette underfoot, Ethan goes inside and stretches out on the leather couch in the front office.

He wakes while the office is still deserted, that bit of song stuck in his head, along with the certainty that he's cocked things up with Rupert.

Love you like rain, darlin'...

He looks in on the recording session and finds the band grinding through a song they'd done 35 times before Randall arrived. He can see from Dierdre's face that this is far from the first take.
Henry likes her best when she's stretched thin, exhausted and emotionally raw. Sweetness and desperation.

She's not on the edge yet. It'll be hours before Henry will be satisfied, before they summon Eyghon.

Ethan slips out the door and hurries back to his flat.

A light rain is falling, freezing as it touches the sidewalk. The dark streets shine with it, black as oil. Love you like rain, darlin'.

Putting on a burst of speed as he rounds the corner leading to his street, he slips and sprawls on the icy glaze. The heel of his hand smart's and bleeds, and there's a rip in his long coat. He scrambles up and runs the rest of the way. If he's not there --

The lights are blazing in the flat. Ethan sucks in a convulsive breath that sounds almost like a sob. He dashes across the street, slipping and nearly falling once again. His hand burning as he fumbles with the key, he lets himself in the building and takes the stairs two at a time.

What if he's gone, lights or no lights? What if he's gone home, or back to Oxford -- anywhere else? He drops the keys, curses, drops them again. Finally he stumbles into the flat. "Rupert!"

Rupert's nowhere in sight, but his suitcases are neatly arranged beside the door. "Fuck! Rupert!"

Rupert emerges from the bog, scowling.

Ethan's knees nearly buckle from sheer relief. "You're still here."

"Christ, give it a rest," Rupert mutters. "I'm leaving."

"No." Ethan slams the door shut, leaving a smear of blood on its painted surface. "Don't go, I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, I was stupid. Please. Don't go."

"What are you on about?" Rupert demands. "Hours ago, you were telling me to get the fuck out. Now you want me to stay."

Ethan shakes his head. "I don't know what came over me."

"So you can change your mind at a whim. Maybe I've given you the impression that I can be toyed with this way, but I assure you --"

"Rupert." Ethan throws himself at him, clinging. "It was a terrible mistake. I'll beg if that's what you want. Forgive me. Please."

Rupert shoves him roughly away. "The mistake was taking up with you in the first place."

"Don't say that. Give me another chance, I won't cock it up this time, you'll see."

Rupert bends to pick up his suitcases and the bleak terror that sweeps through Ethan seems as if it will swallow him whole.

He throws himself against the door. "Give me just another day, I'll prove myself to you."
"Get out of my way, Ethan."

The answer comes to him, a bolt from the blue. "I'll give you something you've been wanting."

"There's nothing I want from you."

"I'll show you something. The darkest magicks I know. You've been bored with the little spells we've been doing. I've found something big, something amazing. Let me show it to you."

The anger in Rupert's face lessens just a bit. "If this is a ploy--"

"It's true, I swear. We're going to call it soon. Eyghon. Let me take you there."

Rupert drops his suitcases then.

"It's why I came back. I wanted to share this with you."

They both know this last is bollocks, but neither of them cares. Rupert clutches at him and they fall against the door, kissing.

It's all right now. Everything's going to be all right.

***

Of all the scenes he's lived in Ethan's skin, all the horrors he knows are to come, this one is the worst for Giles to witness.

He feels like Alex in A Clockwork Orange, strapped into a chair, forced to watch things which will make him ill beyond the telling of it. Except he is an actor in the episodes he's being made to revisit -- not just to watch but to experience every moment.

To feel Ethan's desperation, to know -- as Ethan himself won't for some time yet -- that Rupert is the cause. To picture the scene he wasn't privy to during this sojourn in Ethan's body.

The candles, the supplication to Hecate. Rupert's pretense at packing, the show of leaving the flat. Teasing out Ethan's desperation, relishing every "please." And finally the prize was his: Ethan's utter devotion, capped with his promise to introduce Rupert to the darkest magicks he knew.

He'd played with the will of another, made it subject to his own obsession. The deaths that occurred, beginning with Randall, could be laid at his door.

He feels the suffering of Ethan and magnifies it through the lens of his own guilt and foreknowledge.

Strapped into a chair, eyes forced open, he watches. Sees the destruction he's unleashed while living inside the skin of one of his victims.

***

Kalindi turns from the window. They're still waiting for word from the search, so watching is pointless, but she's still fascinated by the flood of cars that pass the hacienda. So many of them, so shiny and new on roads that are so smooth and wide compared to the ones back in Port Moresby.

Gabriel is hunched over a notebook, her hair hiding her face and what she's working on. Kalindi approaches and perches on the loveseat next to her.
"Do you mind if I peek?"

"Hm? Oh. No. go ahead." She raises her head and tilts the notebook so Kalindi can see.

"Oh," she breathes. It's a sketch of a figure at a window, drawing aside the curtain with a graceful hand. "It's me." She leans in a little closer. "It's really good. Oh. It was you who did the picture of that man they're looking for. Ethan Rayne."

"Yeah. It's not all that good. I usually draw from life, and I've never drawn someone I've never even seen. That was kind of weird."

"It looked good."

"We won't know till we see him."

"Do you have any others in there?"

"Oh, a couple."

"Do you mind if I look?"

Gabriel seems suddenly shy, but she passes over the notebook. There's a sketch of Jenny, a full-figure drawing instead of a portrait. She's in the middle of a tai chi movement, it looks like. "She's always moving, so I had to draw her that way."

"Absolutely. You really captured what makes her her."

She turns the page, and there's a sketch of Xander and Faith together, Faith's head thrown back in laughter, Xander and his crooked grin, gazing at Faith, totally in love. "Oh. That's so sweet. And she has dimples. I don't think I ever noticed them."

Gabriel gets fidgety as Kalindi turns to the next sheet of paper. This portrait isn't one of the residents of the hacienda. "She's pretty," Kalindi says. "Is she your si-- Oh wow. That's you."

"Yeah, I do those sometimes."

The face is Gabriel's but softened just a little bit. Her expression is so serious. Behind it is a page with several full-figure sketches of Gabriel dressed in girl clothes, in several different styles. There's a goth Gabriel, and one of her dressed in something Buffy might wear, and Dawn and Faith.

Gabriel's agitation gets to much for her then, and she reaches out for the sketchbook.

"You're really good at this. And those drawings of you--"

"Forget those, I was just screwing around."

"Trying out what kind of girl you want to be."

Gabriel blinks. "Yeah, kind of."

"I know how that is, though basically I went straight to the goth thing. That's because my friend Claire thought it would look good on me. I wish she were here, she'd love to figure you out. You know, clothes and makeup and hair. Have you done that much?"

"Oh god no. Not for a few years, anyway."
"It's weird. You'd think it would be such a superficial thing, it's just clothes. But -- when Claire dressed me up, and we did the hair and makeup, it was so terrifying, but sort of right, too. I didn't want to look like that girl I left back in PNG, didn't want to be the girl my parents threw away. It felt amazing to look in the mirror and see someone so different from who I'd been."

"Do you feel like how you look matches who you are now?"

"It's pretty extreme, really. I'm like Mary Lou, the Friendly Goth."

Gabriel laughs, and it makes Kalindi happy to be the cause.

"But when I started, it matched the way I felt. And it was awful when my aunt took those clothes away. Maybe sometime we could go to the thrift shops. I could be your Claire."

"Maybe." But Gabriel doesn't look that comfortable with the idea.

Kalindi gets that. Gabriel being a boy to most people who see her would complicate something like going out and trying on clothes. Drawing herself as different types of girls must feel a lot safer. Kalindi decides it's a good time to back off, give Gabriel a break. "Thanks for showing me those. You're so good."

Gabriel shrugs. "It passes the time."

Just then Vi comes into the room. "They're on their way into the house. They've got that guy."

***

The others are angry at first, particularly Dierdre. She senses immediately the connection between Ethan and Rupert, and no doubt remembers seeing them together at the band's performances.

He is torn between the two of them, and it's almost physically painful.

She seizes Ethan by the arm and hauls him into the control booth while the others are taking their break. "What do you mean, bringing him here? How presumptuous of you."

He aches to tear away from her, to rush to Rupert's side. Yet he cannot bear the thought of leaving her, either. "I meant it as a surprise. A gift. Rupert's well versed in the occult. Well, he makes me look like an amateur. "This is true; he has talent and a wealth of knowledge his hated studies instilled in him. He requires Ethan only to spur him on.

"You are an amateur," she spits, and the sting of that mingles with the fierce ache within him. She avidly drinks in his misery, undoubtedly believing it's all for her, and she relents. "Perhaps we'll see what he can do. If he seems suitable, perhaps he can join."

"I think you'll be pleased," he says, then adds a lie: "I was thinking only of you."

She kisses him then, but she winds her fingers into the wild tangle of his hair, tugging enough to bring tears to his eyes. He parts his lips for her, but thinks of Rupert.

The others allow Rupert to watch from the control booth as they summon Eyghon. Although it's apparently Sutcliffe's turn, the others attempt to placate Dierdre by letting her take on the demon. Or perhaps it's merely because Henry wishes to record their rite again, hoping for tape of Eyghon channeled through Dierdre.

For the first time Ethan has an opportunity to see what possession looks like from the outside.
Dierdre goes from lying still as death to writhing on the India print coverlet spread on the studio floor. It looks as if there's a creature inside her desperately seeking a way out. Her skin distorts here and there, demonic features appear and then fade away.

To his surprise, Dierdre utters not only moans and shrieks but actual speech. Some is rendered in a language wholly unfamiliar to Ethan; he looks toward Rupert behind the glass, but Rupert shakes his head.

The demon follows his gaze, fixing its eyes on Rupert. "This one does not know the power he brings," it says in English. "I shall taste it. Later. You are bonded to this one, are you not?" It seize Ethan's arm, much as Dierdre had. "You can watch me have him."

The thing that is not Dierdre pulls her frock over her head and casts it aside. It demands of Ethan what it requires, and he complies. It rides him, but its eyes are locked on Rupert. When it finishes with him, he is bruised, marked by fingernails that leave furrows such as claws might make -- but the experience was everything Dierdre had promised.

Casting him aside with no further thought than it had given her frock, it moves on to the other men. Ethan lifts his head to look at the control booth, but the only thing he can see is the glow of lights on the mixing desk.

***

Buffy's already waiting in the library when Wes brings Ethan Rayne in. It's not the Wes she's known. He's hard, implacable. Weird as it is to think of someone as both cool and cold, this is what he is, and it's not redundant to use both words.

And Ethan.

As she sees him lean his weight on the ornate cane, she feels a stab of something that's hard to name. Regret? Pity?

Are they dangerous emotions, or are they right?

Ethan acts as if Wes ceases to exist the moment he lays eyes on Buffy, even after Wes shoves him into a chair and takes away his cane.

She doesn't have to reach very far inside to come up with cold and implacable herself. "What have you done to him?"

***

"Done?" Ethan echoes. "Why, I have no idea what you're talking about. Who's been done?" He's so much the same Ethan, despite the changes in appearance. His hair, like Wendy's, is white from roots to ends. Like Wendy it doesn't seem to make him look a bit older.

Buffy tries to rein in her temper. "Y'know, it's been a bad few days. I could accessorize that scar for you, just piss me off enough."

Just then Xander arrives. "You found him."

Wes nods. "Registered under the name Edmond Dantes."

Ethan makes a wry face. "I felt it rather clever when I thought of it, but clearly it was too obvious." He brightens. "But it does give one hope for the educational system."
"Could we just gag him?" Xander asks.

"I doubt you could," Ethan says, just as cool and maddening as she remembers him.

"Enough with the clever remarks," she says. "Giles is hurt and coincidentally, you just happen to be in Cleveland. Why don't you tell us what brought you here."

"I've always wanted to see the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I had a brush with that world in my time. But I arrived here, and the place seems to be closed for renovations."

She longs to yank the cane from Wes's hands and wrap it around Ethan's neck. "Did you summon those things? Was that you?"

'No, love. I came after the dust settled. Besides, they weren't summoned. This was prophecy. I keep my ear to the ground, still."

"You came after. So you came, as usual, to screw with Giles. Whatever you've done to hurt him, stop it right now. Make it right."

"I've done nothing to hurt him."

Her fists clench. "He's lying in a hospital right now."

"And what have they found wrong with him?"

That stops her cold for a moment. "They don't know yet."

"You mean they've found nothing."

"He is lying in a coma," she spits.

Wes, who's been lounging behind Ethan's chair, steps forward and leans over him. He lays a hand on Ethan's shoulder, a move that looks casual, but the bend of his fingers and the grimace on Ethan's face make it clear he's making the most of some pressure point. "I encourage you to take this conversation in a more productive direction," he murmurs in Ethan's ear.

When did Wes add smooth and menacing to his repertoire?

"I needed to get Rupert's attention. You may have noticed our conversations don't seem to end well."

"And why is that, I wonder."

He shrugs his shoulder, and a pained expression flickers across his face before he recovers his cool. "We have a tendency to bring out the worst in each other. We always have."

Buffy's temper flares. "Like anything that has happened between you has been Giles's fault. I should--" She takes a step toward him only to be hauled back by Xander.

"Easy, Buff." He turns toward Ethan. "Go on. Why did you want Giles's attention?"

"I think it's time we had a reasonable discussion about the past, that's all. I made an approach, was firmly rebuffed before I'd barely gotten a word out, so I thought I'd try something a little more ... radical."

"And why don't you try being a little more specific than 'radical,'" she says sweetly. "Before I tear
"your kneecaps off."

"That would be kneecap," he amends, and Buffy feels another stab of whatever it was she'd felt before. "Rupert's reliving the past."

"How do we get him out?"

"You can't. The spell has to run its course."

"What part of 'get him out' isn't clear to you?"

"It's a peculiarity of the spell. If it's tampered with, the enchanted person becomes stuck in a time loop. He'd never come out. Believe me, you wouldn't want that."

***

Eyghon's recognition of Rupert and his power stills the anger of the others.

But Ethan has stirred Rupert's displeasure with his insistence on accompanying Dierdre to her flat.

"You don't understand," Ethan says, unable to keep a pleading tone from his voice. "She'll need someone to tend her. The demon takes every ounce of your strength."

"You've been possessed by it?" Rupert's eyes glitter as if accusing him of infidelity.

"Yes." He hurries past this confession. "She needs me. I'll come to you as soon as I can."

Ethan tears himself away then, helping Dierdre home. He plies her with tea and soup, then bundles her into bed. "What you need is sleep," he tells her. "I'll come round again in the morning."

"No, stay." She reaches out to grasp his arm, but her fingers only graze his skin before her limp hand falls to the mattress. Her fingertips have followed precisely along one of the sets of tracks of Eyghon's claws.

He stays, pacing the length of her small flat, running through Gauloises at double his normal pace, fretting about Rupert. When Dierdre makes small mewling noises in her sleep, Ethan goes to her, stroking her hair at the same time he wishes he could leave.

At last she awakens and he offers her more soup and tea, but he makes his excuses when she reaches for him. "I'll look in on you tomorrow," he promises, then lets himself out.

He buys a curry on the way back to his own flat, as an offering to Rupert. Ethan finds him in a haze of cigarette and hashish smoke, faffing about with his guitar. Rupert looks up, his face expressing only boredom.

"How's your bird, then?" His tone making it apparent that he doesn't care. "Right as rain?"

Ethan shakes his head. "She's weak. I should have stayed with her, but -- I couldn't stay away."

Rupert sets aside the guitar and rises. "What have you got? I'm bloody starved." He relieves Ethan of the take away bag but doesn't open it. Instead he cups his free hand round the back of Ethan's neck, drawing him close and bending his head to murmur in his ear. "You have to make a choice. Me or that bint."

Ethan feels as if the ground is slipping out from beneath him. "If I do, we lose Eyghon."
There's a silence, then Rupert tightens the pressure on his neck, slightly but noticeably. "Soon."

Ethan's breath gusts out in relief as Rupert turns away, interested once more in the food. Afterwards he favors Ethan with curry-flavored kisses, hovers over him, stroking the scratches and marks that Eyghon left on his skin. "Tell me what it's like," he whispers.

"I can't remember the possession," he admits. "But the high is brilliant. It lasts for days."

"Tell me the rest of it. What it's like when it's in someone else and it rides you."

Ethan does as he's bidden, and basks in his reward.

Henry calls them back to the studio the next day, cutting the usual resting period short by a day. Dierdre's still weakened, still riding the high of the possession. Henry, it's clear, wants to push her to that desperate edge he's trying to achieve without the need for dozens of takes.

She insists on Ethan's presence, which Rupert allows once he makes the point about access to Eyghon that he'd made the night before.

It's painful to make the break from Rupert, however. It makes him curt with Dierdre when he rouses her at her flat. It makes him fidget in the control booth until Henry threatens to have him ejected from the studio entirely.

He's forced to admit, if only privately, that Henry's strategy is working. Her vocals are raw, chilling, utterly affecting, though they come at the price of increasingly frequent tantrums. Ethan's job is to soothe her tears, build her up for the next half dozen takes before she dissolves again.

Finally he rebels, returning to the booth after another prolonged attempt at calming her. "You can't keep doing this to her. She's breaking down."

Henry rises, his expression so unperturbed that Ethan is taken wholly by surprise when he drives his fist into Ethan's belly. Ethan doubles over, gasping for air, and is met by Henry's knee slamming into his face.

Ethan collapses into a heap behind the mixing desk, but through the roar in his ears he can hear Henry speaking over the studio intercom to Dierdre, who's witnessed it all. "Stop your whimpering. Let's move on. 'Fleurs du Mal.'"

As his gasps subside, he hears the song come forth in one perfect take.

When it's finished, Henry turns to him as if nothing has happened. "Ring your friend and get him here. I want to summon Eyghon."

***

Buffy looks toward Wesley.

"I can do some research," he says quietly. "But I'm afraid it rings true."

"Then you do it," she orders Ethan. "Bring him out of it."

"I'm afraid once the spell is cast, I'm as much an outsider as you. It's done, it can't be undone. It will run its course, if you can keep from interfering."

Buffy's hands curl into fists, and Wesley finds himself wishing he'd inspired as much devotion as a watcher as Giles has. "And exactly what part of the past are you replaying for him?"
He has lost his smirk somewhere along the line, holding her fierce gaze in his serious one. "Our
time in London."

"Eyghon." Her voice is choked with anger and a complex mix of other emotions Wesley can't
begin to name.

"That's part of it."

"Do you have any idea how painful he'd -- " She shakes her head. "Well, of course you do. That's
why you did it. Ethan the merry prankster, that's all you've ever been."

"I've taken my opportunities for petty revenge," he admits.

"In what universe does 'petty' mean nearly getting someone killed?" she asks.

"I've gone too far, it's true."

The apparent honesty of this disarms Buffy entirely, but after a moment she recovers. "Why? What
is it with you? Both of you -- I mean, my god, I can't help but notice you make him totally
homicidal, too."

A smile twitches at the corner of his scarred lips. "Things do become bitter between ex-lovers,
don't you find?"

This time it takes her longer to regain her power of speech, and the recovery is only partial. "Oh
please," she finally sputters.

"Believe what you want," Ethan says, "but back in the day I did love him." A taunting glint returns
to his eyes. "I did even before he cast the love spell on me."

Yowling with inarticulate rage, Buffy lunges toward him, but Xander catches her arm and pulls her
back. "Of all the disgusting lies! Take that back!"

"Step into my office," Xander says, pulling her toward a corner of the room.

"He comes here and says this shit--"

"Actually, Buff, we dragged him here. And I believe him."

"Who cares how he -- what?"

"I think it might be true."

"There's no way Giles would do that. No way. I can't believe you'd even think that. Wes, will you
tell him --?"

Wesley decides to stay out of this row. He spreads his hands in a *What would I know?* gesture.

"Buffy. Remember telling me something you figured out about Joyce? That the things she went
totally ballistic about were all things you found out later she'd done herself back in the day?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"When I did that love spell. You weren't around, I think you were off somewhere being a rat, but
Giles went off on me like he never ever had. He actually sort of scared me."
She finally tears her gaze away from Ethan and turns it onto Xander. "You never said anything."

"I was pretty embarrassed about the whole damn thing. I'm telling you, Buffy, we've both seen him mad, but he went batshit. I think there was maybe a little parental overcompensation going on."

She looks toward Ethan, then Xander, then back again. "Why would he put a love spell on you if you already loved him?"

"I didn't say I was any good at it. There was someone else, too. I was obsessed with her. It got in the way."

"Things get fucked up when a love spell's involved," Xander says. "That's one of the things he was so mad about. This all makes a certain amount of sense now."

"Sense? Bleach my brain."

Ethan laughs softly and Xander has to catch Buffy by the arm again before she does him harm.

"It's hardly surprising," Wesley says. "At least from my point of view. The burden of having a destiny from such a very young age -- he's not the first watcher to act out, and won't be the last. It's hard for you to think of him as an adolescent, but he was one."

"No one manages to escape being young and stupid. The best we can hope for is to grow out of it before we're old and stupid."

This, to Wesley's surprise, seems to pacify her at last. She relaxes, and Xander releases her arm.

"So what's your game?" she asks Ethan.

"No game. It didn't seem like a conversation would be happening, so I arranged a little show and tell, as you Americans call it. Just an expression of our history from my point of view."

"I bet it's a doozy, your point of view," she says.

He smiles again. "You don't know the half of it."

"Whatever. Don't forget, if you hurt Giles in any way, I'm gonna make you pay in so many ways you won't be able to count 'em all."

***

Ethan watches Sutcliffe tattoo the mark of Eyghon onto Rupert's arm, jealousy and resentment rising in him until Dierdre cannot distract or humor him any longer. "Get on with it," he snarls.

Henry tells him to shut the fuck up. Mindful of his swollen, purpled face -- miraculously his nose is not broken -- Ethan does as he's told.

When Sutcliffe finishes his work, however, and remains to wipe the excess ink and the blood from Rupert's arm, Ethan pulls him up by the collar and hurls him against a wall. "You're finished now, so bugger off."

"Darling, don't be tedious," Dierdre says. She approaches Rupert and trails a bare finger through the welling blood and ink, licking it off her fingertip. "You're going to be a rare treat," she tells Rupert.

Bound as he is to Dierdre, Ethan still has to struggle against the urge to do to her what he did to Sutcliffe. She glides her finger over the new tattoo again, smiling at the flinch Rupert cannot
suppress, and this time offers the taste of blood and ink to Rupert himself. He takes her fingertip into his mouth, avid as any of her other followers.

Henry wants matters to move along briskly, and he tells Dierdre to bring out her vial and give Rupert a taste. Watching a repeat of Rupert sucking on her finger makes Ethan feel as though his skin and nerves are on fire, but he’s not certain which of the pair accounts for the greater part of his jealousy. The drug takes effect quickly, however, and when Rupert staggers back a step, Ethan is there to catch him.

It seizes Rupert swiftly, when the rite is barely complete. His features distorted by the demon, he reaches for Ethan, whose hands are still on him.

Ethan finds himself flung to the floor, his shirt torn open, sending buttons flying everywhere. Eyghon stretches its length over him, pinning him. It grinds itself against him as it holds his head still, making sure he takes in the demonic aspects in his lover's face. It says things to him, in snarls and hisses that are wholly inhuman but completely intelligible to him. Telling him what it will do to him -- things that make him shudder -- that it will make him learn to beg for these things.

It secretes a drop of thick black fluid from an aperture at its breastbone, something Ethan has never seen it do. It smears the fluid onto its fingertip and presses it to Ethan's lips, a parody of Dierdre's offerings to Rupert. He is afraid to take it, but more afraid not to.

He parts his lips.

To his surprise the black droplet tastes sweeter than anything he's ever experienced. He sucks at the finger like a baby drawing sustenance, crying out when it's withdrawn.

It commands him to say all its names, in all the demon tongues, and he finds to his surprise that he knows them, and he recites them all. It takes days to list them, and when he comes to the last, Eyghon pushes its fingers into Ethan's head, passing right through his skull. Visions flow through its hands, mainlined straight into his brain. All the demon realms where Eyghon is known are opened to Ethan's view. Beasts he could never have imagined, the heat and stink of blood and viscera, fire and ice and screams and sounds he will never erase from his mind if he lives forever.

Eyghon leads Ethan to a marble slab that is engulfed in cold blue flame, and he bids him lie there. He feels nothing at all from the flame. Eyghon shows him a blade then, and draws it down the center of his chest, so lightly he might be beginning a sketch. It reaches in with both hands and pulls Ethan's ribs apart. The cracking noise they makes is louder even than the sound of his screams.

He knows Eyghon will pull his heart from his chest and consume it.

But it doesn't.

It turns away, leaving him opened. Other creatures are in this place, but none shows any interest in him at all.

He screams until he tastes copper at the back of his throat and he has no voice.

Eyghon is rummaging through a series of wooden boxes. At last it turns back with a crumbling sprig of some herb, a ruby and a small snake. It cups these into its two hands, then clasps the hands tightly together and holds them before it. When Eyghon lets the hands fall open, there is a large black jewel in one palm, with more facets than can be counted.

It steps to Ethan's side then, and touches the jewel to his lips, then shoves it deep into his opened
chest. It encounters resistance but keeps on pushing, shoving the dark stone into his heart.

He tries to scream again, and his mouth fills with blood.

He wakes in Dierdre's bed.

Panicked, he scrambles over the sheets, backing himself into the corner where the walls meet. He finds he's wearing a singlet, and yanks it over his head and casts it aside. His chest is unmarked. Not even the bruises and claw marks of Eyghon's previous appearance remain.

Dierdre enters the room just then, and hurries to him. "Darling, I thought I heard you."

He asks the question that's more appropriately hers to ask. "Am I all right?"

"Of course you are. You've been tripping, although I'm not sure how."

"Eyghon. It fed me something. How long have I been ... gone?"

"Six hours, perhaps." Six hours? He would have thought as many days.

Ethan pushes his way past her to her mirror, inspecting his face and head and, once again, his chest. Unblemished, except for the bruises left by Henry's attack. "Where is Rupert?"

"Tommy took him home with him. He went deep."

Ethan nods. "So did I."

"What it said was true. Rupert does have power. It's never been anything like this before." She comes to him, slipping her arms round him from behind. "It wants to walk in this world. Can you imagine?"

Better than Ethan walking in its worlds. "To do what?"

"Does it matter? It's going to be brilliant."

***

"There's one little thing we forgot when rebuilding our life here," Xander says to Wes. "A cage."

Ethan's still in the library, tied to his chair with a stony-faced Faith keeping guard over him. Wes and Xander have taken themselves off to the lounge area nearby.

Wes is puttering with the coffeemaker, preparing a pot. "Ah, yes. As I recall that did come in handy a few times."

"We've been more about the killing than the capturing so far here. So why did you want to talk with me?" And not with Buffy, he wonders.

"I've been having some thoughts about Ethan."

"He is strangely magnetic, isn't he?" Xander says. "Still, keep 'em to yourself. And incidentally, that was a joke." Magnetic. Bleach his brain, too, while the bottle's out.

"I'm curious why he was drawn here."

"Easy. He lives to fuck with Giles. Giles is here. There's your answer."
"I'm not certain that's the whole story. From everything you've told me, Ethan Rayne has a well honed sense of self-preservation. Would an event like that at the Hall of Fame have drawn him back when you knew him?"

"Probably not. And especially not after the Initiative. He sensed that coming, Giles told me he gave him some intel about the whole Adam project, though he didn't know the exact details. But we didn't see Ethan here until after the dust settled."

"We didn't see him until then."

"Why, you don't think he had something to do with that?"

"No, not at all." Wes rises and pours coffee for the two of them, brings a cup to Xander. "But I wonder if something is drawing him to events such as this, or to the hellmouth."

"You're making with the inscrutable, Wes. Why would you think so?"

"I keep coming back to the change that came over Wendy's appearance. And now Ethan --"

"Don't go there, Wes. Do not."

He goes there. "I just think perhaps we should explore the possibility that he's tied in with the Guardians."

"Oh hell no. It's hair, that's all. We haven't seen the guy in several years, and he's been imprisoned by people who weren't exactly known card-carrying ACLU members. Aren't there stories about prisoners' hair going white?"

"Yes, of course." His tone, though, says But--

Xander lets out a breath. "How do we 'explore the possibility'?"

"We can question him, find out more about his recent experiences and activities."

"Wendy didn't know anything about the Guardians. What makes you think he'd know, even assuming there's some connection?"

"As he said, he keeps his ear to the ground. For all we know, he may have been aware of the Guardians even before the spell that opened the slayer and watcher lines."

"You know what we need? Seriously, we need some cool name to refer to the spell and the expansion of the lines. Something vaguely mystical sounding. The Awakening, some shit like that. Think of the verbiage it would save, every time we bring this up."

"It was merely a suggestion."

"Yeah," Xander says. "What the hell. We might as well ask."

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_The knowledge that Rupert is with Sutcliffe makes it impossible for Ethan to rest. Despite Dierdre's protestations, he insists on leaving, relenting only to allow her to accompany him._

_Rupert is still dreamy and lethargic when Ethan arrives to collect him. Sutcliffe looks altogether too satisfied for Ethan's taste, and the room smells of sex. Ethan seizes Rupert by the arm. "Come on."_
"Oh, what's the hurry," Rupert slurs.

"Someone's jealous," Sutcliffe says. "Someone passed out early and missed Ripper's best moments as Eyghon's conduit."

"What?" Rupert blurs. "I missed something? What?"

Sutcliffe laughs, and Dierdre joins in. "Go home with your nanny, Ripper," Sutcliffe says. "We'll tell you all about it in the morning."

Ethan releases Rupert's arm, and he stumbles backward into a wall as Ethan shoves Sutcliffe into the opposite wall, hand at his throat. "Have I mentioned how tired I am of you?" He squeezes just long and hard enough to wipe the smirk from Sutcliffe's face, then turns away, grabbing Rupert's arm again. "Let's go."

Rupert, giggling at the spectacle, comes away with him, leaning heavily on Ethan as they descend the stairs from Sutcliffe's flat. Halfway home, he starts singing lustily, butchering "Cum On Feel the Noize." Ethan manages to maneuver him up the stairs to his own flat and dump him onto the mattress, half ready to collapse himself.

Rupert catches Ethan's arm and tumbles him onto the mattress beside him. "God, you're pretty," he murmurs.

"As pretty as Sutcliffe?" he asks, instantly hating himself. He's never felt this way about anyone, half mad with jealousy at every glance that passes between his lover and someone else.

"Don't be petulant," Rupert says. "I woke up in his bed."

"Right. What else were you to do but shag him?"

"Exactly." Rupert falls on him then, shagging him with such wholehearted enthusiasm that Ethan forgets his anger.

Afterward they fall asleep, sweaty limbs tangled together. Ethan's dreams are uneasy, filled with flashes of the visions he'd had under Eyghon's influence. He wakes, sprawled across the mattress, alone. Panic spears through him as he sits up, looking around for Rupert. Scrambling out of bed, he bounds out of the room, calling Rupert's name.

Rupert emerges from the bog, sleeve rolled up and a bottle of antiseptic in his hand. "What are you--"

Ethan throws his arms about him. "I thought you'd gone."

"Oi!" He pulls away, switching the bottle to the other hand, flicking spilled antiseptic off the other.

"What?" Ethan says. "Are you hurt?" But he sees the answer before Rupert speaks. The skin under and around the tattoo is angry and red.

Rupert walks back into the bog and continues tending to the infection.

Ethan follows him, stepping behind him and slipping his arms round Rupert. "I woke up and you weren't there."

"I'm here."

"Come back to bed." He slips a hand down to the front of Rupert's trousers. "I need you. Please."
"Just give me a tick," he says irritably, but Ethan's continued attentions soon lead him to abandon the first-aid attempt. He accompanies Ethan back to the bed, but pushes him down and seizes his wrists. "Hold on. What's this?"

"What?"

Rupert releases his wrist and traces a finger down Ethan's chest, along a cluster of angry scratches. "These weren't there before."

"I had a dream. About Eyghon. It put something inside my chest. Buried it in my heart."

"What was it?"

"I can't remember. Maybe I never knew." He reaches for Rupert. "Forget about it. I'm desperate to have you inside me, that's all that matters."

Rupert gives him what he begs for, but all the while Ethan feels something in his chest, burning like a coal.

This time it's no surprise when Henry calls them back to the studio well before the promised resting time is up. No one complains; they all just appear on time. Ethan brings Rupert, although the idea of seeing him in the same room with Sutcliffe unsettles him, because he can't bear the thought of being apart for another session of one to two days. Henry lets him in without comment, beyond a brusque tutorial on the etiquette of recording studios.

This session proves to be more of what came before. Ethan is called on to calm Dierdre's nerves and tears after each successful take. He sees her beginning to unravel as the bouts of hysteria occur more and more frequently, but he's learned his lesson about pressing the point with Henry.

The main difference in this session is after several of these interludes, Rupert hauls Ethan into the alley behind the studio, where he kisses Dierdre's tears off Ethan's lips and thrusts fevered hands under his shirt and trousers.

After a knee-trembler in the alley, Rupert and Ethan collapse onto a loading dock, sharing a smoke. "I don't like the way this is going. Henry's a fucking tyrant."

"Dierdre? She loves it," Rupert says. "She adores drama, and he's spoon-feeding it to her, richer than Devon cream."

"Don't be stupid. He's going to break her."

"He'll get a brilliant record before he does. I never thought I'd say it, but it's going to be a piece of genius."

"That's all she's worth to you? A brilliant record?"

Rupert flicks the fag against the brick wall across the way. "If she means so sodding much, say something."

Ethan scowls and points at the bruises on his face. "Well, I did that, didn't I?" He lights another Gauloise. "It's the same with Eyghon. Pushing further and further."

"Well, that's brilliant too. I've no complaints."

No complaints from Ethan, really. An increasing number of doubts, however. Those are by no
means allayed by the next time they perform the ritual. This time it's Sutcliffe they put in a deep sleep, and Eyghon swoops down on him the second the chanting dies down. Just as before, it's stronger than it had been before Rupert joined the circle. The demonic features don't flicker quite so feebly under the skin of the possessed Sutcliffe. It reaches for Rupert, who meets it eagerly as it seizes him by the arm, its hand wrapping itself around the reddened tattoo.

The others, disappointed not to be first, reach for one another, rutting with abandon until Eyghon casts Rupert aside and seizes Dierdre by the throat. "I am weary of the same games;" it growls. "I am not the plaything of children. I will experience more than your pathetic attempts at pleasure."

Dierdre's throat whistles in a desperate attempt to draw in air. Henry jumps onto Eyghon's back, but it hurls him onto the floor. Ethan throws himself at the demon then, but Rupert's voice rings out, chanting the exorcism rite.

It turns and snarls at Rupert, then collapses into a heap, and Sutcliffe's body is his own once more.

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At Wes's insistence they untie Ethan and bring him out into the lounge. "Coffee?" Wes asks.

"Thank you, no," Ethan says, with such an arch to his brow that Xander can't stop himself from saying, "No, that's you."

"Me?"

"Who likes to dose up the food and the drinks and make them magically delicious. But whatever. Wes has some questions for you."

"Me?" Wes blurts, unconsciously echoing Ethan.

"You did so well earlier," Xander says. "Keep up the good work."

Wes eyes Xander, then seems to resign himself. "Yes. Well, then. You told us earlier that you keep your ear to the ground. Why don't you tell us a little more about your sources."

"You want names? Sorry, I value my skin -- and I mean that literally. There are at least two skin-eaters in my acquaintance."

"Nothing that specific," Wes says. "I'm more interested in how you learn about things. The events at the Hall of Fame, for example."

"Believe it or not, I turned on my television. The destruction of a great cultural landmark of our day does excite a little comment."

"How much faster would all this go without snark?" Xander asks. "Just wondering."

"Pot, meet kettle," Ethan replies.

Wes ignores them both. "I very much doubt you feel moved to visit the scene of every building collapse in the Western Hemisphere. What made this one different?"

"Oh, come now. The building was sheared off from the top, like a soft-boiled egg. The place was full of dazed people in robes, and I suspect the suicides were not-quite-people in robes. If that doesn't stink of the supernatural, I've lost my touch."

"But why come here?"
"Broken prophecy has the stink of Rupert Giles and his merry band. I thought I had a fair chance of finding him here."

"That's the second time you've said that," Xander says. "About the prophecy. How do you know that?"

"That's what we're trying to get at," Wes says. "How you find your information."

"Spend time in the right pubs, magic shops, drug dens, karaoke bars. You'd be surprised at what you can learn if you just sit and listen."

"What about associations?" Wes asks.

"Associations?"

"Official, I mean. Groups."

Ethan shakes his head. "I'm not exactly a joiner."

"More a freelance asshole," Xander says.

"Xander," Wes chides.

"Sorry," Xander lies.

"This may seem out of left field," Wes says, "but when did your hair turn white?"

Ethan's brows raise. "That's somewhere beyond left field."

"Was it recently or some time ago?"

"When I managed to break free of the Initiative, it was this way. I couldn't say when it turned."

"How long did they hold you?"

"Eighteen months." Suddenly agitated, he gestures toward the coffee. "Give me some of that."

Xander rises and pours a cup, setting it before him on the coffee table.

"Curious, don't you think?" Wes says. "Why should they find you so interesting for so long? You're a magic user, yes, but you're human. Did they forget you?"

"I rather wish they had." He reaches for the coffee, and Xander notices a slight unsteadiness to his hand. "I won't talk about that."

"I think it's important that we do," Wes says.

"What a pity for you."

"You held enough interest for them to pay concentrated attention to you for a year and a half. That tells me there's something more to you than there seems to be, something more than your history with Giles suggests."

The brows go up again. "You know of my history with Ripper?"

"I read his diaries when I came to Sunnydale. There were records of his three encounters with you there."
"Including the return of Eyghon? How thoroughly did he describe the background?"

"It was ... elliptical."

"No doubt. Which is why Ripper's having the gaps filled in even as we speak."

"We've gotten off track," Wes says. "Why were they so interested in a middling level mage whose track record consisted of schoolboy pranks?"

"Middling level'? Like hell."

"What did they want?"

"Get stuffed."

"We're wasting our time here." Wes's voice has gone cold and hard. "Xander, is the holding cell ready?"

Xander shrugs. "We only got the walls halfway hosed down. Some of the grosser demon-bits clogged the drain in the floor, and with Giles being in the hospital, we just let it go. Still, I'd say it's usable."

Ethan pales considerably. "Cell?"

"Well," Xander says, "we think it was a bomb shelter when it was built. We changed the locks around to the outside, and it works well enough to contain the odd demon."

"You wouldn't put me in there."

"Like Wes says, we're wasting time, and we've got enough around here we're letting slip since Giles has been out of commission. We'll get back to you when things calm down some."

"Christ, don't, I can't. Ask what you wanted to know."

Xander almost feels guilty. He does feel sorry for the poor bastard. "Wes--"

"What was their interest in you?"

Ethan closes his eyes and releases a breath. "They were interested in visions I'd had in the Eyghon days. I'd seen into demon realms, and they wanted everything I could tell them."

"Visions?" Xander asks. "I never knew about that."

"It only happened once, but it seemed to go on for days. I don't know how many realms I saw. Dozens, hundreds. It must have been in the hundreds, or the Initiative would have gotten bored with me and cut out my heart."

"Aren't we being a tiny bit dramatic?" Xander tries to imagine Riley hacking out someone's heart. A demon, maybe. Ethan? No.

"At the end of the vision, Eyghon cut my chest open and pushed a jewel into my heart. They were extremely curious about whether it was real or a figment. I have no doubt they'd have vivisected me to see the moment I ceased to be useful."

"You kept them interested for a year and a half?" Wes asks. "You remembered that much detail after, what, twenty years?"
Ethan shakes his head. "No. They made me relive it. Tell them everything I was seeing as I saw it."

"How did they do that?"

"They planted a chip in my head. They could take me back into the vision whenever they wanted."

"Jesus Christ," Xander sputters. "They did that to you for a year and a half? Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. We don't have a cell, we made that up so you'd talk. Jesus."

Wes says nothing about him spilling the beans. Instead he asks Ethan, "Did they ever mention a group called the Guardians?"

"No."

"Have you ever heard anything about them? In any of your intelligence-gathering trips to the pubs or drug dens or karaoke bars?"

"No. Aren't they that vigilante lot in the berets that used to patrol in New York?"

Wes scrutinizes him for a moment then says, "No, that's the Guardian Angels. Have you noticed anything unusual since this past May?"

"My life is bloody resplendent with the unusual."

Wes smiles. "Yes, I suppose. Anything outside your normal realm of the unusual, then."

"Well, I went off the junk. Cold turkey, without so much as a shiver or a craving."

"You were addicted to heroin?" Wes asks.

"I took everything I could to get that shit out of my head. Took too much of it periodically, but I seem to be impossible to kill."

The hair is rising on the nape of Xander's neck. "Do you remember when you stopped?"

"Of course I do. It was May 20."

Xander and Wes exchange a look. Wes says, "I have an idea. I'll be back."

Ethan reaches into his pocket for a cigarette case, and Xander doesn't stop him from lighting up. He just puts a saucer on the table.

"Shit, I'm sorry," he says again. "We needed the information, but that was cruel."

Ethan waves him off. His air of cool seems to be coming back, though the smirk hasn't made it all the way back. "It's actually a bit of a relief to have it out. It's not as if I can go to a support group and say I have post-traumatic stress from having a chip put in my head by secret government torturers, is it?"

"Anything else different since May 20?"

Ethan takes a drag of his pungent cigarette and ponders. "I started thinking of looking up Rupert again."

"Cooked up your elaborate revenge?"
He shakes his head. "This isn't revenge. I needed to get the past straight between us."

"Why? Twelve stepping it?"

Ethan laughs. "I'm not exactly powerless, am I? And no, I was clean from the moment I decided to stop. I don't actually know why, but the idea grew so strong I couldn't ignore it."

Xander's beginning to have an idea why, and he's not sure anyone's going to like it.

Wes returns then, with Wendy in tow. Ethan looks at her, puzzled at Wes's air of revelation.

"They said you had him," she says. She eyes him curiously.

"Shake hands and say hello," Xander says, and Wendy casts him a bemused glance.

She hesitates.

"I'm safe as houses, darling," Ethan says. He crushes his cigarette in the saucer and rises, offering his hand.

Wendy takes it, and they both react with a start. Then Wendy utters the dreaded two words: "Oh, wow."

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While Sutcliffe is still in the grip of euphoria, he begins to write a song. He and Henry and Dierdre huddle together to work on it. Dierdre's voice is slightly rougher than normal, but she's essentially unhurt.

The other band members are required to stay so they can learn the new tune when it's finished, but Ethan and Rupert are free to do as they will. On a whim of Rupert's they abandon their plan to get take away curry, and Rupert spends the last of his cigarette money buying them dinner at a Greek restaurant.

As they're walking back to Ethan's flat, they discuss whether they want to change clothes and go see the new band at the club where Dierdre's band was discovered, or spend the night shagging. Shagging seems to be winning out when they turn a corner and suddenly two men emerge from a gleaming black car.

"Rupert Giles," one of them calls out. "Your family's had enough of this shite. Come with us."

"Bugger that," Rupert snarls, and starts to walk on.

The two of them advance then, seizing him and muscling him toward the car. Rupert takes one by the neck and delivers a vicious headbutt, and Ethan lunges at the other, using elbows, knees, fists, boot-clad feet. Both assailants sag to the pavement, and Ethan and Rupert kick them until they're sure neither will be following them. Ethan relieves them of their wallets and a flick-knife he finds on one of the men. They run, taking a zigzag path, cutting through alleyways, until they reach the studio.

Laughing like lunatics, they burst into the empty main offices and shut themselves into a stall in the bog for a fevered mutual wank. After, sprawled on the tatty sofa in the lounge, Ethan asks, "Your family really sent those two after you?"

Rupert's expression closes down. "Not them. The Council."
Ethan frowns. "That seems rather -- excessive, don't you think?"

"No no, the Council of Watchers. It's the organization I'm bound to."

"Your mysterious destiny, you mean?"

"Yes. They don't take kindly to being crossed. I'm promised to them by birth. They won't stop. We'll have to take another flat."

Ethan reaches for his cigarettes. "I can barely afford the one I have now."

"Then it's time to be changing that, innit?" He begins to catalogue some spells that might bring in some money when the bass player comes into the lounge to tell them to stick around.

"Henry wants to call Eyghon."

"So soon?" Rupert asks.

He shrugs. "He wants Dierdre in that euphoric state for the vocals. Better get in there before he throws a wobbly. Me, I'm going home to change clothes and have a decent meal while I can."

Ethan takes another drag of his cigarette. "Tell him I'll be in directly."

"Fond of living dangerously, aren't you?" Rupert says.

"Maybe taking care of your friends gave me a taste for it." Fuck Henry. Ethan's doesn't take orders from him; he's not in the sodding band.

Rupert shrugs and goes into the studio, and after finishing the fag, Ethan crushes it out and follows.

"Christ," he mutters when he's stepped inside. "They'll let anyone into this club."

Sutcliffe is bent over Randall's arm, tattooing the last bit of the mark of Eyghon. Dierdre makes her way to Ethan, slipping her arms around him.

"Are you all right, love?" he asks.

"Tired, that's all," she says, but he's certain she's lying.

He tips her chin up and sees the imprint of Sutcliffe's hands on her throat. "Are you frightened?"

"Don't be silly." Her smile, however, is brittle.

"It's getting stronger."

"God, yes. And so is the high -- that's what Tommy says. Wait till you hear the new song."

"Henry thinks you have to be coming off a possession to sing it? You own every song you sing, you don't need him setting up elaborate conditions. You were brilliant even before he came along."

Pouting, she pushes away from him, going to Henry's side. He's lit the candles and is now spilling salt in a large circle. "Bring me the vial," he says to her.

"But I thought I would be the one--"

He seizes her arm and shakes her. "Shut up, you stupid bint, and do as I say."
Dierdre hurries to do his bidding. Ethan steps toward him, fed up to the teeth and willing to fight for her, but Randall stumbles against him.

"Sorry, sorry," he slurs.

"Jesus Christ, you wanker," says Sutcliffe. "Don't faint."

Without answering, Randall sits heavily on one of the large pillows on the floor, looking unsteadily about him.

Dierdre brings Henry the vial.

"That's my darling," he says, hooking a casually possessive arm round her neck. Uncapping the vial, he tips it against her lips, and a small noise escapes her as she slips to the floor. "You," Henry orders Rupert. "Start chanting."

Rupert begins the incantation, and the air crackles and hums with the power that flows from him.

The demon pours itself into Dierdre, and it rises, pacing the perimeter of the circle Henry's laid down. "Release me," it says. "I grow weary of confinement."

The demons features pulse beneath Dierdre's skin, like a cat trying to batter its way out of a bag. After a moment of flickering, it manifests more completely than it ever has, seeming far more demon than woman.

"Fuck me," Randall mutters and sprawls on the floor, passed out cold.

Eyghon points to Rupert. "You," it says, echoing Henry. "Free me."

Rupert takes an unsteady breath. "I won't."

"You dare defy me?"

"The world isn't ready for you. People will be hurt."

It interlaces its hands and swings its doubled fist at Rupert's head, knocking him to the floor. "Starting with you. Release me, or I'll kill everyone in this circle."

Ethan leaps onto Eyghon from behind, surprised when they fall in a heap and it stays sprawled on the floor without a fight.

Too late he realizes it's left Dierdre's body and entered Randall. It rushes into him like a freight train, pushing aside everything that's human until what stands before them is pure demon. Using its fists as clubs, it strikes down Sutcliffe and Henry, battering Rupert back down to the ground. It lifts Ethan off Dierdre and shoves its fingers into his head once again. He feels as though he's screaming, but he doesn't hear a sound. His mind fills entirely with the idea that he must break the circle, obliterate it with his hands so Eyghon can be freed. He Crawls toward the circle even as Rupert shouts at him not to let the demon loose in the world.

He is torn between the two commands, but Eyghon's is the greater of the two. Its grip on his mind is so tenacious it's as though talons are tearing through the fabric of his self. He knows he'll die or go mad if he doesn't smear his hand through the line of salt.

Rupert plants himself in Ethan's path, chanting. The demon roars and pulls its hands from his head, pulling a dark curtain over everything with its withdrawal. Ethan shrieks even as the demon
howls and lunges at Rupert. It flings Rupert to the ground yet again and poises its hand against his breastbone, forming a blade with its clawed hand. He screams as it begins to force its hand into his body.

Ethan suddenly remembers the flick-knife. He opens it and jabs its blade into Eyghon's shoulder. It howls and flails, trying desperately to reach the hilt of the knife. Using his boot to brace himself, Ethan jerks the knife out as Eyghon whirls toward him, enraged. Ethan plunges the knife into its breast and pulls it out again, and a hot geyser of blood jets over him. It sprays in rhythm with Randall's heart, bright arterial blood. Each stream spurs with less force than the last until no more comes out at all.

Still Eyghon stands, lashing out at Ethan and clubbing him to the floor.

Rupert rouses himself and resumes the chant.

It seizes Ethan by the head and he's certain it's going to snap his neck, when Rupert's voice raises with force and finality and finishes the chant.

Eyghon roars, releasing Ethan to clutch at its own head. Then it drops to the ground and is still. The form of the demon dissolves away, leaving Randall, pale as death, like the skin shed by a snake.

"Oh god," Dierdre whispers. "What have you done?"

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"Translation?" Xander prompts.

"He has power," Wendy says. "Not the sight. It's complex. Like a lightning-blasted oak covered in vines and the most amazing flowers."

Ethan's eyes widen. "And who is this fascinating creature?"

Wes says, "Wendy recently joined us, but a few of us remember her from Sunnydale."

"You do have the sight," Ethan says to her.

"I get flashes." She looks at Xander. "That's not all I got. There's a sense of ... kinship, for lack of a better word. As if what's flowing through him is the same thing that flows through me."

"This is not a thing I want to hear," Xander says. "Because he's evil."

Ethan takes his seat again and lights another one of his pungent cigarettes. "Oh, I've never been evil. Wicked, perhaps."

"Babies, pal," Xander says. "You were an accomplice in the that whole baby-eating demon incident. You fucked with the band candy so no one would be on guard."

"I'd like to point out no actual babies were eaten," Ethan says. "Look, I needed money and Trick offered a lot of money. I knew Rupert and Buffy would stop anything from actually happening, I'd have the money and no one would blame me if Trick's plans were wrecked."

"The bullshit, it piles so deep."

"I didn't know it was babies they were after. I observed a strict don't ask, don't tell policy back when I freelanced. It's cleaner that way."
"Cleaner."

"Well, I believed that at the time. I actually haven't sold my services since I left the hospitality of the Initiative."

"What's the Initiative?" Wendy asks.

"Secret military research project," Xander says. "They had a project going in Sunnydale, which was pretty nasty, actually."

"That's a very nice coat you own," Wes says, "and your cane is quite fine. You have funds coming in from somewhere, and they're not inconsiderable."

"I have a business. I create and sell fake grimoires. Those who buy them are merely collectors, since even the real ones are terribly unreliable. No one's harmed. People who have that much money are generally improved by being relieved of some of it." He directs a smile at Wendy. "Don't you think?"

"Rupert said you could be charming," she says.

"He did?" Ethan and Xander say in unison.

"We've strayed off course," Wes points out. "Our aim is to see if you might have some connection to the Guardians."

"Again, I know nothing about these Guardians."

"He's connected somehow," Wendy says. "If I am, he is."

Xander groans. "That's going to go over so well."

"You keep mentioning this lot," Ethan says. "Who are they, and why do you think I have something to do with them?"

"Not a lot is known about them," Wes says. "They're an ancient order, much like the Watchers, but the last member died just before the hellmouth was closed. They had a ... complicated relationship with the Watchers."

"I know what that's like," Ethan says with a smirk. "So why are you asking me all these questions about a dead order?"

"We believe it may have been revived," Wes says. "In your efforts to keep up with supernatural happenings, have you heard anything about the slayer?"

"Do we really want to share any of this information with him?" Xander asks.

"It hardly seems fair to expect answers from him while refusing to clarify what we're looking for. He's been forthcoming about his activities, both recent and less recent."

"Easy for you, Wes. You haven't been around for any of his performances."

Ethan ignores the debate. "I did hear a deliciously interesting tidbit, in fact. That you've started a little home for wayward slayers, and you've got more than just the one."

Wes nods. "There was a spell, shortly before the collapse of Sunnydale. It opened the slayer line to girls who were just potential slayers."
"That still doesn't tell me anything about the dead order," Ethan says.

"We've found the Watcher line, which was decimated shortly before the closing of the hellmouth, has expanded as well as the Slayer line. It seems likely, if they're so inextricably bound together, that the Guardians must have undergone a similar expansion -- or in their case, a rebirth."

"Wait wait wait," Xander says. "I remember Buffy saying this: The Guardians were women. I don't believe for a minute we've got ourselves another case of gender issues."

"It may be something akin to a mutation. The line ensuring its survival by expanding the criteria. Perhaps those with power were chosen, but also those who've had a strong connection with a member of the Watcher line. Wendy, I know, foresew your life here in Cleveland even before you ever met Buffy, and then the two of you were bound together as the seers who prepared the way for the return of the god. And Mr. Rayne here -- well, he and Giles did a bit of demon-raising in their youth."

"A connection of some kind seems to argue against the Guardians," Xander says. "They were underground. The last one didn't reveal herself to Buffy until just before the big battle."

"Except in the cases of the rogue watchers," Wes reminds him. "In those cases, some type of partnership was apparently formed."

Xander leans back in his chair, trying to come up with another reason why Ethan Rayne couldn't possibly have anything to do with the Guardians.

"There are rogue watchers?" Ethan asks. "That has great potential for amusement."

"We have no record of those watchers or what they might have done," Wes says. "The Council is being remade, old rules broken. It seems the perfect time for the old relationship between the Guardians and the Watchers to be remade."

"But -- but -- Ethan Rayne," Xander sputters. "I mean, I can't even decide if that's insane or just stupid."

"Believe me," Wes says, "this sounds exactly like something the Powers That Be would do." He smiles. "They did make Cordelia a seer."

Xander's got no comeback for that, beyond, "Giles is going to shit." He realizes this is, in an odd way, a hopeful statement. Somewhere deep down he believes Giles is going to come out of the coma and be his old self. And then he'll shit.

Ethan asks, "What is it, exactly, that the Guardians do?"

Xander says, "Buffy said the one she met told her they watch the Watchers."

Ethan throws back his head and laughs. When he finally subsides, he wipes his eyes and says, "God, that is just too marvelous."

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Before they can react and decide what must be done about Randall, his body is gone, dissolved into a green puddle. The blood, however, is another story. Henry and Sutcliffe bundle up all the pillows and the bright woven cloths from the floor, but there are still sprays of blood across the walls and the control booth window.
Ethan attempts to help an unsteady Dierdre out to the sofa, but she shoves him away.

"You," Henry says. "Rayne and Ripper. Get yourselves cleaned up, find your fucking clothes and disappear. If I see you in London before a fortnight is up, there'll be hell to pay. I'll take care of the rest."

When Ethan hesitates, Henry winds a bloody fist in his hair and shoves him against a wall. "Don't fucking cross me, Rayne. You're useless to me now, piss me off and I'll shove that drum kit straight up your arse." He releases Ethan, who loses no time making his escape.

He and Rupert scurry along dark, deserted streets on their way back to the flat, avoiding the clubs where there are still likely to be people gathered outside. "All right," Ethan says, "where do we go? We could disappear in Brighton dead easy. Or Liverpool. Or Newcastle. Even take the--"

"Just shut up. Let me think." But he doesn't offer any suggestions of his own, and when Ethan chances a look at him, his expression is closed, unreadable.

After a bit Ethan tries again. "I've the wallets I lifted off those Council gits. I didn't count it, but one was stuffed with notes."

Rupert flicks an impatient hand but doesn't answer, and Ethan starts feeling a growing uneasiness in addition to everything else ricocheting through his head.

"You're not planning to stay, are you? I hate Henry, but I think he's--" Ethan stops as they round the corner at their street and this time four men pile out of a black saloon car. "Fuck." He turns to run, but four more men are ranged on the pavement behind him.

Ethan flicks a glance at Rupert, who's spread his arms in a gesture of surrender. "I'm ready to go back," Rupert says.

"Ripper," Ethan protests. "You can't just--" One of the Council thugs drives a fist into his stomach, and he finds himself on his knees on the pavement.

"Let my mate go, and I'll come without a fight." Rupert gets his own gut punch in response, and as he wheezes and gasps on his knees, one of the thugs pulls a black hood over Rupert's head and binds his hands behind his back. A few loops of cord around his ankles, and he's hog-tied. Two of the men hurl him into the back of one of the cars.

A hand winds itself into Ethan's hair. "I fink you 'ave somefin' of mine," a voice says from just behind his ear. A black hood descends over his head, and at least two men work him over with feet and fists and truncheons. Hands rifle his pockets, relieving him of the two wallets and his own for good measure. Emptied of its two quid, it lands on the pavement beside him with a soft smack.

The hood is yanked off his head, but all Ethan sees is a dark form bending over him.

"Fucking nance." His attacker aims one last kick to his ribs.

"Come on," one of the others calls from beside the car, in a bored tone as if he's waiting on a mate who's flirting with a barmaid.

The thug contents himself with spitting on Ethan's coat and turning to join the others. Much as he'd like to curl in on himself and expire on the spot, Ethan's certain the landlady has been watching with the lights off. He drags himself to his feet and crawls upstairs to his flat before she calls the filth on him for bleeding on her pavement.
Despite Henry's dire warning to get out of London without delay, Ethan crawls onto his mattress and falls into a fog punctuated by dark dreams, dull aches and sharp pains. He rises in midafternoon and despite the pain in his ribs, he carries an armload of Ripper's LPs to the used record shop to sell for fare to Brighton. Farewell, O, Lucky Man! A favorite of Ripper's, but too sodding bad.

If you have a friend on whom you think you can rely, you are a lucky man. Too right.

In the train station he sees the headlines, and buys a handful of papers. The studio has burned down in the night. The doors kicked in and petrol splashed everywhere, then ignited. One body was found inside by a locked door, tentatively identified as a transient from the neighborhood. Philip Henry's quoted as saying he'd had trouble with a tramp he'd had to roust from the studio's entrance. The man, he told police, had uttered threats which Henry said he hadn't taken seriously.

The scenery flashes by as Ethan reads the various versions. Christ, he thinks. He remembers the tramp from the neighborhood. An amiable sort, if a bit slow-witted. The worst he'd ever done was ask for a few pence whenever the band came and went. Christ, would Henry --? Of course he would.

Only one account mentions Dierdre and the band at all, saying they'd been recording earlier in the night, but had left some hours before the fire began. How is she, he wonders. She was looking none too steady when Ethan had left. Ironic that he should find himself hoping that Sutcliffe took her home, but he hates to think of her in the clutches of Philip Henry.

And what's become of Ripper? Such an army they sent to bring their errant lad home. He wonders if they gave him the same treatment as Ethan once they got him off the street, or has he gotten the standard prodigal son welcome? I'm ready to go back, he said. Adventure over, now that everything's gone to shit. He's had his rebellion, and clearly Ethan is not worth much more than a torn ticket left lying on the pavement.

It enrages him to mean so little. He loves Ripper, fucking killed for him. The first night in Brighton, every time he closes his eyes he feels the hot spray of blood drenching his naked skin. Ripper would be dead without him. He never cared, just toyed with him, used him to find the rebellion he so badly wanted, used him to get to Eyghon. Then when he couldn't handle it, it was time to run back to Daddy, to the Council, to his fucking Destiny.

Where would they have taken him? To his parents? To Oxford? He'd lost a fair amount of time from his studies, but Ethan knows when you're as brilliant as Ripper, people -- even institutions -- make allowances. And Ripper told him the Council is deeply embedded in Oxford, though there's no official notice of any link.

Fuckers. They'll have him brainwashed, deprogrammed, in no time flat. Ripper won't even fight it. Ethan sees him with his arms spread wide, signaling submission. Over and over he pictures himself walking up to him, pistol extended or knife clenched in fist. Sees in his mind's eye Ripper falling backward, arms outstretched, into the waiting arms of the Council's thugs.

He deserves as much, for this betrayal. For making a murderer of Ethan, and an indirect cause of that old sod's death in the fire. If Ethan's going to bear the blame and guilt, he may as well have another death on his hands -- the man who's responsible for all this.

For three days these thoughts churn in his brain. He tries to drink them into submission, tries to shag someone else and forget Ripper and his betrayal. He finds a girl at a pub the third night, who's stolen her look directly from Dierdre Page. He accompanies her to her room, only to find she's shy and not at all like Dierdre. Trying to blind himself to that, he attempts to fuck her, but he
can't. Rage sweeps through him at her attempts to console him, and he envisions himself wrapping his hands round her neck until she shuts up. Instead, shaking, he fumbles on his clothes and crashes out into the night.

He will not murder some innocent girl. It's Ripper he'll kill. He paces until daylight, when he manages to buy himself a knife. No guns. Ethan wants to feel the hot gush of his blood, just as he had Randall's blood. Throwing his things into his bag, he quits his rented room and takes the train to Oxford.

Once he arrives, it takes him nearly two days to find Ripper. He walks about the first night until he's ready to drop, then sleeps at the train station. In the morning he washes up in the gents. He looks like a madman. It's love that's brought him to this. He'd give anything to have it burned out of him, no matter if it destroys him in the process. Killing Ripper is the only way he can think of that might accomplish that. Cut Ripper's throat and then his own, and let there be an end to it.

At last he finds someone unwary enough to point out Ripper's rooms to him. Much as he wants to finish this now, he decides to wait until dark to confront him. It won't be long; the sun goes down by 4:00 by this time of year. Ethan finds a chippy where he nurses a cup of tea and reads grease-stained newspapers -- those used as fish-wrap and those left by customers.

In a small item in a gossip column, he reads that both Dierdre Page and Thomas Sutcliffe have checked into separate private clinics for "exhaustion." Posh detox units, is the implication. Ethan has no doubt it's Henry's doing -- what better place to stow away a pair of rising pop stars who may be wittering on about demons and possession and blood? Ripper and Ethan, on the other hand, can take their chances with getting nicked by the police and shut away in a loony bin. No matter. Neither of them will live so long.

After dark he makes his way back to Ripper's rooms. There are still people about, but Ethan no longer cares. Standing in the slanted box of light cast by Ripper's window, he shouts up at it, equal parts invective and desperate declarations of love.

Ripper finally appears in the window, gazing down at him impassively.

"Ripper, come down, I need to see you," he shouts. "God, I love you, I can't bear this any longer. Let me see you, let me talk to you. I'll beg if you want." He drops to his knees.

Ripper shoves his window open. "Ethan, stop." He sounds weary. "Go away."

"You can't do this to me. All I ever did was love you. Let me in, I have to see you."

Shaking his head, Ripper says, "Bugger off, before I call security."

"You let them brainwash you," he shouts, and again his hate and rage surges through him with alarming intensity.

Ripper slams his window down and pulls his curtains closed.

"You can't do this to me," he screams, his voice cracking with the force of his shout.

He feels for the knife, then begins climbing up a drainspout between Ripper's windows. The pain in his ribs takes his breath away, but he persists. All his pain will be over soon. His blood will mingle with Ripper's, and they'll be together for those last few moments. After that, he doesn't care.

He hears a voice from the windows above and pauses to hear what Ripper's saying. But he's not calling out to Ethan, he's chanting. Ripper couldn't possibly be calling Eyghon without him, could
he? The thought of such a betrayal fuels his rage, and he resumes his climb, gritting his teeth against the pain. The voice inside rises to a crescendo, accompanied by an orange-tinged flash behind the curtains, and Ethan feels a sudden wave of vertigo. He tries to hang on to the drainspout, but his left foot slips and he loses his footing entirely, shifting his whole weight onto his arms with a suddenness that makes him yell with agony. Letting go, he tumbles onto the shrubs below the windows.

When the pain subsides to merely excruciating, Ethan realizes the rage and bloodlust have left him, along with the desperate need for Rupert. Feeling profoundly foolish, he remains in the bushes until the cold grips him and shivering revives the fire in his sides. He totters to his feet and staggers off.

Christ, this whole thing -- a spell. How had he missed seeing it before? Walking out on Rupert, then suffering such agonies of remorse and need that he turned round to beg him to stay. The obsession that nearly tore him in two, that gave him the courage to strike down Eyghon without a second thought -- all manufactured, imposed on him by magic. How had Ethan, of all people, missed seeing the obvious signs of enchantment?

Wrapping his long coat about him, he wanders the campus. At closing time, he takes to the high street, where he uses his knife to rob a drunken student for train fare back to London.

Back in the city he chucks out or sells all of Rupert's belongings, except for anything to do with magic, although some of these books would fetch him more than the other things combined. Ethan studies these texts as he waits for his old life to resume, but it seems as though Dierdre never gains her release from rehab. The band is gone and the clubs and the music papers have moved on to new darlings. Philip Henry leaves his small, prestigious record label and becomes a cog in the complex machinery of one of the major companies. Rupert, of course, disappears into his studies and then into the byzantine realms of the Council.

Ethan cuts a swath through the young men and women of London, but he refuses to fall in love again. Sometimes he believes it's a choice, that he's through being a fool for anyone. At other times he wonders if Rupert's spell pushed such a surge of power through his heart that it burned out the circuitry required for giving his love to another person.

He discovers chaos magic and gives himself to a succession of magical paradigms, but -- just as with lovers -- he settles on none.

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"Great," Xander says. "Ethan Rayne is yukking it up. That always means there's fun times ahead."

"I've done nothing," Ethan protests. "Well, beyond acquainting Ripper with my point of view. You're the ones who are so convinced I'm connected with the Guardians."

Xander turns to Wes. "You know who we should talk to? Whistler. Buffy told me. I wouldn't put this kind of thing past him."

"A way of maintaining checks and balances, now that the Slayer and Watcher lines have opened."

"Exactly."

Just then the door opens from the stairway. "In here is good," Buffy's saying to someone behind her, then she stops in her tracks. "Whoa. I thought you were in there. What's he doing untied?"

"We've been having a very fruitful chat," Ethan says cheerfully. "Looks like I'm a Guardian."
"Fucking what?" she says.

"We've been exploring the possibility," Wes says calmly.

"The Guardians are all dead," Buffy says. "The Guardians were all women. The Guardians were not evil."

"That's the point I was trying to get across," Xander says.

"Who pulled this moronic notion out of their ass?" she asks.

"I guess that would be me," Wendy admits. "Whatever his source is, it's the same as mine."

"How do you know that?"

"I touched his hand, and I saw it."

"I think," says Wes, "that we have to consider the possibility of the Guardian line opening as the Slayer and Watcher lines have done."

"I hate to say it, Buff, but there's something there," Xander adds. "A change came over him on May 20. He's been drawn here, same as Kalindi, same as Gabriel and Wendy. I'm thinking maybe Whistler's been doing his balancing act."

"Ethan Rayne is always drawn to Giles. He came here to screw with him, like always, and like always he got caught because he stayed to gloat."

"Getting heavy," sings out a voice behind Buffy, and she moves aside.

"Right. We came to bring you lunch. Gabriel and the girls --" Buffy gives her head a shake -- "the girls made this for everyone."

Dawn comes in with a large tray, and while the others murmur over the prospect of food, it's Ethan's reaction that gets notice.

He sucks in a breath, staring at Dawn. "Sweet Jesus," he says.

"Don't be gross," Buffy says. "I'm still itching to kick you down the stairs."

"When did this glorious creature --"?

"Stop," Dawn says. "You met me years ago." She sets the tray down on the coffee table and sidles closer to Xander.

"I most certainly did not," Ethan claims. "I would remember."

"I remember you," she says. "Vividly. Why don't you --"

"Knock off the staring. She's young enough to be your daughter, at least."

He tears his gaze away. It seems like an effort. "Oh, she's a lot older than me. Older than Eyghon, I'd wager."

Dawn clutches at Xander's shoulder, and he puts his hand over hers. "What do you see?" she asks, her voice almost quivering.
"The form of a young woman. Who shimmers with primal energy like I haven't seen for --" He turns to Buffy. "How did you harness this? I never thought Rupert would --"

"That's enough," Buffy snaps. "Dawnie, do you want to go?"

"No. He's weirding me out, but it's nothing I haven't dealt with. It's just -- no one's seen me that way for years."

"And they were crazy," Xander says pointedly. He tightens his grip on her hand, as much for himself as for her.

"This is not just a shell," Ethan says to Buffy. "She's someone to you."

"She's my sister," Buffy says. "And as much as I'll kill you if something happens to Giles, I'd kill you twice as hard if you ever think of harming her."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he says, and every last trace of smarm or snark has fled. "I'm at your service."

Dawn's hand squeezes Xander's. "Oh god, weird."

Before anyone can respond to that, Willow appears from the stairway. "Buffy, I'm sorry to interrupt, but the hospital's on the phone. They won't talk to anyone but you."

Without a further word, Buffy rushes downstairs, and Dawn follows her.

"How did they sound, Will? Good newsy or bad?"

"Neutral."

"Neutral." Willow notices Ethan. "Ethan. Good. You're right here where I can kill you if it's bad news."

"Get in the queue," he says. "And it's not -- not that you'll believe me."

"Damn straight, I don't."


"What?" Willow asks. "Who, Giles?"

"Ethan," Wendy clarifies. She looks at him. "Were you heard?"

"I merely cornered my audience and pressed 'play,'" he says. "I've no idea how long it will take."

"I have not a clue what you people are talking about," Willow says.

"Don't feel lonely," Wendy responds. "I just sat in on a conversation like that."

"Look," Xander says. "I can't stand the suspense. I'm going downstairs to see what the news is."

Wendy reaches out and squeezes his hand. He tugs it from her and goes, unwilling to wait around and hear what sort of psychic flashes she might have gotten.

Xander meets Buffy at the first landing. Tears are streaking down her face, and his knees wobble.

"What did they say?"

"He's awake." She throws her arms around him and he can feel the sobs shake her body. "Oh,
Xander. He's awake and he's okay."

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"I don't get it," Buffy says to Xander during the drive to the hospital. The others -- Willow, Dawn and Faith -- are on the way over in Wendy's car. Buffy asked for this arrangement so she can have some time to mull things over without editing herself. "What's his scam?"

"I don't know, Buffy. I'm not sure he's got one."

Buffy scoffs. "Come on. When did Ethan Rayne not have a scam?"

"That's just it. I think things are different for him."

"You're saying he's magically changed."

He considers a moment. "I'm saying I'm not ruling it out."

She scowls. "So the big slayer mojo can turn someone like him good. I'm willing to believe it can create a flock of superpowered girls, but I'm not that crazy."

"I didn't quite say that. A lot has happened in the years since we saw him last." They get caught behind a double-parked moving van halfway unloaded, and the traffic on Euclid is so thick it's hard to pull into the lane that's still moving. "Those events started making him into a different person, and what happened in May changed him further."

"Ethan Rayne a different person -- that's a laugh. He's been seventeen since he was seventeen. Nothing can convince me he's changed."

"He was chipped, you know. By the Initiative."

That gives her pause. She never would have believed Spike would change, either. "He's not Spike," she says at last. "And besides, what difference would it make, really? He's never been ultraviolence guy. Ethan's technique is to step back and let someone else do the unpleasant part after he's set the stage."

"That's not what the chip is for."

"Well then, what does it do?" She looks out the window and suppresses a sigh. They've only reached the Agora.

"He had some kind of vision, back in the Eyghon days. He saw all kinds of demon realms. Hundreds, maybe. The Initiative thought that might be useful information."

"Yeah, so?"

"They used the chip to put him into the vision at their convenience. From the way it sounds, he spent a year and a half being shoved back into that vision so he could tell them what he saw."

"God. That's inhuman, Xander."

He nods. "We've seen how far they'd go, but this -- I only had visions for a few weeks, and none of them had demon realms, and I thought I was gonna snap. He's tougher that we think, if he survived that, no matter how he did it."

"What do you mean by that?"
"He told Wes and me that he was on heroin and anything else he could take after he got out of there. Until May 20. He said he just walked away from it then, without a pang."

Buffy shivers and reaches out to adjust the heat. "This is the craziest thing I ever heard."

"Wes points out that the Powers That Be, as he calls 'em, go for the crazy. His example was them making Cordy a visionary."

"This is still crazier." She chews her lip. "Do you think he was playing you when he talked about the drug thing?"

"I don't. It was almost an aside. And he's the one who mentioned the date. I've never seen him without the smirk before now, but he dropped it completely."

Buffy nods. "Ethan Rayne being sincere. Surely that's a sign of the apocalypse."

Xander cracks a smile. "It might be."

"And here's another portent for you. I actually feel sorry for him."

"Yeah," Xander says softly. "Me too. Wes tried to get him to talk by making him think we had a holding cell here, and it wigged him so bad I couldn't even keep up the pretense. They really fucked him up."

"And we could have done something about it. We just let him rot there. Knowing what we knew after they got their hands on Oz. He's an asshole, but he's human, Xander. This makes me sick."

"He was a perpetual threat, and he did nearly get Giles killed. It was easy to forget about him there, and that's partly his doing too."

Scowling, she shakes her head. "I don't know. It's hard to see anything in black and white anymore. And all that about Dawn -- how weird was that?"

"He's in tune with something, that much seems obvious. And Wendy believes it's coming from the same place as her thing."

"I can't wait to get Giles's input on this." Tears well, threatening to spill again. "I was afraid I'd never get to ask him for it again." Then they overflow, and she doesn't bother wiping them away. "Thank god, Xander. Thank god he's okay."

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The nurse only allows two visitors to Giles's room, which causes a flurry of politeness that slows everything up. Finally Willow declares, "Buffy gets first rights, of course, and Xander knows more about what's going on than the rest of us--" This is not unaccompanied by a hint of a glare -- "plus he's really Giles's lieutenant. So I think you two should go, but give him our love, or face the wrath."

The others readily agree, especially with the wrath part, so Xander and Buffy follow the nurse to his room.

Buffy hesitates just before they reach his door. "Is -- is he really okay?"

"Somewhat irritable."

A breath gusts from Buffy. "He's fine, then."
"He's hungry as a bear," the nurse adds.

"I hope this isn't a prelude to him doing a John Hurt in *Alien,*" Xander says.

"Oh, thanks for that image," Buffy retorts. She pushes the door open to reveal Giles sitting on the edge of the bed, wrapped in his own robe, which someone brought while he's been in the hospital.

He looks as alert -- more alert, actually -- than most of the times Xander has roused him in the middle of the night.

"Giles!" Buffy tackles him in a fierce hug, this one without tears. "How are you, are you okay, we've been so scared!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." He hugs her tighter than his British reserve usually allows, though, and Xander notices his expression looks a little pinched. He catches Xander's eye and smiles wearily. "Xander."

"Next time you decide to take a few days off give us a little advance notice, will you?"

Buffy releases Giles and Xander steps in for his own fierce hug.

"What have I missed?" Giles asks.

"Nothing. Us coping, that's all," Xander says. "Oh hey, wait -- an old friend of yours is in town. Edgar -- Eustace -- no, that's not -- Ethan, that's the name. You must not know, because *I know you would have said something.*"

Giles does mild chagrin. "Yes. Well. I thought you'd all had enough upheaval recently. I decided to handle it myself."

"That worked out well, didn't it?"

"Oh, give him a break, Xander. Let's at least get him home before we start the neverending grief."

"Ethan's surely up to something if he wanted me out of the way," Giles says. "Have you found him?"

"I think what he's been up to is you," Xander says, and again Giles gives the unsettled look. "This was about something he wanted to settle with you. Can you tell us what's been going on with you? As far as the doctors were concerned, you were in a coma, and a deep one, but I get the idea there was more to it on your end."

"I'd much rather discuss this later, when I'm out of here."

"Are they letting you out?" Buffy asks.

"They don't intend that, but I do," Giles says.

"What did the doctors say?"

"They want to keep me overnight for observation. But they've been observing me all this time, and they've learned bugger-all."

"They didn't give you anything at all?" Buffy asks.

"A useless diagnosis. 'Idiopathic coma.'"
"Which means, what? Caused by your own stupidity?"

Giles glares at Xander in a way that he finds oddly comforting. "It means 'of unknown origin.'"

"I could still be right."

The scowl softens. "Yes. Yes, you could be." Giles spreads his arms. "Come here, both of you." He hugs them both simultaneously, so tight it's almost a Buffy hug. "I'm so glad to be back."

Xander swipes at his left eye, which is leaking. "I'm supposed to tell you under threat of bodily harm that Willow and Dawn and Faith and Wendy are here too, but they'd only let two of us in. And the others are back at the house, but they've all been worried about you."

"Are they all well?"

"Everyone's fine," Xander says. "Wes is even coming out of his funk. He really stepped up while you've been gone. We might even get him back into the watcherly fold."

"It's an ill wind that blows no good," Giles says. "I'm glad to hear it."

"And, um, something else." Xander shoots a quick look at Buffy. "We think we might have found another Guardian."

"Speaking of ill winds," Buffy adds.

"That's remarkable. How did you find her?"

"That's the funny thing," Xander says. "It's not a her. But the evidence seems to be mounting that he could be the real deal. Like Wendy, it's someone who already had a wide streak of supernatural ability even before the big mojo. Wes thinks it's possible, even though he's male. He says it could be like a mutation, to ensure the survival of the line."

"I suppose. We know so little about them. We're not even sure there weren't male Guardians before."

"I'm sure," Buffy says. "The one I met told me they've always been women. So I'm not convinced." She shoots a glance at Xander. "Anyway, I don't think this is the time."

"It's worth investigating, Buffy," Giles says. "The Guardians could be powerful allies if we reinvent the relationship between them and the Watchers."

The energy that lights Giles's face fills Xander with such incredible relief that he drops, weak-kneed, into one of the visitor's chairs.

"Tell me, how did you find him?"

"Oh, it's a long story," Buffy says. "Let's save that for later."

"He found us," Xander says at the same time. "It's Ethan Rayne."

The change that comes over Giles's face would almost be funny, if Xander were going for that effect. Shock, giving way to horror, then a painful forced laughed, almost like a sneeze. "You had me going for a moment there. Good joke, Xander. Though not in the best taste considering I'm still in hospital."

"Except, not a joke. We've taken in another little birdie blown all the way here by the Sunnydale
storm, and it's him."

"I'm not convinced," Buffy says. "But Wes and Xander think it's a distinct possibility, and Wendy's certain."

"She touched him, and she had a flash."

Giles's expression makes it clear he gives some weight to her opinions, however unwillingly. "Perhaps the doctors are right. I think I could use a night of observation."

"How about a talk?" Xander suggests. "Watcher to watcher."

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Giles does not miss the glare Buffy directs at Xander. "I think we've tired him out enough."

Xander studies him. "Maybe you're right. Sorry. I should have picked a better time."

Giles rubs his brow. "No. I'm not an invalid. You're quite right, we should discuss this."

"Good," Xander says. "Now back in the bed."

Despite his previous statement, Giles obeys, allowing Xander to pull the covers over his legs. He elevates the head of the bed so that he's leaning back, yet sitting up.

"What are you hungry for?"

"The nurse said she'd be bringing something."

"Mmm, hospital food," Xander says. "Really?"

He craves nothing so much as a curry or fish and chips wrapped in a greasy newspaper. But even if they were possible, he doubts they'd taste right. "I could do with a rather large cheeseburger."

Buffy eyes the two of them. "I'll go. I think that was the general subtext here. Plus female: provider of cooked food."

Giles offers a faint smile. "You and I will talk about this, I promise. But for now --"

"I think I get it. The peer-to-peer thing first, to sort things out. But do not clam up on me. You remember that from the second time he showed up, right, that clamming up is not of the good?"

"I do."

"All right, then. I'll hold you to it." She kisses him on the cheek. "It may take a little while, the area's a little barren right around here."

Giles almost calls her back as she slips out the door, but he recognizes the spasm of panic for what it is. When the door drifts closed behind her, he says to Xander, "You can't seriously believe he's been called to the Guardians."

"It's a long story. He's not the same man we saw years ago."

Giles shakes his head. "You can't trust him. Where is he?"

"Back at the hacienda."
"With those girls? For the love of god, Xander --"

"With Wes. Speaking of people who aren't the same. Believe me, Wes will give Ethan Rayne no quarter." Xander seats himself again, pulling his chair closer to the head of the bed. "We don't have unlimited time. Why don't we get to the debriefing, as the actress said to the bishop."

Suddenly he's overwhelmed by the enormity of everything he's endured in the last -- what? Days? Weeks? Months? "How long has it been?"

"Since you collapsed? That was Halloween. It's the third of November now, just past evening rush hour."

Closing his eyes, he releases a breath. "It seemed -- so much longer."

"Ethan said you were reliving your past. Your time in London together, he said."

"Yes."

"Feel like talking about any of that? What did he do, just press some kind of mystical 'play' button, and you watched the whole thing?"

"Not watched. Lived. Except it was Ethan's consciousness I was trapped inside."

"You mean ... you were Ethan?"

Giles can't suppress a shudder at hearing it put into words. "I was myself. Knowing what I know now, trapped inside Ethan's mind, privy to all his thoughts and feelings." He remembers now what Ethan said at the pub. *You never gave a loss for my feelings.* He'd made damn sure Giles would become intimately acquainted with his emotions.

"Wow. What was that like?"

"Eye-opening. The experience held a rather merciless mirror up to my younger self."

"Just because it's unflattering, doesn't mean it's accurate."

This prompts a wistful smile from Giles. "It's surprisingly accurate, I'm sorry to say. I was quite arrogant and foolish in my youth."

"That is kinda what it's for."

"This wasn't beer bongs and stealing the rival high school's mascot, Xander. I abandoned school and my destiny, ingested almost every variety of drug, shagged nearly everyone who would say yes and took up magicks I had no business meddling with."

"I pretty much knew or suspected all of that." Xander shrugs. "You have an epic destiny. Which you knew, unlike most of us, who stumble into what we're meant for. It's kind of a given you'd make epic youthful mistakes. Mascot stealing is what you do if your destiny is selling auto parts."

"You'd make excuses for me, then?"

"I'd have compassion for you." Xander regards him closely, however, in a way that indicates he's waiting for something further. After a moment, he says, "So what Ethan made you relive, they were the true events, no spin or scenes recreated for dramatic purposes?"

"There were events I wasn't there to witness when they happened. But based on those I could
verify, I'm inclined to believe them true."

Xander gazes off at nothing for a moment, thinking, and Giles does not interrupt.

"So," Xander finally says, returning his sharp gaze to Giles. "A while ago when we had that 'Regrets, I've had a few' conversation, doing a love spell on Ethan must have been filed under, 'Then again, too few to mention.'"

"Ethan told you this?"

"He did." What he doesn't have to say is that he found the claim credible.

"This is one of the most colossal mistakes I've made it my life. The ramifications, clearly, haven't died down even today."

"Which might have been a reason to tell someone about it some night when the topic of mistakes and regrets happened to come up."

Despite Xander's calm, reasonable manner, irritability gets the best of Giles. "The memory happens to be an extremely painful one."

"I know," Xander says, his calm unshaken. "I have one of those in my past too."

*Of course.* "I'd quite forgotten."

"Funny. I had a very strong impression you'd never forget that."

"I was hard on you." He remembers shouting, telling Xander to get out of his sight. He also remembers the immediate, flinching reaction -- not the manner of someone unused to being shouted at, but of someone who knows it too well, who recognizes it as the prelude to something worse. "I overreacted because of my own experience."

"I figured that out, as soon as Ethan mentioned it."

"My anger was based in fear. I knew how badly things could have gone. I could have explained that to you, when I'd had time to calm down."

"You're Brit guy. Certain things go unspoken."

"A great deal went unspoken. Partly due to habit and upbringing, partly because of the fear of seeming improper in my behavior. Principal Snyder made it clear he was watching me, that a known nonreader was spending far too much time in the library."

"He didn't attribute that to the Bo Jackson 'Reading Is Fun' poster?"

"No, he did not. At any rate, I haven't expressed how much I've valued your friendship over the years, and how much I admire the man you've become."

Xander's hand flies to his left eye, wiping away moisture. "That means a lot. Your friendship's been very important to me, too. You have to know that."

The muscles of Giles's throat have bunched into a knot, and he fears attempting to speak will cause them both extreme embarrassment. A clatter rises in the corridor, then an orderly arrives with a dinner tray.

"Oh, thank Christ," Giles blurts, and he and Xander laugh so hard at his exclamation that they can
wipe their eyes without self-consciousness.

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Once the orderly has gone, Giles pushes the tray away without even lifting its cover.

Xander eyes it, fighting the impulse, then giving in. "Is there red jello?"

"When is there not red jello?" He lifts the cover to see, and asks, "Would you like it?"

"Despite my red jello-related brush with death, I have a weakness."

Giles regards him. "You had a red jello-related brush with death?" He hands over the bowl and his spoon.

"Remember when the lunch lady snapped? I was just starting to shove some jello in my mouth when I saw her with the economy-sized box of rat poison."

"Some day when I catalog our brushes with death by category, I mustn't forget 'Food Related.'"

"Make sure 'Sex Related' gets in there too." Something occurs to him. "When you freaked out about my backfired love spell, you had a lot to say about homicidal impulses -- besides yours at that moment, I mean. Does that mean you had a 'Sex Related' yourself?"

Giles nods. "Ethan was on his way to murder me when I reversed the spell. I also believe the spell may have led him to kill Eyghon's host, although that saved my life, I'm sure. I'm not certain I'd call that murder. I believe Eyghon had consumed Randall by then. There was no visible trace of humanity in him."

Xander can see the complexity of emotions swirling around this period of Giles's life even after all this -- well, it must all be pretty fresh to him again. Xander isn't sure whether to feel relieved that massive confusion isn't unique to him, or freaked out to think that he could be in his forties -- or sixties -- or eighties -- and still have trouble sorting out such complicated feelings. "Let's talk about where things stand with Ethan now," he suggests.

"He's convinced you that he's changed," Giles says.

"He's led me to believe it's possible."

"Present your evidence, then. You said he claims something happened to him the day the hellmouth closed."

"Apparently he picked up a drug problem after he got away from the Initiative. He told us he stopped cold turkey the 20th of May, without a single craving. The other thing he said is he got a strong inclination to find you that wouldn't die down."

Giles shakes his head. "The latter is a behavior pattern of his. It proves nothing."

"I wonder. If he was hot for revenge he could have come as soon as he escaped. It's been over two years since he got out."

"I'm doubtful the specific mention of May 20 means anything, either. Ethan's always had a finger on the pulse of the supernatural. I'm certain he's well aware of what happened on that date."

"I remember that, yeah," Xander says. "Here's something interesting, though. He recognized Dawn."
"There's nothing so surprising about that. They've met on a number of occasions."

"No, I mean he saw what she is. Primal energy, I think he said. Older than Eyghon."

Giles's jaw drops. "That's extraordinary."

"Yeah." Xander finishes off the jello and sets aside the dish and spoon. "He's tapped into something, Giles. Wendy believes it's the same thing that's flowing through her."

"But that's no guarantee he'll use it for the same ends."

"I know, but get this: When Buffy said if he even dreamed of doing anything that would hurt Dawn she'd kill him, he looked at her -- Dawn, I mean -- and said, 'I'm at your service.' He *meant* it. When you see Ethan Rayne being sincere for the first time ever, it gets your attention."

"Why?"

"I'm beginning to have my theories. It has to do with what happened when the Initiative had him. Do you know how long they held him prisoner?"

Giles's expression darkens. "Eighteen months, he told me. I saw him, that night you and I went out for a pint."

"Did he tell you what they did?"

"No. I told him rather emphatically to bugger off, and he did."

"There was a vision he had. Back during Eyghonpalooza. Did you know about that?"

Giles shudders. "I do, yes."

"Oh shit, is that one of the things you just relived? Okay, maybe this will help explain why I think he might be a different man than he was. The Initiative thought it would be helpful to have first-person recon of all those demon realms. They chipped him, and they kept him reliving that vision so they could interrogate him about what he was seeing."

"Jesus wept."

"Yeah. Eighteen months."

"Once was quite enough."

"Say you've been living in those realms for a year and a half. Then you see -- really see -- someone like Dawn. Maybe he needs this now. Something that's as powerful as the other shit but isn't demonic, that can push all that aside. And maybe we need his sort of power, too."

"Perhaps," he says, and falls silent for a long while.

After a time, Xander says softly, "You should talk with him. When you're home and more settled."

"Yes."

Xander rises. "I think what you need right now is a unicorn chaser."

"A what?"
"Palate cleanser. I'm gonna send in Wendy for a few minutes."

***

"He asked her if she chases unicorns," Xander says. "This is possibly one of the greatest days of my life." He and Faith are sitting in the waiting area, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder. Dawn and Willow are in with Giles, and Wendy's driven Buffy home so the hacienda's car is available when the rest of them are ready to go.

"Babe, I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about."

"Which is quite all right." He plants a kiss on her head, breathing in her scent. "It's been so crazy these last few days. I've missed you."

"Me too. Can we see Giles, then go home and screw ourselves senseless?"

"I'm fairly certain that could be arranged."

She raises her head from his shoulder and kisses him, teasing at his lips with her tongue until he opens to her. Giving him the coming attractions for the feature later tonight. He forgets where he is, the pages and sounds of equipment and gurneys fading into white noise until a security guard approaches to suggest they cool it.

Faith settles back in her chair, stroking the side of Xander's face. "This whole Ethan Rayne thing," she says after a while. "I just can't help thinking --"

He has a pretty good idea what she's thinking. "Yeah?"

"You know. The R-word. But you spent a lot more time with him than I did."

"I think it's possible, too."

She rubs her hand lightly over his leg. "Don't assume too much. I'm thinkin' he's ready to start redeeming himself, not that he has. And people -- what's the word Marquita used to use? Backfire. No. Backslide. They backslide. Sometimes that means you made a mistake, trying to help them. But sometimes it means they did, but they're still working to change. You tell all that to Giles, would you?"

"I think you should tell him. You're a lot more eloquent on the subject than me."

"Hey, look. Here comes Marlene." Faith removes her hand from his leg, which had been trailing steadily northward. "Hi, Rev."

Marlene draws a chair close to them and sits. "I hear you have good news."

Xander nods. "Giles woke up this evening. He seems fine, but they're holding him another night to keep an eye on him."

"I'm so glad. I haven't had a chance to look in on him."

"We've been keeping him pretty busy," Xander says. "He looks good, though. He's totally alert. Listen, thanks for all your -- you know, for --"

Marlene grins. "For praying?"

"Yeah. It helped, knowing you were doing that for us."
She catches him by the hand and squeezes it briefly. "Xander, we were all praying for him. We just call it different things. Still, feel free to ask me for that anytime." Her phone vibrates and she excuses herself as Dawn and Willow make their way to the waiting area.

"He's tiring," Dawn says, "but he wants to see you, Faith."

"You come with," Faith says, and he slips his hand into hers as they head for his room.

Giles is propped up by pillows and the adjustable bed, but he's looking weary.

"If I know this bunch, nobody's said it," Faith says without preamble. "But you scared the shit out of all of us, keeling over like that."

"I rather scared the shit out of myself too, just before I blacked out," he assures her. "I'll try to make it up to everyone."

"FYI, warm beer is not the way."

Smiling, Giles reaches a hand out toward her, and she takes it, letting him draw her toward him. "I count on you to tell me the unvarnished truth," he says.

"Like countin' on the sap from the trees, Rupert."

"Except not so sticky," Xander adds.

"I'd value your opinion on our visitor," Giles tells her. "Your first impression, and your thoughts when you've had an opportunity to speak with him."

"Me?"

"Naturally. I consider you our resident expert on redemption. Not to mention your bullshit detector is fairly acute."

This vote of confidence -- and maybe the word "bullshit" falling from Giles's lips -- renders Faith speechless. Xander takes her hand and gives it a squeeze, and she finally comes around. "Be glad to help, Rupert," she says simply.

But Xander senses all the currents in her words, pride and amazement and warmth.

"Like I was telling Xander, I don't think he's gotten there, but it looks like he's ready to start."

"Ah," Giles says. "I've been caught up in thinking 'has he or hasn't he.' Viewing it that way makes a difference."

"If we decide we want to help him get there, we gotta follow through. Half-assed help isn't much better than none."

Giles holds her gaze for a moment until she shifts her feet. "I failed you, didn't I?"

"I wasn't ready until I was ready, and then I had Angel. And the hospital ain't the place for rehashin' the past."

Giles's laughter startles her. "That's all I've been doing here. But your point is well taken. We'll have a talk once I'm home. And I'd appreciate your advice on Ethan as well."

"Sure. We're gonna get out of your hair now. Coma can kick your ass, so you get some rest."
Xander lays a hand on his arm. "We'll talk to the staff and see when they want us to come for you tomorrow. Get some sleep, huh?"

"I've done enough of that, thank you."

"Sleep," Faith growls.

She leans into Xander as he slips his arm around her shoulders as they accompany Dawn and Willow out of the hospital, but she's quiet all the way home.

***

It's late when they get to bed, since the girls and Wes all cluster around to hear about Giles, and then Wes confers with him about what they should do with Ethan. "I don't like the idea of him having free rein of the house, but we can't exactly imprison him."

"Let him go back to his hotel."

Wes looks startled.

"He's gone to all this trouble to have Giles's ear. He's not going to bolt now."

"Do you wish to see him before he goes?"

"Nah. Drive him back or get him a cab and tell him we'll call when Giles is ready to meet with him." Xander rubs at his eyes, careful, as always, not to dislodge the false one. "I'm going up. Thanks for your help with Ethan, and keeping things going so smoothly here."

Wes shoves his hands in his pants pockets. "Glad to help. It's a particular talent of mine, to step in when a leader goes walkabout for whatever reason. I ran Angel's agency for a time, as well."

Xander eyes him. "We're not asking you to fade into the background here."

"No, no of course," Wes stammers. "It's just -- I find life has a tendency to knock me back there." He shakes his head. "I didn't mean to go into that."

"You have a particular talent for deflecting praise, too." It's one of Xander's own talents, so he knows it when he hears it.

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"You've spent enough time in the House of Chaos to know we can use you. Anyway. Get Ethan out the door and get yourself to bed. And thanks again." He chucks Wes on the arm and then heads upstairs to Faith, who sees that he's rode hard and put away wet.

At 4:17, he comes awake, suddenly and completely. He lies perfectly still for a moment, listening for a repeat of a sound that might have awakened him. Except for the quiet engine of a car passing by, there's nothing.

He knows from the time he spent in the grip of the visions that he's not getting back to sleep, so he slips out of bed and makes his way down to the kitchen. The light's already on, and he smells coffee. Xander finds Gabriel perched by the island with a mug at her elbow, bent over her sketchbook.

"Morning," he greets her.
"Hey," Gabriel says. "I didn't think you'd be up for a long while."

"Neither did I. Mind if I have some of your coffee?"

"Go right ahead."

Xander pours himself a mug. She's been supplying them with the Starbucks coffee on the employee discount, so it's good and strong.

"I used to get these visions at night," Xander says. "Every night. I'd shoot right up in bed and that would be the end of sleeping. Maybe my body got used to that."

"Have you been doing that ever since?"

"Nah. But that's what it felt like tonight, so I didn't even bother trying to fall back asleep. What got you up at this hour?"

"Thinking about stuff." She puts her pencil down, and Xander sees she's been working on a sketch of Buffy. Her drawing of Ethan had been good, but this is full of life. It's not just a picture of a pretty woman, it captures something essentially Buffy.

"Ah, that's really nice."

"Thanks. When you and Faith did that switch --"

"The body swap?"

"Yeah. How did that feel?"

"Well, I'm your classic guy. I'm pretty attached to my di-- uh, my guyness. As I told Faith, the sudden absence is nightmare territory. She, on the other hand, she was all for trying out the new equipment."

Gabriel grins. "I can kind of imagine her."

"Although there were my own personal breasts, always at my disposal. That was sort of novel and cool. It didn't quite make up for the sudden appearance of the period, though."

"Ack. No, I guess not."

"I didn't really have all that much time to experience what it was like. I was in the middle of flashing back to all these different spells that had affected me over the years -- that was how the body swap came in -- and it was just one crisis after the other. Not to mention I was in a women's prison for a good portion of that time."

"Shit."

"Pretty much. What's on your mind?"

"I've been reading all these books Mr. Giles gave me. I guess I want to take the next step."

Xander nods. "We'll get you to the right people to talk to."

"This is gonna cost a shitload, isn't it?"

"The Council's got money. Whatever you need, we'll make sure you get it."
"Okay." She gazes into her coffee cup for a moment. "I'm ready to go with the name, too. You think people here could get used to calling me Elizabeth?"

***

"Oh crap, there's the car," Jenny says. She's been on lookout duty at the front window while the others hover over Gabriel at the dining room table. It's Elizabeth now, she's gotta remember that. Elizabeth looks the same this morning, but she's come around to deciding what A.L. knew that night he first saw her at the hacienda. The thing that seems weirdest about it to Jenny is how matter-of-fact Kalindi is about the whole thing. She'd think someone raised by religious nuts like Kalindi's aunt would be a lot more freaked out, but she'd come down at breakfast before Elizabeth and announced the name change on her behalf.

"What do we do with this?" Vi asks. "It's too wet to stick on the wall."

"I should have thought of this last night," Jenny says.

"It's nice you thought of it at all," Kalindi says.

"He's out of the car, and he's moving at a clip," Jenny reports. "He doesn't look like he's been in a coma."

Elizabeth puts down the brush on the poster paint lid. "Let's just hold it up. He'll get the idea."

They scramble to line up and carefully lift the banner so it doesn't curl on itself and smudge or get paint on the girls. By the time the front door opens, they're pretty much arranged.

"I think I'll go upstairs," Giles says in the hallway. "Have a proper shower and get out of these dreadful clothes."

"No!" Kalindi calls out. "In here, Mr. Giles!"

Mr. Giles follows her voice and comes into the dining room, A.L., Faith and Wendy trailing behind. The girls giggle at his clothes, the shiny print shirt from Halloween and the hippie sandals. He grins at the sign:

WELCOME HOME, GI

"We didn't have time to finish it," Gab--Elizabeth says.

"They sprung you a lot faster than we thought," Jenny adds.

"I'll get the others," Kalindi says. "They're down in the kitchen making dinner." She transfers her part of the sign to Vi and rushes toward the back stairs.

"This is lovely," he says. "Thank you all."

"Jenny had the idea," Elizabeth says.

"Andrew made a welcome banner for me," Jenny says. "It made me feel like part of the team."

The room goes kind of quiet at Andrew's name, which makes Jenny want to kick herself. Before she can apologize, the others come thundering up from downstairs, whooping and grabbing up Mr. Giles in hugs like he's just scored the game-winning run.

Yeah. Safe at home.
Giles’s welcome-home dinner is a raging success. The gold-rimmed china and the best silverware have been cracked out, just as it was when Faith had made it home from prison and Wes was in town to get the body swap sorted out. The menu seems more planned than that meal was, less insanely everything-but-the-kitchen-sinkish. Wes and his helpers have produced a roast, and there are mashed potatoes and a repeat of Willow’s field greens salad and Kennedy’s cheese biscuits.

They're getting the hang of the celebration dinner, Faith thinks. Not only the menu that doesn't seem like it was created like a chef on a meth binge, but the vibe around the table. They're all part of this, the new girls and the old-school Scoobies and Wendy and Wes. Even Vi, who's always seemed out of sync with the others, acts like she feels part of the group.

Maybe Giles is sensing it too, and wanting to extend it. He tells Willow he’d like her to renew her efforts to find Andrew, and asks Vi if she has contact information for Rona.

"Actually, I had an email last night," Vi says. She starts to get up from the table. "I could print it out and read it to you guys."

Giles gestures for her to stay in her seat. "You needn't let your food get cold. We'll hear it over dessert. She's well, though?"

Vi cracks a grin that Faith can't read. "Yeah, she is."

While Kalindi and Gabri -- no, it's Elizabeth again -- while they clear the dishes, Vi runs off to the computer. Dawn brings up coffee, and Buffy brings a tray of tea for the Brits and Wendy.

Finally everyone's settled back in, and Vi clears her throat. "Okay. I got this last night. Hey. Vi. You will not BELIEVE who showed up last week. ANDREW, no shi--, uh, no kidding. He had this crazy-ass idea that we should be a crime-fighting duo, except vampire-fighting instead of crime. That's what he says, except he also says, 'You know, like' -- and then he mentions a bunch of names of comic book characters like I'm supposed to know -- or give a -- hoot," Vi edits, "who they are. He acts like it's all his idea, but I keep thinking I see Whistler out the corner of my eye, which explains a LOT. He was talking to me a lot before I left Cleveland -- Whistler, I mean. Anyway, my moms thinks he's the cutest effin' thing alive -- Andrew, I mean -- but -- Well, that part isn't very interesting." Vi's gaze dart over the paper. "I'm gonna kill him if he -- Oh, that's not that informative either. We killed two vampires last night on the waterfront, and three a few nights ago in Fells Point. Crazy as shit--" Vi glances up from the printout. "Sorry --but it's working out all right. But if he thinks I'M gonna be the sidekick, HE HAS ANOTHER THINK COMING. That attitude adjustment is coming up real fast, don't worry. There's a bunch more that, um, isn't that interesting, then she says, Hope Mr. Giles will be all right, keep me posted okay? He's all right, even if he -- " She hastily folds the paper and stuffs it in her pocket. "That's pretty much it."

"Wow," says Buffy.

"Seconded," Xander says. "All in agreement? The 'wows' carry it."

And all through the evening, even after they've gone up to bed, Xander breaks into occasional soft laughter.

***

Giles fusses with his books, pokes at the fire. Ridiculous to think Ethan might be punctual -- when had he ever been on time?
He moves a book off the mantle, places it on the table beside his chair, then shakes his head and moves to reverse the process.

Why should he give a rat's arse what Ethan thinks?

He realizes, however, that this is the first time Ethan will step inside Giles's home since the depressing flat they shared in London. It's bound to reveal a great deal about him, and he'd like to control what he exposes.

There's a light tap at his door, and Giles very nearly drops the fragile text he's holding. "Yes," he calls, rather irritably, bracing himself.

It's Xander. "I just thought I'd see how you're doing."

"Completely out of sorts. Why in Christ's name isn't he here yet?"

"He's not due for twenty minutes. I suppose it's pointless to say 'Relax.'"

"Yes, I suspect so." He moves the book back to the spot next to his chair.

"You want me around while you meet with him? At least at first?"

Giles shakes his head. "A third party will just make things more awkward, not less."

"So that's what you're concerned about. Not that he's got some other party trick up his sleeve."

"I do think his motives this time were different," Giles says. "He claimed -- he said he wanted to make peace, move beyond the past. For so many years I've believed Ethan Rayne would never change, yet whenever we meet I respond to him in the same way."

"I remember when the Eyghon thing was happening, with the dead guy and the puddle of goo and the 'hello, Ripper.' You were kind of a scary guy there."

"He reminds me of a time I'd much rather forget. A person I wish I'd never been."

"That's the funny thing about running from a part of the past. You tend to get stuck there until you're willing to face it."

Giles smiles. "I think it may be time to stop being surprised when you say something wise."

"Oh, I dunno. It surprises me most of the time." He swats Giles on the shoulder. "You're through the worst part. You'll do fine."

Xander retreats and a moment later the doorbell sounds, but Giles is not sure if either of Xander's last two statements is true.

***

Giles thrusts a hand through his hair and makes his way downstairs to greet Ethan.

Buffy has already admitted him into the foyer, where she watches, fists on hips, as he removes his coat.

Buffy comments, "Let me just state for the record that I cannot believe I am letting Ethan Rayne into my house. Dragging you in for interrogation, yeah, that I had no trouble with."
"You're as delightful as ever," Ethan responds, "and even more beautiful."

"Oh, gag me." She makes no move to take his coat, so Ethan props his cane against an ornamental table and hangs the coat on the hall tree himself. Beneath the cashmere coat, his clothes are just as expensive and well-tailored.

He takes up his cane again, then spots Giles descending the stairs. "Ah, Rupert. She's still a hard one, your slayer."

"Her protective instincts have always been strong." Fencing comes so naturally, it's hard to stop himself. As he reaches the bottom of the stairs, Giles offers his hand to Ethan. "I appreciate your coming. I have a private room upstairs where we can talk." He gestures for Ethan to precede him upstairs.

"Is there anything I can bring you?" Buffy asks. "A hatchet?" She mimes hacking with said weapon.

Giles can't suppress a smile. "Thank you, no." It occurs to him that he needs to have a conversation with Buffy similar to the one he'd had with Xander before all this happened, the one where he'd endeavored to turn the reticent King of Cups upright. He touches her shoulder, then turns to follow Ethan.

It's a laborious process for Ethan to climb the stairs, and his limp seems a bit more pronounced once they reach the hallway above.

Giles directs him to his door and invites him to enter. Ethan pauses near the threshold, taking in his surroundings. "The Council really got into your soul, didn't they? So very proper and Victorian."

"The furnishings, down to the antiques and the dinnerware, came with the house. We came out of Sunnydale with nothing."

"You were there when it fell." It's a statement, not a question.

"Yes." Giles gestures toward the fireplace. "Please. Have a seat."

Ethan settles himself in a chair, arranging himself and his bad leg in such a way that the effect is the same as if he'd flung himself there carelessly. Legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, he hardly seems different from the youth Giles knew. "Closing the hellmouth took serious power."

"It did. We took a gamble with our attempt to magnify that power. We also had a little help, and the loan of an artifact."

"You all made it out safely?"

"Not all," Giles says. He moves to the small table which serves as his wet bar. "I'm afraid I haven't any gin, but I have some rather nice Scotch."

"Oh, I don't indulge anymore," Ethan says. "You go ahead."

Giles raises an eyebrow. "At all?"

Ethan slips a silver cigarette case from his pocket. "I've kept one or two of my filthy habits." His smile as he extracts a cigarette from the case gives Giles a good idea what the other one must be.

"Tea, then?"
"If you feel you must rattle about."

He does, and it irritates him that Ethan has realized this. He suppresses the urge to busy himself and seats himself by the fire. Belatedly, he wishes he'd taken advantage of Ethan's suggestion (which, annoyingly, sounded like permission) to avail himself of the scotch, but he refuses to spring up again to get it.

"I've heard your magicks may have had an effect on a much wider scale than you'd intended,"

Ethan says.

"Yes, well. It seems that, instead of us using the power, the power used us. The Guardians had been destroyed and the Watchers nearly so, and in extending the line of the Slayer, we inadvertently strengthened those lines as well."

"You've always had some kind of intensifying effect on whatever magicks you came near."

Giles regards him. "You believe that?"

"I do. I suspect you're some kind of genetic sport, even among the Watchers." Ethan looks about for something to use as an ashtray, and Giles rises to fetch him a saucer.

While he's up, he pours himself a scotch. "Xander seems to feel you experienced some effects from the spell to open the Slayer line."

"It seems I did. He and the other watcher--"

"Wesley."

"Yes. They both seem to believe I could be one of your Guardians. A phoenix rising from the ashes, in more ways than one." Ethan's eyes sparkle with mischievous glee.

"Yes," Giles says, somewhat sourly. "He believes we should investigate the possibility."

Ethan takes another drag of his cigarette, his thumb stroking the scar on his lip before he drops his hand. "Oh come on, Rupert. Don't you find this the least bit funny?"

Giles eyes him. "I would go as far as ironic, perhaps."

Ethan finds this amusing as well.

"Before we begin contemplating the future," Giles says, "I think it's best we discuss the past. As you've come all this way and gone to such trouble."

"Are you sure you don't mean 'caused such trouble'?"

Giles says nothing.

"I'm not making it easy, am I? Never mind me -- carry on."

"I've spent a good many years doing my best not to think of the past -- that aspect of the past -- at all. What filtered through has been very selective."

"Which is one of the reasons you've felt so very threatened whenever I've made an appearance."

"Exactly so."
Ethan crushes his cigarette into the saucer and immediately lights another.

"Let me have one of those, would you?" Giles asks. Ethan passes him the silver case and matching lighter, and Giles gratefully draws the harsh smoke into his lungs. "I hardly know where to begin."

"There's no great hurry." Again he strokes his thumbnail along the scar on his lip.

"The love spell, then. It goes against everything I believe in, to tamper with another's will. That action led to everything that followed. First Randall's death, then the others. But even without all of that, the spell was a very great wrong. I suspect now that it explains why you kept coming round, once you found me."

Ethan scowls. "You think the spell was never fully lifted?" Annoyance snaps in his tone, and Giles finds it oddly gratifying that he can be irritated.

"Not at all. But the outrage you must have harbored --"

Ethan taps his ash into the saucer. "And let's not forget that I just enjoyed fucking with you. It was almost as fun as fucking you."

Giles feels the heat rise to his face, and knows Ethan's acute gaze has noted it.

"You act as if that time was an aberration," Ethan says. "As if it has nothing to do with the person you are now. You'd erase those months completely if you could."

"Of course I would."

"And who would you be, if you hadn't come to London? Would you be the man who guided the slayer who's lived longer than any other? Would you be the one who has averted more than one apocalypse, perhaps more than half a dozen? Would you have this place now, building a new Council from the ashes of the old? Has it never occurred to you that Eyghon was a slingshot? That you needed to go that far in order to rocket back to your destiny? Look how straight and true and far you've flown. From my point of view, Eyghon was part of your destiny. Those sanctimonious old farts at the Council would never have told you that because your guilt suited their purposes, but nothing will make me believe it's not true."

Giles sits back in his chair, speechless.

"I'd also like to mention that I have no doubt you saved the world the night Eyghon consumed Randall. We'd never have contained it without your power."

"You wouldn't have had to," Giles says. "I fueled it, magnified its power. You did say I have that effect -- I certainly did in that case."

Ethan shakes his head. "It would have escaped us eventually. It might have taken longer, but it was growing weary of being the plaything of stupid children."

With the memory of those possessions so fresh in his mind, Giles can't deny the logic of Ethan's words. After a long silence, he says, "The vision you had. I don't believe I knew about it."

"I didn't talk about it. Or at least, not until the soldier boys got hold of me. Then I never shut up."

"Xander told me about that. It's appalling to think I could let them take you, and then leave you in their hands. No matter what passed between us, that kind of torture is inexcusable."
"You hardly knew what they were capable of."

"No, but I found out. And by then I'd happily forgotten you. As you've said, I wanted to believe that self had nothing to do with me. I am sorry for my part in what happened."

"Water under the bridge. Or demon blood, perhaps." Ethan deposits another length of ash in the saucer, and Giles follows suit. "And I have apologies to make as well."

There was a time Giles would have heartily agreed, but now it seems the magnitude of these offenses has been washed away in the deluge of his own sins. "No."

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Rupert. If you're going to wallow in penitence, I really must go."

Giles, to his surprise, finds himself laughing. "Very well, then. Let's have them."

"I am sorry about the Fyarl demon incident. That was childish."

Giles stabs his cigarette into the saucer. "Apologies tend to work better when the apologizer doesn't look quite so pleased with himself."

"I'll work on that."

"And the band candy, I suppose?"

"Not especially. As I told your associate, I needed money, so I took on a job. I knew full well you and your slayer would stop anything irreparable from happening."

"And the Halloween incident? In Sunnydale, I mean."

Considering for a moment, Ethan finally shakes his head. "That was a bit of fun, that's all."

"You did promise apologies, plural."

"I'm sorry things ended so badly between us."

"As much my fault as yours. The love spell guaranteed things would get messy."

"I'm not sorry for getting your attention. You'll recall I did make a reasonable attempt at a discussion before I took things to extreme."

Giles can't resist a smile. "For the most part, you're Edith Bloody Piaf, aren't you?"

"Regret, for the most part, is a waste of time." Ethan crushes his cigarette into the saucer.

"Certainly if one doesn't change his ways," Giles says. "So what's next, Ethan?"

"That's a good question. What sort of role do you envision for your newly-hatched Guardian chicks?"

"We don't know yet. I understand Wendy's help was valuable in getting to the source of our recent problem." This he underscores with an ironic look. "I suspect you've a wealth of information that would be extremely useful. Not just from the vision. It seems you've spent as many years in the study of the arcane as I have. And I must say you've shown yourself to be more insightful than I'd have expected. The question is, do you have any interest in joining us?"

Again Ethan strokes the scar with the edge of his thumb. "I used to think you'd settled for a dull
and regimented life. I've seen that that's not true."

"Not even my comas are dull," Giles says wryly.

"It would be fun to torment you on a regular basis. I promise not to raise it to the level of blood sport."

Much to his surprise, Giles suspects it would be fun having him about.

Ethan sobered. "All joking aside, your slayer's so-called sister is a factor. The idea of being on the same side as that kind of power --"

"Two warnings: Dawn is very much a normal young woman, not an ancient power. If you're expecting otherwise, you're in for a disappointment. If you show any improper interest in her or in any of my newly-hatched slayer chicks, I will snap you in half and let Xander have the pieces."

"Furthest thing from my mind, Rupert, I assure you."

The promise only makes Giles wonder who has caught his eye.

"As it is, you won't be living here. You're free to make your own arrangements."

"I have no interest in living in a dormitory," Ethan says. "I'll stay in my hotel. I do plan to continue my side project."

"Which is?"

"Fake grimoires. If I sell about one a year I can live quite comfortably."

Giles considers how likely he'd be to live on the Council payroll. "Make certain they are in no way traceable to us, or even to Cleveland."

"Fair enough."

"I can't believe I'm doing this." He extends a hand to Ethan. "If the others agree, let's give it a try."

After all these years, the sexual buzz at the touch of Ethan's hand is still strong.

Ethan maintains the contact just long enough to let Giles know he's fully aware of it too, then he sits back. "I have a small gift for you, but unfortunately I left it downstairs."

"If you like, I can retrieve it." He heads downstairs to fetch the briefcase Ethan left by the hall tree.

As Ethan opens the case, Giles half expects to see an ancient text, but instead he withdraws a slim square cardboard box marked with faded ink script. He displays it to Giles without explanation. Inside is a reel-to-reel tape.

"What is this?" he asks, but he thinks he knows.

"The recording sessions."

"How did you--?"

"You'd be amazed at what you can find on eBay." It has the ring of a lie, but Giles doesn't pursue it. "It's yours to do with as you wish."
"Have you listened to it?"

"You know I couldn't resist. It's as brilliant as I remember."

Giles thinks of Dierdre onstage singing "Take It All" as the audience surrendered to her completely. Thinks of her in the studio, exhaustion and desperation shuddering through her as she did the most astonishing work of her life. Gooseflesh rises on his arms to think of it.

Months later, after her return from the posh clinic, she settled into a dull life as a pudgy shop girl, and later as a vacant-eyed housewife.

"It would fetch a pretty penny from some record executive who knows his history," Ethan says.

Giles tries to imagine this out in the world. Dierdre, alive again. Eyghon's snarls, channeled through Ethan.

"Or," Ethan adds, "I could throw it on the fire."

He locks his eyes on Ethan's, feels their history arc between them.

He wants to listen.

"Burn it," Giles says, and without hesitation Ethan draws aside the fireplace screen and throws it on the flames.

***

Giles approaches Wendy's storefront, whose bright colors clash with the threatening sky. The lake wind has turned bitter, and he hunches into his coat. Despite the cold, he's glad to be moving his body, and doubly glad to be on his way to see Wendy.

The closed sign is still on her shop door, but he wastes no time, tapping the glass in front of the cat sleeping in the window. Lolo opens her remarkable green eyes and glares at him, looking vaguely insulted. She regards him for a moment before she deigns to pick herself up and stroll into the back room.

Wendy emerges immediately and hurries to admit him. She's wearing jeans and the bright blue sweater. Her bare feet dance in the frigid draft as she opens the door to him. "You didn't have to come out in this. I'd have come to you."

"Contrary to popular belief, I am not an invalid."

"Lolo said you were out of sorts."

"I am not!" he protests. Ridiculous to think a cat would pass judgment on his moods.

Wendy merely smiles as she takes his coat and hangs it on the coatrack by the door. It seems to take up as much space as another person in the tiny storefront. "How are you settling in back at home?"

"I'm being fussed over a bit too much. It makes the hacienda seem far too small."

"They smother because they love." She says it lightly and with humor, but it makes him aware of how churlish he sounds.

He softens. "No doubt."
"Tea? Something stronger?"

He doesn't really want anything except to pick up where they'd left off, but his social timing seems to be off today, at least by the cat's standards. Best not to offend Wendy too. "Tea would be fine, thank you."

As she goes to put the kettle on the fire, Giles sits at the little table by the window. A Tarot deck and a notebook with an ornate cover rest on the tablecloth. "You haven't had clients already," he says as Wendy emerges from the back room.

"No, just my daily reading."

*You will encounter a tall, churlish non-stranger.*

"We were interrupted at a most inopportune time," he says.

"You can say that again."

"I wanted to visit you here where it's less chaotic to talk about whether we might pick up where we left off."

"Nothing's changed, Rupert."

Everything has changed, but he doesn't quite know how.

"Unless," she adds, "they've changed for you."

"My interest in you hasn't changed. Ethan's appearance, however, makes things more complicated. We've decided to work together, or at least try it out, although he won't be living at the hacienda."

"That's going to be interesting."

Giles chuckles. "Yes, in the sense of that old Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times.'"

The kettle shrieks in the next room, and Wendy rises to attend to it. "Just a second."

He uses the time to gather his thoughts. When she returns, he says, "This is bound to be unsettling for me at times. Ethan and I -- well, back in my student days, we were lovers."

"Oh, I knew that."

Giles blinks. "He told you that?" God knows what else Ethan has said, then.

"No. Back when I did -- I think it was the second reading I did for you. I got a flash."

"I was quite wild in my youth. At least during a few months of rebellion. It wasn't just Ethan."

She reaches across and lays a hand on his knee. "Oh, Rupert. I'm not ready for the recitation of former lovers."

"Oh. Does that mean --" What? That she's not ready to pick up where they'd been interrupted? That she's rethinking the entire proposition?

She rises and settles herself on his lap. "It means," she says, tracing a finger along his lips, "that I want you all to myself right now."
Wendy kisses him quite thoroughly, and after a long bout of snogging, she leads him to a small but pleasant bedroom, as quirkily new agey as Wendy herself. By the time they emerge again, the tea she's brewed is quite cold, and strong enough to varnish furniture.

***

Xander's in the bedroom pulling off his shoes when Faith comes in, fresh from washing up and brushing her teeth.

"Hey, I thought you were stopping off to talk to Giles," she says.

"He's not back."

Faith glances at the clock. "Really? What time did he leave?"

"Noon, I think. Maybe a little before."

Her dimples are suddenly on display. "Go, Rupert. It's about time he got laid."

Xander flails his hands. "No no no. No mental pictures!"

"Oh, I don't want to see that nearly as much as I'd have liked to see him and Ethan Rayne goin' at it."

"No to the tenth power! Stop!"

Faith pulls her shirt over her head and unfastens her jeans. "Oh c'mon, don't you think he's wicked sexy? Who'da thought, some white-haired guy Rupert's age, but I bet he gets plenty on both sides of the fence."

"Wicked yes, sexy no. And cut that out. I need the brain bleach as it is."

Faith steps out of her jeans and advances toward him. "Don't get it too squeaky clean. I got some plans that call for it dirty."

She tugs a shoe out of his hand and drops it on the floor. "Looks like you need a little help undressing." She fumbles with his buttons, letting her fingers wander between each unbuttoning until his skin buzzes with desire.

"I think I can take it from here," he tells her, eager to tear the rest of his clothes off.

She captures his wrists. "I think you should leave it with me."

Slowing her pace to a maddening crawl, she manages to drive everything out of his head but her.

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